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SELF-PRESERVATION AND THE DEATH INSTINCT

BY ERNST SIMMEL (LOS ANGELES)

There is a certain uneasiness among psychoanalysts today regarding those fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory, the theories of the libido and of instinct. This uneasiness originated when Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle developed a dualistic instinct theory which assumed that life in its normal as well as abnormal manifestations was controlled by the antagonistic dynamics of a libidinal, constructive life instinct and a nonlibidinal, self-destructive death instinct. It should be remembered that Freud's first fundamental instinct theory, developed on the basis of the clinical study of the transference neuroses, was also dualistic. It envisaged a conflict between the ego and the sexual instinct, or, as Freud phrased it at the time, a conflict between ego instincts and sexual instincts.

In his Introductory Lectures¹ Freud says, 'Psychoanalysis has never forgotten that nonsexual instincts also exist; it has been built upon a sharp distinction between sexual instincts and ego instincts; and in the face of all opposition it has insisted *not* that they arise from sexuality but that the neuroses owe their origin to a *conflict* between ego and sexuality.'

The ego instincts were the instincts of self-preservation. Freud once formulated this principle of self-preservation inherent in the ego instincts in a very simple way when he said, 'The ego in *all* its conflicts can have no other aim than to maintain itself.'

The instinct theory with which Freud started his psychoanalytic researches thus had one thing in common with the theory with which he concluded it: the principle of a dualism

¹Read before the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Society April 17, 1943.

¹Freud: *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1933. p. 294.

reflecting the dynamics of two instinctual and opposing energies.

The formulation of the first conception thus was *self-preservation versus sex*, or, as Freud phrases it, in biological terms: 'The ego, in its capacity of independent individual organism, had entered into opposition with itself in its other capacity as a member of a series of generations'.²

Freud went far along the path of psychoanalytic research until, having started out from a dualistic theory concerning a conflict *with* the ego, he finally arrived at the conception of an instinctual conflict *within* the ego: a struggle of one part of the ego which desires to keep alive against another part which desires to destroy itself. Along the way, he repeatedly found it necessary to reexamine his basic concepts of libido and instincts and to change, or, respectively, enlarge them.

This paper is an attempt to advance another theory concerning the dualistic theory of instincts, which differs to a certain degree from Freud's views.³ It substantiates Freud's

² *Ibid.*, pp. 345-346. It is apparent that Freud was inclined to assume that the conflict between two instinct categories pointed to an ultimate conflict between self-preservation of the individual on the one hand, and reproduction as preservation of the species on the other. However, he emphasized that this biological antagonism seemed to him of no importance, as it was not applicable to the study of transference neuroses.

³ I presented my theories at various meetings of the German Psychoanalytic Society, and the International Psychoanalytic Association, as far back as 1921. As early as 1924, I summarized them at the Innsbruck meeting, giving a paper on the subject of *Primary Repression* (Urväterängung) and *Instinctual Libido*, and later at Wiesbaden in 1932, under the heading of *Pregenital Instinct Primacy and Libido Organization*. These studies dealt with the vicissitudes of ego libido, precisely the problem to which Freud had again and again called the attention of psychoanalysts, requesting them to study it. This because the field of ego psychology still was largely unexplored, and promised to yield results important for a deeper understanding of the psychopathology of certain personality disorders.

When I considered the advisability of presenting my theories in book form, I decided to put it off for the following reason: I found myself at that time unable to fit my theory into the Freudian concept of a dualistic theory of libidinal eros instinct versus nonlibidinal death instinct. My theories had been developed independently of and partly previous to Freud's publications on this subject. I started work on a paper which bore the title: *On the Ubiquity of Introjective Destruction*. Since Freud in the meantime had published

view that the fundamental conflict which binds and disrupts extra-individual life is also responsible for all intra-individual disturbances. It is an eternal conflict between constructive and destructive principles: the ambivalent conflict between love and hate. However, it deviates from that of Freud as soon as we come to the discussion of the essence of libido, and its rôle in the conflict between the two above-mentioned principles.

Anticipating, I may say that I do not consider the destructive energies to be manifestations of a death instinct, but instead to be the manifestation of an instinct of self-preservation. In accordance with Freud's last concept of libido, the need of self-preservation is to be considered a *libidinal* component of the ego. If one accepts this then there is an apparent contradiction from the very beginning in ascribing destructive tendencies to the ego instinct of self-preservation. That we are aggressive and destructive when faced with the necessity of defending our endangered self sounds sensible though banal. However, to maintain that we derive the destructive instinctual energies for such emergencies from the reservoir of libido appears to be clear-cut libido-theoretical nonsense. And this because in accordance with Freud's latest concepts, libido is precisely that instinctual energy which is supposed to *bind* substances, not to aim at their disruption and *destruction*.

Before one can expect to accept the assertion that there is no actual contradiction between these two statements one must briefly review the development of Freud's theories of libido and instinct. Freud himself finally broadened the concept of libido to such an extent that we have no practical or theoretical difficulty in including the destructive energies within the libidinal nature of the instinct of self-preservation.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle, it was only natural for me to suspect that my own theories might be all wrong and that I should wait for further publications by Freud, testing meanwhile my own hypotheses by further clinical observations. Today I am convinced that my original assumptions were correct, for they can be used as a working hypothesis to shed new light not only on the genesis and dynamics of transference neuroses but also on narcissistic neuroses, psychoses and problems of psychosomatic medicine.

Let us recapitulate Freud's formulation of instinct and libido:

'An "instinct" appears to us as a borderland concept between the mental and the physical'. . . .⁴ 'An instinct may be described as having a source, an object, and an aim. The source is a state of excitation within the body, and its aim is to remove that excitation; in the course of its path from its source to the attainment of its aim the instinct becomes operative mentally.'⁵

Freud further characterizes the sexual instinct as an instinct with the specific aim of providing organic pleasure to certain erogenous zones of the body. The chief erogenous zones of childhood are the mouth, the anus and the genitals. The experience of pleasurable sensations in these zones, gained in contact with the object, establishes the child's object relationships, even though the sexual character of these zones become recognizable as such only later, when the erogenous zones are organized under the primacy of the genital zone, and enter the service of the function of reproduction.⁶

Now let us return to the original concept of libido. 'Libido is the investment of energy, directed by the ego towards the object of its sexual desire.'⁷ Freud differentiates three phases of libido development: the oral, the anal and the phallic, which precede the genital libido organization. He abandoned his original idea that pregenital erogenous zones go 'preying separately' in search of organ pleasure. He discovered that in the pregenital stage there already existed an organization of sexual component impulses which determine the infant's choice of the object and that this pregenital libido organization has destructive characteristics. This is the anal-sadistic organization of the libido.

On the other hand, Freud has frequently used the term

⁴ Freud: *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*. Coll. Papers, IV, p. 64.

⁵ Freud: *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis: Anxiety and Instinctual Life*. London: Hogarth Press, 1933.

⁶ Cf. Freud: *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*. Coll. Papers, IV, pp. 68-69.

⁷ Freud: *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Op. cit., p. 346.

'oral stage of libido development' as synonymous with 'cannibalistic stage of the libido'. Since cannibalism is doubtless of a destructive character, we see that destruction and libido are not irreconcilable opposites in Freud's original theories. Later he assumed that these two energy categories ordinarily appear simultaneously, and that every stage of development of the sexual instinct corresponds to a specific stage of development of the destructive instinct.

Freud has always stressed the point that in the beginning of life, the infantile sexual instincts 'support themselves by the instincts of self-preservation'.⁸ It is evident that Freud considered the oral stage of the libido, the tendency to cannibalistic destruction, and the manifestations of the instincts of self-preservation to be identical or at least coördinated. These three terms are placed side by side, as a preparation for the new theory; to demonstrate that, in discovering a new field, nothing more was done than to pass through a door which Freud himself had opened without entering.

Freud frequently emphasized that the two principal forces reigning over the world were hunger and love. However, while concentrating on the study of the psychodynamics of the transference neuroses, he did not expect that the comparison of these two biological forces would in any way help him. He told us that psychoanalytic investigation concerning the instincts of self-preservation would have to wait until we had collected more knowledge about the ego itself or about what is happening within the ego, when, in obedience to reality, it has to ward off sexual-libidinal demands. Freud did not keep us waiting too long. He extended his research into the ego deteriorations of the narcissistic neuroses and psychoses and provided us with a deeper understanding of the fact that the ego 'in all its conflicts can have no other tendency than to maintain itself'. This means nothing more than that the ego must strive to keep up its *inner narcissistic libido equilibrium*.

⁸ Freud: *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*. Coll. Papers, IV, p. 69.

Following the observation that in the psychoses the libido withdrawn from the object-world returns to the ego and takes the ego itself as a substitute for the object, Freud was faced with the necessity of enlarging his original concept of libido. It could still be defined as an 'energy investment directed by the ego toward an object of its sexual desire'; but the fact that the ego regressively could become its own object proved that the reservoir of libido was contained within the ego itself, that libido as a psychobiological energy was primarily objectless and could be sent out or withdrawn by the ego in accordance with its needs. This retransformation of object libido into narcissistic libido and the subsequent damming up of ego libido was then considered the dynamic cause of such ego deteriorations as are seen in hypochondria and the paraphrenic psychoses.

The previous *qualitative* prerequisite for sexual libido, the provision of *organ pleasure*, lost its significance and gave way to the view of a quantitative distribution of narcissistic libido within the ego. The original concept of the tendency of the pleasure-pain principle, to provide pleasure and to avoid pain, had been enlarged into the concept of a principle the tendency of which is to keep the libidinal tension within the ego at a certain level beyond which pain or *Unlust* is experienced.

Anxiety is a specific phenomenon of this quantitative disturbance of the narcissistic libido equilibrium. It functions as an alert for the ego, causing it to set in motion either the adequate instinctual autonomic and outer motor discharges or, instead, the necessary psychic defense mechanisms.

The perception of anxiety constitutes the danger situation for the ego. Defined in terms of the instinct theory, we may say that the ego perceives itself as being in danger when it finds itself helplessly exposed to the driving energies of the instinct needs of the id. Fear of annihilation or death results from the concomitant perception that there is either an object stronger than the ego—the hostile object which opposes the release of tension—or that there is no friendly object avail-

able to bring about a release from tension which has become unbearable.

Freud's formulation: 'The ego, in all its conflicts, can have no other aim than to maintain itself' can be interpreted, therefore, in terms of the pleasure-pain principle. Anxiety is the signal to the ego that it is about to succumb to the frustration of a vital instinctual need. Anxiety is a manifestation of the disruption of the ego's narcissistic equilibrium. The ego's aim 'to maintain itself' therefore expresses its need to maintain or to restore to normal its inner narcissistic equilibrium.

The criterion of a normal ego is that it is unaware of itself when functioning as controlling agent, as passage or damming up basin for instinctual id energies. Its unawareness of itself is an expression of its perfect inner libidinal balance. On the other hand, the normal ego remains aware of the outer object world because the driving forces of its instinctual sources make it dependent on it.

The maturity of a normal ego may be described as based on the effective operation of its superego. The superego is a compromise formation. External object reality and internal instinct psychic reality have combined to establish it as a common representative within the ego, for the purpose of arbitration in conflicts between the demands of reality and the demands of instinct. The superego aids the ego in appraising the libidinal intensity of instinctual needs and their potentialities of satisfaction through objects. The effectiveness of the superego determines the capacity of a mature ego to perceive a situation of tension as a danger, and to react to it with the fear of death. (Fear of death is an anticipation of a final, irreparable disruption of narcissistic libido equilibrium.) If appraisal reveals a condition of permanent and absolute helplessness because the object, 'the thing by means of which the instinct achieves its aim', is and will remain out of reach, then there still remains the possibility of avoiding the fear of death by means of a new distribution of narcissistic libido between ego and superego itself. The superego is able to take the place of the object and bind the frustrated object

libido after its transformation into narcissistic libido.⁹ An effective superego can provide the ego with temporary instinct security, like its parent prototype, and thus act as a preventive against fear of death. It seems that this must be the meaning of a remark which Freud once made to the effect that 'the fear of death concerns an interplay between the ego and the superego'.¹⁰ A mature man thus becomes capable of fearless dying by virtue of a well-functioning superego.¹¹

Self-preservation is ultimately an attempt to preserve the coherence of the structural unity of the ego by means of an adequate distribution of narcissistic libido. *Self-preservation indicates the ego's tendency to keep itself free from anxiety.*

Freud's original teaching was that the whole host of psychoneurotic and psychotic disorders arise from the struggle of the ego to fight off anxiety. Psychoneurotic disorders result from the ego's need to set defense mechanisms in motion, because anxiety, as an expression of the tension of instinct needs, lacks adequate somatic discharges. The ego, caught in the conflict between object-frustrations and libidinal claims, is in danger of losing its inner economic balance and therewith its structural coherence.

In retrospect, we may say that Freud's original dualistic concept of ego self-preservation versus id instinctual claims, has fundamentally retained its validity. Since its formulation we have come to understand the preservation of the self as a manifestation of the pleasure-pain principle. Thus it was logical for Freud to accept the libidinal nature of the instincts of self-preservation.

How does Freud's latest assumption of a nonlibidinal aggressive destructive death instinct fit into this scheme? How can Freud taught us to understand that an increase of self-esteem results from instinct renunciation.

⁹ Freud: *The Ego and the Id*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1927, p. 86.

¹¹ However, fearless dying is also a capacity of aged persons because, by virtue of their age, their instinctual sources have ceased to make instinctual claims and they are thus less apt to be helplessly exposed to instinct needs and consequently less exposed to disturbances of their narcissistic libido balance.

the thesis of this destructive instinct be fitted into the theory of neuroses and psychoses?

The ambivalence conflict of love and hate which underlies all psychic disorders appears in a new light when we assume instinct energies with destructive qualities only. How can we apply the theory of a nonlibidinal death instinct to the generally accepted theories of neuroses and psychoses? Would this assumption not entail a revision of the metapsychology of psychic disorders? Freud himself did not undertake the task of reviewing the theory of the neuroses under his new dualistic perspective. And the attempts made by other psychoanalysts in this directions have apparently not yielded satisfactory results.

It is here that the assumption of an instinct of self-preservation with object destructive energies would fill the gap in our understanding of the rôle of hate and destruction in the genesis of the psychoneuroses.

We may ask ourselves whether the necessity for self-preservation is not itself sufficiently intelligible as a manifestation of the libido in its widest sense. Is it necessary to establish a separate instinct for the purpose of self-preservation, which would have the psychobiological task of providing specific gratifications which simultaneously help to maintain the integrity of the ego?

Freud obviously thought this hypothesis unnecessary. He considered the striving for self-preservation explicable on the basis of the libidinal energies of the sex instinct, which now becomes eros. The complications encountered by this striving he considered due to the antagonistic functioning of a separate instinct of self-destruction.

Freud predicated an instinct of self-destruction because self-destruction obeys the ultimate tendency of all instincts to remove organic excitation and to reinstate the earlier condition of instinct-repose. Complete self-destruction removes the excitation of all organic sources, and reinstates the inorganic condition of the substance which is death.

Many psychoanalysts have been willing to accept Freud's assumption of self-destruction as a cardinal principle of nature.

They have, however, hesitated to accept his definition of this principle as an instinct because the death instinct shows only one of the three characteristics of instinct, namely the aim of removing excitation. But there is neither a specific organic source nor an object which could be considered characteristic for a death instinct.

The specific instinct of self-preservation actually fulfils all the requirements of Freud's earlier complete definition of an instinct. Let us examine the instinct of self-preservation by pursuing the method used by Freud to study the sex instinct. All the manifestations of the love life were reduced to one cardinal sex instinct. The instinct of self-preservation has an abundance of manifestations, varieties and derivatives, all of which can also be traced back to the demands of a single organic zone. Furthermore, the instinct of self-preservation has a particular significance for the establishment of a perfect narcissistic libido equilibrium, resulting in complete instinct repose.

What is the origin of the principle of self-preservation? What are its three characteristics: organic source, aim and object?

The origin is the instinct to devour. Its organic source is the gastrointestinal tract.¹² Its aim is to remove the stimulus from the gastrointestinal tract and its object is food. The ultimate aim, represented only in our deepest unconscious as a sort of unconscious instinctual knowledge, is the aim of self-preservation and self-development. This may be contrasted to the ultimate aim of the sexual instinct, that of reproduction. In the latest concept of the libido, Freud abandoned his original idea of the nonexistence of an ultimate aim, of the sex instinct. When he defined libido as 'the energy mani-

¹² In a paper, *Repression, Regression, and Organic Disease*, I once called it 'the animal within us'. Biting and devouring, in an animal, not only serve the purpose of nourishment but also constitute the sole means of aggression if flight is impossible. We have inherited the devouring tendency from our animal forbears, not from our human cannibalistic ancestors, who merely handed it on to us.

festation of the eros instinct, which strives towards the *synthesis of living substances into larger entities*', he certainly included reproduction.

If we accept Freud's definition of the libido as an energy aiming at 'the synthesis of living substances', we find to our surprise that we can fit the destructive energy of the instinct of self-preservation, as defined above, into the category of libidinal energies. The instinct of self-preservation, like the sex instinct, aims at the 'synthesis of living substances'. The instinct of self-preservation seeks to achieve this aim within the individual, while the sex instinct extends beyond the borderline of the individual. Gratification of the sex instinct removes the excitation of its organic source and preserves the object, whereas gratification of the instinct of self-preservation removes the excitation of the gastrointestinal zone and destroys the object.

Freud's encompassing definition of libido makes it permissible to reconcile my thesis of destruction as a manifestation of ego self-preservation with his view that the ego instincts are of libidinal nature.

There are valid reasons for assuming that all the variations of aggression and destructive tendencies which may develop in the course of life are derivatives of the primitive demands of the gastrointestinal zone.

In order to make it comprehensible that the ego instinct, aiming at a reinstatement of the narcissistic libido equilibrium, aims primarily at complete instinct repose, it is necessary to recapitulate Freud's statements concerning the development of ego libido.

Libido is first and foremost narcissistic libido. From its reservoir, libido can be sent out and taken back. It acquires the character of object libido only through a change of attachment.

Freud distinguished three stages in the development of narcissistic libido. In a sequence which is the reverse of their chronological development they are as follows: in the oedipus

conflict, the child responds to the frustration of his object libido with a stage of secondary narcissism. He takes his ego as a substitute for the frustrating object. This is possible because the infantile ego has previously been in a state of primary narcissism. Primary narcissism is a condition in which the infantile ego has discovered itself because of a synthesis of its autoerotic strivings, derived from all its partial erogenous zones. This stage of primary narcissism develops from what might be called a condition of 'primordial narcissism'. This primordial narcissism existed before birth, in utero. It is the vegetative stage of the pre-ego, identical with the id. In this stage there is complete instinct repose. During prenatal existence, narcissistic libido does not have to leave its reservoir to become attached to an object. No pleasure premium gratifications are needed to induce the infant to search for an object, because there is no stimulation of any organic source. The maternal object, 'the thing by means of which' the instinct of self-preservation 'achieves its aim', functions automatically. Likewise there is no need to perceive object want. Complete instinct repose is identical with perfect narcissistic equilibrium and is reflected mentally in a condition of unconsciousness, which is broken by the act of birth.

The trauma of birth, as Freud formulated it, consists in an out and out disruption of the infant's prenatal narcissistic equilibrium. It is through the act of feeding after birth that the infant regains his complete narcissistic equilibrium and becomes unconscious again, i.e., falls asleep. *It is the satiation of the gastrointestinal zone—the representative of the instinct of self-preservation—which brings about this complete instinct repose.* Thus preservation of self, from the very beginning of life, becomes associated in our mind with the tendency to preserve or to regain complete instinct repose.

My fundamental thesis is that the most primitive stage of libido development is not the oral, but the gastrointestinal libido organization, because only through the satiation of the demands of the entire gastrointestinal tract is the infant capable

of regaining general instinct repose. Mouth and anus are merely to be considered the terminal parts of this organic zone, which establish its contacts with the object world. Pleasurable sensations at these terminal zones are essentially forepleasure mechanisms, introducing the end-pleasure of digestion. The operation of the entire gastrointestinal zone is necessary to give the process of feeding the quality of a cannibalistic act. For only hereby does the intake of mother's milk become the incorporation of the maternal object, while simultaneously reestablishing the psychological union which existed between the infant and the maternal object before birth.

In terms of libido theory, we may say: during the postnatal feeding process, narcissistic libido leaves its reservoir and returns to it without undergoing any alteration in quality. It has indeed reached an object, but the satisfaction which this object provides serves only the need to restore the narcissistic libido equilibrium. It is just this psychological constellation resulting from the postnatal act of nutrition which substantiates Freud's statement that, in the beginning of life, the qualities of narcissistic libido and object libido are indistinguishable.

The act of feeding is a receptive, but not merely a passive one. A syndrome of striated muscles must come into play to make it possible for the infant to find the maternal breast and to hold on to it until complete intestinal satiation is achieved and unconsciousness reestablished.

The surrounding world disappears from conscious perception through satiation of the gastrointestinal instinct zone. Inextinguishable memory traces of this primordial postnatal experience doubtlessly remain throughout life and there is sufficient clinical evidence, which cannot be presented here, to prove that these same primordial experiences are the prototype of certain later defense reactions of the individual—physical as well as mental—which occur when the ego, faced with unbearable object frustrations, is in need of reachieving instinct repose.

On other occasions¹³ it has been demonstrated that not only the defense mechanism of introjection but also that of repression is a psychic derivative of the act of devouring which effects the disappearance of the object from conscious perception. Here it is sufficient to refer to the affect of rage and its somatic discharge through adequate outer motor innervations.

Rage must be considered the emotional manifestation of a disturbed narcissistic equilibrium, caused by the frustration of instinctual needs. It is the primordial affective condition reflecting the infant's physical sensation of hunger. By the act of feeding (incorporating), the infant regains its narcissistic equilibrium and overcomes its rage.

The reactive wish to kill the frustrating individual, expressed in the later ambivalence conflict, is fundamentally nothing other than the wish to repeat the primordial experience of devouring in order to become free of the unbearable tension which takes the form of rage. The aggressive tendencies of the individual, which are aroused as a reaction to object frustration, irrespective of the executive organ (mouth, teeth, hands, or even weapons) are unconscious derivatives of the demands of the gastrointestinal zone.

Hate is likewise the emotional expression of demands of the gastrointestinal zone, just as love is the emotional expression of the genital zone. To support this thesis, one must go into a detailed investigation of the affective reaction of the infant to the trauma of birth, and particularly the relationship between primordial anxiety and primordial rage. To be brief: rage, like sexual excitation, is primarily without an object. Both affects become object related through their emotional expressions. We hate objects because they arouse our object hunger by denying its gratification.

¹³ Simmel, Ernst: *Regression, Regression and Organic Disease* (read at the semi-annual meeting of California Analysts, San Francisco, 1940) and *Die Psycho-physische Bedeutsamkeit des Intestinalorgans für die Urverdrängung* (The Psychophysical Significance of the Intestinal Tract for Primary Repression, read at the 8th International Psychoanalytic Congress, Salzburg, 1924; abstract published *Int. Ztschr. f. Psa.*, 1924, X, p. 217-223).

Language is often a monument to the forgotten meanings of the original concrete ideas underlying words. The German word for 'hatred' is *Hass*.¹⁴ *Hass* is derived from *hatzen*; *hatzen* means hunting, and hunting is the pursuit of an animal for the purpose of killing and devouring it. Thus the ultimate aim of hate is the incorporation of its object. The act of devouring and the process of digestion might thus be considered the adequate discharge for rage into external motor innervations, as well as into inner motility; for hatred is the emotional equivalent of the affect of rage.

Freud's three terms of what was considered the earliest stage of libido development were cited above. He called it the 'oral stage', and 'the cannibalistic stage', but he also suggested that at that stage the infantile libidinal sex instincts rest upon the instincts of self-preservation. It is now assumed that these three characteristics actually describe one psychobiological fact, namely, the operation of the libidinal destructive instinct of self-preservation, manifesting the demands of the gastrointestinal tract.

What is the relation between this instinct of self-preservation and Freud's concept of the death instinct? Both concepts have the state of unconsciousness as a common aim. As we have seen, the first gratification of the instinct of self-preservation after birth results in unconsciousness as an expression of complete instinct repose. This condition of absolute unconsciousness may be considered the mental equivalent of physical death. Freud believed the immanent striving of our mental system towards release of tension to be characteristic of the operation of a death instinct. 'Our recognition that the ruling tendency of psychic life . . . is the struggle for reduction, keeping at a constant level, or removal of the inner stimulus tension (the Nirvana principle, as Barbara Low terms it)—a struggle which comes to expression in the pleasure principle—

¹⁴ Cf. Kluge, Friedrich: *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. Strassburg: Verlag von Karl I. Trubner, 1910.

is indeed one of our strongest motives for believing in the existence of death instincts.¹⁵

Freud rightly places particular emphasis on the effectiveness of the Nirvana principle in our mental life. However, in the relationship between this Nirvana principle and our destructive instinct energies, there does not seem to be so much a tendency toward self-destruction as toward destruction of the object; for object destruction serves the purpose of self-preservation, that is, the preservation or reestablishment of the ego's narcissistic equilibrium.

Memory traces of the primordial experience of achieving unconsciousness as a result of devouring associate the impulse to destroy an object with loss of consciousness.¹⁶ The ego, in its search for this state of unconsciousness and instinct repose, withdraws its libido from the outer world into the libido reservoir. However, since the libido has taken on devouring gastrointestinal qualities, its withdrawal may have consequences destructive to the mental and physical systems. The mature individual's ego equilibrium does not express itself in complete unconsciousness, as in the case of the infant. The mature and healthy ego is unaware of itself while functioning in accordance with the demands of object reality. Under pathological conditions, the instinct of 'self-preservation', released in its full instinctual strength and unrestricted by the sex instinct, would compel the individual to kill the whole surrounding world for the sake of his own complete instinct repose. This seems to be the emotional condition of the schizophrenic mass murderer, who is linked to the environmental world only by his gastrointestinal instinctual demands. To summarize: the genital primacy of our libido organization is preceded by a pregenital gastrointestinal primacy. The

¹⁵ Freud: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. London: Int. Psa. Press, 1922, p. 71.

¹⁶ Perhaps therefore in later life unconsciousness inversely may be used as a defense against aggressive-destructive impulses. Phenomena such as fainting, narcolepsy, etc., thus find a possible explanation as regressive phenomena.

gastrointestinal primacy, operating as the primitive agent of our ego libido, never ceases to exert its instinctual power. A continuous conflict between these two instinct primacies persists throughout life. The intestinal primacy becomes subordinated to the genital primacy in the maturing process of the individual, in the ascent from primitive object relationship, governed by hatred, to a civilized object-relationship, governed by love. The conflict of ambivalence reflects the conflict between these two instinct primacies.¹⁷ It underlies all normal and abnormal phenomena of the mental life, intramentally as well as in interpersonal relationships.

This theory may provide us with a wider understanding of the theory of neuroses in so far as the conflict of ambivalence is concerned. Roughly formulated, the theory of psychoneuroses and psychoses would be: in every traumatic experience, based on a frustration of object love, the ego tends to abandon its genital libido primacy in an exchange for the gastrointestinal libido primacy. The cardinal trauma of castration loses nothing of its significance, since it endangers just that organ zone which, under the genital primacy, mediates contact with the object.

A trend towards regression from the genital primacy to the gastrointestinal primacy as a reaction to object love frustration implies that the ego always tends to reinstate the condition of complete instinct repose, as once experienced following the postnatal act of feeding.

Nirvana, i.e., the condition of complete instinct repose, is the basic attraction of all regressive trends which constitute mental

¹⁷ This conflict arises early in infantile life, first on a biological basis, as Lipschultz discovered (Lipschultz, Alexander: *Die Pubertätsdrüse und ihre Wirkungen*. Bern: Bircher, 1919, quoted from Freud: *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*). "The interstitial portion of the sex gland, the factors determining the specific biological urge, develop early in infancy—in a so-called 'intermediary phase of puberty'". This happens at a time when the gastrointestinal primacy is still in full flower. At this period, genital libido is of secondary importance and remains so until the maturing of the gonads endows the genital organ with the leadership in the ego's search for object contact, taking it away from the end zones of the gastrointestinal tract—the anus and the mouth.

disorder. Rank, in his view of the significance of the trauma of birth for the genesis of neuroses, was not mistaken, but he failed in his interpretations. We do not want to repeat the trauma of birth. What we tend to repeat is the aggressive gastrointestinal alimentary act by which we were able to annul the trauma of birth, i.e., to reestablish the condition of release of all tensions.

In the narcissistic neuroses and psychoses the ego has finally abandoned the genital primacy and has given in to the gastrointestinal primacy, the guarantor of complete instinct repose.

In the transference neuroses the ego is arrested on the way to its ultimate aim of regression by stages of libidinal object fixation, where there already existed a fusion of immature sexual libido with gastrointestinal libido. These are the phallic and anal stages.

Space does not permit the presentation of detailed clinical evidence as to what the significance of this theory would be for an enlarged understanding of the theory of the neuroses and psychoses. However some proof should be offered that the theory actually justifies its claim to validity, the criterion of which is that it can be used as a working hypothesis for further research in the field of mental disorders. Viewed through the perspective of the theory, it is evident that the manifestations of the neuroses and psychoses essentially reflect a defense of the ego against the dangerous consequences of its regressively awakened destructive, i.e., devouring tendencies. The basic conflict of the ego, in which it strives 'to maintain itself', consists in the dilemma of being caught between two alternatives, that of preserving the frustrating object, and that of preserving itself, i.e., its narcissistic equilibrium. The way of regression which the ego traverses from the transference neuroses via the narcissistic neuroses towards the psychoses demonstrates the ego's choice between the two alternatives. In the transference neuroses it decides in favor of the object on whose existence it depends for the fulfillment of its demands of love and security. In the psychoses it

tends to sacrifice the object in the interest of achieving complete instinct repose or of reestablishing the condition of primordial narcissism.

The hysteric, as we know, is capable of loving his object only under the condition that he exclude the genital organs from his love. What does this mean? It means that he restricts his unconscious devouring intentions to the genital organ of his object, the focus of his hatred. He has succeeded in localizing his hatred to a part of the ambivalent object, and can thus preserve his love for the object as a whole. The hysteric desexualizes his object relationship either by the unconscious fantasy of having introjectively destroyed the object's genitals or by defending himself against this wish. The globus hystericus indicates that the hated phallus was halted on its way down to the gastrointestinal tract. The vaginal anæsthesia of the frigid woman is a means of defense against the devouring tendency of the vagina, the demands of which unconsciously have been fused with the demands of the mouth.

The compulsion neurotic hates his object in its entirety and tends to devour it in toto. As a defense against this his hands are blocked, for they have assumed the symbolic significance of the mouth. Acting in general, because its aim is devouring, is inhibited and substituted for by thinking, 'the experimental way of acting'. Thus confined to endless ruminating, the compulsion neurotic is capable of preserving his object by discharging his hatred in his process of thinking.

In the narcissistic neuroses the ego is halted at the phase of secondary narcissism, while in retreat to the condition of 'primordial narcissism'. The libido is withdrawn from the object and placed upon the ego which substitutes for the object. However, since a regressive transformation of genital libido into gastrointestinal libido has simultaneously taken place, the tendency of the melancholy ego is to devour itself instead of the object. From a few clinical observations one may deduce that the suicidal attempts of melancholics actually symbolize their wish of self-devouring. In the self-torturing

accusations of the melancholic there is an 'intestinalization' of thought processes similar to the ruminant thinking of the compulsion neurotic. However, the compulsion neurotic uses the 'experimental way of acting' as a defense against devouring his object, while the melancholic introduces the process of self-torturing thinking as a defense against destroying himself.

By the 'intestinalization' of the process of thinking is actually meant an intestinalization of the relationship between ego and superego. We have learned from Freud that the severity of the superego results from the aggressions of the ego which it has suppressed and then 'made over' to the superego. In terms of gastrointestinalization, we might say that the superego has taken over the devouring tendencies of the ego and turned them against the mentally introjected object within the ego. The ego is thus tortured by *Gewissensbisse*, 'gnawings' of conscience, or remorse. The term 'remorse' is derived from the Latin word *re-mordeo*, meaning, 'biting again'. Biting is an initial act of devouring.

A few statements should be made about the ambivalence conflict in schizophrenic psychoses when viewed through the perspective of the operation of a gastrointestinal instinct primacy. Theoretically, the manic state of the narcissistic neuroses can be considered a transition to the schizophrenic psychoses. This conclusion is reached by applying the theory developed above to the well-known fact that the manic state represents the fusion of ego and superego. This fusion is the result of the devouring tendencies of the ego, directed against the superego. In a schizophrenic process, the superego shares the trend of regression with the ego and eventually assumes the significance of the primordial maternal object. In its final stage of regression, the ego tends to find instinct repose by devouring its superego, serving as a mother substitute. In this way, it frees itself from remorse, i.e., from being attacked by its own superego. It has however also lost the mediator between itself and object reality. Thus the ego has become retransformed into an id, for which every external

object is a mother object. The fact that in his relationship towards the object world, the schizophrenic takes everything as a substitute for the primordial mother object, largely determines his final inability to test reality. He feels himself linked to the surrounding world only through reliving the phase of 'magic, hallucinatory omnipotence'.¹⁸ The aggressiveness-of-the-schizophrenic-individual-indicates the tendency to incorporate this external object in order to return to the condition of primordial narcissism, i.e., to complete instinct repose.

The psychotic's 'break with reality' comes about because of the necessity of withdrawing his gastrointestinal devouring demands from the world of objects, with the aim of ultimately regaining complete narcissistic equilibrium, expressed in the condition of unconsciousness. The schizophrenic achieves this aim in the condition of stupor. A similar condition is brought about in a short cut by the coma of modern shock therapy induced by insulin, metrazol, or electric current. The necessity of destroying the object of ambivalence in order to achieve this end therefore becomes superfluous, at least temporarily. On the other hand, the innervations of the skeletal muscles, inducing convulsions, appear to be a repetition of the uncoordinated movements of the infant in which it discharges its primordial, objectless rage.

Retrospectively, we may be allowed to state that the process of defusion of constructive and destructive energies, which was expounded by Freud, corresponds to a trend inherent in the process of regression itself. It is a gradual shifting of the emphasis from genital object love to intestinal object hate.

Perhaps the doubts concerning the validity of regarding the theory of the psychoneuroses and psychoses from this perspective can be dispersed by viewing the one great infantile trauma which is responsible for all regressions—the trauma of object frustration, precipitated by the oedipus conflict.

This trauma is the second great trauma in the child's

¹⁸ Ferenczi, Sándor: Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality in Contributions to Psychoanalysis. London: Hogarth Press, 1916.

mental development. The first was the trauma of birth, which disrupted the balance of 'primordial' narcissism. The second, the œdipus trauma, disrupts the balance of primary narcissism. This disruption occurs when the child is about to attach its awakened but still immature genital libido to the parental objects. The infantile ego tends to restore its narcissistic equilibrium, disrupted by the second trauma, after the pattern of repair of the first trauma. This tendency means to give in to the gastrointestinal libido demands and to return to the earliest stage of life when there was only one object, the incorporation of which brought about complete instinct repose.

The process thus described is nothing but the final solution of the œdipus conflict by means of identification. Quoting Freud: 'When the œdipus complex passes away, the child must give up the intense object-cathexes which it has formed towards its parents, and—to compensate for this loss of object—its identifications with its parents, *which have probably long been present*, become greatly intensified'.¹⁹ 'This identification has been not inappropriately compared with the *oral cannibalistic incorporation* of another person.'²⁰

We see that the tendency to regress temporarily from the genital instinct primacy to the gastrointestinal primacy, in response to object deprivations, is a prerequisite for the normal solution of the œdipus complex. It is this regression which introduces the latency period, characterized by the desexualization of the parental object, that is, the erection of the incest barrier. The instinct renunciation on the genital level is compensated for by an instinct gratification of the gastrointestinal level. However, the actual physical act of incorporation is warded off by the mental act of introjection. There is evidence to indicate that superego formation comes about as a substitute for, and at the same time as a reaction against, the actual gratification of the devouring instinct. A

¹⁹ Freud: *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1933, p. 87.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86. (Italics mine.)

successful identification disposes of the hate between parent and child and allows a reestablishment of the love relationship. The failure to achieve identification on the occasion of the first object conflict in life results in keeping the demands of the devouring instinct alive in the unconscious. This constellation establishes the conflict of ambivalence as a determining factor in the genesis and symptomatology of mental disorder.

It is important to understand how the highest achievement of the human mind—its conscience—arises out of the animalistic desire to devour our fellow creatures. To attempt such an understanding we should have to extend our psychoanalytic investigations from the ontogenetic development of the superego and the guilt complex to phylogenetic considerations and speculations concerning the rise of the superego out of the totem cult. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud gave us a clue as to the evolution of the ontogenetic concept of guilt as it has developed out of the phylogenesis. The ontogenesis of the problem deserves a few remarks with regard to the two-sided aspect of the child's œdipus conflict which ends in the process of identification.

The child, caught in the œdipus situation, is torn by the necessity of choosing between two objects. However, the child has one emotional reaction common to his relationship to both parents: he hates them both. The boy, for instance, hates his father as his rival but he also hates his mother because she denies herself to him. His hatred is the emotional expression of his regressive tendency to return to the gastrointestinal primacy which governed his postnatal existence. He solves the problem of a two-sided hate by a condensation of both parental figures into one object, such as existed after birth. The wish fantasy of a phallic mother seems to be the outcome of this process of condensation of father plus mother.

The castration complex does not lose any of its significance by this assumption. Only the much contested thesis of the

penis envy gains a new aspect. The mother's phallus represents to the unconscious of the child the rediscovered maternal breast, expressed in terms of demands of the genital primacy which, because of the œdipus conflict frustration, yields to the gastrointestinal primacy.

The unified parental object returns intramentally as superego, as 'the heir to the œdipus complex'. Again quoting Freud: 'Renunciation . . . gives rise to conscience' . . .²¹ 'The thwarting of the erotic gratification provokes an access of aggressiveness against the person who interfered with the gratification, and then this tendency to aggression in its turn has to be suppressed. So then it is, after all, *only the aggression which is changed into guilt*, by being suppressed and made over to the superego.'²² Also: 'The relation between superego and ego is a reproduction, distorted by a wish, of the real relations between the ego before it was subdivided, and an external object. . . . The essential difference, however, is that the original severity of the superego does not—or not so much—represent the severity which has been experienced or anticipated from the object, but *expresses the child's own aggressiveness towards the latter*. If this is correct, one could truly assert that conscience is formed in the beginning from the suppression of an aggressive impulse and strengthened as time goes on by each fresh suppression of the kind.'²³ And, in concluding, Freud says: 'I am convinced that *very many processes* will admit of much simpler and clearer explanation if we restrict the findings of psychoanalysis in respect of the origin of the sense of guilt to the aggressive instincts.'²⁴

If we agree to define Freud's term of 'aggressive instincts', in accordance with my assumptions, as devouring-destructive intestinal energies, and as the derivatives of a gastrointestinal

²¹ Freud: *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1930, p. 114.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 131. (Italics mine.)

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116. (Italics mine.)

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131. (Italics mine.)

instinct primacy, then there would be no contradiction between Freud's theory and my own. The superego came into existence through the process of identification, a thesis which is supplemented by stating that identification substitutes for and wards off incorporation, which is the result of the ego's regression to its gastrointestinal instinct primacy.

These theories are the result of twenty years of clinical observation, of which this paper is only an abbreviated abstract. Its intention is to show that there is a devouring instinct in man which is closely associated with his need for self-preservation. The identification process, ending the œdipus conflict, is the normal way of liquidating this animalistic inheritance. Failures in this process precipitate a morbid psychopathology which turns self-preservation into self-destruction by subjecting the ego to the attracting power of the Nirvana principle.

Before I conclude, I want to emphasize that this paper has been concerned only with an investigation of destructive instinct energies so far as we are able to detect them in the psyche of the individual, affecting his intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. I have intentionally omitted all speculations which would have extended into the field of biology.

Considered as a contribution to psychoanalytic science, my work pursues a path of research entered upon by Freud. He did not himself follow the path to its end, because, during the last years of his life, he was not so much concerned with clinical problems. The perspectives which his genius strove to view were not microscopic but macroscopic. He strove for an understanding of the world cataclysms of hate which threaten to engulf our civilization. He applied his concept of death and aggression to the phenomena of mass psychology and the sociological phenomenon of civilization before he had exhausted the essence of his findings by research into the individual mind.

However, sooner or later, if death had not come to him, I

trust that Freud would have arrived at my conclusions. For he summarized the essence of the conflict of ambivalence as follows: "The ego is not at ease with itself—at having to subject its own self to the destructive tendencies of those very aggressions it would like to employ against others itself. It is like a displacement to the field of the mind of the dilemma that rules the organic world: "Devour or be Devoured".'²⁵

²⁵ Freud: *Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*. Vienna: Int. Psa. Verlag, 1933, p. 153. (Trans. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, *loc. cit.*)

