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The Illusion of Personal Individuality†

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WHEN ONE has the notion of studying personality before him, the ideas of maturation, growth, and development ought certainly never to be too far from consciousness. And if you will have those ideas in mind at the beginning, I will avoid talking about them for some time.

A word that is much more common in all discussions of personality is adjustment, and I would like to state the idea of this paper as a special use of the term adjustment; namely, the adjustment of potentialities to necessities—just as, for example, each person who is going to be a full-fledged person very early adjusts his potentialities for learning to do tricks with his speech apparatus, to the overweening necessity of learning the mother tongue of his family. Now the learning of language, which is terribly important in any approach to the study of personality on a general scale, is the classical and perhaps the most important single instance of adjustment in the sense of an immensely capable organism—the vast potentialities of which have perhaps never been adequately envisaged, much less explored—adjusting itself to the necessity for verbal communication with significant people.

Another great word in thinking about personality is experience, and I have never found any better definition of experience than that which is, I believe, embalmed as the first meaning of the term in all good English dictionaries: experience is anything lived, undergone, or the like. But to add slightly to this very general notion, let me say that experience can usefully be considered as of two kinds: *direct* experience, in which you are directly undergoing, living, or the like; and *mediate* experience, in which that which has been previously under-

gone or lived is passed in review. Another form of the mediate experience occurs when we take select excerpts from the past and string them together on the basis of probability, in which case we are engaged in prospective experience, commonly called foresight. Now, experience is quite clearly susceptible of consideration from another standpoint; namely, what happens in awareness, consciousness, or in what we like to term our mental life. And from this standpoint, experience is either noted or unnoticed or, in the first case, formulated. In other words, we note many things which we do not formulate; that is, about which we do not develop clear ideas of what happened to us. And there is also experience which we do not notice but which can be demonstrated to have occurred in explaining subsequent events.

All of us have developed some view of the world, and in general the routes over which we have moved in developing these views of the world are capable of being put under three rubrics. These rubrics that I shall use are terms with pretty definite meaning in certain biological fields, and I am using these terms in a much more general sense; but I think you will see that they have some justification. They are viewpoints. We develop our views of the world from the viewpoint of *morphology*, of our understanding of the way that material is organized; and from *physiology*, in which we gradually come

† *Editor's note:* The William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation has established a committee charged with the responsibility for editing the numerous unpublished papers of Harry Stack Sullivan, and this paper is the first to be edited by the committee. The JOURNAL expects to publish such papers from time to time.

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to understand how functional activity, the working of things, is organized; and *ecology*, in which we finally begin to see that materials interpenetrate and that materials and activity are related in some more or less enduring way. So, from these three standpoints—the organization of material things, the way that activity is or the pattern that activities tend to follow, and the interpretation and interrelation of the whole—we gradually develop our views of the world. I should say that these views are, in their currently best form, either notions of a pluralist universe or notions along the line of the doctrine of organism, which is, while it sounds monistic, very different indeed from any monistic philosophy. Now a pluralist universe is probably not unassimilable to the doctrine of organism, but be that as it may. Wherever we have a great deal of data assembled and free ourselves from prejudices that obscure our study of that data, we discover that there are the three aspects that I have already mentioned, including very importantly the interrelation, the interdependence of this and that.

A classical instance of this interdependence is the organism's relation with oxygen. Every seventh-grade grammar school boy, I am sure, knows that oxygen is a gas which is an ingredient of the atmosphere and that this gas is in some fashion vital to life. It is a very clever seventh-grade boy who knows that the oxygen gets out of the atmosphere into the body and is presently returned to the atmosphere in the shape of carbon dioxide; but what very few seventh-grade pupils know, and some fourth-grade medical students have not yet quite captured, is the notion that there is very little storage of oxygen and that life is dependent on the continual, almost uninterrupted, exchange between the oxygen of the atmosphere, the oxygen in the body, the carbon dioxide in the body and in the atmosphere. They interpenetrate through marvelously capable cells in the lungs, and the balance of the oxygen in the body is very delicately adjusted by a most elaborate apparatus. But life without an atmosphere including oxygen is not possible for man, and, similarly,

an atmosphere which could not receive or would not take the oxygen which we have processed would rapidly prove fatal. There is a continuous interchange which can be called communal existence, if you please, of the organism and its necessary environment.

In this development of a world view, nearly all of us start—not because it is the first thing that intrudes itself upon us but it is the first thing that we can grasp—with some element of the physicochemical world, the world of the nonliving objects and their relations. And then we go from that to the idea of the biological world, the world of the living, living objects and their relations, realizing, as I say, certainly from the seventh grade onward, that the biological world requires some part of the physicochemical world to live. And only as we get well along, do we contemplate the world of people, although they are the first things that impress themselves upon us; and it is at this point—the field of the psychiatrist's interest, the social scientist's interest, the educator's, the lawyer's, and so on—that views of the world are most poignantly deficient in breadth, or depth, or both. All these worlds are encountered through their significant relation with us in our roles of experiencers and formulators. It is probably true that we can experience almost anything for an indefinite length of time; and if we do not fortunately run it through the process which we call formulating, we don't really know what we are doing—although we may get more and more clever at eluding unpleasantness, and so on—and we certainly can't tell our children about it. So the double role of undergoing or living through things and having more or less descriptive and defining thoughts or formulae is the common route by which these various aspects of the universe—the various worlds, if you please—come to be encountered. Because we know of the universe by way of our experience and according to the skill of our formulating faculties, it becomes clear to the thoughtful that whatever the perduring, the long-continuing entities of the universe may be, and however curious

their relations may be, in some respects these will forever be unknown to us because we have no channels for experiencing these things and therefore nothing to formulate. And more in keeping with what I intend to talk about in this paper, the current views which are entertained about any of these worlds and their relations are almost inevitably going to undergo change, the rapidity of change in these views probably being greatest in the world of people and slowest in the physicochemical world with which serious people have been seriously concerned for the longest time.

Now, there is a word which is not particularly an ingredient of common speech but has long since delighted me—it pleased Whitehead also; so at least I am in good company for the moment. I believe that the word in its parental Greek tongue meant “knot”; the word I mean is *nexus*, the place where things get together and are snarled up or tangled. The nexus of all this experience by which we form views of the world, the universe, our place in it, and so on, is always in the experience of me-and-my-mind, or you-and-your-mind if you feel very separate from me. And in this you-and-your-mind there are some things which are fairly clearly capable of being named which go on in experiencing and formulating. We analyze and understand the past, and to understand means that we see certain relations in certain parts of it with the still earlier past, which has gradually taken on personal meaning. We symbolize and formulate the present—and by symbolize we mean we relate it to things, thought forms, words, and so on, which will stand for it. With this conversion of something—which for all I know may be unique—into more or less familiar things that stand for it, one becomes able to throw it into statements and conclusions, to deduce relationships which may not have been clear in the experience, and so on and so forth. And as I said before, we project the future by juggling with past symbolizations, understandings, and present formulations in terms of probable future events. To the extent that we project

well—that is, we are careful in deciding the probabilities of certain courses of events—we sometimes exercise foresight and are prepared for what happens.

The mind—you know I am now talking about me-and-my-mind or you-and-your-mind—the mind is phenomenologically coterminous with consciousness; that is, so far as anything that you can observe or can get anyone else to observe about your mind or his mind, anything that can be sensed and perceived, will be of the same extent as the state of mind called consciousness; and the various ingredients, the contents of consciousness, which cover a wonderful bunch of alleged or real entities, are what one ordinarily means when he talks about his “mental life.” In this we find a marvelous congeries of things, some things being just terms invented by psychologists, and others being such anciently associated labels that we may assume that they pertain to things: sensations; perceptions; feelings of pleasantness and unpleasantness; sundry wishes, desires, and personal needs; beliefs and ideas, of various orders of abstraction—some that refer to very concrete entities, some that refer to classes of entities, some that refer to some totality of all entities, such as the idea of the universe; thoughts and reveries; and even recollected dreams. Besides these, we find rather less clear, less easily communicable, less easily describable ingredients, such as “the exercise of choice,” the manifestation of volition, the state of having intention—always good if you are anything like fully human—and the manifestation of decision; and occasionally, of course, indecision, perplexity, and that peculiarly unpleasant experience which is properly called anxiety—about which, if I am lucky, I will have quite a bit to say presently. And most exciting of all the things that one finds in one’s mind is the feeling of power and effectiveness which is connected with objectifying “the mental life,” which is ordinarily done by thoughts or remarks about I-and-myself.

Now perhaps all of you or most of you are so familiar with thinking about I-and-

myself that you don't realize how delightfully powerful you feel many times when the time comes to say, "I believe so and so." That reaches out and changes things, and only disagreeable people fail to be swayed by the power that you are experiencing and indicating, so that while you-and-your-mind are, so far as phenomena are concerned, coterminous with consciousness, I-and-myself are rather more powerful, more forceful entities, you see, which are in fact somewhat slower in appearing in life than is me-and-myself. The way the "myself" part—you know, that sort of Old Dog Tray that follows along—fits into life gets to be obscure when a patient tells you, "Well, I shall hold myself to doing it." Now I have often tried to picture this process and usually experience a mild tail spin. But it is certainly very reassuring to the patient to announce that he is going to hold himself to something or other, or force himself to do something or other; it's really the most safe and therefore the most sane field in which to exercise power when you don't have it.

In this audience it is scarcely necessary to stress the fact that the content of consciousness, the mental life to which people are really referring when they talk about their minds, is entirely inadequate to account for events, or to exercise very powerful influence directly on the course of events, or even actually to control the contents of consciousness. And for a very long time the science of mind, psychology, was in rather a rum position because its events—in contradistinction to those of the respectable, natural scientific world and even in rather inferior contrast to the growing world of biological knowledge—were discrete and didn't follow each other with due proper copulae and connections but instead were erratic and unpredictable. It is hard to build a science where things have gaps between them. Who knows what's in the gap? And so, as I say, psychology wasn't doing very well with the conscious life as a subject matter for scientific formulation. But things changed a great deal when, through Freud's and Breuer's careful observations

and Freud's brilliant thinking, it became possible to postulate the unconscious. The unconscious, from the way I have actually presented the thing, is quite clearly that which cannot be experienced directly, which fills all the gaps in the mental life. In that rather broad sense, the postulate of the unconscious has, so far as I know, nothing in the world the matter with it. As soon as you begin to arrange the furniture in something that cannot be directly experienced, you are engaged in a work that requires more than parlor magic and you are apt to be embarrassed by some skeptic. And so I say, the postulate of the unconscious as that which fills the gaps explains the discontinuity in the conscious life; that's bully, but don't be tempted to tell the world all about the unconscious because someone is almost certain to ask you how you found out.

One reason why people were not content to realize that the unconscious was a hypothesis which was immensely useful is that in this Western world of ours, with its vast success from technology, it has become extremely important for one's feeling of personal prestige that he shall discriminate the reasonable and rational; and in case he finds himself doing anything in which he might be thought to be unreasonable or irrational, he just devotes, oh, almost any necessary portion of the rest of his life to demonstrating that he was both reasonable and rational. So, as I say, since it is one of the great and specious values of this Western world of ours to look upon the reasonable and the rational as very dignified compared with all the rest of the things that can be said about behavior, it isn't enough to have hit upon a splendid hypothesis and arranged a great many experiments and observations to demonstrate that the hypothesis is not just an intellectual convenience but actually gives a sort of common explanatory pattern for many things which can be observed once there is something postulated to fill the discontinuity. Instead of that one proceeds to make the unconscious—that not susceptible to direct experience—full of reason-

able irrationalities and irrational reasonablenesses, and so on, and thereby, I believe, makes oneself magnificently and completely a clown.

Even in the comparatively simple realm of the nonliving some people have long since learned to avoid explanations that offer no possibility of any operational validation, explanations that cannot be converted into any type of act or experiment that will prove whether they are right or wrong, or whether they are to some extent right or to some extent wrong. Physics, for example, has found that it could get itself into wonderful entanglements as long as there was no way of discovering quite what it was talking about. But if, on the other hand, before uttering, giving voice, it thought, "Well, now how could one do something to demonstrate whether this term is empty or, at least likely, full of reference to the world"—as soon as that attitude was developed, physics began to make remarkable sense in its newly expanded world of atomic physics, in which the good old rules did not apply; rules on which we were educated and on which most technology, other than electronics, is based. As I say, once this new world of the quantum had been discovered, a great deal of abstruse nonsense was taught and finally compelled physicists to realize that if they couldn't devise some operation that had a bearing on their concept, they had best be quiet. That is really quite a good rule, I think, in our very much more complicated, much more treacherous field in which prejudice and wisdom are almost indistinguishable—unless of course the wisdom is in you and the prejudice in someone else. In the world of people, explanations are very easily obtained for almost any act of any person. All you have to do is say, "And why did you do that?" and he rattles like a machine gun with great streams of words—verbal statements; and if you go away, he is apt to use streams of words in a letter to complete the demonstration of how unutterably easily he deceives himself into feeling that he knows what he is doing, which is apparently all that most people

need in order to feel comfortable. But for the study either of the actions of groups of people or of the interrelation of groups of people—or even of what I will ultimately say is as purely hypothetical as the unconscious individual personality, if you can guess how to study it—it just doesn't do to ignore this fabulous world of verbal statements which seem to do so much and have actually done so much harm to human life and human thinking, although inexplicably mixed in with being the basis of the great evolution which is human civilization and all the sciences and technologies that there are.

There would be none of all this without this particular potentiality for making articulate noises and for recognizing phonemal areas in those noises, in other words learning very early in life to discriminate when a certain part of a continuously varying frequency passes from the "ah" to the "á" [*a* as in *add*] phoneme so that you catch the word even though some people's frequencies for "á" are within a few cycles per second of other people's frequencies for "ah." These we call phonemal stations in sound, and they characterize each language. There are phonemal stations covering the whole range of audible frequencies, I guess, and each language has only a comparatively small number of them—which is why you have to work so hard to make some of the Chinese noises and even some of the German noises, if you weren't educated to them in childhood. This potentiality for learning these exquisite discriminations of a really very complex field, the field of audible sound, and for reproducing them with dependable accuracy; and the potentiality for learning a vast number of combinations of these things which make up words, and for learning a fairly complicated system of rules for sticking them together so as to give the impression of past, present, future, action or rest, order, and so on—these potentialities and the evolution of language have underlaid a great deal of the exceedingly distinguished part of human performance.

So I want to have a good deal to say in the course of time on words. I want

to invite your attention to the common experience that you have all undergone and that you are imposing on your children—and know that everybody else is imposing on his children—and to the efforts which not only parents impose on their children but are very anxious indeed to have certain surrogates, in the shape of school teachers, and so on, impose on their children: the education of the young to competent use of the language so that, as the parent often says, you can say what you mean, more generally so that what you say can be understood by people of comparable education who happen to speak the same tongue. Now this takes the learning of not only those things I have mentioned but also of a very large vocabulary, and quite a precise grasp of the principles of grammar; some at least of the rudiments of rhetoric; and, if you expect to move in polite society, speech etiquette—a thing commonly ignored by scientists. Even on back wards in mental hospitals there is a kind of etiquette: there are people who do not speak to each other but who none the less stay silent until the other fellow is through speaking, whereupon they talk to themselves for awhile. Moreover, if you are going to be smart, you must also be able to keep up with speech fashions or even, in the case of some slang, speech fads. Now, this is a big job, as each of you can remember when you think how much of your schooling was devoted to English and its various divisions and what not.

I don't suppose anyone in the audience is a deaf-mute, and so I have to ask you to realize that in talking about speech I am using speech—or at least verbal behavior—a fact which is terribly important not only in its own right, but also because a good grasp on the ideas which I am attempting to express about verbal behavior in its role in the development of personality is applicable to many other aspects of the acculturation, or of the socialization of the young. It is easy to see it in speech. It is easy to talk about it in speech. It is notoriously easy to talk about talk. It is somewhat more difficult

to talk about toilet habits, and so on, particularly to mixed audiences.

So I will have to leave to you the throwing of inferential bridges from the general consideration that I give to verbal behavior to all the other things which are necessary in order that you will be respected by the people that you want to respect you. And I will ask you to realize that what I have said about getting the child to talk so that he will be understood is a pressing necessity on all parents, with respect to this whole gamut of socialized performances. Their child must be acceptable to some other children. He must be regarded as a decent person, must grow into a decent person. He must be able to get his just deserts because he knows how to go after them, and so on, and so forth. It is an imperative necessity which parents cannot escape feeling, however wretchedly they and others may discharge the responsibility. It is this urgent pressure to try to get your offspring something like a fair chance in the world as it is realized to be, that makes the acculturation or socialization of the human young—almost from the cradle 'way into the twentieth year—a more or less continuous task, interrupted only when they are safely tucked in bed, or supposed to be safely tucked in bed. And the amount of things that go on during this period can be explored at your leisure the rest of your life, with illumination on the problem of interpersonal relations every time you see a new aspect of the process of socializing the young.

This is a function of the complexity of the social order in which we live. So far as I know, there is no reason to believe that anywhere at any time thus far has there appeared a system of institutions, emphatically-right ways of doing things, traditions, prevailing prejudices, fashions, and so on, which have been, from the standpoint of reason, unitary; that is, explicable as a series of deductions and inferences from a central proposition, or internally consistent and congruent. Always the systems of social organization, civilizations, cultures, whatever you wish to call them, have grown

in an erratic fashion, in sporadically emerging directions, and under disparate and often conflicting influences, so that they become a wonderful congeries having anything but a common central principle. And the outcome of that is that even if a child were born with the mature genius of Einstein, or of any of the other great figures of human history, he would still have to learn the culture, because it is not capable of being understood; that is, you cannot develop insight into it, you cannot see how it necessarily hangs together because it doesn't necessarily hang together—it falls apart. So the child is subjected to a simply tremendous amount of rote learning, and rote learning—which is one of the beloved terms, I believe, of the educator—is another term for sublimation, a conception that is beloved at least of a few psychiatrists, and I really want to get it beloved by many more of you before the evening is over because the poor term has fallen into some disrepute. Its origin was peculiar. It, I believe, was borrowed from chemistry in which it referred to how sulphur gets from one place to the other under the influence of heat. You know, it doesn't go through all the performances that water does, but you begin to see it disappearing from one place and crystallizing somewhere else. This is called sublimation. Well, sublimation was gathered from chemistry as so many words are and applied to a somewhat obscure process by which low and unworthy human motives sort of move mysteriously to a higher level. Once one saw that there was something in this queer notion and began to look at it, it wasn't necessary to raid chemistry or even to feel mysterious about it. The thing is essentially quite easy to state, and may I assure you that the definition that I give is subject to operational control. If a person is possessed of a motive which, as the parents feel and therefore presently he himself feels, endangers his acceptance by the society to which he should be welcome; then if some way or other he can be led to find a partial satisfaction for this motive by some worthy type of activity—play, or what-have-you

—and if this happens without his noticing it, he has sublimated the unworthy motive. And this works beautifully unless the motive demands something so strongly that so charming a solution won't work. And so this vast rote learning of culture is the general instance of which sublimation as seen in psychiatry is a special instance by which the victim without knowing it finds a socially acceptable, more complicated way of living; and that is how rote memory comes to work. It satisfies more or less something given, but it follows socially approved patterns.

And so actually, the thing which distinguishes the human being from the human animal is the incorporation in the poor human animal of vast amounts of culture, of socially meaningful, rather than biologically meaningful entities, which exert very powerful influence on all subsequent performances of the creature. This process begins in practically identical shape with a rather cute sort of solution that some people find for some problems; namely, they just without noticing it find something estimable to do which gives them considerable satisfaction. Now the operational attack on sublimation—this is a digression—is that if you tell people how they can sublimate, they can't sublimate. In other words, the unwitting part of it—the fact that it is not run through consciousness—is what makes it work and gives a very strong hint of what a vast bunch of abilities we have which do not manifest as such if the contents of consciousness are involved; that doesn't prove anything about the unconscious but it does prove something about the capabilities of the human being. Well, I tell you that human beings are human animals that have been filled with culture—socialized, if you like the word—in which process they move from the biological realm into the world of people. Do not permit yourself to think that because they started as animals, clearly members of the biological realm no matter how immature, and although their bodies and their abilities mature at a more or less specified rate, and although

there is parallel development through the shape of experience, trial-and-error learning, and this and that—all of which can be seen in a dog, a horse, or various other animals—don't permit yourself to think that the animal can be discovered after it has been modified by the incorporation of culture: it is no longer there. It is not a business of a social personality being pinned on or spread over a human animal. It is an initially animal human developing into what the term human properly applies to—a person.

And this statement implies one thing which I have to state specifically, although the implication is reached by several steps which I have no time to get into. While the many aspects of the physicochemical world are necessary environment for every animal—oxygen being one—culture, social organization, such things as language, formulated ideas, and so on, are an indispensable and equally absolutely necessary part of the environment of the human being, of the person. It is for that reason that we can see and can easily document in many cases the deterioration of the outstandingly human, of the more highly socialized aspects of the person, when he is subjected to isolation and does not have in him the capacity to provide a very active cultural interchange because he is dealing with imaginary or ideal persons. Even in the case of the person well equipped with these possibilities for supplying a great deal out of the richness of his past, nonetheless his end-state after a year or so of separation from the channels of mediate communication, the radio, and so on, is by no means as estimable as was his state at the beginning; so the absolutely necessary element of a cultural world with which active interchange is maintained and in which functional activity is carried on is just as necessary to the person as is oxygen, water, foodstuffs. And this business of becoming a human being, which is the great preoccupation of one's parents and teachers and the more or less full-time job of each one of us over a good many years, is an exceedingly important part of each of us, and has an enormous amount

to do with civilization and the intricate systems of institutions which are always associated everywhere in history with the appearance of performances of human size, of life size, you might say. Throughout all of this process, a very great part of the refinements of the social order is presented through systems of verbal reference, vocal behavior, graphic behavior, and so on, pertaining to words.

Now, let me run over briefly this particular aspect of the general process of becoming a human being, which is manifested in the early years of life: The transfer from the manifestations of potentialities to learn phonemes and words, and even rough grammatical structures, to the capacity to use language to communicate information and misinformation. All children and for that matter, I believe, all the young of all the species on the face of the earth enjoy, whatever that means, playing with their abilities. As the young mature, these abilities become manifest in play-activities and are obviously pleasant to manifest in that way. And so, before it is possible for a child to articulate syllables, there is a playing with the phonemal stations which the child has finally been able to hit on in the babbling and cooing business. There follows the picking up of some syllables, and sooner or later every child falls upon the syllable "ma"; and if there is a slight tendency to perseveration so that it becomes "ma-ma," then truly the child discovers that there is something that he had not previously suspected: namely, magic in this noise-making apparatus of his, because very significant people begin to rally around and do things, and they don't hurt—quite the contrary, they are pleasant. I suppose that that little experience is the beginning of what to most people seems to be a lifelong feeling that there is nothing about them that is as powerful as the noises they make with their mouths. But anyway, it will not be very long before this child has a whole flock of articulate noises more or less strung together as words; and those words, which will be the delight of grandma and the satisfaction of mama,

and perhaps even a source of mild satisfaction to papa, will have very little to do indeed with those words as they will be in that person 10 years later. The words as they originally come along are happy accidents of maturation and combination of hearing and motor impulse—and vast bunches of potentialities that I couldn't name if I had time to. Especially we see in the case of "ma-ma"—where almost anything might have been said but that happened to be and it causes commotion among the great significant environment—that this obviously represents some personal power. This is one of the most remarkable performances thus far observed. And so "ma-ma" is of course not the name of a creature that runs around offering breasts and rattles: "ma-ma" pertains much more to the general feeling of force, magic, and so on. And I suppose it comes to everyone as a little bit of a letdown to discover that "ma-ma" is the thing that this creature feels is its proper appellation, and it is only because the creature responds to that name that all this wonderful appearance of magic was called out.

The transfer from the feeling of power in this combination of noise to the realization that it is a pet name for the maternal relative is a transfer from the realm of the autistic or wholly personal, almost animal meaning, to the impersonal, social, conventional, or, as we like to say, consensually validated meaning of the word, and to the realm of scientific discourse, and I hope often to the realm of common speech. One's experience in using words has been observed with such care that one has finally learned how to create in the hearer's mind something remotely resembling what one hoped he would think of. Now, that takes a lot of experimenting, a great deal of observation, many corrections, solemn exhortations, rewards and punishments, and, as can be demonstrated in the case of almost everyone, applies only to a large working vocabulary. In addition to that, there is perhaps twice as large a collection of words in an additional vocabulary that isn't used very much, the meanings of which would come as a mild shock to a lexicographer, and a

few words in a very personal vocabulary which are definitely retained in an autistic state—they are a secret language which will be expressed only obscurely in a very intimate relationship. Now, so far as there remain autistic words, those words would be fragments of the culture, torn from it, and kept as magic possessions of, let us say, an animal, and that is not what I am dealing with. In so far as a great deal of consensual validation has gone on and one can make noises which are more or less exactly communicative to a hearer who knows the language, the words have been stripped of as much as possible of the accidents of their personal history in you, and it is by that process that they come to be so peculiarly impersonal, just as if, you see, you hadn't learned them with the greatest care, having a wealth of meaning to your original words, and gradually sorting out that which was relevant from that which was irrelevant to the purposes of verbal communication.

Now a great deal of life runs through this process. It starts out defined by the more or less accidental occurrence of something. One experiences, observes, formulates—after perhaps naming, symbolizing—and subsequently thinks about, that is, analyzes, and perhaps finally gets insight into or thoroughly understands the relationship of various parts of this complex experience, has information about it; but it is more or less a unique performance. And then, because of the way we live, the equipment we have, the tendencies we mature, and so on, and perhaps the necessities to which we are subjected by others, we want to talk about this; and as we first discuss anything new in our experience—as you may be able to observe from day to day, however mature you are—we don't make awfully good sense; and now and then we have the unpleasant experience in the act of telling somebody about it of discovering that we don't know what we are talking about, even though it is our experience.

The point is that the process of consensual validation running here before our eyes calls in an illusion, an illusory person,

in the sense of a critic, more or less like what we think the hearer is. We observe what goes on in him when we make this string of words or say this sentence, and it isn't satisfactory; and so, we feel that it is an inadequate statement, and therefore, of course, it doesn't communicate even to us as hearers what we are trying to say. So we look again at our experience, and we consider, from the standpoint of illusory critics, and so on: How can the thing be made to communicate? How can I tell somebody about this? And we finally, if we are fairly clever, get the answer. Once we have got that, the unique individuality of the experience begins to shrink, it becomes part of the general structure of life, we forget how strikingly novel the experience was and how peculiarly it had fringes which apply only to us—we lose all that in the process of validation.

You might feel that we were impoverished of much of the original richness of life in the process; maybe we are, but we get great richness from social intercourse, the sharing of experience, the growth of understanding, and the benefits of other people's more or less parallel experience, and so on. In fact, the whole richness of civilization is largely due to this very sort of thing. We can't be alone in things and be very clear on what happened *to* us, and we, as I have said already, can't be alone and be very clear even on what is happening *in* us very long—excepting that it gets simpler and simpler, and more primitive and more primitive, and less and less socially acceptable.

Now in all this process of being socialized and particularly of developing the ability to communicate by verbal behavior, quite a time after little Willie has gotten to talk about "me wanting" bread and jam, little Willie begins to talk about "I"; and when little Willie gets to talking about "I," just the same as when you hear other people talking about "I," you will notice that something is going on that wasn't there when it was "me" that wanted bread; and it is really much more important than when he finally gets around to saying that he is Willie Brown,

or something like that. The coming of "I," as a term, is great stuff.

I have now to refer to a type of experience which may or may not exist—I wouldn't know. I believe it exists, but no one seems to have any time to make many observations; and so since it is more or less important from my way of explaining things and since I know that no one can now controvert the idea, I will present it to you for what it is worth. Some way or other—and the less said about that the better—there is a certain direct contagion of disagreeable experience from significant adults to very young children; in fact this continues in some cases far into life and is part of the paraphernalia that is so puzzling about certain mediumistic and certain hypnotic performances. A simple way of referring to this is empathy. Whether empathy exists or not—as I say, take it or leave it—it is demonstrable that there are feeding difficulties when mother is made apprehensive by a telegram, and that it is not communicated by the tone of her voice; so since it occurs and is often noticed by pediatricians, I guess maybe I am in a moderately defensible position. And, the encouragement of the sublimation by the rote learning of a vast part of the social heritage in the very young is by way of approval and disapproval. Approval, so far as I know, very early in life has almost no effect, but in that case no effect is very welcome. You know that a very young child sleeps as much as possible, and so if there is no disturbance, well, I think it is doing what it wants to do. Disapproval, on the other hand, insofar as there is empathic linkage between the young and significant older people, is unpleasant, lowers the euphoria, the sense of well-being, interferes with the ease of falling asleep, the ease of taking nourishment, and so forth.

All this type of interference is originally profoundly unconscious in that it is in no sense a pure content of consciousness made up of sensations, conceptions, deductions, and inferences; but it does come ultimately to be clearly connected with disapproving attitudes on the part

of others, with other people not being pleased with what we are doing, or not being satisfied with our performances. This early experience is the beginning of what goes on through life as a uniquely significant emotional experience, called by the name of a profoundly important concept in social study and psychiatry—the conception of anxiety. Anxiety begins that way—it is always that way, the product of a great many people who have disapproved. It comes to be represented by abstractions—by imaginary people that one carries around with one, some of them in the shape of ideal statements, some of them actually as almost phenomenologically evident people who disapprove. The disapproval and its effect get to be so subtly effective that a great deal of anxiety which shoos us this way and that, from this and that feeling, emotion, impulse, comes finally to be so smooth-running that very few people have the foggiest notion of what a vast part of their life is influenced by anxiety.

Anxiety is what keeps us from noticing things which would lead us to correct our faults. Anxiety is the thing that makes us hesitate before we spoil our standing with the stranger. Anxiety when it does not work so suavely become a psychiatric problem, because then it hashes our most polite utterances to the prospective boss, and causes us to tremble at the most inopportune times. So you see it is only reasonable and very much in keeping with an enormously capable organization, such as the human being, that anxiety becomes a problem only when it doesn't work smoothly, and that the anxiety which has had to be grasped as a fundamental factor in understanding interpersonal relations is by no means an anxiety attack, a feeling of hollow in the stomach, and so on. Much, much more frequently it manifests as what I have called selective inattention, by which I mean you just miss all sorts of things which would cause you embarrassment, or in many cases, great profit to notice. It is the means by which you stay as you are, in spite of the efforts of worthy psychiatrists, clergymen, and others to help you mend your ways. You

don't hear, you don't see, you don't feel, you don't observe, you don't think, you don't this, and you don't that, all by the very suave manipulation of the contents of consciousness by anxiety—or, if you must get lots of words in your statements, by the threat of anxiety, which still is anxiety. This very great extent of the effects of disapproval and the disturbance of euphoria by the significant people in early life—the people who are tremendously interested in getting you socialized—is what makes the concept of anxiety so crucially important in understanding all sorts of things.

The part of the personality¹ which is central in the experience of anxiety we call the "self." It is concerned with avoiding the supposedly distressing—which is often illuminating—with the exclusion from awareness of certain types of very humiliating recollections, and correspondingly the failure of the development of insight from experience. It maintains selective inattention.

Now the "self" is not coterminous with the ego of the old ego-psychologist, or the ego of Freud, or the superego of Freud, or anything except what I will say—which incidentally I believe is a very simple statement of practically universal experience. The self is the content of consciousness at all times when one is thoroughly comfortable about one's self-respect, the prestige that one enjoys among one's fellows, and the respect and deference which they pay one. Under those estimable circumstances there is no anxiety; the self is the whole works; everything else in life runs smoothly without disturbing us the least bit. And it is when any of these things begin to go a little hay-wire, when we tend to remember a humiliating experience which would disturb our self-esteem, when somebody says something derogatory about us in

¹ When I speak of "parts of personality," it must be understood that "personality" is a hypothesis, so this is a hypothetical part of a hypothesis.

[*Editor's note:* The importance of the explicit recognition of the pyramiding of hypotheses was continually emphasized by Sullivan. In writing about personality, it is particularly easy—and common—to conceal the pyramiding of hypotheses by the facile use of terms of common speech whose ambiguity or hypothetical nature is not obvious because of their familiarity.]

our hearing or to our face, when somebody snubs us, showing the very antithesis of deference, and when somebody shows up our stupidities, thereby impairing our prestige—it is at those times that anxiety is very apt to manifest itself; but, again, it is apt to be overlooked because it is so generally followed by anger. Anger is much more comfortable to experience than anxiety and, in fact, has much the relation of “I” to “me”; anger is much more powerful and reassuring than anxiety, which is the antithesis of power, which is threat and danger. Anger, however, is supposed to intimidate the other fellow, and at least it obscures the damage to our self-esteem, at least temporarily. And so we say that the self is a system within a personality, built up from innumerable experiences from early life, the central notion of which is that we satisfy the people that matter to us and therefore satisfy ourselves, and are spared the experience of anxiety.

We can say that the operations by which all these things are done—in contradistinction to taking food, getting sexual satisfaction, and sleep, and other delightful things—the operations which maintain our prestige and self-respect which are dependent upon the respect of others for us and the deference they pay us, we call security operations. Security operations are things which we might say are herded down a narrow path by selective inattention. In other words, we don't learn them as fast as we might; we never seem to learn how unimportant they are in many circumstances where they get in our way. They are the things that always have the inside track with denizens of this best of possible variants on the Western culture, the most insecure culture I know—our American people. Well, security operations are the things that don't change much, that have the focus of attention, in and out of season, if there is the least chance of feeling anxious. And the security operations are in many cases assertive, starting out with “I”—and “I” in its most powerful fashion. Sometimes the security operations are more subtle—in fact there are always quite subtle security operations in a person of ordinary

abilities—but they interfere with all sorts of grasps on the universe, grasps which would in essence show that the regard in which a person holds us is defined by the past experience of that person and his actual capacity to know what we were doing, which in some cases is very low, that the prestige we did or did not get had little bearing on the prestige which we might get for this particular act six weeks later, that all this vast to-do which in early childhood and the juvenile era is practically necessary to survive the distress of the parents is mostly ancient baggage that could very well be replaced with a few streamlined pieces that made a great deal of sense in the interpersonal world in which we have our being.

As I say, the self does not “learn” very readily because anxiety is just so busy and so effective at choking off inquiries where there is any little risk of loss of face with one's self or others. And the operations to maintain this prestige and feeling of security, freedom from anxiety, are of such crucial importance from the cradle, I mean actually from the very early months of childhood, somewhere around two months onward, that the content of consciousness pertaining to the pursuit of satisfaction and the enjoyment of life is at best marginal. It is one's prestige, one's status, the importance which people feel one is entitled to, the respect that one can expect from people—and even their envy, which becomes precious in that it gives a certain illusion that one has prestige—that dominate awareness. These things are so focal in interpersonal relations of our day and age that the almost unassailable conviction develops, partly based on the lack of information of our parents and others, that each of us, as defined by the animal organism that we were at birth, are unique, isolated individuals in the human world, as our bodies are—very figuratively—unique and individual in the biological world.

Now I started out by suggesting that the interrelations, interdependence, interpenetration, and so on, of the biological world is very striking. Yet, no one will quarrel with the separation as an instrument for study, for thought, and so on,

of organism and environment. And if you are human biologists, I am perfectly willing for you to talk about individual specimens of man. And in so far as you see material objects, I am perfectly willing to agree that you see people walking around individually, moving from hither to yon in geography, and even persisting from now to then in duration; but that does not explain much of anything about the distinctively human. It doesn't even explain very much about the performance of my thoroughly domesticated cocker spaniels. What the biological organism does is interesting and wonderful. What the personality does, which can be observed and studied only in relations between personalities or among personalities, is truly and terribly marvelous, and is human, and is the function of creatures living in indissoluble contact with the world of culture and of people. In that field it is preposterous to talk about individuals and to go on deceiving oneself with the idea of uniqueness, of single entity, of simple, central being.

So it has come about that there has developed this conception of interpersonal relations as the field of study of those parts of the social sciences concerned with the behavior of people and as the field of study of psychiatry. In so far as difficulties in living are the subject of psychiatry, we must study the processes of living in which the difficulties are manifested, since otherwise we can't really sort out what is "difficulty" and what is perhaps novel genius; we really do have to study interpersonal relations to know what we are talking about when we talk about difficulties in living. As I say, the conceptual system has grown up which finds its subject matter not in the study of personality, which is beyond reach, but in the study of that which can be observed; namely, interpersonal relations. And when that viewpoint is applied, then one of the greatest difficulties encountered in bringing about favorable change is this almost inescapable illusion that there is a perduring, unique, simple existent self, called variously "me" or "I," and in some strange fashion, the patient's, or the subject person's, private property.

Progress begins, life unfolds, and interpersonal relations improve—life can become simple and delightful only at the expense of this deeply ingrained illusion and the parallel conviction that that which has sensations must under all conceivable circumstances be the "same" as that which has tenderness and love—tenderness and love being as obviously communal, involving two personalities, as anything known to man can be.

And so let me say very simply that in so far as you will care to check over these various incomplete sketches that I have made on a vast field and will not dismiss what you heard me say as a misunderstanding, you will find that it makes no sense to think of ourselves as "individual," "separate," capable of anything like definitive description in isolation, that the notion is just beside the point. No great progress in this field of study can be made until it is realized that the field of observation is what people do with each other, what they can communicate to each other about what they do with each other. When that is done, no such thing as the durable, unique, individual personality is ever clearly justified. For all I know every human being has as many personalities as he has interpersonal relations; and as a great many of our interpersonal relations are actual operations with imaginary people—that is, in-no-sense-materially-embodied people—and as they may have the same or greater validity and importance in life as have our operations with many materially-embodied people like the clerks in the corner store, you can see that even though "the illusion of personal individuality" sounds quite lunatic when first heard, there is at least food for thought in it.

THE WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF PSYCHIATRY

DISCUSSION *

(A question regarding the concept of the unconscious.)

I tried to say nothing about the unconscious except to suggest that it was not

* *Editor's note:* In the recordings from which this lecture was taken, there are gaps in which questions from the audience can be faintly heard. We have tried to indicate the nature of these questions.

phenomenologically describable. I don't use the conception particularly, certainly didn't in this paper, never do in work with patients or in teaching because so far as I know it is very useful for theory, but there are some other expressions that are perhaps more communicative to other people. But I might say what I could imagine to be true of that which is perhaps properly called the conceptual unconscious, because it fills the discontinuities present in conscious life: I would say that it includes much that has been conscious but is pre-verbal, sub-verbal, if you please; a great deal that has never been attended to and therefore may have been or may not have been on the margins of awareness; and certainly some experience of the person which has not received any representation within what we call his consciousness or his awareness, including a great development of process which has simply been sidetracked in the process of socialization but which manifests, in various ways, as remnants of previous endowment, previous experience, and previous behavior.

In dealing with patients and in attempting to follow the course of psychotherapeutic endeavor by others, the big problem seems to be to elude the interventions of what I have called the self-system—which is not coterminous with awareness but which is certainly the most emphatic and conspicuous and troublesome influence *on* awareness. You might contrast the self-system with the rest of the personality system, always realizing that I am talking about a hypothesis to explain what happens. I don't know that I have any use for anything except what can be observed. But what can be observed by an acute observer in his relations with another person is something quite different from what that other person, at least initially, can observe; and much of it can be accounted for by reference to processes which are not ordinarily noted, some of them so glaringly obvious that one literally is justified in positing a process like *selective inattention* by which I mean that we always overlook certain obvious things which would be awkward if we noticed them.

(A question asking, in effect, *Can we not say that there is a justifiably characterizable self in each person we deal with, which might be called the "real" self?*)

It is, I believe, a statistically demonstrable fact that the interpersonal relations of any person, even though he feels very full of the conviction of his individuality, are under ordinary circumstances rather strikingly restricted in variety, freedom you might say. Such a person is very much more apt to do the same sort of thing with a number of people than to do very different things with each one of that number. Furthermore, even more striking are the observable performances in which he will persistently malfunction with certain people in characterizable ways, despite the most incongruous objective data—of which, of course, *he* is unaware. It is a notorious fact about personality problems that people act *as if* someone else were present when he is not, as the result of interpersonal configurations which are irrelevant to the other person's concern, and do this in a recurrent fashion without any great difference in pattern. These various factors are so striking, in interpersonal relations, that it is perfectly easy and for many purposes very practical to speak of the structure of the character of the person.

All these are, I believe, correct statements of observable data. But when it comes to attempting to form a general theory on which to approach explanations of everything that happens to one in one's intercourse with others, and all the variety of things that occur in particularly-purposed interpersonal relations such as the psychotherapeutic situation, then it is just as easy to notice that the person maintains quite as many of what you ordinarily call imaginary relationships as he does of those that have the peculiar virtue of objective reference. A person, for example, may be said, with considerable justification, to act towards his wife as he did towards his mother. Now it is true that there are many differences in detail, but the general patterns of emotional relationship of conscious versus un-

noticed motivation, of intended versus experienced acts, are very much those that the person first developed in manifest behavior with his mother; and it is quite useful to think of his experience of that mother as interpenetrating the experience of the wife and, in fact, frequently completely suppressing any individualization of or any attention to the characterization of the wife. That is the more difficult part of this conception but it is quite useful in the sense that it can be made to make sense in many of the maneuvers of interpersonal relations that have effect; whereas operations on any other set of assumptions that explains the same phenomena, raise very considerable theoretical difficulties. In other words, it is a matter of what is most generally useful as a theoretical point of departure.

And now to come to the more specific question: Are we not entirely justified—however much we have respect for the fictions which masquerade as human individuals—in realizing that there is a justifiably characterizable self in each person that we deal with?

I, myself, have come gradually to find that unnecessary, whether that be some serious misunderstanding of mine or an insight remains, of course, for others to determine. You know that is true of the evolution of most hypotheses.

One listens, for example, in psychotherapy to a great number of revealing communications, hoping and generally finding finally that the thing has been reviewed very simply in a very small context; and then you run up the flag of hope, and so on, and go hammer and tongs to seeing what can be made of this very simple series of statements which the other fellow won't forget while you are trying to make your point clear. Now, it is decidedly easier to explain this great difficulty on the, you might say, individual-less type of hypothesis than on any other that I have yet dealt with.

(A question regarding the lability of behavior in the human being and in animals, posing whether humanness—a quality produced by the effect of the cultural,

interpersonal environment upon the lability of the human animal—can exist outside of a culture and therefore whether a sense of self within the person is possible apart from the culture.)

You raise a wonderful field of comparative study. Contrary to what would be nice and simple to say at this point, we have pretty convincing evidence of the lability of patterns of behavior in characterizable environments, down as low as certain of the rats; for example, it is known that one of the Florida species of rats can be moved from the state of full-fledged wildness to complete domestication in five generations. This is a very interesting observation of a quite remarkably primitive mammal taking on adaptive habits to utterly novel sets of necessity.

But man is the only animal, if you will understand the locution, that ceases to be an animal in the most significant respect when he becomes a person, and to be a person it is necessary that one live in the world of persons and personal entities, and personal organization, and so on, which we ordinarily call the social order or the world of culture. And insofar as a person is separated from the world of culture, he begins to deteriorate in his attributes as a person. His interpersonal relations, after a period of isolation, are distinctly degenerated from the development of refinement and elaboration which they showed at the start, and while it doesn't work quite as rapidly as separation from the physicochemical universe and oxygen, still it is a move in the same direction explicable on the same basis. Human potentialities are suited to the building up of the person; and when the person is built, he is something else than was implied or given in the human animal at birth. How would you describe that in terms of the Florida rat? You might say that the potentialities of man—in contrast to those of the rat—are almost infinitely labile, even though there is a very rigid, or a pretty rigid, system of maturation. Even that system of maturation gets less and less rigid the further one goes from birth; thus puberty, the appearance of

lust in the human, the furthest very dramatic maturation from birth, is much more susceptible of disturbance in its timing than other maturation of things that come earlier. Even internists recognize the condition of delayed puberty; it happens to coincide statistically very closely with what I as a psychiatrist describe as a schizoid type of interpersonal relations. Both the latter and the former, I believe, are explicable as the result of what are ordinarily called strongly repressive influences applied much earlier in life to operations and thought pertaining to the genital regions and genital acts. So here what would certainly be described as purely interpersonal influences, interpersonal manifestations of cultural views, and so on, have a marked effect on the maturation rate of what is much more inherently of the animal than of the person.

(A question regarding the permissibility of thinking in terms of the individual.)

We have, thus far, I believe, thought in terms of the individual, which is certainly a demonstration of the possibility. The point, rather, I think, is on the utility. I have been at some pains not to deny you the privilege of going on in your convictions, but to suggest to you that there is another view that may—well, if nothing else, permit considerable technological advance, or technical advance as we call it in psychiatry, and may even be useful as a new orientation for certain types of social investigation. I also tried to say at

the beginning that for certain purposes it is certainly very useful to separate organism and environment, particularly for example if one is talking about colonies of paramecia, but I think that perhaps there are biologists who think of the paramecium as a particular part of the world showing certain remarkable features of organization in functional activity, but ceasing very suddenly to manifest those if separated from certain parts of the universe which do not manifest those peculiarities of organization in functional activity. It is all perfectly well, if you wish, to limit your personality to the skin over your bones and adnexa, but my notion is not what can be done or what should be done; it is rather a suggestion of a system of reference which seems to eliminate a great many terms, conceptions, perplexities, and to provide some fairly simple operations that seem to bear up pretty well—and which also is extraordinarily unwelcome from the standpoint of our educational training.

My son has to be to many a mother or father something thoroughly unique, almost priceless different from anyone else; and with that background it is not difficult to realize that when everything else fails one, membership in that family, which makes one unique and distinguishes one on the basis of the very early valuation, would be a treasured possession. I am talking not so much as to what we are to deny our fellowmen or our colleagues, but only in favor of a conceptual system which I believe is defensible and useful.