

UNLIT CORNERS

Dirtiness, Miserliness, Shyness,
Outrageousness, Shallowness,
Indecisiveness, Restlessness,
and Cowardliness

Edited by

Salman Akhtar



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To

JAN WRIGHT

A token of my gratitude for all her help with preparation of numerous manuscripts, maintenance of extensive national and international correspondence, and management of sundry non-clinical aspects of my busy academic life over the last twenty years.

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elaboration through Klein, Lacan, and others. Dr. Civin is the author of one of the first psychoanalytic studies of the internet in the form of the book titled *Male, Female, Email* (2000). Translated into numerous languages, this book predicts the enormous impact on and problematics of the development of the digital world. Among his other publications is the award-winning paper, “The sculpture and the dust.”

Nilofer Kaul, PhD, is a training and supervising analyst based in New Delhi, India. She taught English literature at Delhi University. Her doctorate work was on “Masks and Mirrors: Configurations of Narcissism in Women’s Short Stories” (2012), for which she received the Charles Wallace Grant. She has published many chapters and papers and delivered many papers, including “Parasitism: An autistic island,” which received the 2018 Tustin award for best paper. She is a part of a supervision and training group of the Delhi Chapter of the Indian Psychoanalytic Society. Her book, *Plato’s Ghost: Minus Links and Liminality in Psychoanalytic Practice* (2021), is highly acclaimed and has received glowing reviews in psychoanalytic journals. Her talk (2023) titled “Mis-understanding, misogyny, and adolescence” at the Freud House & Museum in London was similarly very well received.

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Introduction

Psychoanalytic investigation of character traits began with “hysterical” charm and seductiveness (Freud, 1905e; Reich, 1933), the triad of orderliness, parsimony, and obstinacy (Abraham, 1923; Freud, 1908b), “oral” dependence (Abraham, 1924), narcissism and grandiosity (Freud, 1914c; Jones, 1913), and self-loathing leading to suicide (Menninger, 1938). A second wave of studies began to address syndromes emanating from schizoid (Fairbairn, 1952; Guntrip, 1969; Khan, 1974), “antisocial” (Winnicott, 1956), and “borderline” (Kernberg, 1967, 1975) tendencies. More recently, psychoanalysis has turned its gaze towards positive character traits such as friendship (Rangell, 1963), dignity (Marcovitz, 1970), tact (Poland, 1975), and forgiveness, generosity, gratitude, and humility (Akhtar, 2002, 2013, 2019). Even though these contributions have greatly enriched our field, the work is far from over.

Many character traits have escaped attention, even though they frequently prove to be a challenge for the clinician. Eight such traits form the focus of this book. Its contents are divided, in accordance with the expressive direction of the subsumed character traits, into two sections. The first part is titled “Mostly public” and contains chapters on dirtiness, miserliness, shyness, and outrageousness. The second part is titled

“Mostly private” and contains chapters on shallowness, indecisiveness, restlessness, and cowardliness. Brief sketches of the first four chapters follows.

- The first chapter of the book is on dirtiness. In it, Nina Savelle-Rocklin explores the complex meaning of dirtiness in the culture and the consulting room, examining the theme of dirtiness both literally and figuratively, from its origins in anality to its intrapsychic, relational, and social implications. The chapter explicates “dirtiness” of the body, mind, and language. A myriad of ways in which conflicts about being dirty or feeling dirty may be expressed and repressed are presented. This discussion includes the disparate but related areas of fantasy, smell, jokes, and money.
- The next chapter deals with miserliness. Written by Ann Smolen, this chapter emphasizes that the trait has little to do with actual monetary status of the subject. It reflects the poverty of internal good objects which are the basic source of generosity. Smolen offers detailed analytic material on a miserly child she treated and also a brief vignette of an adult case. With the help of this expressive clinical material, she elucidates the multilayered nature not only of such psychopathology but of its treatment as well.
- In the next chapter, Jerome Blackman applies his outstanding descriptive skill to the painful experience of shyness. According to him, shyness is a phenomenological result of a variety of underlying pathological constellations. These nuanced potential meanings of shyness are listed and then considered from the standpoint of psychopathology and, when possible, underlying etiology. Blackman highlights his proposals by including many patient and personal vignettes.
- The fourth chapter of this part is about outrageousness. In it, Lois Choi-Kain deftly categorizes outrageousness into a guilt-driven masochistic type, a hope-driven optimistic type, and a hate-driven sadistic type. Taking her cue from Winnicott’s (1956) seminal paper on “antisocial tendency,” she focuses upon the second type and elucidates its descriptive and dynamic subtleties by presenting a detailed clinical illustration. Fascinatingly, she also includes a subcategory of outrageousness possessed by creative writers and artists who,

almost invariably, resort to the “audacity” (in Auden’s phraseology) of imagination in order to arrive at the aesthetic solution to their psychic conundrum and inner pain.

The second part of the book is followed by the grouping of chapters on shallowness, indecisiveness, restlessness, and cowardliness. Here are thumbnail sketches of these chapters.

- The first chapter of this part addresses the trait of shallowness. Written by Michael Civin, it proposes that applied to a human subject, the adjective “shallow” portrays someone with little depth. This chapter rigorously develops “shallow” as a general construct and, from this, studies “shallow” from a psychoanalytic perspective. Through the lens of Freud’s tripartite topographical model of conscious, preconscious, and unconscious systems (e.g., Freud, 1915e), the author argues that no human can be described accurately as shallow. Although a person might behave in a superficial manner, all human subjects are endowed with the unfathomable depths of an unconscious, even if representations of those depths may be hindered by impaired preconscious functioning.
- The next chapter is on indecisiveness. In this chapter the Kayatekins note that ego has the capability to mediate between different aspects of the structures and functions of mind and the interpersonal world. It controls, mediates, monitors the infinitely complicated world of human motives both in the ways in which they are represented internally and played out in the real human niche that surrounds us. If we strive towards developing a formulation of the individual ego not mainly as an internal regulator, but equally importantly as the regulator of the relation of the internal with the external, with a capacity to shape and be shaped by internal and external; and with a potential to, consciously or unconsciously, but willfully, choose these “shaping actions,” then we will have a more nuanced and realistic understanding of the human mind as the defining aspect of our species as social individuals. The chapter is written with these conjectures in mind.
- Subsequent to this discourse on indecisiveness is the one on restlessness. This chapter, by the New Delhi-based psychoanalyst Nilofer Kaul, looks at “restlessness” and its associations—in psychoanalysis,

but also in literature and culture. What does restlessness look like? Who is restless—the “lover, the lunatic, the poet”? Who else? Is restlessness a symptom of an unresolved psychic conflict (as in *Macbeth*) or is it primary restlessness we are talking of (Bion’s “nameless dread”)? How do we think with the restless patient? Is restlessness a quest for truth or is it born from an evasion of truth? Is it a plea for change or an appeal against it? Literary and clinical material is provided to highlight such quandaries.

- The final chapter of this section and indeed of this book pertains to the rather distasteful human trait of cowardliness. Carefully deconstructing its phenomenology, the chapter links cowardliness to breeches in the early mother–child bond and the “thin-skinned” nature consequent upon this, as well as arising from deficient identification with the same sex parent. Technical implications of the patient’s and analyst’s are also addressed. The discourse concludes with the role of cowardice in the professional lives of analysts as well as in the society at large.

This “breathless” summary of the book’s contents hardly does justice to them. The fact is that the texture of the chapters contained here is quite variable and their viewpoints hardly homogenous. Some are inclined towards philosophy and literature while others rely more on descriptive psychiatry, social anthropology, and psychoanalysis. Tradition and innovation coexist in the pages of this book and so do meditative meandering and therapeutic pragmatism. The hope I have in offering all this material to you, is to deepen your understanding of the character traits discussed here, improve your capacity to empathize with those struggling with such issues, and enhance your capacity to help them overcome that very struggle.