

Section 2 - The Organ of Attention and Denial of Experience

Introduction:

Infants start out life in an utterly helpless state, understanding next to nothing of what is happening and completely dependent on the surrounding environment to keep them alive. They begin life after birth with almost no maneuvers for coping with distress except to try to escape it. Consequently, they will usually try to avoid having the experience, and failing that, they will try to rid themselves of it by evacuation. Avoiding it usually means not “taking in” the experience in the first place. To achieve this, all the infant needs to do is direct his ‘organ of attention’ in some direction other than at the unwanted experience so as to effectively “deny” the existence of the potentially distressing experience.

What is the Organ of Attention?

Essentially, the organ of attention is the totality of each sense of perception: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. Although they are linked to deep brain functions, some part of the personality comes to be increasingly “in charge” of them. Thus, we refer to the totality of these organs of perception and the part of the personality in control of their direction and use at a given moment as the ‘organ of attention.’

For instance, a baby who does not want to see that mom is not paying attention to him may simply stare intently at something else, ignoring mom’s existence at that moment. Another common example occurs when he has been left at day care for several hours. When mom comes to pick him up, he may stare away at first and refuse to look at her. The pain of having been left in the morning was likely “turned away from” and denied until mom came back, finally compelling the infant to face that he had lost someone of great importance, possibly permanently.

I once met a very kindly, older woman who did not like rude or vulgar behavior and had a capacity to literally hallucinate out of existence off color jokes told at the dinner table. Her relatives described this as a lifelong behavior. She was literally unaware that such an activity had just taken place in her presence, probably achieving this by unconsciously anticipating when such an act was forthcoming and turning her ‘organ of attention’ away from that area in advance.

Summary:

The idea of an ‘organ of attention’ is a very useful construct as infants have so few maneuvers available to them. The “denial” of the existence of something an infant doesn’t want to see, by effectively looking away, is perhaps the most rudimentary maneuver available and therefore, quite commonplace in the life of a baby.

Melanie Klein ranks denial as one of the most fundamental of psychological defensive maneuvers because it is so elemental and available to the infant. Denial is ranked alongside the concrete phantasies of “taking something in” and “putting something out.” In psychological terms these maneuvers involve phantasies of “introjection” and “projection.”

[Note: See Module Five for a detailed elaboration on the “Organ of Attention.”]