

The Origins of Body Psychotherapy

The Concept of Character from Freud to Reich

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*In 1925, Wilhelm Reich published his first psychoanalytic monograph, *Der triebhafte Charakter* (The impulsive character). Surely one of the most important psychoanalytic that year, Reich's clinical portrait of the impulsive character was a path-breaking study of what we today call the borderline personality, and laid the conceptual foundation for his later venture into character analysis of body postures and eventually the emotional expressions of the body. Today, the original Freudian theoretical understanding of character is usually forgotten or overlooked, and replaced by a simpler presentation of expression through the body. This paper revisits the original development of the concept of character from Freud to Reich.*

At the organizational as well as theoretical level, psychoanalysis had a golden age in the mid-twenties. By 1925, it was no longer battling for recognition, but was a firmly established professional community, organized as an international association with branches in five different countries (Austria, Germany, Hungary, Britain, and the Netherlands).¹ Freud's scientific and psychiatric project now had its own publishing house, its own journals in German and English, and its own clinics in Berlin and Vienna. It attracted pupils and patients from many countries in Europe and the United States. Lectures, courses, and seminars were held on the premises of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society (*Der Wiener Psychoanalytischen Vereinigung*), at Pelikangasse 18, and the Vienna Outpatient Polyclinic, which was established May 22, 1922 and led by Eduard Hitschmann and Wilhelm Reich, where medical treatment was provided for poor and destitute people.² Advice on sexual hygiene, contraception, and birth control, as well as immediate psychological counseling and assistance, were provided free of charge for the poor. Normally, analysts would devote two to three hours every week to work in the clinic. Reich would also occasionally collect contributions from colleagues to support its operation.

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Freud turns from symptom to character

Two major theoretical developments emerged in the psychoanalytic community in the early to mid-twenties. First, Freud's formulation

1. Originally suggested by Sandor Ferenczi, the IPA's first president was C. G. Jung, a choice later regretted by Freud, who thereafter let the presidency alternate between the members of the "secret committee." Ferenczi himself never became president, to his own regret, although Freud urged him to accept the post in Ferenczi's last year of life (1933). For more on Freud's secret committee, see Phyllis Grosskurth (1991): *The Secret Ring. Freud's Inner Circle and the politics of Psychoanalysis*, Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley.

2. For the history of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Polyclinic, where Eduard Hitschmann and Wilhelm Reich played such central roles, see Elizabeth Ann Danto (2005): *Freud's Free Clinics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

of the faculties of mind into the realms of the ego (*das Ich*), the superego (*das Über-Ich*), and the id (*das Es*), transformed a lot of psychoanalytic theory and general discourse. The second trend, connected to the first, were the attempts at extending psychoanalytic therapy into an analysis of resistance, the sum total of which was seen as a person's *character*. In his autobiography, Richard Sterba (1982) recalled how this transition took place at the beginning of the 1920s in the psychoanalytic community. The older generation of analysts were used to Freud's topographic model of the mind: consciousness as the tip of the iceberg, with most of the ice being like the subconscious. Beginning with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921), Freud introduced the model of the mind as the *ego*, *super-ego*, and *id*. This new model encompassed not only the tension between a rational ego and an irrational unconscious, but aimed at understanding the dynamic tension within the rational domain itself: the *Ich* (ego) and its moral censor, the *Über-Ich* (clumsily translated as the superego). From here on, the ego would be seen as a battleground between *desire* and *resistance*.

In his seminal work *The Ego and the Id*, Freud elaborated upon a point made in an earlier paper, where he explained the painful condition of *melancholia* by supposing that

...in those suffering from it, an object which was lost has been reinstated within the ego; that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification. When this explanation was first proposed, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of the process and did not know how common and typical it is. Since then, we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken on by the ego, and that it contributes materially towards building up what is called *character*.³

This important passage shows how Freud opened an entirely new vista of possible new revelations to psychoanalytic research. Freud now zoomed in on the process of establishing object relations, from the very first bonds between child and parents, and the ambivalence and dynamic tensions connected with this process, aiming at showing how these early object-relations formed adult character. This was Freud's first mention of character as part of the psychoanalytic realm; it would lead

to a new direction in psychoanalysis, furthered by Karl Abraham, Sandor Ferenczi, Otto Rank, Edward Glover, and eventually, perhaps above all, Wilhelm Reich.⁴

Object relations and character formation

The starting point for understanding character was typically to explore the love objects and object relations. A typical resolution of the Oedipus complex was that the boy broke with the father to secure the bond with the mother, but thereby compensated for the loss of the father as a love object by *incorporating* his masculine traits and *identifying* with him; the girl likewise became more feminine in the process of breaking with the mother in order to approach the father as a love object. But these typical patterns were only two of a myriad of possible specific outcomes of early object relations. A woman breaking with her father as a love object could compensate for the loss by interjecting and identifying with his masculine traits, thus becoming both more father-like and masculine as a consequence of feeling rejected by him and breaking with him as a love-object.⁵ And vice versa: a man breaking with his mother as a love object could compensate by adopting a feminine attitude. Wilhelm Reich would later formulate this process in programmatic terms: "We tend to identify with the most frustrating parent."⁶

The study of tension between the ego and the superego thus fundamentally changed the work of psychoanalysts – a change that had only just begun to take hold when Reich published his first monograph in 1925. While the first generation of analysts had been taught to be "libido detectives," as Sterba put it, adhering to Freud's dictum that "the analyst has to follow the libido into its hideouts," the new generation, in contrast, had to accept that the ego itself was part of the repressive mechanism, and this innovation led to increased awareness of transference dynamics and resistance.

In comparing all the different aspects of psychoanalytic training open to a young candidate in the early 1920s and 30s, Sterba concluded: "The most instructive part of the curriculum for me remained the biweekly seminar of continuous case presentations conducted by Wilhelm Reich."⁷ According to Sterba (who later dissociated

3. Sigmund Freud (1923) *The Ego and the Id*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX. London: The Hogarth Press, p. 28.

4. See e.g. Sandor Ferenczi (1920): "Weiterer Ausbau der 'Aktiven Technik' in der Psychoanalyse" in *Bausteine Psychoan.*, vol. II, Vienna: Int. Psa. Verlag; Otto Rank (1923): *Entwicklungsziehe der Psychoanalyse*, Vienna: Int. Psa. Verlag; Karl Abraham (1925): "Psychoanalytic Studies on Character Development", Berlin; Edward Glover (1924): "Notes on Oral Character Formation" *On the Early Development of Mind*, Madison, CT, International Universities Press, 1956; Wilhelm Reich (1925) *Der Triebhafte Charakter*, Vienna: Psychoanalytischer Verlag; (1933) *Charakteranalyse*, Berlin.

5. In 1920, Freud had shown precisely such a process in his famous paper, *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality*, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 1: 125–49.

6. Wilhelm Reich (1931). *The Characterological Mastery of the Oedipus Complex*, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 12: 452–67.

7. Richard Sterba (1982). *Reminiscences of a Viennese Psychoanalyst*, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, p. 31.

from Reich), Reich was “an impressive personality full of youthful intensity. His manner of speaking was forceful; he expressed himself well and decisively. He had an unusual flair for psychic dynamics. His clinical astuteness and technical skill made him an excellent teacher, and his technical seminar was so instructive that many of the older members of the society attended it regularly.”⁸ This differed from the Kinderseminar gathering of the “second generation” of younger analysts (Kinder), a seminar the older members avoided. The old-guard analyst Eduard Hitschmann forbade Sterba from attending the Kinderseminar.

In her biography of Anna Freud, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl acknowledges Wilhelm Reich’s rise to prominence in the Vienna Society as “the most swift” in his generation.⁹ Through his work as vice-director at the Psychoanalytic Clinic and the Wagner-Jauregg-Clinic, Reich acquired strong authority in the clinical therapeutic field, and reported case studies of a nature rarely before seen among analysts. Reich focused his energy on gathering clinical material from the psychiatric ward at the Wagner-Jauregg clinic, combined with innovative theoretical contributions that resulted in one of the most important psychoanalytic publications in 1925, namely *The Impulsive Character. A Psychoanalytic Study of Ego Pathology (Der triebhafte Charakter)*.

Reich expressed an early wish to write a treatise on psychoanalytic technique, which was lacking in the early twenties.

He had proposed this idea to Freud in 1924, who responded in a letter dated June 26, 1924. Freud advised Reich against embarking on such a project at the present time:

I respect your motive, and I also do not doubt your capacity to carry out your undertaking. But I see the following difficulties which I cannot conceal from you.

- a) Psychoanalytic therapy has just now been set in motion by the innovations of Ferenczi and Rank.

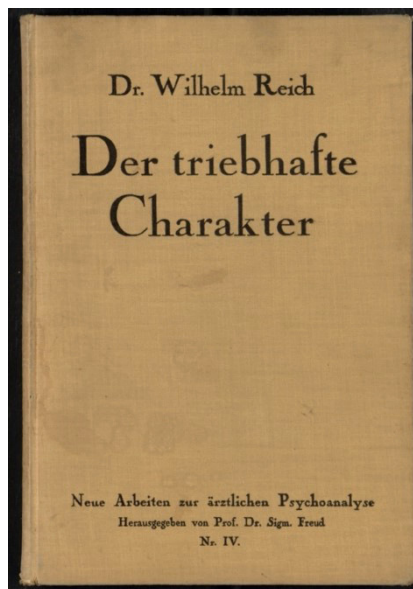
It would not be the right time to attempt a somewhat rounded presentation.

- b) No other realm of psychoanalysis places such high demands on the experience of the analyst if he wishes to say more than what is usual.
- c) A text on psychoanalytic technique, probably similar to what you have in mind, by Dr. H. Sachs is now being published, consisting of the lectures which he delivered before the Congress.

Mit herzlichen Grüßen, Ihr Freud¹⁰

Approaching its centennial, *The Impulsive Character* is a remarkably fascinating read today, exploring what we today speak of as “borderline cases” or latent schizophrenics. Providing both an overview of the psychoanalytic literature on character analysis and character disorders, as well as an outline of several case studies Reich had treated in therapy, it broke new ground. Significantly, Reich wanted to enlarge the scope of psychoanalysis to include schizophrenic patients and narcissistic disorders, normally thought unfit for analytic treatment, as narcissism would preclude a beneficial transference situation. Many of the cases described in this monograph were quite seriously disturbed individuals who Reich had treated through his work at the Wagner-Jauregg clinic, which were far more severe than the general neurotics encountered in private practice:

A twenty-six year old single female came to the psychoanalytic clinic because of continual sexual excitation. She longed for satisfaction but could feel nothing during intercourse. She would lie there ‘tense’ and ‘listening for the satisfaction to come.’ The slightest bodily movement would dispel every upcoming pleasure sensation. She also suffered from insomnia, anxiety states, and compulsive masturbation. She would masturbate with a knife handle up to ten times a day, reach a high pitch of excitement, then stop the friction in order to avoid con-



8. *Ibid.*

9. Young-Bruehl (1989): *Anna Freud. A Biography*, Yale University Press, p. 157.

10. Sigmund Freud in letter to Wilhelm Reich, June 26, 1924, Copy in archives of the British Institute of Psycho-Analysis, Maida Vale, London, CFE/F20/01. I consulted the archives, but these letters have since been published in an article by Elizabeth Ann Danto (2011) “An Anxious Attachment: Letters from Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Reich”, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 47:2, 155-166, DOI: 10.1080/00107530.2011.10746448

summation. She would do this to exhaustion, until, finally, she would have no climax at all, or she would deliberately make her vagina bleed and derive satisfaction from the accompanying sadistic fantasies.¹¹

The woman spoke with her vagina during masturbation, letting the vagina be a little girl “Lotte,” and herself adopting the role of the strict mother. Through the analysis, Reich revealed a “fantasy (or dark memory)” of her being raped by two tenants in her fourth year of life. The upsetting nature of such a violent assault had disturbed her sexual life altogether, and she was tormented by insatiable sexual desires, combined with guilt feelings and self-disgust. Her mother had once thrown a knife after her when she found her daughter masturbating; this had in turn created the obsessive use of the knife as masturbatory instrument. She was masturbating and at the same acting as the mother, punishing herself for her lewdness.

Reich provided clinical examples of two main types of psychiatric cases: compulsive neurotics, and what he termed impulsive characters. Although seemingly completely different types – the former being obsessively tidy, meticulous, and overly conscientious, the latter consisting of borderline cases prone to criminal behavior, sadism or masochism, juvenile delinquency, etc. – they shared a basic similarity, according to Reich. The two types both started with ambivalent feelings toward their parents or primary nurturing relations.

Their main difference was found in the solution to the ambivalence: whereas the compulsive neurotic reacted *against* the ambivalence (e.g., turning a hateful impulse into its opposite, into love), the impulsive character would have regularly *kept* the original ambivalent feelings, or hate would predominate. Whereas the compulsive neurotic in turn developed a very strict superego, a severe moral censor releasing guilt feelings whenever the hateful impulses threatened to break through, the impulsive character had, as it were, isolated the superego, Reich claimed – or managed to neutralize it and dissociate from it. Thus, whereas the compulsive neurotic struggled with sadistic impulses accompanied by guilt, the impulsive character experienced sadistic impulses with no guilt. Similarly, the impulsive character developed an unscrupulous character, while the compulsive neurotic became overly conscientious, often with ascetic ideals.

Freud was thrilled with the book, especially the clinical portion. Clinical work formed an important source of Reich’s authority; few other analysts could point to such wide-ranging clinical experience, which he had

acquired both through his work at the Wagner-Jauregg clinic, and above all at the Psychoanalytic Polyclinic. As the cases in these clinics were often far more serious than those seen in private practice, Reich’s material consisted of many striking examples of psychotic illness – cases previously rare in the psychoanalytic literature. Freud sent an enthusiastic letter after reading the manuscript:

Vienna 14/12/24

Dear Doctor!

I have read without delay the manuscript sent to me and am glad to inform you that nothing stands in the way of its acceptance and publication. Regarding the first sections, I have to criticize the fact that they lack clearness and contain an excess of formulations of problems. We know indeed all that is still unknown to us, and it is of little help if we gather together these problems as long as we cannot solve them. The two last sections, on the other hand, contain very valuable material, are clear, and, I hope, also correct. You confirm the expectation which I once expressed, that the relationships between Ego and Super-ego will be a realm of research for us similar to that hitherto studied alone between the person (Ego + Super-ego) and the object. I leave unanswered the questions of whether the terms “triebhaftige Charakter” (impulsive character) and “Isolated Super-Ego” will prove useful in the final analysis. In any case, your work signifies an important step forward in the knowledge of the forms of illness which perhaps reach their culmination in moral insanity.

Mit herzlichen Grüßen, Ihr
Freud¹²

As a very early study of borderline cases in psychiatric literature, central objects of Reich’s later research focus are already to be found in this work: the development of character through defensive reactions between the ego and superego, and an attempt at broadening psychoanalytic therapy into the realm of narcissistic disorders. Among the very few psychoanalysts who in recent decades have emphasized the importance and neglected influence of Reich’s first publication, David Livingstone Smith points to the impulsive character as a work that broke new ground in psychoanalytic theory on what would later be called the borderline personality disorder.¹³ Smith also points to a significant convergence in this work between Reich and Melanie Klein, who would later have a profound impact on British psychoanalysis. Klein attended a lecture Reich delivered in Berlin in 1925, where he claimed that impulsive characters

11. Wilhelm Reich (1925): *Der triebhafte character*, Wien Psychoanalytischer Verlag 1925. English translation in *The impulsive character and other writings*, New American Library, Times Mirror, New York, 1974, p. 49–50.

12. Sigmund Freud in letter to Wilhelm Reich, December 14, 1924, *Archives of the British Psychoanalytic Society*, CFE/F20/02b

13. David L. Smith (1999): *Approaching Psychoanalysis*, London: Karnac Books.

struggle with a savage, “merely organ” or part-object superego formed shortly after birth – a notion that would be central to Klein’s later reformulations of Freudian theory.¹⁴ Although neither Reich nor his close friend Otto Fenichel had strong ties with Melanie Klein and her school (they were not particularly impressed with Klein’s work, as is clear from Fenichel’s *Rundbriefe*), it is clear that many aspects of Reich’s work are echoed in Klein’s writings, just as his influence on his generation of analysts in general is underrated. During the seven years from 1920 to 1927, Wilhelm Reich was a clear, rising star in the psychoanalytic movement, and Sigmund Freud regarded him as one of the very best in his generation. In 1927, he wrote to Mira Oberholzer that he considered Reich one of the most skillful, eager, and diligent analysts in Vienna [*einer der tüchtigsten, eifrigsten und strebsamsten Analytiker in Wien*].¹⁵ According to Reich, Freud nodded towards the audience at the Seventh Psychoanalytic Congress in Berlin and said to Reich in a low voice: “You see all these people? How many do

you think can analyze, can really analyze?” There were 122 present in the audience. Freud smiled and held up five fingers.¹⁶

Reich’s leadership of the Vienna Technical Seminar from 1924 to 1930 led to the first systematic case presentations, and the first clinical seminar and supervision group. In these meetings, Reich’s focus on character and resistance clarified a coherent and structural approach to clinical procedure. His work on the impulsive character attacks many of the problems that would pervade his later writings; the development of character was due partly to a resolution of Oedipal tensions and conflicts, partly as a defense pattern, and all forms of defenses could eventually stiffen into a permanent behavioral pattern, which Reich later termed character armor [*Charakterpanzer*], and which made him focus on muscle tension and rigidity as defence. Long forgotten today, this discussion on ego relations and object relations formed the theoretical origins of many later schools of body psychotherapy.



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14. Smith (1999): *Ibid.*

15. Sigmund Freud in letter to Mira Oberholzer August 2, 1927, *Archives of the Freud Museum*, Maresfield Gardens, London.

16. Mary Boyd Higgins and Chester Raphael (eds), *Reich speaks of Freud*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, p. 67.