Laval théologique et philosophique

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Theresa M. Crem

Volume 24, numéro 2, 1968

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020129ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1020129ar

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Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)
1703-8804 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Crem, T. M. (1968). A Thomistic Explanation of the Neurosis. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, *24*(2), 294–300. https://doi.org/10.7202/1020129ar

A Thomistic Explanation of the Neurosis

The purpose of this paper is to show how repression, the fundamental cause of the neurosis, can be explained in the light of the principles of Thomistic rational psychology. Such an explanation seems to be more satisfactory than that of Freud. To establish this, we will begin with a brief exposition of Freud's position.

I. THE FREUDIAN POSITION ON MAN'S MENTAL STRUCTURE

In order to explain the Freudian notion of repression, it is necessary to give a synopsis of Freud's concept of man's mental structure. Freud distinguished three basic elements in this structure, namely, the *id*, the *ego*, and the *super-ego*; although he did not consider them to be distinct powers or faculties.[1]

The *id* is the most fundamental element of the structure, the *ego* and *super-ego* being merely its extensions. The *id* is the unconscious, unknown source of the instinctual drives. It is governed by the pleasure principle, seeking satisfaction of these drives regardless of any demands made by external reality. The repressed is part of the *id* and is cut off from the *ego* by the resistance of repression.

The *ego*, an extension of the *id*, is the "surface" of man's mental structure. Although unconscious elements are present even in the *ego*, it constitutes what may be called man's conscious self. By its connection to the system of perception, the *ego* comes into contact with the external world and as a result is guided by the reality principle. The modification introduced by this influence is what essentially distinguishes the *ego* from the *id* proper.

The *ego* serves as a mediator between the *id* and the external world. It seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the *id* and its tendencies, and tries to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the *id*. Since the *ego* controls motor activity which must be utilized if the drives of the *id* are to attain their goal, the *ego* can act as a repressive factor.

According to Freud, the *ego* represents reason and common sense in contrast to the *id*, which is the source of the passions. He compares the relationship of the *ego* and the *id* to that of a rider and his horse.

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1. "The *Ego* and the *Id*," *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Standard Edition, transl. J. Strachey (London, 1961), XIX.

Although the rider controls the horse to a certain extent, at times he is forced to go where the horse desires.

The *super-ego* is the last part of the mental structure to come into existence. It is an extension of the *ego*, but maintains a close relationship to the *id* and is less firmly connected to consciousness than the *ego* proper.

The origin of the *super-ego* lies in the individual's first and most important identification, his identification with his parents, principally with his father who is taken as a model. Through the *super-ego*, parental influence is given lifelong expression. As the child matures, the fathers's role is carried on by teachers and others in authority. Even in later years, their instructions and prohibitions remain powerful in the *super-ego* and exercise moral censorship in the form of conscience. Although accessible to later influences, the *super-ego* always preserves the characteristic derived from its parental origin, namely, its capacity to dominate the *ego*. As the child was once under a compulsion to obey its parents, so the *ego* submits to the *super-ego*. It is generally at the command of the *super-ego* that the *ego* carries out its repressions.

The tension between the demands of the *super-ego* and the actual performances of the *ego* is experienced as a sense of guilt. But the *super-ego's* independence of the conscious *ego* and its link with the unconscious *id* make possible an unconscious sense of guilt. The ideals of the *super-ego* can to a great extent remain unconscious and inaccessible to the *ego*, and there is often communication between the *super-ego* and unconscious instinctual impulses.

II. THE FREUDIAN THEORY OF REPRESSION

Having considered Freud's analysis of man's mental structure, we may now proceed to an explanation of his theory of repression. It is not surprising that Freud's theory of repression, based as it was upon clinical observation, should have evolved over the years.

In an early work entitled *Repression*[1] written in 1915, Freud states that the essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting something and of keeping it out of consciousness. Repression occurs when the satisfaction of an instinct, which in itself is pleasurable, would be irreconcilable with other claims and purposes. Thus, it would cause pleasure in one part of the mind and pain in another. If the desire to avoid pain is greater than the desire for gratification, the instinctual impulse meets a resistance which seeks to impede it.

Repression occurs in two stages. The primary stage excludes from consciousness the mental presentation of the instinct, i.e., the

1. *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XIV (1957).

image representing the object which aroused the impulse. The secondary stage consists in an extension of the repression to include mental derivatives of what has been initially repressed. In other words, any closely associated images or trains of thought are likewise repressed and thereby rendered unconscious.

However, repression does not hinder the repressed impulse from continuing to exist in the unconscious and from exerting an influence in the individual's mental life. Moreover, being withdrawn from conscious influence, repression proceeds to the secondary stage, including more and more derivatives in the repressed material. The impulse itself, cut off from the attainment of its natural goal, may find expression in bizarre forms.

An important aspect of Freud's theory is that repression is not event that occurs once, but a continuous process. Since instincts are continuous by nature, the repressed impulse keeps straining toward its goal. Consequently, maintaining the repression requires a constant expenditure of energy, and if this were to cease the repression would fail.

Since Freud did not clarify his views on the structure of the mind until 1923 in his work *The "Ego" and the "Id,"* we do not find these distinctions applied to his initial explanation of repression. However, in his work *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,*[1] written in 1926, they appear prominently.

In the latter work, Freud states that repression occurs when the *ego,* perhaps at the command of the *super-ego,* refuses to consent to an instinctual impulse proceeding from the *id.* As a result, the impulse is inhibited and cannot follow its natural course.

Because of its connection with the perceptual system and the resulting phenomenon of consciousness, the *ego* exerts considerable influence over processes in the *id.* The *ego* receives stimuli not only from the external world, but also from within, and it endeavors by means of the resulting sensations of pleasure and pain to direct the course of mental events. When the *ego* is opposed to an instinctual process in the *id,* it has only to utilize the pleasure principle which governs the *id* and give a "signal of unpleasure" in order to attain its aim.

Just as the *ego* controls the path to action in regard to the external world, so it controls access to consciousness. In repression it exercises its power in both directions, on the one hand acting upon the instinctual impulse itself impeding the attainment of its goal, and on the other, upon the image arousing the impulse.

Repression is an indication of the strength of the *ego,* but also of its weakness. If the *ego* succeeds in protecting itself from a dangerous instinctual impulse through the process of repression, it has certainly

1. *Ibid.,* XX (1959).

inhibited and damaged the particular part of the *id* concerned; but it has at the same time given the *id* some independence and has renounced some of its own sovereignty. For the repressed material maintains its existence outside the organisation of the *ego* and independently of it. The *ego* loses control over this impulse which is then free to influence mental life unchecked. This is inevitable from the nature of repression, which is, fundamentally, an attempt at flight.

Thus far, Freud has merely developed his theory of repression as stated in his earlier work, but *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* contains two important innovations. One is the recognition that repression does not necessarily involve relegating something to the unconscious. Freud had been led to this conclusion because his early observations were limited to the hysterical neurosis, where this is indeed the case. He found that the perceptual content was forgotten and debarred from being reproduced in memory. But later, when he became familiar with obsessional neuroses he found that pathogenic occurrences are not always forgotten. Because of this discovery, the distinction made earlier between the conscious and the unconscious was diminished in importance.

A second noteworthy innovation regards the origin of anxiety. Earlier, Freud had been of the opinion that anxiety is the result of repression, i.e., that the energy of the repressed impulse is transformed into anxiety. But a further study of phobias enabled him to see that anxiety is the cause of repression, not its effect. The *ego* experiences anxiety because of the instinctual demands of the *id* and as a result initiates the repression.

III. CRITICISM

Although Freud's discovery of the mechanism of repression was an indispensable contribution to the understanding of the neurosis, his explanation of repression leaves much to be desired.

We do not find in Freud's writings a clear distinction between rational and sensory powers, but he attributes to the *ego* certain characteristics of a rational power. Nevertheless, the *ego* cannot simply be equated with a rational power in the Thomistic sense, for Freud considers the *ego* to be merely a portion of the *id*.

Difficulties arise when we consider that man's rational nature demands subordination of his sensory powers to reason. If this is so, why should conflict between the *ego* and the *id* result in repression and the consequent production of a definitely pathological state? Furthermore, everyone experiences at times rational opposition to certain sensory inclinations. Yet, such resistance does not usually result in a neurosis.

As we have seen, we cannot solve these difficulties by stating that repression results only when something is pushed out of consciousness.

In fact, it seems that there are no satisfactory answers to such questions in the Freudian system.

It appears that what is needed to clarify these obscurities is a more adequate concept of man's nature and of the distinction among his powers, a concept such as that found in the philosophy of St. Thomas. Here we find clear distinctions between knowing and appetitive powers, between rational and sensory powers, and even between two sensory appetites, the concupiscible and the irascible.

IV. A THOMISTIC EXPLANATION

St. Thomas explains the instrumentality of the irascible appetite with regard to the concupiscible appetite, indicating how the emotions of the irascible appetite rise and terminate in the emotions of the concupiscible appetite and serve to overcome obstacles to the attainment of its goal.[1] Both sensory appetites are subject to reason, which enjoys a "political" rule over them through the operation of the cogitative sense.[2] This is the natural and normal functioning of these powers, and this order must be preserved if man is to maintain his emotional well-being.

A clue as to how such distinctions can legitimately be applied to explain repression may be found in Freud's contention that anxiety is a cause of repression. Now anxiety is a type of fear, and fear is an emotion of the irascible appetite. It is clear that what is sought by the concupiscible appetite because it is seen as a good may at the same time be feared by the irascible appetite, if from another point of view it is considered an evil.

If this conflict is resolved through rational control, i.e., by the application of a rational judgment, the process is entirely normal because in accord with man's rational nature. But if the concupiscible appetite is denied its object solely or primarily on the basis of the emotion of fear, this amounts to repression; for one emotion is blocking another, and this is unnatural. By such a procedure, the irascible appetite has usurped the directive function which is the prerogative of the rational powers.

It is in the light of these principles that Dr. Anna Terruwe, a Dutch psychiatrist, explains repression in terms of a conflict between emotions of the two sensory appetites. This conflict usually results in the suppression of a concupiscible emotion by an irascible emotion.[3]

This explanation is well in accord with observations made by Freud. It accounts for the fact that true neuroses originate in child-

1. Cf. *Ia*, q.81, a.2.

2. Cf. *ibid.*, a.3.

3. Cf. A. TERRUWE, *The Neurosis in the Light of Rational Psychology* (New York, 1960); *Psychopathic Personality and Neurosis* (New York, 1958).

hood, for at this time rational control is weak at best, and the child is governed by his emotions. It explains Freud's contention that the ideals of the *super-ego*, such as moral precepts, may exert a repressive influence. This may well happen. The child's difficulty in understanding such matters in a rational fashion may lead to adverse emotional reactions. The remedy, of course, is not to eliminate moral instruction, but to exercise care in the presentation of such precepts to children.

Lastly, an explanation in terms of Thomistic principles furnishes greater insight into the pathological character of the neurosis. As Freud had observed, the repressed emotion, although impeded from attaining its natural goal, continues to exist in a state of endless striving. Such a state of unrest does not occur when natural rational control is exercised. Although the sensory appetites are only imperfectly subordinated to reason, the application of rational considerations enables the eventual resolution of any conflict between the sensory appetites and the rational powers. It is only the unnatural suppression of one emotion by another that results in a pathological condition.

But there is another factor which contributes to neurotic tension. The repressing emotion is generally an emotion of the irascible appetite, and as St. Thomas explains,[1] the irascible emotions are by nature mobile. Since the purpose of the irascible appetite is to overcome difficulties in the attainment of good and in the avoidance of evil, the irascible emotions find their natural termination in concupiscible emotions. An irascible emotion always tends toward something else; it never denotes rest.

Now in the neurosis the repressing emotion must constantly exert pressure in order to maintain the repression. This means that it, too, cannot follow its natural course. Hence we see that the tension and unrest characteristic of the neurosis has a twofold source.

From what has been said, it is clear that the neurosis is the result of a serious disorder among man's faculties. Not only has the repressing emotion usurped a prerogative of the rational powers, but the very mechanism of repression renders impossible any subsequent rational control over repressed material. Moreover, if the repressing factor is an irascible emotion, as is generally the case, there is a further disorder inasmuch as the irascible appetite is by nature meant to serve as an instrument of the concupiscible appetite. On the sensory level, primacy belongs to the concupiscible appetite.

In conclusion, the fruitfulness of the application of Thomistic principles to an understanding of the neurosis is evidenced by the clinical work done over a period of several years by Dr. Terruwe. Not only was she able to distinguish two different repressive factors in obsessive compulsive neuroses, namely, fear and energy (courage),

1. Cf. *Ia IIae*, q.25, a.1.

and to discover a third type of neurosis which she named the fear neurosis camouflaged by energy, but also to devise a specific method of treatment for each type.

Theresa M. CREM.