

From The Penguin Freud Reader

The Splitting of the Ego in Defence Processes

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 known and self-evident or something completely new and strange. I suspect, however, it is the latter.

It has finally struck me that, in certain adverse situations, the youthful ego of the person we meet decades later as a patient in analysis must have behaved in a remarkable way. We could state in general – if rather vague – terms that the precondition for this behaviour is the influence of a psychic trauma. I would, however, prefer to focus on a clearly defined individual case, which, to be sure, will not cover every possible causal factor. Let us suppose the ego of the child finds itself governed by a powerful drive-demand, which it is in the habit of satisfying; suddenly it has a terrifying experience which lets it know that to carry on satisfying the drive would lead to a real and almost intolerable danger. It now has to decide whether to acknowledge the real danger, submit to it, and refrain from satisfying the drive, or to deny reality, convince itself there is nothing to fear, and so hold on to the satisfaction. It is a conflict, then, between what the drive demands and what reality forbids. But the child does neither thing, or rather it does both simultaneously, which amounts to the same. It responds to the conflict with two contradictory reactions, each one valid and effective. On the one hand, with the help of certain mechanisms, it rejects reality and refuses any prohibition; on the other hand – and in the very same breath – it acknowledges the danger from reality, turns anxiety about it into a pathological symptom, and attempts subsequently to ward this anxiety off. We must admit this is a very

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neat solution to the problem. Each of the contending parties gets what it wants; the drive can go on being satisfied, and reality is accorded its due respect. But, as we all know, nothing in life is free except death. This success is achieved at the expense of a rift in the ego that will never heal, indeed it will widen as time goes on. The two contradictory reactions to this conflict persist as the focal point of a splitting of the ego. The whole process seems so strange to us because we take it for granted that ego processes tend towards synthesis. Evidently, though, we are wrong here. The – absolutely crucial – synthetic function of the ego has its own particular preconditions and is subject to a whole range of disorders.

Clearly it will be useful to insert the details of a specific case history into this schematic account. One boy became acquainted with female genitals through being seduced by an older girl when aged between three and four. When these relations were broken off, he kept this sexual stimulation going by means of enthusiastic manual masturbation, but he was soon caught by the vigilant nursemaid and threatened with castration, to be carried out, as usual, by the father. All the conditions were right, then, for a massive trauma. By itself, the threat of castration does not necessarily make much of an impression – the child refuses to believe it and can hardly even imagine the loss of such a highly valued part of his body. The sight of female genitals might have been enough to convince the boy in our case of this possibility, but at the time he had not made this deduction because his disinclination had been too strong and there had been no compelling reason to do so. On the contrary, he had silenced any stirrings of unease by declaring that what was missing had not appeared yet, she would grow one – a penis – later. Anyone with enough experience of small boys can remember some such remark being made at the sight of a little sister's genitals. When both factors coincide, however, it is a different matter. Now the memory of the perception, previously considered harmless, is revived by the threat and provides the dreaded corroboration of it. The boy now believed he understood why the girl's genitals were lacking a penis, and he no longer dared doubt that the same thing could happen to his

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Freud, S. "The Splitting of the Ego in Defence Processes" in Phillips, A. (ed.) 2006. The Penguin Freud Reader. London and New York: Penguin Books, pp. 64-67.

own. From that moment on he had to believe castration was a very real danger.

The usual consequence of castration trauma, the one considered normal, is that the boy, either straight away or after something of a struggle, gives in to the threat with complete or at least partial obedience, in that he no longer touches his genitals. That is to say, he fully or partly renounces satisfaction of the drive. But we are prepared for our patient having found a different solution. He created a substitute for the woman's missing penis – a fetish. By so doing, he may have been denying reality, but he had safeguarded his penis. If he did not have to acknowledge that women had lost their penis, then the threat made against him lost its credibility, he no longer had to fear for his penis, and he could go on masturbating undisturbed. Our patient's action here seems like a clear case of turning away from reality, a process we would prefer to restrict to psychosis. Indeed, it is not very far removed from this, but let us reserve judgement, because closer analysis reveals a not insignificant distinction. The boy did not simply contradict his perception and hallucinate a penis where there was none, he merely carried out a displacement in value, transferring the significance of the penis to another part of the body, a process facilitated – in a way we need not explain here – by the mechanism of regression. Of course, this displacement related only to the female body; as far as his own penis was concerned, nothing had changed.

This – one might almost say crafty – way of dealing with reality determined how the boy behaved in practice. He carried on masturbating as if it involved no danger to his penis, but at the same time, in complete contrast to his apparent bravery or nonchalance, he developed a symptom that showed he had indeed acknowledged the danger. Immediately after having been threatened with castration at his father's hands, and simultaneously with his creation of a fetish, he developed an intense anxiety about being punished by his father. This was to become a lasting preoccupation for him, one he was able to overcome and overcompensate for only by bringing to bear the full force of his masculinity. Even this anxiety about his father bore no trace of anything to do with castration. With the

help of regression to an oral phase, it manifested itself as an anxiety about being eaten by his father. It is impossible not to be reminded here of an archaic piece of Greek mythology, which tells how the old father-god Kronos swallowed his children and also wanted to devour his youngest son Zeus, and how Zeus, rescued by his mother's cunning, subsequently emasculated his father. To return to our case history, though, let me add that the patient produced a further, albeit minor symptom, which he retains to this day – an anxious sensitivity about his little toes being touched. It is as if, after all the to-ing and fro-ing between denial and acknowledgement, it was the castration that managed to find the clearer expression . . .