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The birth trauma as the prototype of the affect of anxiety

Freud. The interpretation of dreams. Vol. 5, p. 400, footnote, added in 1909.  
"It was not for a long time that I learned to appreciate the importance of phantasies and unconscious thoughts about life in the womb. They contain an explanation of the remarkable dread that many people have of being buried alive; and they also afford the deepest unconscious basis for the belief in survival after death, which merely represents a projection into the future of this uncanny life before birth. Moreover, the act of birth is the first experience of anxiety, and thus ~~THE SOURCE~~ the source and prototype of the affect of anxiety."

The ego and the id. Vol. 19, p. 53. (1923)

"The fear of death in melancholia only admits of one explanation: that the ego gives itself up because it feels itself hated and persecuted by the super-ego, instead of loved. To the ego, therefore, living means the same as being loved --- being loved by the super-ego, which here again appears as the representative of the id. The super-ego fulfils the same function of protecting and saving that was fulfilled in earlier days by the father and later by Providence or Destiny. But, when the ego finds itself in an excessive real danger which it believes itself unable to overcome by its own strength, it is bound to draw the same conclusion. It sees itself deserted by all protecting forces and lets itself die. Here, moreover, is once again the same situation as that which underlay the first great anxiety-state of birth and the infantile anxiety of longing---the anxiety due to separation from the protecting mother."

Inhibitions, symptoms, and anxiety. Vol. 20, 1926.

Editor's note: "Rank's book [The trauma of birth, published 1924] was far more than an adoption of Freud's explanation of the form taken by anxiety. He argued that all later attacks of anxiety were attempts at 'abreacting' the trauma of birth. He accounted for all neuroses on similar lines, incidentally dethroning the Oedipus complex, and proposed a reformed therapeutic technique based on the overcoming of the birth trauma. Freud's published references to the book seemed at first to be favourable. But the present work shows a complete and final reversal of that opinion. His rejection of Rank's views, however, stimulated him to a reconsideration of his own, and Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety was the result" (p. 86).

"Anxiety. <sup>is</sup> In the first place something that is felt. We call it an affective state, although we are also ignorant of what an affect is. As a feeling, anxiety has a very marked character of unpleasure. But that is not the whole of its quality. Not every unpleasure can be called anxiety, for there are other feelings, such as tension, pain or mourning, which have the character of unpleasure. Thus anxiety must have other distinctive features besides this quality of unpleasure. Can we succeed in understanding the differences between these various unpleasurable affects?.....Analysis of anxiety-states therefore reveals the existence of (1) a specific character of unpleasure, (2) acts of discharge and (3) perceptions of those acts. The last two points indicate at once a difference between states of anxiety and other similar states, like those of mourning and pain. The latter do not have any motor manifestation; or if they have, the manifestation is not an integral part of the whole state but is distinct from it as being a result of it or a reaction to it. Anxiety, then, is a special state of unpleasure with acts of discharge along particular paths. In accordance with our general views we should be inclined to think that anxiety is based upon an increase of excitation which on the one hand produced the character of unpleasure and on the other finds relief through the acts of discharge already mentioned. But a purely physiological account of this sort will scarcely satisfy us. We are tempted to assume the presence of a historical factor which binds the sensations of anxiety and its innervations firmly together. We assume, in other words, that

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an anxiety-state is the reproduction of some experience which contained the necessary conditions for such an increase of excitation and a discharge along particular paths, and that from this circumstance the unpleasure of anxiety receives its specific character. In man, birth provides a prototypic experience of this kind, and we are therefore inclined to regard anxiety-states as a reproduction of the trauma of birth" (pp. 132-133).

"The reason why the infant in arms wants to perceive the presence of ~~tham~~ its mother is only because it already knows by experience that she satisfied all its needs without delay. The situation, then, which it regards as a 'danger' and against which it wants to be safeguarded is that of non-satisfaction, of a growing tension due to need, against which it is helpless. I think that if we adopt this view all the facts fall into place. The situation of non-satisfaction in which the amounts of stimulation rise to an unpleasurable height without its being possible for them to be mastered psychically or discharged must for the infant be analogous to the experience of being born—must be a repetition of the situation of danger. What both situations have in common is the economic disturbance caused by an accumulation of amounts of stimulation which require to be disposed of. It is this factor, then, which is the real essence of the 'danger'. In both cases the reaction of anxiety sets in. (This reaction is still an expedient one in the infant in arms, for the discharge, being directed into the respiratory and vocal muscular apparatus, now calls its mother to it, just as it activated the lungs of the now-born baby to get rid of the internal stimuli.) It is unnecessary to suppose that the child carries anything more with it from the time of its birth than this way of indicating the presence of danger" (p. 137).

"When the infant has found out by experience that an external, perceptible object can put an end to the dangerous situation which is reminiscent of birth, the content of the danger it fears is displaced from the economic situation on to the condition which determined that situation, viz., the loss of object. It is the absence of the mother that is now the danger; and as soon as that danger arises the infant gives the signal of anxiety, before the dreaded economic situation has set in. This change constitutes a first great step forward in the provision made by the infant for its self-preservation; and at the same time represents a transition from the automatic and involuntary fresh appearance of anxiety to the intentional reproduction of anxiety as a signal of danger" (pp. 137-138).

"The significance of the loss of object as a determinant of anxiety extends considerably further. For the next transformation of anxiety, viz., the castration anxiety belonging to the phallic phase, is also a fear of separation and is thus attached to the same determinant. In this case the danger is of being separated from one's genitals" (p.p. 138-139).

"We have...traced the change...from loss of mother as an object to castration. The next change is caused by the power of the super-ego. With the depersonalization of the parental agency from which castration was feared, the danger becomes less defined. Castration anxiety develops into moral anxiety—social anxiety—and it is not so easy now to know what the anxiety is about.....what the ego regards as the danger and responds to it with an anxiety-signal is that the super-ego should be angry with it or punish it or cease to love it. The final transformation which the fear of the super-ego undergoes is, it seems to me, the fear of death (of fear for life) which is a fear of the super-ego projected on to the powers of destiny" (pp. 139-140).

"....the ego is the actual seat of anxiety. I think this proposition still holds good. ...no reason to assign any manifestation of anxiety to the super-ego; while the expression 'anxiety of the id' would stand in need of correction.... ..Anxiety is an affective state and...can...only be felt by the ego. The id



cannot have anxiety as the ego can....On the other hand it very often happens that processes take place or begin to take place in the id which cause the ego to produce anxiety? (p. 140).

"In describing the evolution of the various danger-situations from their prototype, the act of birth, I have had no intention of asserting that every later determinant of anxiety completely invalidates the preceding one. It is true that, as the development of the ego goes on, the earlier danger-situations tend to lose their force and be set aside, so that we might say that each period of the individual's life has its appropriate determinant of anxiety. Thus the danger of psychological helplessness is appropriate to the period of life when his ego is immature; the danger of loss of object, to early childhood when he is still dependent on others; the danger of castration, to the phallic phase; and the fear of his super-ego, to the latency period. Nevertheless, all these danger-situations and determinants of anxiety can persist side by side and cause the ego to react to them with anxiety at a period later than the appropriate one; or, again, several of them can come into operation at the same time. It is possible, moreover, that there is a fairly close relationship between the danger-situation that is operative and the form taken by the ensuing neurosis" (pp. 141-142).

"When, in an earlier part of this discussion, we found that the danger of castration was of importance in more than one neurotic illness, we put ourselves on guard against over-estimating that factor, since it could not be a decisive one for the female sex, who are undoubtedly more subject to neuroses than men. We now see that there is no danger of our regarding castration anxiety as the sole motive force of their defensive processes, which lead to neuroses. I have shown elsewhere how little girls, in the course of their development, are led into making a tender object-cathexis by their castration complex. It is precisely in women that the danger-situation of loss of object seems to have remained the most effective. All we need do is to make a slight modification in our description of their determinant of anxiety, in the sense that it is no longer a matter of feeling the want of, or actually losing the object itself, but of losing the object's love. Since there is no doubt that hysteria has a strong affinity with femininity, just as obsessional neurosis has with masculinity, it appears probable that, as a determinant of anxiety, loss of love plays much the same part in hysteria as the threat of castration does in phobias and fear of the super-ego in obsessional neurosis" (p. 143).

