

A FEW GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF THRESHOLD AND HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS*

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The history of mankind is literally overrun with appalling reports of man's variform destructive drives directed against his fellow-creatures, but history has also recorded man's struggle to control this destructiveness. The notion of an 'original evil' was synthesized in our Jewish-Christian occidental culture; so that the strife between 'right' and the 'original evil' has proved fundamental ever since. The goal of the child's whole education for the process of socialization has been, then, to control and derive benefit from his instinctual drives which constitute the raw material for this 'original evil' of the religious thought. Thus, utopically, culture, should be the modeling , tool for instinctual drives. However according to Freud (1930), culture, has gradually and as yet inexorably, intensified the pain and stress born from instinctive repression, which may be encompassed within the so-called 'civilization discontents'. Unquestionably so, the idea of 'good' has its strongest supporters, in the, deferred pleasure of the, motives of the ego, through the adequate, sociosyntonic relinquishment and taming of the instinctual drives, to the advantage of man's creativity, of comfort, and of the subtle regulation of 'group ethic'. I consider culture as the grouping of organized institutions with some stability.

Particularly outstanding are those Law and Government institutions that contain such 'group ethics'. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the concept that remains fundamental is that culture has failed to constitute a source of happiness for the great majority of men. And, what is even worse, it seems as though technology has fostered the cruelty and dominion of some groups over others - a situation highly reminiscent of the first anthropoid hordes. I will later deal with these generalizations concerning the history of the species, but we must first deal with an almost insurmountable obstacle, which can only be coped with through a side, issue: the historic epoch is only a few thousand years old - an insignificant figure in the evolution of the species; whereas the age of relative statistic accuracy amounts to only a handful of decades. Therefore, I think we must acknowledge, though only to a certain extent, the usefulness of conjectures.

As psychoanalysts, we are able to study the subtleties of those individuals undergoing treatment, but we believe that we can collaborate to attain a better understanding of the man being's intraspecific destructiveness, if we explain metpsychologically and more exhaustively the interaction between the culture-society

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complex and individuals, thus providing material for psychoanalytic studies of the Social Change. But here again, we must face another problem: the conceptual obstacle inherent to each particular science. However, we cannot cope with this obstacle, even indirectly without isolating the psychoanalytic theory. In order to abate, the difficulties of this conceptual obstacle, we can make valid analogies which may lead us to 'bridge concepts', for "these can be used as inductive arguments, to suggest hypotheses... due to the relevance of similar aspects or phenomena. "Analogy in Science". Enc. Brit. 1962, p. 863-864)

Since this is a very general paper, which can only attempt to point out the advantages in the use of the 'bridge concept' of threshold, it appears as inevitable that we should make use of conjectures and analogies, in the sense, defined above. With a starting point in clinical cases, I would like to present two brief vignettes from the analytic material of a couple of patients:

A young activist student communicated during a session "Yesterday, there was a stormy political meeting at the Strike Committee quarters, where radicalism in the various sectors was unusually marked, because it was all about the way we've been provoked to have a face to face confrontation with the troops... Well...you know, every time we have meetings like this one, I feel terribly anguished and I simply can't decide what side I ought to take. For, in these occasions, I feel that everybody has the right answer and a good share of the truth in Social Change...I don't fancy myself a coward, though...but I couldn't say I've acted the hero's role, either. Yesterday, however, at such an open incitement from the army, I felt one with those who long for a final confrontation that releases this strain, at all costs..." After giving further details, he proceeded, "Then, there's this dream, and this "completely new sensation"... (the dream)

I was walking alone through dim corridors at the University. I could perceive all my sensations with a great degree of accuracy, and I could also hear my own footsteps distinctly, and the click from the light switches I kept turning on as I walked. I finally reached yard –like the one at home when I was a child –, where I could see a ping-pong table ready for a match, but there was no opponent... I hear steps, and fear starts creeping inside me because I somehow know it's one of my elder uncles, who used to abuse me when I was a little brat... and yes, it is he, he standing in the dim light. Feeling tense all over, 1 step forward so I can speak to him; I see all of his face now, he is smiling; and then we start playing fiercely... I feel relieved because, he has approached me as the friend he is now and not as the enemy he used to be when I was, a child... (the 'new sensation') At this moment I woke up, and then got up to have a glass of water and to piss. It made me laugh, hearing the click when I turned on the light, because it was just like my dream. As I walked into the bathroom, for an instant, I experienced again the same kind of fear I had had in my dream, next I would be coming across one of those uncles... But, all of a sudden, all my fears vanished. I started laughing, and for the first time, I felt that this dream belonged exclusively to the past nothing to do with this

present, difficult situation of the student movement, where one must, take serious decisions...I had a complete new sensation for me that never again would I be subject to the same kind of fear..."

From that time on, the behavior of this young 'rebel', both at the meetings of the student movement, as well as in his daily life, became far more "rational" -in the sense described by Hartmann (1947)-, a behavior that is basically referred to a greater autonomy of the ego.

The second vignette is even shorter: During her sessions, a young woman used to indulge in expiatory self-punishment for the violent punishments that she inflicted upon her infant children. She had already acquired some insight into the mechanism of identification with infantile aggressors, and also, at this time, she was in the process of realizing its transference repetition. In one session she reported: "I felt a very peculiar kind of horror at the sight of unspeakable fear drawn in the face of my little daughter, whom I was punishing just then..." Her self-reproaches were, less insistent or violent this time; then she added: "It was as if a new strength had been stirred up in me, which prevented me from going on beating her...Doctor, I must keep this inner bridle that thwarts my aggression..." Shortly after, she reported having "discovered the pleasure of new games with her children".

We may also observe the presence of this 'new barrier' not only as concerned to those conflicts with the aggressive impulses which are at the roots of destructive behavior, but also as related to partial ambivalent sexual impulses. For instance, and for generalization purposes only, a homosexual initiated his shift of object with a "new and intense feeling of nausea" for the anal region of the partenaire; this feeling of nausea was experienced by the patient during intercourse, in which he suffered from impotency previous to penetration.

The clinical material taken, both from the young rebel, as from the young woman, may be 'macroscopically' grasped as changes in the ego due to insight. It would be very expedient though unfortunately, this is not the right place, or moment- to draw a model of a 'microscopic' analysis of the process of insight, as Rangell (1969), does of the 'intrapsychic conflict', from a unified psychobiological theory of anxiety, leading to the symptom formation. Rangell (p.65), presents "a psychoanalytic model of the intrapsychic sequential chain of events which occurs between stimulus and response with the disruption of structural equilibrium."(Italics mine). I consider it fundamental to attempt a study of what there is inside that 'leap' from stimulus to response, as we shall later see in the operative definition of threshold.

Deutsch (1959), quotes Freud's famous phrase, which is the title of his book On the Mysterious Leap from the Mind to the Body a book in which there are important contributions to the study of conversion, and which makes some references to the concept

of threshold. Rangell refers to this same 'leap' as a challenge to our own theoretical interests.

The vignettes I have presented show the process of 'structural reconstruction', though, of course, we can ways recall instances tending to the opposite direction. That I actually mean to show in this paper is the operative ness of the 'bridge concept' of 'threshold variation with structural modifications'. I shall now proceed to give a fairly detailed outline of 'sequential change': the therapeutic alliance of the analytic situation allows regression at the service of the ego. This implies threshold abatement and disruptions, particularly those related to defenses and affects. In this way, reverberating cycles of stimuli begin, with disrupted thresholds in different areas of the structure. These inner reverberations increase the probability for the coming into scene of engrams stimuli 'infantile traumatic situations' which constitute some of the basic ingredients for the process, of insight. Through the transference object cathexis, which turn the analyst into a very peculiar intermediary object, the links with reality are, nonetheless,, kept as a basis for regulation and autonomy. The links with reality, and particularly scanning functions are manifest in my patients for the keenness of their perception. I studied (1965), in patients; this capacity for traumatic memory recovery through deep analytic regression; these studies were carried. out experimentally, in prolonged sessions, with early orphans. It is precisely at this moment of confluence of stimuli that the optimal conditions are set for the re-structuring, of new thresholds with another hierarchy of structural organization. This new organization may be experienced, as my patients did, as 'new controls for aggressive drives'.

The time has now come for me to talk about the concept of threshold. With Dorland (1966), I will define it operatively as "the stage in the scale of stimulus-response reactions in which there appears, a change in the response". This term is continuously used in Neurophysiology, and is a fundamental theoretical device for the first level of abstraction because of its accessibility for quantification. It is linked to the control of the dependent variables of almost any experimental design, while its statistic significance in sufficient for subsequent hypotheses.

In the analytic theory since the appearance of the classical concept of stimuli protecting apparatus, the term threshold has remained implicit in the processes of senso-perception and in the motor and affective discharges. Freud (1920 p.8-9), when quoting Fechner, says that between "qualitative thresholds of pleasure and unpleasure, there is a margin of aesthetic (in the old sense, related to sensation or perception) indifference". The structural theory has dealt with this concept more explicitly. Rapaport (1956) , considerers that the threshold apparatus of impulse and affective discharge are among "the apparatus of the ego's primary autonomy...congenitally acquired as evolutive givens" (Italics mine). Hartmann (1951),points them out as the main guarantees of organism's adaptability to its environment. Mental structures stability, their growth-and autonomy which maintain an optimal hierarchization (does, this not have the familiar ring of the neurophysiological, language?) , are all founded upon stimuli as their nourishment

(Piaget 1954 and Erikson 1956). It seems to me therein implicit that they are the apparatus of threshold in their congenital basis with those modifications apprehended during the developmental interaction, the periphery microstructures of the more abiding organizations which are in charge of cathexis regulation.

This bibliographical scrutiny has been useful to emphasize the operationality of the 'bridge concept' of threshold with other sciences, that are providing more and more data towards the understanding of human intraspecific destructive behavior. But I would not like to finish this part without laying special emphasis on the ideas of Beres (1965), and Lamp de Groot (1960), which also serve as 'bridge concepts', concerning the superego formation and the relative autonomy of the ego. Both, Beres and Lamp de Groot, concur in the convenience of keeping asunder the precursors of the superego, particularly the libidinal nuclei of the ego-ideal, of the more abiding, structure with more restrictive functions, and which contains the 'group ethics'. In a paper on the protest phenomenon (1969), I explained how the affiliation of the groups of protest to doctrines like Marcuse's (1953, 1968, 1969), philosophy of alienation-liberation may be traced to the evocation of those libidinal nuclei of the ego-ideal, to which Beres and Lamp de Groot refer. These are organized before the oedipal superego. The Marcusean 'possible utopia' contains the longing for libidinal reorganization in a more stable world, where stimuli may be slower, where there may be less contingencies that disrupt protecting thresholds, which may trigger emergent reactive chains. Under these circumstances, stimuli are used as a projection screen which is hardly rectifiable. The threshold reorganization in structures of lower hierarchy and autonomy is more frequent in these juvenile phenomena than it is with higher autonomy and hierarchy structures. This reorganization depends, to a certain extent, on the leader qualities, due to the well-known group repressions and identification with him, which Freud (1913, 1921, 1927), examined from different angles in his classical papers with sociological orientation. If the psychoanalytic theory is to attain the rank of general psychology, we must find 'bridge concepts' with other sciences, and study those 'leaps' in theories. The usefulness of this 'bridge' with neurophysiology and its derivative disciplines is self-evident from the very source of the term. The same holds true concerning cybernetic, since the terms threshold, charge variance and electrical resistance are, in a sense, akin.

However, I still doubt whether threshold is the correct term for what I have been dealing with, or whether I should have simply emphasized that of 'moments of change' in a more general way. In any observation of a given series of 'dynamic' phenomena, the 'moments of change' may be focused in the series; however, the analogical capacity of this term is poor because of its intrinsic vagueness. When going from simple common sense to the theoretical organization of the scientific method (Bunge, 1962), it is advisable to reach a second level of measurement. The first is a plain, comparative grouping of facts. The second allows for a certain measurement with fixed patterns, because the experimental design moves from the group towards the intervals among the different integrals. Perhaps it was this greater accuracy that drove me to choose the concept of 'threshold variation'.

If we want to go 'beyond the theory of instincts' in order to go deep into the biological bases of human intraspecific destructiveness, we must resort to ethology. There are several fruitful examples in that direction: Carthy and Ebling (1964), Lorenz (1966), and Storr (1968). Ostow (1960), pertinently remarks on the danger and advances of analogies between ethology and psychoanalysis.

It is still operative in psychoanalysis to speak of two kinds of instinctual drives: the sexual and the aggressive, ones. However, this does not mean that there exist two kinds of physical or mental energy. I do not want to engage myself in a long discussion of the instinctive dualism, or whether the death instinct (Freud, 1920), is a 'personification' of the second law of thermodynamics; my sole intention here is to show two brief examples of the use of the 'bridge concept' of threshold as related to the ethologists' findings. For Tinbergen (1951), the animal instinctive behavior is developed by stages, a concept that is deepened by Lorenz (1966), with his concepts of ritualization. Through the development of their ideas, both imply the hierarchization of threshold a in series of stimuli-response. Ritualization is the principal mechanism for the control of intraspecific aggression. Incidentally, let us recall the, 'ritualized game' in the young rebel's dream, as well as the young woman's discovery of new games. Lorenz (1966) compares the animal ritualization with the rise of human ethic controls, due to their independence from the most primary sources of the animal behavior, specially in predators. For the organization of rituals, perception is essential, a perception that matures the evolutive givens or that is rigidly fixed in the imprintings. Godall's (1963, 1965, 1967), sharp, patient field observations of chimpanzees make us concur with Ardrey (1970) in the importance of facial perception among all the members' of a group. This recognition is indispensable for the appearance of the ritualization that inhibits aggressive discharges. Let us remember, once more, all the many and keen perceptions of my patients during those optimal moments of change.

Erikson's (1968), concept of 'human subspecies' must incite us to a more systematic study of the extremely destructive 'paranoid overadaptation' of some human groups over others. The struggle to turn the scale for the 'good' of the ego must continue. Psychoanalysis may keep its position at the cross-roads of Man's Sciences, if only we, can manage to render our theory more agile and simple, thus preventing the possible development of a 'scientific subspecies'.

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