The Denial of Death

Ernest Becker

Souvenir Press

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Foreword

The first words Ernest Becker said to me when I walked into his hospital room were: "You are catching me in extremis. This is a test of everything I've written about death. And I've got a chance to show how one dies, the attitude one takes. Whether one does it in a dignified, manly way; what kinds of thoughts one surrounds it with; how one accepts his death."

When *The Denial of Death* arrived at Psychology Today in late 1973 and was placed on my desk for consideration it took me less than an hour to decide that I wanted to interview Ernest Becker. On December 6th, I called his home in Vancouver to see if he would do a conversation for the magazine. His wife, Marie, told me he had just been taken to the hospital and was in the terminal stage of cancer and was not expected to live for more than a week Unexpectedly, she called the next day to say that Ernest would like to do the conversation if I could get there while he still had strength and clarity. So I went to Vancouver with speed and trembling, knowing that the only thing more presumptuous than intruding into the private world of the dying would be to refuse his invitation.

Although we had never met, Ernest and I fell immediately into deep conversation. The nearness of his death and the severe limits of his energy stripped away the impulse to chatter. We talked about death in the face of death; about evil in the presence of cancer. At the end of the day Ernest had no more energy, so there was no more time. We lingered awkwardly for a few minutes, because saying "goodbye" for the last time is hard and we both knew he would not live to see our conversation in print. A paper cup of medicinal sherry on the night stand, mercifully, provided us a ritual for ending. We drank the wine together and I left.

That day a quarter of a century ago was a pivotal event in shaping my relationship to the mystery of *my* death and, therefore, my life. I will carry for a lifetime the images of Ernest's courage, his clarity purchased at the cost of enduring pain, and the manner in which his passion for ideas held death at bay for a season. It is a privilege to have witnessed such a man in the heroic agony of his dying.

In the years since his death, Becker has been widely recognized as one of the great spiritual cartographers of our age and a wise physician of the soul. Gradually, reluctantly, we are beginning to acknowledge that the bitter medicine he prescribes —contemplation of the horror of our inevitable death—is, paradoxically, the tincture that adds sweetness to mortality.

Becker's philosophy as it emerges in *Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil* is a braid woven from four strands.

The first strand. The world is terrifying. To say the least, Becker's account of nature has little in common with Walt Disney. Mother Nature is a brutal bitch, red in tooth and claw, who destroys what she creates. We live, he says, in a creation in which the routine activity for organisms is "tearing others apart with teeth of all types—biting, grinding flesh, plant stalks, bones between molars, pushing the pulp greedily down the gullet with delight, incorporating its essence into one's own organization, and then excreting with foul stench and gasses the residue."

The second strand. The basic motivation for human behavior is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death. Human beings are naturally anxious because we are ultimately helpless and abandoned in a world where we are fated to die. "This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have

a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die."

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Ernest Becker were strange allies in fomenting the cultural revolution that brought death and dying out of the closet. At the same time that Kubler-Ross gave us permission to practice the art of dying gracefully, Becker taught us that awe, fear, and ontological anxiety were natural accompaniments to our contemplation of the fact of death.

The third strand. Since the terror of death is so overwhelming we conspire to keep it unconscious. "The vital lie of character" is the first line of defense that protects us from the painful awareness of our helplessness. Every child borrows power from adults and creates a personality by introjecting the qualities of the godlike being. If I am like my all-powerful father I will not die. So long as we stay obediently within the defense mechanisms of our personality, what Wilhelm Reich called "character armor" we feel safe and are able to pretend that the world is manageable. But the price we pay is high. We repress our bodies to purchase a soul that time cannot destroy; we sacrifice pleasure to buy immortality; we encapsulate ourselves to avoid death. And life escapes us while we huddle within the defended fortress of character.

Society provides the second line of defense against our natural impotence by creating a hero system that allows us to believe that we transcend death by participating in something of lasting worth. We achieve ersatz immortality by sacrificing ourselves to conquer an empire, to build a temple, to write a book, to establish a family, to accumulate a fortune, to further progress and prosperity, to create an information-society and global free market. Since the main task of human life is to become heroic and transcend death, every culture must provide its members with an intricate symbolic system that is covertly religious. This means that ideological conflicts between cultures are essentially battles between immortality projects, holy wars.

One of Becker's lasting contributions to social psychology has been to help us understand that corporations and nations may be driven by unconscious motives that have little to do with their stated goals. Making a killing in business or on the battlefield frequently has less to do with economic need or political reality than with the need for assuring ourselves that we have achieved something of lasting worth. Consider, for instance, the recent war in Vietnam in which the United States was driven not by any realistic economic or political interest but by the overwhelming need to defeat "atheistic communism."

The fourth strand. Our heroic projects that are aimed at destroying evil have the paradoxical effect of bringing more evil into the world. Human conflicts are life and death struggles—my gods against your gods, my immortality project against your immortality project. The root of humanly caused evil is not man's animal nature, not territorial aggression, or innate selfishness, but our need to gain self-esteem, deny our mortality, and achieve a heroic self-image. Our desire for the best is the cause of the worst. We want to clean up the world, make it perfect, keep it safe for democracy or communism, purify it of the enemies of god, eliminate evil, establish an alabaster city undimmed by human tears, or a thousand year Reich.

Perhaps Becker's greatest achievement has been to create a science of evil. He has given us a new way to understand how we create surplus evil—warfare, ethnic cleansing, genocide. From the beginning of time, humans have dealt with what Carl Jung called their shadow side—feelings of inferiority, self-hate, guilt, hostility—by projecting it onto an enemy. It has remained for Becker to make crystal clear the way in which warfare is a social ritual for purification of the world in which the

enemy is assigned the role of being dirty, dangerous, and atheistic. Dachau, Capetown and Mi Lai, Bosnia, Rwanda, give grim testimony to the universal need for a scapegoat—a Jew, a nigger, a dirty communist, a Muslim, a Tutsi. Warfare is a death potlatch in which we sacrifice our brave boys to destroy the cowardly enemies of righteousness. And, the more blood the better, because the bigger the body-count the greater the sacrifice for the sacred cause, the side of destiny, the divine plan.

Becker's radical conclusion that it is our altruistic motives that turn the world into a charnel house—our desire to merge with a larger whole, to dedicate our lives to a higher cause, to serve cosmic powers—poses a disturbing and revolutionary question to every individual and nation. At what cost do we purchase the assurance that we are heroic? No doubt, one of the reasons Becker has never found a mass audience is because he shames us with the knowledge of how easily we will shed blood to purchase the assurance of our own righteousness. He reveals how our need to deny our nakedness and be arrayed in glory keeps us from acknowledging that the emperor has no clothes.

After such a grim diagnosis of the human condition it is not surprising that Becker offers only a palliative prescription. Expect no miracle cure, no future apotheosis of man, no enlightened future, no triumph of reason.

Becker sketches two possible styles of nondestructive heroism.

The best we can hope for society at large is that the mass of unconscious individuals might develop a moral equivalent to war. The science of man has shown us that society will always be composed of passive subjects, powerful leaders, and enemies upon whom we project our guilt and self-hatred. This knowledge may allow us to develop an "objective hatred" in which the hate object is not a human scapegoat but something impersonal like poverty, disease, oppression, or natural disasters. By making our inevitable hatred intelligent and informed we may be able to turn our destructive energy to a creative use.

For the exceptional individual there is the ancient philosophical path of wisdom. Becker, like Socrates, advises us to practice dying. Cultivating awareness of our death leads to disillusionment, loss of character armor, and a conscious choice to abide in the face of terror. The existential hero who follows this way of self-analysis differs from the average person in knowing that he/she is obsessed. Instead of hiding within the illusions of character, he sees his impotence and vulnerability. The disillusioned hero rejects the standardized heroics of mass culture in favor of cosmic heroism in which there is real joy in throwing off the chains of uncritical, self-defeating dependency and discovering new possibilities of choice and action and new forms of courage and endurance. Living with the voluntary consciousness of death, the heroic individual can choose to despair or to make a Kierkegaardian leap and trust in the "sacrosanct vitality of the cosmos," in the unknown god of life whose mysterious purpose is expressed in the overwhelming drama of cosmic evolution.

There are signs—the acceptance of Becker's work being one—that some individuals are awakening from the long, dark night of tribalism and nationalism and developing what Tillich called a transmoral conscience, an ethic that is universal rather than ethnic. Our task for the future is exploring what it means for each individual to be a member of earth's household, a commonwealth of kindred beings. Whether we will use our freedom to encapsulate ourselves in narrow, tribal, paranoid personalities and create more bloody Utopias or to form compassionate communities of the abandoned is still to be decided. So long as human beings possess a measure of freedom, all hopes for the future must be stated in the subjunctive—we may, we might, we could. No prediction by any expert can tell us

whether we will prosper or perish. We may choose to increase or decrease the dominion of evil. The script for tomorrow is not yet written.

In the end, Becker leaves us with a hope that is terribly fragile and wonderfully potent. "It is," he says, "the disguise of panic that makes us live in ugliness, and not the natural animal wallowing. And this means that evil itself is amenable to critical analysis and, conceivably, to the sway of reason." If, in some distant future, reason conquers our habit of self-destructive heroics and we are able to lessen the quantity of evil we spawn, it will be in some large measure because Ernest Becker helped us understand the relationship between the denial of death and the dominion of evil.

Those interested in the ways Becker's work is being used and continued by philosophers, social scientists, psychologists, and theologians may contact The Ernest Becker Foundation, 3621, 72nd St., Mercer Island, WA 98040 and receive a newsletter and notification of lectures and conferences.

Sam Keen

Preface

… for the time being I gave up writing—there is already too much truth in the world—an over-production which apparently cannot be consumed!

—OTTO RANK[1]

The prospect of death, Dr. Johnson said, wonderfully concentrates the mind. The main thesis of this book is that it does much more than that: the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man. The noted anthropologist A. M. Hocart once argued that primitives were not bothered by the fear of death; that a sagacious sampling of anthropological evidence would show that death was, more often than not, accompanied by rejoicing and festivities; that death seemed to be an occasion for celebration rather than fear—much like the traditional Irish wake. Hocart wanted to dispel the notion that (compared to modern man) primitives were childish and frightened by reality; anthropologists have now largely accomplished this rehabilitation of the primitive. But this argument leaves untouched the fact that the fear of death is indeed a universal in the human condition. To be sure, primitives often celebrate death—as Hocart and others have shown—*because* they believe that death is the ultimate promotion, the final ritual elevation to a higher form of life, to the enjoyment of eternity in some form. Most modern Westerners have trouble believing this any more, which is what makes the fear of death so prominent a part of our psychological make-up.

In these pages I try to show that the fear of death is a universal that unites data from several disciplines of the human sciences, and makes wonderfully clear and intelligible human actions that we have buried under mountains of fact, and obscured with endless back-and-forth arguments about the "true" human motives. The man of knowledge in our time is bowed down under a burden he never imagined he would ever have: the overproduction of truth that cannot be consumed. For centuries man lived in the belief that truth was slim and elusive and that once he found it the troubles of mankind would be over. And here we are in the closing decades of the 20th century, choking on truth. There has been so much brilliant writing, so many genial discoveries, so vast an extension and elaboration of these discoveries—yet the mind is silent as the world spins on its age-old demonic career. I remember reading how, at the famous St. Louis World Exposition in 1904, the speaker at the prestigious science meeting was having trouble speaking against the noise of the new weapons that were being demonstrated nearby. He said something condescending and tolerant about this needlessly disruptive play, as though the future belonged to science and not to militarism. World War I showed everyone the priority of things on this planet, which party was playing idle games and which wasn't. This year the order of priority was again graphically shown by a world arms budget of 204 billion dollars, at a time when human living conditions on the planet were worse than ever.

Why, then, the reader may ask, add still another weighty tome to a useless overproduction? Well, there are personal reasons, of course: habit, drivenness, dogged hopefulness. And there is Eros, the urge to the unification of experience, to form, to greater meaningfulness. One of the reasons, I believe, that knowledge is in a

state of useless overproduction is that it is strewn all over the place, spoken in a thousand competitive voices. Its insignificant fragments are magnified all out of proportion, while its major and world-historical insights lie around begging for attention. There is no throbbing, vital center. Norman O. Brown observed that the great world needs more Eros and less strife, and the intellectual world needs it just as much. There has to be revealed the harmony that unites many different positions, so that the "sterile and ignorant polemics" can be abated.[2]

I have written this book fundamentally as a study in harmonization of the Babel of views on man and on the human condition, in the belief that the time is ripe for a synthesis that covers the best thought in many fields, from the human sciences to religion. I have tried to avoid moving against and negating any point of view, no matter how personally antipathetic to me, if it seems to have in it a core of truthfulness. I have had the growing realization over the past few years that the problem of man's knowledge is not to oppose and to demolish opposing views, but to include them in a larger theoretical structure. One of the ironies of the creative process is that it partly cripples itself in order to function. I mean that, usually, in order to turn out a piece of work the author has to exaggerate the emphasis of it, to oppose it in a forcefully competitive way to other versions of truth; and he gets carried away by his own exaggeration, as his distinctive image is built on it. But each honest thinker who is basically an empiricist has to have some truth in his position, no matter how extremely he has formulated it. The problem is to find the truth underneath the exaggeration, to cut away the excess elaboration or distortion and include that truth where it fits.

A second reason for my writing this book is that I have had more than my share of problems with this fitting-together of valid truths in the past dozen years. I have been trying to come to grips with the ideas of Freud and his interpreters and heirs, with what might be the distillation of modern psychology—and now I think I have finally succeeded. In this sense this book is a bid for the peace of my scholarly soul, an offering for intellectual absolution; I feel that it is my first mature work.

One of the main things I try to do in this book is to present a summing-up of psychology after Freud by tying the whole development of psychology back to the still-towering Kierkegaard. I am thus arguing for a merger of psychology and mythico-religious perspective. I base this argument in large part on the work of Otto Rank, and I have made a major attempt to transcribe the relevance of his magnificent edifice of thought. This coming-to-grips with Rank's work is long overdue; and if I have succeeded in it, it probably comprises the main value of the book.

Rank is so prominent in these pages that perhaps a few words of introduction about him would be helpful here. Frederick Perls once observed that Rank's book *Art and Artist* was "beyond praise."[3] I remember being so struck by this judgment that I went immediately to the book: I couldn't very well imagine how anything scientific could be "beyond praise." Even the work of Freud himself seemed to me to be praiseworthy, that is, somehow expectable as a product of the human mind. But Perls was right: Rank was—as the young people say—"something else." You cannot merely praise much of his work because in its stunning brilliance it is often fantastic, gratuitous, superlative; the insights seem like a gift, beyond what is necessary. I suppose part of the reason—in addition to his genius—was that Rank's thought always spanned several fields of knowledge; when he talked about, say, anthropological data and you expected anthropological insight, you got something else, something more. Living as we do in an era of hyperspecialization we have lost the expectation of this kind of delight; the experts give us manageable thrills—if

they thrill us at all.

One thing that I hope my confrontation of Rank will do is to send the reader directly to his books. There is no substitute for reading Rank. My personal copies of his books are marked in the covers with an uncommon abundance of notes, underlinings, double exclamation points; he is a mine for years of insights and pondering. My treatment of Rank is merely an outline of his thought: its foundations, many of its basic insights, and its overall implications. This will be the pale Rank, not the staggeringly rich one of his books. Also, Ira Progoff's outline presentation and appraisal of Rank is so correct, so finely balanced in judgment, that it can hardly be improved upon as a brief appreciation.[4] Rank is very diffuse, very hard to read, so rich that he is almost inaccessible to the general reader. He was painfully aware of this and for a time hoped that Anaïs Nin would rewrite his books for him so that they would have a chance to have the effect they should have had. What I give in these pages is my own version of Rank, filled out in my own way, a sort of brief "translation" of his system in the hope of making it accessible as a whole. In this book I cover only his individual psychology; in another book I will sketch his schema for a psychology of history.

There are several ways of looking at Rank. Some see him as a brilliant coworker of Freud, a member of the early circle of psychoanalysis who helped give it broader currency by bringing to it his own vast erudition, who showed how psychoanalysis could illuminate culture history, myth, and legend—as, for example, in his early work on *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* and *The Incest-Motif.* They would go on to say that because Rank was never analyzed, his repressions gradually got the better of him, and he turned away from the stable and creative life he had close to Freud; in his later years his personal instability gradually overcame him, and he died prematurely in frustration and loneliness. Others see Rank as an overeager disciple of Freud, who tried prematurely to be original and in so doing even exaggerated psychoanalytic reductionism. This judgment is based almost solely on his 1924 book *The Trauma of Birth* and usually stops there. Still others see Rank as a brilliant member of Freud's close circle, an eager favorite of Freud, whose university education was suggested and financially helped by Freud and who repaid psychoanalysis with insights into many fields: cultural history, childhood development, the psychology of art, literary criticism, primitive thought, and so on. In short, a sort of many-faceted but not-too-well-organized or self-controlled boy-wonder—an intellectually superior Theodor Reik, so to speak.

But all these ways of summing up Rank are wrong, and we know that they derive largely from the mythology of the circle of psychoanalysts themselves. They never forgave Rank for turning away from Freud and so diminishing their own immortality-symbol (to use Rank's way of understanding their bitterness and pettiness). Admittedly, Rank's *Trauma of Birth* gave his detractors an easy handle on him, a justified reason for disparaging his stature; it was an exaggerated and ill-fated book that poisoned his public image, even though he himself reconsidered it and went so far beyond it. Not being merely a coworker of Freud, a broad-ranging servant of psychoanalysis, Rank had his own, unique, and perfectly thought-out system of ideas. He knew where he wanted to begin, what body of data he had to pass through, and where it all pointed. He knew these things specifically as regards psychoanalysis itself, which he wanted to transcend and did; he knew it roughly, as regards the philosophical implications of his own system of thought, but he was not given the time to work this out, as his life was cut short. He was certainly as complete a system-maker as were Adler and Jung; his system of thought is at least as brilliant as theirs, if not more so in some ways. We respect Adler for the solidity of

his judgment, the directness of his insight, his uncompromising humanism; we admire Jung for the courage and openness with which he embraced both science and religion; but even more than these two, Rank's system has implications for the deepest and broadest development of the social sciences, implications that have only begun to be tapped.

Paul Roazen, writing about "The Legend of Freud,"[5] aptly observed that "any writer whose mistakes have taken this long to correct is ... quite a figure in intellectual history." Yet the whole matter is very curious, because Adler, Jung, and Rank very early corrected most of Freud's basic mistakes. The question for the historian is, rather, what there was in the nature of the psychoanalytic movement, the ideas themselves, the public and the scholarly mind that kept these corrections so ignored or so separated from the main movement of cumulative scientific thought.

Even a book of broad scope has to be very selective of the truths it picks out of the mountain of truth that is stifling us. Many thinkers of importance are mentioned only in passing: the reader may wonder, for example, why I lean so much on Rank and hardly mention Jung in a book that has as a major aim the closure of psychoanalysis on religion. One reason is that Jung is so prominent and has so many effective interpreters, while Rank is hardly known and has had hardly anyone to speak for him. Another reason is that although Rank's thought is difficult, it is always right on the central problems, Jung's is not, and a good part of it wanders into needless esotericism; the result is that he often obscures on the one hand what he reveals on the other. I can't see that all his tomes on alchemy add one bit to the weight of his psychoanalytic insight.

A good many phrasings of insight into human nature I owe to exchanges with Marie Becker, whose fineness and realism on these matters are most rare. I want to thank (with the customary disclaimers) Paul Roazen for his kindness in passing Chapter Six through the net of his great knowledge of Freud. Robert N. Bellah read the entire manuscript, and I am very grateful for his general criticisms and specific suggestions; those that I was able to act on definitely improved the book; as for the others, I fear that they pose the larger and longer-range task of changing myself.

Notes

Note: As the following works of Otto Rank are mentioned frequently, for the sake of convenience they are abbreviated in the references as follows:

PS *Psychology and the Soul,* 1931 (New York: Perpetua Books Edition, 1961)
ME *Modern Education: A Critique of Its Fundamental Ideas* (Agathon Press, 1968).
AA *Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development* (Agathon Press, 1968).
WT *Will Therapy and Truth and Reality* (New York: Knopf, 1936; One Volume Edition, 1945).
BP *Beyond Psychology,* 1941 (New York: Dover Books, 1958).

Excerpts from new translations of other of Rank's works have appeared in the *Journal of the Otto Rank Association,* along with transcriptions of some of Rank's lectures and conversations; this publication is cited as JORA.

I have also cited frequently Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (New York: Viking Books, 1959) and abbreviated it LAD.

I have also abbreviated often-cited tides of papers and books by various authors after the first complete reference.

1. Rank, letter of 2/8/33, in Jessie Taft's outstanding biography, *Otto Rank* (New York: Julian Press, 1958), p. 175.
2. LAD, p. 322.

3. F. S. Perls, R. F. Hefferline, and P. Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy* (New York: Delta Books, 1951), p. 395, note.
4. I. Progoff, *The Death and Rebirth of Psychology* (New York: Delta Books, 1964).
5. P. Roazen, *The Virginia Quarterly Review,* Winter, 1971, p. 33.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Human Nature and the Heroic

In times such as ours there is a great pressure to come up with concepts that help men understand their dilemma; there is an urge toward vital ideas, toward a simplification of needless intellectual complexity. Sometimes this makes for big lies that resolve tensions and make it easy for action to move forward with just the rationalizations that people need. But it also makes for the slow disengagement of truths that help men get a grip on what is happening to them, that tell them where the problems really are.

One such vital truth that has long been known is the idea of *heroism;* but in "normal" scholarly times we never thought of making much out of it, of parading it, or of using it as a central concept. Yet the popular mind always knew how important it was: as William James—who covered just about everything—remarked at the turn of the century: "mankind's common instinct for reality ... has always held the world to be essentially a theatre for heroism."[1] Not only the popular mind knew, but philosophers of all ages, and in our culture especially Emerson and Nietzsche—which is why we still thrill to them: we like to be reminded that our central calling, our main task on this planet, is the heroic.*

One way of looking at the whole development of social science since Marx and of psychology since Freud is that it represents a massive detailing and clarification of the problem of human heroism. This perspective sets the tone for the seriousness of our discussion: we now have the scientific underpinning for a true understanding of the nature of heroism and its place in human life. If "mankind's common instinct for reality" is right, we have achieved the remarkable feat of exposing that reality in a scientific way.

One of the key concepts for understanding man's urge to heroism is the idea of "narcissism." As Erich Fromm has so well reminded us, this idea is one of Freud's great and lasting contributions. Freud discovered that each of us repeats the tragedy of the mythical Greek Narcissus: we are hopelessly absorbed with ourselves. If we care about anyone it is usually ourselves first of all. As Aristotle somewhere put it: luck is when the guy next to you gets hit with the arrow. Twenty-five hundred years of history have not changed man's basic narcissism; most of the time, for most of us, this is still a workable definition of luck. It is one of the meaner aspects of narcissism that we feel that practically everyone is expendable except ourselves. We should feel prepared, as Emerson once put it, to recreate the whole world out of ourselves even if no one else existed. The thought frightens us; we don't know how we could do it without others—yet at bottom the basic resource is there: we could suffice alone if need be, if we could trust ourselves as Emerson wanted. And if we don't feel this trust emotionally, still most of us would struggle to survive with all our powers, no matter how many around us died. Our organism is ready to fill the world all alone, even if our mind shrinks at the thought. This narcissism is what keeps men marching into point-blank fire in wars: at heart one doesn't feel that *he* will die, he only feels sorry for the man next to him. Freud's explanation for this was that the unconscious does not know death or time: in man's physiochemical, inner organic recesses he feels immortal.

None of these observations implies human guile. Man does not seem able to

"help" his selfishness; it seems to come from his animal nature. Through countless ages of evolution the organism has had to protect its own integrity; it had its own physiochemical identity and was dedicated to preserving it. This is one of the main problems in organ transplants: the organism protects itself against foreign matter, even if it is a new heart that would keep it alive. The protoplasm itself harbors its own, nurtures itself against the world, against invasions of its integrity. It seems to enjoy its own pulsations, expanding into the world and ingesting pieces of it. If you took a blind and dumb organism and gave it self-consciousness and a name, if you made it stand out of nature and know consciously that it was unique, then you would have narcissism. In man, physiochemical identity and the sense of power and activity have become conscious.

In man a working level of narcissism is inseparable from self-esteem, from a basic sense of self-worth. We have learned, mostly from Alfred Adler, that what man needs most is to feel secure in his self-esteem. But man is not just a blind glob of idling protoplasm, but a creature with a name who lives in a world of symbols and dreams and not merely matter. His sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished narcissism feeds on symbols, on an abstract idea of his own worth, an idea composed of sounds, words, and images, in the air, in the mind, on paper. And this means that man's natural yearning for organismic activity, the pleasures of incorporation and expansion, can be fed limitlessly in the domain of symbols and so into immortality. The single organism can expand into dimensions of worlds and times without moving a physical limb; it can take eternity into itself even as it gaspingly dies.

In childhood we see the struggle for self-esteem at its least disguised. The child is unashamed about what he needs and wants most. His whole organism shouts the claims of his natural narcissism. And this claim can make childhood hellish for the adults concerned, especially when there are several children competing at once for the prerogatives of limitless self-extension, what we might call "cosmic significance." The term is not meant to be taken lightly, because this is where our discussion is leading. We like to speak casually about "sibling rivalry," as though it were some kind of by-product of growing up, a bit of competitiveness and selfishness of children who have been spoiled, who haven't yet grown into a generous social nature. But it is too all-absorbing and relentless to be an aberration, it expresses the heart of the creature: the desire to stand out, to be *the* one in creation. When you combine natural narcissism with the basic need for self-esteem, you create a creature who has to feel himself an object of primary value: first in the universe, representing in himself all of life. This is the reason for the daily and usually excruciating struggle with siblings: the child cannot allow himself to be second-best or devalued, much less left out. "You gave him the biggest piece of candy!" "You gave him more juice!" "Here's a little more, then." "Now *she's* got more juice than me!" "You let her light the fire in the fireplace and not me." "Okay, you light a piece of paper." "But this piece of paper is *smaller* than the one she lit." And so on and on. An animal who gets his feeling of worth symbolically has to minutely compare himself to those around him, to make sure he doesn't come off second-best. Sibling rivalry is a critical problem that reflects the basic human condition: it is not that children are vicious, selfish, or domineering. It is that they so openly express man's tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else.

When we appreciate how natural it is for man to strive to be a hero, how deeply it goes in his evolutionary and organismic constitution, how openly he shows it as a

child, then it is all the more curious how ignorant most of us are, consciously, of what we really want and need. In our culture anyway, especially in modern times, the heroic seems too big for us, or we too small for it. Tell a young man that he is entitled to be a hero and he will blush. We disguise our struggle by piling up figures in a bank book to reflect privately our sense of heroic worth. Or by having only a little better home in the neighborhood, a bigger car, brighter children. But underneath throbs the ache of cosmic specialness, no matter how we mask it in concerns of smaller scope. Occasionally someone admits that he takes his heroism seriously, which gives most of us a chill, as did U.S. Congressman Mendel Rivers, who fed appropriations to the military machine and said he was the most powerful man since Julius Caesar. We may shudder at the crassness of earthly heroism, of both Caesar and his imitators, but the fault is not theirs, it is in the way society sets up its hero system and in the people it allows to fill its roles. The urge to heroism is natural, and to admit it honest. For everyone to admit it would probably release such pent-up force as to be devastating to societies as they now are.

The fact is that this is what society is and always has been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism. Each script is somewhat unique, each culture has a different hero system. What the anthropologists call "cultural relativity" is thus really the relativity of hero-systems the world over. But each cultural system is a dramatization of earthly heroics; each system cuts out roles for performances of various degrees of heroism: from the "high" heroism of a Churchill, a Mao, or a Buddha, to the "low" heroism of the coal miner, the peasant, the simple priest; the plain, everyday, earthy heroism wrought by gnarled working hands guiding a family through hunger and disease.

It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. When Norman O. Brown said that Western society since Newton, no matter how scientific or secular it claims to be, is still as "religious" as any other, this is what he meant: "civilized" society is a hopeful belief and protest that science, money and goods *make man count* for more than any other animal. In this sense everything that man does is religious and heroic, and yet in danger of being fictitious and fallible.

The question that becomes then the most important one that man can put to himself is simply this: how conscious is he of what he is doing to earn his feeling of heroism? I suggested that if everyone honestly admitted his urge to be a hero it would be a devastating release of truth. It would make men demand that culture give them their due—a primary sense of human value as unique contributors to cosmic life. How would our modern societies contrive to satisfy such an honest demand, without being shaken to their foundations? Only those societies we today call "primitive" provided this feeling for their members. The minority groups in present-day industrial society who shout for freedom and human dignity are really clumsily asking that they be given a sense of primary heroism of which they have been cheated historically. This is why their insistent claims are so troublesome and upsetting: how do we do such an "unreasonable" thing within the ways in which

society is now set up? “They are asking for the impossible” is the way we usually put our bafflement.

But the truth about the need for heroism is not easy for anyone to admit, even the very ones who want to have their claims recognized. There’s the rub. As we shall see from our subsequent discussion, to become conscious of what one is doing to earn his feeling of heroism is the main self-analytic problem of life. Everything painful and sobering in what psychoanalytic genius and religious genius have discovered about man revolves around the terror of admitting what one is doing to earn his self-esteem. This is why human heroics is a blind drivenness that burns people up; in passionate people, a screaming for glory as uncritical and reflexive as the howling of a dog. In the more passive masses of mediocre men it is disguised as they humbly and complainingly follow out the roles that society provides for their heroics and try to earn their promotions within the system: wearing the standard uniforms—but allowing themselves to stick out, but ever so little and so safely, with a little ribbon or a red boutonniere, but not with head and shoulders.

If we were to peel away this massive disguise, the blocks of repression over human techniques for earning glory, we would arrive at the potentially most liberating question of all, the main problem of human life: How *empirically true* is the cultural hero system that sustains and drives men? We mentioned the meaner side of man’s urge to cosmic heroism, but there is obviously the noble side as well. Man will lay down his life for his country, his society, his family. He will choose to throw himself on a grenade to save his comrades; he is capable of the highest generosity and self-sacrifice. But he has to feel and believe that what he is doing is truly heroic, timeless, and supremely meaningful. The crisis of modern society is precisely that the youth no longer feel heroic in the plan for action that their culture has set up. They don’t believe it is empirically true to the problems of their lives and times. We are living a crisis of heroism that reaches into every aspect of our social life: the dropouts of university heroism, of business and career heroism, of political-action heroism; the rise of anti-heroes, those who would be heroic each in his own way or like Charles Manson with his special “family”, those whose tormented heroics lash out at the system that itself has ceased to represent agreed heroism. The great perplexity of our time, the churning of our age, is that the youth have sensed—for better or for worse—a great social-historical truth: that just as there are useless self-sacrifices in unjust wars, so too is there an ignoble heroics of whole societies: it can be the viciously destructive heroics of Hitler’s Germany or the plain debasing and silly heroics of the acquisition and display of consumer goods, the piling up of money and privileges that now characterizes whole ways of life, capitalist and Soviet.

And the crisis of society is, of course, the crisis of organized religion too: religion is no longer valid as a hero system, and so the youth scorn it. If traditional culture is discredited as heroics, then the church that supports that culture automatically discredits itself. If the church, on the other hand, chooses to insist on its own special heroics, it might find that in crucial ways it must work against the culture, recruit youth to be anti-heroes to the ways of life of the society they live in. This is the dilemma of religion in our time.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this brief introduction is to suggest that the problem of heroics is the central one of human life, that it goes deeper into human nature than anything else because it is based on organismic narcissism and on the child’s need

for self-esteem as *the* condition for his life. Society itself is a codified hero system, which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning. Every society thus is a "religion" whether it thinks so or not: Soviet "religion" and Maoist "religion" are as truly religious as are scientific and consumer "religion," no matter how much they may try to disguise themselves by omitting religious and spiritual ideas from their lives. As we shall see further on, it was Otto Rank who showed psychologically this religious nature of all human cultural creation; and more recently the idea was revived by Norman O. Brown in his *Life Against Death* and by Robert Jay Lifton in his *Revolutionary Immortality.* If we accept these suggestions, then we must admit that we are dealing with *the* universal human problem; and we must be prepared to probe into it as honestly as possible, to be as shocked by the self-revelation of man as the best thought will allow. Let us pick this thought up with Kierkegaard and take it through Freud, to see where this stripping down of the last 150 years will lead us. If the penetrating honesty of a few books could immediately change the world, then the five authors just mentioned would already have shaken the nations to their foundations. But since everyone is carrying on as though the vital truths about man did not yet exist, it is necessary to add still another weight in the scale of human self-exposure. For twenty-five hundred years we have hoped and believed that if mankind could reveal itself to itself, could widely come to know its own cherished motives, then somehow it would tilt the balance of things in its own favor.

Notes

1. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature,* 1902 (New York: Mentor Edition, 1958), p. 281.

* In the following discussion I am obliged to repeat and sum up things I have written elsewhere (*The Birth and Death of Meaning,* Second Edition, New York: Free Press, 1971) in order to set the framework for the other chapters.

PART I

THE DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY OF HEROISM

I drink not from mere joy in wine nor to scoff at faith—no, only to forget myself for a moment, that only do I want of intoxication, that alone.

—OMAR KHAYYAM

CHAPTER TWO

The Terror of Death

Is it not for us to confess that in our civilized attitude towards death we are once more living psychologically beyond our means, and must reform and give truth its due? Would it not be better to give death the place in actuality and in our thoughts which properly belongs to it, and to yield a little more prominence to that unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed? This hardly seems indeed a greater achievement, but rather a backward step … but it has the merit of taking somewhat more into account the true state of affairs….

—SIGMUND FREUD[1]

The first thing we have to do with heroism is to lay bare its underside, show what gives human heroics its specific nature and impetus. Here we introduce directly one of the great rediscoveries of modern thought: that of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death. After Darwin the problem of death as an evolutionary one came to the fore, and many thinkers immediately saw that it was a major psychological problem for man.[2] They also very quickly saw what real heroism was about, as Shaler wrote just at the turn of the century:[3] heroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration; it moves us deeply in our hearts because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be. When we see a man bravely facing his own extinction we rehearse the greatest victory we can imagine. And so the hero has been the center of human honor and acclaim since probably the beginning of specifically human evolution. But even before that our primate ancestors deferred to others who were extrapowerful and courageous and ignored those who were cowardly. Man has elevated animal courage into a cult.

Anthropological and historical research also began, in the nineteenth century, to put together a picture of the heroic since primitive and ancient times. The hero was the man who could go into the spirit world, the world of the dead, and return alive. He had his descendants in the mystery cults of the Eastern Mediterranean, which were cults of death and resurrection. The divine hero of each of these cults was one who had come back from the dead. And as we know today from the research into ancient myths and rituals, Christianity itself was a competitor with the mystery cults and won out—among other reasons—because it, too, featured a healer with supernatural powers who had risen from the dead. The great triumph of Easter is the joyful shout "Christ has risen!", an echo of the same joy that the devotees of the mystery cults enacted at their ceremonies of the victory over death. These cults, as G. Stanley Hall so aptly put it, were an attempt to attain "an immunity bath" from the greatest evil: death and the dread of it.[4] All historical religions addressed themselves to this same problem of how to bear the end of life. Religions like Hinduism and Buddhism performed the ingenious trick of pretending not to want to be reborn, which is a sort of negative magic: claiming not to want what you really want most.[5] When philosophy took over from religion it also took over religion's central problem, and death became the real "muse of philosophy" from its

beginnings in Greece right through Heidegger and modern existentialism.[6]

We already have volumes of work and thought on the subject, from religion and philosophy and—since Darwin—from science itself. The problem is how to make sense out of it; the accumulation of research and opinion on the fear of death is already too large to be dealt with and summarized in any simple way. The revival of interest in death, in the last few decades, has alone already piled up a formidable literature, and this literature does not point in any single direction.

The "Healthy-Minded" Argument

There are "healthy-minded" persons who maintain that fear of death is not a natural thing for man, that we are not born with it. An increasing number of careful studies on how the actual fear of death develops in the child[7] agree fairly well that the child has no knowledge of death until about the age of three to five. How could he? It is too abstract an idea, too removed from his experience. He lives in a world that is full of living, acting things, responding to him, amusing him, feeding him. He doesn't know what it means for life to disappear forever, nor theorize where it would go. Only gradually does he recognize that there is a thing called death that takes some people away forever; very reluctantly he comes to admit that it sooner or later takes everyone away, but this gradual realization of the inevitability of death can take up until the ninth or tenth year.

If the child has no knowledge of an abstract idea like absolute negation, he does have his own anxieties. He is absolutely dependent on the mother, experiences loneliness when she is absent, frustration when he is deprived of gratification, irritation at hunger and discomfort, and so on. If he were abandoned to himself his world would drop away, and his organism must sense this at some level; we call this the anxiety of object-loss. Isn't this anxiety, then, a natural, organismic fear of annihilation? Again, there are many who look at this as a very relative matter. They believe that if the mother has done her job in a warm and dependable way, the child's natural anxieties and guilts will develop in a moderate way, and he will be able to place them firmly under the control of his developing personality.[8] The child who has good maternal experiences will develop a sense of basic security and will not be subject to morbid fears of losing support, of being annihilated, or the like.[9] As he grows up to understand death rationally by the age of nine or ten, he will accept it as part of his world view, but the idea will not poison his self-confident attitude toward life. The psychiatrist Rheingold says categorically that annihilation anxiety is not part of the child's natural experience but is engendered in him by bad experiences with a depriving mother.[10] This theory puts the whole burden of anxiety onto the child's nurture and not his nature. Another psychiatrist, in a less extreme vein, sees the fear of death as greatly heightened by the child's experiences with his parents, by their hostile denial of his life impulses, and, more generally, by the antagonism of society to human freedom and self-expansiveness.[11]

As we will see later on, this view is very popular today in the widespread movement toward unrepressed living, the urge to a new freedom for natural biological urges, a new attitude of pride and joy in the body, the abandonment of shame, guilt, and self-hatred. From this point of view, fear of death is something that society creates and at the same time uses against the person to keep him in submission; the psychiatrist Moloney talked about it as a "culture mechanism," and Marcuse as an "ideology."[12] Norman O. Brown, in a vastly influential book that we shall discuss at some length, went so far as to say that there could be a birth and development of the child in a "second innocence" that would be free of the fear of

death because it would not deny natural vitality and would leave the child fully open to physical living.[13]

It is easy to see that, from this point of view, those who have bad early experiences will be most morbidly fixated on the anxiety of death; and if by chance they grow up to be philosophers they will probably make the idea a central dictum of their thought—as did Schopenhauer, who both hated his mother and went on to pronounce death the "muse of philosophy." If you have a "sour" character structure or especially tragic experiences, then you are bound to be pessimistic. One psychologist remarked to me that the whole idea of the fear of death was an import by existentialists and Protestant theologians who had been scarred by their European experiences or who carried around the extra weight of a Calvinist and Lutheran heritage of life-denial. Even the distinguished psychologist Gardner Murphy seems to lean to this school and urges us to study *the person* who exhibits the fear of death, who places anxiety in the center of his thought; and Murphy asks why the living of life in love and joy cannot also be regarded as real and basic.[14]

The "Morbidly-Minded" Argument

The "healthy-minded" argument just discussed is one side of the picture of the accumulated research and opinion on the problem of the fear of death, but there is another side. A large body of people would agree with these observations on early experience and would admit that experiences may heighten natural anxieties and later fears, but these people would also claim very strongly that nevertheless the fear of death is natural and is present in everyone, that it is the basic fear that influences all others, a fear from which no one is immune, no matter how disguised it may be. William James spoke very early for this school, and with his usual colorful realism he called death "the worm at the core" of man's pretensions to happiness.[15] No less a student of human nature than Max Scheler thought that all men must have some kind of certain intuition of this "worm at the core," whether they admitted it or not.[16] Countless other authorities—some of whom we shall parade in the following pages—belong to this school: students of the stature of Freud, many of his close circle, and serious researchers who are not psychoanalysts. What are we to make of a dispute in which there are two distinct camps, both studded with distinguished authorities? Jacques Choron goes so far as to say that it is questionable whether it will ever be possible to decide whether the fear of death is or is not the basic anxiety.[17] In matters like this, then, the most that one can do is to take sides, to give an opinion based on the authorities that seem to him most compelling, and to present some of the compelling arguments.

I frankly side with this second school—in fact, this whole book is a network of arguments based on the universality of the fear of death, or "terror" as I prefer to call it, in order to convey how all-consuming it is when we look it full in the face. The first document that I want to present and linger on is a paper written by the noted psychoanalyst Gregory Zilboorg; it is an especially penetrating essay that—for succinctness and scope—has not been much improved upon, even though it appeared several decades ago.[18] Zilboorg says that most people think death fear is absent because it rarely shows its true face; but he argues that underneath all appearances fear of death is universally present:

For behind the sense of insecurity in the face of danger, behind the sense of discouragement and depression, there always lurks the basic fear of death, a fear which undergoes most complex elaborations and manifests itself in many indirect ways…. No

one is free of the fear of death…. The anxiety neuroses, the various phobic states, even a considerable number of depressive suicidal states and many schizophrenias amply demonstrate the ever-present fear of death which becomes woven into the major conflicts of the given psychopathological conditions…. We may take for granted that the fear of death is always present in our mental functioning.[19]

Hadn't James said the same thing earlier, in his own way?

Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet.[20]

The difference in these two statements is not so much in the imagery and style as in the fact that Zilboorg's comes almost a half-century later and is based on that much more real clinical work, not only on philosophical speculation or personal intuition. But it also continues the straight line of development from James and the post-Darwinians who saw the fear of death as a biological and evolutionary problem. Here I think he is on very sound ground, and I especially like the way he puts the case. Zilboorg points out that this fear is actually an expression of the instinct of self-preservation, which functions as a constant drive to maintain life and to master the dangers that threaten life:

Such constant expenditure of psychological energy on the business of preserving life would be impossible if the fear of death were not as constant. The very term "self-preservation" implies an effort against some force of disintegration; the affective aspect of this is fear, fear of death.[21]

In other words, the fear of death must be present behind all our normal functioning, in order for the organism to be armed toward self-preservation. But the fear of death cannot be present constantly in one's mental functioning, else the organism could not function. Zilboorg continues:

If this fear were as constantly conscious, we should be unable to function normally. It must be properly repressed to keep us living with any modicum of comfort. We know very well that to repress means more than to put away and to forget that which was put away and the place where we put it. It means also to maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness.[22]

And so we can understand what seems like an impossible paradox: the ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation, as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life:

Therefore in normal times we move about actually without ever believing in our own death, as if we fully believed in our own corporeal immortality. We are intent on mastering death…. A man will say, of course, that he knows he will die some day, but he does not really care. He is having a good time with living, and he does not think about death and does not care to bother about it—but this is a purely intellectual, verbal admission. The affect of fear is repressed.[23]

The argument from biology and evolution is basic and has to be taken seriously; I don't see how it can be left out of any discussion. Animals in order to survive have had to be protected by fear-responses, in relation not only to other animals but to

nature itself. They had to see the real relationship of their limited powers to the dangerous world in which they were immersed. Reality and fear go together naturally. As the human infant is in an even more exposed and helpless situation, it is foolish to assume that the fear response of animals would have disappeared in such a weak and highly sensitive species. It is more reasonable to think that it was instead heightened, as some of the early Darwinians thought: early men who were most afraid were those who were most realistic about their situation in nature, and they passed on to their offspring a realism that had a high survival value.[24] The result was the emergence of man as we know him: a hyperanxious animal who constantly invents reasons for anxiety even where there are none.

The argument from psychoanalysis is less speculative and has to be taken even more seriously. It showed us something about the child's inner world that we had never realized: namely, that it was more filled with terror, the more the child was different from other animals. We could say that fear is programmed into the lower animals by ready-made instincts; but an animal who has no instincts has no programmed fears. Man's fears are fashioned out of the ways in which he perceives the world. Now, what is unique about the child's perception of the world? For one thing, the extreme confusion of cause-and-effect relationships; for another, extreme unreality about the limits of his own powers. The child lives in a situation of utter dependence; and when his needs are met it must seem to him that he has magical powers, real omnipotence. If he experiences pain, hunger, or discomfort, all he has to do is to scream and he is relieved and lulled by gentle, loving sounds. He is a magician and a telepath who has only to mumble and to imagine and the world turns to his desires.

But now the penalty for such perceptions. In a magical world where things cause other things to happen just by a mere thought or a look of displeasure, anything can happen to anyone. When the child experiences inevitable and real frustrations from his parents, he directs hate and destructive feelings toward them; and he has no way of knowing that malevolent feelings cannot be fulfilled by the same magic as were his other wishes. Psychoanalysts believe that this confusion is a main cause of guilt and helplessness in the child. In his very fine essay Wahl summed up this paradox:

> … the socialization processes for all children are painful and frustrating, and hence no child escapes forming hostile death wishes toward his socializers. Therefore, none escape the fear of personal death in either direct or symbolic form. Repression is usually … immediate and effective….[25]

The child is too weak to take responsibility for all this destructive feeling, and he can't control the magical execution of his desires. This is what we mean by an immature ego: the child doesn't have the sure ability to organize his perceptions and his relationship to the world; he can't control his own activity; and he doesn't have sure command over the acts of others. He thus has no real control over the magical cause-and-effect that he senses, either inside himself or outside in nature and in others: his destructive wishes could explode, his parents' wishes likewise. The forces of nature are confused, externally and internally; and for a weak ego this fact makes for quantities of exaggerated potential power and added terror. The result is that the child—at least some of the time—lives with an inner sense of chaos that other animals are immune to.[26]

Ironically, even when the child makes out real cause-and-effect relationships they become a burden to him because he overgeneralizes them. One such generalization is what the psychoanalysts call the "talion principle." The child crushes insects, sees the cat eat a mouse and make it vanish, joins with the family to

make a pet rabbit disappear into their interiors, and so on. He comes to know something about the power relations of the world but can't give them relative value: the parents could eat him and make him vanish, and he could likewise eat them; when the father gets a fierce glow in his eyes as he clubs a rat, the watching child might also expect to be clubbed—especially if he has been thinking bad magical thoughts.

I don't want to seem to make an exact picture of processes that are still unclear to us or to make out that all children live in the same world and have the same problems; also, I wouldn't want to make the child's world seem more lurid than it really is most of the time; but I think it is important to show the painful contradictions that must be present in it at least some of the time and to show how fantastic a world it surely is for the first few years of the child's life. Perhaps then we could understand better why Zilboorg said that the fear of death "undergoes most complex elaborations and manifests itself in many indirect ways." Or, as Wahl so perfectly put it, death is a *complex symbol* and not any particular, sharply defined thing to the child:

> … the child's concept of death is not a single thing, but it is rather a composite of mutually contradictory paradoxes … death itself is not only a state, but a complex symbol, the significance of which will vary from one person to another and from one culture to another.[27]

We could understand, too, why children have their recurrent nightmares, their universal phobias of insects and mean dogs. In their tortured interiors radiate complex symbols of many inadmissible realities—terror of the world, the horror of one's own wishes, the fear of vengeance by the parents, the disappearance of things, one's lack of control over anything, really. It is too much for any animal to take, but the child has to take it, and so he wakes up screaming with almost punctual regularity during the period when his weak ego is in the process of consolidating things.

The "Disappearance" of the Fear of Death

Yet, the nightmares become more and more widely spaced, and some children have more than others: we are back again to the beginning of our discussion, to those who do not believe that the fear of death is normal, who think that it is a neurotic exaggeration that draws on bad early experiences. Otherwise, they say, how explain that so many people—the vast majority—seem to survive the flurry of childhood nightmares and go on to live a healthy, more-or-less optimistic life, untroubled by death? As Montaigne said, the peasant has a profound indifference and a patience toward death and the sinister side of life; and if we say that this is because of his stupidity, then "let's all learn from stupidity."[28] Today, when we know more than Montaigne, we would say "let's all learn from repression"—but the moral would have just as much weight: repression takes care of the complex symbol of death for most people.

But its disappearance doesn't mean that the fear was never there. The argument of those who believe in the universality of the innate terror of death rests its case mostly on what we know about how effective repression is. The argument can probably never be cleanly decided: if you claim that a concept is not present because it is repressed, you can't lose; it is not a fair game, intellectually, because you always hold the trump card. This type of argument makes psychoanalysis seem unscientific

to many people, the fact that its proponents can claim that someone denies one of their concepts because he represses his consciousness of its truth.

But repression is not a magical word for winning arguments; it is a real phenomenon, and we have been able to study many of its workings. This study gives it legitimacy as a scientific concept and makes it a more-or-less dependable ally in our argument. For one thing, there is a growing body of research trying to get at the consciousness of death denied by repression that uses psychological tests such as measuring galvanic skin responses; it strongly suggests that underneath the most bland exterior lurks the universal anxiety, the "worm at the core."[29]

For another thing, there is nothing like shocks in the real world to jar loose repressions. Recently psychiatrists reported an increase in anxiety neuroses in children as a result of the earth tremors in Southern California. For these children the discovery that life really includes cataclysmic danger was too much for their still-imperfect denial systems—hence open outbursts of anxiety. With adults we see this manifestation of anxiety in the face of impending catastrophe where it takes the form of panic. Recently several people suffered broken limbs and other injuries after forcing open their airplane's safety door during take-off and jumping from the wing to the ground; the incident was triggered by the backfire of an engine. Obviously underneath these harmless noises other things are rumbling in the creature.

But even more important is how repression works: it is not simply a negative force opposing life energies; it lives on life energies and uses them creatively. I mean that fears are naturally absorbed by expansive organismic striving. Nature seems to have built into organisms an innate healthy-mindedness; it expresses itself in self-delight, in the pleasure of unfolding one's capacities into the world, in the incorporation of things in that world, and in feeding on its limitless experiences. This is a lot of very positive experience, and when a powerful organism moves with it, it gives contentment. As Santayana once put it: a lion must feel more secure that God is on his side than a gazelle. On the most elemental level the organism works actively against its own fragility by seeking to expand and perpetuate itself in living experience; instead of shrinking, it moves toward more life. Also, it does one thing at a time, avoiding needless distractions from all-absorbing activity; in this way, it would seem, fear of death can be carefully ignored or actually absorbed in the life-expanding processes. Occasionally we seem to see such a vital organism on the human level: I am thinking of the portrait of *Zorba the Greek* drawn by Nikos Kazantzakis. Zorba was an ideal of the nonchalant victory of all-absorbing daily passion over timidity and death, and he purged others in his life-affirming flame. But Kazantzakis himself was no Zorba—which is partly why the character of Zorba rang a bit false—nor are most other men. Still, everyone enjoys a working amount of basic narcissism, even though it is not a lion's. The child who is well nourished and loved develops, as we said, a sense of magical omnipotence, a sense of his own indestructibility, a feeling of proven power and secure support. He can imagine himself, deep down, to be eternal. We might say that his repression of the idea of his own death is made easy for him because he is fortified against it in his very narcissistic vitality. This type of character probably helped Freud to say that the unconscious does not know death. Anyway, we know that basic narcissism is increased when one's childhood experiences have been securely life-supporting and warmly enhancing to the sense of self, to the feeling of being really special, truly Number One in creation. The result is that some people have more of what the psychoanalyst Leon J. Saul has aptly called "Inner Sustainment."[30] It is a sense of bodily confidence in the face of experience that sees the person more easily through severe life crises and even sharp personality changes; it almost seems to take the

place of the directive instincts of lower animals. One can't help thinking of Freud again, who had more inner sustainment than most men, thanks to his mother and favorable early environment; he knew the confidence and courage that it gave to a man, and he himself faced up to life and to a fatal cancer with a Stoic heroism. Again we have evidence that the complex symbol of fear of death would be very variable in its intensity; it would be, as Wahl concluded, "profoundly dependent upon the nature and the vicissitudes of the developmental process."[31]

But I want to be careful not to make too much of natural vitality and inner sustainment. As we will see in Chapter Six, even the unusually favored Freud suffered his whole life from phobias and from death-anxiety; and he came to fully perceive the world under the aspect of natural terror. I don't believe that the complex symbol of death is ever absent, no matter how much vitality and inner sustainment a person has. Even more, if we say that these powers make repression easy and natural, we are only saying the half of it. Actually, they get their very power from repression. Psychiatrists argue that the fear of death varies in intensity depending on the developmental process, and I think that one important reason for this variability is that the fear is transmuted in that process. If the child has had a very favorable upbringing, it only serves all the better to hide the fear of death. After all, repression is made possible by the natural identification of the child with the powers of his parents. If he has been well cared for, identification comes easily and solidly, and his parents' powerful triumph over death automatically becomes his. What is more natural to banish one's fears than to live on delegated powers? And what does the whole growing-up period signify, if not the giving over of one's life-project? I am going to be talking about these things all the way through this book and do not want to develop them in this introductory discussion. What we will see is that man cuts out for himself a manageable world: he throws himself into action uncritically, unthinkingly. He accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look; he doesn't bite the world off in one piece as a giant would, but in small manageable pieces, as a beaver does. He uses all kinds of techniques, which we call the "character defenses": he learns not to expose himself, not to stand out; he learns to embed himself in other-power, both of concrete persons and of things and cultural commands; the result is that he comes to exist in the imagined infallibility of the world around him. He doesn't have to have fears when his feet are solidly mired and his life mapped out in a ready-made maze. All he has to do is to plunge ahead in a compulsive style of drivenness in the "ways of the world" that the child learns and in which he lives later as a kind of grim equanimity —the "strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting"—as James put it. This is the deeper reason that Montaigne's peasant isn't troubled until the very end, when the Angel of Death, who has always been sitting on his shoulder, extends his wing. Or at least until he is prematurely startled into dumb awareness, like the "Husbands" in John Cassavetes' fine film. At times like this, when the awareness dawns that has always been blotted out by frenetic, ready-made activity, we see the transmutation of repression redistilled, so to speak, and the fear of death emerges in pure essence. This is why people have psychotic breaks when repression no longer works, when the forward momentum of activity is no longer possible. Besides, the peasant mentality is far less romantic than Montaigne would have us believe. The peasant's equanimity is usually immersed in a style of life that has elements of real madness, and so it protects him: an undercurrent of constant hate and bitterness expressed in feuding, bullying, bickering and family quarrels, the petty mentality, the self-deprecation, the superstition, the obsessive control of daily life by a strict authoritarianism, and so on. As the title of a recent essay by Joseph

Lopreato has it: "How would you like to be a peasant?"

We will also touch upon another large dimension in which the complex symbol of death is transmuted and transcended by man—belief in immortality, the extension of one's being into eternity. Right now we can conclude that there are many ways that repression works to calm the anxious human animal, so that he need not be anxious at all.

I think we have reconciled our two divergent positions on the fear of death. The "environmental" and the "innate" positions are both part of the same picture; they merge naturally into one another; it all depends from which angle you approach the picture: from the side of the disguises and transmutations of the fear of death or from the side of its apparent absence. I admit with a sense of scientific uneasiness that whatever angle you use, you don't get at the actual fear of death; and so I reluctantly agree with Choron that the argument can probably never be cleanly "won." Nevertheless something very important emerges: there are different images of man that he can draw and choose from.

On the one hand, we see a human animal who is partly dead to the world, who is most "dignified" when he shows a certain obliviousness to his fate, when he allows himself to be driven through life; who is most "free" when he lives in secure dependency on powers around him, when he is least in possession of himself. On the other hand, we get an image of a human animal who is overly sensitive to the world, who cannot shut it out, who is thrown back on his own meagre powers, and who seems least free to move and act, least in possession of himself, and most undignified. Whichever image we choose to identify with depends in large part upon ourselves. Let us then explore and develop these images further to see what they reveal to us.

Notes

1. S. Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," 1915, *Collected Papers,* Vol. 4 (New York: Basic Books, 1959), pp. 316–317.
2. Cf., for example, A. L. Cochrane, "Elie Metschnikoff and His Theory of an *'Instinct de la Mort,'" International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 1934, 15:265–270; G. Stanley Hall, "Thanatophobia and Immortality," *American Journal of Psychology,* 1915, 26:550–613.
3. N. S. Shaler, *The Individual: A Study of Life and Death* (New York: Appleton, 1900).
4. Hall, "Thanatophobia," p. 562.
5. Cf., Alan Harrington, *The Immortalist* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 82.
6. See Jacques Choron's excellent study: *Death and Western Thought* (New York: Collier Books, 1963).
7. See H. Feifel, ed., *The Meaning of Death* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), Chapter 6; G. Rochlin, *Griefs and Discontents* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 67.
8. J. Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1952), p. 11.
9. Cf. Walter Tietz, "School Phobia and the Fear of Death," *Mental Hygiene,* 1970, 54:565–568.
10. J. C. Rheingold, *The Mother, Anxiety and Death: The Catastrophic Death Complex* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).
11. A. J. Levin, "The Fiction of the Death Instinct," *Psychiatric Quarterly,* 1951, 25:257–281.
12. J. C. Moloney, *The Magic Cloak: A Contribution to the Psychology of Authoritarianism* (Wakefield, Mass.: Montrose Press, 1949), p. 217; H. Marcuse, "The Ideology of Death," in Feifel, *Meaning of Death,* Chapter 5.
13. LAD, p. 270.
14. G. Murphy, "Discussion," in Feifel, *The Meaning of Death,* p. 320.
15. James, *Varieties,* p. 121.

16. Choron, *Death,* p. 17.
17. *Ibid*., p. 272.
18. G. Zilboorg “Fear of Death,” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly,* 1943, 12: 465–475. See Eissler’s nice technical distinction between the anxiety of death and the terror of it, in his book of essays loaded with subtle discussion: K. R. Eissler, *The Psychiatrist and the Dying Patient* (New York: International Universities Press, 1955), p. 277.
19. Zilboorg “Fear of Death,” pp. 465–467.
20. James, *Varieties,* p. 121.
21. Zilboorg, “Fear of Death,” p. 467. Or, we might more precisely say, with Eissler, fear of annihilation, which is extended by the ego into the consciousness of death. See *The Psychiatrist and the Dying Patient,* p. 267.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid*., pp. 468–471 *passim.*
24. Cf. Shaler, *The Individual.*
25. C. W. Wahl, “The Fear of Death,” in Feifel, pp. 24–25.
26. Cf. Moloney, *The Magic Cloak,* p. 117.
27. Wahl, “Fear of Death,” pp. 25–26.
28. In Choron, *Death,* p. 100.
29. Cf., for example, I. E. Alexander *et al*., “Is Death a Matter of Indifference?” *Journal of Psychology,* 1957, 43:277–283; I. M. Greenberg and I. E. Alexander, “Some Correlates of Thoughts and Feelings Concerning Death,” *Hillside Hospital Journal,* 1962, No. 2:120–126; S. I. Golding *et al.,* “Anxiety and Two Cognitive Forms of Resistance to the Idea of Death,” *Psychological Reports,* 1966, 18: 359–364.
30. L. J. Saul, “Inner Sustainment,” *Psycholoanalytic Quarterly,* 1970, 39:215–222.
31. Wahl, “Fear of Death,” p. 26.

CHAPTER THREE

The Recasting of Some Basic Psychoanalytic Ideas

From the child of five to myself is but a step. But from the new-born baby to the child of five is an appalling distance.
—LEO TOLSTOI

Now that we have outlined the argument in the first two chapters, it is time to fill in the details. Why exactly is the world so terrible for the human animal? Why do people have such trouble digging up the resources to face that terror openly and bravely? To talk about these things takes us right into the heart of psychoanalytic theory and what is now the existential rebirth in psychology; it lays bare the nature of man with a clarity and comprehensiveness that are truly amazing.

Man's Existential Dilemma

We always knew that there was something peculiar about man, something deep down that characterized him and set him apart from the other animals. It was something that had to go right to his core, something that made him suffer his peculiar fate, that made it impossible to escape. For ages, when philosophers talked about the core of man they referred to it as his "essence," something fixed in his nature, deep down, some special quality or substance. But nothing like it was ever found; man's peculiarity still remained a dilemma. The reason it was never found, as Erich Fromm put it in an excellent discussion, was that there was no essence, that the essence of man is really his *paradoxical* nature, the fact that he is half animal and half symbolic.[1] As we shall see in Chapter Five it was Kierkegaard who forcefully introduced the existential paradox into modern psychology, with his brilliant analysis of the Adam and Eve myth that had conveyed that paradox to the Western mind for all time. In recent times every psychologist who has done vital work has made this paradox the main problem of his thought: Otto Rank (to whom I want to devote special chapters later on) more consistently and brilliantly than anyone else since Kierkegaard, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Rollo May, Ernest Schachtel, Abraham Maslow, Harold F. Searles, Norman O. Brown, Laura Perls, and others.

We might call this existential paradox the condition of *individuality within finitude.* Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small god in nature, as the Renaissance thinkers knew.

Yet, at the same time, as the Eastern sages also knew, man is a worm and food for worms. This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it. His body is a material fleshy casing that is alien to him in many ways—the strangest and most repugnant way being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die. Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of

nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with. The lower animals are, of course, spared this painful contradiction, as they lack a symbolic identity and the self-consciousness that goes with it. They merely act and move reflexively as they are driven by their instincts. If they pause at all, it is only a physical pause; inside they are anonymous, and even their faces have no name. They live in a world without time, pulsating, as it were, in a state of dumb being. This is what has made it so simple to shoot down whole herds of buffalo or elephants. The animals don't know that death is happening and continue grazing placidly while others drop alongside them. The knowledge of death is reflective and conceptual, and animals are spared it. They live and they disappear with the same thoughtlessness: a few minutes of fear, a few seconds of anguish, and it is over. But to live a whole lifetime with the fate of death haunting one's dreams and even the most sun-filled days—that's something else.

It is only if you let the full weight of this paradox sink down on your mind and feelings that you can realize what an impossible situation it is for an animal to be in. I believe that those who speculate that a full apprehension of man's condition would drive him insane are right, quite literally right. Babies are occasionally born with gills and tails, but this is not publicized—instead it is hushed up. Who wants to face up fully to the creatures we are, clawing and gasping for breath in a universe beyond our ken? I think such events illustrate the meaning of Pascal's chilling reflection: "Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness." *Necessarily* because the existential dualism makes an impossible situation, an excruciating dilemma. *Mad* because, as we shall see, everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness—agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same. "Character-traits," said Sandor Ferenczi, one of the most brilliant minds of Freud's intimate circle of early psychoanalysts, "are secret psychoses." This is not a smug witticism offered in passing by a young science drunk with its own explanatory power and success; it is a mature scientific judgment of the most devastating self-revelatory kind ever fashioned by man trying to understand himself. Ferenczi had already seen behind the tight-lipped masks, the smiling masks, the earnest masks, the satisfied masks that people use to bluff the world and themselves about their secret psychoses. More recently Erich Fromm[2] wondered why most people did not become insane in the face of the existential contradiction between a symbolic self, that seems to give man infinite worth in a timeless scheme of things, and a body that is worth about 98¢, How to reconcile the two?

In order to understand the weight of the dualism of the human condition, we have to know that the child can't really handle either end of it. The most characteristic thing about him is that he is precocious or premature; his world piles up on him and he piles up on himself. He has right from the beginning an exquisite sensory system that rapidly develops to take in all the sensations of his world with an extreme finesse. Add to it the quick development of language and the sense of self and pile it all upon a helpless infant body trying vainly to grab the world correctly and safely. The result is ludicrous. The child is overwhelmed by experiences of the dualism of the self and the body from both areas, since he can be master of neither. He is not a confident social self, adept manipulator of symbolic categories of words, thoughts, names, or places,—or especially of time, that great

mystery for him; he doesn't even know what a clock is. Nor is he a functioning adult animal who can work and procreate, do the serious things he sees happening around him: he can't "do like father" in any way. He is a prodigy in limbo. In both halves of his experience he is dispossessed, yet impressions keep pouring in on him and sensations keep welling up within him, flooding his body. He has to make some kind of sense out of them, establish some kind of ascendancy over them. Will it be thoughts over body, or body over thoughts? Not so easy. There can be no clearcut victory or straightforward solution of the existential dilemma he is in. It is his problem right from the beginning almost of his life, yet he is only a child to handle it. Children feel hounded by symbols they don't understand the need of, verbal demands that seem picayune, and rules and codes that call them away from their pleasure in the straightforward expression of their natural energies. And when they try to master the body, pretend it isn't there, act "like a little man," the body suddenly overwhelms them, submerges them in vomit or excrement—and the child breaks down in desperate tears over his melted pretense at being a purely symbolic animal. Often the child deliberately soils himself or continues to wet the bed, to protest against the imposition of artificial symbolic rules: he seems to be saying that the body is his primary reality and that he wants to remain in the simpler physical Eden and not be thrown out into the world of "right and wrong."

In this way we realize directly and poignantly that what we call the child's character is a *modus vivendi* achieved after the most unequal struggle any animal has to go through; a struggle that the child can never really understand because he doesn't know what is happening to him, why he is responding as he does, or what is really at stake in the battle. The victory in this kind of battle is truly Pyrrhic: character is a face that one sets to the world, but it hides an inner defeat. The child emerges with a name, a family, a play-world in a neighborhood, all clearly cut out for him. But his insides are full of nightmarish memories of impossible battles, terrifying anxieties of blood, pain, aloneness, darkness; mixed with limitless desires, sensations of unspeakable beauty, majesty, awe, mystery; and fantasies and hallucinations of mixtures between the two, the impossible attempt to compromise between bodies and symbols. We shall see in a few pages how sexuality enters in with its very definite focus, to further confuse and complicate the child's world. To grow up at all is to conceal the mass of internal scar tissue that throbs in our dreams.

So we see that the two dimensions of human existence—the body and the self—can never be reconciled seamlessly, which explains the second half of Pascal's reflection: "not to be mad would amount to another form of madness." Here Pascal proves that great students of human nature could see behind the masks of men long before scientific psychoanalysis. They lacked clinical documentation but they saw that the coolest repression, the most convincing equanimity, or the warmest self-satisfaction were accomplished lies both toward the world and to oneself. With the clinical documentation of psychoanalytic thought, we got a fairly comprehensive picture of human character styles—what we can now call "styles of madness" after Pascal. We might say that psychoanalysis revealed to us the complex penalties of denying the truth of man's condition, what we might call *the costs of pretending not to be mad.* If we had to offer the briefest explanation of all the evil that men have wreaked upon themselves and upon their world since the beginnings of time right up until tomorrow, it would be not in terms of man's animal heredity, his instincts and his evolution: it would be simply in *the toll that his pretense of sanity takes,* as he tries to deny his true condition. But more of this vital idea later.

A sensitive thinker in the age of Freud has had to live a tortured intellectual life—at least this is an autobiographical reflection. There seems to be so much truth in the Freudian world view, and at the same time so much of it seems so wrong-headed. The ambiguities of Freud's legacy were not in the wrong ideas that he had, since it has been relatively easy to lay these aside; the problem has been in his brilliantly true insights, which were stated in a way that they fell just to one side of reality; and we needed an immense amount of work and clarification in order to bring the two into line. Actually what was needed was a framework into which to fit the corpus of psychoanalytic insight, so that the truth of it could emerge clearly and unambiguously, free of the nineteenth-century reductionism, instinctivism, and biologism that Freud fettered it with. This framework is the existential one; reinterpretations of Freud within an existential context give his insights their full scientific stature. This goal was recently achieved brilliantly by Norman O. Brown[3] in his reinterpretation of the idea of "anality" and its central role in psychoanalytic theory; probably the main value of that book historically is that it has reclaimed the most esoteric and inverted of the Freudian ideas and has made them the property of the human sciences.

I am tempted to quote lavishly from the analytic riches of Brown's book, but there is no point in repeating what he has already written. Let us just observe that the basic key to the problem of anality is that it reflects the dualism of man's condition—his self and his body. Anality and its problems arise in childhood because it is then that the child already makes the alarming discovery that his body is strange and fallible and has a definite ascendancy over him by its demands and needs. Try as he may to take the greatest flights of fancy, he must always come back to it. Strangest and most degrading of all is the discovery that the body has, located in the lower rear and out of sight, a hole from which stinking smells emerge and even more, a stinking substance—most disagreeable to everyone else and eventually even to the child himself.

At first the child is amused by his anus and feces, and gaily inserts his finger into the orifice, smelling it, smearing feces on the walls, playing games of touching objects with his anus, and the like. This is a universal form of play that does the serious work of all play: it reflects the discovery and exercise of natural bodily functions; it masters an area of strangeness; it establishes power and control over the deterministic laws of the natural world; and it does all this with symbols and fancy.* With anal play the child is already becoming a philosopher of the human condition. But like all philosophers he is still bound by it, and his main task in life becomes the denial of what the anus represents: that in fact, he is nothing *but* body so far as nature is concerned. Nature's values are bodily values, human values are mental values, and though they take the loftiest flights they are built upon excrement, impossible without it, always brought back to it. As Montaigne put it, on the highest throne in the world man sits on his arse. Usually this epigram makes people laugh because it seems to reclaim the world from artificial pride and snobbery and to bring things back to egalitarian values. But if we push the observation even further and say men sit not only on their arse, but over a warm and fuming pile of their own excrement—the joke is no longer funny. The tragedy of man's dualism, his ludicrous situation, becomes too real. The anus and its incomprehensible, repulsive product represents not only physical determinism and boundness, but the fate as well of all that is physical: decay and death.

We now understand that what psychoanalysts have called "anality" or anal

character traits are really forms of the universal protest against accident and death. Seen in this way a large part of the most esoteric psychoanalytic corpus of insights achieves a new vitality and meaningfulness. To say that someone is "anal" means that someone is trying extra-hard to protect himself against the accidents of life and danger of death, trying to use the symbols of culture as a sure means of triumph over natural mystery, trying to pass himself off as anything but an animal. When we comb the anthropological literature we find that men everywhere have been anal in some basic levels of their cultural strivings; and we find that primitives have often shown the most unashamed anality of all. They have been more innocent about what their real problem is, and they have not well disguised their disguise, so to speak, over the fallibilities of the human condition. We read that men of the Chagga tribe wear an anal plug all their lives, pretending to have sealed up the anus and not to need to defecate. An obvious triumph over mere physicalness. Or take the widespread practice of segregating women in special huts during menstruation and all the various taboos surrounding menstruation: it is obvious that man seeks to control the mysterious processes of nature as they manifest themselves within his own body. The body cannot be allowed to have the ascendancy over him.[4]

Anality explains why men yearn for freedom from contradictions and ambiguities, why they like their symbols pure, their Truth with a capital "T." On the other hand, when men really want to protest against artificialities, when they rebel against the symbolisms of culture, they fall back on the physical. They call thoughts down to earth, mannerisms back to basic chemistry. A perfect example of this was in the recent "anal" film *Brewster McCloud,* where speeches, official badges, and shiny manufactured surfaces were pummeled from the sky with obliterating excrement. The message was one that the modern filmmakers are making with great daring: calling the world back from hypocrisy by stressing basic things about life and the body. Stanley Kubrick jarred audiences when he showed in *2001* how man stepped out into space like an ape dancing to schmaltzy Strauss waltz music; and again in *A Clockwork Orange* he showed how naturally and satisfyingly a man can murder and rape in tune with the heroic transcendence of Beethoven's Ninth.

The upsetting thing about anality is that it reveals that all culture, all man's creative life-ways, are in some basic part of them a fabricated protest against natural reality, a denial of the truth of the human condition, and an attempt to forget the pathetic creature that man is. One of the most stunning parts of Brown's study was his presentation of anality in Jonathan Swift. The ultimate horror for Swift was the fact that the sublime, the beautiful, and the divine are inextricable from basic animal functions. In the head of the adoring male is the illusion that sublime beauty "is all head and wings, with no bottom to betray" it.[5] In one of Swift's poems a young man explains the grotesque contradiction that is tearing him apart:[6]

> Nor wonder how I lost my Wits;
> Oh! Caelia, Caelia, Caelia shits!

In other words, in Swift's mind there was an absolute contradiction "between the state of being in love and an awareness of the excremental function of the beloved."[7]

Erwin Straus, in his brilliant monograph on obsession,[8] similarly earlier showed how repulsed Swift was by the animality of the body, by its dirt and decay. Straus pronounced a more clinical judgment on Swift's disgust, seeing it as part of the typical obsessive's world-view: "For all obsessives sex is severed from unification and procreation.... Through the ... isolation of the genitals from the whole of the body, sexual functions are experienced as excretions and as decay."[9] This degree of

fragmentation is extreme, but we all see the world through obsessive eyes at least part of the time and to some degree; and as Freud said, not only neurotics take exception to the fact that "we are born between urine and faeces."[10] In this horror of the incongruity of man Swift the poet gives more tormented voice to the dilemma that haunts us all, and it is worth summing it up one final time: Excreting is the curse that threatens madness because it shows man his abject finitude, his physicalness, the likely unreality of his hopes and dreams. But even more immediately, it represents man's utter bafflement at the sheer *non-sense* of creation: to fashion the sublime miracle of the human face, the *mysterium tremendum* of radiant feminine beauty, the veritable goddesses that beautiful women are; to bring this out of nothing, out of the void, and make it shine in noonday; to take such a miracle and put miracles again within it, deep in the mystery of eyes that peer out—the eye that gave even the dry Darwin a chill: to do all this, and to combine it with an anus that shits! It is too much. Nature mocks us, and poets live in torture.

I have tried to recapture just a bit of the shock of a scientific and poetic discussion of the problem of anality, and if I have succeeded in such an offhand way, we can understand what the existential paradox means: that what bothers people is really incongruity, life as it *is.* This view leads to a whole re-examination of Freudian theory, not only of the problem of anality, but also of Freud's central idea, the Oedipus complex. Let us now linger on this, again using Brown's brilliant reformulation.

The Oedipal Project

Freud often tended to understand human motives in what can be called a "primitive" way. Sometimes so much so that when disciples like Rank and Ferenzci pulled away from him they accused him of simple-mindedness. The accusation is, of course, ludicrous, but there is something to it—probably what they were driving at: the doggedness with which Freud stuck to his stark sexual formulas. No matter how much he changed later in life, he always kept alive the letter of psychoanalytic dogma and fought against a watering-down of the motives he thought he uncovered. We will understand better why in a later chapter.

Take the Oedipus complex. In his early work Freud had said that this complex was the central dynamic in the psychic life. In his view, the boy child had innate drives of sexuality and he even wanted to possess his mother. At the same time, he knew that his father was his competitor, and he held in check a murderous aggressiveness toward him. The reason he held it in check was that he knew the father was physically stronger than he and that the result of an open fight would be the father's victory and the castration of the son. Hence the horror of blood, of mutilation, of the female genitals that seemed to have been mutilated; they testified that castration was a fact.

Freud modified his views all through his life, but he never got a full distance away from them. No wonder: they kept being "confirmed" in some intimate way by the people he studied. There was indeed something about the anus and the genitals, the physicalness of the family, and its copulations that weighed on the psyche of neurotics like an age-old stone. Freud thought that such a heavy weight must date from time immemorial, from the first emergence of humans out of primate ancestors. He thought that the guilt we each feel deep down is connected with a primal crime of patricide and incest committed in the dim recesses of prehistory; so deep is guilt ingrained, so much is it confused with the body, with sex and excrement, and with the parents. Freud never abandoned his views because they

were correct in their elemental suggestiveness about the human condition—but not quite in the sense that he thought, or rather, not in the framework which he offered. Today we realize that all the talk about blood and excrement, sex and guilt, is true not because of urges to patricide and incest and fears of actual physical castration, but because all these things reflect man's horror of his own basic animal condition, a condition that he cannot—especially as a child—understand and a condition that—as an adult—he cannot accept. The guilt that he feels over bodily processes and urges is "pure" guilt: guilt as inhibition, as determinism, as smallness and boundness. It grows out of the constraint of *the basic animal condition,* the incomprehensible mystery of the body and the world.

Psychoanalysts have been preoccupied since the turn of the century with the experiences of childhood; but, strangely enough, it is only since "just yesterday" that we are able to put together a fairly complete and plausible commonsensical picture of why childhood is such a crucial period for man. We owe this picture to many people, including especially the neglected Rank, but it is Norman O. Brown who has summed it up more pointedly and definitively than anyone else, I think. As he argued in his own reorientation of Freud, the Oedipus complex is not the narrowly sexual problem of lust and competitiveness that Freud made out in his early work. Rather, the Oedipus complex is the Oedipal *project,* a project that sums up the basic problem of the child's life: whether he will be a passive object of fate, an appendage of others, a plaything of the world or whether he will be an active center within himself—whether he will control his own destiny with his own powers or not. As Brown put it:

> The Oedipal project is not, as Freud's earlier formulations suggest, a natural love of the mother, but as his later writings recognize, a product of the conflict of ambivalence and an attempt to overcome that conflict by narcissistic inflation. The essence of the Oedipal complex is the project of becoming God—in Spinoza's formula, *causa sui*.... By the same token, it plainly exhibits infantile narcissism perverted by the flight from death....

If the child's major task is a flight from helplessness and obliteration, then sexual matters are secondary and derivative, as Brown says:

> Thus again it appears that the sexual organizations, pregenital and genital, do not correspond to the natural distribution of Eros in the human body: they represent a hypercathexis, a supercharge, of particular bodily functions and zones, a hypercathexis induced by the fantasies of human narcissism in flight from death.[11]

Let us take these technical gems and spread them out a bit. The Oedipal project is the flight from passivity, from obliteration, from contingency: the child wants to conquer death by becoming the *father of himself,* the creator and sustainer of his own life. We saw in Chapter Two that the child has an idea of death by the age of three, but long before that he is already at work to fortify himself against vulnerability. This process begins naturally in the very earliest stages of the infant's life—in what is called the "oral" stage. This is the stage before the child is fully differentiated from his mother in his own consciousness, before he is fully cognizant of his own body and its functions—or, as we say technically, before his body has become an object in his phenomenological field. The mother, at this time, represents literally the child's life-world. During this period her efforts are directed to the gratification of the child's wishes, to automatic relief of his tensions and pains. The child, then, at this time, is simply "full of himself," an unflinchable manipulator and champion of his world. He lives suffused in his own omnipotence and magically controls

everything he needs to feed that omnipotence. He has only to cry to get food and warmth, to point to demand the moon and get a delightful rattle in its place. No wonder we understand this period as characterized by "primary narcissism": the child triumphantly controls his world by controlling the mother. His body is his narcissistic project, and he uses it to try to "swallow the world." The "anal stage" is another way of talking about the period when the child begins to turn his attention to his own body as an object in his phenomenal field. He discovers it and seeks to control it. His narcissistic project then becomes the mastery and the possession of the world through self-control.

At each stage in the unfolding discovery of his world and the problems that it poses, the child is intent on shaping that world to his own aggrandizement. He has to keep the feeling that he has absolute power and control, and in order to do that he has to cultivate independence of some kind, the conviction that he is shaping his own life. That is why Brown, like Rank, could say that the Oedipal project is "inevitably self-generated in the child and is directed against the parents, irrespective of how the parents behave." To put it paradoxically, "children toilet train themselves."[12] The profound meaning of this is that there is no "perfect" way to bring up a child, since he "brings himself up" by trying to shape himself into an absolute controller of his own destiny. As this aim is impossible, each character is, deeply and in some way, fantastically unreal, fundamentally imperfect. As Ferenczi so well summed it up: "Character is from the point of view of the psychoanalyst a sort of abnormality, a kind of mechanization of a particular way of reaction, rather similar to an obsessional symptom."[13]

The Castration Complex

In other words, the narcissistic project of self-creation, using the body as the primary base of operations, is doomed to failure. And the child finds it out: *this* is how we understand the power and meaning of what is called the "castration complex," as Freud came to develop it in his later writings and as Rank[14] and Brown have detailed it. In the newer understanding of the castration complex it is not the father's threats that the child reacts to. As Brown so well says, the castration complex comes into being solely in confrontation with the mother. This phenomenon is very crucial, and we must linger a bit on how it happens.

It all centers on the fact that the mother monopolizes the child's world; at first, she *is* his world. The child cannot survive without her, yet in order to get control of his own powers he has to get free of her. The mother thus represents two things to the child, and it helps us understand why the psychoanalysts have said that ambivalence characterizes the whole early growth period. On the one hand the mother is a pure source of pleasure and satisfaction, a secure power to lean on. She must appear as the goddess of beauty and goodness, victory and power; this is her "light" side, we might say, and it is blindly attractive. But on the other hand the child has to strain against this very dependency, or he loses the feeling that he has aegis over his own powers. That is another way of saying that the mother, by representing secure biological dependence, is also a fundamental threat.

The child comes to perceive her as a threat, which is already the beginning of the castration complex in confrontation with her. The child observes that the mother's body is different from the male's—strikingly different. And this difference gradually comes to make him very uncomfortable. Freud never tried to ease the shock of the revelations of his theory, and he called this discomfort "horror at the mutilated creature," the "castrated mother," the sight of genitals "devoid of a penis." Freud's

shock effect seemed to many people to partake of caricature. The horror in the child's perceptions seemed too contrived, too pat, too much designed to fit into Freud's own addiction to sexual explanations and biological reductionism. Others, too, saw Freud's way of thinking as a reflection of his own ingrained patriarchy, his strong sense of masculine superiority, which made the woman seem naturally inferior if she lacked male appendages.

The fact is that the "horror at the mutilated creature" is contrived, but it is the child who contrives it. Psychoanalysts reported faithfully what their neurotic patients told them, even if they had to pry just the right words into their expressions. What troubles neurotics—as it troubles most people—is their own powerlessness; they must find something to set themselves against. If the mother represents biological dependence, then the dependence can be fought against by focussing it on the fact of *sexual differentiation.* If the child is to be truly *causa sui,* then he must aggressively defy the parents in some way, move beyond them and the threats and temptations they embody. The genitals are a small thing in the child's perceptual world; hardly enough to be traumatic just because they lack protuberance. As Brown so well put it, the horror is the child's "own invention; it is a tissue of fantasy inseparable from his own fantastic project of becoming father of himself (and, as fantasy, only remotely connected with actual sight of the female genitalia)."[15] Or, put another way, we can say that the child "fetishizes" the mother's body as an object of global danger to himself. It is one way of cutting her down to size, depriving her of her primary place in creation. Using Erwin Straus' formula, we would say that the child splits the mother's genitals off from her totality as a love-object; they then come to be experienced as a threat, as decay.

Penis-Envy

The real threat of the mother comes to be connected with her *sheer physicalness.* Her genitals are used as a convenient focus for the child's obsession with the problem of physicalness. If the mother is a goddess of light, she is also a witch of the dark. He sees her tie to the earth, her secret bodily processes that bind her to nature: the breast with its mysterious sticky milk, the menstrual odors and blood, the almost continual immersion of the productive mother in her corporeality, and not least—something the child is very sensitive to—the often neurotic and helpless character of this immersion. After the child gets hints about the mother's having babies, sees them being nursed, gets a good look at the toiletful of menstrual blood that seems to leave the witch quite intact and unconcerned, there is no question about her immersion in stark body-meanings and body-fallibilities. The mother must exude determinism, and the child expresses his horror at his complete dependency on what is physically vulnerable. And so we understand not only the boy's preferance for masculinity but also the girl's "penis-envy." Both boys and girls succumb to the desire to flee the sex represented by the mother;[16] they need little coaxing to identify with the father and his world. He seems more neutral physically, more cleanly powerful, less immersed in body determinisms; he seems more "symbolically free," represents the vast world outside of the home, the social world with its organized triumph over nature, the very escape from contingency that the child seeks.[†]

Both the boy and girl turn away from the mother as a sort of automatic reflex of their own needs for growth and independence. But the "horror, terror, contempt"[17] they feel is, as we said, part of their own fantastic perceptions of a situation they can't stand. This situation is not only the biological dependency and physicalness

represented by the mother, but also the terrible revelation of the problem of the child's own body. The mother's body not only reveals a sex that threatens vulnerability and dependency—it reveals much more: it presents the problem of two sexes and so confronts the child with the fact that his body is itself arbitrary. It is not so much that the child sees that neither sex is "complete" in itself or that he understands that the particularity of each sex is a limitation of potential, a cheating of living fulness in some ways—he can't know these things or fully feel them. It is again not a sexual problem; it is more global, experienced as the curse of arbitrariness that the body represents. The child comes upon a world in which he could just as well have been born male or female, even dog, cat, or fish—for all that it seems to matter as regards power and control, capacity to withstand pain, annihilation, and death. The horror of sexual differentiation is a horror of "biological fact," as Brown so well says.[18] It is a fall out of illusion into sobering reality. It is a horror of assuming an immense new burden, the burden of the meaning of life and the body, of the fatality of one's incompleteness, his helplessness, his finitude.

And this, finally, is the hopeless terror of the castration complex that makes men tremble in their nightmares. It expresses the realization by the child that he is saddled with an impossible project; that the *causa-sui* pursuit on which he is launched *cannot be achieved by body-sexual means*,[19] even by protesting a body different from the mother. The fortress of the body, the primary base for narcissistic operations against the world in order to insure one's boundless powers, crumbles like sand. This is the tragic dethroning of the child, the ejection from paradise that the castration complex represents. Once he used any bodily zone or appendage for his Oedipal project of self-generation; now, the very genitals themselves mock his self-sufficiency.

This brings up the whole matter of why sexuality is such a universal problem. No one has written about the problem of sexuality better than Rank in his stunning essay on "Sexual Enlightenment."[20] As I am going to talk about it in some detail in Chapter Eight, there is no point in repeating that discussion here. But we can anticipate it by showing how sexuality is inseparable from our existential paradox, the dualism of human nature. The person is both a self and a body, and from the beginning there is the confusion about where "he" really "is"—in the symbolic inner self or in the physical body. Each phenomenological realm is different. The inner self represents the freedom of thought, imagination, and the infinite reach of symbolism. The body represents determinism and boundness. The child gradually learns that his freedom as a unique being is dragged back by the body and its appendages which dicate "what" he is. For this reason sexuality is as much a problem for the adult as for the child: the physical solution to the problem of who we are and why we have emerged on this planet is no help—in fact, it is a terrible threat. It doesn't tell the person what he is deep down inside, what kind of distinctive gift he is to work upon the world. This is why it is so difficult to have sex without guilt: guilt is there because the body casts a shadow on the person's inner freedom, his "real self" that—through the act of sex—is being forced into a standardized, mechanical, biological role. Even worse, the inner self is not even being called into consideration at all; the body takes over completely for the total person, and this kind of guilt makes the inner self shrink and threaten to disappear.

This is why a woman asks for assurance that the man wants "me" and not "only my body"; she is painfully conscious that her own distinctive inner personality can be dispensed with in the sexual act. If it is dispensed with, it doesn't count. The fact is that the man usually does want only the body, and the woman's total personality

is reduced to a mere animal role. The existential paradox vanishes, and one has no distinctive humanity to protest. One creative way of coping with this is, of course, to allow it to happen and to go with it: what the psychoanalysts call "regression in the service of the ego." The person becomes, for a time, merely his physical self and so absolves the painfulness of the existential paradox and the guilt that goes with sex. Love is one great key to this kind of sexuality because it allows the collapse of the individual into the animal dimension without fear and guilt, but instead with trust and assurance that his distinctive inner freedom will not be negated by an animal surrender.

The Primal Scene

This is the right place to discuss another psychoanalytic idea that always seemed to many to bypass credulity, the so-called "trauma of the primal scene." The orthodox psychoanalytic notion was that when the child witnessed sexual intercourse between the parents (the primal scene) it left him with a deep-seated trauma because he could not take part in it. Freud talked about the actual "stimulation of sexual excitement upon observation of parental coitus."[21] Put so bluntly the idea seems incredible enough, but we must remember that Freud prided himself above all on the discovery of *infantile* sexuality. In the minds of other psychoanalysts the idea is given a slightly different emphasis. Thus, as Roheim put it, the primal scene represents the child's wish for reunion with the mother fulfilled; but he sees his father in his place, and instead of a complete identification with the succoring mother he sees the "violent motion" of a struggle.[22] Finally, Ferenczi—who was a keen student of the effects of the parents on the child—gives the matter another slightly different twist from Freud's stark formulation:

> If intimate parental intercourse is observed by the child in the first or second year of life, when its capacity for excitement is already there but it lacks as yet adequate outlets for its emotion, an infantile neurosis may result.[23]

Roheim and Ferenczi, then, are actually talking about quite different things from Freud's subject. Roheim is talking about identification with the mother, who represents the total support of the child, and the child's inability to understand the relation of his loved object with other objects like the father. Ferenczi is saying that the child is overwhelmed by emotions that he cannot yet organize. This is precisely where a more existential interpretation of the problem comes in. The child uses his body as his *causa-sui* project; he only definitely abandons this project when he learns the impossibility of it. Each of these alternatives is a life-and-death matter for him; and so, if we are going to talk about trauma, it must be because of a confusion of life-and-death matters. Even when we are grown, most of us experience some distaste and disillusionment at the idea of our parents having intercourse; it doesn't seem the "right" thing for them to do. I think the exact reason for our distaste is that their image is confounded in our eyes. The thing that the parents represent most of all is the discouragement of the body as a *causa-sui* project; they represent the castration complex, disillusionment with the body, and the fear of it. Even more, they themselves are the living embodiment of the cultural world view that the child has to internalize in order for him to get out of his impasse with his body. When *they themselves* do not transcend the body in their most intimate relations, the child must experience some anxious confusion. How is his struggling ego to handle these double messages and make sense out of them? Furthermore, one of these messages

is given in concrete physical grunts, groans, and movement that must be overwhelming, especially as it is precisely the horror of the body that the child is trying to overcome. If he tries to fall back on the body role and imitate his parents, they become anxious or furious. He can well feel betrayed by them: they reserve their bodies for the closest relationship but deny it to him. They discourage physicalness with all the powers at their command, and yet they themselves practice it with an all-absorbing vengeance. When we take all this together we can see that the primal scene can truly be a trauma, not because the child can't get into the sexual act and express his own impulses but rather because the primal scene is itself a complex symbol combining the horror of the body, the betrayal of the cultural superego, and the absolute blockage of any action that the child can take in the situation or any straightforward understanding that he can have of it. It is the symbol of an anxious multiple bind.

The body, then, is one's animal fate that has to be struggled against in some ways. At the same time, it offers experiences and sensations, concrete pleasure that the inner symbolic world lacks. No wonder man is impaled on the horns of sexual problems, why Freud saw that sex was so prominent in human life—especially in the neurotic conflicts of his patients. Sex is an inevitable component of man's confusion over the meaning of his life, a meaning split hopelessly into two realms—symbols (freedom) and body (fate). No wonder, too, that most of us never abandon entirely the early attempts of the child to use the body and its appendages as a fortress or a machine to magically coerce the world. We try to get metaphysical answers out of the body that the body—as a material thing—cannot possibly give. We try to answer the transcendent mystery of creation by experiences in one, partial, physical product of that creation. This is why the mystique of sex is so widely practiced—say, in traditional France—and at the same time is so disillusioning. It is comfortingly infantile in its indulgence and its pleasure, yet so self-defeating of real awareness and growth, if the person is using it to try to answer metaphysical questions. It then becomes a lie about reality, a screen against full consciousness.[24] If the adult reduces the problem of life to the area of sexuality, he repeats the fetishization of the child who focusses the problem of the mother upon her genitals. Sex then becomes a screen for terror, a fetishization of full consciousness about the real problem of life.

But this discussion doesn't exhaust the reasons that sex is so prominent a part of the confusions of life. Sex is also a positive way of working on one's personal freedom project. After all, it is one of the few areas of real privacy that a person has in an existence that is almost wholly social, entirely shaped by the parents and society. In this sense, sex as a project represents a retreat from the standardizations and monopolizations of the social world. No wonder people dedicate themselves so all-consumingly to it, often from childhood on in the form of secret masturbations that represent a protest and a triumph of the personal self. As we will see in Part II of this book, Rank goes so far as to say that this use of sex explains all sexual conflicts in the individual—"from masturbation to the most varied perversions."[25] The person attempts to use his sex in an entirely individual way in order to *control* it and relieve it of its determinism. It is as though one tried to transcend the body by depriving it entirely of its given character, to make sport and new invention in place of what nature "intended." The "perversions" of children certainly show this very clearly: they are the true artists of the body, using it as clay to assert their symbolic mastery. Freud saw this and recorded it as "polymorphous perversity"—which is one way of talking about it. But he seems not to have realized that this kind of play is already a very serious attempt to transcend determinism, not merely an animal search for a variety of body-zone pleasures.

By the time the child grows up, the inverted search for a personal existence through perversity gets set in an individual mold, and it becomes more secret. It has to be secret because the community won't stand for the attempt by people to wholly individualize themselves.[26] If there is going to be a victory over human incompleteness and limitation, it has to be a social project and not an individual one. Society wants to be the one to decide how people are to transcend death; it will tolerate the *causa-sui* project only if it fits into the standard social project. Otherwise there is the alarm of "Anarchy!" This is one of the reasons for bigotry and censorship of all kinds over personal morality: people fear that the standard morality will be undermined—another way of saying that they fear they will no longer be able to control life and death. A person is said to be "socialized" precisely when he accepts to "sublimate" the body-sexual character of his Oedipal project.[27] Now these euphemisms mean usually that he accepts to work on becoming the father of himself by abandoning his own project and by giving it over to "The Fathers." The castration complex has done its work, and one submits to "social reality"; he can now deflate his own desires and claims and can play it safe in the world of the powerful elders. He can even give his body over to the tribe, the state, the embracing magical umbrella of the elders and their symbols; that way it will no longer be a dangerous negation for him. But there is no real difference between a childish impossibility and an adult one; the only thing that the person achieves is a practiced self-deceit—what we call the "mature" character.

Notes

1. Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 116–117.
2. Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1955), p. 34.
3. LAD.
4. Cf. Lord Raglan, *Jocasta's Crime: An Anthropological Study* (London: Methuen, 1933), Chapter 17.
5. LAD, p. 186.
6. *Ibid.,* p. 189.
7. *Ibid.,* pp. 186–187.
8. E. Straus, *On Obsession, A Clinical and Methodological Study* (New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Monographs, 1948), No. 73.
9. *Ibid.,* pp. 41, 44.
10. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents,* 1930 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1969 edition), p. 43.
11. LAD, p. 118.
12. *Ibid.,* p. 120.
13. Sandor Ferenczi, *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psychoanalysis* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 66.
14. PS, p. 38.
15. LAD, p. 124.
16. *Ibid.,* p. 123.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.,* p. 128.
19. *Ibid.,* p. 127.
20. ME.
21. Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1943), p. 324.
22. Geza Roheim, *Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (New York: International Universities Press, 1950), pp. 138–139.
23. Ferenczi, *Final Contributions,* pp. 65–66.
24. Rollo May recently revived the Rankian perspective on this; see his excellent

discussion of "Love and Death" in *Love and Will* (New York: Norton, 1971).
25. ME, p. 52.
26. *Ibid.,* p. 53.
27. LAD, pp. 127–128.

* As anal play is an essential exercise in human mastery, it is better not interfered with. If the adult anxiously cuts it short, then he charges the animal function with an extra dose of anxiety. It becomes more threatening and has to be extra-denied and extra-avoided as an alien part of oneself. This extra-grim denial is what we mean by the "anal character." An "anal" upbringing, then, would be an affirmation, via intense repression, of the horror of the degrading animal body as the human burden *sans pareil.*

† Penis-envy, then, arises from the fact that the mother's genitals have been split off from her body as a focalization of the problem of decay and vulnerability. Bernard Brodsky remarks about his female patient: "Her concept of woman as fecal greatly stimulated her penis envy, since the lively erectile penis was the antonym of the dead, inert stool." (B. Brodsky, "The Self-Representation, Anality, and the Fear of Dying," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association,* 1959, Volume 7, p. 102.) Phyllis Greenacre—outstanding student of the child's experiences—had already remarked on this same equation in the child's perception: penis = movement, therefore life; feces = inertia, therefore death. (P. Greenacre, *Trauma, Growth and Personality,* New York: Norton, 1952, p. 264.) This makes penis-envy very natural. Greenacre even used the apt idea of "penis-awe" to refer to the spell that the large male appendage can cast in the child's perceptions of the father. The child, after all, lives in a world of body-power predominantly—he doesn't understand abstract or symbolic power. So, more body equals more life. A grown woman might well experience a lingering of the same feeling. An indentation and lack of protuberance, with all that goes on inside, is different from an aggressive extension that must give less of a feeling of vulnerability.

Brodsky's patient, as we might expect, was in trouble because both dimensions of her ambivalence toward her mother were heightened, the patient's need of her mother and the mother's threat to the patient: "The mother's overprotection and hindrance of the patient's gaining motor skills contributed to the faulty development of the self-image. She had both intense separation anxiety and marked castration anxiety." In other words, her dependency was intensified, and at the same time it intensified her castration anxiety, as she could not break away from an object that represented decay. This is an almost sure formula for clinical neurosis.

CHAPTER FOUR

Human Character as a Vital Lie

Take stock of those around you and you will … hear them talk in precise terms about themselves and their surroundings, which would seem to point to them having ideas on the matter. But start to analyse those ideas and you will find that they hardly reflect in any way the reality to which they appear to refer, and if you go deeper you will discover that there is not even an attempt to adjust the ideas to this reality. Quite the contrary: through these notions the individual is trying to cut off any personal vision of reality, of his own very life. For life is at the start a chaos in which one is lost. The individual suspects this, but he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality, and tries to cover it over with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear. It does not worry him that his "ideas" are not true, he uses them as trenches for the defense of his existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality.

—José Ortega y Gasset[1]

The problem of anality and the castration complex already takes us a long way toward answering the question that intrigues us all: if the basic quality of heroism is genuine courage, why are so few people truly courageous? Why is it so rare to see a man who can stand on his own feet? Even the great Carlyle, who frightened many people, proclaimed that he stood on his father as on a stone pillar buried in the ground under him. The unspoken implication is that if he stood on his own feet alone, the ground would cave in under him. This question goes right to the heart of the human condition, and we shall be attacking it from many sides all through this book. I once wrote[2] that I thought the reason man was so naturally cowardly was that he felt he had no authority; and the reason he had no authority was in the very nature of the way the human animal is shaped: all our meanings are built into us from the outside, from our dealings with others. This is what gives us a "self" and a superego. Our whole world of right and wrong, good and bad, our name, precisely who we are, is grafted into us; and we never feel we have authority to offer things on our own. How could we?—I argued—since we feel ourselves in many ways guilty and beholden to others, a lesser creation of theirs, indebted to them for our very birth.

But this is only part of the story—the most superficial and obvious part. There are deeper reasons for our lack of courage, and if we are going to understand man we have to dig for them. The psychologist Abraham Maslow had the keenest sense for significant ideas, and shortly before his recent untimely death he began to attack the problem of the fear of standing alone.[3] Maslow used a broad humanistic perspective in his work, and he liked to talk about concepts like "actualizing one's potential" and one's "full humanness." He saw these as natural developmental urges and wondered what holds them up, what blocks them. He answered the question in existential language, using terms like the "fear of one's own greatness" and the "evasion of one's destiny." This approach throws a new light on the problem of courage. In his words:

We fear our highest possibility (as well as our lowest ones). We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments…. We enjoy and even thrill to the godlike possibilities we see in ourselves in such peak moments. And yet we

simultaneously shiver with weakness, awe and fear before these very same possibilities.[4]

Maslow used an apt term for this evasion of growth, this fear of realizing one's own fullest powers. He called it the "Jonah Syndrome." He understood the syndrome as the evasion of the full intensity of life:

We are just not strong enough to endure more! It is just too shaking and wearing. So often people in … ecstatic moments say, "It's too much," or "I can't stand it," or "I could die"…. Delirious happiness cannot be borne for long. Our organisms are just too weak for any large doses of greatness….

The Jonah Syndrome, then, seen from this basic point of view, is "partly a justified fear of being torn apart, of losing control, of being shattered and disintegrated, even of being killed by the experience." And the result of this syndrome is what we would expect a weak organism to do: to cut back the full intensity of life:

For some people this evasion of one's own growth, setting low levels of aspiration, the fear of doing what one is capable of doing, voluntary self-crippling, pseudo-stupidity, mock-humility are in fact defenses against grandiosity …[5*]

It all boils down to a simple lack of strength to bear the superlative, to open oneself to the totality of experience—an idea that was well appreciated by William James and more recently was developed in phenomenological terms in the classic work of Rudolf Otto. Otto talked about the terror of the world, the feeling of overwhelming awe, wonder, and fear in the face of creation—the miracle of it, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum* of each single thing, of the fact that there are things at all.[6] What Otto did was to get descriptively at man's natural feeling of inferiority in the face of the massive transcendence of creation; his real *creature feeling* before the crushing and negating miracle of Being. We now understand how a phenomenology of religious experience ties into psychology: right at the point of the problem of courage.

We might say that the child is a "natural" coward: he cannot have the strength to support the terror of creation. The world as it *is,* creation out of the void, things as they are, things as they are not, are too much for us to be able to stand. Or, better: they *would be* too much for us to bear without crumbling in a faint, trembling like a leaf, standing in a trance *in response* to the movement, colors, and odors of the world. I say "would be" because most of us—by the time we leave childhood—have repressed our vision of the primary miraculousness of creation. We have closed it off, changed it, and no longer perceive the world as it is to raw experience. Sometimes we may recapture this world by remembering some striking childhood perceptions, how suffused they were in emotion and wonder—how a favorite grandfather looked, or one's first love in his early teens. We change these heavily emotional perceptions precisely because we need to move about in the world with some kind of equanimity, some kind of strength and directness; we can't keep gaping with our heart in our mouth, greedily sucking up with our eyes everything great and powerful that strikes us. The great boon of repression is that it makes it possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so full of beauty, majesty, and terror that if animals perceived it all they would be paralyzed to act.

But nature has protected the lower animal by endowing them with instincts. An instinct is a programmed perception that calls into play a programmed reaction. It is very simple. Animals are not moved by what they cannot react to. They live in a tiny

world, a sliver of reality, one neuro-chemical program that keeps them walking behind their nose and shuts out everything else. But look at man, the impossible creature! Here nature seems to have thrown caution to the winds along with the programmed instincts. She created an animal who has no defense against full perception of the external world, an animal completely open to experience. Not only in front of his nose, in his *umwelt,* but in many other *umwelten.* He can relate not only to animals in his own species, but in some ways to all other species. He can contemplate not only what is edible for him, but everything that grows. He not only lives in this moment, but expands his inner self to yesterday, his curiosity to centuries ago, his fears to five billion years from now when the sun will cool, his hopes to an eternity from now. He lives not only on a tiny territory, nor even on an entire planet, but in a galaxy, in a universe, and in dimensions beyond visible universes. It is appalling, the burden that man bears, the *experiential* burden. As we saw in the last chapter, man can't even take his own body for granted as can other animals. It is not just hind feet, a tail that he drags, that are just "there," limbs to be used and taken for granted or chewed off when caught in a trap and when they give pain and prevent movement. Man's body is a *problem* to him that has to be explained. Not only his body is strange, but also its inner landscape, the memories and dreams. Man's very insides—his self—are foreign to him. He doesn't know who he is, why he was born, what he is doing on the planet, what he is supposed to do, what he can expect. His own existence is incomprehensible to him, a miracle just like the rest of creation, closer to him, right near his pounding heart, but for that reason all the more strange. Each thing is a problem, and man can shut out nothing. As Maslow has well said, "It is precisely the god-like in ourselves that we are ambivalent about, fascinated by and fearful of, motivated to and defensive against. This is one aspect of the basic human predicament, that we are simultaneously worms and gods."[7] There it is again: gods with anuses.

The historic value of Freud's work is that it came to grips with the peculiar animal that man was, the animal that was not programmed by instincts to close off perception and assure automatic equanimity and forceful action. Man had to invent and create out of himself the limitations of perception and the equanimity to live on this planet. And so the core of psychodynamics, the formation of the human character, is a study in human self-limitation and in the terrifying costs of that limitation. The hostility to psychoanalysis in the past, today, and in the future, will always be a hostility against admitting that man lives by lying to himself about himself and about his world, and that character, to follow Ferenczi and Brown, is a vital lie. I particularly like the way Maslow has summed up this contribution of Freudian thought:

> Freud's greatest discovery, the one which lies at the root of psycho dynamics, is that *the* great cause of much psychological illness is the fear of knowledge of oneself—of one's emotions, impulses, memories, capacities, potentialities, of one's destiny. We have discovered that fear of knowledge of oneself is very often isomorphic with, and parallel with, fear of the outside world.

And what is this fear, but a fear of the reality of creation in relation to our powers and possibilities:

> In general this kind of fear is defensive, in the sense that it is a protection of our self-esteem, of our love and respect for ourselves. We tend to be afraid of any knowledge that could cause us to despise ourselves or to make us feel inferior, weak, worthless, evil, shameful. We protect ourselves and our ideal image of ourselves by repression and

similar defenses, which are essentially techniques by which we avoid becoming conscious of unpleasant or dangerous truths.[8]

The individual has to repress *globally,* from the entire spectrum of his experience, if he wants to feel a warm sense of inner value and basic security. This sense of value and support is something that nature gives to each animal by the automatic instinctive programming and in the pulsating of the vital processes. But man, poor denuded creature, has to build and earn inner value and security. He must repress his smallness in the adult world, his failures to live up to adult commands and codes. He must repress his own feelings of physical and moral inadequacy, not only the inadequacy of his good intentions but also his guilt and his evil intensions: the death wishes and hatreds that result from being frustrated and blocked by the adults. He must repress his parents' inadequacy, their anxieties and terrors, because these make it difficult for him to feel secure and strong. He must repress his own anality, his compromising bodily functions that spell his mortality, his fundamental expendability in nature. And with all this, and more that we leave unsaid, he must repress the primary awesomeness of the external world.

In his later years Freud evidently came to realize, as Adler had earlier, that the thing that really bothers the child is the nature of his world, not so much his own inner drives. He talked less about the power of the Oedipus complex and more about "human perplexity and helplessness in the face of nature's dreaded forces," "the terrors of nature," "the painful riddle of death," "our anxiety in the face of life's dangers," and "the great necessities of fate, against which there is no remedy."[9] And when it came to the central problem of anxiety, he no longer talked—as he had in his early work—about the child's being overwhelmed from within by his instinctual urges; instead, Freud's formulations became existential. Anxiety was now seen largely as a matter of the reaction to global helplessness, abandonment, fate:

I therefore maintain that the fear of death is to be regarded as an analogue of the fear of castration, and that the situation to which the ego reacts is the state of being forsaken or deserted by the protecting superego—by the powers of destiny—which puts an end to security against every danger.[10]

This formulation indicates a great broadening of perspective. Add to it a generation or two of psychoanalytic clinical work, and we have achieved a remarkably faithful understanding of what really bothers the child, how life is really too much for him, how he has to avoid too much thought, too much perception, too much *life*. And at the same time, how he has to avoid the death that rumbles behind and underneath every carefree activity, that looks over his shoulder as he plays. The result is that we now know that the human animal is characterized by two great fears that other animals are protected from: the fear of life and the fear of death. In the science of man it was Otto Rank, above all, who brought these fears into prominence, based his whole system of thought on them, and showed how central they were to an understanding of man. At about the same time that Rank wrote, Heidegger brought these fears to the center of existential philosophy. He argued that the basic anxiety of man is anxiety *about* being-in-the-world, as well as anxiety *of* being-in-the-world. That is, both fear of death and fear of life, of experience and individuation.[11] Man is reluctant to move out into the overwhelmingness of his world, the real dangers of it; he shrinks back from losing himself in the all-consuming appetites of others, from spinning out of control in the clutchings and clawings of men, beasts and machines. As an animal organism man senses the kind of planet he has been put down on, the nightmarish, demonic frenzy in which nature

has unleashed billions of individual organismic appetites of all kinds—not to mention earthquakes, meteors, and hurricanes, which seem to have their own hellish appetites. Each thing, in order to deliciously expand, is forever gobbling up others. Appetites may be innocent because they are naturally given, but any organism caught in the myriad cross-purposes of this planet is a potential victim of this very innocence—and it shrinks away from life lest it lose its own. Life can suck one up, sap his energies, submerge him, take away his self-control, give so much new experience so quickly that he will burst; make him stick out among others, emerge onto dangerous ground, load him up with new responsibilities which need great strength to bear, expose him to new contingencies, new chances. Above all there is the danger of a slip-up, an accident, a chance disease, and of course of death, the final sucking up, the total submergence and negation.

The great scientific simplification of psychoanalysis is the concept that the whole of early experience is an attempt by the child to deny the anxiety of his emergence, his fear of losing his support, of standing alone, helpless and afraid. The child's character, his style of life, is his way of using the power of others, the support of the things and the ideas of his culture, to banish from his awareness the actual fact of his natural impotence. Not only his impotence to avoid death, but his impotence to stand alone, firmly rooted on his own powers. In the face of the terror of the world, the miracle of creation, the crushing power of reality, not even the tiger has secure and limitless power, much less the child. His world is a transcendent mystery; even the parents to whom he relates in a natural and secure dependency are primary miracles. How else could they appear? The mother is the first awesome miracle that haunts the child his whole life, whether he lives within her powerful aura or rebels against it. The superordinacy of his world intrudes upon him in the form of fantastic faces smiling up close through gaping teeth, rolling eery eyes, piercing him from afar with burning and threatening glances. He lives in a world of flesh-and-blood Kwakiutl masks that mock his self-sufficiency. The only way he could securely oppose them would be to know that he is as godlike as they, but he can never know this straightforwardly and unambiguously. There is no secure answer to the awesome mystery of the human face that scrutinizes itself in the mirror; no answer, at any rate, that can come from the person himself, from his own center. One's own face may be godlike in its miraculousness, but one lacks the godlike power to know what it means, the godlike strength to have been responsible for its emergence.

In these ways, then, we understand that if the child were to give in to the overpowering character of reality and experience he would not be able to act with the kind of equanimity we need in our non-instinctive world. So one of the first things a child has to do is to learn to "abandon ecstasy," to do without awe, to leave fear and trembling behind. Only then can he act with a certain oblivious self-confidence, when he has naturalized his world. We say "naturalized" but we mean unnaturalized, falsified, with the truth obscured, the despair of the human condition hidden, a despair that the child glimpses in his night terrors and daytime phobias and neuroses. This despair he avoids by building defenses; and these defenses allow him to feel a basic sense of self-worth, of meaningfulness, of power. They allow him to feel that he *controls* his life and his death, that he really does live and act as a willful and free individual, that he has a unique and self-fashioned identity, that he *is somebody*—not just a trembling accident germinated on a hothouse planet that Carlyle for all time called a "hall of doom." We called one's life style a vital lie, and now we can understand better why we said it was vital: it is a *necessary* and basic dishonesty about oneself and one's whole situation. This revelation is what the Freudian revolution in thought really ends up in and is the basic reason that we still

strain against Freud. We don't want to admit that we are fundamentally dishonest about reality, that we do not really control our own lives. We don't want to admit that we do not stand alone, that we always rely on something that transcends us, some system of ideas and powers in which we are embedded and which support us. This power is not always obvious. It need not be overtly a god or openly a stronger person, but it can be the power of an all-absorbing activity, a passion, a dedication to a game, a way of life, that like a comfortable web keeps a person buoyed up and ignorant of himself, of the fact that he does not rest on his own center. All of us are driven to be supported in a self-forgetful way, ignorant of what energies we really draw on, of the kind of lie we have fashioned in order to live securely and serenely. Augustine was a master analyst of this, as were Kierkegaard, Scheler, and Tillich in our day. They saw that man could strut and boast all he wanted, but that he really drew his "courage to be" from a god, a string of sexual conquests, a Big Brother, a flag, the proletariat, and the fetish of money and the size of a bank balance.

The defenses that form a person's character support a grand illusion, and when we grasp this we can understand the full drivenness of man. He is driven away from himself, from self-knowledge, self-reflection. He is driven toward things that support the lie of his character, his automatic equanimity. But he is also drawn precisely toward those things that make him anxious, as a way of skirting them masterfully, testing himself against them, controlling them by defying them. As Kierkegaard taught us, anxiety lures us on, becomes the spur to much of our energetic activity: we flirt with our own growth, but also dishonestly. This explains much of the friction in our lives. We enter symbiotic relationships in order to get the security we need, in order to get relief from our anxieties, our aloneness and helplessness; but these relationships also bind us, they enslave us even further because they support the lie we have fashioned. So we strain against them in order to be more free. The irony is that we do this straining uncritically, in a struggle within our own armor, as it were; and so we increase our drivenness, the second-hand quality of our struggle for freedom. Even in our flirtations with anxiety we are unconscious of our motives. We seek stress, we push our own limits, but we do it with our *screen against despair* and not with despair itself. We do it with the stock market, with sports cars, with atomic missiles, with the success ladder in the corporation or the competition in the university. We do it in the prison of a dialogue with our own little family, by marrying against their wishes or choosing a way of life because they frown on it, and so on. Hence the complicated and second-hand quality of our entire drivenness. Even in our passions we are nursery children playing with toys that represent the real world. Even when these toys crash and cost us our lives or our sanity, we are cheated of the consolation that we were in the real world instead of the playpen of our fantasies. We still did not meet our doom on our own manly terms, in contest with objective reality. It is fateful and ironic how the lie we need in order to live dooms us to a life that is never really ours.

It was not until the working out of modern psychoanalysis that we could understand something the poets and religious geniuses have long known: that the armor of character was so vital to us that to shed it meant to risk death and madness. It is not hard to reason out: If character is a neurotic defense against despair and you shed that defense, you admit the full flood of despair, the full realization of the true human condition, what men are really afraid of, what they struggle against, and are driven toward and away from. Freud summed it up beautifully when he somewhere remarked that psychoanalysis cured the neurotic misery in order to introduce the patient to the common misery of life. Neurosis is another word for describing a complicated technique for avoiding misery, but

reality is the misery. That is why from earliest times sages have insisted that to see reality one must die and be reborn. The idea of death and rebirth was present in shamanistic times, in Zen thought, in Stoic thought, in Shakespeare's *King Lear,* as well as in Judeo-Christian and modern existential thought. But it was not until scientific psychology that we could understand what was at stake in the death and rebirth: that man's character was a neurotic structure that went right to the heart of his humanness. As Frederick Perls put it, "To suffer one's death and to be reborn is not easy." And it is not easy precisely because so much of one has to die.

I like the way Perls conceived the neurotic structure as a thick edifice built up of four layers. The first two layers are the everyday layers, the tactics that the child learns to get along in society by the facile use of words to win ready approval and to placate others and move them along with him: these are the glib, empty talk, "cliché," and role-playing layers. Many people live out their lives never getting underneath them. The third layer is a stiff one to penetrate: it is the "impasse" that covers our feeling of being empty and lost, the very feeling that we try to banish in building up our character defenses. Underneath this layer is the fourth and most baffling one: the "death" or fear-of-death layer; and this, as we have seen, is the layer of our true and basic animal anxieties, the terror that we carry around in our secret heart. Only when we explode this fourth layer, says Perls, do we get to the layer of what we might call our "authentic self": what we really are without sham, without disguise, without defenses against fear.[12]

From this sketch of the complex rings of defense that compose our character, our neurotic shield that protects our pulsating vitality from the dread of truth, we can get some idea of the difficult and excruciatingly painful, all-or-nothing process that psychological rebirth is. And when it is through psychologically, it only begins humanly: the worst is not the death, but the rebirth itself—there's the rub. What does it mean "to be born again" for man? It means *for the first time to be subjected* to the terrifying paradox of the human condition, since one must be born not as a god, but as a man, or as a god-worm, or a god who shits. Only this time without the neurotic shield that hides the full ambiguity of one's life. And so we know that every authentic rebirth is a real ejection from paradise, as the lives of Tolstoy, Péguy, and others attest. It takes men of granite, men who were automatically powerful, "secure in their drivenness" we might say, and it makes them tremble, makes them cry—as Péguy stood on the platforms of Parisian busses with hot tears rolling down his cheeks while he mumbled prayers.

It was Rank who very early admitted that anxiety could not all be overcome therapeutically, and this is what he meant: that it is impossible to stand up to the terror of one's condition without anxiety. It was Andras Angyal who got to the heart of the matter of psychotherapeutic rebirth when he said that the neurotic who has had therapy is like a member of Alcoholics Anonymous: he can never take his cure for granted, and the best sign of the genuineness of that cure is that he lives with *humility*.[13]

Full Humans and Part Humans

This discussion brings up a basic contradiction of the whole therapeutic enterprise that has not been aired widely enough; we are going to be dwelling on it at the close of this book, but this is the right place to introduce it. It is simply this: what sense does it make to talk about "enjoying one's full humanness"—as Maslow urges along with so many others—if "full humanness" means the primary *mis-adjustment* to the world? If you get rid of the four-layered neurotic shield, the armor

that covers the characterological lie about life, how can you talk about "enjoying" this Pyrrhic victory? The person gives up something restricting and illusory, it is true, but only to come face to face with something even more awful: genuine despair. Full humanness means full fear and trembling, at least some of the waking day. When you get a person to emerge into life, away from his dependencies, his automatic safety in the cloak of someone else's power, what joy can you promise him with the burden of his aloneness? When you get a person to look at the sun as it bakes down on the daily carnage taking place on earth, the ridiculous accidents, the utter fragility of life, the powerlessness of those he thought most powerful—what comfort can you give him from a psychotherapeutic point of view? Luis Buñuel likes to introduce a mad dog into his films as counterpoint to the secure daily routine of repressed living. The meaning of his symbolism is that no matter what men pretend, they are only one accidental bite away from utter fallibility. The artist disguises the incongruity that is the pulse-beat of madness but he is aware of it. What would the average man do with a full consciousness of absurdity? He has fashioned his character for the precise purpose of putting it between himself and the facts of life; it is his special *tour-de-force* that allows him to ignore incongruities, to nourish himself on impossibilities, to thrive on blindness. He accomplishes thereby a peculiarly human victory: the ability to be smug about terror. Sartre has called man a "useless passion" because he is so hopelessly bungled, so deluded about his true condition. He wants to be a god with only the equipment of an animal, and so he thrives on fantasies. As Ortega so well put it in the epigraph we have used for this chapter, man uses his ideas for the defense of his existence, to frighten away reality. This is a serious game, the defense of one's existence—how take it away from people and leave them joyous?

Maslow talks very convincingly about "self-actualization" and the ecstasy of "peak experiences" wherein a person comes to see the world in all its awe and splendor and senses his own free inner expansion and the miracle of his being. Maslow calls this state "being cognition," the openness of perception to the truth of the world, a truth concealed by the neurotic distortions and illusions that protect one against overwhelming experiences. This idea is fine and correct, this enjoinder to develop the capacity for "being cognition" in order to break out of the one-dimensionality of our lives, the cave of our imprisoning security. But like most things human it *is* a very paradoxical kind of triumph. This was already clearly seen by Maslow, when he talked about the "*dangers* of being-cognition."[14] Maslow was too broad-minded and sober to imagine that being-cognition did not have an underside; but he didn't go far enough toward pointing out what a dangerous underside it was —that it could undermine one's whole position in the world. It can't be overstressed, one final time, that to see the world as it really is is devastating and terrifying. It achieves the very result that the child has painfully built his character over the years in order to avoid: it *makes routine, automatic, secure, self-confident activity impossible.* It makes thoughtless living in the world of men an impossibility. It places a trembling animal at the mercy of the entire cosmos and the problem of the meaning of it.

Let us digress here for a moment in order to show that this view of character is not one put forth by morbid existentialists but instead represents the now-agreed merger of Freudian and post-Freudian psychology. A subtle but very profound change has come over our understanding of the early development of the child. It is a change that can be summed up briefly in the shifts from Freudian to post-Freudian psychology and now back again to a sobered Freudianism. Freud saw the child as an antagonist of his world, as someone who had drives of aggression and sexuality that

he wanted to work on the world. But as he could not work them out as a child, he had to suffer frustration and develop substitute satisfactions. The thwarting of these drives in childhood led to such a residue of bitterness and antisociality that the world would always be peopled by a type of animal that resented what it had done to him, what it had deprived him of. He would be a mean animal, deep down, one who felt cheated, one who harbored choked-up feelings and desires. He might on the surface be pleasant enough, responsible, creative; but underneath it all was a residue of trashiness that threatened to burst out and that in any event would somehow work itself out on others or on himself.

Freud's theory of innate instincts was undermined very early in social-psychological quarters and very late within psychoanalysis itself, and a new view of the child came into vogue. It tended to see the child as neutral, instinct-free, basically malleable; apart from some unknown factors of hereditary constitution and temperament, the child was looked upon wholly as a creature shaped by his environment. In this view the parents were thought to be responsible for the child's repressions, for the character defenses that he developed, and for the kind of person he turned out to be, as they had provided him with an environment and molded him to it. Even more than that, as the parents had opposed the child's natural energetic and free expansion and had demanded his surrender to their world, they could be considered in some fundamental way as guilty for whatever warpings his character had. If the child had no instincts he at least had plenty of free energy and a natural innocence of the body. He sought continual activity and diversion, wanted to move about his world in its entirety, to bend it to his use and delight as much as possible. He sought to express himself spontaneously, feel the most satisfaction in his bodily processes, derive the most comfort, thrill, and pleasure from others. But as this kind of limitless expansion is not possible in the world, the child has to be checked for his own good; and the parents were the checkers of his activity. Whatever attitudes the child had toward himself, his body, and his world were considered to have been implanted by his experience with his trainers and with his immediate environment.

This was the post-Freudian view of character development, the reaction against Freud's instinctivism. Actually it is pre-Freudian, dating from the Enlightenment and Rousseau and Marx. In recent years the most biting and carefully thought-out critique of this view was given by Norman O. Brown.[15] The epithets he used against Fromm and the neo-Freudians were bitter indeed for a book that called us all back to Eros. But the gravamen of Brown's critique was a serious one that had been overlooked by many in recent decades: that the situation of the child was an impossible one and that he had to fashion his own defenses against the world, had to find a way of surviving in it. As we saw in Chapter Three, the child's own existential dilemmas gave him his task quite independently of the parents: his "attitudes" came to him from his need to adapt to the whole desperate human condition, not merely to attune himself to the whims of his parents.

The student of ideas is entitled to wonder what kind of book Brown would have fashioned out of his brilliance if he had digested Adler and Rank with the thoroughness with which he studied Freud. It was Adler and Rank, after all, who understood the desperate situation of the child, without falling either into the Freudian trap of inner instincts or that of easy environmentalism. As Rank put it once and for all, for all future psychoanalysts and students of man:

> every human being is … equally unfree, that is, *we* … *create* out of freedom, a prison….[16]

Rank was criticizing Rousseau's vision of man as born free and then put into chains

by training and by society. Rank understood that in the face of the overwhelmingness of the world the child could not out of himself muster the stamina and the authority necessary to live in full expansiveness with limitless horizons of perception and experience.

We have arrived at a unique stage in the development of psychoanalytic thought. By fully incorporating the work of Adler and Rank on an equal level with Freud, modern psychoanalysis has been able to keep the roundness and soberness of the master without the errors, extreme formulations, and dogma of strict Freudianism. As I see it, Brown's book represents a declaration that the circle has been closed fully between the psychoanalysis of the founders and the most recent theoretical and clinical work, without anything essential being lost. Even on the syndrome that in truth could most justifiably accuse the parents of failing to fashion an adequate human being—that of schizophrenia—there has been a marked change of emphasis, a new consciousness of the tragic dimensions of human life. No one has summed this up better than Harold Searles, and I would like to quote at length his sensitive and authoritative personal statement, which I think is a very important one historically:

> At Chestnut Lodge, the twice-weekly, hour-long case presentations usually have to do with schizophrenic patients.... When the author went there, nearly 12 years ago, the therapists—including the author—presenting these cases often tended to paint a totally, or almost totally, black picture of the patient's childhood family relationships; the feeling-atmosphere of the presentation was one of blame of the parents more than anything else. As the years have gone on, the author has found that the presentations have come to convey less and less of such blame, and to convey more and more of the tragedy of the patients' lives—tragedy which is so much of a piece with the tragedy of life for all of us that the presentation is often a profoundly grief-laden experience for both the presenter and the listeners. One feels that the staff-presentation now gives a truer picture of a patient's life, but a picture which is much more deeply shaking than was the blame-colored picture previously often seen.[17]

The tragedy of life that Searles is referring to is the one we have been discussing: man's finitude, his dread of death and of the overwhelmingness of life. The schizophrenic feels these more than anyone else because he has not been able to build the confident defenses that a person normally uses to deny them. The schizophrenic's misfortune is that he has been burdened with extra anxieties, extra guilt, extra helplessness, an even more unpredictable and unsupportive environment. He is not surely seated in his body, has no secure base from which to negotiate a defiance of and a denial of the real nature of the world. The parents have made him massively inept as an organism. He has to contrive extra-ingenious and extra-desperate ways of living in the world that will keep him from being torn apart by experience, since he is already almost apart. We see again confirmed the point of view that a person's character is a defense against despair, an attempt to avoid insanity because of the *real* nature of the world. Searles looks at schizophrenia precisely as the result of the inability to shut out terror, as a desperate style of living with terror. Frankly I don't know anything more cogent that needs to be said about this syndrome: it is a failure in humanization, which means a failure to *confidently deny* man's real situation on this planet. Schizophrenia is the limiting test case for the theory of character and reality that we have been expounding here: the failure to build dependable character defenses allows the true nature of reality to appear to man. It is scientifically apodictic. The creativity of people on the schizophrenic end of the human continuum is a creativity that springs from the inability to accept the standardized cultural denials of the real nature of experience. And the price of this

kind of almost "extra human" creativity is to live on the brink of madness, as men have long known. The schizophrenic is supremely creative in an almost extra-human sense because he is furthest from the animal: he lacks the secure instinctive programming of lower organisms; and he lacks the secure cultural programming of average men. No wonder he appears to average men as "crazy": he is not in anything's world.†

Conclusion

Let us close our long discussion of the function of character by juxtaposing two great pieces of poetic writing and insight, separated by almost three centuries. The first, by Thomas Traherne, gives a beautiful description of the world as it appears to the perceptions of the child before he has been able to fashion automatic reactions. Traherne describes the pristine perceptions of the child:

> All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful…. The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold; the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling in the street, and playing, were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die…. The city seemed to stand in Eden….

We might call this the paradise of prerepression. But then, Traherne goes on to describe his fall from Eden; the development of cultural perceptions and denials of the pristine character of reality; and like a modern psychoanalyst in the early days of, say, Chestnut Lodge, he accuses the parents of this fall, makes his whole case against them:

> Thoughts are the most present things to thoughts, and of the most powerful influence. My soul was only apt and disposed to great things; but souls to souls are like apples to apples, one being rotten rots another. When I began to speak and go, nothing began to be present to me, but what was present to me in their thoughts. Nor was anything present to me any other way, than it was so to them…. All things were absent which they talked not of. So I began among my play-fellows to prize a drum, a fine coat, a penny, a gilded book, & c.,…. As for the Heavens and the Sun and Stars they disappeared, and were no more unto me than the bare walls. So that the strange riches of man's invention quite overcame the riches of Nature, being learned more laboriously and in the second place.[18]

What is missing in this splendid portrayal of the child's fall from natural perception into the artificialities of the cultural world? Nothing less than what we have cited as the great post-Freudian merger on the human personality: Traherne's own complicity in the process, his *need* to fall from grace in order to grow, move about without anxiety, protect himself *against* the Sun, the Stars, the Heavens. Traherne doesn't record his other pristine reactions, say, to the piercing screams of his "play-fellows" as they cut their hands or smashed their noses and mouths and splashed him with globs of weird, warm red that sent terror into his bowels. He says that he knew not that they should die, that all seemed immortal—but did his parents

introduce death into the world? This was the deep-lying rot that rubbed into his soul, and it rubbed in not from the parents but from the world, from the "riches of nature." In some complex ways death edged itself as a symbol into his perceptions and chilled his soul, and to banish the *facts* of life Traherne had to remold his paradise, even to lying about it in his memory as we all do. True, the earth was the place of mystical beauty that he painted it and that Carlyle later agreed to be "a mystic temple"; but it was at the same time "a hall of doom" that Traherne chose to deny in his memory of childhood.

The totality of the human condition is the thing that is so hard for man to recapture. He wants his world safe for delight, wants to blame others for his fate. Compare to Traherne a modern poet's consciousness of the full roundness of the human condition. Marcia Lee Anderson tells us with penetrating brilliance how we have to live in a hall of doom, what we need to do to protect ourselves:

We multiply diseases for delight,
Invent a horrid want, a shameful doubt,
Luxuriate in license, feed on night,
Make inward bedlam—and will not come out.
Why should we? Stripped of subtle complications,
Who could regard the sun except with fear?
This is our shelter against contemplation,
Our only refuge from the plain and clear.
Who would crawl out from under the obscure
To stand defenseless in the sunny air?
No terror of obliquity so sure
As the most shining terror of despair
To know how simple is our deepest need,
How sharp, and how impossible to feed.[19]

The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive. Marcia Lee Anderson draws the circle not only on Traherne, but on Maslow, on humanistic psychoanalysis, and even on Freudian Norman O. Brown himself. What exactly would it mean on this earth to be wholly unrepressed, to live in full bodily and psychic expansiveness? It can only mean to be reborn into madness. Brown warns us of the full radicalness of his reading of Freud by stressing that he resolutely follows Ferenczi's insight that "Character-traits are, so to speak, secret psychoses."[20] This is shaking scientific truth, and we have also subscribed to it with Brown. If it has seemed hard for men to get agreement on such a truth during the age of Freud, one day it will be secure.

But the chilling reality behind this truth is even more upsetting, and there doesn't seem to be much that we can do with it or will ever be able to do with it: I mean that *without* character-traits there has to be full and open psychosis. At the very end of this book I want to sum up the basic contradictions of Brown's argument for new men without character defenses, his hope for a rebirth of mankind into a "second innocence." For now, it is enough to invoke Marcia Lee Anderson's complete scientific formula: "Stripped of subtle complications [i.e., of all the character defenses—repression, denial, misperception of reality], who could regard the sun except with fear?"

Notes

1. Ortega, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton, 1957), pp. 156–157.

2. E. Becker, *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man* (New York: Braziller, 1968), p. 192.
3. See his two fine papers, "The Need to Know and the Fear of Knowing" *Journal of General Psychology,* 1963, 68:111–125; and "Neurosis as a Failure of Personal Growth," *Humanitas,* 1967, 3:153–169.
4. Maslow, "Neurosis as a Failure," p. 163.
5. *Ibid.,* pp. 165–166.
6. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy,* 1923 (New York: Galaxy Books, 1958).
7. Maslow, "The Need to Know," p. 119.
8. *Ibid.,* pp. 118–119.
9. Cf. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion,* 1927 (New York: Anchor Books Edition, 1964), Chapters 3 and 4.
10. Freud, *The Problem of Anxiety,* 1926 (New York: Norton, 1936), pp. 67 ff.
11. Cf. also the continuation of Heidegger's views in modern existential psychiatry: Médard Boss, *Meaning and Content of Sexual Perversions: A Daseinanalytic Approach to the Psychopathology of the Phenomenon of Love* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1949), p. 46.
12. F. Perls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (Lafayette, Calif.: Real People Press, 1969), pp. 55–56.
13. A. Angyal, *Neurosis and Treatment: A Holistic Theory* (New York: Wiley, 1965), p. 260.
14. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being,* second edition (Princeton: Insight Books, 1968), Chapter 8.
15. LAD.
16. ME, p. 13, my emphasis.
17. Harold F. Searles, "Schizophrenia and the Inevitability of Death," *Psychiatric Quarterly,* 1961, 35:633–634.
18. Traherne, *Centuries,* C.1672 (London, Faith Press edition, 1963), pp. 109–115, *passim.*
19. Marcia Lee Anderson, "Diagnosis," quoted in Searles, "Schizophrenia," p. 639.
20. LAD, p. 291.

* As we shall see in the pages that follow, other thinkers had their version of the "Jonah Syndrome" long before Maslow; I am thinking especially of Rank, who gave the idea no special name, and of Freud, who probably began our scientific approach to it with his famous discovery of the "Wrecked by Success" syndrome. He saw that certain people couldn't stand success after they had achieved it; as it was too much for them, they quickly gave it up or went to pieces. I am leaving Freud out here because Maslow so well represents the existential approach that I believe is a considerable expansion of the Freudian horizon—even though Freud himself developed far toward an existential framework, as we shall see in Chapter Six where we discuss this problem again.

† For a fuller summing-up of the problem of schizophrenic failure see Chapter Ten.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Psychoanalyst Kierkegaard

The whole order of things fills me with a sense of anguish, from the gnat to the mysteries of incarnation; all is entirely unintelligible to me, and particularly my own person. Great is my sorrow, without limits. None knows of it, except God in Heaven, and He cannot have pity.

—SÖREN KIERKEGAARD[1]

Today we can call Kierkegaard a "psychoanalyst" without fear of being laughed at—or at least with confidence that the scoffers are uninformed. In the last few decades a new discovery of Kierkegaard has been taking place, a discovery that is momentous because it links him into the whole structure of knowledge in the humanities in our time. We used to think that there was a strict difference between science and belief and that psychiatry and religion were consequently far apart. But now we find that psychiatric and religious perspectives on reality are intimately related. For one thing they grow out of one another historically, as we shall see in a later section. Even more importantly for now, they reinforce one another. Psychiatric experience and religious experience cannot be separated either subjectively in the person's own eyes or objectively in the theory of character development.

Nowhere is this merger of religious and psychiatric categories clearer than in the work of Kierkegaard. He gave us some of the best empirical analyses of the human condition ever fashioned by man's mind. But ironically, it was not until the epoch of the scientific atheist Freud that we could see the scientific stature of the theologian Kierkegaard's work. Only then did we have the clinical evidence to support it. The noted psychologist Mowrer summed it up perfectly two decades ago: "Freud had to live and write before the earlier work of Kierkegaard could be correctly understood and appreciated."[2] There have been several good attempts to show how Kierkegaard anticipated the data of modern clinical psychology. Most of the European existentialists have had something to say about this, along with theologians like Paul Tillich.[3] The meaning of this work is that it draws a circle around psychiatry and religion; it shows that the best existential analysis of the human condition leads directly into the problems of God and faith, which is exactly what Kierkegaard had argued.

I am not going to attempt to repeat and decode Kierkegaard's breathtakingly penetrating and often difficult-to-understand analysis of the human condition. What I want to do instead is to try to present a summing-up of the main argument contained in his psychological works, as pointedly and sparingly as possible, so that the reader can see "in a nutshell" what Kierkegaard was driving at. If I can do this without getting too involved because fascinated by Kierkegaard's genius, the reader should be struck by the result. The structure of Kierkegaard's understanding of man *is almost exactly a recap of the modern clinical picture of man that we have sketched in the first four chapters of this book.* The reader can then judge for himself how congruent the two pictures are at basic points (even though I don't present Kierkegaard in his stunning detail), why it is that we are today comparing Kierkegaard's stature in psychology to Freud's, and why I and others are prepared to call Kierkegaard as

great a student of the human condition as was Freud. The fact is that, although writing in the 1840's he was really post-Freudian, which conveys the eternal uncanniness of genius.

The Existential Paradox as the Beginning of Psychology and Religion

The foundation stone for Kierkegaard's view of man is the myth of the Fall, the ejection of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In this myth is contained, as we saw, the basic insight of psychology for all time: that man is a union of opposites, of self-consciousness and of physical body. Man emerged from the instinctive thoughtless action of the lower animals and came to reflect on his condition. He was given a consciousness of his individuality and his part-divinity in creation, the beauty and uniqueness of his face and his name. At the same time he was given the consciousness of the terror of the world and of his own death and decay. This paradox is the really constant thing about man in all periods of history and society; it is thus the true "essence" of man, as Fromm said. As we saw, the leading modern psychologists have themselves made it the cornerstone of their understanding. But Kierkegaard had already counseled them: "Further than this psychology cannot go ... and moreover it can verify this point again and again in its observation of human life."[4]

The fall into self-consciousness, the emergence from comfortable ignorance in nature, had one great penalty for man: it gave him *dread,* or anxiety. One does not find dread in the beast, says Kierkegaard, "precisely for the reason that by nature the beast is not qualified by spirit."[5] For "spirit" read "self" or symbolic inner identity. The beast has none. It is ignorant, says Kierkegaard, therefore innocent; but man is a "synthesis of the soulish and bodily"[6] and so experiences anxiety. Again, for "soulish" we must read "self-conscious."

> If a man were a beast or an angel, he would not be able to be in dread. [That is, if he were utterly unself-conscious or totally un-animal.] Since he is a synthesis he can be in dread … man himself produces dread.[7]

Man's anxiety is a function of his sheer ambiguity and of his complete powerlessness to overcome that ambiguity, to be straightforwardly an animal or an angel. He cannot live heedless of his fate, nor can he take sure control over that fate and triumph over it by being outside the human condition:

> The spirit cannot do away with itself [i.e., self-consciousness cannot disappear]…. Neither can man sink down into the vegetative life [i.e., be wholly an animal]…. He cannot flee from dread.[8]

But the real focus of dread is not the ambiguity itself, it is the result of *the judgment* on man: that if Adam eats of the fruit of the tree of knowledge God tells him "Thou shalt surely die." In other words, the final terror of self-consciousness is the knowledge of one's own death, which is the peculiar sentence on man alone in the animal kingdom. This is the meaning of the Garden of Eden myth and the rediscovery of modern psychology: that death is man's peculiar and greatest anxiety.*

Kierkegaard's Characterology

Kierkegaard's whole understanding of man's character is that it is a structure built up to avoid perception of the "terror, perdition [and] annihilation [that] dwell next door to every man."[9] He understood psychology the way a contemporary psychoanalyst does: that its task is to discover the strategies that a person uses to avoid anxiety. What style does he use to function automatically and uncritically in the world, and how does this style cripple his true growth and freedom of action and choice? Or, in words that are almost Kierkegaard's: how is a person being enslaved by his characterological lie about himself?

Kierkegaard described these styles with a brilliance that today seems uncanny and with a vocabulary that sums up much of the psychoanalytic theory of character defenses. Whereas today we talk about the "mechanisms of defense" such as repression and denial, Kierkegaard talked about the same things with different terms: he referred to the fact that most men live in a "half-obscurity" about their own condition,[10] they are in a state of "shut-upness" wherein they block off their own perceptions of reality.[11] He understood the compulsive character, the rigidity of the person who has had to build extra-thick defenses against anxiety, a heavy character armor, and he described him in the following terms:

> A partisan of the most rigid orthodoxy … knows it all, he bows before the holy, truth is for him an ensemble of ceremonies, he talks about presenting himself before the throne of God, of how many times one must bow, he knows everything the same way as does the pupil who is able to demonstrate a mathematical proposition with the letters ABC, but not when they are changed to DEF. He is therefore in dread whenever he hears something not arranged in the same order.[12]

There is no doubt that by "shut-upness" Kierkegaard means what we today refer to by repression; it is the closed personality, the one who has fenced himself around in childhood, not tested his own powers in action, not been free to discover himself and his world in a relaxed way. If the child is not burdened by too much parental blocking of his action, too much infection with the parents' anxieties, he can develop his defenses in a less monopolizing way, can remain somewhat fluid and open in character. He is prepared to test reality more in terms of his own action and experimentation and less on the basis of delegated authority and prejudgment or preperception. Kierkegaard understood this difference by making a distinction between "lofty" shut-upness and "mistaken" shut-upness. He went on to give a Rousseau-like enjoinder for raising children with the right kind of character orientation:

> It is of infinite importance that a child be brought up with a conception of the lofty shut-upness [reserve], and be saved from the mistaken kind. In an external respect it is easy to perceive when the moment has arrived that one ought to let the child walk alone; … the art is to be constantly present and yet not be present, to let the child be allowed to develop itself, while nevertheless one has constantly a survey clearly before one. The art is to leave the child to itself in the very highest measure and on the greatest possible scale, and to express this apparent abandonment in such a way that, unobserved, one at the same time knows everything.… And the father who educates or does everything for the child entrusted to him, but has not prevented him from becoming shut-up, has incurred a great accountability.[13]

Just as Rousseau and Dewey, Kierkegaard is warning the parent to let the child do his own exploration of the world and develop his own sure experimental powers. He knows that the child has to be protected against dangers and that watchfulness by

the parent is of vital importance, but he doesn't want the parent to obtrude his own anxieties into the picture, to cut off the child's action before it is absolutely necessary. Today we know that such an upbringing alone gives the child a self-confidence in the face of experience that he would not have if he were overly blocked: it gives him an "inner sustainment." And it is precisely this inner sustainment that allows the child to develop a "lofty" shut-upness, or reserve: that is, an ego-controlled and self-confident appraisal of the world by a personality that can open up more easily to experience. "Mistaken" shut-upness, on the other hand, is the result of too much blockage, too much anxiety, too much effort to face up to experience by an organism that has been overburdened and weakened in its own controls: it means, therefore, more automatic repression by an essentially *closed* personality. And so, for Kierkegaard, the "good" is the opening toward new possibility and choice, the ability to face into anxiety; the closed is the evil, that which turns one away from newness and broader perceptions and experiences; the closed shuts out revelation, obtrudes a veil between the person and his own situation in the world.[14] Ideally these should be transparent, but for the closed person they are opaque.

It is easy to see that shut-upness is precisely what we have called "the lie of character," and Kierkegaard calls it the same thing:

> It is easy to see that shut-upness *eo ipso* signifies a lie, or, if you prefer, untruth. But untruth is precisely unfreedom … the elasticity of freedom is consumed in the service of close reserve…. Close reserve was the effect of the negating retrenchment of the ego in the individuality.[15]

This is a perfectly contemporary psychoanalytic description of the costs of repression on the total personality. I am omitting Kierkegaard's more detailed and penetrating analysis of how the person becomes fragmented within himself by the repression, how the real perception of reality dwells under the surface, close at hand, ready to break through the repression, how the repression leaves the personality seemingly intact, seemingly functioning as a whole, in continuity—but how that continuity is broken, how the personality is really at the mercy of the discontinuity expressed by the repression.[16] To a modern, clinically-trained mind such an analysis must be truly marvelous.

Kierkegaard understood that the lie of character is built up because the child needs to adjust to the world, to the parents, and to his own existential dilemmas. It is built up before the child has a chance to learn about himself in an open or free way, and thus character defenses are automatic and unconscious. The problem is that the child becomes dependent on them and comes to be encased in his own character armor, unable to see freely beyond his own prison or into himself, into the defenses he is using, the things that are determining his unfreedom.[17] The best that the child can hope is that his shut-upness will not be of the "mistaken" or massive kind, in which his character is too fearful of the world to be able to open itself to the possibilities of experience. But that depends largely on the parents, on accidents of the environment, as Kierkegaard knew. Most people have parents who have "incurred a great accountability," and so they are obliged to shut themselves off from possibility.

Kierkegaard gives us some portrait sketches of the styles of denying possibility, or the lies of character—which is the same thing. He is intent on describing what we today call "inauthentic" men, men who avoid developing their own uniqueness; they follow out the styles of automatic and uncritical living in which they were conditioned as children. They are "inauthentic" in that they do not belong to

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First published in Great Britain in 2011
by Souvenir Press, 43 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3PD

This ebook edition first published in 2014

ISBN 9780285640078