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# Wilhelm Reich

1897-1957

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

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WALTER BRIEHL

Of the many psychoanalysts who have contributed to the theoretical and technical aspects of the science, Wilhelm Reich stands out because of his overwhelming preoccupation with the problems of technique.

Reich was born in 1897 in Austria, where his father was a farmer. He became interested in biology early in life and, prior to his military service during World War I, maintained plant and insect collections and his own breeding laboratory. In 1918, at the age of twenty-one, he matriculated at the University of Vienna School of Medicine where he was awarded the Doctor of Medicine degree "with distinction." His post-graduate work was carried on at the Vienna Neuropsychiatric Institute under Julius von Wagner-Jauregg and Paul Schilder. At the age of twenty-three, while still a medical student, he attained membership in the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, a recognition that could only be bestowed on one who showed promise in this field. The position of older members in the society—Federn, Hitschmann, Nunberg, and others—had already been firmly established by virtue of maturity and talent. Nevertheless, Reich's driving energy (expended in analysis, teaching, lecturing, writing, and administration) advanced his prestige rapidly. Temperamental clashes between Reich and other members of the group and differences of opinion concerning some of his ideas and technical procedures at times required the dispassionate intercession of Dr. Federn for the re-establishment of objectivity and soberness.

A basis for Reich's work seems to have been laid by Ferenczi of

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Budapest. Having been Freud's closest friend, Ferenczi was highly regarded in Vienna, even though his technique varied so sharply later in life from even the bold therapeutic innovations embodied in his "active therapy" that he and Freud parted psychoanalytic company. As Ferenczi had developed his active therapeutic procedures for use when and where a long trial of classical analysis is unable to penetrate ego structures, so Reich developed his theory and practice of character analysis after he discovered that all too frequently the therapeutic efforts of analysts had been thwarted, but because of countertransference this outcome had ended in a blind alley (*Sackgasse*) rationalized as the patient's resistance against getting well.

Reich was director of the Seminar for Psychoanalytic Therapy in Vienna from 1924 to 1930. This seminar was designed to work exclusively with case histories of stalemates and analytic failures; by its nature it proved a most stimulating and provocative undertaking. Contributions from this seminar and from his analyses furnished the material for his most important paper, "Über Charakteranalyse," 1928b, although before this publication numerous forerunners had appeared that had already created American interest in Reich as the representative of a more active psychoanalytic therapy in Vienna. Because of the inaccessibility of Freud (whose time and energy were reserved for such older and established colleagues as Clarence Oberndorf, Abram Kardiner, George Amsden, Smiley Blanton, Monroe Meyer, and Ruth Mack Brunswick), analysts who wished to go abroad to the psychoanalytic mecca, Vienna, were advised by training analysts in New York and by Ferenczi (who was lecturing in New York during 1926-1927) to go to Reich for their personal analyses. Accordingly, a number of persons who became prominent were brought into close contact with the personality and theories of Reich.

One of Reich's early papers lays down several rather categorical standards for successful or unsuccessful treatment. One, perhaps of greatest validity at that time, is this: "If the genital period is not reached either by genital masturbation, or genital exhibitionism or genital incestuous wishes, such cases have a bad prognosis" (1924). Reich supplemented some of the hypotheses of this paper with some technical principles in a report given before the Eighth International Association Congress in Salzburg in 1924:

As a criterion of the genital or pregenital organization of adult patients, it is advisable to observe the specific form which onanism may assume in

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them. Here one must not hesitate to forbid absolutely every extra-genital form of onanism, but to encourage the genital form. And an analysis cannot be accounted complete until the patient has freed his genitality from the sense of guilt and withdrawn it from the incestuous object and also has finally risen above his preperinatal level of organization. The criteria of this change are to be found in the phantasies and dreams of the transference (1924, Vol. 5, pp. 398-399).

In 1926 Reich delivered a paper before the Vienna Seminar for Psychoanalytic Therapy that was the forerunner of his most distinguished work, *Character Analysis* (1945). This earlier presentation, which also appeared in the *Zeitschrift* (1927a), was titled "The Technique of Interpretation and of Resistance Analysis." It is strange that this excellent paper never has been translated into English, dealing as it does with one of the most significant aspects of analytic therapy, the transference neurosis in its repressed and disguised manifestations—particularly in its negative aspects. In this paper, Reich laid special emphasis on, in essence, "no interpretation of content without first interpreting the resistance to the process of free association." (During this period of psychoanalysis the term "resistance" was used, later giving way to the broader term, "defense.")

Many of the ideas of technique that Reich was formulating in the later twenties accrued not only from his own experience but from the suggestions of members of the therapy seminar. He may not have been the originator of such ideas, but it must be said that in Vienna he was the dynamic power behind their organization. Freud often expressed regret that the teaching of psychoanalysis precludes the presence of an observer, as is possible in hospital bedside teaching. To reduce this inadequacy to a minimum, Reich conducted his seminar with informality and spontaneity. He placed emphasis on two main themes: the study of individualized resistance problems and the study of the reasons for analytic failures, which up to this time had been considered due to individual inexperience or errors, rather than to limitations of technique.

From these studies Reich published several books: *Der Triebhafte Charakter*, in 1925, *Die Funktion des Orgasmus*, in 1927, and in 1933 his most important work, *Charakteranalyse*, which appeared in an English edition (1945). In later editions, so much material of a nonpsychoanalytic nature is interspersed and admixed that one reviewer has stated: "It is not the translation of the German book which Reich published in 1928 and which became a marking stone in psychoanalysis as a scientific

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technique, deeply influencing almost the entire generations of English psychoanalysts." An abstract or reading would only detract from the prestige that was Reich's during the period of his psychoanalytic accreditation, a prestige well-earned by his work.

Although Karl Abraham's *Psycho-Analytic Studies on Character Development* preceded Reich's papers on character analysis, Abraham's studies are primarily restricted to what might be called the phenomenological aspects of character formation, that is, character formation as an outgrowth and development of oral, anal, and genital ego types. Nevertheless, one of Abraham's papers deserves mention at this point. Here Abraham writes of encountering marked narcissistic resistance in some patients and not being able to proceed analytically until he had made known to them the nature of such narcissistic resistance at the very beginning of treatment (1919). In brief, Abraham's approach regards the character of narcissistic resistance as a transient one, whereas in Reich's approach such resistance is considered as a more or less chronic, structured ego function, the dissolution of which becomes the focal point of therapy.

Freud, as is known, modified his technique from that of direct interpretation of symptoms to that of analyzing and overcoming resistances and defenses. Reich would not have changed the term "resistance analysis" to that of "character analysis" had not particular circumstances made the latter term preferable to him. Of the various types of resistance encountered in practice, Reich noted a particular group to which he gave the name "character resistance." To quote:

These acquire their specific imprint, not from their content, but from the patient's individual mode of behavior. . . . The form taken by the reactions of the ego—a form which in the face of similarity of experiential content differs according to the character—is just as much determined by infantile experiences as is the content of the symptoms and phantasies (1948, p. 131).

Although other psychoanalysts, Edward Glover and Franz Alexander foremost among them, have differentiated character and symptom neurosis as nosological entities, Reich was of the opinion that a neurotic character is invariably the underlying basis of a symptom neurosis, that is, that, rather than being separate and somewhat unrelated entities, they have a direct, causal relationship.

The difference between character neuroses and symptom neuroses is simply that in the latter the neurotic character has produced symptoms as well—

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that the neurotic symptoms are, so to speak, a concentrate of the neurotic character . . . the more deeply we penetrate into its [the symptom's] determinants, the further we get from the field of symptomatology proper and the more does the characterological substratum come to the fore (1948, p. 131).

Coming to the fore, this characterological substratum serves as a compact defense mechanism against therapeutic efforts, a phenomenon to which Reich gave the name "character armor."

How did Reich put his theories of character analysis into a system of technique? This problem involves the therapeutic viewpoint, that is, does the therapist interpret the id striving, or, without touching upon the id striving, does he preferably approach the aspect of resistance, which is more closely related to the conscious ego, the ego defense, the rejection? From the latter aspect of therapy, Reich postulated that every defense ultimately must end in a negative transference and the character, the armor of the ego likewise, revealed and uncovered.

The turning point necessary for a successful analysis is the emotional outburst or activated aggressiveness in the sense of a negative transference. Observing in a patient a major "character armor" trait, for example, affectlessness and indifference, Reich would continually belabor him with it—practically to the exclusion of all other interpretations. The patient would then have the choice of either discontinuing therapy or of mobilizing a reaction—aggression or hostility—against the repetitive therapeutic provocation aimed at his characterological armor. When such a situation has been brought about, the blocking of affect has been broken down, and the patient becomes analyzable. Whether the armor be of the nature of affectlessness or some mannerism of speech or motility, the technique remains the same.

Reich followed the publication of his work *Über Charakteranalyse* in 1928 with another significant contribution, "The Genital and the Neurotic Character" (1929), devoted mainly to the psychoanalytic theory of character. This he defined as the typical mode of reaction of the ego toward the id and the outer world. "Character resistance" is not to be confused with Freud's "ego resistance," which is resistance with a specific content offered by the ego. Character resistance refers to the typical form of resistance adopted in defense and remains the same whether of id or superego origin. Thus there is a close relationship between repression of instinctual demands and character that, once formed, makes a great deal of repression needless, since the instinctual energies

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that float freely in ordinary repression are consumed by the character formation in rigid ego-syntonic reactions and behavior. Repressions that have resulted in well-established character traits are more difficult to eliminate than those at the basis of a symptom.

In this paper, Reich places much emphasis on sublimation and reaction formation. Reaction formation and reactive achievement are largely responsible for increased damming up of the libido.

Reich's third important contribution, *Character Formation and the Phobias of Childhood* (1930), is an attempt to develop further the theoretical aspects of the two above-mentioned papers. Reich's acceptable contributions to psychoanalytic literature came to an end shortly thereafter. In 1934, he officially resigned from membership in the psychoanalytic movement, and from that time on he became further and further removed from analytic associations.

What relationship and attitudes might have existed between Freud and Reich? What previous set of circumstances might have effected such a resignation? What was the dramatic last link in the association? In his biography of Freud, Jones wrote that Freud thought highly of Reich in early days, but, "Reich's political fanaticism has led to both personal and scientific estrangement" (1953-1957, Vol. 3, p. 191). Although Reich was considered an alarmist and a political fanatic, the fact remains that his conjecture on the course of events and the dangers of the Nazi regime, as elucidated in his book on Fascism, were realistic and correct—though too premature for current acceptance. However, when he blended his political ideology and psychoanalytic theory, he raised a storm of conflict. A paper in this vein was published in the *Zeitschrift* and, according to Freud, "culminated in the nonsensical statement that what we have called the death instinct is a product of the capitalistic system."

But perhaps other and subtle factors of a personal nature were operative. Reich was still esteemed for his work in the late twenties and early thirties, yet there was an aura of misgiving about his future. Perhaps Freud sensed the presence of an intrapsychic conflict, and, as a result, Reich's resignation met with no great opposition. Alienated from psychoanalysis, Reich also fell into disfavor with Marxist groups as he sought to introduce ideas of sexual reform and enlightenment to them.

Reich left Vienna in 1930 and worked in Berlin, Copenhagen, and, finally, Oslo, from whence he had to flee following the threat of the Nazi occupation of Norway. At these places, he won adherents who

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shared his thinking and activity and who, under the name *Sexpol*, issued a *Journal of Political Psychology and Sexual Economy*, as well as pamphlets on related themes. He also practiced a form of psychotherapy to which he gave the name "vegetotherapy," which he considered an extension of character analysis to its deepest repository of resistance, the autonomic system. Here, he believed, dammed-up libido and orgasmic impotence cause the tensions and malfunctioning of psyche and soma alike. Related to this and with the aid of a well-equipped laboratory in Oslo, he carried on extensive experimentation that I shall not discuss in detail, but which can be pinpointed from a pamphlet title, *Electric Function of Sexuality and Anxiety* (1937). It is worthy of mention that, according to Reich's own judgment, he had never repudiated basic psychoanalytic principles. Rather, he believed that all he had accomplished—however unacceptable to analysts—was but of the nature of profoundest penetration into hitherto unknown areas.

In 1939, during the years of the Hitler nightmare in Europe, Reich came to the United States through the efforts of American colleagues who, with funds and affidavits, brought as many European analysts as possible to our shores, to spare them the concentration camp or to save their lives.

Shortly after his arrival here, friendly overtures were made to Reich, but he avoided them. He established himself on Long Island with the extensive laboratory equipment he had brought from Oslo and attracted about himself a group of friends and interested persons. At the first, I was a member of this group, but it was obvious that personality changes had occurred and that he was not the Reich of old, of the psychoanalytic therapy seminars in Vienna. Finally, he began to react with increasing irritability and projected hostility to helpful advice offered in various categories (for example, whether to avoid conflict, how to effect adjustment, or suggestions pertaining to medical licensure); with this state of affairs—offering no basis for personal or professional understanding—further association became impossible and our relationship was terminated.

Reich finally settled in Maine, where he obtained a large estate to carry on the experimentation on "biones" that he had begun in Oslo. He claimed that his discovery of biones had fundamentally advanced a theory concerning the origin of life, and that it was also related to the cancer problem. Going beyond his theory of biones, Reich claimed that he had discovered a method for gathering cosmic radiation that,