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On the Development of Mental Functioning (1958)

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The paper I present here is a contribution to metapsychology, an attempt to carry further Freud's fundamental theories on this subject in the light of conclusions derived from progress in psycho-analytic practice.

Freud's formulation of mental structure in terms of id, ego and super-ego has become the basis for all psycho-analytic thinking. He made it clear that these parts of the self are not sharply separated from one another and that the id is the foundation of all mental functioning. The ego develops out of the id, but Freud gave no consistent indication at which stage this happens; throughout life the ego reaches deep down into the id and is therefore under the constant influence of unconscious processes.

Moreover, his discovery of the life and death instincts, with their polarity and fusion operating from birth onwards, was a tremendous advance in the understanding of the mind. I recognized, in watching the constant struggle in the young infant's mental processes between an irrepressible urge to destroy as well as to save himself, to attack his objects and to preserve them, that primordial forces struggling with each other were at work. This gave me a deeper insight into the vital clinical importance of Freud's concept of life and death instincts. When I wrote *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*¹, I had already come to the conclusion that under the impact of the struggle between the two instincts, one of the ego's main functions—the mastery of anxiety—is brought into operation from the very beginning of life.²

Freud assumed that the organism protects itself against the danger arising from the death instinct working within by deflecting it outwards, while that portion of it which cannot be deflected is bound by the libido. He considered in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922)

1 Cf. pp. 126-28.

2 In 'Notes on some Schizoid Mechanisms' (1946), I suggested that some of the functions—in particular that of dealing with anxiety—which we know from the later ego, are already operative at the beginning of life. The anxiety arising from the operation of the death instinct within the organism, and felt as fear of annihilation (death), takes the form of persecution.

the operation of the life and death instincts as biological processes. But it has not been sufficiently recognized that Freud in some of his writings based his clinical considerations on the concept of the two instincts, as for example in 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' (1924). May I recall the last few sentences of that paper. He said: 'Thus moral masochism becomes a classical piece of evidence for the existence of fusion of instinct. Its danger lies in the fact that it originates from the death instinct and corresponds to that part of the instinct which has escaped being turned outwards as an instinct of destruction. But since, on the other hand, it has the value of an erotic component, even the subject of destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction.' (S.E. 19, p. 170). In the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933), he put the psychological aspect of his new discovery in even stronger terms. He said: 'This hypothesis opens a prospect to us of investigations which may some day be of great importance for the understanding of pathological processes. For fusions may also come apart, and we may expect that functioning will be most gravely affected by defusions of such a kind. But these conceptions are still too new; no one has yet tried to apply them in our work.' (S.E. 22, p. 105). I would say that in so far as Freud took the fusion and defusion of the two instincts as underlying the psychological conflict between aggressive and libidinal impulses, it would be the ego, and not the organism, which deflects the death instinct.

Freud stated that no fear of death exists in the unconscious, but this does not seem compatible with

his discovery of the dangers arising from the death instinct working within. As I see it, the primordial anxiety which the ego fights is the threat arising from the death instinct. I pointed out in 'The Theory of Anxiety and Guilt' (1948)¹ that I do not agree with Freud's view that 'the unconscious seems to contain nothing that would lend substance to the concept of the annihilation of life' and that, therefore, 'the fear of death should be regarded as analogous to the fear of castration'. In 'The Early Development of Conscience in the Child' (1933), I referred to Freud's theory of the two instincts, according to which at the outset of life the instinct of aggression, or the death instinct, is being opposed and bound by the libido or life instinct—the Eros—and said: 'The danger of being destroyed by this instinct of aggression sets up, I think, an excessive tension in the ego, which is felt by it as an anxiety, so that it is faced at the very beginning of its development with the task of mobilizing libido against its death-instinct.' I concluded that the danger of being destroyed by the death instinct thus gives rise to primordial anxiety in the ego.²

¹ See pp. 28-30 in this volume.

² Joan Riviere (1952) refers to 'Freud's decisive rejection of the possibility of an unconscious fear of death'; she goes on to conclude that 'the helplessness and dependence of human children must, in conjunction with their phantasy life, presuppose that the fear of death is even part of their experience.'

The young infant would be in danger of being flooded by his self-destructive impulses if the mechanism of projection could not operate. It is partly in order to perform this function that the ego is called into action at birth by the life instinct. The primal process of projection is the means of deflecting the death instinct outwards.¹ Projection also imbues the first object with libido. The other primal process is introjection, again largely in the service of the life instinct; it combats the death instinct because it leads to the ego taking in something life-giving (first of all food) and thus binding the death instinct working within.

From the beginning of life the two instincts attach themselves to objects, first of all the mother's breast.² I believe, therefore, that some light may be thrown on the development of the ego in connection with the functioning of the two instincts by my hypothesis that the introjection of the mother's feeding breast lays the foundation for all internalization processes. According to whether destructive impulses or feelings of love predominate, the breast (for which the bottle can symbolically come to stand) is felt at times to be good, at times to be bad. The libidinal cathexis of the breast, together with gratifying experiences, builds up in the infant's mind the primal good object, the projection on the breast of destructive impulses the primal bad object. Both these aspects are introjected and thus the life and death instincts, which had been projected, again operate within the ego. The need to master persecutory anxiety gives impetus to splitting the breast and mother, externally and internally, into a helpful and loved and, on the other hand, a frightening and hated object. These are the prototypes of all subsequent internalized objects.

The strength of the ego—reflecting the state of fusion between the two instincts—is, I believe, constitutionally determined. If in the fusion the life instinct predominates, which implies an ascendancy of

¹ Here I differ from Freud in so far as it seems that Freud understood by deflection only the process whereby the death instinct directed against the self is turned into aggression against the object. In my view, two processes are involved in that particular mechanism of deflection. Part of the death instinct is projected into the object, the object thereby becoming a persecutor; while that part of the death instinct which is retained in the ego causes aggression to be turned against that persecutory object.

² In 'Notes on some Schizoid Mechanisms', I said: 'The fear of the destructive impulse seems to attach itself at once to an object—or rather it is experienced as the fear of an uncontrollable

overpowering object. Other important sources of primary anxiety are the trauma of birth (separation anxiety) and frustration of bodily needs; these experiences too are from the beginning felt as being caused by objects.’

- 238 -

the capacity for love, the ego is relatively strong, and is more able to bear the anxiety arising from the death instinct and to counteract it.

To what extent the strength of the ego can be maintained and increased is in part affected by external factors, in particular the mother's attitude towards the infant. However, even when the life instinct and the capacity for love predominate, destructive impulses are still deflected outwards and contribute to the creation of persecutory and dangerous objects which are reintrojected. Furthermore, the primal processes of introjection and projection lead to constant changes in the ego's relation to its objects, with fluctuations between internal and external, good and bad ones, according to the infant's phantasies and emotions as well as under the impact of his actual experiences. The complexity of these fluctuations engendered by the perpetual activity of the two instincts underlies the development of the ego in its relation to the external world as well as the building up of the internal world.

The internalized good object comes to form the core of the ego around which it expands and develops. For when the ego is supported by the internalized good object, it is more able to master anxiety and preserve life by binding with libido some portions of the death instinct operative within. However, a part of the ego, as Freud described in the New Introductory Lectures (1933), comes to ‘stand over’ against the other part as a result of the ego splitting itself. He made it clear that this split-off part performing many functions is the super-ego. He also stated that the super-ego consists of certain aspects of the introjected parents and is largely unconscious.

With these views I agree. Where I differ is in placing at birth the processes of introjection which are the basis of the super-ego. The super-ego precedes by some months the beginning of the Oedipus complex,¹ a beginning which I date, together with that of the depressive position, in the second quarter of the first year. Thus the early introjection of the good and bad breast is the foundation of the super-ego and influences the development of the Oedipus complex. This conception of super-ego formation is in contrast to Freud's explicit statements that the identifications with the parents are the heir of the Oedipus complex and only succeed if the Oedipus complex is successfully overcome.

¹ For a more detailed picture of how my views on the early Oedipus complex have developed, see ‘Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict’ (1928), *The Psycho-Analysis of Children* (1932), (particularly Chapter VIII), ‘The Oedipus Complex in the Light of Early Anxieties’ (1945), and ‘Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant’ (1952, p. 218).

- 239 -

In my view, the splitting of the ego, by which the super-ego is formed, comes about as a consequence of conflict in the ego, engendered by the polarity of the two instincts.¹ This conflict is increased by their projection as well as by the resulting introjection of good and bad objects. The ego, supported by the internalized good object and strengthened by the identification with it, projects a portion of the death instinct into that part of itself which it has split off—a part which thus comes to be in opposition to the rest of the ego and forms the basis of the super-ego. Accompanying this deflection of a portion of the death instinct is a deflection of that portion of the life instinct which is fused with it. Along with these deflections, parts of the good and bad objects are split off from the ego into the super-ego. The super-ego thus acquires both protective and threatening qualities. As the process of integration—present from the beginning in both the ego and the super-ego—goes on, the death instinct is bound, up to a point, by the super-ego. In the process

of binding, the death instinct influences the aspects of the good objects contained in the super-ego, with the result that the action of the super-ego ranges from restraint of hate and destructive impulses, protection of the good object and self-criticism, to threats, inhibitory complaints and persecution. The super-ego—being bound up with the good object and even striving for its preservation—comes close to the actual good mother who feeds the child and takes care of it, but since the super-ego is also under the influence of the death instinct, it partly becomes the representative of the mother who frustrates the child, and its prohibitions and accusations arouse anxiety. To some extent, when development goes well, the super-ego is largely felt as helpful and does not operate as too harsh a conscience. There is an inherent need in the young child—and, I assume, even in the very young infant—to be protected as well as to be submitted to certain prohibitions, which amounts to a control of destructive impulses. I have suggested in *Envy and Gratitude* (pp. 179-80 above), that the infantile wish for an ever-present, inexhaustible breast includes the desire that the breast should do away with or control the infant's destructive impulses and in this way protect his good object as well as safeguard him against persecutory anxieties. This function pertains to the super-ego. However, as soon as the infant's destructive impulses and his anxiety are aroused, the super-ego is felt to be strict and over-bearing and the ego then, as Freud described it, 'has to serve three harsh masters', the id, the super-ego, and external reality.

When at the beginning of the twenties I embarked on the new

1 Cf. for instance 'The Theory of Anxiety and Guilt' (1948), this volume pp. 31-32.

- 240 -

venture of analysing by play technique children from their third year onwards, one of the unexpected phenomena I came across was a very early and savage super-ego. I also found that young children introject their parents—first of all the mother and her breast—in a phantastic way, and I was led to this conclusion by observing the terrifying character of some of their internalized objects. These extremely dangerous objects give rise, in early infancy, to conflict and anxiety within the ego; but under the stress of acute anxiety they, and other terrifying figures, are split off in a manner different from that by which the super-ego is formed, and are relegated to the deeper layers of the unconscious. The difference in these two ways of splitting—and this may perhaps throw light on the many as yet obscure ways in which splitting processes take place—is that in the splitting-off of frightening figures defusion seems to be in the ascendant; whereas super-ego formation is carried out with a predominance of fusion of the two instincts. Therefore the super-ego is normally established in close relation with the ego and shares different aspects of the same good object. This makes it possible for the ego to integrate and accept the super-ego to a greater or less extent. In contrast, the extremely bad figures are not accepted by the ego in this way and are constantly rejected by it.

However, with young infants, and I assume that this is more strongly the case the younger the infant is, the boundaries between split-off figures and those less frightening and more tolerated by the ego are fluid. Splitting normally succeeds only temporarily or partially. When it fails, the infant's persecutory anxiety is intense, and this is particularly the case in the first stage of development characterized by the paranoid-schizoid position, which I assume to be at its height in the first three or four months of life. In the very young infant's mind the good breast and the bad devouring breast alternate very quickly, possibly are felt to exist simultaneously.

The splitting-off of persecutory figures which go to form part of the unconscious is bound up with splitting off idealized figures as well. Idealized figures are developed to protect the ego against the terrifying ones. In these processes the life instinct appears again and asserts itself. The contrast between persecutory and idealized, between good and bad objects—being an expression of life and death instincts and forming the basis of phantasy life—is to be found in every layer of the self. Among the hated and threatening objects, which the early ego tries to ward off, are also those which are felt to have been injured or killed and which thereby turn into dangerous persecutors. With the

strengthening of the ego and its growing capacity for integration and synthesis, the stage of the depressive position is reached. At this stage the injured object is no longer
- 241 -

predominantly felt as a persecutor but as a loved object towards whom a feeling of guilt and the urge to make reparation are experienced.¹ This relation to the loved injured object goes to form an important element in the super-ego. According to my hypothesis, the depressive position is at its height towards the middle of the first year. From then onwards, if persecutory anxiety is not excessive and the capacity for love is strong enough, the ego becomes increasingly aware of its psychic reality and more and more feels that it is its own destructive impulses which contribute to the spoiling of its objects. Thus injured objects, which were felt to be bad, improved in the child's mind and approximate more to the real parents; the ego gradually develops its essential function of dealing with the external world.

The success of these fundamental processes and the subsequent integration and strengthening of the ego depend, as far as internal factors are concerned, on the ascendancy of the life instinct in the interaction of the two instincts. But splitting processes continue; throughout the stage of the infantile neurosis (which is the means of expressing as well as working through early psychotic anxieties) the polarity between the life and death instincts makes itself strongly felt in the form of anxieties arising from persecutory objects which the ego attempts to cope with by splitting and later by repression.

With the beginning of the latency period, the organized part of the super-ego, although often very harsh, is much more cut off from its unconscious part. This is the stage in which the child deals with his strict super-ego by projecting it on to his environment—in other words, externalizing it—and trying to come to terms with those in authority. However, although in the older child and in the adult these anxieties are modified, changed in form, warded off by stronger defences, and therefore are also less accessible to analysis than in the young child, when we penetrate to deeper layers of the unconscious, we find that dangerous and persecutory figures still co-exist with idealized ones.

To return to my concept of primal splitting processes, I have recently put forward the hypothesis that it is essential for normal development that a division between the good and bad object, between love and hate, should take place in earliest infancy. When such a division is not too severe, and yet sufficient to differentiate between good and bad, it forms in my view one of the basic elements for stability and mental health. This means that the ego is strong enough not to be overwhelmed by anxiety and that, side by side with splitting, some integration is going on (though in a rudimentary

¹ For clinical material illustrating this particular point, see 'A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States (1934). Writings, 1, pp. 273-74.

- 242 -

form) which is only possible if in the fusion the life instinct predominates over the death instinct. As a result, integration and synthesis of objects can eventually be better achieved. I assume, however, that even under such favourable conditions, terrifying figures in the deep layers of the unconscious make themselves felt when internal or external pressure is extreme. People who are on the whole stable—and that means that they have firmly established their good object and therefore are closely identified with it—can overcome this intrusion of the deeper unconscious into their ego and regain their stability. In neurotic, and still more in psychotic individuals, the struggle against such dangers threatening from the deep layers of the unconscious is to some extent constant and part of their instability or their illness.

Since clinical developments in recent years have made us more aware of the psycho-pathological processes in schizophrenics, we can see more clearly that in them the super-ego becomes almost indistinguishable from their destructive impulses and internal persecutors. Herbert Rosenfeld (1952)

in his paper on the super-ego of the schizophrenic, has described the part which such an overwhelming super-ego plays in schizophrenia. The persecutory anxieties these feelings engender I found also at the root of hypochondria.¹ I think the struggle and its outcome is different in manic depressive illnesses, but must satisfy myself here with these hints.

If, owing to a predominance of destructive impulses which goes with excessive weakness of the ego, the primary splitting processes are too violent, at a later stage integration and synthesis of objects are impeded and the depressive position cannot be worked through sufficiently.

I have emphasized that the dynamics of the mind are the result of the working of the life and death instincts, and that in addition to these forces the unconscious consists of the unconscious ego and soon of the unconscious super-ego. It is part of this concept that I regard the id as identical with the two instincts. Freud has in many places spoken about the id, but there are some inconsistencies in his definitions. In at least one passage, however, he defines the id in terms of instincts only; he says in the New Introductory Lectures: 'Instinctual cathexes seeking discharge—that, in our view, is all there is in the id.'

¹ As I mentioned, for instance, in the footnote on p. 63 of this volume, 'the anxiety relating to attacks by internalized objects—first of all part-objects—is in my view the basis of hypochondriasis. I put forward this hypothesis in my book *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, pp. 144, 264, 273.' Similarly in 'The Theory of Intellectual Inhibition' (1931), I pointed out, on p. 238, that 'a person's fear of his faeces as a persecutor is ultimately derived from his sadistic phantasies. ... These fears give rise to a terror of having a number of persecutors inside his body and of being poisoned, as well as to hypochondriacal fears.'

- 243 -

It even seems that the energy of these instinctual impulses is in a state different from that in the other regions of the mind.' (S.E. 22, p. 74).

My concept of the id, from the time I wrote *The Psycho-Analysis of Children* (1933), has been in accordance with the definition contained in the above quotation; it is true that I have occasionally used the term id more loosely in the sense of representing the death instinct only or the unconscious. Freud stated that the ego differentiates itself from the id by the repression-resistance barrier. I have found that splitting is one of the initial defences and precedes repression, which I assume begins to operate in about the second year. Normally no splitting is absolute, any more than repression is absolute. The conscious and unconscious parts of the ego are therefore not separated by a rigid barrier; as Freud described it, in speaking of the different areas of the mind, they are shaded off into each other.

When, however, there is a very rigid barrier produced by splitting, the implication is that development has not proceeded normally. The conclusion would be that the death instinct is dominant. On the other hand, when the life instinct is in the ascendant, integration and synthesis can successfully progress. The nature of splitting determines the nature of repression.¹ If splitting processes are not excessive, the conscious and unconscious remain permeable to one another. However, whereas splitting performed by an ego which is still largely unorganized cannot adequately lead to modification of anxiety, in the older child and in the adult repression is a much more successful means both of warding off anxieties and modifying them. In repression the more highly organized ego divides itself off against the unconscious thoughts, impulses, and terrifying figures more effectively.

Although my conclusions are based on Freud's discovery of the instincts and their influence on the different parts of the mind, the additions I have suggested in this paper have involved a number of differences, upon which I would now make some concluding remarks.

¹ Cf. my paper 'Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant' (pp. 86-87 of this volume) where I said: 'The mechanism of splitting underlies repression (as implied in

Freud's concept); but in contrast to the earliest forms of splitting which lead to states of disintegration, repression does not normally result in a disintegration of the self. Since at this stage there is greater integration, within both the conscious and the unconscious parts of the mind, and since in repression the splitting predominantly effects a division between conscious and unconscious, neither part of the self is exposed to the degree of disintegration which may arise in previous stages. However, the extent to which splitting processes are resorted to in the first few months of life vitally influences the use of repression at a later stage.'

- 244 -

You may recall that Freud's emphasis on the libido was much greater than that on aggression. Although long before he discovered the life and death instincts he had seen the importance of the destructive component of sexuality in the form of sadism, he did not give sufficient weight to aggression in its impact on emotional life. Perhaps, therefore, he never fully worked out his discovery of the two instincts and seemed reluctant to extend it to the whole of mental functioning. Yet, as I pointed out earlier, he applied this discovery to clinical material to a greater extent than has been realized. If, however, Freud's conception of the two instincts is taken to its ultimate conclusion, the interaction of the life and death instincts will be seen to govern the whole of mental life.

I have already suggested that the formation of the super-ego precedes the Oedipus complex and is initiated by the introjection of the primal object. The super-ego maintains its connection with the other parts of the ego through having internalized different aspects of the same good object, a process of internalization which is also of the greatest importance in the organization of the ego. I attribute to the ego from the beginning of life a need and capacity not only to split but also to integrate itself. Integration, which gradually leads to a climax in the depressive position, depends on the preponderance of the life instinct and implies in some measure the acceptance by the ego of the working of the death instinct. I see the formation of the ego as an entity to be largely determined by the alternation between splitting and repression on the one hand, and integration in relation to objects on the other.

Freud stated that the ego constantly enriches itself from the id. I have said earlier that in my view the ego is called into operation and developed by the life instinct. The way in which this is achieved is through its earliest object relations. The breast, on which the life and death instincts are projected, is the first object which by introjection is internalized. In this way both instincts find an object to which they attach themselves and thereby by projection and reintroduction the ego is enriched as well as strengthened.

The more the ego can integrate its destructive impulses and synthesize the different aspects of its objects, the richer it becomes; for the split-off parts of the self and of impulses which are rejected because they arouse anxiety and give pain also contain valuable aspects of the personality and of the phantasy life which is impoverished by splitting them off. Though the rejected aspects of the self and of internalized objects contribute to instability, they are also at the source of inspiration in artistic productions and in various intellectual activities.

- 245 -

My conception of earliest object relations and super-ego development is in keeping with my hypothesis of the operation of the ego at least from birth onwards, as well as of the all-pervading power of the life and death instincts.

- 246 -