ad formed in response to an u are, be who I need you to other powerful introject car- her to believing that she was ted pregnancy and unwanted hat she had wanted a termi- she needed to adapt in order sce. In order to live in accord- e the creative adjustment of in her disowning these parts. loved for all she truly was. introjects such as ‘don’t be : discovered that questioning ssible. on gestalt, one discovery that ade by Freud that we humansnts that challenge our core : selective capacity regarding i what we distort, forget or : Challenge these beliefs pre- pound has been built, and they

Retroflection

‘...whipping yourself with your own tail...you achieve – achieve just as well what you could have achieved without effort.’

(F. Kafka, 2005)

In retroflection the contact boundary increases in rigidity through an armouring process. Just as with a suit of armour the individual protects herself from the environment and in protecting herself holds her body back from contact with her environment. Whilst this armouring keeps the environment at bay it means that impulses are turned inwards towards the individual experiencing the reaction rather than being expressed. Contact with the present environment is resisted.

One form of retroflection is turning an impulse back in upon myself. The individual splits himself into the aspect who does and the aspect who is done unto. In doing so the individual substitutes himself for his environment. This splitting is usually present in the language used and is visible bodily in ways that diminish contact with the environment such as shallow breathing, muscular armouring, restricted movement, paleness. I have faced many clients who have given an account of being treated abusively by another and when asked whether they experience any anger, I have met with the response, ‘I am angry...with myself’. Here the retroflective split is evident in the doer, ‘I am angry...’ acting upon the done unto ‘myself’. Although, at one extreme, retroflection can lead to self harm (F. Perls described suicide as retroflective homicide), equally it can lead to self-motivation in positive ways – I push myself to go down to the gym or engage in positive self-talk to encourage myself.

There is a second kind of retroflection that is doing to myself what I need from the environment, sometimes called profection. An example of this process can be seen in the process of rocking oneself to sleep or self-soothing; masturbation could be viewed

ject’ as defined by McConville theory than ‘core belief’.
through this lens. This process of providing for oneself what is absent or inaccessible in the environment can be a healthy substitution for what is missing, and if brought to awareness can provide the client with information regarding what they may need. However, if it becomes an habitual way of being that fails to be updated, in extreme examples such a fixed gestalt can form part of the foundations of characterological problems, particularly in relation to intimacy.

I agree with PHG (1951) that it is in the big, overt movements that we make in our environment that we run the greatest risk of putting ourselves down and punishing ourselves through the process of retroflection. Such a process of self-punishment can lead to humiliation, guilt and/or shame. If emotional or intellectual expression is repeatedly met with negative responses we learn to stop expressing ourselves fully. In the here and now of the therapy room bodily and intellectual expression is inhibited as the echoes of introjected messages support the retroflective behaviour. Muscles are mobilized but are held still with a balance of tension between the muscles that move towards and those providing a counter-force to the action – retroflection requires energy. If the tension held is enduring this can result in chronic soreness and joint problems as muscle groups push and pull against each other. This may present in subtle ways such as a tension held in the person’s jaw. The therapist needs to be attentive to when these tensions surface in sessions. People that have developed a habitual pattern of retroreflecting tend to restrict their use of space and lack freedom in their movement.

Below is an example of a dialogue between a female client and myself to illustrate one way in which the process of retroflection can be supported by introjection. The client’s husband has recently left her for another woman, leading to her seeking therapy.

Client – (Talking about her relationship) He told me that he never loved me (chest begins to redden, hands begin to clench) ... and that I’d never been a good mother (fingernails now dig into her own hands).

Therapist – What are you aware of right now? (I move the focus to the present to increase contact and counter possible deflection).

Client – (Volume of her voices increases) I feel angry with myself for not having been a better mother.

Therapist – That sounds fine if you weren’t angry with the expression of the retroflected. Client – Somehow my mother is angry with my mother, sh

that supports the client’s re.
one itself what is a healthy substitute for what they may need. That fails to be fully expressed in the process, particularly in...)

vert movements he greatest risk is the threat of punishment from agents, or the recognition of their own weakness. Responses we are and now of the self can be inhibited if a balance is not found, and those who require energy, chronic soreness all against each other. To where these are and placed in a habitual pattern and lack of freedom, the client and of reflection and has recently engaged in therapy.

he that he never clenched... and now dig into her... 

ove the focus to deflection) — try with myself for not having been a better mother (Client’s retroactive split becomes evident).

Therapist — That sounds familiar. Who would you be angry with if you weren’t angry with yourself? (I seek to facilitate some expression of the retroflected emotion).

Client — Somehow my mother comes to mind... but I can’t be angry with my mother, she did the best she could. (An introject that supports the client’s retroactive process is verbalized).

In the above example we can see how the introjected belief leads to the retroflected behaviour of the client turning her anger in upon herself. In such examples of self-blame the retroactive behaviour is often supported by introjected beliefs. However, a failure to retroreflect would result in a total lack of any field constraints leading to antisocial behaviour, anarchy, hedonism and narcissistic madness. Without the ability to hold back our impulses our society would disintegrate.