

## Omnipotence

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### *Introduction and Historical Note*

The following paper consists of a review and critical analysis of three classical accounts of the clinical phenomenon of omnipotence as presented during the early decades of the twentieth century by Sigmund Freud, Karl Abraham and Sandor Ferenczi. Restricting myself to these three theorists will necessarily exclude discussion of more recent contributors to the theory of omnipotence. This is not meant as a denigration of the significance of these contributions, but rather reflects my conviction that many contemporary disagreements within psychoanalysis can be traced back to conflicts of opinion initially articulated during the early history of psychoanalysis.

A survey of the early literature reveals that there was a great deal of interest in the phenomenon of omnipotence during the period immediately preceding World War One. This can be partially attributed to the advent of the theory of narcissism which has been introduced by Isidor Sadger in a discussion of male homosexuality at a meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society on 10 November 1909 and taken up by Freud in the second edition of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1910). Because we now take it so much for granted, it is strange to realise that the early analytic theorists were not at first consciously aware of the intimate tie between narcissism and omnipotence. The concept of omnipotence was actually introduced one year before the term 'narcissism' emerged in print in a psychoanalytic context. I am referring of course to Freud's discussions of omnipotence in the case of the Rat Man (Freud 1909). It was not until 1912 in *Totem and Taboo* that omnipotence was viewed as a specifically narcissistic phenomenon. After 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (Freud 1914) Freud's explicit references to omnipotence become quite scarce. This is not because he lost interest in the subject but rather because by 1914 he had definitely subsumed omnipotence under the more general clinical heading of narcissism.

If we are to accept the proposition that the emergent interest in omnipotence and narcissism were due to the same underlying factors, even though analytic theorists were not at first aware of their connection, we can approach the question of why *narcissism* was a topic of such intense interest at that time. This question can be addressed from three interrelated perspectives. The first of these concerns the logical development of theory and technique. By 1910 the widening scope of psychoanalysis led to an examination of clinical phenomena such as psychosis, fluctuations in self-esteem and certain types of male homosexuality which could not be adequately conceptualised within the framework of the topographical model of the personality. It was clear that psychoanalytic metapsychology would

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have to be expanded to encompass new observations, and the emergence of the theory of narcissism can certainly be seen as a movement in this direction.

Secondly, one can view the theory of narcissism in the light of the history of the psychoanalytic movement. During the period 1910-1915 when interest in narcissism was at its height the psychoanalytic movement itself was threatened by factionalism. These years saw the departure of Stekel, Adler and Jung. The strident criticisms of these former insiders was now added to the voices of those opposing psychoanalysis. This must have been felt as a narcissistic injury by supporters of psychoanalysis. As Greenberg and Mitchell have demonstrated (1983) Freud responded to the objections of Jung and Adler not primarily with counter-attacks but rather with a strategy of theoretical accommodation, i.e. with modifications in his own theory. The emergence of the theory of narcissism can therefore be seen in terms of Freud's reaction to Adler's stress on the striving for power - which is particularly germane to the concept of omnipotence - and to Jung's monistic/ asexual model of the psyche. This latter point is quite obvious in 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' where Freud strives to demonstrate that much of what appears to be non-sexual energy of the ego can be genetically traced to the cathexis of the ego with libido (Greenberg & Mitchell 1983).

Finally, we can look at the rise of the theory of narcissism in the light of Freud's ongoing intrapsychic processes and self-analysis. Isbister (1985) in an unfortunately hostile biography argues rather cogently that Freud's earliest discussions of narcissism - in particular the Schreber analysis - were based on his workingthrough of the relationship with Fliess. The hypothesis that Freud used the Schreber memoirs as a pretext for presenting the results of his analysis of his relationship with Fliess, which possessed distinctly narcissistic, homosexual and paranoid qualities, would explain his curious neglect of the information readily available concerning Schreber's horrific early history (Neiderland 1974).

The period that we are discussing is also of course the period of Freud's relationship with Jung. There is now considerable evidence that Freud and Jung were engaged in a mutual narcissistic transference (Homans 1979). As Jones (1955) points out, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' was written during the worst time of the Freud/Jung conflict. 'It appears', writes Homans (1979), 'that their complex encounter led both Freud and Jung to turn their energies to working out the nature of narcissistic processes...'.

### *Freud's Formulation of Omnipotence*

Freud's formulation of omnipotence is quite simple and easily summarised. It consists of two cardinal elements: omnipotence as a narcissistic phenomenon and omnipotence as an attitude of thinking. The two major Freudian texts on omnipotence are 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis' (Freud 1909D) and 'Totem and Taboo' (Freud 1912X).

The 1909 work introduces 'the omnipotence of thoughts' (a 1923 footnote alters this to 'the omnipotence of wishes', p. 235) as the belief that one's thoughts are capable of directly influencing the external world without any means of physical mediation. Omnipotent thinking is seen as the residuum of 'infantile megalomania' (p. 234) in a statement which is probably Freud's earliest reference to the developmental stage of narcissism introduced formally in 1911 (Freud 1911C). In 1912

Freud describes omnipotence as the 'narcissistic' overvaluation of psychical acts (pp. 89-90). This is ascribed to the sexualisation of thinking. During this period Freud conceived of narcissism as the libidinal cathexis of the self-representation and his remarks on the narcissistic nature of omnipotence must be understood in this context. He is saying that the omnipotence of thought involves the libidinal cathexis of the representation of self-as-thinker. It is because of this narcissistic cathexis that thinking is experienced as sexually exciting. The omnipotence of thought is the psychological basis for the belief in magic as a method of influencing the external world.

It may be enquired why the libidinal cathexis of self-as-thinker should necessarily lead to the overvaluation of the power of thought. In order to respond to this question it is necessary to refer to 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (Freud 1914C) where Freud states that overvaluation is an intrinsic characteristic of narcissistic cathexis.

There are few explicit references to omnipotence in Freud's writings after 1912. The reason for this is indicated by the way he discusses magic in 'On Narcissism'. Whereas the belief in magic was attributed in 1912 to omnipotent thinking, by 1914 it is attributed to narcissism. This shift in emphasis suggests that after 1912 the growing significance of narcissism impels Freud to submerge omnipotence in the more general and fundamental concept and to lost interest in it as a discrete clinical entity.

#### *Abraham's Formulation of Omnipotence*

Karl Abraham's account of omnipotence is based on the study of dreams, neurotic and psychotic symptoms. Like Freud he considers omnipotence to be a narcissistic phenomenon but unlike Freud he sees it in terms of the overestimation of one's body - particularly one's erotogenic zones - rather than as a narcissistic attitude towards thinking. The two key texts are 'Restrictions and Transformations of Scopophilia in Psycho-Neurotics: With Remarks on Analogous Phenomena in Folk-Psychology' (Abraham 1913) and 'The Narcissistic Evaluation of Excretory Processes in Dreams and Neurosis' (Abraham 1920).

In the 1913 paper Abraham remarks on the phenomenon of the overestimation of the power of the glance. He refers to this as the omnipotence of the glance (p. 199). The omnipotence of the glance appears in two symptoms: the neurotic fear that the glance will evoke erotic excitement in all whom it falls upon and the paranoid belief that the glance has the power to kill. Abraham comes to the conclusion, at least in the case of the paranoid symptom, that the eye represents the penis in these instances, an interpretation which implicitly suggests the existence of *phallic* omnipotence.

In 1920 Abraham describes his encounter with a similar cluster of omnipotent phenomena, this time revolving around the excretory functions. He introduces the term 'omnipotence of the function of bladder and bowel' (p. 319) as a label for this type of omnipotence. The overestimation of the excretory functions may be of two sorts: (a) the overestimation of the quantity of the substance excreted, and (b) the overestimation of the capacity of the excretory functions to create or destroy objects. Abraham attempts to bring this into line with Freud's formulation by

stating that excretory omnipotence is the primitive precursor of the omnipotence of thought.

The main difference between Abraham's and Freud's accounts is that the narcissistic cathexis of a different portion of the self-representation is described. His patients cathect the exciting or destructive phallus and then displace this cathexis in the case of ocular omnipotence, while the creative and destructive functions of urination, defaecation and flatus are cathected in excretory omnipotence. This way of looking at things of course makes great sense in relation to Freud's theory of libidinal development. Since each of the stages was described by Freud from 1915 onwards as having important narcissistic components it can be plausibly argued that a theory of psychosexual omnipotent modes is latent in Freud's maturational framework.

### *Ferenczi's Formulation of Omnipotence*

Ferenczi is the only one of the three authors cited in this paper who attempts to formulate a systematic maturational theory of omnipotence. Like Freud and Abraham, Ferenczi sees omnipotence as closely related to narcissism, but unlike them he considers the sense of omnipotence to be an interactional phenomenon - a product of the relationship between infant and caretaker - rather than simply an intrapsychic consequence of narcissism. The key text is 'Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality' (Ferenczi 1913).

According to Ferenczi the initial stage in the development of the sense of reality is the stage of *unconditional omnipotence* which corresponds to the intrauterine period. The stage of unconditional omnipotence is characterised by the absolute dominion of the pleasure-principle and is the basis of all later omnipotence-feeling. As Glatzer and Evans have pointed out (1977, p. 89) Ferenczi's conception of an epoch in which there is a perfect fit between organismic demands and environmental provisions is much more radical than the notion of a period in which all one's needs are instantaneously gratified: it is a conception of a developmental era when *one did not even need to need!* Ferenczi considers this state of needlessness to be the root of omnipotence feeling.

With the upheaval of birth the period of *magical-hallucinatory omnipotence* is ushered in. During this stage the infant spontaneously seeks to recapture the intrauterine state through hallucinatory mechanisms. With adequate mothering this hallucination becomes real and the interaction preserves the infant's sense of omnipotence. Unlike the previous position there is scope for environmental failure here, which is why communicative mechanisms come into play immediately after birth. The infant responds to organismic distress by crying and uncoordinated motor discharge which its mother hears as a signal that the experience of need is penetrating her infant's tranquility, which she then restores. The presence of omnipotence-feeling during this stage is dependent on the mother immediately gratifying her infant's needs.

Gradually the infant comes to understand and becomes able to use the process of signalling. During the period of *omnipotence by the help of magic gestures* needs are signalled through the performance of coordinated motor exertions. The transition to this stage is forced by the child's increasing cognitive, affective and biological complexity. Needs are now too specific to be signalled effectively by the

earlier global methods. Similarly the preservation of the sense of omnipotence is now dependent upon the infant's capacity to signal accurately and the mother's capacity to interpret these signals and perform the appropriate ministrations. During the course of the period of omnipotence by the help of magic gestures a 'painful discordance' enters the infant's world: it begins to recognise the independent existence of an external world. The first objects are 'certain perfidious things ... which do not obey his will' (1913, p. 226). The discovery of objects is explained in a later paper (Ferenczi 1926A, p. 371) as due to ambivalence. Ferenczi came to the conclusion that it is only when an object is both gratifying and frustrating that it can be recognised as external to the self-representation. Objects which are always satisfying are perceived as parts of the subjective ego, while objects that are always hostile are obliterated by massive disavowal. It is noteworthy that Ferenczi is employing a theory of primary 'identification' or self-object fusion. When parental objects have become differentiated they are perceived as 'divine powers' whose favour must be gained in order for the magic to work.

The *animistic period* begins when the child has succeeded in situating at least a good portion of the world beyond the boundary of its self-representation. The infant then attempts to find its organs and their functions in the external world. The interface of this conjunction of me and not-me corresponds to *the symbolic*. According to Ferenczi's account it is only projective and introjective symbolic mechanisms that come into play at this point. Symbolisation through displacement has not yet been developed. With the advent of projective-introjective symbolism (as we will call it) a new dimension is added to the primitive gesture-language: the infant becomes able to communicate wishes concerned with changing the outer world. Once again the interaction between the child communicating symbolically and the parent's capacity to understand and respond to its messages is the factor determining to what extent the sense of omnipotence is allowed to persist.

During the period of *magic thoughts and magic words* the young child learns to express itself through conscious thought and speech by means of word-presentations. The sense of omnipotence is preserved at this time inasmuch as the infant's entourage is able to make sense of its primitive speech and guess its few rudimentary thoughts. This period corresponds to the mode of omnipotence described by Freud. For Freud the omnipotence of thought was viewed as a purely intrapsychic consequence of narcissism, while for Ferenczi it is based on the caretaker's ability to collude with the child's narcissistic trends in an age-appropriate way.

The final stage of the renunciation of omnipotence is said to occur when complete psychical detachment from the parents is achieved. In the 1913 paper Ferenczi states that the timing of this event is extremely variable. In a 1926 review of one of Rank's works, however, the complete psychical detachment from the parents is said to occur when the superego has been constituted (Ferenczi 1926). The abandonment of primitive omnipotence could of course be partially explained as an economic consequence of superego formation. Ferenczi describes two transformations of omnipotence persisting during this final stage: philosophical beliefs (such as the doctrines of determinism and free will) and character traits (such as optimism). It is uncertain to what extent he conceived of this phase as interactionally mediated.

*Towards a Definition of Omnipotence*

All three authors consider omnipotence to be a narcissistic phenomenon. All three also describe omnipotence as manifest in fantasy. For Freud it is a fantasy concerning the effects of one's thoughts; for Abraham a fantasy concerning the potency of one's erotogenic zones; for Ferenczi a fantasy concerning one's capacity to influence objects. The only exception to the rule is Ferenczi's formulation of unconditional omnipotence which he insists is 'no empty delusion' (1913, p. 219). Another characteristic that all three accounts have in common is the element of activity. For Freud the activity is thinking; for Abraham it is exhibiting the phallus (or gazing), urinating, defaecating and passing wind; for Ferenczi it is uncoordinated motor activity, coordinated gesturing, symbolising and communicating symbolically, speaking and thinking. Once again the only exception is Ferenczi's formulation of unconditional omnipotence. It would appear that we are required to differentiate between an omnipotent *state* and omnipotent *activity*. We are now in a position to frame two rough definitions.

*Omnipotent state:*

The omnipotent state is a narcissistic condition of not needing to need genetically derived from the intrauterine period.

*Omnipotent activity:*

Omnipotent activity is the narcissistic overestimation in fantasy of the consequences of one's mental or physical activities.

These two definitions cover all of the data at our disposal but do not throw much light on underlying dynamics.

One area of ambiguity in these definitions is the precise relationship between narcissism and omnipotence. It will be remembered that Freud (and Abraham) treated omnipotence as a simple *consequence* of narcissism. In Ferenczi's writing the relationship is much more obscure and given relatively little significance. How can this be understood? It would appear that the concept of unconditional omnipotence does the same job in Ferenczi's theory as the concept of narcissism does in Freud's. As a matter of fact from 1916 onwards Freud described the intrauterine position as one of 'absolute primary narcissism' (Freud 1916X). This is why it was impossible to develop one definition including unconditional omnipotence with the other omnipotent phenomena. If Ferenczi's definition of unconditional omnipotence is taken as a definition of absolute primary narcissism we are left with a much more straightforward formulation of omnipotence.

Is omnipotence simply a consequence of narcissism? This explanation is not supported by Ferenczi's observations which suggest that omnipotent activities have the regulatory function of the restoration and maintenance of narcissism. As the elements of Ferenczi's model cannot be encompassed by the theory that omnipotence is a consequence of narcissism while the facts noted by Freud and Abraham fit Ferenczi's explanation without difficulty, it would seem that Ferenczi's conception of the relationship between infantile narcissism and omnipotence is a more adequate one than that proposed by Freud.

We are now in a position to examine the final major distinction between the account presented by Freud and that presented by Ferenczi: the intrapsychic/ interactional polarity. For Freud omnipotent fantasies are purely intrapsychic phenomena. The overvaluation of the potency of the self is seen as a natural and obvious consequence of the libidinal cathexis of the self-representation. Also,

omnipotence is seen as a residuum of a normal infantile state and not intrinsically related to defensive processes. For Ferenczi omnipotence is an interactional product. The normal development of the sense of reality involves the active collusion of parent with infant in the maintenance of narcissism through omnipotent activities. The infant of course does not know this; and this ignorance is essential to the experience of omnipotence. In Ferenczi's theory the maintenance of the infant's sense of omnipotence by the caretaker is an *interactional defence* against severe narcissistic insult (Langs 1982). This is not to say that he regards omnipotence as coming entirely from the 'outside'. The period of magical-hallucinatory omnipotence begins with the innate tendency to restore 'omnipotently' the satisfying condition disrupted by birth through the process of hallucinatory wish-fulfilment. It is the caretaker's *support* of this process through her actions, however, that consolidates the infantile sense of omnipotence and eventually mediates its dissolution. We already know from Ferenczi himself how Freud's formulations fit into this picture. Can Karl Abraham's observations also be interpreted as interactional products? It is possible that fantasies of the phallus evoking sexual excitement in all who see it, or of the power of the bowel or bladder to create and destroy objects, are interactionally based; particularly if one takes into account such unconscious communicative processes as projective identification. If this is the case then such apparently bizarre omnipotent fantasies as a woman's belief that she possesses a magical sadistic penis (Abraham 1913, p. 200) could still be regarded as interactionally based projections of adult psychopathology into the infant. A mother projecting a sadistic phallic self-representation into her infant daughter might then be seen as attempting to preserve her own narcissistic perfection through an interactional defence: the defence is now operating the wrong way round and will have a destructive rather than a facilitative effect on the child's maturation.

There is another possible interpretation of the phenomena observed by Abraham that is closer to classical theory. Ferenczi describes in his paper the course of the normal development of the sense of reality. He consistently emphasises that environmental provisions might fail at any point but never describes what the consequences of such a failure might be. One obvious answer is that the infant suffers traumatic narcissistic injury which is defended against by massive *intrapsychic* omnipotent defences which will have a disruptive effect on future development. These intrapsychic omnipotent defences can be understood in terms of a secondary libidinal cathexis of the self-representation.

We have now formulated a concise definition of omnipotence capable of organising the observations of Freud, Abraham and Ferenczi. To sum up:

*Omnipotence:*

The quality of mental, physical or imaginary actions designed to maintain or restore the primary narcissistic feeling of not needing to need. Omnipotence is therefore intrinsically defensive although not necessarily pathological and may be established through both intrapsychic and interactional mechanisms.

### *Conclusion*

Freud, Abraham and Ferenczi have each described omnipotence in a different way. Freud and Abraham view omnipotent fantasy as the consequence of a

narcissistic idealisation of the self-representation. Freud focuses on the omnipotence of thinking and attributes this to the libidinal cathexis of thinking.

Abraham focuses on omnipotent sexual fantasies, and implicitly attributes this to the narcissistic cathexis of the erotogenic zones. Both Freud and Abraham embrace what we have called a *representational* view of omnipotence, that is, they understand omnipotence to be the outcome of the libidinal cathexis of the self representation. We have concluded that this sort of interpretation is of limited usefulness as an account of the normal omnipotence of infancy, but may be considerably more applicable to psychopathological modifications of omnipotence.

Ferenczi conceptualises omnipotence as an affective state which is maintained by the mother's capacity to satisfy the infant's wishes - or potential wishes - immediately. For Ferenczi the extent to which the actual environment approximates the hypothetical intrauterine environment - that is, where there is no gap between need and the fulfilment of need - is the extent to which one experiences oneself as omnipotent. This is an *affective* account of omnipotence which does not rely on the concept of the self-representation. Ferenczi's formulation appears quite applicable to normal infantile omnipotence but somewhat less appropriate for the understanding of pathological omnipotence.

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