

IDENTIFICATION: A METAPSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING
of
ITS GENESIS

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The process of identification first achieves prominence as a major psychological concept with Sigmund Freud's contextual enunciation of the phenomenon in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," written in 1917. In dealing with problems of severe depression in some of his patients, he refers to the process as a triphasic early childhood development involving, (1) fusion of ego and object; (2) splitting away of object from ego and the resultant attachment of libido to the lost object; and (3) abandonment of father as sexual object, acceptance of the mother as such, and the reinforcement of the earlier identification with the father, accompanied by ambivalent feelings of love and hostility toward him.

It becomes clear from Freud's theories as developed later in his writings, as well as in current theories which are either at variance or in apposition, that identification is a mechanism of defense, developmental in character, and is utilized as an alternative in the absence of other means of defense. In the various transformation of the concept implicit in Freudian and current thinking, very little has been added concerning the psychogenesis of the process along evolutionary lines, nor have acceptable inferences been drawn regarding Freud's early allusions and later conclusions which are in conflict with each other. Taking into account his own emendations to the theory as related to sexuality, an amplification of his thinking can yield the following conclusions:

I. The process of identification has primitive beginnings and evolves developmentally as a product of some archetype, antedating sex differentiation.

II. This primitive evolutionary process finds its expression in metachrosis and mimicry as the earliest prototype of identification operating on a simple libidinal plane.

III. The libidinal method of performance remains as a phylogenetic heritage in all creatures to operate various relationships and functions of which sexual ones are only a part. It is indispensable to this line of reasoning that the dichotomous nature of primal libido and sexual libido be recognized.

IV. Identification can only be defensive in character and finds its etiology in object loss, but this object loss is not a differentiated sexual one. Instead it functions within the spectrum of primal libidinal relationships which are ubiquitous and perdurable.

The Freudian hypothesis concerning the two major instincts, Eros and Death, appears to be the logical point of departure in the establishment of its history. These two instincts find their manifestation in the anabolic and catabolic forces functioning in conflict with each other, from which emerge the various mechanisms for the survival or defense of living organisms, namely the instrumentalities for attack, fugue and neutralization. If the psychological concepts of projection, compulsion and identification are superimposed upon these three as equivalents, insight may be gained concerning their relatedness. Projection would correspond with attack, or extrojection of inherent death trends on to the external world. The organism which for any reason finds this

function impossible, can adopt the second alternative of fugue, or withdrawal. This would correspond with compulsion in the sense that flight would become a compelling imperative. However, if an organism is unable to avail itself of both prerogatives, it may be forced to the third line of defense by virtue of its proneness. It then attempts to neutralize or identify with the threatening condition in a diffuse or undifferentiated way by a partial introjection of significant traits or qualities present in the object or medium. In brief, it attempts to alter itself after some perceived or felt attribute, in the unconscious belief that it is in this manner vitiating the force of the threat.

It thus appears that these three principles of attack, fugue and neutralization find their analogous counterparts in human development as projection, compulsion and identification, but on a higher and more complex plane.