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*Is the Medium the Message in Psychoanalysis?**

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"In the beginning was the Word [logos] and the Word [logos] was with God and the Word [logos] was God." [John 1:1](#)

If psychoanalysis is regarded as a "talking cure" in which the analysand is enjoined to "put everything into words," then an argument can be made that its linguistic medium is, in many respects, also its message, producing a range of, essentially socializing, effects in the subject--*subjecting* the analysand to the symbolic order.

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan (1964) argues that: "... in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message ... [that] the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by ... any new technology" (p. 7).

But the content of any medium blinds us to its character (p. 8). We become hypnotized by the "amputation and extension" (p. 11) of our being it brings about. McLuhan even refers to this blindness as a "subliminal state of Narcissus trance" (p. 15).

McLuhan has described the "typographic spell" (p. 19) induced by literacy and the "prison without walls" in which writing and print confined us, until it began to be undermined by electric technology. Regarding the medium of speech, he writes: "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print.... If it is asked, 'What is the content of speech?' it is necessary to say, 'It is an actual process of thought, which is itself nonverbal'" (p. 8).

McLuhan addresses the ways in which, apart from any content or message in what we say, we are affected by the saying, i.e., by the medium of speech. Whereas the visual stress of phonetic writing promotes "separation of the senses" and of "the individual from the group" (p. 78), "the spoken word does not afford the extension and amplification of the visual power needed for habits of individualism and privacy" (pp. 78-9) and promotes less separation and "detachment from the feelings or emotional involvement" (p. 79) than does writing.

But despite these differences between speech and writing, McLuhan goes on

to describe their similar effects, affirming Henri Bergson's (1907) view that language, as such, is "a human technology that has impaired and diminished the values of the collective unconscious" (p. 79) and that "Speech acts to separate man from man, and mankind from the cosmic unconscious" (pp. 79-80). "Language extends and amplifies man but it also divides his faculties. His collective consciousness or intuitive awareness is diminished by this technical extension of consciousness that is speech" (p. 79). In this view, verbalization disrupts "the state of collective awareness [that] may have been the preverbal condition of men" (p. 80).

According to McLuhan, the separation, detachment, division and individualism induced by both speech and writing are being undermined by electric technology:

Language as the technology of human extension, whose powers of division and separation we know so well, may have been the "Tower of Babel" by which men sought to scale the highest heavens. Today computers hold out the promise of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language. The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity. The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to by-pass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamt of by Bergson. The condition of "weightlessness," that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace (p. 80).

Now McLuhan is writing this in the early 1960s, a time of a resurgent romantic sensibility expressed most clearly in the youth counterculture of the time. He writes before the pastoral romanticism of the flower children gave way to the satanic romanticism of the Altamont pop festival where the Hell's Angels committed murder while the Stones' expressed "Sympathy for the Devil." But it is not as if the dark side of romanticism was unknown. There is no need here to review yet again its associations with fascism (Hamilton, 1971; Viereck, 1941).

Suffice it to say that McLuhan's antinomian longing for a "Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity," a "general cosmic consciousness," and "a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace" brought about through "speechlessness" leaves me (almost) speechless. Although influenced, no doubt, by P re Teilhard de Chardin's (1959) dream of evolution through complexified communication toward the Omega Point, like Teilhard's, McLuhan's vision, at least at the time he wrote this in the early 1960s, seems overweening by any realistic standard, and most certainly from the standpoint of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the fall of man in which we have been banished from paradise, a flaming sword (an instrument that "cuts") having

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been set up to the East of Eden to prevent our return.

If indeed we are becoming a “global village,” let us hope it is radically distinct from the one marked off by severed heads on poles established by Col. Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*. By the late seventies when the film was made, Francis Ford Coppola had enough distance from the sixties to appreciate the disturbing commonality between countercultural romanticism and the barbarism of both

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the military-industrial complex and regressive tribalism. What is opposed by all of these, of course, is the self-possessed, rational and responsible individual, an Enlightenment ideal shared by Freud. Although his rationalism was tempered by profound awareness of human irrationality, he sought through the “talking cure” in which the patient is enjoined to “say everything,” to “put everything into words,” to foster the dominance of reason over the irrational forces of both id and superego: “Where id was, there ego shall be. It is a work of culture—not unlike the draining of the *Zuider Zee*” (Freud, 1933 [1932], p. 80). When the desire to sever heads is put into words it is less likely to be put into action.

Students of the philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934) might argue that language cannot be regarded as an extension of the self, for without language there would be no human self to be extended. In this view, language is *constitutive* of the self, not merely an extension of it. Mead regarded the preverbal infant as “an organism without a self.” If in the 1960s we had taken Mead seriously, we would have realized that attempting to shed the “merely verbal” self through meditation, lysergic acid diethylamide, or other means, would be akin to peeling an onion: after the last layer is removed we are left with ... nothing.

According to the Scottish anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1970, p. 82):

All distinctions are mind, by mind, in mind, of mind
No distinctions, no mind to distinguish

A darling of the 60’s counterculture, Laing embodied its antinomian sensibility. Hence, he may very well have intended in these words to recommend and celebrate a condition of mindlessness. One might argue, cynically, that by the end, with the help of alcohol and other drugs, Laing came near to achieving

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this goal. But he is quite right to say that without distinctions there is no mind. Is this an argument for, or against, distinctions—for or against the mind? The answer given by psychoanalysis is clear: it is distinguished among other therapeutic modalities by its valorization of the differentiations and integrations that dialectically make and grow the mind.

Thanks to empirical infant research, today we recognize that there are several

preverbal “senses of self” (the sense of an emergent self; the sense of a core self; and the sense of an intersubjective self) that precede the sense of a verbal self (Stern, 1985) that Mead took to be the self as such. Language may certainly be regarded as an extension of the self, for it extends the earlier, preverbal senses of self into the realm of symbolization. But the central Meadian point remains: it is through symbolization that we become human *subjects*.

Through the acquisition of language sometime during the second year of life, the human being becomes, as Kenneth Burke (1963-64) puts it, “the inventor of the negative,” the being who, in Sartre’s (1943) view, “brings nothingness into the world” because human consciousness, or *being-for-itself*, is doubly *nihilating*: in order to know this cup I must know it is *not* me (separation of the knower and the known) and, further, I must know it is *not* the table on which it rests. As Lacan (1977) put it, “the word is the death of the thing” and upon entrance into the symbolic order we discover our *manqué a etre*, our lack of being. As T.S. Elliot (1925) makes the point in “The Hollow Men”:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

On that revolutionary day at the pump when Helen Keller re-entered the symbolic order (having “eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil”), she realized that everything has a name (“and the eyes of them both were opened”). Returning to the house where, earlier, in a fit of rage, she had shattered her doll on the hearth, she encountered shame (“and they knew that they were naked”), as well as guilt, loss, grief and death, for all the king’s

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horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put her doll together again.

As George Steiner (1971) reminds us, we are “language animals.” From this vertex it can be said that language constitutes the most radical extension of the self, literally opening up human existence—*Dasein* or *being-in-the-world*—to the world of the “no longer” and the “not yet” (i.e., to time), and even to each individual’s ownmost possibility: that of ceasing to *be* altogether (Heidegger, 1927). (“For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”)

But although we are *animal symbolicum* (White, 1940), we remain animal—animals upon whom “hominization,” “primary socialization” and “enculturation” are imposed. And as the objects of colonization by language, we *resist*, to greater or lesser degrees and at greater or lesser degrees of cost, not least through romantic dreams of speechless unity and bliss.

Perhaps the wounding of our animality in the development of our sociality has best been expressed by Louis Althusser (1964), a man in whose tragic personal life we witness the violent and catastrophic reopening of such wounds and the price sometimes paid for the return of the repressed. In his essay, “Freud and Lacan,” Althusser likens the socialization process, “the extraordinary adventure that, from birth to the liquidation of the Oedipus Complex, transforms a small animal engendered by a man and a woman into a little human child” (p. 22), to Mao’s long march through China:

That this little biological being survives, and instead of surviving as a child of the woods become the charge of wolves or bears ... survives as a *human child* (having escaped all the deaths of childhood, of which many are human deaths, deaths sanctioning a failure of humanization), is the ordeal that all men, as adults, have surmounted: they are, *forever amnesiac*, the witnesses and quite often the victims of that victory, bearing in the deafest—that is, at the most vocal—recess of themselves the wounds, infirmities, and aches of that fight for human life or death. Some, most, emerge more or less unscathed—or at least make a point, out loud, of making it known; many of those former combatants remain marked by the experience for life; certain among them will die from their combat a bit later, old wounds suddenly reopened in a psychotic explosion, in madness, in the ultimate compulsion of a “negative therapeutic reaction”; others, who are more numerous, will die as “normally” as could be, under a cloak of “organic” failure. Humanity inscribes only its official deaths on its war memorials, those who managed to die on time, that is, late, men in human wars, in which only *human* wolves and gods sacrifice and tear each other apart. Psychoanalysis, in its sole survivors, is concerned with a different struggle, in the sole war without memoirs or memorials, which humanity pretends never to have fought, the one it thinks it has always won in advance, quite simply because its very existence is a function of having survived it, of living and giving birth to itself as

culture within human culture. This is a war that, at every instant, is waged in each of its offspring, who, projected, deformed, rejected, each for himself in solitude and against death, have to undertake the long forced march that turns mammalian larvae into human children, that is, *subjects* (pp. 22-23).

Psychotic explosion, negative therapeutic reaction, “organic” failure—these are only a few of the manifestations of resistance to what Lacan calls “oedipalization”—subjection to the symbolic order as *le nom (non) du père*, the name, “no!” and law of the father. Other forms include neurosis, perversion, outright psychopathy or sociopathy—all of which even law-abiding folks experience, but only in their dreams, while, in their waking lives at least, they have submitted to “castration”—i.e., to crucifixion—and acceptance of life outside of Eden on the *Via Dolorosa* (“He falls. He is stripped of His garments. He is nailed to the Cross ...”). Leonard Cohen (1992) says “Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” But it is just this enlightening crucifixion, this illuminating and emancipating castration, this acceptance of lack, suffering and death, this “common unhappiness” as distinct from hysterical misery (Freud, in Breuer & Freud, 1893-95, p. 305) that the neurotic, psychotic, psychopathic and perverse find unbearable and refuse. Unwilling to go to the Cross themselves, the latter (the psychopathic and perverse) tend to send others on their behalf, while the former (neurotic and psychotic) seek to multiply their wounds and embrace perpetual crucifixion without resurrection.

What then is psychoanalysis? It is hominization, soul-making through the crucifixion or castration entailed in putting everything into words. For the word is the death of the thing. The signifier is NOT what it signifies. And the signified is NOT the *ding an sich*. There are cuts and holes everywhere ... in the hands, the feet, the side. To speak is gap-making, and the soul emerges, along with love and death, in the gaps.

In order not to fall into the one-sidedly dark vision of what I have called “melancholic existentialism” (Carveth 2004), it is essential to remember that the gap between subject and object makes possible, not only the loss of the object, but also true communion with it as *other*. In this sense, nothingness opens us up to love, connection and *jouissance*, as much as to loss and sorrow. But in seeking to defend against the latter, we close ourselves off from the former. When the holes and cracks are foreclosed, the soul is sealed. In marked contrast to the situation pertaining in physical medicine, and marking the difference between psyche and soma, here pathology arises when the fundamental wound constituting our *abjection* (Kristeva, 1982) closes over, whereas in health it continues to bleed.

What is said is less significant than the saying, for the saying involves distinctions, separations, differentiations. Speaking sets us on the *Via Dolorosa* but also on the *Via Negativa*—the negative path of spiritual

development through realizing “I am not this, not that ...” and learning to live with and in such gaps. Psychoanalysis and Buddhist or other forms of meditation need not be integrated, for psychoanalysis IS meditation. It is a process of dis-identification or soul-making, through which the imaginal preverbal life of identification is subordinated to symbolic triangulation in which one gives way to two through the third that separates them. In opening up a space for death, lack and loss, it simultaneously opens up a space for life, love, play and creativity. It is only through crucifixion (death of the “false self,” the Lacanian “specular ego”) that resurrection (new life in the “true self,” the Lacanian living “subject”) can occur. [5]

But can the psychoanalytic process really be reduced to language? Does it not contain important non-verbal, non-discursive elements irreducible to discourse. Of course, patients, those guerrilla-fighters of the resistance, refuse “the basic rule” in a myriad of ways. They put their feelings into action, not words, arriving late, arriving early, arriving not at all, arriving on the wrong day, arriving drunk or stoned, refusing to lie on the couch, lying with one foot on the floor ... lying! ... withholding dreams or free associations, putting feelings and thoughts into body language instead of words, or discharging them through projective identification into the analyst rather than into speech—this list can be indefinitely extended. But this is the preverbal material that must find its way into speech, the Imaginary material that must find its way into the Symbolic, if the analytic process is to succeed in bringing about the transformation of *beta* into *alpha* elements through *alphabetization* (Bion, 1962).

While it is certainly true that the symbolic cannot be identified with language and with discourse, for there are highly complex, non-discursive forms of symbolization, such as music, dance, mime, painting, liturgy, etc., it is crucial that the non-symbolic find its way to symbolization, in discursive or in non-discursive forms. Therefore, there is art therapy, dance therapy, music therapy, etc. And even in psychoanalysis proper, there are non-discursive forms of symbolic communication and relationship that surely play a significant role in the therapeutic process.

Today, the adherents of “relational psychoanalysis” might agree that the medium is the message, but speech is not the medium they have in mind. They might agree that it is not the content of what comes to light in analysis, not so much insight or self-knowledge that is curative, but rather the reliable presence, the “holding” and “containing,” the empathic attunement and non-judgmental acceptance offered the analysand by the analyst. Here the medium is held to be the relationship, not the process of verbalization *per se*, the latter being seen as merely a modality through which relationship, the key element, takes place.

There is no doubt that such relational elements play an important role in any analytic therapy, but if they predominate the cure is effected through

transference, it is a so-called “transference cure,” and the process is psychotherapeutic, not psychoanalytic. In psychoanalysis, the cure is not achieved primarily or exclusively through identification with a good object. This may play a part in earlier stages of the process; it may even be *necessary*, but it is in no way *sufficient* for an analytic cure. For “the talking cure” is effected, not through the building up of a self through identification, but through dis-identification with one’s “selves” and with one’s objects, including one’s analyst. It is a process in which the non-symbolized or de-symbolized psychic contents (Bion’s “beta elements”) occluding, constipating and deadening the analysand’s life and creativity are pressed into speech. In this way the analysand is helped to move from Klein’s (1946) paranoid-schizoid position (narcissism, part-object functioning, splitting and projection) into the so-called depressive position (separation of self and object, whole-self and whole-object functioning, and ownership of unwanted parts of the self). This entails

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progression from a kind of death-in-life to a life-in-death. It involves working through and learning to bear the separation and annihilation anxieties, sadness and remorse that are, along with capacities for love, creativity and joy, the marks of mature mental functioning. It entails developing a conscience as distinct from a persecutory superego, living in constant dialogue with it, and

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learning to bear the guilt this inevitably involves.

As early as 1963 Marcuse argued that the Freudian concept of man that had once been true had become obsolescent in the social reality because a new personality type had emerged whose ego-identity is diffuse and shifting due to its lack of inner support from internalized values and ideals. In this situation, he observed, “the mediations between the self and the other gives way to immediate identification” while “the ego shrinks to such an extent that it seems no longer capable of sustaining itself, as a self, in distinction from id and superego” (p. 47). What role does electric technology play in this cultural shift and in the consequent decreased popularity of psychoanalysis and the types of personality it produces?

The ironic fact is now apparent that psychoanalysis was all along secretly dependent upon the interiority created by the Judeo-Christianity it despised. Its attacks upon the host to which it was parasitically attached helped bring about a post-Christian culture no more interested in the soul cultivated by psychoanalysis than in that produced by Judeo-Christianity. For, despite their manifest differences, both emphasize the centrality of interior conflict between impulse and conscience, the claims of the self and those of others, and both are centrally concerned with the *logos*. Derrida (1967) would see both as *logocentric* and committed to a *metaphysics of presence*, but in fact they recognize both absence and presence, *Thanatos* and *Eros*, *Fort!* and *Da!* (Freud, 1920), Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Despite continual attempts on the part of psychoanalysis to obscure the fact, it has always been, like Judeo-Christianity, a moral not a medical discourse, destined to enjoy little popularity

with today's fugitive from guilt (Carveth & Hantman, 2003).

This linkage of psychoanalysis with religious discourse will likely be disturbing to secular humanists sharing Freud's identification of religion with fundamentalism and psychoanalysis with an essentially critical and emancipatory discourse (Murray, 2005, p. 5). What this ignores is the fact that some forms of psychoanalysis are themselves fundamentalist, while some forms of religion are not. Any theory may be held on the level of either the paranoid-schizoid or the depressive position. Those colleagues who hold their psychoanalytic theories on the PS level tend to relate to Freud's writings (or Klein's or Lacan's or Kohut's) as sacred scripture and, as is always the case in paranoid-schizoid thinking, tend to polarize people into Freud (or Klein or Lacan or Kohut) idolaters like themselves, or Freud (or Klein or Lacan or Kohut) bashers, namely anyone with the temerity to bring a critical consciousness to bear on their sanctified ideas. Perhaps it was this type of psychoanalysis that the Viennese critic and satirist Karl Kraus had in mind when he suggested that psychoanalysis is itself the disease of which it claims to be the cure (my paraphrase of Kraus in Szasz, 1976, p. 103).

Conversely, in addition to religious fundamentalists, there are those who, like the distinguished Canadian literary critic and biblical scholar, Northrop Frye, regard the Bible as "a tissue of metaphors from beginning to end" (Frye in Cayley, 1992, p. 177)—but metaphors and myths that, properly decoded, contain profound existential, ethical, psychological and social truth. Needless to say, in linking psychoanalysis and religion as I have in this essay, it is the depressive position varieties of each that I have in mind (Forster & Carveth, 1999). For fundamentalism, in either field, is psychopathology: it entails foreclosure of the gap that the healthy versions of each seek to open or reopen and keep open.

In light of all this, I think it can be said that, in a significant sense, the verbal medium of psychoanalysis is indeed its message. Those who will not accept the message must reject the medium, and those who reject the medium won't get the message.

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I am indebted to Murray (2005, p. 3) who, in his formal discussion of this paper, drew my attention to another side of McLuhan's thinking, in which he warns of the dangers of electric technology and of the savagery that may characterize the global village.

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Murray (2005) points out that in *Heart of Darkness*, the Conrad (1899) novella upon which the film is based, what is particularly disturbing about Kurtz's savagery is that it is carried out in the name of God, King and country. I think Coppola is making precisely the point that there is little to distinguish stone-age barbarism from the modern, technologically enhanced varieties, beyond the fact that napalm and tactical nuclear weapons destroy on a far greater scale than spears or poisoned darts. I am not employing the term regression in any ethnocentric, social evolutionist sense, but in a psychoanalytic sense, referring to a psychic devolution from the more mature and morally responsible position Melanie Klein (1946) called "depressive" (because it reflects depressive anxiety or concern regarding the impact of one's destructiveness upon the other) to the primitive, narcissistic and pre-moral mental position she called "schizo-paranoid" to refer both to the splitting, or black and white thinking, and the projection and paranoia that characterize it. In Coppola's film, Col. Kurtz, the drugged soldiers, the stone-age warriors, and various figures within the American military bureaucracy are depicted as equally regressed in this sense.

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On the other hand, it was rumored that, before the end, Laing asked to be received back into the Church of Scotland. I first heard of this at the 1989 Fairbairn conference in Edinburgh where it was all the talk. A biographer of Laing (Burston, 1996) writes (personal communication) that "there may be something to that rumor," that he had "heard quite a bit about it," though it was also disputed by many and therefore remains open to doubt.

[4]

"One day, while I was playing with my new doll, Miss Sullivan put my big rag doll into my lap also, spelled "d-o-l-l" and tried to make me understand that "d-o-l-l" applied to both. Earlier in the day we had had a tussle over the words "m-u-g" and "w-a-t-e-r." Miss Sullivan had tried to impress it upon me that "m-u-g" is *mug* and that "w-a-t-e-r" is *water*, but I persisted in confounding the two. In despair she had dropped the subject for the time, only to renew it at the first opportunity. I became impatient at her repeated attempts and, seizing the new doll, I dashed it upon the floor. I was keenly delighted when I felt the fragments of the broken doll at my feet. Neither sorrow nor regret followed my passionate outburst. I had not loved the doll. In the still, dark world in which I lived there was no strong sentiment of tenderness. I felt my teacher sweep the fragments to one side of the hearth, and I had a sense of satisfaction that the cause of my discomfort was removed. She brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow" (Keller, 1902, ch. 4).

[5]

Winnicott's (1960) false self is not always understood as corresponding to Lacan's (1977) specular (Imaginary) ego, nor his true self to Lacan's (Symbolic) subject. But in associating the true self with "going-on-

being” and with the capacity for self-forgetting, and the false self with defenses against abandonment and impingement and with the need to know, Winnicott has far more in common with Lacan than with the relational and self psychologists who conceive the cure as building up a cohesive sense of self through identification and processes of “transmuting internalization” (Kohut, 1977).

[6]

“In the midst of life we are in death.” *Order For the Burial of the Dead, Book of Common Prayer.*

[7]

In an earlier paper (Carveth 2001), I argued that Freud’s equation of the unconscious need for punishment with unconscious guilt is unhelpful, for it obscures the fact that the former generally defends against genuine guilt, which I hold is a conscious form of mental pain (depressive anxiety) that, when unbearable, gives way to unconscious self-persecution. In my view, unconscious guilt does not exist, however the unconscious superego and the unconscious need for punishment to which it gives rise certainly do.