KAREN HORNEY, M.D.

Our
Inner Conflicts

A CONSTRUCTIVE THEORY
OF NEUROSIS

Contents

Preface

[[7]]THIS BOOK is dedicated to the advancement of psychoanalysis. It has grown out of my experience in analytical work with my patients and with myself. While the theory it presents evolved over a period of years, it was not until I undertook the preparation of a series of lectures under the auspices of the American Institute for Psychoanalysis that my ideas finally crystallized. The first of these, centering about the technical aspects of the subject, was entitled "Problems of Psychoanalytical Technique" (1943). The second series, which covered the problems dealt with here, was given in 1944 under the title "Integration of Personality." Selected subjects — "Integration of Personality in Psychoanalytical Therapy," "The Psychology of Detachment," and "The Meaning of Sadistic Trends"—have been presented at the Academy of Medicine and before the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis.

It is my hope that the book will be useful to psychoanalysts who are seriously interested in improving our theory and therapy. I hope also that they will not only make the ideas presented here available to their patients but will apply them to themselves as well. Progress in psychoanalysis can only be made the hard way, by including ourselves and our difficulties. If we remain static and averse to change, our theories are bound to become barren and dogmatic.

I am convinced, however, that any book that goes be[[8]]yond the range of merely technical matters or abstract psychological theory should benefit also all those who want to know themselves and have not given up struggling for their own growth. Most of us who live in this difficult civilization are caught in the conflicts described here and need all the help we can get. Though severe neuroses belong in the hands of experts, I still believe that with untiring effort we can ourselves go a long way toward disentangling our own conflicts.

My prime gratitude belongs to my patients who, in our work together, have given me a better understanding of neurosis. I am also indebted to my colleagues who have encouraged my work by their interest and sympathetic understanding. I refer not only to my older colleagues but also to the younger ones, trained in our Institute, whose critical discussions have been stimulating and fruitful.

I want to mention three persons outside the field of psychoanalysis who in their own particular ways have given me support in the furtherance of my work. It was Dr. Alvin Johnson who gave me the opportunity to present my ideas at the New School for Social Research at a time when classical Freudian analysis was the only recognized school of analytical theory and practice. More especially I am indebted to Clara Mayer, Dean of the School of Philosophy and Liberal Arts of the New School for Social Research. By her continued personal interest she has encouraged me, year after year, to offer for discussion whatever new findings were garnered from my analytical work. And then there is my publisher, W. W. Norton, whose helpful advice has led to [[9]] many improvements in my books. Last but not least, I want to express my appreciation to Minette Kuhn who has helped me greatly toward a better organization of the material and a clearer formulation of my ideas.

K. H.

Introduction

[[11]]WHATEVER the starting point and however tortuous the road, we must finally arrive at a disturbance of personality as the source of psychic illness. The same can be said of this as of almost any other psychological discovery: it is really a rediscovery. Poets and philosophers of all times have known that it is never the serene, well-balanced person who falls victim to psychic disorders, but the one torn by inner conflicts. In modern terms, every neurosis, no matter what the symptomatic picture, is a character neurosis. Hence our endeavor in theory and therapy must be directed toward a better understanding of the neurotic character structure.

Actually, Freud's great pioneering work increasingly converged on this concept—though his genetic approach did not allow him to arrive at its explicit formulation. But others who have continued and developed Freud's work—notably Franz Alexander, Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich, and Harald Schultz-Hencke—have defined it more clearly. None of them, however, is agreed as to the precise nature and dynamics of this character structure.

My own starting point was a different one. Freud's postulations in regard to feminine psychology set me thinking about the role of cultural factors. Their influence on our ideas of what constitutes masculinity or femininity was obvious, and it became just as obvious to me that Freud had arrived at certain erroneous con[[12]]clusions because he failed to take them into account. My interest in this subject grew over the course of fifteen years. It was furthered in part by association with Erich Fromm who, through his profound knowledge of both sociology and psychoanalysis, made me more aware of the significance of social factors over and above their circumscribed application to feminine psychology. And my impressions were confirmed when I came to the United States in 1932. I saw then that the attitudes and the neuroses of persons in this country differed in many ways from those I had observed in European countries, and that only the difference in civilizations could account for this. My conclusions finally found their expression in *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time.* The main contention here was drat neuroses are brought about by cultural factors—which more specifically meant that neuroses are generated by disturbances in human relationships.

In the years before I wrote *The Neurotic Personality* I pursued another line of research that followed logically from the earlier hypothesis. It revolved around the question as to what the driving forces are in neurosis. Freud had been the first to point out that these were compulsive drives. He regarded these drives as instinctual in nature, aimed at satisfaction and intolerant of frustration. Consequently he believed that they were not confined to neuroses *per se* but operated in all human beings. If, however, neuroses were an outgrowth of disturbed human relationships, this postulation could not possibly be valid. The concepts I arrived at on this score were, briefly, these. Compulsive drives are specifically neurotic; they are born of feelings of isolation, [[13]] helplessness, fear and hostility, and represent ways of coping with the world despite these feelings; they aim primarily not at satisfaction but at safety; their compulsive character is due to the anxiety lurking behind them. Two of these drives—neurotic cravings for affection and for power—stood out at first in clear relief and were presented in detail in *The Neurotic Personality.*

Though retaining what I considered the fundamentals of Freud's teachings, I realized by that time that my search for a better understanding had led me in directions that were at variance with Freud. If so many factors that Freud regarded as instinctual were culturally determined, if so much that Freud considered libidinal was a neurotic need for affection, provoked by anxiety and aimed at feeling safe with others, then the libido theory was no longer tenable. Childhood experiences remained important, but the influence they exerted on our lives appeared in a new light. Other theoretical differences inevitably followed. Hence it became necessary to formulate in my own mind where I stood in reference to Freud. The result of this clarification was *New Ways in Psychoanalysis.*

In the meantime my search for the driving forces in neurosis continued. I called the compulsive drives neurotic trends and described ten of them in my next book. By then I, too, had arrived at the point of recognizing that the neurotic character structure was of central significance. I regarded it at that time as a kind of macrocosm formed by many microcosms interacting upon one another. In the nucleus of each microcosm was a neurotic trend. This theory of neurosis had a practical application. If psychoanalysis did not primarily involve [[14]] relating our present difficulties to our past experiences but depended rather upon understanding the interplay of forces in our existing personality, then recognizing and changing ourselves with little or even no

expert help was entirely feasible. In the face of a widespread need for psychotherapy and a scarcity of available aid, self-analysis seemed to offer the hope of filling a vital need. Since the major part of the book dealt with the possibilities, limitations, and ways of analyzing ourselves, I called it *Self-Analysis.*

I was, however, not entirely satisfied with my presentation of individual trends. The trends themselves were accurately described; but I was haunted by the feeling that in a simple enumeration they appeared in a too isolated fashion. I could see that a neurotic need for affection, compulsive modesty, and the need for a "partner" belonged together. What I failed to see was that together they represented a basic attitude toward others and the self, and a particular philosophy of life. These trends are the nuclei of what I have now drawn together as a "moving toward people." I saw, too, that a compulsive craving for power and prestige and neurotic ambition had something in common. They constitute roughly the factors involved in what I shall call "moving against people." But the need for admiration and the perfectionist drives, though they had all the earmarks of neurotic trends and influenced the neurotic's relation with others, seemed primarily to concern his relations with himself. Also, the need for exploitation seemed to be less basic than either the need for affection or for power; it appeared less comprehensive [[15]] than these, as if it were not a separate entity but had been taken out of some larger whole.

My questionings have since proved justified. In the years following, my focus of interest shifted to the role of conflicts in neurosis. I had said in *The Neurotic Personality* that a neurosis came about through the collision of divergent neurotic trends. In *Self-Analysis* I had said that neurotic trends not only reinforced each other but also created conflicts. Nevertheless conflicts had remained a side issue. Freud had been increasingly aware of the significance of inner conflicts; he saw them, however, as a battle between repressed and repressing forces. The conflicts I began to see were of a different kind. They operated between contradictory sets of neurotic trends, and though they originally concerned contradictory attitudes toward others, in time they encompassed contradictory attitudes toward the self, contradictory qualities and contradictory sets of values.

A crescendo of observation opened my eyes to the significance of such conflicts. What first struck me most forcibly was the blindness of patients toward obvious contradictions within themselves. When I pointed these out they became elusive and seemed to lose interest. After repeated experiences of this kind I realized that the elusiveness expressed a profound aversion to tackling these contradictions. Finally, panic reactions in response to a sudden recognition of a conflict showed me I was working with dynamite. Patients had good reason to shy away from these conflicts: they dreaded their power to tear them to pieces.

Then I began to recognize the amazing amount of energy and intelligence that was invested in more or less [[16]] desperate efforts to "solve"[1] the conflicts or, more precisely, to deny their existence and create an artificial harmony. I saw the four major attempts at solution in about the order in which they are presented in this book. The initial attempt was to eclipse part of the conflict and raise its opposite to predominance. The second was to "move away from" people. The function of neurotic detachment now appeared in a new light. Detachment was part of the basic conflict—that is, one of the original conflicting attitudes toward others; but it also represented an attempt at solution, since maintaining an emotional distance between the self and others set the conflict out of operation. The third attempt was very different in kind. Instead of moving away from others, the neurotic moved away from himself. His whole actual self became somewhat unreal to him and he created in its place an idealized image of himself in which the conflicting parts were so transfigured that they no longer appeared as conflicts but as various aspects of a rich personality. This concept helped to clarify many neurotic problems which hitherto were beyond the reach of our understanding and hence of our therapy. It also put two of the neurotic trends which had previously resisted integration into their proper setting. The need for perfection now appeared as an endeavor to measure up to this idealized image; the craving for admiration could be seen as the patient's need to have outside affirmation that he really was his idealized image. And the farther the image was removed from reality the more insatiable this latter need would logically be. Of all the attempts at solution the idealized [[17]]image is probably the most important by reason of its far-reaching effect on the whole personality. But in turn it generates a new inner rift, and hence calls for further patchwork. The fourth attempt at solution seeks primarily to do away with this rift, though it helps as well to spirit away all other conflicts.

---

[1] Throughout the text I shall use the term "solve" in connection with the neurotic's attempts to do away with his conflicts. Since he unconsciously denies their existence he does not, strictly speaking, try to "resolve" them. His unconscious efforts are directed toward "solving" his problems.

Through what I call externalization, inner processes are experienced as going on outside the self. If the idealized image means taking a step away from the actual self, externalization represents a still more radical divorce. It again creates new conflicts, or rather greatly augments the original conflict—that between the self and the outside world.

I have called these the four major attempts at solution, partly because they seem to operate regularly in all neuroses—though in varying degree—and partly because they bring about incisive changes in the personality. But they are by no means the only ones. Others of less general significance include such strategies as arbitrary Tightness, whose main function is to quell all inner doubts; rigid self-control, which holds together a torn individual by sheer will power; and cynicism, which, in disparaging all values, eliminates conflicts in regard to ideals.

Meanwhile the consequences of all these unresolved conflicts were gradually becoming clearer to me. I saw the manifold fears that were generated, the waste of energy, the inevitable impairment of moral integrity, the deep hopelessness that resulted from feeling inextricably entangled.

It was only after I had grasped the significance of neurotic hopelessness that the meaning of sadistic trends finally came into view. These, I now understood, repre[[18]]sented an attempt at restitution through vicarious living, entered upon by a person who despaired of ever being himself. And the all-consuming passion which can so often be observed in sadistic pursuits grew out of such a person's insatiable need for vindictive triumph. It became clear to me then that the need for destructive exploitation was in fact no separate neurotic trend but only a never-failing expression of that more comprehensive whole which for lack of a better term we call sadism.

Thus a theory of neurosis evolved, whose dynamic center is a basic conflict between the attitudes of "moving toward," "moving against," and "moving away from" people. Because of his fear of being split apart on the one hand and the necessity to function as a unity on the other, the neurotic makes desperate attempts at solution. While he can succeed this way in creating a kind of artificial equilibrium, new conflicts are constantly generated and further remedies are continually required to blot them out. Every step in this struggle for unity makes the neurotic more hostile, more helpless, more fearful, more alienated from himself and others, with the result that the difficulties responsible for the conflicts become more acute and their real resolution less and less attainable. He finally becomes hopeless and may try to find a kind of restitution in sadistic pursuits, which in turn have the effect of increasing his hopelessness and creating new conflicts.

This, then, is a fairly dismal picture of neurotic development and its resulting character structure. Why do I nonetheless call my theory a constructive one? In the first place it does away with the unrealistic optimism [[19]] that maintains we can "cure" neuroses by absurdly simple means. But it involves no equally unrealistic pessimism. I call it constructive because it allows us for the first time to tackle and resolve neurotic hopelessness. I call it constructive most of all because in spite of its recognition of the severity of neurotic entanglements, it permits not only a tempering of the underlying conflicts but their actual resolution, and so enables us to work toward a real integration of personality. Neurotic conflicts cannot be resolved by rational decision. The neurotic's attempts at solution are not only futile but harmful. But these conflicts *can* be resolved by changing the conditions within the personality that brought them into being. Every piece of analytical work well done changes these conditions in that it makes a person less helpless, less fearful, less hostile, and less alienated from himself and others.

Freud's pessimism as regards neuroses and their treatment arose from the depths of his disbelief in human goodness and human growth. Man, he postulated, is doomed to suffer or to destroy. The instincts which drive him can only be controlled, or at best "sublimated." My own belief is that man has the capacity as well as the desire to develop his potentialities and become a decent human being, and that these deteriorate if his relationship to others and hence to himself is, and continues to be, disturbed. I believe that man can change and go on changing as long as he lives. And this belief has grown with deeper understanding.

PART I

Neurotic Conflicts and Attempts at Solution

CHAPTER ONE

The Poignancy of Neurotic Conflicts

[[23]]LET ME say to begin with: It is not neurotic to have conflicts. At one time or another our wishes, our interests, our convictions are bound to collide with those of others around us. And just as such clashes between ourselves and our environment are a commonplace, so, too, conflicts within ourselves are an integral part of human life.

An animal's actions are largely determined by instinct. Its mating, its care for its young, its search for food, its defenses against danger are more or less prescribed and beyond individual decision. In contrast, it is the prerogative as well as the burden of human beings to be able to exert choice, to have to make decisions. We may have to decide between desires that lead in opposite directions. We may, for instance, want to be alone but also want to be with a friend; we may want to study medicine but also to study music. Or there may be a conflict between wishes and obligations: we may wish to be with a lover when someone in trouble needs our care. We may be divided between a desire to be in accord with others and a conviction that would entail expressing an opinion antagonistic to them. We may be in conflict, finally, between two sets of values, as occurs when we believe in taking on a hazardous job in wartime but believe also in our duty to our family.

[[24]]The kind, scope, and intensity of such conflicts are largely determined by the civilization in which we live. If the civilization is stable and tradition bound, the variety of choices presenting themselves are limited and the range of possible individual conflicts narrow. Even then they are not lacking. One loyalty may interfere with another; personal desires may stand against obligations to the group. But if the civilization is in a stage of rapid transition, where highly contradictory values and divergent ways of living exist side by side, the choices the individual has to make are manifold and difficult. He can conform to the expectations of the community or be a dissenting individualist, be gregarious or live as a recluse, worship success or despise it, have faith in strict discipline for children or allow them to grow up without much interference; he can believe in a different moral standard for men and women or hold that the same should apply for both, regard sexual relations as an expression of human intimacy or divorce them from ties of affection; he can foster racial discrimination or take the stand that human values are independent of the color of skin or the shape of noses—and so on and so forth.

There is no doubt that choices like these have to be made very often by people living in our civilization, and one would therefore expect conflicts along these lines to be quite common. But the striking fact is that most people are not aware of them, and consequently do not resolve them by any clear decision. More often than not they drift and let themselves be swayed by accident. They do not know where they stand; they make compromises without being aware of doing so; they are in[[25]]volved in contradictions without knowing it. I am referring here to normal persons, meaning neither average nor ideal but merely non-neurotic.

There must, then, be preconditions for recognizing contradictory issues and for making decisions on that basis. These preconditions are fourfold. We must be aware of what our wishes are, or even more, of what our feelings are. Do we really like a person or do we only think we like him because we are supposed to? Are we really sad if a parent dies or do we only go through the motions? Do we really wish to become a lawyer or a doctor or does it merely strike us as a respectable and profitable career? Do we really want our children to be happy and independent or do we only give lip service to the idea? Most of us would find it difficult to answer such simple questions; that is, we do not know what we really feel or want.

Since conflicts often have to do with convictions, beliefs, or moral values, their recognition would presuppose that we have developed our own set of values. Beliefs that are merely taken over and are not a part of us hardly have sufficient strength to lead to conflicts or to serve as a guiding principle in making decisions. When subjected to new influences, such beliefs will easily be abandoned for others. If we simply have adopted values cherished in our environment, conflicts which in our best interest should arise do not arise. If, for instance, a son has never questioned the wisdom of a narrow-minded father, there will be little conflict when the father wants him to enter a profession other than the one he himself prefers. A married man who falls in love

with another woman is actually engaged in [[26]] a conflict; but when he has failed to establish his own convictions about the meaning of marriage he will simply drift along the path of least resistance instead of facing the conflict and making a decision one way or the other.

Even if we recognize a conflict as such, we must be willing and able to renounce one of the two contradictory issues. But the capacity for clear and conscious renunciation is rare, because our feelings and beliefs are muddled, and perhaps because in the last analysis most people are not secure and happy enough to renounce anything.

Finally, to make a decision presupposes the willingness and capacity to assume responsibility for it. This would include the risk of making a wrong decision and the willingness to bear the consequences without blaming others for them. It would involve feeling, "This is my choice, my doing," and presupposes more inner strength and independence than most people apparently have nowadays.

Caught as so many of us are in the strangling grip of conflicts—however unacknowledged—our inclination is to look with envy and admiration on people whose lives seem to flow along smoothly without being disturbed by any of this turbulence. The admiration may be warranted. These may be the strong ones who have established their own hierarchy of values, or who have acquired a measure of serenity because in the course of years conflicts and the need for decision have lost their uprooting power. But the outward appearance may be deceptive. More often, due to apathy, conformity, or opportunism, the people we envy are incapable of truly [[27]]facing a conflict or of truly trying to resolve it on the basis of their own convictions, and consequently have merely drifted or been swayed by immediate advantage.

To experience conflicts knowingly, though it may be distressing, can be an invaluable asset. The more we face our own conflicts and seek out our own solutions, the more inner freedom and strength we will gain. Only when we are willing to bear the brunt can we approximate the ideal of being the captain of our ship. A spurious tranquillity rooted in inner dullness is anything but enviable. It is bound to make us weak and an easy prey to any kind of influence.

When conflicts center about the primary issues of life, it is all the more difficult to face them and resolve them. But provided we are sufficiently alive, there is no reason why in principle we should not be able to do so. Education could do much to help us to live with greater awareness of ourselves and to develop our own convictions. A realization of the significance of the factors involved in choice would give us ideals to strive for, and in that a direction for our lives.[1]

The difficulties always inherent in recognizing and resolving a conflict are immeasurably increased when a person is neurotic. Neurosis, it must be said, is always a matter of degree—and when I speak of "a neurotic" I invariably mean "a person to the extent that he is neurotic." For him awareness of feelings and desires is at a low ebb. Often the only feelings experienced con[[28]]sciously and clearly are reactions of fear and anger to blows dealt to vulnerable spots. And even these may be repressed. Such authentic ideals as do exist are so pervaded by compulsive standards that they are deprived of their power to give direction. Under the sway of these compulsive tendencies the faculty to renounce is rendered impotent, and the capacity to assume responsibility for oneself all but lost.[2]

Neurotic conflicts may be concerned with the same general problems as perplex the normal person. But they are so different in kind that the question has been raised whether it is permissible to use the same term for both. I believe it is, but we must be aware of the differences. What, then, are the characteristics of neurotic conflicts?

A somewhat simplified example by way of illustration: An engineer working in collaboration with others at mechanical research was frequently afflicted by spells of fatigue and irritability. One of these spells was brought about by the following incident. In a discussion of certain technical matters his opinions were less well received than those of his colleagues. Shortly afterward a decision was made in his absence, and no opportunity was given him subsequently to present his suggestions. Under these circumstances, he could have regarded the procedure as unjust and put up a fight, or he could have accepted the majority decision with good grace. Either

---

[1] To normal persons merely dulled by environmental pressures, a book like Harry Emerson Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person* would be of considerable profit.

[2] *Cf.* Chapter 10, Impoverishment of Personality.

reaction would have been consistent. But he did neither. Though he felt deeply slighted, he did not fight. Consciously he was merely aware of being irritated. The murderous rage within him appeared [[29]] only in his dreams. This repressed rage—a composite of his fury against the others and of his fury against himself for his own meekness—was mainly responsible for his fatigue.

His failure to react consistently was determined by a number of factors. He had built up a grandiose image of himself that required deference from others to support it. This was unconscious at the time: he simply acted on the premise that there was nobody as intelligent and competent in his field as he was. Any slight could jeopardize this premise and provoke rage. Furthermore, he had unconscious sadistic impulses to berate and humiliate others—an attitude so objectionable to him that he covered it up by overfriendliness. To this was added an unconscious drive to exploit people, making it imperative for him to keep in their good graces. The dependence on others was aggravated by a compulsive need for approval and affection, combined as it usually is with attitudes of compliance, appeasement, and avoidance of fight. There was thus a conflict between destructive aggressions—reactive rage and sadistic impulses—on the one hand, and on the other the need for affection and approval, with a desire to appear fair and rational in his own eyes. The result was inner upheaval that went unnoticed, while the fatigue that was its external manifestation paralyzed all action.

Looking at the factors involved in the conflict, we are struck first by their absolute incompatibility. It would be difficult indeed to imagine more extreme opposites than lordly demands for deference and ingratiating submissiveness. Second, the whole conflict remains unconscious. The contradictory tendencies operating in it are [[30]] not recognized but are deeply repressed. Only slight bubbles of the battle raging within reach the surface. The emotional factors are rationalized: it is an injustice; it is a slight; my ideas were better. Third, the tendencies in both directions are compulsive. Even if he had some intellectual perception of his excessive demands, or of the existence and the nature of his dependence, he could not change these factors voluntarily. To be able to change them would require considerable analytical work. He was driven on either hand by compelling forces over which he had no control: he could not possibly renounce any of the needs acquired by stringent inner necessity. But none of them represented what he himself really wanted or sought. He would want neither to exploit nor to be submissive; as a matter of fact he despised these tendencies. Such a state of affairs, however, has a far-reaching significance for the understanding of neurotic conflicts. It means that no decision is feasible.

A further illustration presents a similar picture. A free-lance designer was stealing small sums of money from a good friend. The theft was not warranted by the external situation; he needed the money, but the friend would gladly have given it to him as he had on occasion in the past. That he should resort to stealing was particularly striking in that he was a decent fellow who set great store by friendship.

The following conflict was at the bottom of it. The man had a pronounced neurotic need for affection, especially a longing to be taken care of in all practical matters. Alloyed as this was with an unconscious drive to [[31]] exploit others, his technique was to attempt both to endear and intimidate. These tendencies by themselves would have made him willing and eager to receive help and support. But he had also developed an extreme unconscious arrogance which involved a correspondingly vulnerable pride. Others should feel honored to be of service to him: it was humiliating for him to ask for help. His aversion to having to make a request was reinforced by a strong craving for independence and self-sufficiency that made it intolerable for him to admit he needed anything or to place himself under obligation. So he could take, but not receive.

The content of this conflict differs from that of the first example but the essential characteristics are the same. And any other example of neurotic conflict would show a like incompatibility of conflicting drives and their unconscious and compulsive nature, leading always to the impossibility of deciding between the contradictory issues involved.

Allowing for an indistinct line of demarcation, the difference, then, between normal and neurotic conflicts lies fundamentally in the fact that the disparity between the conflicting issues is much less great for the normal person than for the neurotic. The choices the former has to make are between two modes of action, either of which is feasible within the frame of a fairly integrated personality. Graphically speaking, the conflicting directions diverge only 90 degrees or less, as against the possible 180 degrees confronting the neurotic.

In awareness, too, the difference is one of degree. As [[32]]Kierkegaard[3] has pointed out: "Real life is far

---

[3] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death,* Princeton University Press, 1941.

too multifarious to be portrayed by merely exhibiting such abstract contrasts as that between a despair which is completely unconscious, and one which is completely conscious." We can say this much, however: a normal conflict can be entirely conscious; a neurotic conflict in all its essential elements is always unconscious. Even though a normal person may be unaware of his conflict, he can recognize it with comparatively little help, while the essential tendencies producing a neurotic conflict are deeply repressed and can be unearthed only against great resistance.

The normal conflict is concerned with an actual choice between two possibilities, both of which the person finds really desirable, or between convictions, both of which he really values. It is therefore possible for him to arrive at a feasible decision even though it may be hard on him and require a renunciation of some kind. The neurotic person engulfed in a conflict is not free to choose. He is driven by equally compelling forces in opposite directions, neither of which he wants to follow. Hence a decision in the usual sense is impossible. He is stranded, with no way out. The conflict can only be resolved by working at the neurotic trends involved, and by so changing his relations with others and with himself that he can dispense with the trends altogether.

These characteristics account for the poignancy of neurotic conflicts. Not only are they difficult to recognize, not only do they render a person helpless, but they[[33]] have as well a disruptive force of which he has good reason to be afraid. Unless we know these characteristics and keep them in mind, we shall not understand the desperate attempts at solution[4] which the neurotic enters upon, and which constitute the major part of a neurosis.

---

[4] Throughout the text I shall use the term "solve" in connection with the neurotic's attempts to do away with his conflicts. Since he unconsciously denies their existence he does not, strictly speaking, try to "resolve" them. His unconscious efforts are directed toward "solving" his problems.

CHAPTER TWO

The Basic Conflict

[[34]]CONFLICTS play an infinitely greater role in neurosis than is commonly assumed. To detect them, however, is no easy matter—partly because they are essentially unconscious, but even more because the neurotic goes to any length to deny their existence. What, then, are the signals that would warrant us to suspect underlying conflicts? In the examples cited in the previous chapter their presence was indicated by two factors, both fairly obvious. One was the resulting symptoms—fatigue in the first case, stealing in the second. The fact is that every neurotic symptom points to an underlying conflict; that is, every symptom is a more or less direct outgrowth of a conflict. We shall see gradually what unresolved conflicts do to people, how they produce states of anxiety, depression, indecision, inertia, detachment, and so on. An understanding of the causative relation here helps direct our attention from the manifest disturbances to their source—though the exact nature of the source will not be disclosed.

The other signal indicating that conflicts were in operation was inconsistency. In the first example we saw a man convinced of a procedure being wrong and of injustice done him, making no move to protest. In the second a person who highly valued friendship turned to stealing money from a friend. Sometimes the person [[35]] himself will be aware of such inconsistencies; more often he is blind to them even when they are blatantly obvious to an untrained observer.

Inconsistencies are as definite an indication of the presence of conflicts as a rise in body temperature is of physical disturbance. To cite some common ones: A girl wants above all else to marry, yet shrinks from the advances of any man. A mother oversolicitous of her children frequently forgets their birthdays. A person always generous to others is niggardly about small expenditures for himself. Another who longs for solitude never manages to be alone. One forgiving and tolerant toward most people is oversevere and demanding with himself.

Unlike the symptoms, the inconsistencies often permit of tentative assumptions as to the nature of the underlying conflict. An acute depression, for instance, reveals only the fact that a person is caught in a dilemma. But if an apparently devoted mother forgets her children's birthdays, we might be inclined to think that the mother was more devoted to her ideal of being a good mother than to the children themselves. We might also admit the possibility that her ideal collided with an unconscious sadistic tendency to frustrate them.

Sometimes a conflict will appear on the surface—that is, be consciously experienced as such. This would seem to contradict my assertion that neurotic conflicts are unconscious. But actually what appears is a distortion or modification of the real conflict. Thus a person may be torn by a conscious conflict when, in spite of his evasive techniques, well-functioning otherwise, he finds himself confronted with the necessity of making a major de[[36]]cision. He cannot decide now whether to marry this woman or that one or whether to marry at all, whether to take this or that job, whether to retain or dissolve a partnership. He will then go through the greatest torment, shuttling from one opposite to the other, utterly incapable of arriving at any decision. He may in his distress call upon an analyst, expecting him to clarify the particular issues involved. And he will necessarily be disappointed, because the present conflict is merely the point at which the dynamite of inner frictions finally exploded. The particular problem distressing him now cannot be solved without taking the long and tortuous road of recognizing the conflicts hidden beneath it.

In other instances the inner conflict may be externalized and appear in the person's conscious mind as an incompatibility between himself and his environment. Or, finding that seemingly unfounded fears and inhibitions interfere with his wishes, a person may be aware that the crosscurrents within himself issue from deeper sources.

The more knowledge we gain of a person, the better able we are to recognize the conflicting elements that account for the symptoms, inconsistencies, and surface conflicts—and, we must add, the more confusing becomes the picture, through the number and variety of contradictions. So we are led to ask: Can there be a

basic conflict underlying all these particular conflicts and originally responsible for all of them? Can one picture the structure of conflict in terms, say, of an incompatible marriage, where an endless variety of apparently unrelated disagreements and rows over friends, [[37]] children, finances, mealtimes, servants, all point to some fundamental disharmony in the relationship itself?

A belief in a basic conflict within the human personality is ancient and plays a prominent role in various religions and philosophies. The powers of light and darkness, of God and the devil, of good and evil are some of the ways in which this belief has been expressed. In modern psychology, Freud, on this score as on so many others, has done pioneer work. His first assumption was that the basic conflict is one between our instinctual drives, with their blind urge for satisfaction, and the forbidding environment—family and society. The forbidding environment is internalized at an early age and appears from then on as the forbidding superego.

It is hardly appropriate here to discuss this concept with the seriousness it deserves. That would require a recapitulation of all the arguments that have been raised against the libido theory. Let us try rather to understand the meaning of the concept itself, even if we discard Freud's theoretical premises. What remains, then, is the contention that the opposition between primitive egocentric drives and our forbidding conscience is the basic source of our manifold conflicts. As will be seen later, I, too, attribute to this opposition —or what is roughly comparable to it in my way of thinking—a significant place in the structure of neuroses. What I dispute is its basic nature. My belief is that though it is a major conflict, it is secondary and arises of necessity during the development of a neurosis.

The reasons for this refutation will become apparent [[38]]later on. Just this one argument here: I do not believe that any conflict between desires and fears could ever account for the extent to which a neurotic is divided within himself and for an outcome so detrimental that it can actually ruin a person's life. A psychic situation such as Freud postulates would imply that a neurotic retains the capacity to strive for something wholeheartedly, that he merely is frustrated in these strivings by the blocking action of fears. As I see it, the source of the conflict revolves around the neurotic's loss of capacity to wish for anything wholeheartedly because his very wishes are divided, that is, go in opposite directions.[1] This would constitute a much more serious condition indeed than the one Freud visualized.

In spite of the fact that I consider the fundamental conflict more disruptive than Freud does, my view of the possibility of an eventual solution is more positive than his. According to Freud, the basic conflict is universal and in principle cannot be resolved: all that can be done is to arrive at better compromises or at better control. According to my view, the basic neurotic conflict does not necessarily have to arise in the first place and is possible of resolution if it does arise—provided the sufferer is willing to undergo the considerable effort and hardship involved. This difference is not a matter of optimism or pessimism but inevitably results from the difference in our premises.

Freud's later answer to the question of a basic conflict is philosophically quite appealing. Again setting [[39]] aside the various implications of his line of thought, his theory of a "life" and "death" instinct boils down to a conflict between constructive and destructive forces in human beings. Freud himself was less interested in bringing this concept to bear on conflicts than he was in the way the two forces are alloyed. He saw the possibility, for instance, of explaining masochistic and sadistic drives as a fusion between sexual and destructive instincts.

To apply this concept to the study of conflicts would have required the introduction of moral values. These, however, were to Freud illicit intruders in the realm of science. In line with his convictions, he strove to develop a psychology devoid of moral values. I believe that this very attempt to be "scientific" in the sense of the natural sciences is one of the more cogent reasons why Freud's theories and the therapy based on them are confined within too narrow channels. More specifically, it seems to have contributed to his failure to appreciate the role of conflicts in neurosis, despite his extensive work in this field.

Jung also placed considerable emphasis on the opposing tendencies in human beings. Indeed he was so impressed with the contradictions at work in the individual that he took it to be a general law that the presence of any element would of necessity indicate the presence also of its opposite. An outward femininity implied an inward masculinity; a surface extraversion, a concealed introversion; an outward preponderance of thinking and

---

[1] *Cf.* Franz Alexander, "The Relation of Structural and Instinctual Conflicts," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly,* Vol. XI, No. 2, April, 1933.

reasoning, an inner preponderance of feeling, and so on. Up to this point it would appear that Jung regarded conflicts as an essential feature of neu[[40]]rosis. However, he goes on to say that these opposites are not conflicting but complementary—the goal is to accept both and thereby approximate the ideal of wholeness. To him the neurotic is a person who has been stranded in a one-sided development. Jung formulated these concepts in what he called the law of complements. Now I, too, recognize that the opposing tendencies contain complementary elements neither of which can be dispensed with in an integrated personality. But in my opinion these are already outgrowths of neurotic conflicts and are so tenaciously adhered to because they represent attempts at solution. If, for instance, we regard a tendency toward being introspective, withdrawn, more concerned with one's own feelings, thoughts, or imagination than with other persons' as an authentic inclination—that is, constitutionally established and reinforced by experience—then Jung's reasoning would be correct. The effective therapeutic procedure would be to show the person his hidden "extravert" tendencies, to point out the dangers of one-sidedness in either direction, and encourage him to accept and live out both tendencies. If, however, we look upon introversion (or, as I prefer to call it, neurotic detachment) as a means of evading conflicts that arise in close contact with others, the task is not to encourage more extraversion but to analyze the underlying conflicts. The goal of wholeheartedness can be approximated only after these have been resolved.

Proceeding now to evolve my own position, I see the basic conflict of the neurotic in the fundamentally contradictory attitudes he has acquired toward other per[[41]]sons. Before going into detail, let me call attention to the dramatization of such a contradiction in the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. We see him on the one hand delicate, sensitive, sympathetic, helpful, and on the other brutal, callous, and egotistical. I do not, of course, mean to imply that neurotic division always adheres to the precise line of this story, but merely to point to a vivid expression of basic incompatibility of attitudes in relation to others.

To approach the problem genetically we must go back to what I have called basic anxiety,[2] meaning by this the feeling a child has of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world. A wide range of adverse factors in the environment can produce this insecurity in a child: direct or indirect domination, indifference, erratic behavior, lack of respect for the child's individual needs, lack of real guidance, disparaging attitudes, too much admiration or the absence of it, lack of reliable warmth, having to take sides in parental disagreements, too much or too little responsibility, over-protection, isolation from other children, injustice, discrimination, unkept promises, hostile atmosphere, and so on and so on.

The only factor to which I should like to draw special attention in this context is the child's sense of lurking hypocrisy in the environment: his feeling that the parents' love, their Christian charity, honesty, generosity, and so on may be only pretense. Part of what the child feels on this score is really hypocrisy; but some of it may be just his reaction to all the contradictions he[[42]] senses in the parents' behavior. Usually, however, there is a combination of cramping factors. They may be out in the open or quite hidden, so that in analysis one can only gradually recognize these influences on the child's development.

Harassed by these disturbing conditions, the child gropes for ways to keep going, ways to cope with this menacing world. Despite his own weakness and fears he unconsciously shapes his tactics to meet the particular forces operating in his environment. In doing so, he develops not only *ad hoc* strategies but lasting character trends which become part of his personality. I have called these "neurotic trends."

If we want to see how conflicts develop, we must not focus too sharply on the individual trends but rather take a panoramic view of the main directions in which a child can and does move under these circumstances. Though we lose sight for a while of details we shall gain a clearer perspective of the essential moves made to cope with the environment. At first a rather chaotic picture may present itself, but out of it in time three main lines crystallize: a child can move *toward* people, *against* them, or *away from* them.

When moving *toward* people he accepts his own helplessness, and in spite of his estrangement and fears tries to win the affection of others and to lean on them. Only in this way can he feel safe with them. If there are dissenting parties in the family, he will attach himself to the most powerful person or group. By complying with them, he gains a feeling of belonging and support which makes him feel less weak and less isolated.

When he moves *against* people he accepts and takes[[43]] for granted the hostility around him, and

---

[2] Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time,* W. W. Norton, 1937.

determines, consciously or unconsciously, to fight. He implicitly distrusts the feelings and intentions of others toward himself. He rebels in whatever ways are open to him. He wants to be the stronger and defeat them, partly for his own protection, partly for revenge.

When he moves *away from* people he wants neither to belong nor to fight, but keeps apart. He feels he has not much in common with them, they do not understand him anyhow. He builds up a world of his own— with nature, with his dolls, his books, his dreams.

In each of these three attitudes, one of the elements involved in basic anxiety is overemphasized: helplessness in the first, hostility in the second, and isolation in the third. But the fact is that the child cannot make any one of these moves wholeheartedly, because under the conditions in which the attitudes develop, all are bound to be present. What we have seen from our panoramic view is only the predominant move.

That this is so will become evident if we jump ahead now to the fully developed neurosis. We all know adults in whom one of the attitudes we have sketched stands out. But we can see, too, that his other tendencies have not ceased to operate. In a predominantly leaning and complying type we can observe aggressive propensities and some need for detachment. A predominantly hostile person has a compliant strain and needs detachment too. And a detached personality is not without hostility or a desire for affection.

The predominant attitude, however, is the one that most strongly determines actual conduct. It represents those ways and means of coping with others in which[[44]] the particular person feels most at home. Thus a detached person will as a matter of course use all the unconscious techniques for keeping others at a safe distance because he feels at a loss in any situation that requires close association with them. Moreover, the ascendant attitude is often but not always the one most acceptable to the person's conscious mind.

This does not mean that the less conspicuous attitudes are less powerful. It would often be difficult to say, for instance, whether in an apparently dependent, compliant person the wish to dominate is of inferior intensity to the need for affection; his ways of expressing his aggressive impulses are merely more indirect. That the potency of the submerged tendencies may be very great is evidenced by the many instances in which the attitude accorded predominance is reversed. We can see such reversal in children, but it occurs in later life as well. Strickland in Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* would be a good illustration. Case histories of women often reveal this kind of change. A girl formerly tomboyish, ambitious, rebellious, when she falls in love may turn into a compliant, dependent woman, apparently without ambition. Or, under pressure of crushing experiences, a detached person may become morbidly dependent.

Changes like these, it should be added, throw some light on the frequent question whether later experience counts for nothing, whether we are definitely channeled, conditioned once and for all, by our childhood situation. Looking at neurotic development from the point of view of conflicts enables us to give a more adequate answer than is usually offered. These are the possibili[[45]]ties: If the early situation is not too prohibitive of spontaneous growth, later experiences, particularly in adolescence, can have a molding influence. If, however, the impact of early experiences has been powerful enough to have molded the child to a rigid pattern, no new experience will be able to break through. In part this is because his rigidity does not leave him open to any new experience: his detachment, for instance, may be too great to permit of anyone's coming close to him, or his dependence so deep-rooted that he is forced always to play a subordinate role and invite exploitation. In part it is because he will interpret any new experience in the language of his established pattern: the aggressive type, for instance, meeting with friendliness, will view it either as a manifestation of stupidity or an attempt to exploit him; the new experience will tend only to reinforce the old pattern. When a neurotic does adopt a different attitude it may look as if later experiences had brought about a change in personality. However, the change is not as radical as it appears. Actually what has happened is that combined internal and external pressures have forced him to abandon his predominant attitude in favor of the other extreme—but this change would not have taken place if there had been no conflicts to begin with.

From the point of view of the normal person there is no reason why the three attitudes should be mutually exclusive. One should be capable of giving in to others, of fighting, and of keeping to oneself. The three can complement each other and make for a harmonious [[46]]whole. If one predominates, it merely indicates an overdevelopment along one line.

But in neurosis there are several reasons why these attitudes are irreconcilable. The neurotic is not flexible; he is driven to comply, to fight, to be aloof, regardless of whether the move is appropriate in the particular

circumstance, and he is thrown into a panic if he behaves otherwise. Hence when all three attitudes are present in any strong degree, he is bound to be caught in a severe conflict.

Another factor, and one that considerably widens the scope of the conflict, is that the attitudes do not remain restricted to the area of human relationships but gradually pervade the entire personality, as a malignant tumor pervades the whole organic tissue. They end by encompassing not only the person's relation to others but also his relation to himself and to life in general. If we are not fully aware of this all-embracing character, the temptation is to think of the resulting conflict in categorical terms, like love *versus* hate, compliance *versus* defiance, submissiveness *versus* domination, and so on. That, however, would be as misleading as to distinguish fascism from democracy by focusing on any single opposing feature, such as their difference in approach to religion or power. These are differences certainly, but exclusive emphasis upon them would serve to obscure the point that democracy and fascism are worlds apart and represent two philosophies of life entirely incompatible with each other.

It is not accidental that a conflict that starts with our relation to others in time affects the whole personality. Human relationships are so crucial that they are bound [[47]]to mold the qualities we develop, the goals we set for ourselves, the values we believe in. All these in turn react upon our relations with others and so are inextricably interwoven.[3]

My contention is that the conflict born of incompatible attitudes constitutes the core of neurosis and therefore deserves to be called *basic.* And let me add that I use the term *core* not merely in the figurative sense of its being significant but to emphasize the fact that it is the dynamic center from which neuroses emanate. This contention is the nucleus of a new theory of neurosis whose implications will become apparent in what follows. Broadly considered, the theory may be viewed as an elaboration of my earlier concept that neuroses are an expression of a disturbance in human relationships.[4]

---

[3] Since the relation to others and the attitude toward the self cannot be separated from one another, the contention occasionally to be found in psychiatric publications, that one or the other of these is the most important factor in theory and practice, is not tenable.
[4] This concept was first presented in The Neurotic Personality of Our Time and elaborated in New Ways in Psychoanalysis and Self-Analysis.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- ➤ HTML (Free /Available to everyone)

- ➤ PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)

- ➤ Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below