Anna Freud, from Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense

CHAPTER 10

A Form of Altruism

The effect of the mechanism of projection is to break the connection between the ideational representatives of dangerous instinctual impulses and the ego. In this it resembles most closely the process of repression. Other defensive processes, such as displacement, reversal or turning round upon the self, affect the instinctual process itself: repression and projection merely prevent its being perceived. In repression the objectionable idea is thrust back into the id, while in projection it is displaced into the outside world. Another point in which projection resembles repression is that it is not associated with any particular anxiety situation but may be motivated equally by objective anxiety, superego anxiety, and instinctual anxiety. Writers of the English school of psychoanalysis maintain that in the earliest months of life, before any repression has taken place, the infant already projects its first aggressive impulses and that this process is of crucial importance for the picture which the child forms

of the world around him and the way in which his personality develops.

At all events the use of the mechanism of projection is quite natural to the ego of little children throughout the earliest period of development. They employ it as a means of repudiating their own activities and wishes when these become dangerous and of laying the responsibility for them at the door of some external agent. A "strange child," an animal, even inanimate objects are all equally useful to the infantile ego for the purpose of disposing of its own faults. It is normal for it constantly to get rid of prohibited impulses and wishes in this way, handing them over in full measure to other people. If these wishes entail punishment by authorities, the ego puts forward as whipping boys the persons upon whom it has projected them; if, on the other hand, the projection was prompted by a sense of guilt, instead of criticizing itself it accuses others. In either case it dissociates itself from its proxies and is excessively intolerant of its judgment of them.

The mechanism of projection disturbs our human relations when we project our own jealousy and attribute to other people our own aggressive acts. But it may work in another way as well, enabling us to form valuable positive attachments and so to consolidate our relations with one another. This normal and less conspicuous form of projection might be described as "altruistic surrender"[1] of our own instinctual impulses in favor of other people.

The following is an example of what I mean.

A young governess reported in her analysis that, as a child, she was possessed by two ideas: she wanted to have

[1] "*Altruistische Abtretung.*" This term was coined by Edward Bibring.

beautiful clothes and a number of children. In her fantasies she was almost obsessionally absorbed in picturing the fulfillment of these two wishes. But there were a great many other things that she demanded as well: she wished to have and to do everything that her much older playmates had and did—indeed, she wanted to do everything better than they and to be admired for her cleverness. Her everlasting cry of "Me too!" was a nuisance to her elders. It was characteristic of her desires that they were at once urgent and insatiable.

What chiefly struck one about her as an adult was her unassuming character and the modesty of the demands which she made on life. When she came to be analyzed, she was unmarried and childless and her dress was rather shabby and inconspicuous. She showed little sign of envy or ambition and would compete with other people only if she were forced to do so by external circumstances. One's first impression was that, as so often happens, she had developed in exactly the opposite direction from what her childhood would have led one to expect and that her wishes had been repressed and replaced in consciousness by reaction formations (unobtrusiveness instead of a craving for admiration and unassumingness instead of ambition). One would have expected to find that the repression was caused by a prohibition of sexuality, extending from her exhibitionistic impulses and the desire for children to the whole of her instinctual life.

But there were features in her behavior at the time when I knew her which contradicted this impression. When her life was examined in more detail, it was clear that her original wishes were affirmed in a manner which seemed scarcely possible if repression had taken place. The repudiation of her own sexuality did not prevent her from taking an affectionate interest in the love life of her women friends and colleagues. She was an enthusiastic matchmaker and many love affairs were confided to her. Although she took no trouble about her own dress, she displayed a lively interest in her friends' clothes. Childless herself, she was devoted to other people's children, as was indicated by her choice of a profession. She might be said to display an unusual degree of concern about her friends' having pretty clothes, being admired, and having children. Similarly, in spite of her own retiring behavior, she was ambitious for the men whom she loved and followed their careers with the utmost interest. It looked as if her own life had been emptied of interests and wishes; up to the time of her analysis it was almost entirely uneventful. Instead of exerting herself to achieve any aims of her own, she expended all her energy in sympathizing with the experiences of people she cared for. She lived in the lives of other people, instead of having any experience of her own.

The analysis of her infantile relations to her mother and father revealed clearly the nature of the inner transformation which had taken place. Her early renunciation of instinct had resulted in the formation of an exceptionally severe superego, which made it impossible for her to gratify her own wishes. Her penis wish, with its offshoots in the shape of ambitious masculine fantasies, was prohibited, so too her feminine wish for children and the desire to display herself, naked or in beautiful clothes, to her father, and to win his admiration. But these impulses were not repressed: she found some proxy in the outside world to serve as a repository for each of them. The vanity of her women friends provided, as it were, a foothold for the projection

of her own vanity, while her libidinal wishes and ambitious fantasies were likewise deposited in the outside world. She projected her prohibited instinctual impulses onto other people, just as the patients did whose cases I quoted in the last chapter. The only difference lay in the way in which these impulses were subsequently dealt with. The patient did not dissociate herself from her proxies but identified herself with them. She showed her sympathy with their wishes and felt that there was an extraordinarily strong bond between these people and herself. Her superego, which condemned a particular instinctual impulse when it related to her own ego, was surprisingly tolerant of it in other people. She gratified her instincts by sharing in the gratification of others, employing for this purpose the mechanisms of projection and identification.[2] The retiring attitude which the prohibition of her impulses caused her to adopt where she herself was concerned vanished when it was a question of fulfilling the same wishes after they had been projected onto someone else. The surrender of her instinctual impulses in favor of other people had thus an egoistic significance, but in her efforts to gratify the impulses of others her behavior could only be called altruistic.

This passing on of her own wishes to other people was characteristic of her whole life and could be traced very clearly in the analysis of little isolated incidents. For instance, at the age of thirteen she secretly fell in love with a friend of her elder sister who had formerly been the special object of her jealousy. She had an idea that, at times, he preferred her to her sister and she was always hoping that he would give some sign of loving her. On one occasion it

[2] Compare in this connection Paul Federn's notion (1936) of "sympathetic" identification and his remarks on this subject.

happened, as it had often happened before, that she found herself slighted. The young man called unexpectedly one evening to take her sister for a walk. In analysis the patient remembered perfectly distinctly how, from having been at first paralyzed with disappointment, she suddenly began to bustle about, fetching things to make her sister "pretty" for her outing and eagerly helping her to get ready. While doing this, the patient was blissfully happy and quite forgot that it was not she, but her sister, who was going out to enjoy herself. She had projected her own desire for love and her craving for admiration onto her rival and, having identified herself with the object of her envy, she enjoyed the fulfillment of her desire.

She went through the same process when frustration rather than fulfillment was in question. She loved to give the children of whom she was in charge good things to eat. On one occasion a mother refused to give up a particular tit-bit for her child. Although the patient herself was, in general, indifferent to the pleasures of the table, the mother's refusal made her furiously indignant. She experienced the frustration of the child's wish as if it were her own, just as in the other case she had rejoiced vicariously in the fulfillment of her sister's desires. It is plain that what she had made over to other people was the right to have her wishes fulfilled without hindrance.

The last trait comes out even more clearly in the experiences of another patient of the same type. A young woman, whose relation to her father-in-law was a particularly friendly one, reacted very strangely to the death of her mother-in-law. The patient, with other women of the family, undertook to dispose of the dead woman's clothes. Unlike all the others, my patient refused to take even a single

garment for her own use. Instead, she set aside one coat as a present for a cousin who was badly off. The mother-in-law's sister wanted to cut off the fur collar of the coat and keep it herself, whereupon the patient, who so far had been quite indifferent and uninterested, flew into a blind rage. She turned the full fury of her usually inhibited aggression upon her aunt and insisted on her protégée's having what she had intended for her. Analysis of this incident showed that the patient's sense of guilt prevented her from appropriating anything which had belonged to her mother-in-law. To take a garment symbolized to her the gratifying of her wish to fill her mother-in-law's place with her father-in-law. She therefore renounced any claim herself and surrendered in favor of her cousin the desire to be her "mother's" successor. Having done so, however, she felt the full force of the wish and its disappointment and was able to insist on its fulfillment, a thing which she could never do when she herself was concerned. The superego, which took up so implacable an attitude toward her own instinctual impulse, assented to the desire when it was no longer associated with the patient's own ego. When the fulfillment of another person's wish was in question, the aggressive behavior which was usually inhibited suddenly became ego syntonic.

Any number of cases similar to those which I have quoted can be observed in everyday life, when once our attention has been called to this combination of projection and identification for purposes of defense. For instance, a young girl, who had scruples of conscience about marrying herself, did all she could to encourage her sister's engagement. A patient, who suffered from obsessional inhibitions in spending any money on herself, had no hesitation in spending

lavishly on presents. Another patient, who was prevented by anxiety from carrying out her plans for travel, was quite unexpectedly pressing in her advice to her friends to do so. In all these cases the patient's identification of herself with a sister, a friend, or the recipient of a gift betrayed itself by a sudden warm sense of a bond between them, which lasted as long as her own wish was being vicariously fulfilled. Jokes about "matchmaking old maids" and "meddlesome onlookers, for whom no stakes are too high"[3] are perennial. The surrender of one's own wishes to another person and the attempt to secure their fulfillment thus vicariously are, indeed, comparable to the interest and pleasure with which one watches a game in which one has no stake oneself.

This defensive process serves two purposes. On the one hand it enables the subject to take a friendly interest in the gratification of other people's instincts and so, indirectly and in spite of the superego's prohibition, to gratify his own, while, on the other, it liberates the inhibited activity and aggression primarily designed to secure the fulfillment of the instinctual wishes in their original relation to himself. The patient who could not lift a finger to gratify her own oral impulses could feel indignant at the mother's refusal to indulge her child, i.e., at oral renunciation imposed on someone else. The daughter-in-law who was prohibited from claiming the rights of the dead wife felt it permissible to defend the symbolic right of another with the full force of her aggression. An employee who would never venture to ask for a raise in salary for herself suddenly besieged the manageress with demands that one of her fellow workers should have her rights. Analysis of such situations shows

[3] *"Kiebitze, denen kein Spiel zu hoch ist."*

that this defensive process has its origin in the infantile conflict with parental authority about some form of instinctual gratification. Aggressive impulses against the mother, prohibited so long as it is a question of fulfilling the subject's own wishes, are given rein when the wishes are ostensibly those of someone else. The most familiar representative of this type of person is the public benefactor, who with the utmost aggressiveness and energy demands money from one set of people in order to give it to another. Perhaps the most extreme instance is that of the assassin who, in the name of the oppressed, murders the oppressor. The object against which the liberated aggression is directed is invariably the representative of the authority which imposed renunciation of instinct on the subject in infancy.

Various factors determine the selection of the object in favor of whom instinctual impulses are surrendered. Possibly the perception of the prohibited impulse in another person is sufficient to suggest to the ego that here is an opportunity for projection. In the case of the patient who assisted in the disposal of her mother-in-law's property, the fact that the vicarious figure was not a near relation was a guarantee of the harmlessness of the wish which, when cherished by the patient herself, represented her incestuous impulses. In most cases the substitute has once been the object of envy. The altruistic governess in my first example displaced her ambitious fantasies onto her men friends and her libidinal wishes onto her women friends. The former succeeded to her affection for her father and her big brother, both of whom had been the object of her penis envy, while the latter represented the sister upon whom, at

a rather later period of childhood, that envy was displaced in the form of envy of her beauty. The patient felt that the fact that she was a girl prevented her from achieving her ambitions and, at the same time, that she was not even a pretty enough girl really to be attractive to men. In her disappointment with herself she displaced her wishes onto objects who she felt were better qualified to fulfill them. Her men friends were vicariously to achieve for her in professional life that which she herself could never achieve, and the girls who were better-looking than herself were to do the same in the sphere of love. Her altruistic surrender was a method of overcoming her narcissistic mortification.

This surrender of instinctual wishes to an object better qualified to fulfill them often determines the relation of a girl to some man whom she chooses to represent her—to the detriment of any true object relation. On the grounds of this "altruistic" attachment she expects him to carry out the projects in which she believes herself to be handicapped by her sex: for instance, she wants him to lead the life of a student or to adopt a particular profession or to become famous or rich in her place. In such cases egoism and altruism may be blended in very various proportions. We know that parents sometimes delegate to their children their projects for their own lives, in a manner at once altruistic and egoistic. It is as if they hoped through the child, whom they regard as better qualified for the purpose than themselves, to wrest from life the fulfillment of the ambitions which they themselves have failed to realize. Perhaps even the purely altruistic relation of a mother to her son is largely determined by such a surrender of her own wishes to the object whose sex makes him "better qualified" to carry

them out. A man's success in life does, indeed, go far to compensate the women of his family for the renunciation of their own ambitions.

The finest and most detailed study of this altruistic surrender is to be found in Edmond Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The hero of the play is a historical figure, a French nobleman of the seventeenth century, a poet and officer of the Guards, famous for his intellect and valor but handicapped in his wooing of women by a peculiarly ugly nose. He falls in love with his beautiful cousin, Roxane, but, conscious of his ugliness, he at once resigns every hope of winning her. Instead of using his formidable skill as a fencer to keep all rivals at a distance, he surrenders his own aspirations to her love in favor of a man better looking than himself. Having made this renunciation, he devotes his strength, his courage, and his brains to the service of this more fortunate lover and does all he can to help him to attain his desire. The climax of the play is a scene at night, under the balcony of the woman whom both men love. Cyrano whispers to his rival the words with which to win her. Then he takes the other's place in the dark and speaks for him, forgetting in the ardor of his wooing that he himself is not the wooer and only at the last moment falling back into his attitude of surrender when the suit of Christian, the handsome lover, is accepted and he goes up to the balcony to embrace his love. Cyrano becomes more and more devoted to his rival and in battle tries to save Christian's life rather than his own. When this vicarious figure is taken from him by death, he feels that it is not permissible for him to woo Roxane. That the poet is depicting in Cyrano's "altruism" something more than a strange love adventure is clear from the parallel which he draws between Cyrano's love life and his fate as a poet. Just as Christian woos Roxane with the help of Cyrano's poems and letters, writers like Corneille, Molière, and Swift borrow whole scenes from his unknown works, thus enhancing their own fame. In the play Cyrano accepts this fate. He is as ready to lend his words to Christian, who is handsomer than himself, as to Molière, who is a greater genius. The personal defect which he thinks renders him contemptible makes him feel that the others who are preferred to himself are better qualified than he to realize his wish fantasies.

In conclusion, we may for a moment study the notion of altruistic surrender from another angle, namely, in its relation to the fear of death. Anyone who has very largely projected his instinctual impulses onto other people knows nothing of this fear. In the moment of danger his ego is not really concerned for his own life. He experiences instead excessive concern and anxiety for the lives of his love objects. Observation shows that these objects, whose safety is so vital to him, are the vicarious figures upon whom he has displaced his instinctual wishes. For instance, the young governess, whose case I have described, suffered from quite excessive anxiety about the safety of her friends in pregnancy and childbirth. Again, as is shown in the sketch which I have given, Cyrano sets Christian's safety in battle far above his own. It would be a mistake to suppose that this is a question of suppressed rivalry breaking through in death wishes, which are then warded off. Analysis shows that both the anxiety and the absence of anxiety are due rather to the subject's feeling that his own life is worth living and preserving only insofar as there is opportunity in it for the gratification of his instincts. When his impulses have been surrendered in favor of other people, their lives

become precious rather than his own. The death of the vicarious figure means—as Christian's death meant for Cyrano—the destruction of all hope of fulfillment.

It was only after analysis, when she happened to fall ill, that the young governess discovered that the thought of dying was painful to her. To her own surprise she found that she ardently desired to live long enough to furnish her new home and to pass an examination which would secure her promotion in her profession. Her home and the examination signified, though in a sublimated form, the fulfillment of instinctual wishes which analysis had enabled her to relate once more to her own life.[4]

[4] There is an obvious similarity between the situation in altruistic surrender and the conditions which determine male homosexuality. The homosexual makes over his claim on his mother's love to a younger brother whom he has previously envied. It is true that he proceeds to satisfy this demand himself by adopting a maternal attitude, i.e., by enjoying both the active and the passive side of the relation between mother and son. It is difficult to determine how far this process contributed to the various forms of altruistic surrender which I have described. Cyrano and the altruistic young governess must both have derived pleasure from this mechanism even before they could rejoice vicariously in the successes of their substitutes. Their rapture of giving and helping shows that the surrender is in itself a gratification of instinct. As in the process of identification with the aggressor, passivity is transformed into activity, narcissistic mortification is compensated for by the sense of power associated with the role of benefactor, while the passive experience of frustration finds compensation in the active conferring of happiness on others.

It remains an open question whether there is such a thing as a genuinely altruistic relation to one's fellowmen, in which the gratification of one's own instinct plays no part at all, even in some displaced and sublimated form. In any case it is certain that projection and identification are not the only means of acquiring an attitude which has every appearance of altruism; for instance, another and easy route to the same goal is by way of the various forms of masochism.