

SPLITTING OF THE EGO IN THE PROCESS OF DEFENCE

(1940)

I find myself for a moment in the interesting position of not knowing whether what I have to say should be regarded as something long familiar and obvious or as something entirely new and puzzling. But I am inclined to think the latter.

I have at last been struck by the fact that the ego of a person whom we know as a patient in analysis must, dozens of years earlier, when it was young, have behaved in a remarkable manner in certain particular situations of pressure. We can assign in general and somewhat vague terms the conditions under which this comes about, by saying that it occurs under the influence of a psychical trauma. I prefer to select a single sharply defined special case, though it certainly does not cover all the possible modes of causation.

Let us suppose, then, that a child's ego is under the sway of a powerful instinctual demand which it is accustomed to satisfy and that it is suddenly frightened by an experience which teaches it that the continuance of this satisfaction will result in an almost intolerable real danger. It must now decide either to recognize the real danger, give way to it and renounce the instinctual satisfaction, or to disavow reality and make itself believe that there is no reason for fear, so that it may be able to retain the satisfaction. Thus there is a conflict between the demand by the instinct and the prohibition by reality. But in fact the child takes neither course, or rather he takes both simultaneously, which comes to the same thing. He replies to the conflict with two contrary reactions, both of which are valid and effective. On the one hand, with the help of certain mechanisms he rejects reality and refuses to accept any prohibition; on the other hand, in the same breath he recognizes the danger of reality, takes over the fear of that danger as a pathological symptom and tries subsequently to divest himself of the fear. It must be confessed that this is a very ingenious solution of the difficulty. Both of the parties to the dispute obtain their share: the instinct is allowed to retain its satisfaction and proper respect is shown to reality. But everything has to be paid for in one way or another, and this success is achieved at the price of a rift in the ego which never heals but which increases as time goes on. The two contrary reactions to the conflict persist as the centre-point of a splitting of the ego. The whole process seems so strange to us because we take for granted the synthetic nature of the processes of the ego. But we are clearly at fault in this. The synthetic function of the ego, though it is of such extraordinary importance, is subject to particular conditions and is liable to a whole number of disturbances.

It will assist if I introduce an individual case history into this schematic disquisition. A little boy, while he was between three and four years of age, had become acquainted with the female genitals through being seduced by an older girl. After these relations had been broken off, he carried on the sexual stimulation set going in this way by zealously practising manual masturbation; but he was soon caught at it by his energetic nurse and was threatened with castration, the carrying out of which was, as usual, ascribed to his father. There were thus present in this case

conditions calculated to produce a tremendous effect of fright. A threat of castration by itself need not produce a great impression. A child will refuse to believe in it, for he cannot easily imagine the possibility of losing such a highly prized part of his body. His sight of the female genitals might have convinced our child of that possibility. But he drew no such conclusion from it, since his disinclination to doing so was too great and there was no motive present which could compel him to. On the contrary, whatever uneasiness he may have felt was calmed by the reflection that what was missing would yet make its appearance: she would grow one (a penis) later. Anyone who has observed enough small boys will be able to recollect having come across some such remark at the sight of a baby sister's genitals. But it is different if both factors are present together. In that case the threat revives the memory of the perception which had hitherto been regarded as harmless and finds in that memory a dreaded confirmation. The little boy now thinks he understands why the girl's genitals showed no sign of a penis and no longer ventures to doubt that his own genitals may meet with the same fate. Thenceforward he cannot help believing in the reality of the danger of castration.

The usual result of the fright of castration, the result that passes as the normal one, is that, either immediately or after some considerable struggle, the boy gives way to the threat and obeys the prohibition either wholly or at least in part (that is, by no longer touching his genitals with his hand). In other words, he gives up, in whole or in part, the satisfaction of the instinct. We are prepared to hear, however, that our present patient found another way out. He created a substitute for the penis which he missed in females - that is to say, a fetish. In so doing, it is true that he had disavowed reality, but he had saved his own penis. So long as he was not obliged to acknowledge that females have lost their penis, there was no need for him to believe the threat that had been made against him: he need have no fears for his own penis, so he could proceed with his masturbation undisturbed. This behaviour on the part of our patient strikes us forcibly as being a turning away from reality - a procedure which we should prefer to reserve for psychoses. And it is in fact not very different. Yet we will suspend our judgement, for upon closer inspection we shall discover a not unimportant distinction. The boy did not simply contradict his perceptions and hallucinate a penis where there was none to be seen; he effected no more than a displacement of value - he transferred the importance of the penis to another part of the body, a procedure in which he was assisted by the mechanism of regression (in a manner which need not here be explained). This displacement, it is true, related only to the female body; as regards his own penis nothing was changed.

This way of dealing with reality, which almost deserves to be described as artful, was decisive as regards the boy's practical behaviour. He continued with his masturbation as though it implied no danger to his penis; but at the same time, in complete contradiction to his apparent boldness or indifference, he developed a symptom which showed that he nevertheless did recognize the danger. He had been threatened with being castrated by his father, and immediately afterwards, simultaneously with the creation of his fetish, he developed an intense fear of his father punishing him, which it required the whole force of his masculinity to master

and overcompensate. This fear of his father, too, was silent on the subject of castration: by the help of regression to an oral phase, it assumed the form of a fear of being eaten by his father. At this point it is impossible to forget a primitive fragment of Greek mythology which tells how Kronos, the old Father God, swallowed his children and sought to swallow his youngest son Zeus like the rest, and how Zeus was saved by the craft of his mother and later on castrated his father. But we must return to our case history and add that the boy produced yet another symptom, though it was a slight one, which he has retained to this day. This was an anxious susceptibility against either of his little toes being touched, as though, in all the to and fro between disavowal and acknowledgement, it was nevertheless castration that found the clearer expression. . . . * * * * *