

Holt to Rapaport—May 3, 1957

Dear David:

Let me start by an attempt to clear my own thoughts through a restatement of some of your points. If there were no autonomy of the ego from the environment, but a complete dependence on it, robbing man of contact with the environment would put him wholly at the mercy of the drives. This was the basis of my first hypothesis about the effects of isolation. It assumes that, since we are relatively dependent on the environment, if contact with reality is cut the autonomy from the drives cannot be maintained and secondary process will give way to primary. In other words, that the autonomy of cognitive, secondary processes from the id was secured and maintained by a dependence on the environment. It underestimated the strength of the ego, the organism's capacity for self-sustenance and thus the far-reachingness of its autonomy. This has been brought home to me by Leo Goldberger's work.¹ His isolation experiment has yielded results that are inconsistent with the hypothesis in three ways, while generally supporting it: a. subjects don't immediately, on severing the contact with the environment, regress—it takes time; b. with any given amount of deprivation of reality contact, there are individual differences in the amount of regression; c. as between individuals and over the course of time, different (secondarily autonomous ego-, or secondary process-) functions are affected to different degrees and at different rates. (This last seems to me an important source of evidence that primary and secondary processes are not unitary, but heterogeneous concepts.)

Page 8: for some time, I've been [made] vaguely uneasy by the "apparatus" terminology. The more we study perception, the less sense it seems to make to speak of a "perceptual apparatus." That implies some kind of structure devoted to this particular function. To a degree, of course, there is specialization of bodily structure (particularly of brain structure) for such functions as perception and movement. Muscles, tendons and bones are

¹ His dissertation research, later published as Goldberger (1961).

important parts of “the motor apparatus,” I suppose, along with the muscular innovations and “motor areas” of the cortex, and an indefinite amount of other brain tissue in addition. In the brain particularly, however, there is a lot of non-specialized “mass action.” It seems to me especially arbitrary to single out and classify together “threshold apparatuses.” I’m not sure I understand what is meant by drive-discharge or its threshold, ditto affect-discharge. The usual meaning of threshold is the absolute or differential limits of perceptual psychology—which would presumably be part of “the perceptual apparatus.” The consummation of drives (and so possibly, drive-discharge thresholds?) requires the functioning of all the other apparatuses mentioned. All told, it seems that much confusion is caused by the apparatus terminology. Wouldn’t we do better to stick to calling perception, memory and motor action functions? The bodily structures associated with each one are the province of anatomists and kindred scientists; and we should move very cautiously in denoting any generalized function a psychic structure, for there we are treading close to the bog of hypostasis [I should have said misplaced concreteness]. True, any function goes on in a structure, is limited, facilitated, guided, etc. by structure, which may be defined as that which performs these services. But there are similar dangers in such definitions, which look away from what they supposedly denote and give only secondary properties of it. (Thus, if one defined Boulder Dam only by Lake Mead, he wouldn’t know its primary properties: its dimensions, how it was built, its materials, etc. For the most part, this is how we define psychic structures, however.) —Is the secondary process an apparatus? Is the ego an apparatus of apparatuses? Where do we stop in automatically assuming a special structure (apparatus) for every function we may choose to single out? We must have independent means of defining psychic structures in terms of their primary properties, or we’re faced with the logical prospect of an infinity of them in any person. (Like the old static, taxonomic “instinct” cul-de-sac.)

Page 9: Erikson’s modes need to be examined to clarify their relation to cognitive styles. To varying degrees they may be independent of what George [Klein] calls “content” (in the case of a mode, independent of zones, I suppose),

so that what he is saying about cognitive attitudes and cognitive styles in the paper he is giving today might well apply to modes.

Page 11: Autonomy from the environment is defined by the extent to which behavior is a function of the organism, not the stimulus conditions or situation, as I see it. From this formulation, it would follow that any enduring organismic determinant of behavior is a “source and guarantee” of autonomy from the environment. To a usually inconspicuous and often trivial degree, these may be aspects of bodily structure: the crippled person’s hobble is built in, not by drives but by his deformity; the myope’s manner of peering—and perhaps many other aspects of his behavior—are partly caused by the structure of his eyes (interacting with the drives, of course). Then, if behavior is shaped by such individual psychic structures of primary autonomy as thresholds, these also guarantee autonomy from the environment; see George’s paper on cognitive attitudes in this respect, since what he says may stand for all other autonomous psychic structures. As you yourself later point out, memory structures play a particularly important part, for it is memory that enables us to create an imaginal world if we’re cut off (or if we cut ourselves off) from the real one. I would differ from you on the role of memory only in stressing its structural aspect rather than its role as self-stimulating nutriment.

To the extent that all of these structures have primary autonomy, the drives may be said not to be the ultimate source of autonomy from the environment. I suppose in a sense, however, it’s legitimate to say that the above mentioned structural sources of autonomy from the environment are not ultimate guarantees, because they represent only the machinery, not what makes it go, though here George’s new formulations would part company with you. I agree about the ultimate role of drives, because it seems to me that if we imagine a person deprived of stimuli from without and deprived of instinctual drives, then no matter how elaborate his internal structures, he would be just a stationary car with no gas in its tank. George is arguing, with Hebb [1949], that there is only one kind of “gas” for the human machine: the energy released by oxidation of food. This energy is then channeled (and perhaps recruited) by motivational structures, of which the drives are only a few; cognitive attitudes are others. The

difficulty with this position, as I see it, is that it makes it hard to explain transformation of instincts like displacements; how come a repressed drive acts like a capped flowing well that finds other outlets?² And how can this formulation account for the periodicity of drives? I am really addressing those questions to George, not to you.

The structures I have mentioned may have primary autonomy from the drives, but they have much less primary autonomy from the environment. Certainly Brozek's studies show that the somatotype is not autonomous with respect to the literal nutriment a person gets.³ And of course the recent experiments and observations showing the dependence of more figurative kinds of structures on infantile stimulation are relevant here. I don't think we can ever speak of absolute autonomy from the environment, therefore, only relative autonomy.

Brainwashing and especially thought reform is a procedure calculated to minimize autonomy from the environment. Starvation may have similar effects (see below).

Page 15: Goldberger's data suggest that certain stylistic "structures" are more resistive to change—less dependent on stimulation or reality contact—than are secondary processes. I wish that Hebb's data could be examined from this standpoint, or that we could get another group of subjects for intensive study with a much longer period of isolation, asking which structures are least affected, and in what kind of order are they undermined by isolation? With only eight hours of isolation, in many of our subjects some of the most fragile-seeming functions (attention, concentration) make a very fast comeback, and may even be better at the end of isolation when re-tested (compare the learning results of Vernon and Parry).⁴

² I had not yet realized that this assumption lacked a good foundation in data.

³ Josef Brozek, a Czech who came to the U.S. in 1939, is best known as the psychologist on the team of researchers (Keyes, Brozek, and Henschel) who carried out the groundbreaking Minnesota Starvation Study, published as *The Biology of Human Starvation*, by the University of Minnesota Press, 1950, in two volumes.

⁴ What I meant was Hoffman & Vernon (1956); see my letter of May 16, 1957.

In general, I feel (I can't yet formulate it very well) that the nutriment conceptualization doesn't fit the facts very well. Part of the time it seems to mean something like what we refer to by the metaphor of "grist for the mill."—Machinery rusts if left unused, needs something to work on to keep it in good condition, just as a muscle needs use not to atrophy. But that suggests that we should look for the oxygen that does the rusting of psychic function (and perhaps the water that catalyzes this rusting) in our situation; just what is the atrophic process? I'm reminded of the forgetting issue: active interference rather than trace decay seems to be the answer. The use of a term like nutriment instead of one like grist seems to me to imply that there is some constant building of structure, not just the use of it.

If repression is weakened in isolation (and it does seem to be because we get "deeper" stuff, though maybe that's a function of a change in inhibition rather than repression), does this imply that repressive defense is nourished somehow by the presence of ordinary reality-contact of a non-specific sort? The grist for repression is presumably repressible impulses, and there's every reason to suppose that they are even more present in isolation than outside of it, though on second thought I suppose that isolation represents a situation of being removed from temptation for at least some subjects. I find that kind of non-specific nourishing function harder to understand for repression than, for example, to accept the idea that attention or concentration need the nutriment of objects to be regarded. What I don't understand is how one can tell in a situation like this whether the emergence of something that was formerly repressed is due to the weakening of repression, or to the strengthening of the impulse, or to the removal of another, not usually noticed control, reality-contact? Unfortunately I can't take the time right now to try to pull together my thoughts on the notion that contact with an external reality may serve many of the same functions as internal controlling structures. Perhaps this is a familiar enough idea; if so, I'd appreciate being steered to some references on it.

Pages 15–16, re hypnosis and the reduction of autonomy from the id: this doesn't sound so convincing, because hypnosis is not notorious for being a drive-dominated state—in fact, quite the opposite. The hypnotist takes over the task of

external control and does so very effectively: the subject isn't likely to start raping and murdering; there's even quite a controversy over the hypnotist's ability to induce him to steal or act out other impulses against which he is usually defended. No, I don't see terribly much id-dominance; the hypnotist can get the subject to use his primary process, to hallucinate, dream, etc., but in a sense the subject thus has even more control than usual, in the sense that regression in the service of the ego is cited by you as an instance of ego autonomy; he can turn on or off either primary or secondary process. According to your formulation, it would be hard to understand how feats of concentration and intellectual labor could be carried out under hypnosis. (Of course, I don't know the literature well—are there actually well documented instances of hypnotic hyperfunction of a strictly secondary process kind? I wouldn't regard hypermnesia as such.)

Page 16: how good are our studies of stimulus intake in depression and mourning? May it not also be the other way, too: that some withdrawal from external objects (stimulation) is useful to conserve energy for the work of mourning? Mourners resolutely turn away from new, stimulating activities; they seek solitude and quiet to meditate, and perhaps if they are forced to keep up a busy, highly stimulated life, they don't do the work of mourning very well. I don't know the clinical facts on that.

Last sentence of paragraph one, page sixteen, is unclear to me: which structures? Why is the nutriment concept necessary to make therapy conceivable?

We must carefully distinguish between nutriment of internal controls (structure building) and the availability of external controls. What seems to be super-ego control of moral behavior may be to a large extent dependence on external controls. (Compare here Riesman and Witkin,⁵ and the externalization-

⁵ David Riesman, Harvard sociologist, very well known at the time as author (with Nathan Glaser and Reuel Denney) of *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). Herman A. Witkin was author of the concept of field-dependence vs. field-independence and methods for measuring it. See, for example, Witkin & Goodenough (1977). George Klein, a good friend of Witkin's, considered it a cognitive style which he often used in his own research.

internalization issue as formulated by the authoritarian personality group.) I'd answer your examples with [those of] Anne Frank's father and other inner-directed characters with well internalized superegos and strong senses of identity. You yourself refer to them later on in the paper (page 32 ff.). In your examples, I don't think you refer specifically to people who show surprising ability to resist circumstances that cause apparent atrophy of the superego in others, but I'm sure that you would admit their existence. Under such circumstances, isn't there similar stimulus-nutrient for everyone, both the craven and the hero? From where does the superego get its nutriment in such instances—surely not from itself? I read the implications of Erikson's work quite differently. If one has a firm sense of identity, then he is no longer so dependent on the pressure and opinions of others. In fact, I think there's good experimental evidence for this viewpoint in the work of Asch, Barron and Crutchfield⁶ (which I tried to summarize in my brainwashing paper [Holt, 1964]).

Page 18: I'm inclined to a different view of echolalia and echopraxia, which I agree are crucially important examples, though I feel a little abashed about stating my hypotheses since they are based on an almost total ignorance of the subject. I read somewhere—I think it was in Sorokin's autobiographical account of experiences with starving Siberians—about similar behavior in non-catatonic people, which inclines me to think of it as symbolic oral incorporation. A starving man is no more a victim of “massive blocking” of libidinal and aggressive drives than a man prostrated with physical illness, yet despite their similarly weakened states, echolalia and echopraxia are not seen in the latter condition. I suspect that in schizophrenia these symptoms may be: a. a kind of expression of extreme regression to the oral sucking stage, b. a restitutive effort to rebuild by identification a shattered ego, but an effort that fails because there is too little to build on or too little cathexis for what is introjected; c. an extreme of “schizophrenic empathy” in which the patient cannot resist the impact of another person, who captures his defenseless psychic apparatus which is not manned by any workable sense of identity.

⁶ Asch (1952), Barron (1952), Crutchfield (1955).

Page 18: often the aim of brainwashing is to extort “confession”; promises, threats and beatings do not work as well. See the testimony before the McClellan Committee on this point.

Page 19: it’s not clear to me what you mean by “nourishment for memory.” Actually, I understand this [Chinese thought reform] as an attempt to undermine memory via an attack on identity and belief, the inculcation of a new value system, and the steady input of competing “facts.” What Orwell omitted, I think, is the systematic attack on identity, and also some of the features of brainwashing technique that produce the “acute” phase, as against the “chronic” phase which is more emphasized by Lifton [1961].

Page 20: Is a concentration camp “barren of stimulus nutriment”? We have to be careful in using these terms. It’s monotonous in a number of respects, but not like the cell of a Russian prisoner, nor the situations of Lilly⁷ or our subjects.⁸ Also, I think you underplay the role of physical and physiological influences in these coercive situations. I believe that they are very important in weakening the capacity of the person (or ego, if you will) to be autonomous with respect to anything. You can weaken a person so much that he no longer responds to or in terms of the usual drives, but I doubt that this state could be called one of autonomy. Under such circumstances, extreme passivity and compliance have been reported; the person is under the domination of the environment almost completely. I suppose in a sense you might call this a special case of “blocking the instinctual drives,” since the drives are unable to function in an exhausted and enervated organism, so he doesn’t have them to fall back on, to mobilize him. [. . .]

On page 21, you say that maximized deprivation, danger and fear “enlist the drives . . . as the prompters of surrender”; I don’t see how either sexuality or

⁷ John C. Lilly, M.D., at NIMH in 1954 devised an isolation tank of warm salt water for some of the earliest studies on sensory deprivation.

⁸ Leo Goldberger and I had done a series of studies (Goldberger & Holt, 1958, 1961a, b; Holt & Goldberger, 1959, 1960, 1961) at the Research Center for Mental Health, starting with his dissertation. In each, volunteer participants rested on a bed in a sound-proof room with halved ping pong balls over their eyes for up to eight hours.

aggression are enlisted. Did you have something else in mind? I should subsume this condition under that of exhaustion, which I've just been describing. I'm surprised that you mention a relatively subordinate matter like the deprivation of privacy, and say nothing about attacks on identity as such. Finally, I don't care for the formulation of your fifth point. You have never described what you mean by nutritive; now you introduce the concept of "non-nutritive instructions and information"—something that is very much in need of clarification. Since I don't find the "nutriment" concept very congenial anyhow, maybe I should hold my peace, though it seems to me that forcible indoctrination provides what I think you mean by nutriment for the formation of unwanted structures to replace the others that are systematically torn down. In this instance, I think that it is seriously confusing the issues to talk about "stimulus-nutriment" in a context where you have been discussing isolation experiments, for there the term stimulus is meant quite literally, and here I think it is metaphorical. Someone who is being "struggled" [subjected to "thought reform"] in a Chinese prison is certainly bombarded with highly figured stimuli of all sorts in all his senses, and one certainly cannot say that the abstract structures of the ego are robbed of contact with the type of stimulus that has built them.

There's a good deal of repetition on pages 23 and 24, and I think you push the concept of autonomy a little too far—as you yourself recognize in the first paragraph on page 24, yet you go right on in the second paragraph speaking of autonomy in the way you just criticized.

Reading pages 27 and 28, it strikes me that many learning theorists would say that what you call "stimulus-nutriment" is only reinforcement, or in some instances practice. If the concept is retained, it will be necessary to distinguish it carefully from these learning concepts.

On page 29, I see that you are making distinctions between the different kinds of nutriment, such as I just called for. But I wonder how far you can go in calling anything that fosters or promotes something psychological as "nutriment." The more broadly it is used, the more it seems not to be a technical innovation but merely a loose metaphor.

I was very interested by your statement on pages 33 and 34 that structures may be nourished from drives and from the superego. Unfortunately, you merely state this without working it out in any detail. I don't really see how reference to drives or the superego helps very much; I wish you could expand on that.

Page 38, next to the last sentence. This seems like a paradox: counter-cathetic barriers to the discharge of tension are, by definition (as I understand it), a part of the ego, but you say that "a non-autonomous ego . . . does not regulate the tension." What I think you mean to stress is that insofar as this defense is redoubled automatically as drive tension rises, it is not operating as an autonomous ego function. I guess it is essentially just a matter of verbal expression; although the regulation of tension must remain an ego matter, it may at the same time be in turn regulated by the id, although the second usage of the word "regulated" is slightly different from the first.

Because I haven't yet finished the paper on activity and passivity, I am not convinced that your attempt to treat the metapsychology of the autonomies via activity and passivity is the best strategy for accomplishing that task. From what I've read of both papers, I have the feeling that the old issue of the will is still plaguing us. Its revenant refused to remain interred when the dread curse, "pseudo-problem!" was pronounced over its grave. And I don't think that the discussions of activity, passivity and the autonomies will wholly placate this restless spirit.

I suppose what I'm saying is that your paper opens up many problems, only sketching out possible solutions to many of them. It's already a long paper and shouldn't be expected to solve all of the problems it identifies; merely to call attention to them is a large contribution. I think I would like the paper a little better, though, if it explicitly recognized that on a number of issues, nothing more has been done than to point in the general direction where solutions may be found.

Altogether these reflections have been fragmentary and not brought together very well, a fault that I am tempted to attribute entirely to the haste with which I have prepared them. Perhaps there will be more matured ideas after the staff discussion; if so, I'll write them to you, even if the deadline is passed.

Yours,

Bob

Editor's Afterword

Trying to follow what feels like a tortured argument more than half a century later, I see here some of the many ways in which it was slowly becoming evident to me that Rapaport's basic project was impossible: to bring together and make internally coherent and orderly the elements of Freud's basic theory, metapsychology, while maintaining fidelity to scientific methodology and relevance to observations, mostly clinical but also those of disciplined research. Of course my relative youth, plus talents and scholarship so vastly inferior to those of a revered mentor whom I also cherished as a friend, put me in an eventually untenable position. I could and did point out inconsistencies and implausibilities in his drafts but not raise fundamental questions about the inherent feasibility of the whole project. Uneasy though I was about concepts like instinctual drive, psychic structure, and the generally unquestioned ego-id-superego triad, I was far from ready to challenge, much less to abandon them. I doubt that I ever understood my own unease in just these terms at the time.