

THE TYRANNY OF THE SHOULD

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(1885-1952)

WE HAVE discussed so far chiefly how the neurotic tries to actualize his idealized self with regard to the outside world: in achievements, in the glory of success or power or triumph. Neurotic claims, too, are concerned with the world outside himself: he tries to assert the exceptional rights to which his uniqueness entitles him whenever, and in whatever ways, he can. His feeling entitled to be above necessities and laws allows him to live in a world of fiction as if he were indeed above them. And whenever he falls palpably short of being his idealized self, his claims enable him to make factors outside himself responsible for such "failures."

We shall now discuss that aspect of self-actualization, briefly mentioned in the first chapter, in which the focus is within himself. Unlike Pygmalion, who tried to make another person into a creature fulfilling his concept of beauty, the neurotic sets to work to mold himself into a supreme being of his own making. He holds before his soul his image of perfection and unconsciously tells himself: "Forget about the disgraceful creature you actually are; this is how you should be; and to be this idealized self is all that matters. You should be able to endure (p. 64) everything, to understand everything, to like everybody, to be always productive" -- to mention only a few of these inner dictates. Since they are inexorable, I call them "the tyranny of the should."

The inner dictates comprise all that the neurotic should be able to do, to be, to feel, to know -- and taboos on how and what he should not be. I shall begin by enumerating some of them out of context, for the sake of a brief survey. (More detailed examples will follow as we discuss the characteristics of the shoulds.)

He should be the utmost of honesty, generosity, considerateness, justice, dignity, courage, unselfishness. He should be the perfect lover, husband, teacher. He should be able to endure everything, should like everybody, should love his parents, his wife, his country; or, he should not be attached to anything or anybody, nothing should matter to him, he should never feel hurt, and he should always be serene and unruffled. He should always enjoy life; or, he should be above pleasure and enjoyment. He should be spontaneous; he should always control his feelings. He should know, understand, and foresee everything. He should be able to solve every problem of his own, or of others, in no time. He should be able to overcome every difficulty of his as soon as he sees it. He should never be tired or fall ill. He should always be able to find a job. He should be able to do things in one hour which can only be done in two to three hours.

This survey, roughly indicating the scope of inner dictates, leaves us with the impression of demands on self which, though understandable, are altogether too difficult and too rigid. If we tell a patient that he expects too much of himself, he will often recognize it without hesitation; he may even have been aware of it already. He will usually add, explicitly or implicitly, that it is better to expect too much of himself than too little. But to speak of too high demands on self does not reveal the peculiar characteristics of inner dictates. These come into clear relief under closer examination. They are overlapping, because they all result from the necessity a person feels to turn into his idealized self, and from his conviction that he can do so. (p. 65)

What strikes us first is the same disregard for feasibility which pervades the entire drive for actualization. Many of these demands are of a kind which no human being could fulfill. They are plainly fantastic, although the person himself is not aware of it. He cannot help recognizing it, however, as soon as his expectations are exposed to the clear light of critical thinking. Such an intellectual realization, however, usually does not change much, if anything. Let us say that a physician may have clearly realized that he cannot do intensive scientific work in addition to a nine-hour practice and an extensive social life; yet, after abortive attempts to cut down one or another activity, he keeps going at the same pace. His demands that limitations in time and energies should not exist for him are stronger than reason. Or take a more subtle illustration. At an analytic session a patient was dejected. She had talked with a friend about the latter's marital problems, which were complicated. My patient knew the husband only from social situations. Yet, although she had been in analysis for several years and had enough understanding of the psychological intricacies involved in any relationship between two people to know better, she felt that she should have been able to tell her friend whether or not the marriage was tenable.

I told her that she expected something of herself which was impossible for anybody, and pointed out the multitude of questions to be clarified before one could even begin to have a more than dim impression of the factors operating in the situation. It turned out then that she had been aware of most of the difficulties I had pointed out. But she had still felt that she should have a kind of sixth sense penetrating all of them.

Other demands on self may not be fantastic in themselves yet show a complete disregard for the conditions under which they could be fulfilled. Thus many patients expect to finish their analysis in no time because they are so intelligent. But the progress in analysis has little to do with intelligence. The reasoning power which these people have may, in fact, be used to obstruct progress. What counts are the emotional forces operating in the patients, their capacity to be straight and to assume responsibility for themselves.

This expectation of easy success operates not only in refer- (p. 66) ence to the length of the whole analysis, but equally so in regard to an individual insight gained. For instance, recognizing some of their neurotic claims seems to them the equivalent of having outgrown them altogether. That it requires patient work; that the claims will persist as long as the emotional necessities for having them are not changed -- all of this they ignore. They believe that their intelligence should be a supreme moving power. Naturally, then, subsequent disappointment and discouragement are unavoidable. In a similar way, a teacher may expect that, with her long experience in teaching, it should be easy for her to write a paper on a pedagogical subject. If the words do not flow from her pen, she feels utterly disgusted with herself. She has ignored or discarded such relevant questions as: Has she something to say? Have her experiences crystallized to some useful formulations? And even if the answers are affirmative, a paper still means plain work in formulating and expressing thoughts.

The inner dictates, exactly like political tyranny in a police state, operate with a supreme disregard for the person's own psychic condition -- for what he can feel or do as he is at present. One of the frequent shoulds, for instance, is that one should never feel hurt. As an absolute (which is implied in the "never") anyone would find this extremely hard to achieve. How many people have been, or are, so secure in themselves, so serene, as never to feel hurt? This could at

best be an ideal toward which we might strive. To take such a project seriously must mean intense and patient work at our unconscious claims for defense, at our false pride -- or, in short, at every factor in our personality that makes us vulnerable. But the person who feels that he should never feel hurt does not have so concrete a program in mind. He simply issues an absolute order to himself, denying or overriding the fact of his existing vulnerabilities.

Let us consider another demand: I should always be understanding, sympathetic, and helpful. I should be able to melt the heart of a criminal. Again, this is not entirely fantastic. Rare people, such as the priest in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, have achieved this spiritual power. I had a patient to whom the figure of the priest was an important symbol. She felt she should be (p. 67) like him. But she did not, at this juncture, have any of the attitudes or qualities which enabled the priest to act as he did toward the criminal. She could act charitably at times because she felt that she should be charitable, but she did not feel charitable. As a matter of fact, she did not feel much of anything for anybody. She was constantly afraid lest somebody take advantage of her. Whenever she could not find an article, she thought it had been stolen. Without being aware of it, her neurosis had made her egocentric and bent on her own advantage -- all of which was covered up by a layer of compulsive humility and goodness. Was she at that time willing to see these difficulties in herself, and to work at them? Of course not. Here, too, it was a question of a blind issuing of orders which could lead only to self-deception or unfair self-criticism.

In trying to account for the amazing blindness of the shoulds, we again have to leave many loose ends. This much, however, is understandable from their origin in the search for glory and their function to make oneself over into one's idealized self: the premise on which they operate is that nothing should be, or is, impossible for oneself. If that is so, then, logically, existing conditions need not be examined.

This trend is most apparent in the application of demands directed toward the past. Concerning the neurotic's childhood, it is not only important to elucidate the influences which set his neurosis going, but also to recognize his present attitudes toward the adversities of the past. These are determined less by the good or the bad done to him than by his present needs. If he has developed, for instance a general need to be all sweetness and light he will spread a golden haze over his childhood. If he has forced his feelings into a strait jacket he may feel that he does love his parents because he should love them. If he generally refuses to assume responsibility for his life, he may put all the blame for all his difficulties on his parents. The vindictiveness accompanying this latter attitude, in turn, may be out in the open or repressed.

He may finally go to the opposite extreme, and seemingly assume an absurd amount of responsibility for himself. In this case he may have become aware of the full impact of intimidating and cramping early influences. His conscious attitude is (p. 68) quite objective and plausible. He may point out, for instance, that his parents could not help behaving the way they did. The patient sometimes wonders himself why he does not feel any resentment. One of the reasons for the absence of conscious resentment is a retrospective should that interests us here. Though he is aware that what has been perpetrated on him was quite sufficient to crush anybody else, he should have come out of it unscathed. He should have had the inner strength and fortitude not to let these factors affect him. So, since they did, it proved that he was no good from the beginning. In other words, he is realistic up to a point; he would say: "Sure, that was a

cesspool of hypocrisy and cruelty.” But then his vision becomes blurred: “Although I was helplessly exposed to this atmosphere, I should have come out of it like a lily out of a swamp.”

If he could assume a matter-of-fact responsibility for his life instead of such a spurious one, he would think differently. He would admit that the early influences could not fail to mold him in an unfavorable way. And he would see that, no matter what the origin of his difficulties, they do disturb his present and future life. For this reason he had better muster his energies to outgrow them. Instead, he leaves the whole matter at the completely fantastic and futile level of his demand that he should not have been affected. It is a sign of progress when the same patient at a later period reverses his position and rather gives himself credit for not having been entirely crushed by the early circumstances.

The attitude toward childhood is not the only area in which the retrospective should operate with this deceptive counterfeit of responsibility and the same resultant futility. One person will maintain that he should have helped his friend by voicing a frank criticism; another that he should have brought up his children without their becoming neurotic. Naturally we all regret having failed in this or that regard. But we can examine why we failed, and learn from it. We must also recognize that in view of the neurotic difficulties existing at the time of the “failures,” we may actually have done the best we could at that time. But, for the neurotic, to have done his best is not good (p. 69) enough. In some miraculous way he should have done better. Similarly, the realization of any present shortcoming is unbearable for anybody harassed by dictatorial shoulds. Whatever the difficulty, it must be removed quickly. How this removal is effected varies. The more a person lives in imagination, the more likely it is that he will simply spirit away the difficulty. Thus a patient who discovered in herself a colossal drive for being the power behind the throne, and who saw how this drive had operated in her life, was convinced by the next day that this drive was now entirely a matter of the past. She should not be power ridden; so she was not. After such “improvements” occurred frequently, we realized that the drive for actual control and influence was but one expression of the magic power she possessed in her imagination.

Others try to remove by dint of sheer will power the difficulty of which they have become aware. People can go to an extraordinary length in this regard. I am thinking, for instance, of two young girls who felt that they should never be afraid of anything. One of them was scared of burglars and forced herself to sleep in an empty house until her fear was gone. The other was afraid of swimming when the water was not transparent because she felt she might be bitten by a snake or a fish. She forced herself to swim across a shark-infested bay. Both girls managed in this way to crush their fears. Thus the incidents seem to be grist for the mills of those who regard psychoanalysis as newfangled nonsense. Do they not show that all that is necessary is to pull oneself together? But actually the fears of burglars or snakes were but the most obvious, manifest expression of a general, more hidden apprehensiveness. And this pervasive undercurrent of anxiety remained untouched by the acceptance of the particular “challenge.” It was merely covered up, driven deeper by disposing of a symptom without touching the real disorder.

In analysis we can observe how the will-power machinery is switched on in certain types as soon as they become aware of foibles. They resolve and try to keep a budget, to mix with people to be more assertive or more lenient. This would be fine if they showed an equal interest in

understanding the implications and sources of their troubles. Unfortunately this interest is sadly lacking. The very first step, which is to see the whole extent of the particular disturbance, would go against their grain. It would indeed be the exact opposite to their frantic drive to make the disturbance disappear. Also, since they feel they should be strong enough to conquer it by conscious control, the process of careful disentangling would be an admission of weakness and defeat. These artificial efforts are bound, of course, to abate sooner or later; then, at best, the difficulty is a little more under control. All that is sure is that it has been driven underground and that it continues to operate in a more disguised form. The analyst, naturally, should not encourage such efforts but should analyze them.

Most neurotic disturbances resist even the most strenuous efforts at control. Conscious efforts simply do not avail against a depression, against a deeply ingrained inhibition to work, or against consuming daydreams. One would think that this would be clear to any person who has gained some psychological understanding during analysis. But again the clarity of thinking does not penetrate to the "I should be able to master it." The result is that he suffers more intensely under depressions, etc., because, in addition to its being painful anyhow, it becomes a visible sign of his lack of omnipotence. Sometimes the analyst can catch this process at the beginning and nip it in the bud. Thus a patient who had revealed the extent of her daydreaming, while exposing in detail how subtly it pervaded most of her activities, came to realize its harmfulness -- at least to the extent of understanding how it sapped her energies. The next time she was somewhat guilty and apologetic because the daydreams persisted. Knowing her demands on herself, I injected my belief that it would be neither possible nor even wise to stop them artificially, because we could be sure that they fulfilled as yet important functions in her life -- which we would have to come to understand gradually. She felt very much relieved and now told me that she had decided to stop the daydreams. But since she hadn't been able to she felt I would be disgusted with her. Her own expectation of herself had been projected to me.

Many reactions of despondence, irritability, or fear occurring during analysis are less a response to the patient's having dis- (p. 71) covered a disturbing problem in himself (as the analyst tends to assume) than to his feeling impotent to remove it right away.

Thus the inner dictates, while somewhat more radical than other ways to maintain the idealized image, like the others do not aim at real change but at immediate and absolute perfection. They aim at making the imperfection disappear, or at making it appear as if the particular perfection were attained. This becomes especially clear if, as in the last example, the inner demands are externalized. Then what a person actually is, and even what he suffers, becomes irrelevant. Only what is visible to others creates intense worries: a shaking of the hand, a blush, an awkwardness in social situations.

The shoulds, therefore, lack the moral seriousness of genuine ideals. People in their grip are not striving, for instance, toward approximating a greater degree of honesty but are driven to attain the absolute in honesty -- which is always just around the corner, or is attained in imagination.

They can achieve at best a behavioristic perfection, such as Pearl Buck has described in the character of Madame Wu in *The Pavilion of Women*. Here is the portrait of a woman who always

seems to do, feel, think the right thing. The superficial appearance of such people is, needless to say, most deceptive. They themselves are bewildered when, seemingly out of a blue sky, they develop a street phobia or functional heart trouble. How is that possible, they ask. They have always managed life perfectly, have been the leaders in their class, the organizers, the model marriage partners or parents. Eventually a situation which they cannot manage in their usual way is bound to occur. And, having no other way to deal with it, their equilibrium is disturbed. The analyst, when getting acquainted with them and the enormous tension under which they operate, rather marvels that they have kept going as long as they have without gross disturbances.

The more we get a feeling for the nature of the shoulds, the more clearly do we see that the difference between them and real moral standards or ideals is not a quantitative but a qualitative one. It was one of Freud's gravest errors to regard the (p. 72) inner dictates (some of the features of which he had seen and described as superego), as constituting morality in general. To begin with, their connection with moral questions is not too close. True enough, the commands for moral perfection do assume a prominent place among the shoulds, for the simple reason that moral questions are important in all our lives. But we cannot separate these particular shoulds from others, just as insistent, which are plainly determined by unconscious arrogance, such as "I should be able to get out of a Sunday-afternoon traffic jam" or "I should be able to paint without laborious training and working." We must also remember that many demands conspicuously lack even a moral pretense, among them "I should be able to get away with anything," "I should always get the better of others," and "I should always be able to get back at others." Only by focusing on the totality of the picture are we able to get the proper perspective on the demands for moral perfection. Like the other shoulds, they are permeated by the spirit of arrogance and aim at enhancing the neurotic's glory and at making him godlike. They are, in this sense, the neurotic counterfeit of normal moral strivings. When one adds to all this the unconscious dishonesty necessarily involved in making blemishes disappear, one recognizes them as an immoral rather than a moral phenomenon. It is necessary to be clear about these differences for the sake of the patient's eventual reorientation from a make-believe world into the development of genuine ideals.

There is one further quality of the shoulds that distinguishes them from genuine standards. It is implied in the previous comments but carries too much weight of its own not to be stated separately and explicitly. That is their coercive character. Ideals, too, have an obligating power over our lives. For instance, if among them is the belief in fulfilling responsibilities which we ourselves recognize as such we try our best to do so even though it may be difficult. To fulfill them is what we ourselves ultimately want, or what we deem right. The wish, the judgment the decision is ours. And because we are thus at one with ourselves, efforts of this kind give us freedom and strength. In obeying the shoulds, on the other hand there is just about as much freedom as there is in a "voluntary" contribution or (p. 73) ovation within a dictatorship. In both instances there are quick retributions if we do not measure up to expectations. In the case of the inner dictates, this means violent emotional reactions to nonfulfillment -- reactions which traverse the whole range of anxiety, despair, self-condemnation, and self-destructive impulses. To the outsider they appear entirely out of proportion to the provocation. But they are entirely in proportion to what it means to the individual.

Let me cite still another illustration of the coercive character of the inner dictates. Among the inexorable shoulds of one woman was that of having to foresee all contingencies. She was very proud of what she considered her gift of foresight and of preserving her family from dangers through her prescience and prudence. Once she had made elaborate plans to persuade her son to be analyzed. She had failed, however, to consider the influence of a friend of her son's who was antagonistic toward analysis. When she realized that she had left this friend out of her calculations she had a physical shock-reaction, and felt as if the ground had been pulled away from under her. Actually it was more than dubitable whether the friend was as influential as she thought, and also whether she could have engaged his help in any case. The reaction of shock and collapse was entirely due to her sudden realization that she should have thought of him. Similarly a woman who was an excellent driver lightly bumped a car ahead of her and was called out of the car by a police officer. She had a sudden feeling of unreality, although the accident was minimal and she was not afraid of policemen whenever she felt in the right.

Reactions of anxiety often escape attention because the customary defenses against anxiety are set going instantaneously. Thus a man who felt he should be a saint like friend realized that he had been harsh toward a friend when he might have been helpful, and went on a heavy drinking spree. Again a woman who felt that she should always be pleasant and likable was mildly criticized by a friend for not having invited another friend to a party. She felt a fleeting anxiety, was for a moment physically close to fainting, and reacted to that with an increased need for affection -- which was her way of checking anxiety. A man, under the duress of unfulfilled shoulds, evolved (p. 74) an acute urge to sleep with some woman. Sexuality for him was a means to feel wanted and to re-establish his sunken self-respect.

No wonder then, in view of such retributions, that the shoulds have a coercive power. A person may function fairly well as long as he lives in accordance with his inner dictates. But he may be thrown out of gear if he is caught between two contradictory shoulds. For instance, one man felt that he should be the ideal physician and give all his time to his patients. But he should also be the ideal husband and give his wife as much time as she needed to be happy. When realizing he could not do both to the full, mild anxiety ensued. It remained mild because he immediately tried to solve the Gordian knot by cutting it with a sword: by determining to settle down in the country. This implied giving up his hopes for further training and thus jeopardizing his whole professional future.

The dilemma was finally solved satisfactorily by analyzing it. But it shows the amount of despair that can be generated by conflicting inner dictates. One woman almost went to pieces because she could not combine being an ideal mother with being an ideal wife, the latter meaning to her being all enduring toward an alcoholic husband.

Naturally such contradictory shoulds render it difficult, if not indeed impossible, to make a rational decision between them because the opposing demands are equally coercive. One patient had sleepless nights because he could not decide whether he should go with his wife on a short vacation or stay in his office and work. Should he measure up to his wife's expectations or to the alleged expectations of his employer? The question as to what he wanted most did not enter his mind at all. And, on the basis of the shoulds, the matter simply could not be decided.

A person is never aware either of the full impact of the inner tyranny or of its nature. But there are great individual differences in the attitudes toward this tyranny and the ways of experiencing it. They range between the opposite poles of compliance and rebellion. While elements of such different attitudes operate in each individual, usually one or the other (p. 75) prevails. To anticipate later distinctions, the attitudes toward and ways of experiencing inner dictates are primarily determined by the greatest appeal life holds for the individual: mastery, love, or freedom. Since such differences will be discussed later, 1 [Cf. Chapters, 8, 9, 10, 11.] I shall here indicate only briefly how they operate with regard to the shoulds and taboos.

The expansive type, for whom mastery of life is crucial, tends to identify himself with his inner dictates and, whether consciously or unconsciously, to be proud of his standards. He does not question their validity and tries to actualize them in one way or other. He may try to measure up to them in his actual behavior. He should be all things to all people; he should know everything better than anybody else; he should never err; he should never fail in anything he attempts to do -- in short, fulfill whatever his particular shoulds are. And, in his mind, he does measure up to his supreme standards. His arrogance may be so great that he does not even consider the possibility of failure, and discards it if it occurs. His arbitrary rightness is so rigid that in his own mind he simply never errs.

The more he is engulfed in his imagination, the less necessary it is for him to make actual efforts. It is sufficient, then, that in his mind he is supremely fearless or honest, no matter how beset he is by fears or how dishonest he actually is. The border line between these two ways of "I should" and "I am" is vague for him -- for that matter, probably not too sharp for any of us. The German poet Christian Morgenstern has expressed this concisely in one of his poems. A man was lying in a hospital with a broken leg after having been run over by a truck. He read that in the particular street in which the accident happened trucks were not allowed to drive. And so he arrived at the conclusion that the whole experience was only a dream. For, "sharp as a knife," he concluded that nothing can happen that should not happen. The more a person's imagination prevails over his reasoning, the more the border line disappears and he is the model husband, father, citizen, or whatever he should be.

The self effacing type for whom love seems to solve all problems, likewise feels that his shoulds constitute a law not to be (p. 76) questioned. But when trying -- anxiously -- to measure up to them, he feels most of the time that he falls pitifully short of fulfilling them. The foremost element in his conscious experience is therefore self-criticism, a feeling of guilt for not being the supreme being.

When carried to the extreme, both these attitudes toward the inner dictates render it difficult for a person to analyze himself. Tending toward the extreme of self-righteousness may prevent him from seeing any flaws in himself. And tending toward the other extreme -- that of too readily feeling guilty -- entails the danger of insights into shortcomings having a crushing rather than a liberating effect.

The resigned type, finally, to whom the idea of "freedom." appeals more than anything else, is, of the three, most prone to rebel against his inner tyranny. Because of the very importance which freedom -- or his version of it -- has for him, he is hypersensitive to any coercion. He may

rebel in a somewhat passive way. Then everything that he feels he should do, whether it concerns a piece of work or reading a book or having sexual relations with his wife, turns -- in his mind -- into a coercion, arouses conscious or unconscious resentment, and in consequence makes him listless. If what is to be done is done at all, it is done under the strain produced by the inner resistance.

He may rebel against his shoulds in a more active way. He may try to throw them all overboard, and sometimes go to the opposite extreme by insisting upon doing only what he pleases when he pleases. The rebellion may take violent forms, and then often is a rebellion of despair. If he can't be the ultimate of piety, chastity, sincerity, then he will be thoroughly "bad," be promiscuous, tell lies, affront others.

Sometimes a person who usually complies with the shoulds may go through a phase of rebellion. It is usually then directed against external restrictions. J. P. Marquand has described such temporary rebellions in a masterly way. He has shown us how easily they can be put down, for the very reason that the restricting external standards have a mighty ally in the internal dictates. And then afterward the individual is left dull and listless.

Finally, others may go through alternating phases of self- (p. 77) castigating "goodness" and a wild protest against any standards. To the observant friend such people may present an insoluble puzzle. At times they are offensively irresponsible in sexual or financial matters, and at others they show highly developed moral sensibilities. So the friend who has just been despairing of their having any sense of decency is reassured about their being fine persons after all, only to be thrown into severe doubts again shortly thereafter. In others there may be a constant shuttling between an "I should" and "no, I won't." "I should pay a debt. No, why should I?" "I should keep to a diet. No, I won't." Often these people give the impression of spontaneity and mistake their contradictory attitudes toward their shoulds for "freedom."

Whatever the prevailing attitude, a great deal of the process is always externalized; it is experienced as going on between self and others. Variations in this regard concern the particular aspect that is externalized, and the way in which it is done. Roughly, a person may primarily impose his standards upon others and make relentless demands as to their perfection. The more he feels himself to be the measure of all things, the more he insists -- not upon general perfection but upon his particular norms being measured up to. The failure of others to do so arouses his contempt or anger. Still more irrational is the fact that his own irritation with himself for not being, at any moment and under all conditions, what he should be may be turned outward. Thus, for instance, when he is not the perfect lover, or is caught in a lie, he may turn angrily against those he failed and build up a case against them.

Again he may primarily experience his expectations of himself as coming from others. And, whether these others actually do expect something or whether he merely thinks they do, their expectations then turn into demands to be fulfilled. In analysis he feels that the analyst expects the impossible from him. He attributes to the analyst his own feelings that he should always be productive, should always have a dream to report, should always talk about what he thinks the analyst wants him to discuss, should always be appreciative of help and show it by getting better. (p. 78)

If he believes in this way that others are expecting or demanding things of him, he may, again, respond in two different ways. He may try to anticipate or guess at their expectations and be eager to live up to them. In that case he usually also anticipates that they would condemn him or drop him at a moment's notice if he fails. Or, if he is hypersensitive to coercion, he feels that they are imposing upon him, meddling in his affairs, pushing him or coercing him. He then minds it bitterly, or even openly rebels against them. He may object to giving Christmas presents, because they are expected. He will be at his office or at any appointment just a little later than expected. He will forget anniversaries, letters, or any favor for which he has been asked. He may forget a visit to relatives just because his mother had asked him to make it, although he liked them and meant to see them. He will overreact to any request made. He will then be less afraid of the criticism of others than resentful of it. His vivid and unfair self-criticism also becomes tenaciously externalized. He then feels that others are unfair in their judgment of him or that they always suspect ulterior motives. Or, if his rebellion is more aggressive, he will flaunt his defiance and believe that he does not in the least care what they think of him.

The overreaction to requests made is a good lead to recognizing the inner demands. Reactions which strike us ourselves as being out of proportion may be particularly helpful in self-analysis. The following illustration, in part self-analysis, may be useful in showing also certain faulty conclusions we may draw from self-observations. It concerns a busy executive whom I saw occasionally. He was asked by phone whether he could go to the pier and meet a refugee writer coming from Europe. He had always admired this writer and had met him socially on a visit to Europe. Since his time was jammed with conferences and other work, it would actually have been unfeasible to comply with this request, particularly since it might have involved waiting on the pier for hours. As he realized later on, he could have reacted in two ways, both of them sensible. He could either have said that he would think it over and see whether he could make it, or he could have declined with regret and (p. 79) asked whether there was anything else he could do for the writer. Instead he reacted with immediate irritation and said abruptly that he was too busy and never would call for anybody at the pier.

Soon after this he regretted his response and later went to some length to find out where the writer was located so that he could help him if necessary. He not only regretted the incident; he also felt puzzled. Did he not think as highly of the writer as he had thought he did? He felt sure that he did. Was he not as friendly and helpful as he believed himself to be? If so, was he irritated because he was put on the spot in being asked to prove his friendliness and helpfulness?

Here he was on a good track. The mere fact of his being able to question the genuineness of his generosity was for him quite a step to take -- for, in his idealized image, he was the benefactor of mankind. It was, however, more than he could digest at this juncture. He rejected this possibility by remembering that afterward he was eager to offer and give help. But while closing one avenue in his thought he suddenly hit upon another clue. When he offered help the initiative was his, but the first time he had been asked to do something. He then realized that he had felt the request as an unfair imposition. Provided he had known about the writer's arrival he would certainly have considered on his own the possibility of meeting him at the boat. He now thought of many similar incidents in which he had reacted irritably to a favor asked and realized that apparently he felt as imposition or coercion many things which in actual fact were mere requests or suggestions. He also thought of his irritability over disagreements or criticism. The

conclusion he arrived at was that he was a bully and wanted to dominate. I mention this here because reactions of this kind are easily mistaken for tendencies to dominate. What he had seen on his own was his hypersensitivity to coercion and to criticism. He could not stand coercion because he felt in a strait jacket anyhow. And he could not stand criticism because he was his own worst critic. In this context we also could pick up the track he had abandoned when questioning his friendliness. To a large extent he was helpful because he should be helpful and not be- (p. 80) cause of his rather abstract love for humanity. His attitude toward concrete individuals was much more divided than he realized. Thus any request plunged him into an inner conflict: he should accede to it and be very generous and also he should not allow anybody to coerce him. The irritability was an expression of feeling caught in a dilemma which at that time was insoluble.

The effects the shoulds have on a person's personality and life vary to some extent with his way of responding to them or experiencing them. But certain effects show inevitably and regularly, though to a greater or lesser degree. The shoulds always produce a feeling of strain, which is all the greater the more a person tries to actualize his shoulds in his behavior. He may feel that he stands on tiptoe all the time, and may suffer from a chronic exhaustion. Or he may feel vaguely cramped, tense, or hemmed in. Or, if his shoulds coincide with attitudes culturally expected of him, he may feel merely an almost imperceptible strain. It may be strong enough, however, to contribute to a desire in an otherwise active person to retire from activities or obligations.

Furthermore, because of externalizations, the shoulds always contribute to disturbances in human relations in one way or another. The most general disturbance on this score is hypersensitivity to criticism. Being merciless toward himself, he cannot help experiencing any criticism on the part of others -- whether actual or merely anticipated, whether friendly or unfriendly -- as being just as condemnatory as his own. We shall understand the intensity of this sensitivity better when we realize how much he hates himself for any lagging behind his self imposed standards. 2 [Cf. Chapter 5, Self Hate and Self Contempt.] Otherwise the kinds of disturbance in human relations depend upon the kind of prevailing externalization. They may render him too critical and harsh of others or too apprehensive, too defiant, or too compliant.

Most important of all, the shoulds further impair the spontaneity of feelings, wishes, thoughts, and beliefs -- i.e., the ability (p. 81) to feel his own feelings, etc., and to express them. The person, then, can at best be "spontaneously compulsive" (to quote a patient) and express "freely" what he should feel, wish, think, or believe. We are accustomed to think that we cannot control feelings but only behavior. In dealing with others we can enforce labor but we cannot force anybody to love his work. Just so, we are accustomed to think that we can force ourselves to act as if we were not suspicious but we cannot enforce a feeling of confidence. This remains essentially true. And, if we needed a new proof, analysis could supply it. But if the shoulds issue an order as to feelings, imagination waves its magic wand and the border line between what we should feel and what we do feel evaporates. We consciously believe or feel then as we should believe or feel.

This appears in analysis when the spurious certainty of pseudofeelings is shaken, and the patient then goes through a period of bewildering uncertainty which is painful but constructive.

A person for instance who believed she liked everybody because she should do so may then ask: Do I really like my husband, my pupils, my patients? Or anybody at that? And at that point the questions are unanswerable because only now can all the fears, suspicions, and resentments that have always prevented a free flow of positive feelings, and yet were covered up by the shoulds, be tackled. I call this period constructive because it represents a beginning search for the genuine.

The extent to which spontaneous wishes can be crushed by the inner dictates is amazing. To quote from a patient's letter written after she discovered the tyranny of her shoulds:

I saw that I was quite simply unable to want anything, not even death! And certainly not "life." Until now I had thought my trouble was just that I was unable to do things; unable to give up my dream, unable to gather up my own things, unable to accept or control my irritability, unable to make myself more human, whether by sheer will power, patience, or grief.

Now for the first time I saw it -- I was literally unable to feel anything. (Yes, for all my famous supersensitivity!) How well I knew pain -- every pore of me clogged with inward rage, self-pity, self contempt, and despair for the last six years and over and over again and again! Yet I saw it now -- all was negative, reactive, compulsive, (p. 82) all imposed from without; inside there was absolutely nothing of mine. 3 [From "Finding the Real Self," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1949. A Letter, with Foreword by Karen Homey.]

The creation of make-believe feelings is most striking in those whose idealized image lies in the direction of goodness, love, and saintliness. They should be considerate, grateful, sympathetic, generous, loving, and so in their minds they have all these qualities. They talk and go through the motions as if they simply were that good and loving. And, since they are convinced of it, they even can be temporarily convincing to others. But of course these make-believe feelings have no depth and no sustaining power. Under favorable circumstances they may be fairly consistent and then, naturally, are not questioned. Madame Wu, in *Pavilion of Women*, started to question the genuineness of her feelings only when difficulties arose in the family situation and when she met a man who was straight and honest in his emotional life.

More often the shallowness of the made-to-order feelings shows in other ways. They may disappear easily. Love readily makes way for indifference, or for resentment and contempt, when pride or vanity is hurt. In these instances people usually do not ask themselves: "How does it happen that my feelings or opinions change so easily?" They simply feel that here is another person who has disappointed their faith in humanity, or that they never "really" trusted him. All of this does not mean that they may not have slumbering capacities for strong and alive feelings, but what appears on more conscious levels often is a massive pretense with very little that is genuine in it. In the long run they give the impression of something unsubstantial, elusive, or -- to use a good slang word -- of being phonies. An irruptive anger often is the only feeling that is really fair.

At the other extreme, feelings of callousness and ruthlessness can also be exaggerated. The taboos on feelings of tenderness, sympathy, and confidence can be just as great in some neurotics as the taboos on hostility and vindictiveness are in others. These people feel that they should be

able to live without any close personal relations, so they believe that they do not need them. (p. 83) They should not enjoy anything; so they believe they do not care. Their emotional life then is less distorted than plainly impoverished.

Naturally the emotional pictures engendered by the inner commands are not always as streamlined as in these two extreme groups. The orders issued can be contradictory. You should be so sympathetic that you shun no sacrifices whatever, but you should also be so coldblooded that you can carry out any act of vengeance. As a result, a person is convinced at times that he is callous and at others that he is extremely kindhearted. In other people so many feelings and wishes are checked that a general emotional deadness ensues. There may be, for instance, a taboo on wanting anything for themselves, which puts the lid on all alive wishes and creates pervasive inhibitions about doing anything for themselves. Then, partly because of these inhibitions, they develop just as pervasive claims on the grounds of which they feel entitled to have everything in life presented on a silver platter. And then the resentment over the frustration of such claims may be choked off by a dictate that they should put up with life.

We are less aware of the harm done our feelings by these pervasive shoulds than of other damage inflicted by them. Yet it is actually the heaviest price we pay for trying to mold ourselves into perfection. Feelings are the most alive part of ourselves; if they are put under a dictatorial regime, a profound uncertainty is created in our essential being which must affect adversely our relations to everything inside and outside ourselves.

We can hardly overrate the intensity of the impact of the inner dictates. The more the drive to actualize his idealized self prevails in a person, the more the shoulds become the sole motor force moving him, driving him, whipping him into action. When a patient who is still far removed from his real self discovers some of the cramping effects of his shoulds, he may nevertheless be entirely unable to consider relinquishing them because without them -- so he feels -- he would or could not do anything. He may sometimes express this concern in terms of the belief that one cannot make other people do the "right" (p. 84) thing except by force, which is an externalized expression of his inner experience. The shoulds then acquire a subjective value for the patient with which he can dispense only when he experiences the existence of other spontaneous forces in himself.

When we realize the enormous coercive power of the shoulds we must raise one question, the answer to which we shall discuss in the fifth chapter: what does it do to a person when he recognizes that he cannot measure up to his inner dictates? To anticipate the answer briefly: then he starts to hate and despise himself. We cannot in fact understand the full impact of the shoulds unless we see the extent to which they are interwoven with self-hate. It is the threat of a punitive self-hate that lurks behind them, that truly makes them a regime of terror. (p. 85)

Horney, Karen (1950). *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. (1991 edition)