

CHAPTER

8

Dissociative Processes¹

I NOW WANT to take up the massive dissociative processes in personality which I have so far discussed only in part. I think I have made clear why schizophrenic thought processes are so odd, so insane, if you please, by referring to the very early stages that they represent. I have also indicated my belief that we actually do have to seize upon a conception as intrinsically repellent, perhaps, to the intellect as the concept of regression, by which recent experience becomes as if it had not occurred. I have also discussed the fact that large elements of the bodily activity system can be cut off, as it were, from clear relationship to consciousness and be given impulses which lead to activity as if of that of a subordinate or secondary personality. Along with such very massive dissociated things as automatic writing, I mentioned the horribly overcondensed and nearly purely symbolic movements which occur as tics.

¹ *Editors' note:* Sullivan later became dissatisfied with his own explanation of dissociation and posited the *not-me* as a conceptual tool for the examination of dissociative processes. In a notebook written some time after this lecture was given, he says, "To account for the phenomena of dissociation, it was necessary to add to our conceptions *that which is related to the personified self in the sense of its contradictory*, the not-me, a phase of the organization of experience personal acquaintance with which must be at best (1) marginal, unelaborated observations of particular other people—real or more or less mythological—which show this personal reference by attendant experience of awe, dread, loathing, horror (with arrest of referential process within awareness), or (2) starkly terrifying events in the deeper levels of sleep."

But what I have not done—and in fact we had to go a long way before it could be expressed very clearly—is to consider dissociation from my tripartite standpoint—namely, the self-system; the personality as a whole, with a special emphasis on that which is not accessible to awareness; and the special signs and symptoms that appear in the phase of life called sleep. In other words, I am now concerned with the actual dynamic situation, if you please, by which an important system of the personality is effectively barred from any disturbing influence on personal awareness for a period of years and perhaps for a lifetime. There is a good deal of need for clarity about this. One of the reasons why we have run into considerable risk in the development of dynamic psychiatric theory is that the frame of reference which would tell the whole story is not found; and therefore a good deal of stuff which, when it is bandied about, becomes sheer nonsense, has to be excogitated to prevent the feeling of incompleteness of theory. I think the original conception of the censor and the subsequent formulations which replaced it are pretty much that sort of thing. It is because the phenomena that we encounter are not adequately subsumed by any of these more or less allegorical formulations that I want to present something different. What I offer you is not going to be so charmingly simple as the theories I have mentioned, but the complexity does not come simply because I like complex theory.

Thus far, until we came to dissociation, the reason why many things which one would expect to be within a person's awareness are not there is that when anything might provoke their appearance, the person feels anxious; and anxiety always has an extraordinarily arresting effect on whatever was about to happen. Anxiety is more important, in a way, than the thing that called it out, and its importance, of course, is from the standpoint of personal awareness. The appearance of frank anxiety preoccupies attention. The faint beginnings of full-blown anxiety is in many people entirely sufficient cause for

doing something pretty complicated, something which is certainly not the simple awareness which the particular stream of events might otherwise have resulted in.

The business of being thrust down a particular path in life by anxiety, with or without its feeble disguise of anger, generally leads to an appallingly uncomfortable life. Take, for example, a person to whom any sexual impulse, any movement of lust, is an intolerable ingredient of awareness. Presumably the only discharge of impulses which concerned lust would occur in sleep or in some other very extraordinary situation. One would expect long stretches of waking life to remain in which the person was in the throes of lust. That would mean, from our standpoint, that he was anxious, and was therefore practically incapable of that application to reality that is necessary in order to carry out complex performances, to realize goals that take more than momentary action.

It is because of the utter impracticability of life under those circumstances that I assume that this dynamism which I call dissociation is part of the equipment of the surviving human animal. It is, in contradistinction to everything else we have dealt with here, a dynamism which does not require disturbance of the contents of consciousness and which does not act as an impediment to the conduct of life in the areas where there is not dissociation. Now it is not quite as magical as that statement sounds. In other words, one is more efficient and much nearer happiness, contentment, and all those things which we allege to be the positive returns in life, abstractly considered, if one does not have any important system of personality in dissociation. The way in which a person suffers from dissociation is best discovered from a patient who is recovering from a chronic dissociated state—who has retrieved and successfully reintegrated a dissociated system of personality. When such patients have really been communicative with me, and when the relationship has been such that I could without risk ask them how things were before and after, they have told me that

they could now take things easier. Life was less exhausting; it was not so intense; it did not tire them so rapidly per hour, one might say. That is the first hint we get as to how this incredibly suave process of dissociation works. It is not perfect, it is not the solution of anything. But it is a dynamism which is useful where none of the other dynamisms can be utilized, either because they fail utterly, and one is worse off than if one had not used them, or else because they require practically the abandonment of fully human living, as in the case of the paranoid dynamism, where it becomes impossible to look forward to any simple, direct satisfactions which are fully human in the sense of one's equal status, one's relationships with others, and so on.

As a preliminary to developing a tripartite approach to dissociation, I shall try to describe how a person acts who has an important system in dissociation, using an illustration which concerns lust and the traditionally important 'partial impulse.' Let us assume that a man, Mr. A, is married and leads a relatively restrained sexual life. Sex doesn't seem to have a very large place in his life. He has only occasional sexual relations with his wife and seems to get on very nicely that way, somewhat to her chagrin. He is quite capable of giving her satisfaction in a particular act, but he does not have much sexual appetite. And we will assume that he has, in dissociation, the experience of happiness which he had in definite homosexual operations when he was in the preadolescent phase; and that therefore he has what is really a definite drive toward homosexual types of integration.

Now we will suppose that the wife taxes him with his lack of interest in sexual relations with her. With no loss of security—in other words, with nothing remotely like anxiety—he says that he often wonders about that, and wonders whether it is awkward for her that he has so little appetite. Since he has thought he might be odd that way, he has actually done a certain amount of inquiry, and he finds that most men who

seem to him perfectly normal do need intercourse more frequently than would ever occur to him. He is different, but then people do differ notoriously in this field; some of them have intercourse every night, and some of them once a week, and he is just a little more different and finds that once a month does him very nicely. It just seldom occurs to him, and this is why he is often kindly but vaguely unwilling when he is prodded toward lustful sports.

Now you may say that the fact that he has made this inquiry of other men is a manifestation of the homosexual component; but there you would be wrong. It is a clear manifestation of the very elaborate character of the dynamism of dissociation. If circumstances were such that this man could not be perfectly clear on how few heterosexual relations were enough for him, then he would be in danger of anxiety; so there is in his self a necessity to be safe in that area, and he uses the best way on earth that any of us have for being safe in a situation which we think may be unusual—he gets the data. He has made a study, not because he is interested in sexual conversation with others, but because he senses—as we all do if we are not too gummed up by education and early experience—that if he is perfectly clear on a thing, he is not going to be unhorsed by it—it is part of him. So he documents the fact that lust does not have the place in his life that it ordinarily has in most people's; that is one of his peculiarities—nothing to be profoundly ashamed about, although perhaps hard on his wife. But he is able to develop certain techniques for filling the gaps that may be left in her life. He is unusually considerate in some ways, very thoughtful about bringing home flowers for the dining-room table, and things like that. He is perfectly able to say, "Well, I don't think you get everything you want from me, and it's a pleasure to give you what I can." It is all very nice, you see. It is quite secure; there is no exposure to risk.

Now let us suppose that by some magic we have him meet another man, Mr. X, who has many outstanding traits of the

preadolescent partner, so that the resemblance would in any ordinary instance be utterly sufficient to provoke a vivid recall in Mr. A of the early, highly satisfactory experience. Furthermore, from all that we know about ourselves and others, we would assume that if such a person crossed one's path, that person would, if there were no obstacle anywhere in the personality, immediately be invested with emotional expectations, colored by what had been so happy in the past. There was nothing wrong with that experience from one's early life, and so immediately there is likely to be a definite feeling of warmth and liking for this person who recalls it. This, as I say, is what one would expect to happen in more ordinary circumstances which did not concern an important dissociated system.

But in the case of Mr. A—whom we have now presented with a person who is of just the type to activate powerfully an impulse which, if it worked out very simply, would lead to homosexual instances with this person—any number of astonishing things may happen. Because I want you to see what a very remarkable performance dissociation is, I shall make this an extreme instance. Mr. A scarcely notices this person. He autonomically goes through the gestures of being introduced, but treats the man almost as a nonexistent entity. He may act decently, but without taking the trouble to look at the other fellow, and so on and so forth. You see, if he deleted the person entirely, that, of course, would be a relatively psychotic performance and would be profoundly disturbing to friends of his. So, of course, something is done, but it is reduced to the very remnant of Mr. A's ordinary social manner. And for purposes of explanation, again, let us say that this is just as surprising to Mr. A as it is to anyone else. Under those circumstances, from what we know of ourselves and others, Mr. A has a strong necessity to rationalize—to arrive at a plausible explanation. And the simplest of all rationalizations is, "There's something about him that makes me think of precisely the type of person I dislike so strongly that I can barely be polite." He

may put a period there, and consider it an adequate explanation. Or he may add, "He reminds me of someone. I can't think who, but I really couldn't bear his attitude."

Now let us say that we are in a position to observe Mr. A with Mr. X. We might find that Mr. A at all sorts of odd moments will be studying the profile, perhaps the whole build, of this man whom he is treating with such extreme casualness, and who, he explains, is such a problem because he is so thoroughly detested. I don't know whether you realize how much we can do with our eyes, without disturbing awareness at all, as I tried to indicate in the story of my father and the wallpaper.² This study of Mr. X's profile does not interfere with anything that Mr. A is doing. He is having a very interesting conversation, let us say, on the tidal currents around Dakar, and the times he makes this ritual study are probably when somebody else is making some interesting observation; he immediately comes in, showing that he has followed what was said perfectly. The activity of his eyes is no part of the content of his awareness.

Now let us assume for a moment that this activity on the part of Mr. A had nothing to do with a dissociated impulse—that the circumstances were the more commonplace ones of selective inattention. Let us also assume that I came along

² *Editors' note:* Sullivan tells the wallpaper story in Lecture 3 of this series, as an illustration of processes of 'normal' awareness: "During my father's period of being a widower, I visited him. On this occasion, we sat and talked in the room which I had always liked best in the house. In the process, I noticed that the old gentleman was getting a bit distracted. In my usual fashion I went over the context of our conversation and found nothing at all offensive to him. And so, in the margin of my mind, I grew more and more puzzled over what was clear to me as some unsatisfactory mental state in my father. Finally he said, 'Well, what do you think of the wallpaper?' On hearing this question, I was able vividly to recall that in an hour and a half's conversation, I had studied every damned line at which the wallpaper came together. I had not only observed that it was new wallpaper applied since my last visit, but I had made a minute study for any poor workmanship or regrettable defects in its application. But that had in no sense disturbed my consciousness. It required this intervention by my father to attach any awareness in my mind either of the new wallpaper or of the great care with which I had been studying it."

and said to Mr. A, "Well, what do you think of his mug?" Under those circumstances, Mr. A would sort of snap into it and say, "Why, hell, it's really quite classic, isn't it?" In other words, the data would be there; they had just been utterly inattended to.

But let us now assume that Mr. A does have dissociated homosexual impulses. Then if I say to him, "What do you think of Mr. X's looks?" he takes a very hurried glance at this other man and immediately says something polite. And I can see the wheels turning as he thinks, "Certainly, he must be dumb to ask me this when he knows that I can hardly stand the looks of this man, or his presence, or anything else." In other words, Mr. A has anything but data on what he has been doing. This is the essence of dissociated behavior; it not only does not disturb awareness, but one cannot by any ordinary device discover any sign that it occurred in awareness.

Let us prolong this example and suppose that everybody is going in to dinner and that nobody has taken any trouble to arrange the guests; and lo, we are impressed to discover that Mr. A and Mr. X are seated directly across from each other at the table. If we think back a little while, we remember that Mr. A was delayed by a slipping garter or something or other so that he didn't get into the dining room until Mr. X had gone in, and then he immediately almost rudely got in himself. He didn't seem to be in any hurry to sit down, but as soon as Mr. X had sat down, Mr. A took the chair directly across the table from him. It is just the thing one would do if one wanted to continue looking at a person in order to enjoy his physical presence; yet everything in Mr. A's awareness adds up to the idea that this man makes him feel quite hostile. We may further discover that, when Mr. X talks, Mr. A has remarkable lapses, you might say, of concentration at any complex task that we might put him at; but he will have by any ordinary available method of investigation not the foggiest notion of what Mr. X's voice sounds like; or if he does, it will

remind him of the voice of some very unpleasant person whose voice actually has no noticeable resemblance to Mr. X's.

Thus here is an aspect of the self-organization which frequently appears in the dissociation of the major tendencies. That is, a patient with a dissociated impulse will experience special cognitive distortions about anyone whose combination of positive values horribly moves the patient to integrate his dissociated impulse. These positively valued people are then endowed by the patient with the negative of the feelings that would accompany this integration, so that one literally, suavely, and automatically misidentifies the meaning of such a person. In other words, in order that the dissociated tendency shall never disturb awareness, shall not provoke anxiety—because if it did, one would be anxious so much of the time that one could not do things which are necessary to life—the security system has come to include very elaborate pseudo memories, reverie processes, and so on, which amount to a wonderfully thorough piece of fantasy that neatly and very adequately excludes any of the ordinary ways by which one would become aware of something. You need not marvel too much that such things can be, because our erroneous explanations of things are of the same type, and you know they run very beautifully unless they happen to break down in a particularly distressful situation.

We will get clear evidence of the magnitude of the self processes concerned in maintaining dissociation only at times when the person is engaged in such a complex task that practically all of his abilities are called upon—when he is under considerable pressure from a task requiring microscopic attention, swift placing of many factors, and so on. If, under those circumstances, he encounters another person who awakens the dissociated tendency or is suitable for integration along the path of the dissociated tendency, and who makes his presence felt to any of the sense organs—by his speech, for instance—then there will be certain evidence of the dissociative processes. This evidence will appear in the fact that the pres-

ence of this person will disturb the concentration necessary for the difficult task; but, if the person notices it, it will be immediately rationalized, often by means of a pseudo recollection, which is the easiest thing in this culture that a person can build in himself to resist the capacity of interesting people to disturb awareness. Thus, if Mr. X disturbs my concentration by talking, I can be aware of this disturbance; but I would feel insecure at being disturbed without any idea of what was disturbing me, and so it is this detestable person in my past of whom Mr. X reminds me. I am sure Mr. X is a nice man, and all that, but I cannot work around his personality; I simply have to go away if I am to concentrate on anything.

Let us push our illustration to the point where the whole thing proves to be a house party, and everybody has to stay overnight. There are only half as many beds as guests, and the deferences to polite society that Mr. A has to make have the exceedingly unhappy result that he has to share a bed with Mr. X. He is so horribly embarrassed at his disliking this stranger, and so awfully anxious not to make things too difficult for the host and hostess, that, well, the simple thing is to swallow all this stupid feeling of his and act like a good guest, and so they finally wind up in bed together. Mr. X is somewhat embarrassed by the strange casualness and avoidance on the part of Mr. A which he has suffered all day—an attitude that he realizes is quite different from his own feeling that he would like Mr. A if Mr. A weren't so distant. In fact, by this time his feelings have been reasonably well wounded, and he is not much pleased with this arrangement. So he takes reasonable precautions to get undressed and in bed before the other man does, or vice versa. But as he is about to fall asleep, his companion sighs deeply and starts to apologize rather queerly, and gets up and fiddles around a little while; and Mr. X realizes that he is listening to some queer kind of cock-and-bull story about how Mr. A has never really slept with anyone before, and is just horribly angry with himself and so on, but he doesn't

know whether he can get any sleep unless he gets under the bottom sheet. And so this is what he does.

What is apt to happen in the course of the night—what, in fact, has in many such instances happened—is the following: During the night Mr. A gets out from under his cotton precaution and goes around and tenderly fondles Mr. X, and then goes back to bed under his bottom sheet. There is considerable evidence of his being in a curiously foggy state of mind, which so impresses Mr. X that he does not say anything about the incident the next morning. Mr. A acts as if nothing on earth like that could conceivably have happened, and Mr. X just says to himself, "Well, this bird is a funny one." Mr. A leaves the house with a feeling that, considering that he had had to share a room with this extremely disagreeable person, he has had a remarkably good night's sleep. He feels fine, and has no trace of any information about what has happened.

Since the security machinery is theoretically pretty feeble when one is really asleep, quite often much more meaningful behavior occurs in states of light sleep than at any other time in people with major systems in dissociation. Under those circumstances, what is left of the security mechanism of the self-system will suffice to maintain consciousness at any state that does not leave any ordinarily accessible recall. We will even, for purposes of illustration, say that Mr. X taxes Mr. A with what happened during the night. If Mr. A's dissociative system is working smoothly, there will be not the remotest suggestion in his awareness that this is true. If he is really quite a secure person in his dissociated state, he does not even have to have extremely unpleasant ideas about Mr. X. The fellow has obviously had a very, very vivid dream, Mr. A will say, and he will have no doubt that this is what happened. He may think that this dream means that Mr. X is homosexual and has a homosexual interest in him, and now he understands why he disliked him so much, and so on. That will all be kept to himself, however, if he wants to avoid unpleasantness; obviously Mr. X is

simply a victim of unhappy sexual twists. But if Mr. A is not so secure, if the rest of his life does not make him quite bombproof, then when Mr. X taxes him with what happened, he will be horribly angry; he will regard it as a beastly canard, and probably the situation will develop into a very unpleasant type of business. The dream explanation will still be there, but he will tell Mr. X off rather roughly. But still he is undisturbed.

Now this, I insist to you, can happen only when the material easily accessible to awareness—that is, the self—has artifacts which neatly cut off any reasonable prospect of one's noticing a tendency to become integrated in a type of situation the impulse for which is dissociated. In the self, one gets unquestionable evidence of the wear and tear of life that is brought about by the dissociated system only when there is the right sort of person around for the integration and the subject person is engaged in something that calls for all the abilities he has. Then it goes very badly; he ordinarily finds that the other person is troublesome, and goes away. Thus people with major systems in dissociation are rather often singularly at the mercy of troubles of one kind or another; a good many things annoy them dreadfully, and they go away, get out of the annoying situation, with some excellent rationalization. They have felt no anxiety in the situation, but have just found it such a nuisance that they could not get their work done. This is practically pathognomonic of dissociation. In other words, if you find yourself disturbed by another person, but by the most minute investigation convince yourself that he does not stir anxiety, then you can be quite sure that the other person is of great significance to some dissociated impulse in the personality. It shows that way because there is such an elaborate pseudo or artifact organization in the self that anxiety simply is not going to be called out by anything short of a cataclysmic collision with this other person.

In the total personality, there is the vulnerability to situations which I have suggested in the matter of concentrated

effort. Life is much more difficult in that any satisfaction of the impulse in dissociation is gotten either in a very incomplete fashion or in sleep. Ordinarily the most that happens in sleep is purely symbolic, so far as other people's cooperation is concerned. And since the tendency system in dissociation must be a powerful one—for it includes an impulse that is so extremely dangerous that it must not even be permitted to stir anxiety, which is the formula that leads to dissociation—quite obviously symbolic operations with imaginary people are not going to be very deeply satisfying. Thus we expect in the total personality that there will be an extraordinary sensitivity to anything that touches upon the dissociated system.

Unobserved alertness—a rather contradictory use of words, by which I mean the sort of activity of the eyes which I have already referred to—is much more striking in a person who has a major dissociated system than in one who does not have. In other words, let me draw a contrast between a purely imaginary sort of person who has 'repressed'—a relatively futile business—the happy days of homosexual life and not dissociated the impulses at all. Let us say that he has, after preadolescence, lived in a society that is exclusively feminine for twenty years, and then he runs onto another man who just rings the bell. He becomes almost immediately the prey of violent homosexual cravings—that is, assuming he does not immediately respond positively—but he also decides that this is all very horrible. He is so completely anxious that every time the potential love object is in any way even recalled to him, he actually gets jittery, sweats, and shows every sign of intense anxiety. He is panicky at the very thought of this forgotten desire of his, which he had supposed was just gone with the wind but which now blazes up with ferocious power and simply hounds him. When he is with this potential love object, he may gaze wildly at the fly of his pants, and then he has still more anxiety, and sweats, and looks firmly out the window. He is having a terrible time with his tendency to move toward this other person,

and anything like a calm study of the potential love object's profile is as impossible to him as sprouting wings would be. With the dissociated person, on the other hand, we see any amount of this sort of unnoticed, inclinationless interest in, and attention to, if you please, the potential love object.

Impulses in dissociation have lots of experience; they grow, and they grow at not so terribly different a rate or degree from that of any impulse system. What they do not get is satisfaction—simple, direct, and everyday satisfaction in proportion to their power and importance in the total personality. So we can read off from this that a person with a powerful dissociated system is an extremely risky person to put in a type of situation that will require practically everything he has, because it is quite certain that a number of his abilities, particularly those of the sensory organs—which are much easier, you might say, to use than the motor systems—and a good deal of his energy are going to be spent in this unnoticed, fairly contentless attention to an unnoticed object. And the self struggles unsuccessfully to maintain application and focal attention on the assigned task at those times. So far as the person can tell you, well, his mind wandered; he dropped into a moment of abstraction. There are several reasons for this interference with extremely demanding tasks. One of them is that the very concentration required for this complex task tends to impair the easy operations of the self devices against awareness of the dissociated system and its operations. But since it is much more vital to maintain the dissociation than to get any mere task done, the task in turn suffers under the necessity of the self-system to devalue the object and undisturbedly to ignore something that has impinged on one. And thus there is disturbance of the concentration on the task.

We may expect either that the dream life of people with dissociated systems will be glaringly meaningful or that the dreams will be as utterly obliterated as the dreams which characterize the night terror of very early life. Let me remind you

that night terror is a situation in which a child awakens screaming in abject terror; and by the time he can pay any attention to so mild a thing as a real person and can make some efforts at communication, he has not the foggiest trace of any idea of what it was all about. He is probably clear on the fact that he was unutterably shaken by a terrible experience, and he may be still trembling, but the curtain is immovable—there is nothing left of what happened. I do not want to get into a discussion of night terror, which is not relevant at the moment, except to draw attention to this obliteration of awareness of processes; at the same time, I might remind you of what I have said about schizophrenia—that it occurs when the self loses the ability to control awareness of more primitive processes.

The person with a major system in dissociation may recall from his sleep very vivid and blatantly meaningful dreams as long as nothing provides a path between these dreams and his security. As long as this situation continues, it is all very simple; for one thing, dreams that can be remembered come a little nearer to satisfying the tendencies concerned than do dreams that have to be forgotten. But if, perhaps as a result of someone else's attempt at interpretation or of something read in a book, these dreams come to interfere with the self-system's suave function of keeping the dissociated tendency out of awareness, then the person will cease to recall any dreams whatsoever. He may have very disturbed sleep; his wife may report that he groans and yells in his sleep, and he may startle into full awareness over and over during the night; but he will have no trace of recollection of any dream. In other words, the self will be on the job from then on, and sleep will be maintained at a level at which primitive processes cannot intrude into awareness. If anything does get by, the person takes time out the instant he recovers his waking awareness to inattend it in some manner. And afterward, new complexities are developed in the self to make it impossible to dream that sort of

thing again—the person wakes up if he starts to dream anything like it again. You might think that for a very little while after awakening, he might be vulnerable to a demand as to whether he did not dream so-and-so. But we would be unable to guess exactly what he had dreamed, and even a slight error in depicting it would permit the self to make a flat denial without disturbance of awareness. If it were just in the process of being repressed, then there might be a vague feeling that it did stir some vague memory; but even so, the person would merely wonder how his questioner ever happened to have such a fantasy. Then the function of the self to keep the tendency concerned out of awareness would go on developing, and the next time the person was simply forced to have such a dream, he would wake up the moment the thing started developing. When awareness is lifted again, the thing may run itself off at primitive levels, but it will not be a dream—there will be no record.

It is hard to tackle a thing that seems so unearthly—except when you see somebody else show it—as does the trick of dissociation. I hope I have laid enough stress on the extraordinary nature of the self-system in dissociation, the elaborate development of processes in the self, to make it clear why any frontal attack on dissociation almost always fails. Frontal attacks have long since been anticipated by all sorts of processes which immediately go into effect and which simply blunt the attack or brush it off to the side.