

Books Reconsidered

*The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence: Anna Freud**

This book was first published in English in 1937. In science fifty years is a long time, longer even than in politics, yet I can recommend psychiatrists to read this traditional psychoanalytic text for many reasons.

In the first place, for sentimental reasons. Anna Freud, daughter of the Master, is no ordinary analyst. Furthermore, her real contribution to psychoanalysis lay in her elucidation of the defences and in the very necessary extension of the work to children. Freudian developmental theory was largely retrospective and inferential, so that the work of Anna Freud was particularly valuable. This book is concerned with both these aspects of her work.

Another reason for reading this book is that the simplicity of the style and the immediacy of the clinical material give a powerful impression of the real nature of defence mechanisms. It is a pleasure to realise that subtle and rich descriptions of largely unconscious mental events can be described without jargon in clear, ordinary, yet striking language. Every psychologist or psychiatrist who has failed to resist the temptation to yield to jargon, however learned, in his reports or papers should read this book.

The content of the book, in my view, is still valuable. It sets out clearly the main defence mechanisms and is richly illustrated with clinical material. I know of no better guide to these unconscious processes. At this juncture, however, I can hear readers' objections that surely Freudian defences are old hat, that psychoanalysis has moved on, that modern analysts and psychiatry in general has outgrown the model of the mind implicit in the notion of defences.

This view of defences is, I think, mistaken. Thus, experimental psychology, which has always been so strongly opposed to psychoanalytic ideas, has

recently become interested in unconscious processing (of information rather than affect), and concomitantly studies of subliminal perception are now more respectable in departments of psychology and there is a considerable body of experimental work relevant to defence mechanisms. I think this experimental evidence is important because it substantiates the psychoanalytic concept of defences.

Defences, given that they can be substantiated, are important for a variety of reasons. Firstly, for eclectic psychiatrists and psychologists they give valuable insights into behaviour. Notions such as denial and reaction formation are useful in unravelling presenting symptoms. Repression, too, is widely used even by workers who would refuse validity to anything psychoanalytic.

Furthermore, they are powerful in understanding complex attitudes and viewpoints in society, ones which often desperately require change. Thus to conceive of racism as projection helps us understand its protagonists and suggests methods of alteration. The violence of anti-vivisectionists, for example, and of football crowds, when seen as displacement becomes less strange. The savagery of those in favour of fierce punishment for sexual offenders and murderers, and the reaction-formation of those troubled by such conflicts, again makes sense.

Defence mechanisms, even for those who are cautious in accepting the concepts of psychoanalysis, have powerful explanatory force; they may be among the most long-lasting and useful ideas in psychoanalysis. Their lucid and elegant explication by Anna Freud seems to me well worthy of reading; this is a classic text.

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