

April 12, 1959

Dear Doctor Sarlin:

"The Ego's Fear of its Wish to Regress", and "The Ego's Basic Anxiety in Neuroses". I cannot help it, but these formulations do not stop being irritating to me because I find them contradictory to our "basic" concept of regression as a neurotic defence and the meaning of anxiety. You know of my aversion to complicate analytic terms either by expanding their applicability, by using them in a modified or transformed way, or isolating them from proper connections by means of specific or speculated definitions.

First: what is "basic" anxiety? In Freud's description, anxiety is a danger-signal given to the ego as a warning against the peril of approaching a state of psychic helplessness in facing an overwhelming occurrence. In considering what might represent a danger of helplessness, Freud concluded that this would be different in various stages of development, and he correlated such modifications to divergent clinical conditions as fear of the loss of a protecting or gratifying object, fear of loss of love by the ego or super-ego, castration-fear, etc. Basically, anxiety is a sort of sample-remembrance (Glevar), a repetition of a previous helplessness as experienced in the ontogenetic development at birth, in the phylogenesis as primary anxiety, an instinctual warning-signal in the service of self-preservation.

This summary of Freud's monograph, "Inhibition, Symptom-Formation and Anxiety", (published 1926, first translated 1927, then 1936 with the title: "The Problem of Anxiety"), is not supposed to be complete or adequate to profound understanding, but essentially this scheme did not change up to now. I cannot see how "the ego's basic anxiety" can be interrelated into "the ego's fear of its wish to regress", without to shake the whole concept of analytic metapsychology. An ego-wish always arises in accordance with the pleasure-principle, even if the wish in effect seems to deal with a state "beyond the pleasure-principle" as in masochism or the need of self-destruction. Freud looks at the ego as an ally of the instinctual wishes and aggressive impulses, who would be most likely their executor to attain ego-gratification, unless the ego would not be forced in its attempt to keep peaceful harmony to submit to the higher institutions of the super-ego and, to use Anna Freud's words, "to enter obediently into a struggle against the instinctual impulses, with all the consequences which such a struggle entails". To continue with Anna Freud: "The characteristic point about this process is that the ego itself does not regard the impulses which it is fighting as in the least dangerous. The motive which prompts the defence is not originally its own."

In chapter V of "The Ego and the Mechanisms of defence", Anna Freud mentions three main sources of anxiety and danger which motivates the ego to initiate defences against instincts: (a) super-ego anxiety in the neuroses of adults. The instinct is regarded as dangerous because the super-ego prohibits the ego's gratification and, if it achieves its aim, it will certainly stir up troubles between the ego and the super-ego. Hence the ego of the neurotic adult fears the instincts because it fears the super-ego. (b) objective anxiety, related only to infantile neuroses. (c) instinctual anxiety (dread of the strength of the instincts). The human ego by its very nature is friendly to the instincts only so long it is itself but little differentiated

from the id. When it has evolved from the primary to the secondary process, from the pleasure- to the reality-principle, it has become alien territory to the instincts. His mistrust of their demands is always present but, under normal conditions, hardly noticeable. It is lost sight of in the much more tumultuous warfare waged within its domain by the super-ego and the outside world against the impulses of the id. But, if the ego feels itself abandoned by these protective higher powers or if the demands of the instinctual impulses become excessive, its mute hostility to instinct is intensified to the point of anxiety.

To return to the formulation: "the neurotic ego's basic fear of its wish to regress", there is to say that ego-anxiety of an ego-wish as such is a contradiction in terms, since the ego does not wish what may arouse its anxiety. The adult ego discriminates distinctly between the wish and its fulfillment, and will rather renounce the wish than to risk the anxiety resulting from the veto of authoritative quarters. In the mature ego the wishes indeed are constituted according to the pleasure-principle, but the expectation of fulfillment depends on the reality-principle. As Anna Freud it expresses: "The sovereign principle which governs the psychic processes is that of obtaining pleasure; but in the ego the association of ideas is subject to strict conditions, to which we apply the comprehensive term "secondary process" (in contrast to the incoordinate "primary process" in the id)." These conditions dominate the ego and determine its defensive measures against the instinctual wishes. If the ego-demands with which they are associated are to be warded off, the instincts and affects must submit to the defensive method which neutralizes them by available means, consequently whether the ego likes it or not.

Once more, ego-anxiety is not due to an ego-wish, but the reinforcement of the power of the super-ego or of the strength and the danger of the representation of sexual or aggressive instincts in the ego causes ~~the anxiety~~ it to respond with anxiety. The defences are serving the purpose of neutralization of anxiety, not of an ego-wish but of instincts, and are forced as such upon the ego by stronger and more effective institutions. Therefore regression as a defence cannot be wished by the ego, but results in a condition subsequent to the pressure of circumstances which, from the point of view of conflict-alleviation, may be regarded as efficient. In your formulation "regression, an ego-defence against instinctual frustration, at the very same time, becomes a basic threat to its very own existence. The wish to regress is merely the distorted neurotic derivative of the original need for survival primary expressed in the healthy striving toward the mother from which it derives its instinctual intensity." Granted that this definition is admissible, in what is expressed the essential purpose of a defence to decrease the inner strain of the unconscious conflict? When regression creates a basic threat to the ego's existence, why the ego wishes to regress, and in which way this defence contributes to the ego's release from instinctual frustration? There is no defence-mechanism which would not be a threat to the ego's identity, but in the condition of defence the ego is too much preoccupied with the re-establishment of its balance as to be concerned at its identity which has been confused anyway.

I do not mean that your statements are throughout wrong. I have just the impression that too many metapsychological ideas are integrated into each other and used as an explanation of functioning and interacting, so that the process of development of certain conceptions appears to be unduly complicated and hard to perceive, especially where simpler interpretations are susceptible and the maintenance of the primary meaning of certain concepts ~~possible~~ can be kept. For instance, in your formulation the original implication of a defence or of anxiety is displaced and involved in procedures which are only remotely related to the mechanism of defence or the formation of anxiety in the proper sense. In other connection seems to me avoided the consideration that the descent of a psychic process as projection, identification and internalization, does not necessarily determine its later functioning ("the wish to regress is the distorted neurotic derivative of the original need for survival expressed in the healthy striving toward the mother from which it derives its instinctual intensity." That is true

for the source of energy and from the point of view of development of regression, but the dynamic structure of regression as a defence has no longer anything in common with the "healthy striving toward the mother", while regression as a defence certainly expresses "the need for survival", but no longer in the original form.) Growing up and maturation alters the primary functions as much as the influence of different internal institutions and external circumstances and constellations. Therefore one better is on guard by using generalisations. What appears to be actual in the dynamic of one formation, can be in pathogenesis of another completely unlike, even if the result may be the same. It may be meaningless to call your attention to commonplaces. Just because I happen to know you every inch, I feel justified to remind you that falling in love with an own idea can easily blind our logic and self-control. I like your paper and most of your ideas are splendid, are good and interesting contributions to metapsychology. Nevertheless, I would like you to revise your formulations thoroughly before you decide for publication,.

Cordially yours,

Dr. Robert H. Jokl

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