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The Stepchild of Psychoanalysis, Adolescence

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Abstract

Dr. Louise Kaplan contributes here her thoughts on "the stepchild" of psychoanalysis--adolescence, an area in which she is a specialist and which is the topic of one of her many books, Adolescence: The Farewell to Childhood (1984). Originally delivered as the Anna Freud Commemorative Address for 1986 to the New York Freudian Society, Dr. Kaplan's article builds on Anna Freud's unique experience of the "intolerant" ego of the adolescent and is a contemporary reworking to which she brings her own original interpretation and experience. By using clinical examples, she shows how historical insights combine with contemporary therapeutic preoccupations and critical tensions to forge future directions in treatment of the sexual and moral transformations of adolescence.

The occasion of Anna Freud's Centenary provides an opportunity to elucidate further a few ideas about that stepchild of psychoanalysis, adolescence.¹ There is a decided tension between my own interpretations of adolescence and some of those of Anna Freud. However, as I began to review her papers on adolescence, it became clear that these tensions were also reflections of the expectable theoretical tensions between the ego and the id, the social and the biological, rational life and instinctual life, moral life and sexual life--tensions peculiar to and expressive of the richness of the psychoanalytic vision of the human mind. I know that it will be occurring to the reader that the classification--social, rational, moral, ego on the one side with the biological, instinctual, sexual, id on the other--while capturing something important about the way we think of the mental life, also overlooks other matters equally crucial to development and experience. These days, in theory at least, we always keep in mind the mutual influences of ego and id.

Even before he began to explore these mutualities, Heinz [End Page 257] Hartmann (1964 [1934]) lamented those readings of psychoanalysis that portrayed the id as the representative of what was innate and biological and the ego as the outcome and agency of social, non-biological forces. The dangers of such dichotomization are twofold. During those eras when the biological is idealized, then, as Hartmann puts it, "we worship instinct and pour scorn on reason" (9). For the contrasting position, Hartmann cautions that the most

rational attitude is not necessarily the most adaptive. The ego, with its synthesizing and organizing functions equips the human being with "a very highly differentiated organ of adaptation which by itself is incapable of guaranteeing adaptation. . . . A more primitive system is needed to supplement it" (13). In fact, every now and again, in the interests of psychic economy, securing pleasure, or advancing developmental issues, the ego will induce a giving up of its most differentiated functions.

Adolescence is one of those times when developmental issues are advanced by a temporary relinquishment of differentiation. In order for sexuality and morality to attain optimal maturity, the hard won emotional and intellectual differentiations of latency must be undone. I suspect, however, that the ego is not so entirely in command of this relinquishment of differentiation as Hartmann's remarks would suggest.

From its inception psychoanalysis has shifted between two attitudes toward the dynamic interplay of sexuality and morality. The more conventional psychoanalytic attitude maintains that the moral sense flourishes during latency because during those years the child is relatively untroubled by the urgency of sexuality. The deferment of biological maturity allows the human child to acquire the rudiments of civilization before the eruption of genitality and the subsequent demands of family life and reproduction. However, it also has been central to psychoanalytic interests to question whether the moral forces which are synonymous with civilization necessarily be constructed at the cost of sexuality. An inherent pathogenic antagonism between the two is not an assumption of psychoanalysis.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Sigmund Freud (1905) starts out by consenting to the idea that psychoanalysts **[End Page 258]** were united with educators and other representatives of the authority of the social order in thinking and acting as though sexual activity would make a child ineducable. But he then comments on the limitations of that point of view. He says of the educators: "They stigmatize every sexual manifestation by children as a 'vice,' without being able to do much against it" (179). Basically, Freud is convinced that the dread of infantile sexuality would not get the psychoanalyst or the educator very far. In the place of dread, Freud proposes some enlightenment. A guiding theme of each of the three essays is to examine the nature of the component sexual instincts and to understand the processes by which the energy of these sexual impulses might be diverted from manifestly sexual activities toward moral and cultural ends. He speaks, in that connection, of sublimation and of what he then thought of as a subspecies of sublimation, reaction formation. It is entirely legitimate to continue to regard sublimation as expressive of Freud's general idea that the human mind is enriched as well as burdened by the drives. In that fundamental sense, every instance of upheaval in the economy of libido can be considered an opportunity for moral transformation.

The tenor of Freud's proposals on the relationship between sexuality and moral enlightenment is first suggested in his study of "Little Hans." He (1909) points out that when education had set itself the task of controlling or suppressing the instincts the results had been far from gratifying and rarely successful. Moreover, there had been a failure to inquire into the emotional costs of such suppression of the "inconvenient instincts." The educators and social reformers would do better, suggests Freud, if they would substitute for suppression other aims. He recommends that they address their efforts instead to helping an individual become a useful member of society with as little sacrifice of personal liberty as possible.

Expectably, the early readers of Freud misconstrued his daring proposal for child upbringing. Social philosophers, particularly the ardent proponents and the equally ardent opponents of progressive education, saw in Freud's attempt to reconcile the instinctual life with the demands of civilization a license for free impulse expression in the classroom. It fell to **[End Page 259]** Anna Freud to restore order to the classroom and respectability to the reputation of psychoanalysis.

By the early 1930s, she was able to enlist her appreciation of the ego's mechanisms of defence in these restorations. For Anna Freud (1966 [1936]), the most exciting applications of psychoanalysis to classroom life were based on her father's idea of making friends with the instinctual impulses in order to divert them to the aims of civilization. In 1976, she recaptured the spirit of those pioneering days when she and her co-workers devoted themselves to applying that psychoanalytic principle to the education of the latency-age child. The buoyancy and optimism of her original experience is clearly discernible in her later reminiscence when she writes that "there was hardly a school subject which we did not learn to harness to one or the other of the children's instinctual or emotional concerns so that it could profit from drive energies transferred to it" (310). She further states:

Seen in these terms by us teachers, the whole curriculum became a challenge, an attempt to tap and divert the drive energies underlying the child's private fantasy world, thereby to ban dullness, boredom, and learning by rote from our programs. What we strove to do was to turn what had formerly been chores into exciting adventures for the child. (310)

Confronted with the onslaught of the instinctual upsurges of puberty, Anna Freud became decidedly less friendly and much less willing to make alliances with the instinctual drives. The chapter on "The Ego and the Id at Puberty" (1966 [1936]) is a vivid saga of the struggles of the ego to master the tensions and pressures arising from the drive derivatives, and the effects of these struggles on character formation.

Anna Freud portrays these matters in the terminology of warfare. The ego enters into a struggle for survival. All the available methods of defense are brought into play and strained to the utmost. The inner conflicts between the id and the ego which had been provisionally resolved during latency now blaze up afresh and with renewed intensity. Soon there is more **[End Page 260]** libido at the id's disposal; and it cathects indiscriminately any id impulses that are at hand. Aggression becomes unruliness. Hunger becomes voracity. Naughtiness becomes criminal behavior. Habits of cleanliness give place to pleasure in dirt and disorder. Instead of modesty and sympathy we find exhibitionism, brutality, and cruelty. The reaction formations threaten to fall to pieces. The instinctual trends from the infantile period become invading forces. The ego confronts the instinctual conflagration with only one wish: "to preserve the character developed during the latency period, to re-establish the former relation between its own forces and those of the id, and to reply to the greater urgency of the instinctual demands with redoubled efforts to defend itself" (147). It is a struggle for supremacy between the ego and the id, a struggle in which the adversaries are unevenly matched.

With not a glimmer of the enthusiasm with which she described the moral possibilities of the latency period, Anna Freud concedes that adolescence could at least be instructive on issues of internal danger, anxiety, defense, symptom formation, and mental breakdown. In the chapter on "Instinctual Anxiety during Puberty" (1966 [1936]), she uses the adolescent process to illustrate the ego's basic dread of instinctual life. At puberty, the sudden accession of instinctual energy accentuates the ego's primary antagonism to such a degree that the dread and repudiation of the drives becomes distinguishable, as asceticism (or alternatively, as instinctual excess), from the usual forms of defense mechanism such as the process of repression--instinctual renunciation possibly represents "a special case, or rather a preliminary phase, of repression" (157). With the increase in the quantity of the drives at puberty, this primary ambivalent antagonism is accentuated to become a specific and active defense mechanism. Thus, the asceticism of puberty embodies the innate hostility between the ego and the instincts, a hostility which is, "indiscriminate, primary, and primitive" (158). Earlier, she (1955 [1949]) describes a converse of asceticism, that is, social maladjustment and delinquency, as "irruptions of more or less undistorted libidinal and

aggressive material into the sphere of the individual's dealings with the real environment" (195). **[End Page 261]**

Anna Freud was somewhat friendlier but not nearly so friendly as we often suppose she had been to that second adolescent defense, intellectualization. She starts out by agreeing that intellectualization is superior to asceticism. Asceticism, with its flat-out prohibition of instinctual expression, can be crippling to the individual. With intellectualization, at least the ascetic flight from the drives is exchanged for a turning toward them. But the intellectual strategies turn out to be nearly as ineffective as the ascetic ones. Furthermore, she continues, adolescent intellectualization is a process divorced from action in the real world. The "intellectual gymnastics" (161) and abstract intellectual speculations that characterize adolescent thought processes do not solve the tasks set by reality. First and foremost, intellectualization is a demonstration of the adolescent's tense alertness to upsurges of the drives. At this point in her discussion, she comes to the enjoyable concept that "this would explain the fact that instinctual danger makes human beings intelligent" (163). Instinctual danger, like objective danger and deprivation, acts as a spur to intellectual ingenuity. Objective security tends to make us complacent, comfortably stupid.

In that phrase which lovers of reason and rationality tend to remember, one likes to imagine that Anna Freud believed that the intellectual life of adolescence was superior to that of the latency years. For had she not portrayed the latency-age child as rather dull, stupid, and unimaginative in comparison with the infant and adolescent? However, and this is the part one tends not to remember, the imminence of instinctual danger soon overcomes that intellectual direction of her argument.

Infancy and puberty are periods of instinctual danger and the "intelligence" which characterizes them serves at least in part to assist the subject to surmount that danger. . . . At the same time we must not forget that these mental performances, especially at puberty, brilliant and remarkable as they are, remain to a great extent unfruitful. (164)

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She then concludes that "the intellectual work performed by the ego during the latency period and in adult life is incomparably more solid, more reliable, and above all, much more closely connected with action" (165).

Anna Freud closes the chapter on "Instinctual Anxiety in Puberty" with an admission that she tends to compare the characteristics of the adolescent phase of life with the phenomena of grave (even psychotic) disease to which this phase with its surge of libido sometimes bears a resemblance. Her view that the sexualization of ego-activities produces certain familiar forms of psychopathic behavior is expressed in her essay on social maladjustment [1955 (1949)] in which she observes that "a grave disturbance of social adjustment is to be traced back to the complete suppression of phallic masturbation and the consequent flooding of the ego-activities with sexual content" (204). Shortly before her death in 1982, in her conversations with Joseph Sandler (1985), Anna Freud would continue to underline the dangers of the two kinds of adolescent defenses of asceticism and intellectualization: asceticism, particularly, but also the more benign-appearing intellectualization are represented as potentially treacherous in that they all too often bring about a withdrawal from object relations and from the oedipal fantasies associated with them. The next step in this regressive sequence is the weakening of the superego. Then finally, in the absence of guilt, the unconscious, incestuous wishes become a real possibility. Thus, rather than protecting the adolescent, asceticism and intellectualization leave him or her even more exposed to instinctual danger.

The above allusions to Anna Freud's unremitting alertness to the dangers of the drives during adolescence lead to a consideration, below, of certain other modifications she made. To the very end of her life, though, Miss Freud was immensely skillful at expressing in technical psychoanalytic discourse the everyday anxieties experienced by most parents, educators, and social and religious leaders when confronted with the awesome instinctual life of the adolescent, where even the so-called anti-instinctual forces are intrinsically dangerous.

Of course, by examining the potential dangers of the adolescent defenses, Anna Freud was also calling attention to **[End Page 263]** certain adolescent motives that most adults would tend to overlook. Many of us, while we might stand firm before the more blunt expressions of adolescent sexuality, aggression and narcissism, can be led astray by the subterfuges of the adolescent defenses. To these apparently benign forces, we are apt to respond with approval, even encouragement. However, as she perceived, asceticism and intellectualization, while appearing to ward off the drives, will be making a sneak attack at the very structure of the superego. The ego itself is corrupted by the alliance between the id and the superego.

At this juncture in Anna Freud's thought, I am always reminded of the more than average expectable difficulties in maintaining analytic neutrality in clinical work with adolescents. As analysts, we are supposedly representatives, but not necessarily enforcers, of moral authority. Yet we know that our therapeutic efforts are doomed if we are in any way doctrinaire with respect to the drives--and by doctrinaire, I mean permissive, oblivious, sponsoring, suppressive, or confronting. At other times, our wholesome desire to ally ourselves with the ego misleads us as to the ego's captivity in the service of the drives. Most of us who enjoy work with adolescents know how easy it is to be betrayed by the periods of relative calm between the more expectable phases of acting out and reckless, interpersonal activities. After the chaos and the passions, how ungracious of us to cast a questioning eye at moral purity and aloof intellectualizing! Of course, we quickly find out that the calm is ominous and often more treacherous than the tempests.

When a sixteen-year-old girl, recouping her energies after a disastrous bout of sexual promiscuity, suddenly relents on her provocative and hostile attitudes toward her parents, friends, and therapist and becomes intellectually preoccupied with producing and deciphering dream material, we think it essential to try and estimate the degree of withdrawal from object related fantasies. When the fourteen-year-old boy who has spent the year tormenting his mother and female teachers becomes obedient and respectful in those situations and so alarmed at a classmate's recent school suspension for selling drugs that he gives up smoking cigarettes, guzzling peach **[End Page 264]** brandy, binging on junk food, and vandalizing subway cars, we entertain the suspicion that his abrupt, all-out acquiescence with law and order is likely to be a further sign of the boy's anti-social responses to the upheavals in his instinctual life. In other words, we do not welcome such instances of intellectualization and asceticism as resolutions of drive conflict but merely as indications of the varieties of ways that the adolescent's ego colludes with these drives. We have learned to respect Anna Freud's wariness with regard to the deceptiveness of the adolescent defenses.

Nevertheless, as she suggests in some of her later papers, when these defensive attitudes are temporary and balanced with the other typical adolescent strategies, we may be quite right to see in them the rudiments of potentially valuable social attitudes and ideals. We who sometimes allow ourselves to succumb to the charm of the adolescent quest for bodily, intellectual, and moral purity are not entirely on the wrong track when we hear Anna Freud's famous dictum in the simple old-fashioned way. The instinctual dangers of adolescence can make a person wise, even moral and ethical.

Nor was Anna Freud without insight into the beneficial effects of the drives. Even as early as 1936, as she constructs the outcomes of the battle between the id and the ego during puberty, she arrives at a crucial insight. She (1966 [1936]) describes the two extreme results between which most normal outcomes tend to fall: obviously the id may triumph, in which case the individual's entrance into adulthood is "marked by a riot of uninhibited gratification of instinct" (149). The primary emphasis of her conclusion, though, is on the disastrous consequences should the ego come off totally victorious, for then the character of the child as it evolves during latency would establish itself as final and irrevocable. When faced with the terrible waste of human spirit in that barren solution, Anna Freud makes a tentative gesture as an ally of the forces of the id. "Apart from the resulting crippling of the instinctual life," she writes, "the fact that the victorious ego becomes rigidly fixed is permanently injurious to the individual" (150).

Some fifteen years later, Anna Freud (1952 [1951]) generously admits some of the limitations of her previous attitudes. **[End Page 265]** "I know from personal experience that, while studying the defense mechanisms of the ego, the investigator runs the risk of stressing one-sidedly the hostility between ego and id, at the expense of the cooperation which exists between them," she states and then sums up: "The ego's role as an ally of the id precedes that of an agent designed to slow up and obstruct satisfaction" (236).

Anna Freud also comes to appreciate that the character structure achieved during latency was preliminary and precarious and that "it has to be abandoned to allow adult sexuality to be integrated into the individual's personality." However, beneficial as puberty's increase in libido may be in the larger scheme of things, adolescence itself sets off alarms. It begins with crudities, simplifications, primitivizations of aggression, and narcissism--a breakdown of controls, an eruption of unruly passions and desires, a dissolution of the civilizing trends of childhood (as becomes especially evident in delinquency). It is difficult indeed to detect the virtue in it all.

Moreover, Anna Freud's metaphors of warfare express something accurate about the adolescent state of mind. Adolescence is a kind of emotional battleground on which the past and the future contend for mastery over the adult mind that is about to emerge. In this contest between past and future the adolescent poses a considerable threat to the present adult generation, which usually has a stake in keeping things just as they are. It is understandable that the major efforts of the adult world would be in the direction of controlling and suppressing the adolescent passions. In every period of human history some recognition is accorded to the potential threat to society of this transition in development. Both changing child and adult world make every effort to harness the emerging genitality to the prevailing social norms and to the moral order--whatever these may be.

So, finally our thoughts on the stepchild of psychoanalysis, adolescence, lead to considerations of inner transformations that are far more elaborate than the comparatively straightforward sublimations of latency where, for example, sexual curiosity can be converted into a thirst for knowledge or anatomical explorations into an interest in geography. Until puberty the **[End Page 266]** inherent antagonisms between the passions of family life and the demands of civilization can be masked by the common interests of the family and the social order. When, however, the child arrives at genital maturity, the already uneasy relationship between civilization and the erotic aspects of family life become equivocal. The danger is that the family could swallow up the child. The stronger the erotic attachments between parents and child, the harder it is for the family to relinquish the child to the wider circle of life. Thus, puberty instigates a displacement of sexual desire outside the family and a revision of the moral authority of the parents. By themselves, purely economic concepts of desexualization, substitution, or transfer cannot possibly give a full account of the intricacies of these radical transformations. If for no other reason than to apprehend the complicated nature of the sublimations of adolescence, Sigmund Freud

would have had to advance his earlier concepts of identification and narcissism, propose the structural model of id, ego, and superego, and consider an enlarged dual instinct theory that could embody the vicissitudes of aggression. As he (1905) viewed these dilemmas of puberty, the progress of civilization itself depended on the child's ability to detach from parental authority: "one of the most painful, psychical achievements of the pubertal period," he writes, is "detachment from parental authority, a process that alone makes possible the opposition, which is so important for the progress of civilization, between the new generation and the old" (227).

In her later writings, Anna Freud is fully alert to the dangers of the short-circuiting of the adolescent process in the interests of a spurious rationality and false peace. In her important essay on "Adolescence," Anna Freud (1958 [1957]) speaks of those so-called good children of fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen, who remain "wrapped up in their family relationships, considerate sons of their mothers, submissive to their fathers, in accord with the atmosphere, ideas and ideals of their childhood background" (150). She explains that "convenient as this may be, it signifies a delay of normal development and is, as such, a sign to be taken seriously" (150). In conclusion, she writes: "These are children who have built up excessive [End Page 267] defenses against their drive activities and are now crippled by the results, which act as barriers against the normal maturational processes of phase development" (150).

Some youths conclude their journey through the adolescent realm of infinite possibility by settling back into the familiar civilized routines. They reinstate, albeit with a few new flourishes and minor alterations, the frozen plots of childhood. They are ruled again by the inflexible dictates of 'should' and 'ought,' dominated by seeking and finding sexual gratification--but only 'this' way and not 'that' way. They try to assuage dread by returning to the safety of the schoolyard and are forever young; but they have lost their youthfulness. Most of the casualties of youth are of this commonplace variety. When their adolescence is over, they are destined, like Icarus, to fall from the heavens or from whatever narrow or wide reach of imagination they have dared, right into the conformities of everyday existence, without making so much as a ripple.

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Note

1. An earlier version of this article, entitled, "The Sexual and Moral Transformations of Adolescence," was presented as the Anna Freud Commemorative Address for 1986 to the New York Freudian Society; Peter Blos and Aaron Esman were discussants.

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