CHAPTER VI

Steps in the Development of an Object-Relations Theory of the Personality ¹ (1949)

On my first introduction to the academic study of psychology in 1909, I was immediately intrigued by the prospect of acquiring some insight into the springs of human behaviour; but it did not take me long to observe some remarkable omissions in the account of mental life presented to me. In particular, I noted an almost complete absence of reference to two important groups of phenomena which, even at that time, I found it difficult to believe that any account of mental life could ignore. I refer to the respective phenomena of sex and conscience. Years subsequently I discovered in Freud a psychologist who could scarcely be accused of any such remarkable omissions; and thereafter it was in the direction opened up by his researches that my psychological interest was preponderantly drawn—and all the more so because the field of psychology, in which his researches were conducted, was one which had meanwhile come to occupy my own special attention. There was, however, one cardinal feature of Freud's theories which I always found great difficulty in accepting, viz., his psychological hedonism. This was, partly at least, because, in the course of a philosophical training, I had become acquainted with the dilemma confronting the theory of hedonism as originally propounded by John Stuart Mill, and had observed the inconsistent, but inevitable, process of transition in this writer's thought from the psychological principle of pleasure-seeking to the ethical principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number.' It was, of course, in deference to the inexorable facts of social life that this transition was effected; and


its necessity reveals the difficulty of giving any satisfactory account of object-relationships in terms of the pleasure-seeking principle. In the development of Freud's thought a similar transition may be observed—a transition from the libido theory, in which libido is conceived as primarily pleasure-seeking, to the super-ego theory, which is designed to explain how pleasure-seeking becomes subordinated to a moral principle under the pressure of object-relationships. Here again it was the inexorability of the facts of social life that revealed the inadequacy of the theory of pleasure-seeking; and it was only after his formulation of the super-ego theory that Freud was able to embark upon a systematic attempt to explain the phenomena of group life in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. In this work he explained the cohesion of the social group in terms of common loyalty to a leader conceived as functioning as an outer representative of the individual super-ego. The group leader was, of course, also conceived as a father-figure; and this is a reflection of the fact that Freud already regarded the super-ego as an endopsychic representative of parental figures internalized during childhood at the instance of an inner necessity for the control of the Oedipus situation. It will be observed that the Oedipus situation itself implies the existence of object-relationships and the existence of the family as a social group. At the same time the super-ego is obviously a product of the child's object-relationships as well as a means of controlling them; and, of course, it is itself an internal object. It is further to be noted that Freud's theory of the ego is bound up with his theory of the super-ego as the instigator of repression; for it was upon a study of the agency of repression that his theory of the ego was based. The progress of Freud's thought is thus seen to lead from his original theory that behaviour is determined by pleasure-seeking to a theory of the personality conceived in terms of relationships between the ego and objects, both external and internal. According to this latter theory, the nature of the personality is determined by the internalization of an external object, and the nature of group relationships is in turn determined by the externalization or projection of an internal object. In such a development then we detect the germ of an 'object-relations' theory of the personality—a theory based upon the conception that object-relationships exist within the personality as well as between the personality and external objects.

This development was carried a stage further by Melanie Klein, whose analytical researches led her to ascribe ever-increasing import-
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to the influence of internal objects in the development of the personality. In Freud's theory the only internal object to be recognized was the super-ego; and the role attributed to this structure was that of an internal parent exercising the function of a conscience. Melanie Klein, of course, accepts the concept of the super-ego; but she also envisages the presence of a multiplicity of other introjected objects—good objects and bad objects, benign objects and persecuting objects, whole objects and part objects. The introjection of these various objects is regarded by her as the result of phantasies of oral incorporation occurring primarily and characteristically during the oral phase of infancy. This conception has given rise to controversies into which I shall not enter; but, as it seems to me, Melanie Klein has never satisfactorily explained how phantasies of incorporating objects orally can give rise to the establishment of internal objects as endopsychic structures—and, unless they are such structures, they cannot be properly spoken of as internal objects at all, since otherwise they will remain mere figments of fantasy. Be that as it may, Melanie Klein goes on to attribute the goodness and badness of internal objects to components of the child's own oral activities—their goodness being related to a libidinal factor, and their badness to an aggressive factor in conformity with Freud's dualistic theory of instinct. At the same time, whilst developing and expanding the concept of internal objects, Melanie Klein also develops and expands the concept of introjection and projection in such a way as to represent the mental life of the child in terms of a constant interplay between the introjection of external objects and the projection of internalized objects. The form assumed by the child's developing personality thus comes to be largely explained in terms of object-relationships.

In general, Melanie Klein's views seemed to me from the first to represent an important advance in the development of psychoanalytical theory. In due course, however, it occurred to me with increasing conviction that, in certain important respects, she had failed to push her views to their logical conclusions. First and foremost, she continued to adhere uncritically to Freud's hedonistic libidino theory. This seemed to me an inconsistency; for, if the introjection of objects and the perpetuation of such objects in the inner world are as important as her views imply, it is difficult to be satisfied with attributing this simply to the presence of oral impulses in the child or to the compulsions of libidinal pleasure-seeking. On the con-

trary, it seems to point inevitably to the conclusion that libido is not primarily pleasure-seeking, but object-seeking. This is a conclusion which I registered in a paper published in 1941, and to which I have subsequently adhered. It is a conclusion which involves a modification of Freud's conception of erotogenic zones—a modification to the effect that these zones cannot properly be regarded as themselves the sources of pleasure-seeking aims in the interests of which objects are more or less adventitiously exploited, but rather that they constitute channels adapted for the fulfillment of libidinal aims which have their source in the ego and are directed towards the establishment of satisfactory relationships with objects.

A second conception which Melanie Klein has, to my mind inconsistently, retained is Abraham's theory of libidinal development. This theory, based as it is upon Freud's theory of erotogenic zones, postulates a developmental series of libidinal phases, each characterized by the dominance of a specific zone. It would be unfair to Abraham to say that he is indifferent to object-relationships; for each of his phases is intended to represent not only a stage in libidinal organization, but also a stage in the development of object-love. Nevertheless, his phases are described, not in terms of appropriate objects, but in terms of erotogenic zones. Thus, instead of speaking of a "breast" phase, he speaks of an "oral" phase. Another feature of Abraham's theory is, of course, that he attributes each of the classic psychoses and neuroses to a fixation at a specific phase. Both of these features were subjected to criticism on my part in the paper to which I have referred. At the same time I ventured to put forward alternative views. In place of Abraham's theory of libidinal development I formulated a theory based upon the nature of dependence upon objects; and I outlined a process of development in terms of which an original state of infantile dependence gave place to a final state of adult dependence during the course of an intermediate stage of transition. I also formulated the view that, with the two exceptions of schizophrenia and depression, the various classic psychopathological conditions represented, not fixations at specific libidinal phases, but specific techniques for regulating relationships with internal objects; and I described these techniques as originating during the developmental stage of transition from infantile dependence to adult dependence for the purpose of defending the growing personality against the effects of the conflicts involved in early object-relationships. On the other

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hand, I interpreted schizophrenia and depression as representing the emergence of psychological states which these techniques were designed to avert, and whose etiological origin I ascribed to the primary stage of infantile dependence.

The impulse-psychology which Freud originally adopted and never abandoned constitutes another feature of pre-existing psychoanalytical thought which Melanie Klein has allowed to remain unquestioned, but which I have now come to regard as an anachronism in the light of her researches. In retrospect it is easy to see that the first step in my renunciation of impulse-psychology was taken when I reformulated the libido theory in terms of object-seeking; but I took a more obvious step in this direction when, in a paper published in 1943, I went on to consider the implications of this revision of the libido theory for the classic theory of repression. In doing so, I took as my text Freud's statement, 'The super-ego is, however, not merely a deposit left by the earliest object-choices of the id; it also represents an energetic reaction formation against these choices.' Now, whilst in describing the super-ego as a deposit of object-choices Freud is describing it as an internal object, in describing it as a reaction formation against object-choices he is, of course, describing it as the instigator of repression. It therefore seemed to me obvious that, if repression involved a reaction against object-choices, it must be directed against objects—objects which, like the super-ego, were internal, but which, unlike the super-ego, were rejected by the ego. Accordingly, I proceeded to give explicit formulation to this view, which seemed to me a more logical conclusion from Freud's premises than his own view that repression was directed against guilty impulses. From this standpoint, guilt, or the sense of personal moral badness, became secondary to a sense of badness in the object; and it appeared to represent a product of tension arising from a conflict between the relationship of the ego with the super-ego as an internal object accepted as good and its relationships with other internal objects regarded, pari passu, as bad. Guilt thus resolved itself into a defence against relationships with bad-objects. In the light of these conclusions it becomes important to determine why the child should incorporate objects which presented themselves to him as bad; and the answer to this question seemed to me to be that the child internalized bad objects partly with a view to controlling them (an aggressive motive), but chiefly because he experienced a libidinal need of them. Accordingly I

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directed attention to the part played by positive libidinal attachments to internal bad objects in the phenomenon of resistance encountered in psychotherapy; and in doing so, of course, I departed from Freud's principle that resistance is exclusively a manifestation of repression.

The subject of repression is one to which I returned in a paper published in 1944. In this paper I directed more specific attention to the weakness of impulse-psychology, adopting the general standpoint that it is impossible to isolate so-called 'impulses' from the endopsychic structures which they energize and the relationships which they enable these structures to establish with objects. I suggested further that similar considerations applied to so-called 'instincts'. In conformity with this line of thought, I envisaged a replacement of the outmoded impulse-psychology, which, once adopted, Freud had never seen fit to abandon, by a new psychology of dynamic structure. This step involved a critical examination of Freud's description of mental structure in terms of id, ego and super-ego. Such an examination reveals at the outset an inherent incompatibility between any psychology of dynamic structure and Freud's conceptions of the id as a reservoir of instinctive impulses, and of the ego as a structure which develops on the surface of the id for the regulation of id-impulses in relation to outer reality. Obviously the principle of dynamic structure can only be maintained if the distinction between id and ego is abolished and the ego is regarded as an original structure which is itself the source of impulse-tension. At the same time impulse-tension in the ego must be regarded as inherently oriented towards outer reality, and thus initially determined by the reality principle. From this point of view, inadequacies in the child's capacity for adaptation will be explained as largely due to lack of experience combined with the fact that the instinctive endowment of mankind only assumes the form of general trends which require experience to enable them to acquire a more differentiated and rigid pattern. With the child's inexperience goes a tendency on his part to be more emotional and impulsive, and to be less tolerant of the many frustrations which he encounters. These various factors must all be taken into account; and it is only in so far as conditions of adaptation become too difficult for the child that the reality principle gives place to the pleasure principle as a secondary, and deteriorative (as against regressive) principle of behaviour calculated to relieve tension and provide compensatory satisfactions. And here I may perhaps add

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that, in somewhat similar fashion, I have come to regard aggression as secondary to libido, thus departing from Freud, who regarded it as an independent primary factor (viz. as a separate ‘instinct’).

The revised conception of the ego which arises at this point involves a reconsideration of the theory of repression. According to Freud, of course, repression was directed against impulses; but, in order to explain the agency of repression, he felt compelled to postulate the existence of a structure (the super-ego) capable of instigating repression. I was only taking another step in the same direction, therefore, when I postulated the existence of structures which are repressed—as I did in recording the conclusion that what are primarily repressed are internal bad objects. At the time when I took this step I considered that impulses also became subjected to repression in a secondary sense. After my adoption of a psychology of dynamic structure, however, this view could no longer be maintained; and I substituted the view that what became subjected to secondary repression was that part of the ego which was most closely involved in a relationship with repressed objects. This conception presents us with the phenomenon of a split in the ego characterized by the repression of one dynamic part of the ego by another dynamic, but more central, part of the ego.

Here it becomes relevant to observe that, whilst Freud’s earlier researches into the nature of the repressed were based upon a study of hysteria, his later researches into the nature of the agency of repression were based upon a study of melancholia. Whilst it would be presumptuous to suggest that this change of ground has proved a historical mistake, it seems a matter for regret that Freud was not able to pursue his study of the agency of repression on the same ground as his study of the repressed, and so to make the phenomena of hysteria the basis of his theory of mental structure. This is a regret which I registered in the slogan ‘Back to hysteria’ in my 1944 paper. In my opinion, what led Freud to change his ground was an impasse created by the psychological hedonism and the related impulse-psychology to which he adhered, and which prevented him from envisaging the presence of such a process as splitting of the ego in hysteria. Splitting of the ego is, of course, a phenomenon associated characteristically with schizophrenia. It may thus be said that, whilst Freud’s conception of repression was based upon what Melanie Klein subsequently described as the ‘depressive position’, my conception is based upon what may be described as the ‘schizoid position’.

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My conception may, therefore, be regarded as having a more fundamental basis than Freud’s in proportion as schizophrenia is a more primal condition than melancholia; and, at the same time, a theory of the personality based upon the conception of splitting of the ego would appear to be more fundamental than one based upon Freud’s conception of the repression of impulses by an unsplit ego. The theory which I now envisage is, of course, obviously adapted to explain such extreme manifestations as are found in cases of multiple personality; but, as Janet has pointed out, these extreme manifestations are only exaggerated examples of the dissociation phenomena characteristic of hysteria. Thus, if we implement the slogan ‘Back to hysteria’, we find ourselves confronted with the very phenomenon of splitting upon which my theory of repression is based.

At this point it also becomes material to note that, according to Freud, the super-ego as the instigator of repression is no less unconscious than the repressed itself. Why the super-ego should be unconscious is a problem to which Freud never gave any really satisfactory answer; and the question now arises whether the super-ego itself is not repressed. That a structure corresponding to Freud’s ‘super-ego’ is actually repressed was another of the conclusions which I drew in my 1944 paper. The situation which I envisaged was one based upon a split in the internalized bad object. I have already explained how I reached the conclusion that repression of an internalized bad object led to repression of that part of the ego which was most intimately bound by libidinal ties to the object in question; but, if the object is split, it follows that two parts of the ego will also be split off from the central ego, one attached to each of the partial objects. According to my conception, the internalized bad object has two aspects—an exciting aspect and a rejecting aspect; and this duality of aspects forms the basis of a split of the object into an exciting object and a rejecting object. Repression of the exciting object is accompanied by the splitting off and repression of a part of the original ego, which I have described as the ‘libidinal ego’; and repression of the rejecting object is accompanied by the splitting off and repression of another part of the original ego, which I have described as the ‘internal saboteur’.

The conception of the internal saboteur is by no means identical with that of the super-ego; but, being allied to the rejecting object,

1 I retain the term ‘super-ego’ to describe an internal object which is castigated and accepted as ‘good’ by the central ego, and which appears to function as an ego-ideal at a level of organization established subsequently to the basic level now under
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this part of the ego has aims contrary to those of the libidinal ego, which thus becomes subject to its hostility. This hostility of the internal saboteur to the libidinal ego operates in the same direction as the repression exercised over the libidinal ego by the central ego; and accordingly I have described it as a process of 'indirect repression'. This indirect repression would appear to be the aspect of repression upon which Freud chiefly concentrated, and upon which he based his theory of repression as a whole.

The internal situation resulting from the processes which I have just outlined is one which I have described as 'the basic endopsychic situation'. The three ego structures involved (viz. the central and the two subsidiary egos) correspond roughly to Freud's ego, id and super-ego; but they are all conceived as inherently dynamic ego-structures assuming a dynamic pattern in relation to one another, whereas the id is conceived as a source of energy without structure, and the ego and the super-ego as structures without any energy except such as they derive at second-hand from the id. The super-ego is, of course, conceived by Freud as an internalized object which achieves quasi-ego status; but, since the primal id is not conceived as fundamentally object-seeking, it is difficult to see how the internalization of the super-ego can be consistently explained by Freud on theoretic grounds. According to the conception which I have formulated, however, the internalization of objects is the direct expression of the libidinal needs of an original object-seeking ego in the face of the vicissitudes of its early object-relationships. The internal differentiation of structure within the personality through splitting of the ego is also explained in terms of relationships with objects which have been internalized; and these relationships are seen to give rise to relationships between the various parts into which the original ego becomes split. It will be appreciated, accordingly, how appropriate it is for the theory whose genesis and development I have been outlining to be described as 'an object-relations theory of the personality'.

A final word regarding the basic endopsychic situation to which I have just referred. Although, once it has been established, this situation would appear to be relatively immutable from a topographic standpoint, from an economic standpoint it would appear to consideration. I regard the cathexis of this object by the central ego as constituting a defence against the cathexis of internal bad objects by the subsidiary ego, and as providing the basis for the establishment of moral values in the inner world.

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admit of a considerable variety of dynamic patterns; and it may be assumed that the more characteristic of such patterns will correspond to the various psychopathological conditions described in textbooks of psychiatry. The details of these patterns and their relation to symptomatology could, however, only be established after considerable research. Meanwhile, it is in the case of hysteria that the dynamic configuration is clearest. Be that as it may, the general account which I have given must suffice to indicate what is meant by 'an object-relations theory of the personality'; and the historical form in which this account has been cast will, I trust, justify its aim—which is to indicate the raison d'être of a theory of this kind by describing the various considerations which have determined the steps in its progressive development.