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EGO PSYCHOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF ADAPTATION

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Preface

THE publication of a complete English translation of Heinz Hartmann's essay, EGO PSYCHOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF ADAPTATION, inaugurates the Monograph Series of the Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association. This project was conceived several years ago, but its initiation has had to await the availability of a psychoanalytic work of exceptional merit and importance. The editors believe that the appropriate occasion has finally arrived. The timeliness of this decision is attested to by the recent award to Dr. Hartmann, of the Charles Frederick Menninger Award of the American Psychoanalytic Association, for his scientific contributions.

"Ich-Psychologie und Anpassungsproblem" was first presented in 1937 before the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and then published in German in 1939 in the *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und Imago*. Historically it represents a turning point in the development of modern psychoanalytic theory. It is a natural sequel to Freud's previous formulations of the structural hypothesis and his contributions to ego psychology. With its appearance there began an evolution in psychoanalytic thought which continues to

ramify and the full implications of which for theory and practice are not yet fully realized.

To readers intimately acquainted with current psychoanalytic ego psychology, this essay will reveal the first formulations of some of its basic concepts. Many of them will have a ring of familiarity, because of the remarkable degree to which Hartmann's ideas have shaped, and become assimilated into, current psychoanalytic thinking. One becomes aware of the tremendous impact of his theories when one finds that it was in this essay that concepts such as the undifferentiated phase, the conflict-free ego sphere, conflict-free ego development, and primary and secondary autonomy were developed for the first time. Hartmann discusses the role of endowment and of the inborn ego apparatuses and their adaptive nature. The idea that ego defenses may simultaneously serve the control of instinctual drives and the adaptation to the external world finds its expression in this essay. Hartmann's concept of adaptation is in no way restricted to the "cultural" sense of the term. It is a truly inclusive conception, and he views it as an ongoing process, which has its roots in the biological structure, and with many of its manifestations reflecting the constant attempts of the ego to balance intrasystemic and intersystemic tensions. The implications of his theory for the development of perception and thought processes, the concepts of ego strength, ego weakness, and of normality, are also discussed. Neutralization, and the impact of this construct on the concept of sublimation, evolves quite naturally from this paper.

One sees in this work a systematic attempt to establish within the framework of a psychoanalytic ego psychology the groundwork for a theory of human behavior in general, normal as well as abnormal. The great sweep of Hartmann's exceptionally rich intellect has made it possible for him in

this task to integrate the whole field of psychoanalytic knowledge with the related fields of biology, psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

The opportunity to read this essay will reintroduce psychoanalysts to a cardinal requirement of the scientific method which Dr. Hartmann's work demonstrates, namely his unswerving insistence upon precision in methodology, and upon logical consistency of theory. With it all, the rarified atmosphere of theory is flavored by a humanistic tolerance and understanding, which is discernible in his discussions of rational and irrational behavior, automatism and mechanisms of integration.

The fact that this paper has never before been published in its entirety in English left a void in the psychoanalytic literature for English-reading psychoanalysts. This is now being filled by the decision of the Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association to publish this essay as its first Monograph. We are proud to make it available to the many students of psychoanalysis who have never known the full content of this classic essay.

The efforts of many were required to carry out this project. Foremost among these is Dr. David Rapaport, who originally translated and published excerpts of this work in his book, *Organization and Pathology of Thought,* but who for the purposes of this Monograph prepared a completely new translation. His great familiarity with the work in its original form, as well as the fact that Dr. Hartmann himself has participated in the elucidation of certain crucial points, provides assurance of the authoritative stature of this English version of the original German article. In addition to our great indebtedness to Dr. Rapaport, we wish to express our gratitude to the Ford Foundation, whose grant-in-aid to the

Austen Riggs Center permitted Dr. Rapaport and his associates to carry out the preparation of the translation.

We also wish to thank Dr. Merton Gill for his assistance with the primary translation; Miss Suzette H. Annin who is actually the co-translator and fully responsible for the English of this Monograph; and Miss Rosemary Ranzoni who was responsible for the typing of the many versions of this translation. Finally, we acknowledge with great appreciation the over-all editorial assistance, as well as bibliographical work, of Mrs. Lottie Maury Newman, Editor of International Universities Press. It is this combined effort which we hope will make the publication of this first of the Monograph Series of the Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association a noteworthy event.

THE EDITORS

Author's Note

THIS ESSAY, which appeared in German some twenty years ago, is published here essentially unchanged. I still consider most of the thoughts presented in it to be valid. Some of them were developed further, reformulated, or were stated more systematically in subsequent papers. Nonetheless, I feel that a close study of historical developments in psychoanalysis is still one main prerequisite for its fuller understanding. I decided therefore to have this essay published in its original form rather than to rewrite it in conformity with the present state of our knowledge. Footnotes added in this edition (indicated by brackets) will guide the reader to subsequent developments in my work of the subjects dealt with in this paper.

I wish to express my warmest gratitude to Dr. David Rapaport. I am fully aware how much resourcefulness and scholarly labor went into this revised translation of the complete essay.

HEINZ HARTMANN

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EGO PSYCHOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF ADAPTATION

1.

The Conflict-Free Ego Sphere

PSYCHOANALYSIS encounters the issue of adaptation in three forms: as a problem of its ego psychology, as a therapeutic aim, and as an educational consideration. It is striking that while the concept "ego syntonic" is fairly well defined, experience shows that the term "reality syntonic" is so elastic that it covers diverse and even partly contradictory views.

Psychoanalysis alone cannot solve the problem of adaptation. It is a subject of research for biology and sociology also. However, the important insights psychoanalysis has given, and will give, into adaptation could hardly be attained by the other approaches and methods. Therefore we have the right to expect that all investigations of the problem of adaptation take into account the fundamental facts and relationships discovered by psychoanalysis. The increase of our interest in the problems of adaptation is due mainly to those developments in psychoanalysis which focused our attention on ego functions; but it was also fostered by our increased interest in the total personality, as well as by the concern over certain theoretical formulations about mental health, which use "adjustment to reality" as a criterion.

I shall have to touch on some matters which are well known, on some which may be controversial, and on a few which are not, strictly speaking, psychoanalytic. But all that

I have to say is, I believe, in accord with the basic views of psychoanalysis. I maintain that it is a psychoanalytic endeavor—in the broader sense—to transfer concepts which were developed in reference to concrete problems of the personality's central sphere to other realms of mental life, and to study the changes in these concepts necessitated by the conditions prevailing in these other realms.

I shall begin with a few comments on the scope of the problem within the limits I have set for myself, without attempting to give a systematic statement of it.

Psychoanalysis evinced quite early, and perhaps even from the very beginning, a narrower and a broader objective. It started out with the study of pathology and of phenomena which are on the border of normal psychology and psychopathology. At that time its work centered on the id and the instinctual drives. But soon there arose new problems, concepts, formulations, and new needs for explanation, which reached beyond this narrower field toward a *general* theory of mental life. A decisive, and perhaps the most clearly delineated, step in this direction is our recent ego psychology: Freud's work of the last fifteen years; and then—following the pathways of investigation which he opened—primarily Anna Freud's studies, and, in another area, those of the English school. At present we no longer doubt that psychoanalysis can claim to be a *general* psychology in the broadest sense of the word, and our conception of the working methods which may properly be considered psychoanalytic has become broader, deeper, and more discriminating.

Anna Freud (1936, pp. 4-5) defined the goal of psychoanalysis as the attainment of the fullest possible knowledge of the three mental institutions. But not every effort in psychology which contributes to this goal can be considered psychoanalytic. The distinctive characteristic of a psychoanalytic

investigation is not its subject matter but the scientific methodology, and the structure of the concepts it uses. All psychological investigations share some of their objectives with psychoanalysis. These partially shared goals bring into particularly sharp relief the distinctive characteristics of psychoanalytic thinking. (Consider, for instance, the contrast between psychoanalytic ego psychology and Alfred Adler's psychology.) Recent developments in psychoanalysis have not changed its salient characteristics, namely its biological orientation, its genetic, dynamic, economic, and topographic points of view, and the explanatory nature of its concepts. Thus, when psychoanalysis and nonanalytic psychology study the same subject matter, they will, of necessity, arrive at different results. In the last analysis, they differ in their view of what is essential, and this inevitably leads them to different descriptive and relational propositions. A similar situation exists in anatomy, where descriptively insignificant characteristics may be ontogenetically or phylogenetically crucial; and in chemistry, where coal and diamond are identical analytically, though from other points of view they are strikingly different. In general, characteristics which are relevant in a broader theory may be irrelevant in a more limited context. Though these are merely analogies, they do make a valid point, since psychoanalysis does have the potentiality to become a general theory of mental development, broader, both in its assumptions and scope, than any other psychological theory. To realize this potentiality, however, we must survey from the point of view of psychoanalysis, and encompass within our theory, those psychological phenomena which were the subject matter of psychology before psychoanalysis existed, as well as those which are now the subject matter of psychology, but not of psychoanalysis.

It has often been said that while the psychology of the id

was and remains a "preserve" of psychoanalysis, ego psychology is its general meeting ground with nonanalytic psychology. Even the objections against psychoanalytic ego psychology differ from those leveled against id psychology; they are like those commonly encountered in scientific criticism—less hostile and less categorical. To some psychoanalysts this is evidence that the findings of ego psychology are invalid or unimportant. But this is unjustified: the resistance to a new discovery is clearly not a direct measure of its scientific significance. It is also conceivable that ego psychology is criticized more mildly only because nonanalysts rarely grasp its background and implications. Even though Freud rightly declined to regard psychoanalysis as a "system," it is nevertheless a cohesive organization of propositions, and any attempt to isolate parts of it not only destroys its over-all unity, but also changes and invalidates its parts. Consequently, psychoanalytic ego psychology differs radically from the "surface psychologies," even though—as Fenichel (1937b) has pointed out recently—it is, and will be, increasingly interested in the details of behavior, in all the shadings of conscious experience, in the rarely studied preconscious processes, and in the relationships between the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious ego. The dynamic and economic points of view, though they apply to all mental life, have been scarcely applied to these. The history of the development of psychoanalytic psychology explains why we understand as yet relatively little about those processes and working methods of the mental apparatus which lead to *adapted achievements.* We cannot simply contrast the ego as the nonbiological part of the personality with the id as its biological part; the very problem of adaptation warns against such a division, but about this more will have to be said later on. It is, however, true and also natural that pure phenomenological description of the

details of the mental superficies, which we could disregard previously, is essential for and attains a special importance in ego psychology. But we will probably all agree that these phenomenological details, which nowadays command our interest, serve us merely as points of departure. The goal of gathering a maximum of descriptive detail is indeed the goal of phenomenological psychology, but not of psychoanalytic ego psychology: there lies the fundamental difference between the two. For instance, Federn's ego psychology, which focuses on varieties of ego experiences, is certainly not just a phenomenology: the varieties of experience serve it as indicators of other (libidinal) processes and are treated in terms of explanatory rather than descriptive concepts.

The close connection between theory and therapeutic technique, so characteristic of psychoanalysis, explains why the ego functions directly involved in the *conflicts* between the mental institutions commanded our interest earlier than others. It also explains why other ego functions and the process of coming to terms with the environment—except for a few pertinent problems which played a role in psychoanalysis from the beginning—did not become the subject matter of research until a later stage of our science. Psychoanalytic observation has frequently come upon facts and considerations related to these other ego functions, but rarely subjected them to detailed study and theoretical reflection. I believe it is an empirical fact that these functions are less decisive for the understanding and treatment of pathology—on which psychoanalytic interest has been centered so far—than the psychology of the conflicts which are at the root of every neurosis. I am not inclined, however, to underestimate the clinical importance of these functions, though here I shall deal mainly with their theoretical significance, and even with that from only a single point of view. We must recog-