

Repression

Sigmund Freud

- 145 -

ONE of the vicissitudes an instinctual impulse may undergo is to meet with resistances which seek to make it inoperative. Under certain conditions, which we shall presently investigate more closely, the impulse then passes into the state of 'repression' [*Verdrängung*]. If what was in question was the operation of an external stimulus, the appropriate method to adopt would obviously be flight; with an instinct, flight is of no avail, for the ego cannot escape from itself. At some later period, rejection based on judgement (*condemnation*) will be found to be a good method to adopt against an instinctual impulse. Repression is a preliminary stage of condemnation, something between flight and condemnation; it is a concept which could not have been formulated before the time of psycho-analytic studies.

It is not easy in theory to deduce the possibility of such a thing as repression. Why should an instinctual impulse undergo a vicissitude like this? A necessary condition of its happening must clearly be that the instinct's attainment of its aim should produce unpleasure instead of pleasure. But we cannot well imagine such a contingency. There are no such instincts: satisfaction of an instinct is always pleasurable. We should have to assume certain peculiar circumstances, some sort of process by which the pleasure of satisfaction is changed into unpleasure.

In order the better to delimit repression, let us discuss some other instinctual situations. It may happen that an external stimulus becomes internalized—for example, by eating into and destroying some bodily organ—so that a new source of constant excitation and increase of tension arises. The stimulus thereby acquires a far-reaching similarity to an instinct. We know that a case of this sort is experienced by us as *pain*. The aim of this pseudo-instinct, however, is simply the cessation of the change in the organ and of the unpleasure accompanying it. There is no other direct pleasure to be attained by cessation of pain. Further, pain is imperative; the only things to which it can yield are removal by some toxic agent or the influence of mental distraction.

The case of pain is too obscure to give us any help in our

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [248](#)

- 146 -

purpose.¹ Let us take the case in which an instinctual stimulus such as hunger remains unsatisfied. It then becomes imperative and can be allayed by nothing but the action that satisfies it;² it keeps up a constant tension of need. Nothing in the nature of a repression seems in this case to come remotely into question.

Thus repression certainly does not arise in cases where the tension produced by lack of satisfaction of an instinctual impulse is raised to an unbearable degree. The methods of defence which are open to the organism against that situation must be discussed in another connection.³

Let us rather confine ourselves to clinical experience, as we meet with it in psycho-analytic practice. We then learn that the satisfaction of an instinct which is underrepression would be quite possible, and further, that in every instance such a satisfaction would be pleasurable in itself; but it would be irreconcilable with other claims and intentions. It would, therefore, cause pleasure in one place and unpleasure in another. It has consequently become a condition for repression that the motive force of unpleasure shall have acquired more strength than the pleasure obtained from satisfaction. Psycho-analytic observation of the transference neuroses, moreover, leads us to conclude that repression is not a defensive mechanism which is present from the very beginning, and that it cannot arise until a sharp cleavage has occurred between conscious and unconscious mental activity—that *the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious*.⁴ This view of repression would be made more complete by assuming that, before the mental organization reaches this stage, the task of fending off instinctual impulses is dealt with by

the other vicissitudes which instincts may undergo—e.g. reversal into the opposite or turning round upon the subject's own self [cf. pp. [126-7](#)].

It seems to us now that, in view of the very great extent to

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [249](#)

1 [Pain and the organism's method of dealing with it are discussed in Chapter IV of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920g), *Standard Ed.*, 18, [30](#). The subject is already raised in Part I, Section 6, of the 'Project' (1950a [1895]), and in the closing paragraphs of *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926d).]

2 [In the 'Project' (1950a [1895]), Part I, Section 1, this is termed the 'specific action'.]

3 [It is not clear what 'other connection' Freud had in mind.]

4 [A modification of this formula will be found below on p. [203](#).]

- 147 -

which repression and what is unconscious are correlated, we must defer probing more deeply into the nature of repression until we have learnt more about the structure of the succession of psychical agencies and about the differentiation between what is unconscious and conscious. [See the following paper, p. [180](#) ff.] Till then, all we can do is to put together in a purely descriptive fashion a few characteristics of repression that have been observed clinically, even though we run the risk of having to repeat unchanged much that has been said elsewhere.

We have reason to assume that there is a *primal repression*, a first phase of repression, which consists in the psychical (ideational) representative of the instinct¹ being denied entrance into the conscious. With this a *fixation* is established; the representative in question persists unaltered from then onwards and the instinct remains attached to it. This is due to the properties of unconscious processes of which we shall speak later [p. [187](#)].

The second stage of repression, *repression proper*, affects mental derivatives of the repressed representative, or such trains of thought as, originating elsewhere, have come into associative connection with it. On account of this association, these ideas experience the same fate as what was primarily repressed. Repression proper, therefore, is actually an after-pressure.² Moreover, it is a mistake to emphasize only the repulsion which operates from the direction of the conscious upon what is to be repressed; quite as important is the attraction exercised by what was primarily repressed upon everything with which it can establish a connection. Probably the trend towards repression would fail in its purpose if these two forces did not cooperate, if there were not something previously repressed ready to receive what is repelled by the conscious.³

Under the influence of the study of the psychoneuroses, which

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [250](#)

1 [See the Editor's Note to the previous paper, p. [111](#) ff.]

2 [*'Nachdrängen'*.] Freud uses the same term in his account of the process in the Schreber analysis (see next footnote), and also in his paper on 'The Unconscious' (see below, pp. [180](#) and [181](#)). But, on alluding to the point more than twenty years later in the third section of 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' (1937c), he uses the word '*Nachverdrängung*' ('after-repression').]

3 [The account of the two stages of repression given in the last two paragraphs had been anticipated by Freud four years earlier (though in a somewhat different form) in the third section of the Schreber analysis (1911c), and in a letter to Ferenczi of December 6, 1910 (Jones, 1955, [499](#)). See also *Standard Ed.*, 5, [547](#) n., and *Standard Ed.* 7, [175-6](#) n.]

- 148 -

brings before us the important effects of repression, we are inclined to overvalue their psychological bearing and to forget too readily that repression does not hinder the instinctual representative from continuing to exist in the unconscious, from organizing itself further, putting out derivatives and establishing connections. Repression in fact interferes only with the relation of the instinctual representative to *one* psychical system, namely, to that of the conscious.

Psycho-analysis is able to show us other things as well which are important for understanding the effects of repression in the psychoneuroses. It shows us, for instance, that the instinctual representative develops with less interference and more profusely if it is withdrawn

by repression from conscious influence. It proliferates in the dark, as it were, and takes on extreme forms of expression, which when they are translated and presented to the neurotic are not only bound to seem alien to him, but frighten him by giving him the picture of an extraordinary and dangerous strength of instinct. This deceptive strength of instinct is the result of an uninhibited development in phantasy and of the damming-up consequent on frustrated satisfaction. The fact that this last result is bound up with repression points the direction in which the true significance of repression has to be looked for.

Reverting once more, however, to the opposite aspect of repression, let us make it clear that it is not even correct to suppose that repression withholds from the unconscious *all* the derivatives of what was primarily repressed.¹ If these derivatives have become sufficiently far removed from the repressed representative, whether owing to the adoption of distortions or by reason of the number of intermediate links inserted, they have free access to the conscious. It is as though the resistance of the unconscious against them was a function of their distance from what was originally repressed. In carrying out the technique of psycho-analysis, we continually require the patient to produce such derivatives of the repressed as, in consequence either of their remoteness or of their distortion, can pass the censorship

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [251](#)

1 [What follows in this paragraph is discussed at greater length in Section VI of 'The Unconscious' (below, p. [190](#) ff.)]

- 149 -

of the conscious. Indeed, the associations which we require him to give without being influenced by any conscious purposive idea and without any criticism, and from which we reconstitute a conscious translation of the repressed representative—these associations are nothing else than remote and distorted derivatives of this kind. During this process we observe that the patient can go on spinning a thread of such associations, till he is brought up against some thought, the relation of which to what is repressed becomes so obvious that he is compelled to repeat his attempt at repression. Neurotic symptoms, too, must have fulfilled this same condition, for they are derivatives of the repressed, which has, by their means, finally won the access to consciousness which was previously denied to it.¹

We can lay down no general rule as to what degree of distortion and remoteness is necessary before the resistance on the part of the conscious is removed. A delicate balancing is here taking place, the play of which is hidden from us; its mode of operation, however, enables us to infer that it is a question of calling a halt when the cathexis of the unconscious reaches a certain intensity—an intensity beyond which the unconscious would break through to satisfaction. Repression acts, therefore, in a *highly individual* manner. Each single derivative of the repressed may have its own special vicissitude; a little more or a little less distortion alters the whole outcome. In this connection we can understand how it is that the objects to which men give most preference, their ideals, proceed from the same perceptions and experiences as the objects which they most abhor, and that they were originally only distinguished from one another through slight modifications. [Cf. p. [93](#).] Indeed, as we found in tracing the origin of the fetish,² it is possible for the original instinctual representative to be split in two, one part undergoing repression, while the remainder, precisely on account of this intimate connection, undergoes idealization.

The same result as follows from an increase or a decrease in

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [252](#)

1 [In the German editions before 1924 the latter part of this sentence read: 'Welches sich ... den ihm versagten Zugang vom Bewusstsein endlich erkämpft hat'. This was translated formerly 'which has finally... wrested from consciousness the right of way previously denied it'. In the German editions from 1924 onwards the word 'vom' was corrected to 'zum', thus altering the sense to that given in the text above.]

2 [Cf. Section 2 (A) of the first of Freud's *Three Essays* (1905d), *Standard Ed.*, 7, [153](#)-5 and footnotes.]

- 150 -

the degree of distortion may also be achieved at the other end of the apparatus, so to speak, by a modification in the condition for the production of pleasure and unpleasure. Special techniques have

been evolved, with the purpose of bringing about such changes in the play of mental forces that what would otherwise give rise to unpleasure may on this occasion result in pleasure; and, whenever a technical device of this sort comes into operation, the repression of an instinctual representative which would otherwise be repudiated is lifted. These techniques have till now only been studied in any detail in jokes.¹ As a rule the repression is only temporarily lifted and is promptly reinstated.

Observations like this, however, enable us to note some further characteristics of repression. Not only is it, as we have just shown, *individual* in its operation, but it is also exceedingly *mobile*. The process of repression is not to be regarded as an event which takes place *once*, the results of which are permanent, as when some living thing has been killed and from that time onward is dead; repression demands a persistent expenditure of force, and if this were to cease the success of the repression would be jeopardized, so that a fresh act of repression would be necessary. We may suppose that the repressed exercises a continuous pressure in the direction of the conscious, so that this pressure must be balanced by an unceasing counter-pressure.² Thus the maintenance of a repression involves an uninterrupted expenditure of force, while its removal results in a saving from an economic point of view. The mobility of repression, incidentally, also finds expression in the psychical characteristics of the state of sleep, which alone renders possible the formation of dreams.³ With a return to waking life the repressive cathexes which have been drawn in are once more sent out.

Finally, we must not forget that after all we have said very little about an instinctual impulse when we have established that it is repressed. Without prejudice to its repression, such an impulse may be in widely different states. It may be inactive, i.e. only very slightly cathected with mental energy; or it may be cathected in varying degrees, and so enabled to be active. True,

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [253](#)

1 [See the second chapter of Freud's book on jokes ([1905c](#)).]

2 [This is discussed further on p. [180](#) f. below.]

3 [Cf. *The Interpretation of Dreams* ([1900a](#)), Chap. VII (C), *Standard Ed.*, 5, [567-8](#). See also below, p. [225](#).]

- 151 -

its activation will not result in a direct lifting of the repression, but it will set in motion all the processes which end in a penetration by the impulse into consciousness along circuitous paths. With unrepressed derivatives of the unconscious the fate of a particular idea is often decided by the degree of its activity or cathexis. It is an everyday occurrence that such a derivative remains unrepressed so long as it represents only a small amount of energy, although its content would be calculated to give rise to a conflict with what is dominant in consciousness. The quantitative factor proves decisive for this conflict: as soon as the basically obnoxious idea exceeds a certain degree of strength, the conflict becomes a real one, and it is precisely this activation that leads to repression. So that, where repression is concerned, an increase of energetic cathexis operates in the same sense as an approach to the unconscious, while a decrease of that cathexis operates in the same sense as remoteness from the unconscious or distortion. We see that the repressive trends may find a substitute for repression in a weakening of what is distasteful.

In our discussion so far we have dealt with the repression of an instinctual representative, and by the latter we have understood an idea¹ or group of ideas which is cathected with a definite quota of psychical energy (libido or interest) coming from an instinct. Clinical observation now obliges us to divide up what we have hitherto regarded as a single entity; for it shows us that besides the idea, some other element representing the instinct has to be taken into account, and that this other element undergoes vicissitudes of repression which may be quite different from those undergone by the idea. For this other element of the psychical representative the term *quota of affect* has been generally adopted.² It corresponds to the instinct in so far as the latter has become detached from the idea and finds expression, proportionate to its quantity, in processes which are sensed as affects. From this point on, in describing a case of repression, we shall have to follow up separately what, as the result of repression, becomes of the *idea*, and what becomes of the instinctual energy linked to it.

We should be glad to be able to say something general about

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [254](#)

1 [‘*Vorstellung*.’ See footnote 1, p. [174](#).]

2 [*Affektbetrag*.] This term dates back to the Breuer period. Cf., for instance, the last paragraphs of Freud's paper, **1894a**, and the Editor's Appendix, *Standard Edition*, **3**, 60 and 62 ff.]

- 152 -

the vicissitudes of both; and having taken our bearings a little we shall in fact be able to do so. The general vicissitude which overtakes the *idea* that represents the instinct can hardly be anything else than that it should vanish from the conscious if it was previously conscious, or that it should be held back from consciousness if it was about to become conscious. The difference is not important; it amounts to much the same thing as the difference between my ordering an undesirable guest out of my drawing-room (or out of my front hall), and my refusing, after recognizing him, to let him cross my threshold at all.¹ The *quantitative* factor of the instinctual representative has three possible vicissitudes, as we can see from a cursory survey of the observations made by psycho-analysis: either the instinct is altogether suppressed, so that no trace of it is found, or it appears as an affect which is in some way or other qualitatively coloured, or it is changed into anxiety.² The two latter possibilities set us the task of taking into account, as a further instinctual vicissitude, the *transformation* into *affects*, and especially into *anxiety*, of the psychical energies of *instincts*.

We recall the fact that the motive and purpose of repression was nothing else than the avoidance of unpleasure. It follows that the vicissitude of the quota of affect belonging to the representative is far more important than the vicissitude of the idea, and this fact is decisive for our assessment of the process of repression. If a repression does not succeed in preventing feelings of unpleasure or anxiety from arising, we may say that it has failed, even though it may have achieved its purpose as far as the ideational portion is concerned. Repressions that have failed will of course have more claim on our interest than any that may have been successful; for the latter will for the most part escape our examination.

We must now try to obtain some insight into the *mechanism*

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page **255**

1 This simile, which is thus applicable to the process of repression, may also be extended to a characteristic of it which has been mentioned earlier: I have merely to add that I must set a permanent guard over the door which I have forbidden this guest to enter, since he would otherwise burst it open. (See above [p. **151**].) [The simile had been elaborated by Freud in the second of his *Five Lectures* (**1910a**), *Standard Ed.*, **11**, **25-7**.]

2 [Freud's altered views on this last point were stated by him in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (**1926d**), especially at the end of Chapter IV and in Chapter XI, Section A (b).]

- 153 -

of the process of repression. In particular we want to know whether there is a single mechanism only, or more than one, and whether perhaps each of the psychoneuroses is distinguished by a mechanism of repression peculiar to it. At the outset of this enquiry, however, we are met by complications. The mechanism of a repression becomes accessible to us only by our deducing that mechanism from the *outcome* of the repression. Confining our observations to the effect of repression on the ideational portion of the representative, we discover that as a rule it creates a *substitutive formation*. What is the mechanism by which such a substitute is formed? Or should we distinguish several mechanisms here as well? Further, we know that repression leaves *symptoms* behind it. May we then suppose that the forming of substitutes and the forming of symptoms coincide, and, if this is so on the whole, is the mechanism of forming symptoms the same as that of repression? The general probability would seem to be that the two are widely different, and that it is not the repression itself which produces substitutive formations and symptoms, but that these latter are indications of a *return of the repressed*¹ and owe their existence to quite other processes. It would also seem advisable to examine the mechanisms by which substitutes and symptoms are formed before considering the mechanisms of repression.

Obviously this is no subject for further speculation. The place of speculation must be taken by a careful analysis of the results of repression observable in the different neuroses. I must, however, suggest that we should postpone this task, too, until we have formed reliable conceptions of the relation of the conscious to the unconscious.² But, in order that the present discussion may not be entirely unfruitful, I will say in advance that (1) the mechanism of repression does not in fact coincide with the mechanism or mechanisms of forming substitutes, (2) there are a great many different mechanisms of forming substitutes and (3) the mechanisms of repression have at least this one thing in

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [256](#)

1 [The concept of a 'return of the repressed' is a very early one in Freud's writings. It appears already in Section II of his second paper on 'The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence' (1896b), as well as in the still earlier draft of that paper sent to Fliess on January 1, 1896 (1950a, Draft K).]

2 [Freud takes up the task in Section IV of his paper on 'The Unconscious', below, p. [181](#) ff.]

- 154 -

common: *a withdrawal of the cathexis of energy* (or of *libido*, where we are dealing with sexual instincts).

Further, restricting myself to the three best-known forms of psychoneurosis, I will show by means of some examples how the concepts here introduced find application to the study of repression.

From the field of *anxiety hysteria* I will choose a well-analysed example of an animal phobia.¹ The instinctual impulse subjected to repression here is a libidinal attitude towards the father, coupled with fear of him. After repression, this impulse vanishes out of consciousness: the father does not appear in it as an object of libido. As a substitute for him we find in a corresponding place some animal which is more or less fitted to be an object of anxiety. The formation of the substitute for the ideational portion [of the instinctual representative] has come about by *displacement* along a chain of connections which is determined in a particular way. The quantitative portion has not vanished, but has been transformed into anxiety. The result is fear of a wolf, instead of a demand for love from the father. The categories here employed are of course not enough to supply an adequate explanation of even the simplest case of psychoneurosis: there are always other considerations to be taken into account. A repression such as occurs in an animal phobia must be described as radically unsuccessful. All that it has done is to remove and replace the idea; it has failed altogether in sparing unpleasure. And for this reason, too, the work of the neurosis does not cease. It proceeds to a second phase, in order to attain its immediate and more important purpose. What follows is an attempt at flight—the formation of the *phobia proper*, of a number of avoidances which are intended to prevent a release of the anxiety. More specialized investigation enables us to understand the mechanism by which the phobia achieves its aim. [See p. [182](#) ff. below.]

We are obliged to take quite another view of the process of repression when we consider the picture of a true *conversion hysteria*. Here the salient point is that it is possible to bring about a total disappearance of the quota of affect. When this is so, the patient displays towards his symptoms what Charcot called

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [257](#)

1 [This is, of course, a reference to the case history of the 'Wolf Man' (1918b), which, though it was not published till three years after the present paper, had already been completed in essentials.]

- 155 -

'*la belle indifférence des hystériques*'.¹ In other cases this suppression is not so completely successful: some distressing sensations may attach to the symptomsthemelves, or it may prove impossible to prevent some release of anxiety, which in turn sets to work the mechanism of forming a phobia. The ideational content of the instinctual representative is completely withdrawn from consciousness; as a substitute—and at the same time as a symptom—we have an over-strong innervation (in typical cases, a somatic one), sometimes of a sensory, sometimes of a motor character, either as an excitation or an inhibition. The over-innervated area proves on a closer view to be a part of the repressed instinctual representative itself—a part which, as though by a process of *condensation*, has drawn the whole cathexis on to itself. These remarks do not of course bring to light the whole mechanism of a conversion hysteria; in especial the factor of *regression*, which will be considered in another connection, has also to be taken into account.² In so far as repression in [conversion] hysteria is made possible only by the extensive formation of substitutes, it may be judged to be entirely unsuccessful; as regards dealing with the quota of affect, however, which is the true task of repression, it generally signifies a total success. In conversion hysteria the process of repression is completed with the formation of the symptom and does not, as in anxiety hysteria, need to continue to a second phase—or rather, strictly speaking, to continue endlessly.

A totally different picture of repression is shown, once more, in the third disorder which we shall consider for the purposes of our illustration—in *obsessional neurosis*. Here we are at first in doubt what it is that we have to regard as the instinctual representative that is subjected to repression—

whether it is a libidinal or a hostile trend. This uncertainty arises because obsessional neurosis has as its basis a regression owing to which a sadistic trend has been substituted for an affectionate one. It is this hostile impulsion against someone who is loved which is subjected to repression. The effect at an early stage of the work of repression is quite different from what it is at a later one. At first the repression is completely successful; the ideational content

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [258](#)

1 [Freud has already quoted this in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895d), *Standard Ed.*, 2, [135](#).]

2 [This is perhaps a reference to the missing metapsychological paper on conversion hysteria. See Editor's Introduction, p. [106](#).]

- 156 -

is rejected and the affect made to disappear. As a substitutive formation there arises an alteration in the ego in the shape of an increased conscientiousness, and this can hardly be called a symptom. Here, substitute and symptom do not coincide. From this we learn something, too, about the mechanism of repression. In this instance, as in all others, repression has brought about a withdrawal of libido; but here it has made use of *reaction-formation* for this purpose, by intensifying an opposite. Thus in this case the formation of a substitute has the same mechanism as repression and at bottom coincides with it, while chronologically, as well as conceptually, it is distinct from the formation of a symptom. It is very probable that the whole process is made possible by the ambivalent relationship into which the sadistic impulsion that has to be repressed has been introduced. But the repression, which was at first successful, does not hold firm; in the further course of things its failure becomes increasingly marked. The ambivalence which has enabled repression through reaction-formation to take place is also the point at which the repressed succeeds in returning. The vanished affect comes back in its transformed shape as social anxiety, moral anxiety and unlimited self-reproaches; the rejected idea is replaced by a *substitute by displacement*, often a displacement on to something very small or indifferent.¹ A tendency to a complete re-establishment of the repressed idea is as a rule unmistakably present. The failure in the repression of the quantitative, affective factor brings into play the same mechanism of flight, by means of avoidance and prohibitions, as we have seen at work in the formation of hysterical phobias. The rejection of the *idea* from the conscious is, however, obstinately maintained, because it entails abstention from action, a motor fettering of the impulsion. Thus in obsessional neurosis the work of repression is prolonged in a sterile and interminable struggle.

The short series of comparisons presented here may easily convince us that more comprehensive investigations are necessary before we can hope thoroughly to understand the processes connected with repression and the formation of neurotic symptoms. The extraordinary intricacy of all the factors to be taken into consideration leaves only one way of presenting them open to us. We must select first one and then another point of view,

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [259](#)

1 [Cf. Section II (c) of the 'Rat Man' analysis, *Standard Ed.*, 10, [241](#).]

- 157 -

and follow it up through the material as long as the application of it seems to yield results. Each separate treatment of the subject will be incomplete in itself, and there cannot fail to be obscurities where it touches upon material that has not yet been treated; but we may hope that a final synthesis will lead to a proper understanding.

[PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 10, Page [261](#)

- 158 -