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INHIBITIONS, SYMPTOMS AND ANXIETY

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CHAPTER X

ANXIETY is the reaction to danger. One cannot help suspecting, however, that the reason why the affect of anxiety occupies a unique position in the economy of the mind has something to do with the essential nature of danger. Yet danger is a universal human experience; dangers are the same for everybody. What we need and cannot lay our finger on is some factor which will explain why some people are able to subject the affect of anxiety, in spite of its unique quality, to the ordinary workings of the mind, or why others are doomed to break down over this task. Two attempts to find a factor of this kind have been made; and it is natural that such efforts should meet with a sympathetic reception, since they set out to fill a most urgent need. The two attempts in question are mutually complementary; they approach the problem at opposite ends. The first was made by Alfred Adler more than ten years ago.[1] He maintained in essence

[1] [Written in 1926.—*Trans.*]

that it was those individuals who were too greatly impeded by some organic inferiority who failed to master the task set before them by danger. If it were true that *simplex sigillum veri*, we should welcome this answer as a perfect solution of the problem. But on the contrary, our critical studies of the last ten years have effectively demonstrated the total inadequacy of such an explanation—an explanation, moreover, which sets aside the whole wealth of material that has been discovered by psycho-analysis.

The second attempt was made by Otto Rank in 1923 in his book, *The Trauma of Birth*. It would be unjust to put his attempt on the same level as Adler's except in this single point which concerns us here, for it remains upon psycho-analytic ground and pursues a psycho-analytic line of thought, so that it may be accepted as a legitimate endeavour to solve the problems of analysis. In this matter of the relation of the individual to danger Rank moves away from the question of organic defect in the individual and concentrates on the variable degree of intensity of the danger.

The event of birth is the first situation of danger and the economic upheaval which it

produces becomes the prototype of reaction to anxiety. We have already traced the line of development which connects this first danger-situation and determinant of anxiety with all the later ones, and we have seen that they all retain a common quality in so far as they signify in some way a separation from the mother—at first only in a biological sense, next as a direct loss of object and later as a loss of object indirectly incurred. The discovery of this extensive concatenation is an undoubted achievement of Rank's constructive work. Now the trauma of birth overtakes each individual with a different degree of intensity, and the violence of his anxiety-reaction varies with the strength of the trauma. According to Rank, whether the individual will ever learn to control his anxiety —whether he will become normal or neurotic— will depend upon the intensity of the initial anxiety that is thus produced in him.

It is not our business to criticize Rank's hypothesis in detail here. All we need to do is to consider whether it helps to solve the particular problem before us. His proposition that those persons become neurotic in whom the trauma of birth was so strong that they have

never been able completely to abreact it is highly dubious from a theoretical point of view. We do not rightly know what is meant by abreacting a trauma. Taken literally it implies that the more frequently and the more intensely a neurotic person reproduces affects of anxiety the more closely will he approach to mental health. This conclusion is not tenable. It was because it did not tally with the facts that I gave up the theory of abreaction which had played such a large part in the cathartic method. To lay so much stress on the variability in the strength of the birth trauma is to leave no room for the legitimate claims of hereditary constitution as an aetiological factor. For this variability is an organic factor which operates in an accidental fashion in relation to the constitution and is itself dependent on many influences which might be called accidental—as, for instance, upon timely assistance in child-birth. Rank's theory completely ignores constitutional factors as well as phylogenetic ones. If, however, we were to try to find a place for the constitutional factor by qualifying his statement with the proviso, let us say, that what is really important is the extent to which the individual reacts to

the variable intensity of the trauma of birth, we should be depriving his theory of its significance and should be relegating the new factor introduced by him to a position of minor importance: the factor which decided whether a neurosis should supervene or not would lie in a different, and once more in an unknown, field.

Moreover, the fact that while man has the process of birth in common with the other mammals he alone is privileged to possess a special predisposition to neurosis is hardly favourable to Rank's theory. But the main objection to his theory is that it floats in the air instead of being based upon ascertained observations. No body of evidence has been collected to show that difficult and protracted birth does in fact coincide with the development of a neurosis, or even that children so born exhibit early infantile apprehensiveness more strongly and over a longer period than other children. It might be rejoined that precipitate labour and births that are easy for the mother quite possibly involve a severe trauma for the child. But we can still point out that births which lead to asphyxia would be bound to give clear evidence of the results which are

supposed to follow. It should be one of the advantages of Rank's aetiological theory that it postulates a factor whose existence can be verified by observation. And so long as no such attempt at verification has been made it is impossible to assess the value of that theory.

On the other hand I cannot identify myself with the view that Rank's theory contradicts the aetiological importance of the sexual instincts as hitherto recognized by psycho-analysis. For his theory only has reference to the position of the individual in regard to the danger-situation, so that it leaves it perfectly open to us to assume that if a person has not been able to master his first dangers he is bound to succumb to later situations involving sexual dangers and thus be driven into a neurosis.

I do not believe, therefore, that Rank's attempt has solved the problem of the causation of neurosis; nor do I believe that we can say as yet how much it may have contributed to such a solution. If an investigation into the effects of difficult birth upon the predisposition to neurosis should yield negative results we shall rate the value of his contribution low. It is to be feared that our endeavours to find a

single, tangible 'ultimate cause' of neurotic illness wil go unrewarded. The ideal solution, which the medical man no doubt still yearns for, would be to discover some bacillus which could be isolated and bred in a pure culture and which, when injected into a person, would invariably produce the same illness; or, to put it somewhat less fantastically, to demonstrate the existence of certain chemical substances the administration of which would create or abolish particular neuroses. But the probability of a solution of this kind seems slight.

Psycho-analysis leads to less simple and satisfactory conclusions. What I have to say in this connection is already long since known and contains nothing new. If the ego succeeds in protecting itself from a dangerous instinctual impulse, through, say, the process of repression, it has certainly inhibited and damaged the particular part of the id concerned; but it has at the same time given it a bit of independence and has renounced a bit of its own sovereignty. This is inevitable from the nature of repression, which is, fundamentally, an attempt at flight. The repressed is now, as it were, outlawed; it is excluded from the great organization of the

ego and is only subject to the laws which govern the realm of the unconscious. If, now, the danger-situation changes so that the ego has no reason for warding off a new instinctual impulse which resembles the repressed one, the consequence of the restriction of the ego which has taken place will become manifest. The new impulse will run its course under an automatic influence—or, as I should prefer to say, under the influence of the repetition-compulsion. It will follow the same path as the earlier, repressed impulse, as though the danger-situation that had been overcome still existed. The fixating factor in repression, then, is the repetition-compulsion of the unconscious id—a compulsion which in normal circumstances is only done away with by the mobile function of the ego. The ego may occasionally manage to break down the barriers of repression which it has itself put up and to recover its influence over the instinctual impulse and direct its course in accordance with the changed danger-situation. But in point of fact the ego very seldom succeeds in doing this: it cannot undo its repressions. It is possible that the way the struggle will go depends upon quantitative relations. In many

cases one has the impression that the outcome is an enforced one: the regressive attraction exerted by the repressed impulse and the strength of the repression are so great that the new impulse has no choice but to obey the compulsion to repeat. In other cases the entrance of yet another element into the play of forces may be perceived: the attraction exerted by the repressed instinctual prototype is reinforced by a repulsion brought to bear by objective difficulties which are opposed to the new impulse taking a different course.

That this is the origin of fixation in repression and of the retention of danger-situations which are no longer present-day ones is confirmed by the fact of psycho-analytic therapy—a fact which is modest enough in itself but which can hardly be over-rated from a theoretical point of view. When, in the course of an analysis, we have given the ego assistance and have put it in a position to abolish its repressions, it recovers its power over the repressed id and can allow the instinctual impulses to run their course as though the old situations of danger no longer existed. What we can do in this way is in general accord with the therapeutic achievements of

medicine; for as a rule we must be satisfied with bringing about more quickly, more certainly and with less expenditure of energy than would otherwise be the case a desired result which in favourable circumstances would have occurred of itself.

We see from what has been said that it is quantitative relations—relations which are not directly observable but can only be inferred—which determine whether or no old situations of danger shall be preserved, repressions on the part of the ego maintained and childhood neuroses find continuance. Among the factors that play a part in the causation of neuroses and that have created the conditions under which the forces of the mind are pitted against one another, three emerge into prominence: a biological, a phylogenetic and a purely psychological factor.

The biological factor is the long period of time during which the young of the human species is in a condition of helplessness and dependence. Its intra-uterine existence seems to be short in comparison with that of most animals, and it is sent into the world in a less finished state. As a result the influence of the

objective world upon it is intensified and it is obliged to make an early differentiation between the ego and the id. Moreover, the dangers of the outer world have a greater importance for it, so that the value of the object which can alone protect it against them and take the place of its former intra-uterine life is enormously enhanced. This biological factor, then, establishes the earliest situations of danger and creates the need to be loved which will accompany the child through the rest of its life.

The existence of the second, phylogenetic, factor, is based only upon inference. We have been led to assume its reality by a remarkable feature in the development of the libido. We have found that the sexual life of man, unlike that of most of the animals nearly related to him, does not make a steady advance from birth to maturity, but that, after an early expansion up till the fifth year, it undergoes a very decided interruption; and that it then starts on its course once more at puberty, beginning from the point at which it broke off in early childhood. This has led us to suppose that something momentous must have occurred in the vicissitudes of the human species which has left behind this

interruption in the sexual development of the individual as a kind of historical precipitate. This factor owes its pathogenic significance to the fact that the majority of instinctual impulses belonging to infantile sexuality are treated by the ego as dangers and warded off as such, so that the later sexual impulses of puberty, which in the natural course of things would be ego-syntonic, run the risk of succumbing to the attraction of their infantile prototypes and following them into repression. It is here that we come upon the most direct aetiology of the neuroses. It is a curious thing that early contact with the demands of sexuality should have a similar effect on the ego as premature contact with the external world.

The third, psychological, factor resides in a defect of the mental apparatus which has to do with its differentiation into id and ego, and which is therefore ultimately attributable to the influence of the external world. In view of the dangers of objective reality the ego is obliged to guard against certain instinctual impulses in the id and to treat them as dangers. But it cannot protect itself from internal instinctual dangers as effectively as it can from some bit of objective

reality that is not part of itself. Intimately bound up with the id as it is, it can only ward off an instinctual danger by restricting its own organization and by acquiescing in the formation of symptoms in exchange for having impaired the instinct. If the rejected instinct renews its attack, the ego is overtaken by all those difficulties which are known to us as neurotic illness.

Further than this, I believe, our knowledge of the nature and causes of neurosis has not as yet been able to go.