

Edward Bibring's Theory of Depression

David Rapaport

**Edward Bibring's
Theory of
Depression**

David Rapaport

e-Book 2018 International Psychotherapy
Institute

From *Essential Papers on Depression* edited by James C. Coyne

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

Copyright © 1985 by James C. Coyne

Table of Contents

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

[V](#)

[VI](#)

[VII](#)

[VIII](#)

[IX](#)

[X](#)

[XI](#)

[XII](#)

[XIII](#)

[XIV](#)

[REFERENCES](#)

[Notes](#)

Edward Bibring's Theory of Depression

David Rapaport

I

Edward Bibring was one of the few systematic theoreticians of psychoanalysis. His keen awareness of the complexity of psychoanalytic theory and of the responsibility entailed by every attempt to systematize or amend it explains the fact that the range and scope rather than the volume of his writing give us the measure of his stature as a theoretician. Hence his achievement must be read not only in the lines, but also between the lines of his writing. It is such a reading of his paper on depression that I want to present tonight. Until his literary legacy is published—and perhaps even after that—such studies of his published work must serve us as the

means of assessing his theoretical conceptions.

First, a word about his scope and range as a theoretician. As a historian of the theory he gave us the only broad survey of the development of the theory of instinctual drives that we have. As a systematizer he set a standard for such work in his essay on the repetition compulsion. As a critic he provided the first dispassionate analysis of Melanie Klein's theories. His contributions to the clinical theory of therapy you have heard Dr. Anna Freud discuss tonight. As a theory builder he gave us the theory of depression, which is my subject tonight.

One of Edward Bibring's central interests was to bring into the present framework of psychoanalytic theory those parts of it which were formulated before the development of the structural approach and present-day ego

psychology. Of the solutions he reached he published only his theories of psychotherapy and depression, and even these were written during the struggle with his paralyzing illness. It is hoped that some more of his solutions, or hints about the directions in which he sought solutions, will be gleaned from the study of his files: for instance, a preliminary draft of “The Mechanism of Depression” contains several such hints.

II

The theory Edward Bibring presents in “The Mechanism of Depression” (1953) is deliberately limited to the ego of psychology depression. He wrote: . . . the conception of depression presented here does not invalidate the accepted theories of the role which orality and aggression play in the various types of depression” (p. 41). Yet his theory points up the inadequacy of the accepted theory.

Bibring stated his view as follows:... the oral and aggressive strivings are not as universal in depression as is generally assumed and... consequently the theories built on them do not offer sufficient explanation, but require... modification” (p. 41).

As we shall see, he relegated to a peripheral role the factors which are central to the accepted theory of depression: in his theory they appear as precipitating or complicating factors, and indeed at times even as consequences of that ego state which, according to Bibring, is the essence of depression.

The basic proposition of Bibring’s theory is akin to the proposition on which Freud built his structural theory of anxiety. Freud wrote: “...the ego is the real seat of anxiety... Anxiety is an affective state which can of course be experienced

only by the ego” (1926, p. 80). Bibring wrote: “Depression is... primarily an ego phenomenon” (1953, p. 40); “[it] represents an affective state” (p. 27). “[Anxiety and depression are] both... frequent... ego reactions... [and since] they cannot be reduced any further, it may be justified to call them basic ego reactions” (p. 34).

Bibring thus set out to explore the structure of depression as an ego state. He used Freud’s theory of anxiety, Fenichel’s theory of boredom, and some general observations on depersonalization as his points of departure.

How decisive a step this was becomes obvious if we remember that B. D. Lewin’s (1950) monograph on elation, for instance, still rests exclusively on id psychology, on the oral triad.

III

Bibring searched the literature of the accepted

theory for evidence pertaining to depression as an ego state. Freud had pointed out that both grief and depression involve an inhibition of the ego. Bibring saw this inhibition as a ubiquitous characteristic of the depressive ego state. Abraham (1924) had derived from his clinical observation a concept of primal depression (“primal parathymia”); he found that all subsequent depressive episodes “brought with [them]... a state of mind that was an exact replica of...[the] primal parathymia” and asserted that “It is this state of mind that we call melancholia” (1924, p. 469). Abraham’s observations and formulation indicated to Bibring that the regression in depressions is not simply a regression of the libido to an oral fixation point, but primarily an ego regression to an ego state, implying that the depressive state is not produced *de novo* every time by regression, but is a

reactivation of a primal state. Here again we see the parallel to Freud's theory of anxiety. Freud wrote: "...anxiety is not created *de novo* in repression, but is reproduced as an affective state" (1926, p. 20). Bibring wrote: "Whatever... [the precipitating conditions], the mechanism of depression will be the same" (p. 42), and " ... depression can be defined as the emotional expression... of a state of helplessness... of the ego, irrespective of what may have caused the breakdown of the mechanisms which established self-esteem" (p. 24). He saw in Fenichel's simple neurotic depressions, in E. Weiss's simple depressions, and in E. Jacobson's mild, blank depression further evidence for the existence of an affective ego state common to and basic to all depressions. The essence of this—as indeed of any—structural conception is that the phenomenon to be explained—in this case depression—is not

conceived of as created *de novo* by dynamic factors. Since it is the reactivation of a persisting structure, the fact that it appears in essence unaltered, upon various precipitating conditions and in the most varied dynamic contexts, requires no further explanation. We shall see later that Bibring's structural theory of depression, just like Freud's structural theory of anxiety, involves a signal function.

IV

What are the descriptive characteristics of this basic affective state? According to Freud, depression is characterized by *ego inhibition* and lowered *self-esteem*. Bibring adds to these a third characteristic: *helplessness*. He wrote: "... depression represents an affective state, which indicates... [the] state of the ego in terms of [lowered selfesteem] helplessness and inhibition

of functions” (p. 27).

This formulation raised several problems. First, the various clinical forms of depression had to be explained, and were explained by Bibring as complications of the basic state of depression by those factors which accounted for depression in the commonly accepted theory. Second, since the concept of helplessness had already been used by Freud in the theory of anxiety, Bibring had to clarify the relationship between depression and anxiety. Third, the term self-esteem was not defined explicitly by Freud, nor by anyone else, including Bibring. The central role Bibring gave it in his theory leaves us with the necessity to define this term explicitly within the conceptual framework of the psychoanalytic theory, but it also provides an indication of how this defining can be done. We will return to these problems, but first we must consider the genetics and dynamics

of the ego state of depression.

V

What are the genetics of this state? Bibring wrote:

Frequent frustrations of the infant's oral needs may mobilize at first anxiety and anger. If frustration is continued, however, in disregard of the "signals" produced by the infant, the anger will be replaced by feelings of exhaustion, of helplessness and depression. This early self-experience of the infantile ego's helplessness, of its lack of power to provide the vital supplies, is probably the most frequent factor predisposing to depression. ...the emphasis is not on the oral frustration and subsequent oral fixation, but on the infant's or little child's shock-like experience of and fixation to the feeling of helplessness [pp. 36-37],

By the phrase "this early self-experience" Bibring meant the experience of helplessness resulting from frustration of oral needs, and his

apparent reservation expressed in the phrase “the infantile ego’s helplessness... is probably the most frequent fact predisposing to depression” intends to convey that not only the oral but all continued early frustrations are such predisposing factors. His references to Abraham and Erikson corroborate this explanation: “Similar reactions may be established by any severe frustration of the little child’s vital needs in and beyond the oral phase, e.g., of the child’s needs for affection (Abraham), or by a failure in the child-mother relationship of mutuality (Erikson, 1950)” (pp. 39-40).

What is bold and new in this theory is the assertion that *all* depressions are affective states and as such are *reactivations* of a structured infantile ego state of helplessness. Bibring’s conception of the origin of this helplessness is in accord with that of Freud concerning grief in *The*

Problem of Anxiety. But Freud does not apply this conception of helplessness to all depressions nor does he imply that grief is the reactivation of a structured state. Freud wrote:

[The Infant] is not yet able to distinguish temporary absence from permanent loss;... it requires repeated consoling experiences before he learns that... a disappearance on his mother's part is usually followed by her reappearance... Thus he is enabled, as it were, to experience longing without an accompaniment of despair.

The situation in which he misses his mother is... owing to his miscomprehension... a traumatic one if he experiences at that juncture a need which his mother ought to gratify; it changes into a danger situation when this need is not immediate.... Loss of love does not yet enter into the situation.

...[Subsequently] repeated situations in which gratification was experienced have created out of the mother the object who is the recipient, when a need arises, of an intense cathexis, a cathexis which we may call "longingful." It is to this innovation that

the reaction of grief is referable. Grief is therefore the reaction specific to object loss, anxiety to the danger which this object loss entails [1926, pp. 118-119].

It should be re-emphasized that Freud here derives this conception of helplessness from the phenomena of *grief*, while Bibring generalized it to all depressions and—as we shall see—implied that grief is a genetically late, “tamed” reactivation of this helplessness. We might add here that Spitz’s observations on the so-called anaclitic depressions seem to support this part of the genetic aspect of Bibring’s theory.

VI

Before we pursue further the genetics of this ego state, we must turn first to the experiences which reactivate it in adult life, and then to its dynamics. Bibring wrote:

In all these instances [described], the

individuals... felt helplessly exposed to superior powers, fatal organic disease, or recurrent neurosis, or to the seemingly inescapable fate of being lonely, isolated, or unloved, or unavoidably confronted with the apparent evidence of being weak, inferior, or a failure. In all instances, the depression accompanied a feeling of being doomed, irrespective of what the conscious or unconscious background of this feeling may have been: in all of them a blow was dealt to the person's self-esteem, on whatever grounds such self-esteem may have been founded [pp. 23-24].

Thus the conditions precipitating the reactivation of this state are those which undermine self-esteem. Here again Bibring is close to Freud's observations, which he quotes:

...the melancholiac displays... an extraordinary fall in his self-esteem, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale [Freud, 1917, p. 155].

The occasions giving rise to melancholia for the most part extend beyond the clear case of a loss by death, and include all those

situations of being wounded, hurt, neglected, out of favour, or disappointed... [p. 161].

VII

If the crucial dynamic factors of the accepted theory—oral fixation, ambivalence, incorporation, aggression turned round upon the subject—are relegated by Bibring's theory to the peripheral role of factors which complicate the basic affective ego state of depression, how are we to understand the dynamics of the reactivation of that state?

Bibring's explanation is based on two assumptions: first, that a blow is dealt to the subject's self-esteem, second, that this occurs while "certain narcissistically significant, i.e., for the self-esteem pertinent, goals and objects are strongly maintained" (p. 24). He formulates: "It is exactly from the tension between these highly charged narcissistic aspirations on the one hand, and the ego's acute awareness of its (real and

imaginary) helplessness and incapacity to live up to them on the other hand, that depression results” (pp. 24-25).

He enumerates these aspirations: “(1) the wish to be worthy, to be loved, to be appreciated, not to be inferior or unworthy; (2) the wish to be strong, superior, great, secure, not to be weak and insecure; and (3) the wish to be good, to be loving, not to be aggressive, hateful and destructive” (p. 24).

Protagonists of the accepted theory may argue that all these aspirations are but derivatives of instinctual goals and superego demands; that the conflict is one between the ego and the superego, and involves oral fixation, ambivalence, incorporation, and aggression turned round upon the subject. This argument, however, disregards the core of Bibring’s theory. His assumptions that

in depression we are faced with an intra-ego conflict and that the dynamic factors of the accepted theory play only a precipitating or complicating role, imply that the ego processes involved must be studied and understood in their own right, because the observed commonality of depressions cannot be explained by assuming that depression is created *de novo* every time from the basic ingredients—instinct, superego, etc. This implication of Bibring’s theory is also implied by Hartmann and Erikson, and it should be illuminating to cite one of Freud’s formulations which also implies it and is directly pertinent to Bibring’s theory.

According to Bibring, to be loved and to be loving are among the narcissistic aspirations whose role in depressions is crucial. In “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” Freud defined loving as “the relation of the ego to its sources of pleasure”

(1915, p. 78), and he wrote: "...the attitudes of love and hate cannot be said to characterize the relations of instincts to their objects, but are reserved for the relations of the ego as a whole to objects" (p. 80). Thus Bibring's approach to the dynamics of the reactivation of the affective ego state of depression has a precedent in Freud's theorizing. The relationships implied in Freud's formulation have not been explored, and one of the merits of Bibring's theory is that it makes the exploration of them a patent and urgent necessity. The same urgency applies to the necessity of defining selfesteem, and to that of redefining narcissism in ego-psychological terms, since originally it was defined in what we would now call id terms.

Bibring summarized the dynamic aspect of his theory as follows:

Though the persisting aspirations are of a

threefold nature, the *basic mechanism of the resulting depression appears to be essentially the same...* depression is primarily not determined by a conflict between the ego on the one hand and the id, or the superego, or the environment on the other hand, but stems primarily from a tension within the ego itself, from an inner-systemic “conflict.” Thus depression can be defined as the emotional correlate of a partial or complete collapse of the self-esteem of the ego, since it feels unable to live up to its aspirations... [which] are strongly maintained [pp. 25-26].

More generally:

...everything that lowers or paralyzes the ego's self-esteem without changing the narcissistically important aims represents a condition of depression [p. 42].

This conception is in accord with Hartmann's theory of the “intra-systemic conflict” and with Erickson's theory of the crises in psychosocial epigenesis.

VIII

Now we can turn to tracing the fate of the basic depressive state in the course of development.

Bibring's formulation of the epigenesis of narcissistic aspirations is an important step toward specifying the conception of autonomous ego development, which was introduced by Hartmann. It will be worthwhile to remind ourselves that Freud already implied such a conception in "Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning":

...the decision as regards the form of subsequent illness (election of neurosis) will depend on the particular phase of ego-development and libido-development in which the inhibition of development has occurred. The chronological characteristics of the two developments, as yet unstudied, their possible variations in speed with respect to each other, thus receive unexpected significance [1911, pp. 19-20].

Bibring formulated the epigenesis of narcissistic

aspirations as follows: The narcissistic aspirations originating on the oral level are: (1) to get affection; (2) to be loved; (3) to be taken care of; (4) to get supplies. The corresponding defensive needs are: (1) to be independent; (2) to be self-supporting. Depression then follows the discovery of: (1) not being loved; (2) not being independent (p. 27).

The narcissistic aspirations originating on the anal level refer to mastery over the body, over drives, and over objects, and they are: (1) to be good; (2) to be loving; (3) to be clean. The corresponding defensive needs are: (1) not to be hostile; (2) not to be resentful and defiant; (3) not to be dirty. Depression then follows the discovery of: (1) lack of control over libidinal and aggressive impulses; (2) lack of control over objects; (3) feelings of weakness (entailing the former two); (4) feelings of guilt (I will never be good, loving,

will always be hateful, hostile, defiant, therefore evil).

The narcissistic aspirations originating on the phallic level refer to the exhibitionistic and sadistic competitive oedipal needs, and they are: (1) to be admired; (2) to be the center of attention; (3) to be strong and victorious. The corresponding defensive needs are: (1) to be modest; (2) to be inconspicuous; (3) to be submissive. Depression follows the discovery of: (1) fear of being defeated; (2) being ridiculed for shortcomings and defeats; (3) impending retaliation.

These steps in the development of narcissistic aspirations correspond to the first three phases of Erikson's psychosocial epigenesis: the aspirations originating on the oral level correspond to Erikson's phase of basic trust vs. mistrust (mutuality); those originating on the anal level to

his phase of psychosocial autonomy vs. shame and doubt, and those originating on the phallic level to his phase of initiative vs. guilt.

If these formulations should be found wanting in inclusiveness or exclusiveness, they are as rich and thoughtful a collation of what Freud must have meant when he spoke of ego interests, and what we mean when we speak of them or of values, as any in psychoanalytic writing except Erikson's and possibly Horney's.

These genetic formulations use the concept of narcissistic aspirations and bring sharply into focus the need to redefine the concept of narcissism in structural and particularly ego-psychological terms. Hartmann and subsequently Jacobson have made an attempt to reformulate this concept, assuming that narcissism involves the cathecting of the self-representations rather

than the cathecting of the ego. Bibring's formulations seem to require a more radical redefinition of narcissism.

IX

We have here a structural theory which treats depression as the reactivation of a structured state. The universal experiences of grief and sadness, ranging from passing sadness to profound depression, indicate that such an ego state exists in all men. We may infer that individual differences in the relative ease of and intensity of the reactivation of this state are determined by: (a) the constitutional tolerance for continued frustration; (b) the severity and extent of the situations of helplessness in early life; (c) the developmental factors which increase or decrease the relative ease with which this state is reactivated and modulate its intensity; (d) the

kind and severity of the precipitating conditions. As for the dynamic aspect of this theory: the depressive ego state is reactivated by an intra-ego conflict. The factors involved in this conflict, however, are not yet precisely defined. As for the genetic aspect of the theory: the origin of the depressive ego state is clear and so is the epigenesis of the “narcissistic aspirations” involved.

The economic and adaptive aspects of the theory, however, are not directly treated by Bibring. It is in regard to these aspects that much work is still ahead of us. I shall not attempt to infer from Bibring’s theory the directions this work might take.

X

Freud made several attempts to account for various aspects of the economics of depression.

For instance, he wrote: “...the ego’s inhibited condition and loss of interest was fully accounted for by the absorbing work of mourning” (1917, p. 155). Or for instance:

The conflict in the ego [meaning at that time the conflict between the ego and the superego], which in melancholia is substituted for the struggle surging round the object, must act like a painful wound which calls out unusually strong anti-cathexes (p. 170).

But Freud also indicated that these assumptions are insufficient and we need “some insight into the economic conditions, first, of bodily pain, and then of the mental pain” (p. 170) before we can understand the economics of depression; and that:

... we do not even know by what economic measures the work of mourning is carried through; possibly, however, a conjecture may help us here. Reality passes its verdict—that the object no longer exists—upon each

single one of the memories and hopes through which the libido was attached to the lost object, and the ego, confronted as it were with the decision whether it will share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of narcissistic satisfactions in being alive to sever its attachment to the non-existent object [p. 166];

and that:

This character of withdrawing the libido bit by bit is... to be ascribed alike to mourning and to melancholia; it is probably sustained by the same economic arrangements and serves the same purpose in both [p. 167];

and finally:

Why this process of carrying out the behest of reality bit by bit... should be so extraordinarily painful is not at all easy to explain in terms of mental economics [p. 154].

Though it is clear that the phenomenon from which the economic explanation must start is the inhibition of the ego, the economics of depression

is still not understood. Bibring quotes Fenichel's formulation:... the greater percentage of the available mental energy is used up in unconscious conflicts, [and] not enough is left to provide the normal enjoyment of life and vitality" (Bibring, 1953, p. 19). But he finds this statement insufficient to explain depressive inhibition, and proceeds to reconsider the nature of inhibition. He writes:

Freud (1926) defines inhibition as a "restriction of functions of the ego" and mentions two major causes for such restrictions: either they have been imposed upon the person as a measure of precaution, e.g., to prevent the development of anxiety or feelings of guilt, or brought about as a result of exhaustion of energy of the ego engaged in intense defensive activities [p. 33].

Bibring concludes:

The inhibition in depression... does not fall under either category... It is rather due to the fact that certain strivings of the person

become meaningless— since the ego appears incapable ever to gratify them [p. 33].

Bibring implies his own explanation in his comparison of depression to anxiety:

Anxiety as a reaction to (external or internal) danger indicates the ego's desire to survive. The ego, challenged by the danger, mobilizes the signal of anxiety and prepares for fight or flight. In depression, the opposite takes place, the ego is paralyzed because it finds itself incapable to meet the "danger." [In certain instances... depression may follow anxiety, [and then] the mobilization of energy... [is] replaced by a decrease of self-reliance [pp. 34-35],

Thus Bibring's search for an economic explanation of depressive inhibition ends in the undefined term "decrease of self-reliance," which, as it stands, is not an economic concept.

Bibring followed his observations and constructions regardless of where they led him, and had the courage to stop where he did. Yet he

opened up new theoretical possibilities. It is to the discussion of these that I will turn now.

XI

What does it mean that “the ego is paralyzed because it finds itself incapable to meet the ‘danger’”? Clearly “paralyzed” refers to the state of helplessness, one of the corollaries of which is the “loss of selfesteem.” The danger is the potential loss of object; the traumatic situation is that of the loss of object, “helplessness” as Bibring defines it is the persisting state of loss of object. The anxiety signal anticipates the loss in order to prevent the reactivation of the traumatic situation, that is, of panic-anxiety. Fluctuations of self-esteem anticipate, and initiate measures to prevent, the reactivation of the state of persisting loss of object, that is, of the state of helplessness involving loss of selfesteem. Thus the relation between fluctuations

of self-esteem and “helplessness” which is accompanied by loss of self-esteem is similar to the relation between anxiety signal and panic-anxiety. Fluctuations of self-esteem are then structured, tamed forms of and signals to anticipate and to preclude reactivation of the state of helplessness. Yet, according to the accepted theory, fluctuations of self-esteem are the functions of the superego’s relation to the ego, just as anxiety was considered, prior to 1926, as a function of repression enforced by the superego. In 1926, however, superego anxiety was recognized as merely one kind of anxiety and the *repression hence anxiety* relationship was reversed into *anxiety signal hence repression*. Bibring achieves an analogous reversal when he formulates: “...it is our contention, based on clinical observation, that it is the ego’s awareness of its helplessness which in certain cases forces it

to turn the aggression from the object against the self, thus aggravating and complicating the structure of depression” (p. 41). While in the accepted theory it is assumed that the aggression “turned round upon the subject” *results* in passivity and helplessness, in Bibring’s conception it is the helplessness which is the *cause* of this “turning round.”

Thus Bibring’s theory opens two new vistas. One leads us to consider self-esteem as a signal, that is, an ego function, rather than as an *ad hoc* effect of the relation between the ego and the superego. The other suggests that we reconsider the role of the ego, and particularly of its helplessness, in the origin and function of the instinctual vicissitude called turning round upon the subject.

The first of these, like Freud’s structural theory

of anxiety and Fenichel's of guilt (1945, p. 135), leads to a broadening of our conception of the ego's apparatuses and functions. The second is even more far-reaching: it seems to go to the very core of the problem of aggression. We know that "turning round upon the subject" was the basic mechanism Freud used before the "death-instinct theory" to explain the major forms in which aggression manifests itself. It was in connection with this "turning round upon the subject" that Freud wrote:

...sadism ...seems to press towards a quite special aim:—the infliction of pain, in addition to subjection and mastery of the object. Now psycho-analysis would seem to show that infliction of pain plays no part in the original aims sought by [sadism]...: the sadistic child takes no notice of whether or not it inflicts pain, nor is it part of its purpose to do so. But when once the transformation into masochism has taken place, the experience of pain is very well adapted to serve as a passive masochistic aim ... Where

once the suffering of pain has been experienced as a masochistic aim, it can be carried back into the sadistic situation and result in a sadistic aim of *inflicting pain ...* [1915, pp. 71-72],

Thus Bibring's view that "turning round upon the subject" is brought about by helplessness calls attention to some of Freud's early formulations, and prompts us to re-evaluate our conception of aggression. Indeed, it may lead to a theory of aggression which is an alternative to those which have so far been proposed, namely Freud's death-instinct theory, Fenichel's frustration-aggression theory, and the Hartmann-Kris-Loewenstein theory of an independent aggressive instinctual drive.

XII

Let us return once more to the relation between helplessness (involving loss of self-esteem) and the simultaneously maintained

narcissistic aspirations, noting that their intra-ego conflict assumed by Bibring may have been implied by Freud when he wrote in “Mourning and Melancholia”: “A good, capable, conscientious [person]... is more likely to fall ill of [this]... disease than [one]... of whom we too should have nothing good to say” (1917, pp. 156-157).

Fenichel’s summary of the accepted view of the fate of self-esteem in depression is:

...a greater or lesser loss of self-esteem is in the foreground. The subjective formula is “I have lost everything; now the world is empty,” if the loss of self-esteem is mainly due to a loss of external supplies, or “I have lost everything because I do not deserve anything,” if it is mainly due to a loss of internal supplies from the superego [1945, p. 391],

Fenichel’s implied definition of supplies reads: “The small child loses self-esteem when he loses love and attains it when he regains love...

children... need... narcissistic supplies of affection... (1945, p. 41).

Though the term *supplies* has never been explicitly defined as a concept, it has become an apparently indispensable term in psychoanalysis, and particularly in the theory of depression. In Bibring's theory, supplies are the goals of narcissistic aspirations (p. 37). This gives them a central role in the theory, highlighting the urgent need to define them. Moreover, Bibring's comparison of depression and boredom hints at the direction in which such a definition might be sought by alerting us to the fact that there is a lack of supplies in boredom also. "Stimulus hunger"^[1] is Fenichel's term for the immediate consequence of this lack: "Boredom is characterized by the co-existence of a need for activity and activity-inhibition, as well as by stimulus-hunger and dissatisfaction with the available stimuli" (1934, p.

349). Here adequate stimuli are the lacking supplies. Those which are available are either too close to the object of the repressed instinctual drive and thus are resisted, or they are too distant from it and thus hold no interest.

Bibring's juxtaposition of depression and boredom suggests that narcissistic supplies may be a special kind of adequate stimuli and narcissistic aspirations a special kind of stimulus hunger. The implications of this suggestion become clearer if we note that it is the lack of narcissistic supplies which is responsible for the structuralization of that primitive state of helplessness, the reactivation of which is, according to Bibring's theory, the essence of depression.

The conception which emerges if we pursue these implications of Bibring's theory is this: (1)

The development of the ego requires the presence of “adequate stimuli,” in this case love of objects; when such stimuli are consistently absent a primitive ego state comes into existence, the later reactivation of which is the state of depression. (2) Normal development lowers the intensity of this ego state and its potentiality for reactivation, and limits its reactivation to those reality situations to which grief and sadness are appropriate reactions. (3) Recurrent absence of adequate stimuli in the course of development works against the lowering of the intensity of this ego state and increases the likelihood of its being reactivated, that is to say, establishes a predisposition to depression.

This conception is consonant with present-day ego psychology and also elucidates the economic and the adaptive aspects of Bibring’s theory. The role of stimulation in the development of ego structure is a crucial implication of the concept of

adaptation. At the same time, since psychoanalytic theory explains the effects of stimulation in terms of changes in the distribution of attention cathexes, the role of stimulation in ego-structure development, to which I just referred, might well be the starting point for an understanding of the economics of the ego state of depression.

XIII

This discussion of the structural, genetic, dynamic, economic, and adaptive aspects of Edward Bibring's theory gives us a glimpse of its fertility, but does not exhaust either its implications or the problems it poses. An attempt to trace more of these would require a detailed analysis of those points where Bibring's views shade into other findings and theories of psychoanalytic ego psychology, and is therefore beyond our scope tonight.

Instead, I would like to dwell in closing on three roots of Edward Bibring's theory which are less obvious than the observations and formulations so far discussed.

The first is its root in the technique of psychoanalysis. Bibring wrote:

From a... therapeutic point of view one has to pay attention not only to the dynamic and genetic basis of the persisting narcissistic aspirations, the frustrations of which the ego cannot tolerate, but also the dynamic and genetic conditions which forced the infantile ego to become fixated to feelings of helplessness... [the] major importance [of these feelings of helplessness] in the therapy of depression is obvious.^[2]

This formulation seems to say nothing more than the well-known technical rule that "Analysis must always go on in the layers accessible to the ego at the moment" (Fenichel, 1938-39, p. 44). But it does say more, because it specifies that it is the

helplessness, the lack of interest, and the lowered self-esteem which are immediately accessible in depression. It is safe to assume that the clinically observed accessibility of these was one of the roots of Bibring's theory.

A second root of the theory is in Bibring's critique of the English school of psychoanalysis. A study of this critique shows that on the one hand Bibring found some of this school's *observations* on depression sound and, like his own observations, incompatible with the accepted theory of depression; but on the other hand he found this school's *theory* of depression incompatible with psychoanalytic theory proper. It seems that Bibring intended his theory of depression to account for the sound observations of this school *within* the framework of psychoanalytic theory.

Finally, a third root of Bibring's theory seems to be related to the problems raised by the so-called "existential analysis." So far the only evidence for Edward Bibring's interest in and critical attitude toward "existential analysis" is in the memories of those people who discussed the subject with him. Though his interest in phenomenology is obvious in his paper on depression, his interest in existentialism proper is expressed in only a few passages, like "[Depression] is—essentially—'a human way of reacting to frustration and misery' whenever the ego finds itself in a state of (real or imaginary) helplessness against 'overwhelming odds'" (p. 36). Bibring's intent seems to have been to put the sound observations and psychologically relevant concepts of "existential analysis" into the framework of psychoanalytic ego psychology.

XIV

The measures of a theoretician's stature are the range of his interests; his simultaneous responsiveness to empirical evidence, to theoretical consistency, and to existing alternative theories; his courage to follow his constructions even if they cannot entirely bridge the chasm over which he extends them; and the originality and stimulating power of his thought. By these measures Edward Bibring is one of the few real psychoanalytic theoreticians.

In presenting this discussion of "The Mechanism of Depression"—which I organized on the metapsychological pattern—I intended to demonstrate not only the importance of Edward Bibring's theory of depression, and not only its place in the contemporary developments of psychoanalytic theory. I intended also to reflect the multiplicity of observations, theories, historical and general considerations which

Edward Bibring responded to and integrated in his theory of depression.

Our picture of Edward Bibring's achievement would, however, be inadequate if we did not take account of his human achievement, which pervades all the rest. Scientific achievements are human achievements. Psychoanalysts, when looking at a psychological theory as a human achievement, discover its motivation and hence are prone to suspect its objective validity. If this were justified there could be no valid theory: all our theories are the products of motivated human thought. There is little doubt about what provided the immediate motivation for Edward Bibring's theory of depression. He faced the devastating blows of a destructive illness and transformed them into scientific discovery. The motivation of valid theory need not be different from that of an invalid theory. What they do differ in is the control

the theorist has over his motivation. The scientist who develops an invalid theory takes a short cut to the goal of his motivation: he indulges in wishful thinking. The scientist who develops a valid theory takes the detours which are necessary to test and to modify the goals he is motivated to pursue in accordance with observation and existing theory:

Edward Bibring was aware of his motivation and tested it by choosing the detour. His work is a major contribution to psychoanalytic theory and his human achievement is a monument to the power of the human mind.

We wish to acknowledge Basic Books, Inc., for David Rapaport, "Edward Bibring's Theory of Depression," in Merton Gill (Ed.). THE COLLECTED PAPERS OF DAVID RAPAPORT.

REFERENCES

Abraham, K. (1924). A Short Study of the Development of the Libido, Viewed in the Light of Mental Disorders. *Selected Papers*. London: Hogarth Press, 1948, pp. 418-501.

- Bibring, E. (1953). The Mechanism of Depression. In *Affective Disorders*, ed. P. Greenacre. New York: International Universities Press, pp. 13-48.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton.
- Fenichel, O. (1922-36). *Collected Papers*, Vol. I. New York: Norton, 1953.
- ____ (1934). On the Psychology of Boredom. In *Organization and Pathology of Thought*, ed. & tr. D. Rapaport. New York: Columbia University Press, 1951, pp. 349-361.
- ____ (1938-39). *Problems of Psychoanalytic Technique*. Albany, N.Y.: Psychoanalytic Quarterly, Inc., 1941.
- ____ (1945). *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*. New York: Norton.
- Freud, S. (1911). Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning. *Collected Papers*, 4:13-21. New York: Basic Books, 1959.
- ____ (1915). Instincts and Their Vicissitudes. *Collected Papers*, 4:60-83. New York: Basic Books, 1959.
- ____ (1917 [1915]). Mourning and Melancholia. *Collected Papers*, 4:152-170. New York: Basic Books, 1959.
- ____ (1926 [1925]). *The Problem of Anxiety*, tr. H. A. Bunker. New York: Psychoanalytic Quarterly & Norton, 1936.
- Horney, K. (1945). *Our Inner Conflicts*. New York: Norton.
- Lewin, B. D. (1950). *The Psychoanalysis of Elation*. New York:

Norton.

Notes

- [1](#) [Also translated as “craving for stimulus” (Fenichel, 1922-36, p. 292)—Ed.]
- [2](#) This is to some degree in agreement with Karen Horney (1945) who stressed the necessity of analyzing not only the “conflicts,” but also the hopelessness [p. 43].