Conceptualizing Splitting: On the Different Meanings of Splitting and Their Implications for the Understanding of the Person and the Analytic Process

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While “splitting” is a familiar concept, its meaning is not as self-evident as is commonly assumed. In different contexts, it refers to different phenomena and is supported by different understandings of psychic dynamics. In this paper, the author presents four different conceptualizations of splitting, which capture the essential aspects of contemporary psychoanalytic discourse on the concept. There is a dissociative kind of splitting, which involves splitting off, in the face of trauma, whole personalities, which to some extent remain accessible to consciousness; there is a disavowal kind of splitting that splits off our awareness of disturbing realities or their meanings in our efforts to avoid the inner restraints imposed by repression; and there are two forms of splitting of the object into good and bad-one focusing on the splitting of representations of the object due to ego weakness and environmental determinants, and the other on the splitting of the mind itself in a primarily destructive act aimed at sparing the good from the destructiveness of our death instinct. All four conceptualizations have their origins in Freud's writing and then are further developed in the work of later analysts. The author argues that understanding the nature of these various conceptualizations of splitting can contribute to analytic theory and practice. It also sheds light on the essential nature of analytic approaches and how they offer different perspectives on the unity and disunity of man's basic nature.

The concept of splitting may seem at first sight to be fairly clear and straightforward: under certain circumstances, our psyche becomes divided into different parts - good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable - and this has implications for our mental functioning. It is only when one sets out to clarify what exactly this means that the complexity and difficulty of the term comes to the fore. Can the concept of repression, used in relation to the division between ego and id, not account for this division of the psyche? To say that splitting is more primitive, as we are commonly taught, is not in itself sufficiently explanatory. And if splitting is to be reserved for a process *within* the ego, as some maintain, then a number of further questions arise about what exactly it is that is split, and who or what initiates the split. Moreover, the idea that our mind is divided, rather than unified, is so basic to psychoanalytic thinking. What accounts, therefore, for the special interest in the concept of splitting *per se* and what is specific to it? These

are just some of the questions that arise when one attempts to clarify what splitting means. As is the case with many central analytic concepts, the task of clarification leads to the realization that there are multiple uses and meanings behind what at first seems to be a clear and familiar term. Indeed, psychoanalytic terms are used differently by different analytic streams, and even undergo changes within Freud's own writing - without these being made explicit.

In my study of splitting I have found that it is a particularly difficult concept to clarify and conceptualize. This may be tied to the fact that there do not seem to be any clear dimensions or factors in reference to which one may compare all its different uses. For example, some analysts refer to splitting as a certain kind of psychological/phenomenological state, with a subset considering it relevant only within the context of psychopathology; others view splitting as a kind of mechanism, a certain kind of defence or developmental process; and yet others as a kind of organizing principle of infantile experience. Often, analysts implicitly employ several different meanings of the term in their theoretical work, without openly acknowledging them. In other cases, these different meanings are openly acknowledged while not actually employed. For example, in presenting ideas on splitting, Kernberg will sometimes refer back to Klein on splitting and Kleinian authors back to certain notions of Freud's splitting while in fact they are, as we shall see, talking about rather different things. In addition to these limitations, descriptions of splitting tend to be presented especially ambiguously, almost always without any reference to the fact that the term has multiple meanings (see **Brenner, 2009**). There is even little agreement between the few overviews and summaries of the concept that may be found in the literature.

Given the broad differences and ambiguity one may wonder what if anything is, in fact, being added by the concept of splitting, whether it would not be more fruitful to employ other more specific terms for each of the phenomena the term has come to address. Paul Pruyser, an American Winnicottian analyst who worked for many years at the Menninger Clinic, concluded his well-known paper *What splits in 'splitting'?* with a recommendation that the concept "be banned from the psychological vocabulary" (**1975**, p. 44). According to Pruyser, the term implies misguided notions of there being some mysterious agent who goes about initiating and carrying out the splitting process and of psychic structures that are "split-table" rigid entities, rather than dynamic forces and functions.

I disagree. Despite difficulties in grasping the concept of splitting and despite all the confusing variations in its use, I think that one may see (and I hope to show) that it emerges out of necessity; it provides in its various formulations a kind of response to basic questions regarding the nature of the psyche and of the person, the basic divisions of the mind, and the place of unity and striving for integration in analytic thinking.

In this paper, I present four different conceptualizations of splitting: 'splitting as dissociation', 'splitting as disavowal', 'splitting of representations' and 'splitting of the mind'. As I will emphasize, all four of these have their origins in Freud's writing and then are further developed in the works

of later analysts (e.g. the dissociative in Ferenczi's and Kohut's, the representational in Kernberg's, and the mental in Klein's). While the dividing lines between the categories are not always neat, and other ways of dividing are definitely possible, in my view, these four categories capture the essential aspects of contemporary psychoanalytic discourse regarding splitting.

In what follows I will succinctly describe each of the four major conceptualizations of splitting.[1] This presentation should not only allow us some insight into the richness and complexity of the concept of splitting and its theoretical and clinical implications, but also will set the ground for an examination of how the different conceptualizations offer different views of the person and his basic unity and/or disunity, which have implications for our analytic work. In this context I will focus on how recognizing the different conceptualizations of splitting sheds light on essential differences between analytic approaches.

Four Conceptualizations of Splitting

1) . Splitting as Disassociation

This notion of splitting goes back to Freud's references to dissociative states in his early work on hysteria, during what is commonly called his pre-psychoanalytic period. Freud here is concerned with what he refers to as a state of consciousness that is cut off or split from the person's ordinary state of consciousness (Breuer and Freud, **1893-95**, p. **150**). In the relevant texts he makes use of the terms *abgesperrt, Abspaltung* and *Spaltung* and explicitly uses them as synonymous with “disassociation” (**1893-95**, p. **151**). This dissociative split finds expression in what Freud calls “double conscience” (his translation of the French term for “dual consciousness”) (**1893-95**, p. **12**). What he means by this is that there comes into being a nucleus and centre of crystallization for the formation of a psychical group divorced from the ego - a group around which everything which would imply an acceptance of the incompatible idea subsequently collects (**1893-95**, p. **123**).

Freud here describes a state in which it as though there were more than one personality, more than one ego, with different levels of functioning and sets of ideas and memories. ‘Psychic groupings’, rather than individual ideas, are what are split off here **(Brook, 1992)**. This multiplicity of consciousness becomes apparent, according to Freud, in people under hypnosis; it is exemplified in cases of multiple personality and it is what underlies hysteria, the subject of Freud's clinical interest. The hysteric, Freud and Breuer explain, suffers from “a pathological splitting of consciousness” (Breuer and Freud, **1893-95**, p. **42**). They write:

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1 My focus will be on the essential nature of these categories, rather than on their origins and history. Moreover, my description of later uses of the term is illustrative rather than comprehensive. Further understanding may be gained by applying these categories to the study of the uses of the concept of splitting in the works of additional analysts (e.g. Alvarez, Bion, Lacan, Meltzer, Winnicott and American relational psychoanalysts, such as Bromberg).

> The longer we have been occupied with these phenomena the more we have become convinced that *the splitting of consciousness which is so striking in the well-known classical cases under the form of* 'double conscience' *is present to a rudimentary degree in every hysteria, and that a tendency to such a dissociation, and with it the emergence of abnormal states of consciousness (which we shall bring together under the term 'hypnoid') is the basic phenomenon of this neurosis.* (p. **12**)

In his early writings Freud considers this dissociative, split state to be tied to trauma (in contrast to the French views of the time which emphasized organic factors [Freud, **1910**, p. **21**]). Trauma is regarded as a source of ideas incompatible with normal consciousness, and the presence of ideas incompatible with normal consciousness (even when relatively benign, such as ideas about inappropriate sexual desire) is regarded as traumatic (as in the case of Fr. Elisabeth von R). These ideas and the states of mind and functioning associated with them continue to exist elsewhere in the person, outside the reach of normal consciousness (**1893-95**, p. **150**). As Breuer explains: "In our cases the part of the mind that is split off is 'thrust into darkness'" (p. **229**).

Freud returns to this tie between dissociative splitting and trauma towards the end of his life when, in *Moses and Monotheism,* he speaks of a "portion [of the ego] which was early split off and which is dominated by … trauma," and which threatens to fragment or overwhelm the ego if reunited with it (**1939**, p. **78**).

One should take note here of three important features of this conceptualization. (A) Splitting at this point is not regarded as a mechanism in and of its own right, and separate from repression. Rather it is a state of mind that comes about, in part, *through* repression, a process which Freud conceptualized early on. Freud, as he himself explains in one of his retrospective accounts, "looked upon psychical splitting itself as an effect of a process of repelling which at that time … [he] called 'defence', and later, 'repression'" (**1914**, p. **11**). (B) The state of split-consciousness is not one of *simultaneous* presence of more than one consciousness, more than one ego or psychic grouping. Rather Freud speaks of one psychic grouping that is conscious and another that is unconscious. The state of split consciousness is a state in which one tends to shift an attachment from that which is conscious to that which is unconscious (**1910**, p. **19**; see, also, **1912a**, p. **263**, **1915a**, p. **171**). (C) Freud does not argue for the *necessity* of a traumatic source to this kind of splitting. Indeed, it may be suggested that the focus on trauma is tied to the fact that Freud at that time considered all conflict to originate in trauma. Moreover, as noted, Freud defined trauma rather widely, and according to him the presence of incompatible ideas may in itself be considered traumatic.

These three factors call into question the uniqueness of this dissociative kind of splitting, its distinction from any other state in which experiences or ideas are repressed and relegated to the unconscious. (Freud himself later grappled with this issue [**1915a**, p. **170**].) Nevertheless, what seems to characterize this form of splitting is the fact that what is split off is

an organization, a portion of the ego, a psychical grouping, not simply ideas or functions, and that this organization remains fairly accessible. That is, there are indeed recurrent shifts from one organization to the other, one personality to the other. Although Freud does not posit an essential tie to trauma, this kind of splitting is associated with it (a view which gains support from Freud's return to this idea in his very last book as well).

After his early work, Freud wrote little on this kind of dissociative splitting. Nevertheless, one may see that it was central to Ferenczi's thinking. Ferenczi considers trauma, especially trauma associated with the premature sexualization of the child, to be the primary source of emotional disorder; and he sees a dissociative kind of splitting of the self as the typical response to such traumas. In his famous 1932 paper, *Confusion of the tongues between the adults and the child*, he writes: “there is neither shock nor fright without some trace of splitting of personality” (**1949**, p. **229**). This splitting commonly entails one part of the person regressing to a pre-traumatic state of happiness and another instantaneously developing into a mature personality “with all the emotions of [a] mature adult and all [his] … potential qualities” (**1949**, p.**229**), including his intellectual capacities. These different states of consciousness and functioning, which in some sense coexist (and which find expression, in extreme cases, as a form of multiple personality disorder), may be seen to be in line with Freud's notion of dissociative splitting (see **Bokanowski, 2009**).

A more contemporary analyst who has taken up this notion is Heinz Kohut. He contrasts the concept of a horizontal split, which separates conscious from unconscious contents by repression, with that of a vertical split, which separate clusters of content or psychological organizations or groupings that exist side by side, both equally accessible to consciousness (Kohut, **1971**, pp. **176-7**). Kohut employs the latter notion of split in his explanation of various narcissistic conditions in which one readily shifts from a state of grandiosity to that of beingvulnerable and devalued and then back again. Kohut regards these states as “cohesive personality attitudes with different goal structures, different pleasure aims, different moral and aesthetic values” (p. **183**). They are like two minds or two opposing selves that inhabit the person (Goldberg, **1999**, **2000**), but are unaware of each other.

Like Freud and Ferenczi, Kohut considers the source of this dissociative split to be trauma. Kohut's conception of trauma focuses on the parents' failure to serve as self-objects, to offer the child what Kohut considers to be its needed narcissistic nutriments in terms of grandiosityand idealization (for example, mirroring of the infant's sense of being wonderful). And more generally what we find in the analytic literature is that reference to this dissociative kind of splitting, a splitting which involves the relative availability to consciousness of multiple organizations of personality, psychical groupings (in the extreme multiple personalities) appears together with reference to trauma (of whatever kind). Trauma and dissociative splitting are regarded as intimately tied.

In describing his vertical split, Kohut suggests that it is a form of “disavowal”, referring to Freud's ideas on this concept. As we shall now see

Freud's ‘disavowal’ actually refers to a form of splitting that is different from that with which Kohut is concerned.

2). Splitting as Disavowal

Splitting as the manifestation or consequence of disavowal is introduced primarily in some of Freud's writings in the 1920s (**1924**, **1927**), is discussed in his *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* **(Freud, 1940a)** and lies at the centre of his renowned posthumously published text *Splitting of the ego in the process of defence* **(Freud, 1940b)**. (The relatively late date of these ideas may be seen to be tied to the fact that Freud's thinking on disavowal is linked to his reflections on psychosis, which emerge only in the 1920s.) In this form of splitting, Freud maintains, the individual is faced with an unbearable reality, “in general and somewhat vague terms … a psychical trauma” (**1940b**, p. **275**). Freud's prime example here is the little boy's observation of the girl's lack of a penis and the boy's recognition of the danger to his own ability to retain his penis implied by that lack. The boy understands that he may indeed be castrated as threatened if he persists with his masturbatory activities. What the child does in reaction is that he holds on to the belief that the girl has a penis, creating a substitute for the absence through a fetish - “he transferred the importance of the penis to another part of the body” (p. **277**). The boy no longer feels a threat and can continue to masturbate. In so doing, reality - the girl's lack of a penis - is disavowed and a split takes place.

But why does this entail a split? And why is the process not simply described as one of repression or denial? Freud explains: In contrast to the state of denial, in disavowal reality *is* perceived; the child does not hallucinate a penis where there is none. And yet at the same time he maintains that there is no loss and no threat. Two contradictory attitudes to reality are held and hence the split. As Freud writes in his *Outline* (**1940a**, p. **202**):

We may probably take it as being generally true that what occurs in all these cases is a psychical split. Two psychical attitudes have been formed instead of a single one - one, the normal one, which takes account of reality, and another which under the influence of the instincts detaches the ego from reality. The two exist alongside each other.

Part of the difficulty in describing this unique state has to do with a linguistic problem. In the common use of the terms, ‘disavowal’ and ‘denial’ are synonymous (in English). The German term for disavowal is *Verleugnung*; prior to its being regarded in a specific conceptual sense it was translated by Strachey either as ‘disavowal’ or as ‘denial’. And in a sense one may argue that it does, in fact, entail denial, alongside recognition of reality. Or in Freud's words:

> On the one hand they [the fetishists] are disavowing the fact of their perception - the fact that they saw no penis in the female genitals; and on the other hand they are recognizing the fact that females have no penis and are drawing the correct conclusions from it. The two attitudes persist side by side throughout their lives

without influencing each other. Here is what may rightly be called a splitting of the ego.

(p. **203**)

The perception (the absence of the penis), while denied, is still perceived. This, in fact, has led some analysts to interpret Freud to mean that in disavowal what is denied is not a perception, but *the meaning* of what is perceived (i.e. its implications and significance [**Basch, 1983**]).

Just as this kind of disavowing split does not involve psychotic denial, so also it cannot be explained in terms of repression. Freud is quite clear that repression involves a split between the ego and the id. It works against the instincts and other id contents. Were the little boy we have been speaking of to employ repression he would silence his sexual fantasies and forfeit the instinctual gratification of masturbation. In contrast, in disavowal the split is within the ego and is directed against reality (Freud, **1927**, **1940a**, p. **204**).

The disavowal type of splitting is very different from the dissociative type in several ways. First, although traumatic reality is mentioned in both cases, when it comes to disavowal the focus is more on reality than on trauma. The ego is not overwhelmed or fragmented by the force of trauma, but rather *opts* to split itself to avoid repression and the prohibitions that repression entails. One may say perhaps that while in the dissociative type of splitting reality imposes a split on the ego, in the disavowal type the ego splits reality (which involves a split of the ego). Second, in the case of splitting as disavowal, Freud clearly states that it is not based on repression; it is, rather, a special kind of mechanism or process (whereas in dissociative splitting it would seem that repression could be involved). Finally, in splitting as disavowal the split is expressed in the presence of opposing *attitudes* in regard to specific facts, it is not a split of psychic groups, of personalities.

Freud's ideas on splitting in this sense have found a place within all analytic traditions. Perhaps because it focuses on a specific mechanism and a well-defined psychic state it can be readily incorporated within a range of different approaches. But it should be kept in mind that these Freudian ideas on splitting are also often mistakenly embraced; they are wrongly presented as the foundation or roots of notions of splitting that are of a very different kind. Evidence of this may be found in an edited book recently published by the IPA, *On Freud's "Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence*" **(Bokanowski and Lewkowicz, 2009)**. Strangely, its eleven chapters, written by analysts from around the world, although all on the topic of splitting, say almost nothing specific about the concept of disavowal that is at the centre of that brief Freudian text. Instead, they blur the distinctions between it and the other kinds of splitting that they do address.

The Freudian Grounds of the Next Two Forms of Splitting

The next two forms of splitting, those of representations and of the mind, can be traced back to the ideas that Freud put forth on splitting as he was gradually moving towards his structural model and was elaborating ideas on projection and introjection (especially in *Instincts and their vicissitudes* 130

[1915b], *The Ego and the Id* **[1923a]** and *Negation* **[1925]**). In these writings Freud speaks of a split in the ego that takes place through the introjection of what is good and the projection of that which is bad. In *Instincts and their vicissitudes* **(1915b)** he states:

> In so far as the objects which are presented to… [the ego] are sources of pleasure, it takes them into itself, 'introjects' them (to use Ferenczi's [1909] term); and, on the other hand, it expels whatever within itself becomes a cause of unpleasure … For the pleasure-ego the external world is divided into a part that is pleasurable, which it has incorporated into itself, and a remainder that is extraneous to it. It has separated off a part of its own self, which it projects into the external world and feels as hostile.

(p. **136**)

Although Freud makes only a few references to this process, they nevertheless point to an important form of splitting that significantly differs from the others. Unlike the others, this form of splitting is posited as a natural step in development; it involves a different mechanism (introjections and projection), and what is split is the object (of the self or of others, in contrast to whole personalities or pieces of reality).

It is important to recall here that Freud posits many complex relations between objects and self that do *not* involve splitting *per se* (although we may tend to think of them as splitting today). Psychic tension and opposition are central to all of Freud's thinking and *throughout* his writings Freud refers to internal objects that are loved and hated, good and bad. His notions of the Oedipus complex and positive and negative transference rest on this. As he moves towards the development of his structural model Freud also speaks of the ego being comprised of various identifications, which may at times be at odds with each other and result in an incoherent or oppositional ego. Freud's description of the melancholic and the battle within the ego that results from the internalization of the lost object is a clear example of this.

These internal oppositions, however, are presented in terms of relations between identifications or objects in the id, ego and superego, or between libidinal and aggressive trends associated with different objects (as manifested in the positive and negative transference [**Freud, 1912b**]). They are described as referring to certain aspects of the object and the internalization of these (e.g. ideal or devalued). They are not presented in terms splitting of the object and indeed it would seem that, given Freud's distinctions, they should not be regarded as such (as some who study the topic do [e.g. **Lustman, 1977**]).

From these Freudian ideas two forms of splitting emerge, which are addressed in what follows.

3). Splitting of Representations

Splitting of representations refers to a state (or process) in which unitary objects are regarded (or come to be regarded) as two separate images, representations. These separate images are, in fact, only dimensions or aspects of

the object, but are considered as complete objects in their own right. For example, our representation of a parental object, which includes various dimensions of our relationship with the parent - gratification and frustration, love and hate - may be split into two representations, one of a gratifying loved parent and the other of a frustrating hated parent. These representations function in many respects as though they were unrelated to each other. The object that is split (in this conceptualization of splitting) may be a representation of an other, or of the self. Such splittingis regarded as a normal developmental process in early life, but if it persists later in life it is considered to be pathological.

Here two aspects of Freud's thinking are brought together. It makes use of Freud's notion of the splitting of good and bad parts of the object and combines it with his notion of objects as being kinds of representations, functional images, located in the psyche (in one of its structures). That is, it relies on Freud's view of the internalization of an object or identification with it as being a kind of internal representation of it (e.g. Freud, **1923b**, pp. **85-6**).

This representational view of splitting is taken up primarily by ego-psychologists concerned with integrating object relations, especially Otto Kernberg.2 He writes:

> [I]ntensely pleasurable experiences of the infant in the relationship with the mother generate primary, "all good" units of self and object representations, while peak experiences of pain and fear generate "all bad" ones. Within these primary units, self- and objectrepresentations are not yet differentiated from each other. Early splitting operations maintain the segregation between experiences negatively and positively charged with intense affect … These highly charged primitive affective experiences recede deeply into the repressed unconscious, while those conscious and preconscious interactions of the infant and mother that take place under conditions of low-level, affective activation serve adaptive purposes and are incorporated into the conscious and preconscious ego.

(Kernberg, **2001**, p. 608)

In terms of the motive for splitting, Kernberg explains that splitting is:

> maintained as an essential mechanism preventing diffusion of anxiety within the ego and protecting the positive introjections and identifications … the good self, and good object images, and good external objects in the presence of dangerous "all bad" self and objectimages.

(**1967**, p. **666**)

Kernberg also refers to the implications of the process of splitting of representations for pathology and treatment. For instance, he argues that if one fails to bring together the split self and object representations, if one remains fixated at the stage of splitting or regresses to it, the consequence is an unintegrated self, characteristic of borderline disorders. This will make for a chaotic analytic situation, with the patient rapidly shifting within the

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2 It is difficult to locate Fairbairn within this framework. It may be suggested that he combines aspects of this notion of splitting with that of splitting as dissociation.

transference from one split representation to the other (and a similarly chaotic life). In terms of technique Kernberg famously concludes that:

> [S]ystematic interpretation of how the same internalized object relation is enacted again and again with rapid role reversals makes it possible to clarify the nature of the unconscious object relation and the double splitting of (a) self-representation from objectrepresentation and (b) idealized from persecutory object relations. This process promotes integration of the split representations that characterize the object relations of severe psychopathology.

(**1967** p. 617)

Splitting in this context is described as a special "primitive" mechanism of its own. Although according to Kernberg the "division of internalized object relations into 'good' and 'bad' happens at first simply because of the lack of integrative capacity of the early ego" (**1967**, p. **663**), this is followed by active splitting, which Kernberg defines as "the active separation by the ego of positive and negative introjections" (**1966**, p. 264). The nature of these introjected representations and the degree to which splitting will continue to be employed in the course of the developmental process are largely determined by the child's actual relationships with external objects, and to a lesser degree by internal factors, especially the presence of excessive aggression, which in turn is based on experienced oral frustration.

Although it is often noted that Kernberg's thinking on splitting relies on that of Melanie Klein, it may be seen that there are significant and fundamental differences between the two. Klein's approach, based, like Kernberg's, on Freudian grounds - on Freud's thinking about the early introjection and projection of the good and the bad - occupies a category of its own. It should not be blurred with representational approaches like that of Kernberg (although it commonly is). I now turn to describe this final category.

4). Splitting of the Mind

As is well known, Melanie Klein is concerned with the splitting of the object and of the self into good and bad. She does not, however, speak of representations - rather she speaks of the object itself being split, the very self being fragmented. To split the object itself is, according to Klein, to split the mind (the ego), not merely to split representations (images of external objects and of oneself as an object, that reside within the mind). Hanna Segal helps explain this in her brief summary of the process involved in splitting. She writes:

> The ego splits itself and projects that part of itself which contains the death instinct outwards into the original external object - the breast. Thus, the breast, which is felt to contain a great part of the infant's death instinct, is felt to be bad and threatening to the ego, giving rise to a feeling of persecution. In that way, the original fear of the death instinct is changed into fear of a persecutor. The intrusion of the death instinct into the breast is often felt as splitting it into many bits,

> so that the ego is confronted with a multitude of persecutors … the libido is also projected, in order to create an object which will satisfy the ego's instinctive striving for the preservation of life. Thus, quite early, the ego has a relationship to two objects; the primaryobject, the breast, being at this stage split into two parts, the ideal breast and the persecutory one.(**1973**, pp. 25-6)

In other words, splitting does not emerge from a difficulty in dealing with conflicting representations of objects, but rather objects (which to some extent are recognized as whole, integrated) become split because of internal difficulties - because of the person's inner destructiveness and his wish to avoid or deny the destruction that this brings about. Moreover, what is split are not representations but actually parts of oneself - pieces of the ego - and this affects the very nature of the ego, of the mind. In fact, the splitting of the object is the splitting of the ego. This is because the object is not an external person or merely an image of an external person; rather, the object is part of the ego itself. For example, in my relationship with a maternal object in my inner world, the maternal object is just as much part of myself as the self that is in relationship with it. And since the phantasized relationships between these parts are the building blocks of the mind, if in my phantasy I have attacked my maternal object, not only is part of myself under attack, put also part of my mind may be damaged (see **Blass, 2014**).

Melanie Klein clarifies this crucial point in her well-known 1946 paper *Notes on some schizoid mechanisms.* Klein states:

> I believe that the ego is incapable of splitting the object - internal and external - without a corresponding splitting taking place within the ego. Therefore the phantasies and feelings about the state of the internal object vitally influence the structure of the ego. The more sadism prevails in the process of incorporating the object, and the more the object is felt to be in pieces, the more the ego is in danger of being split in relation to the internalized object fragments.

(Klein, **1946**, p. 6)

Klein emphasizes that this intimate tie between object and ego is based on the notion of phantasy. She continues:

> The processes I have described are, of course, bound up with the infant's phantasy-life; and the anxieties which stimulate the mechanism of splitting are also of a phantastic nature. It is in phantasy that the infant splits the object and the self, but the effect of this phantasyis a very real one, because it leads to feelings and relations (and later on, thought-processes) being in fact cut off from one another.

(Klein, **1946**, p. 6).

It may be seen that, as in the case of the ‘splitting of representations’, here too the object is divided into good and bad. However, in her discussion of splitting, Klein not only offers a different explanation of this division, but the phenomenon to be explained is also different. What Klein

observes are not shifting identifications (the consequence of keeping opposing images segregated). Rather, the aggressive splitting of the object and of one's mind that Klein speaks of may be manifested in, and underlies, a variety of forms of relationship, thinking and feeling.3

One of the important expressions of splitting is in the annihilation of parts of oneself, of one's mind and of one's thinking functions. As Klein explains regarding one of her cases:

> The patient split off those parts of himself, i.e. of his ego which he felt to be dangerous and hostile towards his analyst. He turned his destructive impulses from his object *towards his ego,* with the result that parts of his ego temporarily went out of existence. In unconscious phantasy this amounted to annihilation of part of his personality.

(Klein, **1946**, p. 19)

Given this different conception of splitting, the analytic process is also conceived of differently from the one described by the representational approach to splitting. What is required from the analyst, according to Klein, is the consistent interpretation within the lived transference of the splitting dynamics (rather than a more cognitive bringing together of shifting images described by the representational approach).

This Kleinian view of splitting has Freudian roots that lie not only in Freud's ideas on introjecting good and expelling bad, which (as we have seen) he briefly discussed. Two other sources are significant. One is Freud's portrayal of the relationship between the ego and the superego, which at times points to his understanding of how it reflects a split within the ego that damages it. Freud writes:

> Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical agency of the ego and the ego as altered by identification.(**1917a**, p. **249**)

Klein's other major Freudian source for her ideas on splitting is his dual instinct theory. The pervasive influence of the life and death instincts is what makes the split internally motivated and inevitable, not merely a function of ego-weakness and environmental factors. Klein explains how she builds on Freud in an appendix to her *Notes on some schizoid mechanisms.* There she discusses the case of Schreber, a patient who according to Freud split the object of the father (and is strangely almost completely left out of contemporary studies of splitting). First addressing the internal source of the split, Klein writes:

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3 It should be noted that Klein also recognized the defensive and developmental value of splitting. Without it, anxiety would be unbearable, chaos would prevail and functioning that requires splitting would not be possible (e.g. distinguishing good from bad or making an intellectual judgement).

> I would suggest … that the division of the Flechsig soul into many souls was not only a splitting of the object but also a projection of Schreber's feeling that his ego was split … God and Flechsig also represented parts of Schreber's self.

(Klein, **1946**, p. 23)

She continues:

> In the light of Freud's later theory of the life and death instincts … [t]he mechanism of one part of the ego annihilating other parts which, I suggest, underlies "world catastrophe" phantasy (the raid by God on the Flechsig souls) implies a preponderance of the destructive impulse over the libido … If the ego and the internalized objects are felt to be in bits, an internal catastrophe is experienced by the infant which both extends to the external world and is projected on to it.(Klein, **1946**, p. 24)

Although more can be said regarding these different conceptualizations of splitting, their sources, and the distinctions between them, we may at this point reflect on what is to be learnt from distinguishing between these conceptualizations.

The Significance of the Four Conceptualizations of Splitting

While splitting is a familiar concept, one in daily psychoanalytic use, I have shown that its meaning may not be as self-evident as is commonly assumed. In different contexts, it refers to different phenomena and is supported by different understandings of psychic dynamics. To summarize very briefly: There is a dissociative kind of splitting, which involves splitting off, in the face of trauma, whole personalities, which to some extent remain accessible to consciousness; there is a disavowal kind of splitting that splits off our awareness of disturbing realities or their meanings in our efforts to avoid the inner restraints imposed by repression; and there are two forms of splitting of the object into good and bad - one focusing on the splitting of representations of the object due to ego weakness and environmental determinants, and the other on the splitting of the mind itself in a primarily destructive act aimed at sparing the good from the destructiveness of our death instinct.

Not only do these conceptualizations differ in many respects; they also do not evolve in sequence from one to the next. Instead, there are several separate, and non-reconcilable, branches of theoretical development. For example, Kernberg's thinking on representation does not emerge from Freud's thinking on disavowal. To consider them as though they do causes confusion (which characterizes the contemporary literature in this area). In reality there are a few distinct processes of evolution. As we have seen, Freud's dissociative view of splitting evolves in Ferenczi's thinking and that of Kohut; his ideas on the splitting of the object evolve into the models of Kernberg and Klein. Although the latter two models bear some similarities, and are sometimes equated, they are essentially distinct.

Naturally, understanding the nature of these various conceptualizations of splitting can contribute to analytic theory and practice. Being aware of and

being able to explain different types of splitting can sharpen our analytic listening and make our interpretations deeper, more refined and more exact. For example, we may be more inclined to wonder whether a patient is disavowing reality out of a wish to avoid repression, or whether he is annihilating a part of himself in order to protect the object. Is the blindness to certain aspects of reality that seems to follow our patient's splitting founded on simultaneous acts of perception and denial, or is it because a part of his mind is indeed no longer there? And is it no longer there because he shifted dissociatively into another personality that is traumatically split off, or is its absence a consequence of his own inner destructiveness? Many lines of inquiry such as these open up when we become aware of different types of splitting, each of which might lead to different interpretations. They might also lead to a greater tendency to delay interpretation or make use of interventions other than interpretation (e.g. as Winnicott [**1960**, p. **586**] recommends when dealing with traumatically-based states of splitting).

But awareness of the multiple conceptualizations of splitting does more than enrich our understanding in this way. It also invites us to consider basic questions regarding how we conceive of human nature. Were this not the case, a concept that encompasses so many different phenomena would not survive; other terms would have taken over. It survives, it is compelling, because the term captures something basic that we all recognize intuitively (regardless of theoretical differences about *what* is split, *why,* and *how* this manifests itself). In my view, what it captures is man's fundamental disunity, our disjunction, our brokenness.

Indeed Freud was *always* concerned with man's disunity and at the foundation of many of his analytic models one finds attempts on his part to formulate it. For example, he posits tension between ego instincts and sexual instincts, between the systems conscious and unconscious, and between the structures ego, id and superego. But all of these models seem to create a harmony of their own, a kind of balance within tension. In his *A difficulty in the path of psychoanalysis* Freud **(1917b)** famously writes about the ego's arrogant denial of all that goes on in the person outside of conscious awareness, comparing the ego to a despotic ruler who hears only from his officials and never listens to the people. Freud rebukes the ego saying: “Turn your eyes inward, look into your own depths, learn first to know yourself!” (p. **143**). These are forceful reflections on human beings' fundamental disharmony, but it may be seen that even at such points an implicit harmony is posited. The ego to whom Freud speaks is clearly defined and unitary and so is his task in relation to the unknown.

There is a greater, more fundamental sense of brokenness that we encounter in our patients, and in ourselves, that gets lost in this, and here is where, I think, the term ‘splitting’ comes in. ‘Splitting’, I would suggest, serves as a kind of marker of this brokenness, of the absence of an ‘I’ to whom one can speak, or the apparent presence of more than one ‘I’. It is not only, as Freud says, that “*the ego is not master in its own house*” (**1917b**, p. **143**, italics in the original); it is also unclear who the ego is, and where its house is. The different conceptualizations ofsplitting, through their attempts to describe and explain this state of brokenness, point to the

centrality of this state and invite us to consider where we stand in regard to it.4

In other words, setting out the multiple conceptualizations of splitting not only addresses the question of the proper use of the term; it not only describes a range of possible understandings and interventions in analysis, compelling us to consider the proper applications of the concept of splitting to different patients and clinical situations; nor does it merely direct us to the question of man's brokenness. It also confronts us with the fact that different analytic approaches offer fundamentally different, and at times opposing, understandings of this brokenness of human nature. It enriches our grasp of the differences between these approaches, and invites us to choose between them.

One may apply different conceptualizations of splitting in different situations, and Freud himself seems to do so (although it would be important to examine to what extent he held his different views simultaneously). Winnicott is a noted example of a later analyst who shifted between the conceptualizations or mixed them - in various ways tying splitting to dissociative states, divisions within the mind, and states of trauma (e.g. Winnicott, **1966**, **1971**). At the same time, however, the views on splitting offer quite different perspectives on basic features of human nature, and most analysts will tend to rely on one conceptualization or another, relating to the other conceptualizations in the light of it.

It may be seen that splitting as dissociation assumes that the natural state of the person is essentially one of harmony. Our disharmony, the dividedness of who we are comes from without, from trauma, from the aggressive imposition of the external world, from which we must defend ourselves. This strand continues in contemporary psychoanalysis in Self Psychological perspectives (among others). Splitting as disavowal considers our lack of integrity in terms of *our* attack on reality; the wish to avoid its constraints, but the inability to do so. The representational view of splitting is ambiguous regarding the source of our disharmony. It would seem that it considers it to be primarily an inevitable consequence of our encounter with the external world. It is not that we are harmonious and then split by the force of trauma, but rather our minds are too weak to integrate the ambivalent nature of the world. Later in the course of human development, active splitting comes into play. Although the dominance of this process is tied to the force of the aggressive instincts, the aggressive instincts, in turn, are tied to the degree of experienced frustration and so here too splitting is determined primarily by external factors.

The representational approach seems to struggle with the very notion of our being divided, not only with the source of the dividedness. It aims to arrive at an objective and scientific understanding of the matter and to this end speaks in the cognitive language of ‘representations’. This stands in sharp contrast to the ‘splitting of the mind’ approach. According to the latter it is our very selves and minds that are inherently divided and it is we ourselves who do the dividing. The source of the division is in our inner aggression, but

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4 It would be interesting to consider Lacan's thinking on the alienation of the subject in this context, but this would take us to far afield.

also in our love, in our wish to prevent the destruction of the good object. The combination of aggression and love, the opposition of the death and life instincts, is at the foundation of our disunity.5

In describing these different stances on the unity or disunity of the person, the central role of aggression stands out. Where the person is thought to be inherently harmonious, the source of aggression is considered to be external. Where disunity is posited as integral to the individual, the aggression is internal. Although this makes some intuitive sense, we should note the complexity of this relationship. The literature tends to consider the issue of the source of aggression as the more primary one. For example, Klein's focus on innate destructiveness is thought to account for the kind of splitting that she posits. But I would suggest that how we see the unity or disunity of the person, how we understand splitting, also affects how we see aggression. That is, where the mind is thought to be more unified, there is less possibility that one's mind could actually be annihilated, for there would be no one left to experience the destruction. As Freud writes, in his explanations of why fear of death cannot be an unconscious source of anxiety: “nothing resembling death can ever have been experienced” (**1926**, p. **130**; see Blass, **2013**). But where the mind is viewed as fundamentally split, there is the possibility that one part of the mind would be annihilated, while another, split-off part would be experiencing that annihilation. This theory thus allows for the notion that the mind has devastating aggression.

Much more can be said about the different conceptualizations of splitting, and I hope that the present study encourages further clinical and theoretical reflection in this regard. In particular, questions regarding the unity or disunity of human nature that underlie these conceptualizations require further acknowledgement and open exploration. For instance, there is room to consider whether as analysts we fully embrace our own theories of splitting or whether our notions regarding a basic striving towards integration do not conceal the fact that we actually hold a much more unified view of the person. That is, one may wonder whether even when we adopt a view that speaks of an inevitable, inherent split we do not actually view the person in terms of the single moment of wholeness prior to the initiation of the split; and whether we do not always, in fact, posit *one* agent, our partner in analysis who mediates between the different parts of the self, but is actually more directly identified with one of these parts (e.g. the life instinct, rather than that of death). By dealing with such questions, inquiring into our own clinically based conceptualizations, we have the possibility to continue to participate in the important psychoanalytic struggle, which Freud began, to grasp the nature and meaning of the dividedness of the person and its implications for clinical practice.

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5 Edward Bibring's early paper *The development and problems of the theory of instincts* **(1941)** provides interesting reflections on how Freud's primal instinct theory became necessary in order to maintain the psyche as fundamentally divided.

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