

SIGMUND FREUD
"THE SPLITTING OF THE EGO IN THE DEFENSIVE PROCESS" (1938)

Freud, Sigmund. "The Splitting of the Ego in the Defensive Process." Miscellaneous Papers, 1888-1938. Vol. 5 of Collected Papers. 5 vols. London: Hogarth and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1924-1950. 372-375.

Where there is a conflict within the child between instinctual demands and the reality principle, the child faces choice between satisfying the instinctual demand and acknowledging the danger that such satisfaction represents. "On the one hand, with the help of certain mechanisms he rejects reality and refuses to accept any prohibition; on the other hand, in the same breath he recognises the danger of reality, takes over the fear of that danger as a symptom and tries subsequently to divest himself of the fear" (373). The result is a "rift in the ego which never heals but which increases as time goes on. The two contrary reactions to the conflict persist as the centre-point of a split in the ego" (373) in a way that contradicts any notion of the "synthetic nature of the workings of the ego . . . The synthetic function of the ego . . . subject to particular conditions and is liable to a whole series of disturbances" (373).

For example, a boy who indulges in masturbation may be threatened with castration. The sight of the female genitalia in conjunction with the threat provides for the boy a "dreaded confirmation" (374) and makes him feel that he too could face the same fate. Usually, the boy either faces up to the reality and obeys the prohibition (i.e. he surrenders the satisfaction of the instinct) or he creates a "substitute for the penis which is missed in women, that is to say, a fetish" (374). "So long as he was not obliged to acknowledge that women have lost their penis, there was no need for him to believe the threat that has been made against him . . . so he could proceed with his masturbation undisturbed" (374). Unlike in the case of psychosis, the boy "did not simply contradict his perceptions and hallucinate a penis where there is none to be seen; he transferred the importance of the penis to another part of the body, a procedure in which he was assisted by the mechanism of repression" (375). The boy continues with his masturbation as if he has no fear while developing a symptom that reveals that he nevertheless does recognise the danger. For example, after being threatened with castration by one's father, simultaneously with the creation of the fetish, the boy may develop a fear of the father punishing him, which may, via a regression to an earlier oral stage, assume the form of a fear of being eaten by the father.