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THE EGO AND
THE MECHANISMS OF
DEFENCE

ANNA FREUD

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION BY
CECIL BAINES

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A. THEORY OF THE MECHANISMS OF DEFENCE

into its opposite, into an over-insistence on her own magical powers, by means of which she avoided the painful insight into what she supposed to be her physical inferiority. Her ego made use of the defence-mechanism of reversal, a kind of reaction-formation against the affect, at the same time betraying its obsessional attitude towards the instinct. Once this was realized, it was easy for the analyst to deduce the presence of penis-envy whenever the game of magic recurred. We see, then, that what we acquire by applying this principle is simply a kind of technique for the translation of the defensive utterances of the ego, and this method corresponds almost exactly to the resolution of the ego-resistances as they occur in free association. Our purpose is the same as in the analysis of resistance. The more completely we succeed in bringing both the resistance and the defence against affects into consciousness and so rendering them inoperative, the more rapidly shall we advance to an understanding of the id.

CHAPTER IV

THE MECHANISMS OF DEFENCE

PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL theory and the mechanisms of defence.—The term ‘defence,’ which I have used so freely in the three last chapters, is the earliest representative of the dynamic standpoint in psycho-analytical theory. It occurs for the first time in 1894, in Freud’s study ‘The Defence Neuro-Psychoses,’ and is employed in this and several of his subsequent works (‘The Ætiology of Hysteria,’ ‘Further Remarks on the Defence Neuro-Psychoses’) to describe the ego’s struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects. Later, this term was abandoned and, as time went on, was replaced by that of ‘repression.’ The relation between the two notions, however, remained undetermined. In an appendix to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926) Freud reverted to the old concept of defence, stating that he thought it would undoubtedly be an advantage to use it again, ‘provided we employ it explicitly as a general designation for all the techniques which the ego makes use of in conflicts which may lead to a neurosis, while we retain the word “repression” for that special method of defence which the line of approach taken by our investigations made us

better acquainted with in the first instance.'¹ Here we have direct refutation of the notion that repression occupies a unique position amongst the psychic processes, and a place is made in psycho-analytical theory for others which serve the same purpose, namely, 'the protection of the ego against instinctual demands.' The significance of repression is reduced to that of 'a special method of defence.'

This new conception of the rôle of repression suggests an enquiry into the other specific modes of defence and a comparison of those so far discovered and described by psycho-analytical investigators.

The same appendix to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* contains the conjecture to which I alluded in the last chapter, namely, that 'further investigations may show that there is an intimate connection between special forms of defence and particular illnesses, as, for instance, between repression and hysteria.' Regression and reactive alteration of the ego (reaction-formation), isolation and 'undoing' what has been done are all cited as defensive techniques employed in obsessional neurosis.

A lead having thus been given, it is not difficult to complete the enumeration of the ego's defensive methods as described in Freud's other writings. For instance, in 'Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality,' introjection, or identification, and projection² are mentioned as important defensive methods

¹ *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, pp. 154-5.

² 'Certain Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality.' *Collected Papers*, vol. ii, p. 232.

employed by the ego in morbid affections of this type and are characterized as 'neurotic mechanisms.' In his work on the theory of instinct¹ he describes the processes of turning against the self and reversal, and these he designates as 'vicissitudes of instinct.' From the point of view of the ego these two latter mechanisms also must come under the heading of methods of defence, for every vicissitude to which the instincts are liable has its origin in some ego-activity. Were it not for the intervention of the ego or of those external forces which the ego represents, every instinct would know only one fate—that of gratification. To these nine methods of defence, which are very familiar in the practice and have been exhaustively described in the theoretical writings of psycho-analysis (regression, repression, reaction-formation, isolation, undoing, projection, introjection, turning against the self and reversal), we must add a tenth, which pertains rather to the study of the normal than to that of neurosis: sublimation, or displacement of instinctual aims.

So far as we know at present, the ego has these ten different methods at its disposal in its conflicts with instinctual representatives and affects. It is the task of the practising analyst to discover how far these methods prove effective in the processes of ego-resistance and symptom-formation which he has the opportunity of observing in individuals.

A comparison of the results achieved by the different mechanisms in individual cases.—I will take as an illustration the case of a young woman employed

¹ 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes.' *Collected Papers*, vol. iv, p. 69.

in an institution for children. She was the middle child in a number of brothers and sisters. Throughout childhood she suffered from passionate penis-envy, relating to her elder and her younger brother, and from jealousy, which was repeatedly excited by her mother's successive pregnancies. Finally, envy and jealousy combined in a fierce hostility to her mother. But, since the child's love-fixation was no less strong than her hatred, a violent defensive conflict with her negative impulses succeeded an initial period of uninhibited unruliness and naughtiness. She dreaded lest the manifestation of her hate should cause her to lose her mother's love, of which she could not bear to be deprived. She also dreaded that her mother would punish her and she criticized herself most severely for her prohibited longings for revenge. As she entered upon the period of latency, this anxiety-situation and conflict of conscience became more and more acute and her ego tried to master her impulses in various ways. In order to solve the problem of ambivalence she displaced outwards one side of her ambivalent feeling. Her mother continued to be a love-object, but, from that time on, there was always in the girl's life a second important person of the female sex, whom she hated violently. This eased matters: her hatred of the more remote object was not visited with the sense of guilt so mercilessly as was her hatred of her mother. But even the displaced hatred was a source of much suffering. As time went on, it was plain that this

first displacement was inadequate as a means of mastering the situation.

The little girl's ego now resorted to a second mechanism. It turned inwards the hatred, which hitherto had related exclusively to other people. The child tortured herself with self-accusations and feelings of inferiority and, throughout childhood and adolescence right into adult life, she did everything she could to put herself at a disadvantage and injure her interests, always surrendering her own wishes to the demands made on her by others. To all outward appearance she had become masochistic since adopting this method of defence.

But this measure, too, proved inadequate as a means of mastering the situation. The patient then entered on a process of projection. The hatred which she had felt for female love-objects or their substitutes was transformed into the conviction that she herself was hated, slighted or persecuted by them. Her ego thus found relief from the sense of guilt. The naughty child, who cherished wicked feelings against the people around her, underwent metamorphosis into the victim of cruelty, neglect and persecution. But the use of this mechanism left upon her character a permanent paranoid imprint, which was a source of very great difficulty to her both in youth and adult years.

The patient was quite grown up when she came to be analysed. She was not regarded as ill by those who knew her, but her sufferings were acute. In spite of all the energy which her ego had expended upon its defence she had not succeeded in really

mastering her anxiety and sense of guilt. On any occasion when her envy, jealousy and hatred were in danger of activation, she invariably had recourse to all her defence-mechanisms. But her emotional conflicts never came to any issue which could set her ego at rest and, apart from this, the final result of all her struggles was meagre in the extreme. She succeeded in maintaining the fiction that she loved her mother, but she felt herself to be full of hatred and on this account she despised and mistrusted herself. She did not succeed in preserving the sense of being loved; it had been destroyed by the mechanism of projection. Nor did she succeed in escaping the punishments which she had feared in childhood; by turning her aggressive impulses inwards she inflicted upon herself all the suffering which she had formerly anticipated in the form of punishment by her mother. The three mechanisms of which she had made use could not prevent her ego from being in a perpetual state of uneasy tension and vigilance, nor relieve it of the exaggerated demands made upon it and the sense of acute torment from which it suffered.

Let us compare these processes with the corresponding relations in hysteria or obsessional neurosis. We will assume that the problem is the same in each case: how to master that hatred of the mother which springs from penis-envy. Hysteria solves it by means of repression. The hatred of the mother is obliterated from consciousness and any possible derivatives which seek entry into the ego are vigorously warded off. The aggressive impulses

associated with hatred and the sexual impulses associated with penis-envy may be transformed into bodily symptoms, if the patient possesses the capacity for conversion and somatic conditions are favourable. In other cases the ego protects itself against the reactivation of the original conflict by developing a phobia and avoiding the occasions of trouble. It imposes restrictions upon its activity, thus evading any situation which might lead to a return of the repressed impulses.

In obsessional neurosis, as in hysteria, hatred of the mother and penis-envy are in the first instance repressed. Subsequently the ego secures itself against their return by means of reaction-formations. A child who has been aggressive towards her mother develops an excessive tenderness towards her and is worried about her safety; envy and jealousy are transformed into unselfishness and thoughtfulness for others. By instituting obsessional ceremonials and various precautionary measures she protects the beloved persons from any outbreak of her aggressive impulses, while by means of a moral code of exaggerated strictness she checks the manifestation of her sexual impulses.

A child who masters her infantile conflicts in the hysterical or obsessional manner here described presents a more pathological picture than the patient whose case we first considered. The repression which has taken place has deprived such children of the control of part of their affective life. The original relation to the mother and brothers and the important relation to their own

femininity have been withdrawn from further conscious assimilation and have become obsessively and irrevocably fixed in the reactive alteration undergone by the ego. A great part of their activity is consumed in maintaining the anti-cathexes which are designed subsequently to secure the repression, and this loss of energy is apparent in the inhibition and curtailment of other vital activities. But the ego of the child who has solved her conflicts by means of repression, with all its pathological sequels, is at peace. It suffers secondarily through the consequences of the neurosis which repression has brought upon it. But it has, at least within the limits of the conversion-hysteria or obsessional neurosis, bound its anxiety, disposed of its sense of guilt and gratified its ideas of punishment. The difference is that, if the ego employs repression, the formation of symptoms relieves it of the task of mastering its conflicts, while, if it employs the other defensive methods, it still has to deal with the problem.

In practice, the use of repression as distinct from other defensive methods is less common than a combination in one and the same individual of the two techniques. This is well illustrated by the history of a patient who also suffered in very early childhood from acute penis-envy, in her case in relation to her father. The sexual phantasies of this phase reached their climax in the wish to bite off her father's penis. At this point the ego set up its defence. The shocking idea was repressed. It was replaced by its opposite—a general disinclination to

bite, which soon developed into a difficulty in eating, accompanied by hysterical feelings of disgust. One part of the prohibited impulse—that represented by the oral phantasy—had now been mastered. But the aggressive content, i.e. the wish to rob her father or a father-substitute, remained in consciousness for a time, until, as the super-ego developed, the ego's moral sense repudiated this impulse. By means of a mechanism of displacement, which I shall discuss more fully later, the urge to rob was transformed into a peculiar kind of contentedness and unassumingness. We see that the two successive methods of defence produced a substratum of hysteria and, superimposed on this, a specific ego-modification, not in itself of a pathological character.

The impression conveyed by these examples is confirmed when we examine in detail the effect of the different defence-mechanisms in other cases. Theoretically, repression may be subsumed under the general concept of defence and placed side by side with the other specific methods. Nevertheless, from the point of view of efficacy it occupies a unique position in comparison with the rest. In terms of quantity it accomplishes more than they, that is to say, it is capable of mastering powerful instinctual impulses, in face of which the other defensive measures are quite ineffective. It acts once only, though the anti-cathexis, effected to secure the repression, is a permanent institution demanding a constant expenditure of energy. The other mechanisms, on the contrary, have to be

brought into operation again whenever there is an accession of instinctual energy. But repression is not only the most efficacious, it is also the most dangerous, mechanism. The dissociation from the ego entailed by the withdrawal of consciousness from whole tracts of instinctual and affective life may destroy the integrity of the personality for good and all. Thus repression becomes the basis of compromise-formation and neurosis. The consequences of the other defensive methods are not less serious but, even when they assume an acute form, they remain more within the limits of the normal. They manifest themselves in innumerable transformations, distortions and deformities of the ego, which are in part the accompaniment of and in part substitutes for neurosis.

Suggestions for a chronological classification.—Even when we have accorded to repression its exceptional position among the ego's methods of defence, we still feel as regards the rest that we are including under a single heading a number of heterogeneous phenomena. Methods such as that of isolation and undoing stand side by side with genuine instinctual processes, such as regression, reversal and turning against the self. Some of these serve to master large quantities of instinct or affect, others only small quantities. The considerations which determine the ego's choice of mechanism remain uncertain. Perhaps repression is pre-eminently of value in combating sexual wishes, while other methods can more readily be employed against instinctual forces of a different kind, in particular, against

aggressive impulses. Or it may be that these other methods have only to complete what repression has left undone or to deal with such prohibited ideas as return to consciousness when repression fails.¹ Or possibly each defence-mechanism is first evolved in order to master some specific instinctual urge and so is associated with a particular phase of infantile development.²

The appendix to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, from which I have already quoted more than once, contains a provisional answer to these suggestions. 'It may well be that before its sharp cleavage into an ego and an id, and before the formation of a super-ego, the mental apparatus makes use of different methods of defence from those which it employs after it has attained these levels of organization.'³ This may be expanded as follows. Repression consists in the withholding or expulsion of an idea or affect from the conscious ego. It is meaningless to speak of repression where the ego is still merged with the id. Similarly we might suppose that projection and introjection were methods which depended on the differentiation of the ego from the outside world. The expulsion of ideas or affects from the ego and their relegation to the outside world would be a relief to the ego, only when it had learnt to distinguish itself from that world. Or again, introjection from the outside world into the ego could not be said to have the effect of enriching

¹ I am following here a suggestion made by Jeanne Lampl-de Groot during a discussion by the Vienna Society.

² According to a suggestion by Helene Deutsch.

³ *Loc. cit.*, pp. 157-8.

the latter unless there were already a clear differentiation between that which belonged to the one and that which belonged to the other. But the situation is by no means so simple. In the case of projection and introjection the first beginnings are much more obscure.¹ Sublimation, i.e. the displacement of the instinctual aim in conformity with higher social values, presupposes the acceptance or at least the knowledge of such values, that is to say, presupposes the existence of the super-ego. Accordingly, the defence-mechanisms of repression and sublimation could not be employed until relatively late in the process of development, while the position in time which we shall assign to projection and introjection depends upon the theoretical standpoint which happens to be adopted. Such processes as regression, reversal, or turning round upon the self are probably independent of the stage which the psychic structure has reached and as old as the instincts themselves, or at least as old as the conflict between instinctual impulses and any hindrance which they may encounter on their way to gratification. We should not be surprised to find that these are the very earliest defence-mechanisms employed by the ego.

But this suggested chronological classification does not accord with our experience that the earliest manifestations of neurosis which we observe in young children are hysterical symptoms, of whose connection with repression there can be no doubt;

¹ Freud, *Totem und Tabu*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. X, S. 81. Compare also the view held by the English school, to which I refer on page 57.

on the other hand, the genuine masochistic phenomena, which result from the turning-round of the instinct upon the self, are very rarely met with in earliest childhood. According to the theory of the English school of analysis, introjection and projection, which in our view should be assigned to the period after the ego has been differentiated from the outside world, are the very processes by which the structure of the ego is developed and but for which differentiation would never have taken place. These differences of opinion bring home to us the fact that the chronology of psychic processes is still one of the most obscure fields of analytical theory. We have a good illustration of this in the disputed question of when the individual super-ego is actually formed. So a classification of the defence-mechanisms according to position in time inevitably partakes of all the doubt and uncertainty which even to-day attach to chronological pronouncements in analysis. It will probably be best to abandon the attempt so to classify them and, instead, to study in detail the situations which call forth the defensive reactions.