INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL ORIGINS OF NEUROSIS*

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THE HISTORY of science is a history of erroneous statements. Yet these erroneous statements which mark the progress of thought have a particular quality: they are productive. And they are not just *errors* either; they are statements, the truth of which is veiled by misconceptions, is clothed in erroneous and inadequate concepts. They are rational visions which contain the seed of truth, which matures and blossoms in the continuous effort of mankind to arrive at objectively valid knowledge about man and nature. Many profound insights about man and society have first found expression in myths and fairy tales, others in metaphysical speculations, others in scientific assumptions which have proven to be incorrect after one or two generations.

It is not difficult to see why the evolution of human thought proceeds in this way. The aim of any thinking human being is to arrive at the *whole* truth, to understand the *totality* of phenomena which puzzle him. He has only *one* short life and must want to have a vision of the truth about the world in this short span of time. But he could only understand this totality if his life span were identical with that of the human race. It is only in the process of historical evolution that man develops techniques of observation, gains greater objectivity as an observer, collects new data which are necessary to know if one is to understand the *whole*. There is a gap, then, between what even the greatest genius can visualize as the truth, and the limitations of knowledge which depend on the accident of the historical phase he happens to live in. Since we cannot live in suspense, we try to fill out this gap with the material of knowledge at hand, even if this material is lacking in the validity which the essence of the vision may have.

Every discovery which has been made and will be made has a long history in which the truth contained in it finds a less and less veiled and distorted expression and approaches more and more adequate formulations. The development of scientific thought is not one in which old statements are discarded as false and replaced by new and correct ones; it is rather a process of continuous *reinterpretation* of older statements, by which their true kernel is freed from distorting elements. The great pioneers of thought, of whom Freud is one, express ideas which determine the progress of scientific thinking for centuries. Often the workers in the field orient themselves in one of two ways: they fail to differentiate between the essential and the accidental, and defend rigidly the whole system of the master, thus blocking the process of reinterpretation and clarification; or they make the same mistake of failing to differentiate between the essential and the accidental, and equally rigidly fight against the old theories and try to replace them by new ones of their own. In both the orthodox and the rebellious rigidity, the constructive evolution of the vision of the master is blocked. The real task, however, is to reinterpret, to sift out, to recognize that certain insights had to be phrased and understood in erroneous concepts because of the limitations of thought peculiar to the historical phase in which they were first formulated. We may feel then that we sometimes understand the author better than he understood himself, but that we are only capable of doing so by the guiding light of his original vision.

This general principle, that the way of scientific progress is *constructive reinterpretation of basic visions* rather than repeating or discarding them, certainly holds true of Freud's theoretical formulations. There is scarcely a discovery of Freud which does not contain fundamental truths and yet which

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does not lend itself to an organic development beyond the concepts in which it has been clothed.

A case in point is Freud's theory on the origin of neurosis. I think we still know little of what constitutes a neurosis and less what its origins are. Many physiological, anthropological and sociological data will have to be collected before we can hope to arrive at any conclusive answer. What I shall do is to use Freud's view on the origin of neurosis as an illustration of the general principle which I have discussed, that reinterpretation is the constructive method of scientific progress.

Freud states that the *Oedipus complex* is justifiably regarded as the kernel of neurosis. I believe that this statement is the most fundamental one which can be made about the origin of neurosis, but I think it needs to be qualified and reinterpreted in a frame of reference different from the one Freud had in mind. What Freud meant in his statement was this: because of the sexual desire the little boy, let us say, has for his mother, he becomes the rival of his father, and the neurotic development consists in the failure to cope with the anxiety rooted in this rivalry in a satisfactory way. I believe that Freud touched upon the most elementary root of neurosis in pointing to the conflict between the child and parental authority and the failure of the child to solve this conflict satisfactorily. But I do not think that this conflict is brought about essentially by the sexual rivalry, but that it results from the child's reaction to the pressure of parental authority, the child's fear of it and submission to it. Before I go on elaborating this point, I should like to differentiate between two kinds of authority. One is *objective*, based on the competency of the person in authority to function properly with respect to the task of guidance he has to perform. This kind of authority may be called *rational* authority. In contrast to it is what may be called *irrational* authority, which is based on the power which the authority has over those subjected to it and on the fear and awe with which the latter reciprocate.

It happens that in most cultures human relationships are greatly determined by irrational authority. People function in our society as in most societies, on the record of history, by becoming adjusted to their social role at the price of giving up part of their own will, their originality and spontaneity. While every human being represents the whole of mankind with all its potentialities, any functioning society is and has to be primarily interested in its self-preservation. The particular ways in which a society functions are determined by a number of *objective* economic and political factors, which are given at any point of historical development. Societies have to operate within the possibilities and limitations of their particular historical situation. In order that any society may function well, its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them *want* to act in the way they *have* to act as members of the society or of a special class within it. They have to *desire* what objectively is *necessary* for them to do. *Outer force* is to be replaced by *inner compulsion*, and by the particular kind of human energy which is channeled into character traits. As long as mankind has not attained a state of organization in which the interest of the individual and that of society are identical, the aims of society have to be attained at a greater or lesser expense of the freedom and spontaneity of the individual. This aim is performed by the process of child training and education. While education aims at the development of a child's potentialities, it has also the function of reducing his independence and freedom to the level necessary for the existence of that particular society. Although societies differ with regard to the extent to which the child must be impressed by irrational authority, it is always part of the function of child training to have this happen.

The child does not meet society directly at first; it meets it through the medium of his parents, who in their character structure and methods of education represent the social structure, who are the psychological agency of society, as it were. What, then, happens to the child in relationship to his parents? It meets through them the kind of

authority which is prevailing in the particular society in which it lives, and this kind of authority tends to break his will, his spontaneity, his independence. But man is not born to be broken, so the child fights against the authority represented by his parents; he fights for his freedom not only *from* pressure but also for his freedom to be himself, a full-fledged human being, not an automaton. Some children are more successful than others; most of them are defeated to some extent in their fight for freedom. The ways in which this defeat is brought about are manifold, but whatever they are, the scars left from this defeat in the child's fight against irrational authority are to be found at the bottom of every neurosis. This scar is represented in a syndrome the most important features of which are: the weakening or paralysis of the person's originality and spontaneity; the weakening of the self and the substitution of a pseudo-self, in which the feeling of "I am" is dulled and replaced by the experience of self as the sum total of expectations others have about me; the substitution of autonomy by heteronomy; the fogginess, or, to use Dr. Sullivan's term, the parataxic quality of all interpersonal experiences.

My suggestion that the Oedipus complex be interpreted not as a result of the child's sexual rivalry with the parent of the same sex but as the child's fight with irrational authority represented by the parents does not imply, however, that the sexual factor does not play a significant role, but the emphasis is not on the incestuous wishes of the child and their necessarily tragic outcome, its original sin, but on the parents' prohibitive influence on the normal sexual activity of the child. The child's physical functions—first those of defecation, then his sexual desires and activities—are weighed down by moral considerations. The child is made to feel guilty with regard to these functions, and since the sexual urge is present in every person from childhood on, it becomes a constant source of the feeling of guilt. What is the function of this feeling of guilt? It serves to break the child's will and to drive it into submission. The parents use it, although unintentionally, as a means to make the child submit. There is nothing more effective in breaking any person than to give him the conviction of wickedness. The more guilty one feels, the more easily one submits because the authority has proven its own power by its right to accuse. What appears as a feeling of guilt, then, is actually the fear of displeasing those of whom one is afraid. This feeling of guilt is the only one which most people experience as a moral problem, while the genuine moral problem, that of realizing one's potentialities, is lost from sight. Guilt is reduced to disobedience and is not felt as that which it is in a genuine moral sense, self-mutilation.

To sum up this point, it may be said that it is the defeat in the fight against authority which constitutes the kernel of the neurosis, and that not the incestuous wish of the child but the stigma connected with sex is one among the factors in breaking down his will. Freud painted a picture of the necessarily *tragic* outcome of a child's most fundamental wishes: his incestuous wishes are bound to fail and force the child into some sort of submission. Have we not reason to assume that this hypothesis expresses in a veiled way Freud's profound pessimism with regard to any basic improvement in man's fate and his belief in the indispensable nature of irrational authority? Yet this attitude is only one part of Freud. He is at the same time the man who said that "from the time of puberty onward the human individual must devote himself to the great task of freeing himself from the parents"; he is the man who devised a therapeutic method the aim of which is the independence and freedom of the individual.

However, defeat in the fight for freedom does not always lead to neurosis. As a matter of fact, if this were the case, we would have to consider the vast majority of people as neurotics. What then are the specific conditions which make for the neurotic outcome of this defeat? There are some conditions which I can only mention: for example, one child may be broken more thoroughly than others, and the conflict between his anxiety

and his basic human desires may, therefore, be sharper and more unbearable; or the child may have developed a sense of freedom and originality which is greater than that of the average person, and the defeat may thus be more unacceptable. But instead of enumerating other conditions which make for neurosis, I prefer to reverse the question and ask what the conditions are which are responsible for the fact that so many people do *not* become neurotic in spite of the failure in their personal fight for freedom. It seems to be useful at this point to differentiate between two concepts: that of defect and that of neurosis. If a person fails to attain freedom, spontaneity, a genuine experience of self, he may be considered to have a severe defect, provided we assume that freedom and spontaneity are the objective goals to be attained by every human being. If such a goal is not attained by the majority of members of any given society, we deal with the phenomenon of *socially patterned defect.* The individual shares it with many others; he is not aware of it as a defect, and his security is not threatened by the experience of being different, of being an outcast, as it were. What he may have lost in richness and in a genuine feeling of happiness is made up by the security of fitting in with the rest of mankind—*as he knows them.* As a matter of fact, his very defect may have been raised to a virtue by his culture and thus give him an enhanced feeling of achievement. An illustration is the feeling of guilt and anxiety which Calvin's doctrines aroused in men. It may be said that the person who is overwhelmed by a feeling of his own powerlessness and unworthiness, by the unceasing doubt of whether he is saved or condemned to eternal punishment, who is hardly capable of any genuine joy and has made himself into the cog of a machine which he has to serve, has a severe defect. Yet this very defect was culturally patterned; it was looked upon as particularly valuable, and the individual was thus protected from the neurosis which he would have acquired in a culture where the defect would give him a feeling of profound inadequacy and isolation.

Spinoza has formulated the problem of the socially patterned defect very clearly. He says: "Many people are seized by one and the same affect with great consistency. All his senses are so strongly affected by one object that he believes this object to be present even if it is not. If this happens while the person is awake, the person is believed to be insane. . . . But if the *greedy* person thinks only of money and possessions, the *ambitious* one only of fame, one does not think of them as being insane, but only as annoying; generally one has contempt for them. But *factually* greediness, ambition, and so forth are forms of insanity, although usually one does not think of them as 'illness.'" These words were written a few hundred years ago; they still hold true, although the defect has been culturally patterned to *such* an extent now that it is not generally thought any more to be annoying or contemptuous. Today we come across a person and find that he acts and feels like an automaton; that he never experiences anything which is really his; that he experiences himself entirely as the person he thinks he is supposed to be; that smiles have replaced laughter, meaningless chatter replaced communicative speech; dulled despair has taken the place of genuine pain. Two statements can be made about this person. One is that he suffers from a defect of spontaneity and individuality which may seem incurable. At the same time it may be said that he does not differ essentially from thousands of others who are in the same position. With *most* of them the cultural pattern provided for the defect saves them from the outbreak of neurosis. With *some* the cultural pattern does not function, and the defect appears as a severe neurosis. The fact that in these cases the cultural pattern does not suffice to prevent the outbreak of a manifest neurosis is in most cases to be explained by the particular severity and structure of the individual conflicts. I shall not go into this any further. The point I want to stress is the necessity to proceed from the problem of the *origins of neurosis* to the problem of the *origins of the culturally patterned* defect; to the prob-

lem of the *pathology of normalcy*.

This aim implies that the psychoanalyst is not only concerned with the readjustment of the neurotic individual to his given society. His task must be also to recognize that the individual's ideal of normalcy may contradict the aim of the full realization of himself as a human being. It is the belief of the progressive forces in society that such a realization is possible, that the interest of society and of the individual need not be antagonistic forever. Psychoanalysis, if it does not lose sight of the human problem, has an important contribution to make in this direction. This contribution by which it transcends the field of a medical specialty was part of the vision which Freud had.