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Freud’s account of the unconscious: elements of a critique

When I speak of a critique of Freud’s account of the unconscious, I don’t mean critique primarily in the negative sense of pointing out flaws or confusions. That, too, will be part of what I do in this paper, but just as importantly I try to bring out what I take to be crucial points that Freud makes, or that a focus on the thematic he introduces – which could roughly be characterised as the thematic of repression – allows us to see. The thoughts presented here do not form a coherent train of argument; rather, they are fragments of a larger project. They do not aim to exhaust any single topic, even to the limited extent that this is ever possible in philosophy, but rather indicate points of entry into the thematic. Thus, this is less a paper than a number of introductions to papers I hope to write.

1. Introductory

Freud was lead to talk about unconscious motivation in his attempts to understand a family of phenomena – often both striking and strange, and yet not at all uncommon – where a person reacts in ways that she herself cannot make sense of. As Freud says, in these situations “thoughts emerge suddenly without one’s knowing where they come from, nor can one do anything to drive them away ... impulses appear which seem like those of a stranger”; one feels that one’s mind has been visited on by “alien guests”, run over by a “foreign invasion” (SE 17:141–2).¹

Freud’s writings are full of examples of such strange reactions, and of interpretations/explanations that seek to make them intelligible. His general approach is to try to show that the “alien guests” are not really alien after all; that “nothing has entered you from without” and what seems alien to you is in fact “a part of the activity of your own mind” – a part, however, which you have rejected and disowned (SE 17:142). In other words, Freud’s working assumption is that in situations where we are unable to make sense of ourselves, this is not due primarily to the complexity of the processes involved, or to the weakness of our intellectual powers. Rather, the point is that we make ourselves incomprehensible to ourselves by refusing to see ourselves as we are. A person doesn’t simply lose touch with reality (the reality of his own attitudes and that of his situation), rather he actively “turns away from reality because he finds it – as a whole or in part – unbearable” (SE 12, “Two Principles”, first page: CHECK!). He is not doing this consciously and he really is confused about himself, he cannot understand why he behaves as he does, but nonetheless the confusion is motivated by his trying to avoid facing certain difficulties in his life.

Freudian conceptualisations and explanations of unconscious motivation are of human and philosophical interest not only insofar as they manage to reveal sense and meaning in phenomena that initially appear strange and perverse. More importantly, they might enable us to turn back the insights gained from reflecting on the strange and overtly pathological cases onto normal, everyday thought and behaviour in such a way as to make the familiar and seemingly self-evident appear strange and questionable.

2. A dead poet’s society

To give the discussion concretion, let’s look at an example from Freud of the kind of reaction that seems naturally to invite talk of unconscious motivation. The example features a young man whose sister had recently died, in fact committed suicide, and who experienced an “expression of feeling” coming out of himself but which remained “inexplicable” to him.² One day he had a strange experience:

A few months after his sister’s death he himself made a journey in the neighbourhood in which she had died. There he sought out the burial-place of a great poet, who was at that time his ideal, and shed bitter tears upon his grave. This reaction seemed strange to him himself, for he knew that more than two generations had passed by since the death of the poet. (SE 17:23)

You suddenly find yourself crying bitterly, but you don’t understand why! That is indeed strange! This is not like finding a penny in your pocket and not knowing where that came from: it’s more like finding that you can’t recognise yourself in the mirror. It seems clear that the tears, the bitter sorrow, cannot have come from nowhere, and during his analysis with Freud, the young man suddenly realised where it came from:


² The example comes from Freud’s famous case-study of The Wolf Man, so-called: he is the young man in question.
He only understood it when he remembered that his father had been in the habit of comparing his dead sister’s work with the great poet’s. He gave me [Freud] another indication of the correct way of interpreting the homage which he ostensibly paid to the poet, by a mistake in his story which I was able to detect at this point. He had repeatedly specified before that his sister had shot herself; but he was now obliged to make a correction and say that she had taken poison. The poet, however, had been shot in a duel. (SE 17:23)

The poet, then, had been a kind of stand-in for the young man’s sister. To say this, however, doesn’t as yet make his reaction quite intelligible. For we should note that he wasn’t reminded of his dead sister by his visit to the poet’s grave. That kind of association would not, as such, be in any sense strange, and it wouldn’t call for a description in terms of unconscious motives. On the contrary, it is part of grief that all kinds of things can remind one of the deceased – and grief is not only a reaction we are all familiar with, but one of those basic reactions that go into creating the background against which particular reactions can stand out as strange and in need of explanation in the first place. Our young man was not reminded of anything, however, he just felt inexplicably sad. Later, he discovered he was actually crying over his sister. But this, of course, raises the question why his expression of grief was thus displaced and disguised.

The answer has to do with difficulties in his relation to his sister – and to say this is not merely to make a plausible conjecture, but to note a feature of the meaning of the whole situation, insofar as crying over someone is expressive of one’s relationship to that person (although, to be sure, not only of that). When news of his sister’s death arrived, the young man told Freud, he had “felt hardly a trace of grief”; he “had to force himself to show signs of sorrow, and was able quite coolly to rejoice at having now become the sole heir to the property” (SE 17:23). This led Freud to conclude that the emotional scene at the poet’s grave was to be seen as a “substitute for the missing outbursts of grief” (ibid.). It is a basic assumption of Freud’s (we will return to its status) that when an emotional reaction such as sadness or a sense of guilt seems absurd and incomprehensible to a person – attached to a trivial object, ludicrously exaggerated, and so on – it is not the feeling that lies. No, the emotion has a real basis, it concerns real people and events, but because that basis is denied, the emotion will resurface in strange disguises: through a “false connection” the affect of the emotion “attaches itself to other ideas” (SE 3:52).

All this is still, of course, only part of the story of what went on at the poet’s grave. For it still hasn’t been made clear why the young man repressed his grief, and that is no easier to understand than the tears it’s supposed to explain. Based on what he learnt during their sessions, Freud avered that the young man’s coldness was the result of the unconscious feelings of “jealousy” and “incestuous love” he harboured for his sister (SE 17:23). I will not go into the way Freud lays out the incestuous love-part of the story, but I want briefly to say something about how the presence of jealousy makes the repression of grief intelligible. Freud doesn’t spell out the dynamics involved, but I would say this (to which Freud, however, would probably not agree). Allowing himself to grieve his sister would force the young man to own up to and let go of his jealousy, because grief is an expression of love – not, alas, of “incestuous love” – and opening oneself to love drives out one’s jealousy. But the young man wants to keep on to his jealousy; indeed, jealousy is nothing but one mode of refusing and fleeing love.4

I haven’t offered this example as a paradigm, but only to give a sense of the terrain Freud is moving in. I will now proceed to elaborate on various questions raised by this and related examples. First, I will say some things of a general, methodological character, about the kind of explanation just exemplified.

3. Looking for meaning, finding determinism?
I said that the young man’s bitter sorrow at the grave, although inexplicable to himself, “cannot have come from nowhere”. Let’s now investigate the status of this ‘cannot’. Is it just a hypothesis about how things “work”, psychologically speaking, when Freud says that emotional reactions such as sorrow or feelings of guilt have “a real basis”? Or is it perhaps a mere expression of determination on his part to see things in a certain way? No. The point is that it makes no sense to suppose that someone would simply happen to feel guilt, without that feeling being a reaction – even if a displaced and distorted one – to anything. Of course, it’s possible to insist that such feelings might just be there, magically appearing out of nowhere. It’s possible to believe this in the same sense as it’s possible to believe in magic. That is: a person can take that attitude to things she witnesses, but that is more like a refusal to understand things than a particular way of understanding them.

We should note that essentially the same magical attitude is manifested in the currently fashionable inclination to believe that our behaviour, the strange and the normal alike, is explained by neural happenings in the brain. In fact, we have hardly any knowledge about

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3 This is not to say that we all have a perfect understanding of grief, of course. On the contrary, one’s understanding can deepen, just as it can be of a shallow kind, and can be distorted by self-deceptions and repressions of all kinds. However, these very possibilities presuppose that one has some kind of understanding of the thing one distorts or misunderstands.

4 We will return to the how a fleeing from love is involved in repression generally. For now, this short indication must suffice.
suitability as a determinant. We shall have another instance of an insufficient explanation if the vomiting is supposed to have arisen from, let us say, eating a fruit which had partly gone bad. Here, it is true, vomiting is determined by disgust, but we cannot understand how, in this instance, the disgust could have become so powerful as to be perpetuated in a hysterical symptom; the experience lacks traumatic force.

(SE 3:193–4)

To be sure, the hysterical patient will not normally be able to remember the traumatic scene immediately, but rather she will remember other scenes that only have “the significance of ... connecting link[s] in the chain of associations” at the end of which the analyst and, hopefully, the patient herself, will be in a position to make sense of the symptom (SE 3:195–6). For instance, if the hysterical vomiting is first traced back to eating an apple which had partly gone bad, Freud suggests that this memory might nonetheless serve to make the symptom intelligible if it had been “amplified” by the fact that “the bad apple reminded the patient of an earlier experience: while he was picking up windfalls in an orchard he had accidentally come upon a dead animal in a revolting state” (ibid., 196). Freud claims optimistically that a “continuation of the analysis then leads in every instance to the reproduction of new scenes of the character we expect” (ibid.). Whether or not there is such success in particular cases, however, if the symptom indeed has meaning, this implies that it will not have materialised out of nowhere, but expresses a reaction of the person to something (e.g. a situation) that in itself is seen by her as meaningful. Meaning is not something that can be seen is just one isolated instance, but rather a matter of connecting an experience, situation, thought and so on to others.

In other words, the point is that symptoms become intelligible, their meaning is revealed, only insofar as one manages to uncover their “connection with the life of those who produce them” (SE 16:258). Indeed, the symptoms originally appeared as symptoms, rather than being just ordinary (re)actions, precisely because they seemed to lack such connections, and so seemed like alien “intruders and usurpers” (SE 1:348). At the same time, however, symptoms appear to be highly significant for the person who has them; they are not idiosyncratic trivalities or mere blanks of incomprehensibility but emotionally charged behaviours (even if they sometimes, unlike hysterical vomiting or the young man’s tears, appear insignificant at first glance). This indicates from the start that they are connected to the sources of meaning in the person’s life that give them their charge. To understand the symptom is to make these connections evident and thus to reveal that it is, its strangeness notwithstanding, no “foreign body” that has forced itself into the patient’s life (SE 2.6, 221) and “does not admit of being cleanly extirpated from the ego” (SE 2:290). In short: to understand a symptom is to understand the person whose symptom it is. If no connections of
meaning, no connection to the life of the person can be found, we’re not dealing with a symptom, but with something like a brute, physiological tic or reflex.

The dogged attempt to find sense in reactions we don’t at first understand is Freud’s strong point. What I would object to is, firstly, his dogmatic determination to find always and only a particular kind of meaning having to do with his peculiar theories about infantile sexuality, wherever he looks.\(^6\) Secondly, I think Freud himself doesn’t follow up his search for meaning to the end. On the contrary, he systematically stops when he has reached, or believes he has reached, certain reactions of e.g. jealousy (of an Oedipal kind) and fear (of loss of love, or of castration), that he simply assumes to be self-explanatory givens. I think, however, that they are not, but must in themselves be seen as repressive responses to something more primary, namely love. I will return to this crucial point.

Furthermore, we must distinguish between Freud’s determination to find sense and meaning in what we do, both in its sound core and its misuses, and determinism as a theoretical stance and metaphysical requirement, which we also find in Freud. According to him, “there is nothing arbitrary or undetermined in the psychic life”; there is a “strict determinism [even] in seemingly arbitrary actions” (PEL, 196, 212fn). Suppose you find yourself humming a tune, not knowing where it came from. In such a case, you might of course ask yourself why just that tune came into your head just now, and quite often you can actually find some kind of answer, something that led you to make an association to the song. Freud is very ingenious in finding such unconscious, motivational associations, and he claims that it must in principle always be possible to find them.

We might ask what such a claim of necessity could be based on, what the charm is of this attitude that Freud himself, in comparing it to of the superstitious and the paranoid who obsessively see signs and meaning everywhere, characterises in quasi-pathological language as a “compulsion not to let chance pass as chance, but to explain it” (PEL, 216). We might also conclude that given the latitude Freud allows himself in his interpretations, where the most remote association is accepted as valid and an overt rejection of an association can always be interpreted as a hidden confirmation of it, anyone is sure to be able to come up with not just one, but any number of different “explanations” for any action – a fact that Freud, however, is able to turn from an apparent reductio of his explanatory ambition into a confirmation of its success and of determinism, because he claims that the unconscious processes resulting in faulty actions, symptoms, dreams and so on are generally over-determined, manifesting themselves in “forms of expression that can bear several meanings – like the Little Tailor in the fairy story who hit seven flies at a blow” (ID, 562).\(^7\)

In order to discover the illusion of determinism, however, we do best to leave these objections aside and instead grant, for the sake of argument, Freud’s claim that if one tries hard enough, one will always manage to find something or other that was associated to e.g. the one you find oneself humming, and thus explains it. The point is that this wouldn’t prove that our thought and behaviour are determined at all. Why not? Because we can always ask: Granted that this (experience, memory, stimulus, whatever) caused you to associate to the song, why did you make just that association, when any number of others would have been possible? Freud is in fact aware of this objection, and expresses it very clearly – the tune one finds oneself humming, and thus explains it. The point is that this wouldn’t prove that our thought and behaviour are determined at all. Why not? Because we can always ask: Granted that this (experience, memory, stimulus, whatever) caused you to associate to the song, why did you make just that association, when any number of others would have been possible? Freud is in fact aware of this objection, and expresses it very clearly – although, astonishingly, failing to see how fatal it is for his position. He writes about the results obtained by psychoanalytic interpretation which appear to explain what determined a person to behave as they did:

So long as we trace the development [of the case or of some mental process] from its final outcome backwards, the chain of events appears continuous ... But if we proceed the reverse way, we start from the premises inferred from the analysis and try to follow these up to the final result, then we no longer get the impression of an inevitable sequence of events which could not have been otherwise determined. We notice at once that there might have been another result, and that we might have been just as well able to understand and explain the latter ... in other words, from a knowledge of the premises we could not have foretold the nature of the result. (SE 18:167)

To my mind, what this means is that the appearance of a determined chain of events is an illusion: all that we have is a series of steps that each make sense and were in fact (assuming that the analysis was correct) taken. But there is nothing to show that the steps were necessarily taken, that they were determined. The appearance that they were is a retrospective illusion produced by the linguistic fact that we can say, after the event, that “one thing led to another”. This doesn’t mean that the chain of events was determined rather than freely chosen, however, any more than the fact that two people involved in a fight can

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\(^6\) Here I merely assert what would need to be shown. Freud states repeatedly that in his view the vicissitudes of infantile sexuality are at the root of all our more serious troubles (IEE), but it doesn’t follow merely from this that he is being dogmatic, of course. It might be that he is simply reporting a rather startling fact he has discovered. I think this view of the matter can be shown to be clearly untenable, but I will not attempt to do so here, although I will say some things about Freud’s notion of sexuality below.

\(^7\) Sebastiano Timpanaro, *The Freudian Slip* (London: NLB, 1974) gives a thorough demonstration of the arbitrariness, the ability to always reach the kind of conclusion one wants to find, that Freud’s de facto interpretative praxis licenses. As I intimated above, however, I don’t see this factual misuse by Freud and many of his followers as an argument against the principle of trying to find meaning in the apparently incomprehensible or trivial. It should also be clear that in understanding human expressions, there can in general be no question of proving that action x means y, or of reducing the evidence we allow for meaning-ascriptions to things that can be objectively measured in laboratory conditions. This only leads to the superficiality and barrenness evident in so much research in experimental psychology. What we need in understanding people is sound judgment in weighing intangible evidence and insight into what moves (and what frightens) the human heart, including and especially one’s own – and that is also what we need in order to be able to tell impostures from true interpretations.
afterward explain how “one thing led to another” absolves them of responsibility for having started it. First A said x, to which B reacted by saying y, to which A responded by doing z, and so on; the unfolding of events make sense, but that doesn’t mean that the actions of either A or B would have been in any way determined.8

The fact that a series of actions or thoughts make sense is no argument at all for its having been determined rather than free; on the contrary, if there weren’t any meaningful order in the sequence – if thought and actions followed one another in a completely haphazard manner, in a way that made no sense – we would assume that it was either pure chance or else determined by some outside force or other, but certainly not the result of full and free human agency. Freud, however, takes for granted the common but confused idea that the “conviction that there is a free will” is strongest concerning “trivial and indifferent decisions”, where one “feels sure that he could just as easily have acted differently” – while “in weighty and important decisions … one has much more the feeling of a psychic compulsion and gladly falls back upon it. (Compare Luther’s ‘Here I stand, I cannot do anything else.’)” (PEL, 212).

This view is confused insofar as it amounts to disconnecting freedom from meaning, in fact making freedom meaningless: one would be free (or most free) only where it doesn’t matter what one does. The view treats everything that provides reasons and a motive for an action as determining it, making it unfree – whereas in fact these are the very things that make the action meaningful, make it into an action rather than an arbitrary piece of random behaviour, and so open a space for talking of it as free or unfree in the first place.

To introduce the question of freedom means introducing a broadly speaking moral perspective on what is done, in which we can raise questions about responsibility, blame, self-knowledge, the attitudes manifested in what one does, and so on. Discovering that one

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8 Freud doesn’t conclude from the passage I have quoted that the determinism he believes in is illusory, however. On the contrary, while he admits that this is, for a determinist, a “disturbing state of affairs”, he finds that it is “very easy to account for [it]” (one wonders, however, what’s disturbing about it, if it’s so easy to explain?). “Even supposing that we have a complete knowledge of the aetiologica factors”, he writes, “what we know about them is only their quality, and not their relative strength … we never know beforehand which of the determining factors will prove the weaker or the stronger. We only say at the end that those which succeded must have been the stronger … whereas to predict [the outcome] is impossible”. For Freud, however, the point is that a complete knowledge of both quality and quantity (strength) of the factors contributing to the illness would allow us to predict it, and so if two patients in apparently similar circumstances, with similar experiences and tendencies, nonetheless develop different forms of neurosis, we conclude that “there must have been present in [them] special factors that turned the scale” (SE 18:168, emphasis added). – It is of course possible to insist in this purely speculative way on the idea that everything is determined, even while admitting that one has no notion of how the supposed “evident” or “causal” factors, i.e. the strength of the various motives, might be measured. However, insisting on quantities that are impossible to measure only confuses things. Also, Freud’s insistence on this point has the curious consequence that, starting from the conviction that we can find sense and meaning, goals and strivings even in places where we had failed to see them – “In most of our researches we can replace ‘sense’ with ‘intention’ or ‘purpose’”, Freud says (SE 15:40) – he ends up denying that we really ever do anything, that we ever really strive towards anything. Rather, he seems to suggest, we are always pushed helplessly forward by unconscious forces from the past.

was moved to act by a certain motive or association of which one was unaware, has whatever interest it may have only in this moral context. Suppose the tune I start humming is a wedding march. If I realise that I did that because, without consciously registering it, I just passed a street bearing the same name (let’s say Victoria street) as a friend of mine who just got married, I may find the fact curious and funny, but it will have no further relevance. It certainly will not upset any of my notions about free action, because I was never under the impression that I had freely decided to start humming the tune; rather, it just suddenly came into my head, in a way that quite naturally raised the question of why it might have appeared there.

Most of the analyses of faulty actions and kindred phenomena that Freud gives in the Psychopathology of Everyday Life, and which are supposed to show the truth of determinism, are of this kind. What I am suggesting is that they do no such thing: they merely demonstrate that we can often find explanations for trivial pieces of behaviour that at first seem inexplicable. The important point, however, is that their triviality is not changed by their having been given an explanation. In other cases, things are different. Suppose, for instance, I realise that, although I did not think of it at the time, I actually started humming the wedding march because a colleague I dislike, who was recently very unhappily divorced, came into the room. In this case, the explanation of my behaviour puts it in a new light, and shows it not to have been trivial or innocent at all. On the contrary, I now see it as an expression of meanness and spite on my part, no less real or mean for being engaged in unconsciously, apparently quite “accidentally”, rather than deliberately.

Here, the uncovering of the unconscious motivation of my behaviour reveals it to be an expression or, as we can also say, a symptom; the “disease” here would be my meanness. By contrast, in the case where the street name made me think of the wedding march, the explanation did not change my view of my behaviour, it merely revealed its cause. I suggest that explanations in terms of unconscious motivation have an interest (other than entertainment value) only when they change our view of the broadly speaking moral significance of the acts explained, where they allow us to see our acts as expressive of disowned attitudes.

Their value does not then lie in illustrating a thesis of general psychic determinism (they don’t), but in the power they may have of changing our self-understanding with regard to particular actions – for instance by putting me face to face with my disowned meanness. To be sure, such moral-existential changes may have far reaching implications, and they are
never of merely local concern: my meanness towards my colleague was not just an isolated, incomprehensible stain on an otherwise spotless character, rather my behaviour showed the meanness that I am capable of. Nonetheless, what it showed was something about me, not the validity of any general thesis. As Freud himself says, the “advantage” of psychoanalysis over metaphysical speculation as a way of examining life, is that it does not merely claim “on an abstract basis” that there are certain unconscious processes, but seeks to demonstrate these “in matters that touch every individual personally and force him to take up some attitude to these problems” (SE 17:144).

4. Faces of repression

The central point of the characteristically Freudian, “dynamic” conception of the unconscious is that wishes, memories and so on don’t just happen to be unconscious but are so because, through repression, we ourselves make them so. We resort to repression because we feel unable to cope with the anxieties that openly acknowledging certain things would bring. Our unconscious, then, is created by our anxious efforts at keeping ourselves in the dark about the real meaning of our own thoughts, feelings and behaviour: our “‘not knowing’ [is] in fact a ‘not wanting to know’” (SE 2:270).

What, then, are the facts justifying talk of repression? First and foremost, as Freud emphasises, the resistance that a person may put up against approaching certain subjects, where the person herself is not, and does not wish to become, clear about the motives for her resistance. Resistance comes in many shapes, most of them familiar from everyday life. For instance, it may show up as unease and anxiety; as aggressive reactions and indignation at suggestions that are in fact true, as the person herself will perhaps admit later on; as various kinds of disavowal (e.g. “I’m sure this is not important, but...”) appended to the admissions

1 Freud says that his “theory of repression” is “the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests” (SE 14:16); one can “take repression as a centre and … bring all the elements of psycho-analytic theory into relation with it” (SE 20:30). Freud often uses the term ‘repression’ in the broad sense intended in these passages, which I too will keep to: as a general name, that is, for various ways in which we may keep ourselves unaware of unwanted truths. At other times, however, he uses ‘repression’ more narrowly to refer to a particular kind of defensive manoeuvre, which can be contrasted with e.g. ‘projection’ or ‘isolation’. In such contexts, ‘defence’ takes the place of ‘repression’ as generic term (on Freud’s shifting use of these two terms, see the editorial appendix in SE 20:173–4).

10 However, one also finds the opposite notion in Freud, according to which everything in our minds is at first, by default as it were, unconscious, and only becomes conscious through some special activity: “mental processes are in themselves unconscious and are only made conscious by the functioning of special organs (agencies or systems)” (SE 19:198; cf. SE 14:171). On this picture “the unconscious is the true psychical reality” (SE 4–5:613), while consciousness is simply a kind of “sense organ for the apprehension of psychical qualities” (ID 613), which sees only very limited parts of “psychical reality”. This picture seems to me confused in many ways, and helpful in few if any. I will not discuss it further here, but let me note that it is enthusiastically shared by contemporary philosophers of mind impressed with neuroscience and evolutionary theory who do not much like Freud’s other picture, which focuses on repression and our own role in creating our unconscious.

one actually makes (cf. SE 2:280); as a systematic vagueness and contradictoriness that surrounds a person’s memories relating to quite specific topics, in the way “connections are broken, solutions fail to appear” and memories are “recalled indistinctly and incompletely” (SE 2:281). This last possibility Freud illustrates with a patient who brings up a childhood-memory of two boys: he claims that it is “quite obscure to him” what they look like, but he knows they have been guilty of some misdeed; only much later and further into the analysis the memory returns, and now he “recognizes himself in one of the children and his brother in the other” (SE 2:282).

The constraints of psychological intelligibility operate when it comes to identifying resistance, too. This means that behaviour can be seen as resistance only if the thing that the person is resisting is an intelligible object of resistance (and repression). Thus, the reason that I’m resisting all attempts you make to talk about the wonderful trip we made last summer may be that this would remind me of a humiliating incident that happened to me on the day of my return, and that you don’t know about. You don’t understand why I’m so averse to talking about the trip precisely because it makes no sense to suppose that anyone would resist talking about pleasant memories as such, whereas a humiliation is readily intelligible as an object of resistance. This is not to say, of course, that in order for one to see a person as resisting something, one must already know what they are resisting. On the contrary, psychoanalytic investigation and therapy proceeds largely, indeed essentially, precisely through fastening onto and pursuing the points of resistance that show themselves during the analytic sessions – where the source of the resistance is not at first known, but rather is revealed only through the work of investigation.11 In other words it’s just when you feel a resistance to going on in a certain direction that you must go on, because that is where you’ll find the problem, your problem. This is not a prediction but a remark about what it means to have repressed some problem.

But how is the analyst to tell whether a patient who claims, say, that he remembers nothing about what he felt about some situation or is unable to associate anything with a certain dream, is speaking the plain truth or rather resisting, i.e. refusing to admit a memory or association into consciousness? In reply to this question, Freud writes:

11 As Freud says, in listening to the patient’s associative talk, the psychoanalyst “gives up the attempt to bring a particular moment or problem into focus … and … employs the art of interpretation mainly for the purpose of recognising the resistances which appear [on the surface of the patient’s mind], and making them conscious to the patient” (SE 12:147). The “task of therapy” lies in “combating these resistances” (SI 11:225), and it is only “by continuing, in defiance of [the resistance], the analytic work”, that one can “work through it … overcome it” (SE 12:155, first emphasis added).
We can avoid doing the patient an injustice if we make it a quite general rule all through the analysis to keep an eye on his facial expressions. We can then learn to distinguish without any difficulty the restful state of mind that accompanies the real absence of recollection from the tension and signs of emotion with which he tries to disavow the emerging recollection, in obedience to defence. (SE 2:281)

Of course, it is not only in the face that resistance shows itself; tone of voice, posture, small gestures may also be important. Ultimately, the judgment that a person is resisting and repressing something is based on one’s total impression of her against the background of one’s total understanding of her situation. In this, judgments about resistance and repression function precisely like other, more ordinary, judgments about people’s motivation and behaviour. In other words, resistance and repression are not basically theoretical concepts, but descriptive ones denoting things manifest in a person’s behaviour and demeanour. As Freud says, he set himself the task of “bringing to light what human beings keep hidden within them … by observing what they say and what they show” – and he did so convinced from experience that “no mortal can keep a secret”; “If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore” (SE 7:77).

While this approach finds surprising and sometimes spectacular applications in Freud’s clinical practice, the basic idea is, as I have indicated, well-known from everyday life. Thus, if you assure me that you are very content with the new situation at work, but this pronouncement is followed by a slight nervous laughter, I will not be inclined to take your word for it. Rather, I will take the laughter as a sign – that is, I will instinctively hear it as a sign – that reveals a crack in, a disowned underside of, the attitude or persona that you want to present. This means that it is quite misleading to say, as people are wont to do, that Freud’s interpretative approach heralded the discovery of some hitherto hidden, inaccessible “inner” realm. On the contrary, what Freud did was to point out how much more meaning than we might assume – and how different and often disagreeable a meaning – is there in plain sight in our behaviour, if we just care to look for it. In this sense, Freud’s “No mortal can keep a secret” agrees very well with Wittgenstein’s equally slogan-like remark “Nothing is hidden” (PI §435; cf. §126).

However, the concept of repression seems to create a difficulty of understanding that a concept like ‘intending’, say, does not. If I intend to do something I can (normally) tell you what my intention is. With repression, this is not so: on the contrary, if I’m repressing something I cannot tell you that I’m doing so. I’m pushing an idea out of mind, and at the same time also managing to keep myself unaware of the fact that I’m doing this. In other words, repression is quite different from the mere deliberate resolve not to think about something – which we might call suppressing a thought, as opposed to repressing it. Thus a student might resolve not to think about what will happen if she doesn’t pass an important exam, in order to be able to concentrate better on preparing for the exam. If someone surprised by her calm asks her if she doesn’t know how much hangs on her passing, she will say “I know, but I prefer not to distract myself with thinking about it now”. She is simply focusing her attention away from some things, but she knows what she’s doing. By contrast, the person who represses something manages somehow to hide from himself what he’s doing. The question this raises, of course, is how we can understand this at all. In what sense can we be said to be doing something, be actively engaged in bringing it about, if we don’t know what we’re doing at that we’re doing it?13

Interestingly, when Freud first introduced the idea that repression played a central role in neuroses, he claimed that patients consciously undertook, and could recall, at least the onset of repression. “Before hysteria can be acquired”, he declared, “one essential condition must be fulfilled: an idea must be intentionally repressed from consciousness and excluded from associative modification” (SE 2:116). His patients, he explained,

had enjoyed good mental health … until their ego was faced with an experience, an idea or a feeling which aroused such a distressing affect that the subject decided to forget about it … patients can recollect as precisely as could be desired their efforts at defence, their intention of “pushing the thing away”, of not thinking of it, of suppressing it. (SE 3:47)14

However, for some reason – and it would be quite interesting to know why – there are no references to such conscious beginnings of repression in Freud’s later writings. Repression is now supposed to be a process that is wholly unconscious, and makes itself known only by its fruits: resistance, symptoms and so on. However, the difference between the early and the

13 Essentially the same problem arises in the case of self-deception and other forms of motivated irrationality, to use an umbrella term favoured by philosophers of mind. In this paper, I will not try to distinguish between repression and self-deception. This is not to deny that we might contrast these concepts in fruitful ways – just as distinguishing repression from, say, denial and projection might make some things clearer.

14 In another place, Freud again claims that the “most unambiguous statements by the patients give proof of the effort of will, the attempt at defence, upon which the theory lays emphasis” (SE 3:52). At least one of the hysterics Freud analysed, Lucy R., seems to have confirmed this. She said of the repressed love she felt for her employer, which lay at the heart of her hysterical symptoms, “I didn’t know – or rather I didn’t want to know. I wanted to drive it out of my head and not think of it again; and I believe latterly I have succeeded” (SE 2:117). In the light of the quotes in the text and the note, it is strange that an editorial note in the SE should claim that when Freud in his early work uses the word ‘intentionally’ [absichtlich] to qualify repression it “merely indicates the existence of a motive [for the act of repression] and carries no implication of conscious intention” (SE 2:10; fn). This seems patently false.
later view is one of emphasis rather than incompatibility, for even in the first phase of Freud’s thinking, he of course realised that repression involved more than the intentional efforts at suppression that patients could later recall. If that were all they had done, they would not have become patients! The point is that their efforts at suppression were followed by symptoms, by the onset of illness, which certainly wasn’t intended by them, and indicated that they didn’t really know what they were doing even in intentionally suppressing awkward feelings or ideas. In other words, there was a repressed element already in their acts of suppression.

To take a dramatic example of this kind of situation, suppose that a woman makes an apparently cool and collected decision to end an unwanted pregnancy. It would hardly be surprising if the abortion was nonetheless followed by some kind of emotional breakdown expressing remorse and complete terror at what she had done. The woman was probably visited by at least some uncomfortable thoughts about the horror of what she was about to do, but decided resolutely to suppress them, to banish them from her mind. Her later reaction shows, I would say, that she did not really know, did not want to know, what she was suppressing; that is, she was repressing something in her very suppression.

In cases like these, what happens is not that acts of ‘pure and simple’ suppression somehow lead to, or are transformed into, repression. It makes no sense to suppose that a person might take certain steps, all the time knowing what she is doing, which would somehow lead her to a situation where she doesn’t know what she is doing any more. What can happen, and does happen all the time, is that we persuade ourselves that we know what we’re doing, when in fact we don’t. That is: we don’t want to know, and therefore persuade ourselves that we do know what we’re doing in suppressing certain thought or feelings.

Sometimes, as in the abortion example, the bluff is dramatically exposed; the person is unable to uphold the lie any longer. Often, however, the repression-in-suppression goes on indefinitely. Think, for instance, of how when we’re polite we suppress spontaneous reactions that might be considered rude or inappropriate. To claim that one knows quite well what one is feeling and why one isn’t allowing the reaction out would in many cases be a blatant lie. Of course, we can quite sincerely refer to ‘consideration’ and ‘respect’, but that doesn’t explain what is going on. Just try explaining what it is that would be so terrible about telling a person straight to their face that you have no desire to go on talking politely with them just now, why it would be so painfully awkward to do so even if you know quite well that they feel the same way about continuing the conversation with you. Furthermore, you both know that the other knows what the situation is. Even so, openly admitting it feels impossible, and so you both suppress any overt expression of your feelings, and indeed the feelings themselves, while seeking desperately for a pretext to leave – a pretext that both of you know the other won’t be fooled by. This doesn’t sound like a case of two people knowing perfectly well what they’re doing!

To introduce yet another range of examples of repression-in-suppression, let me refer to Kierkegaard, in order also to bring in a thinker who in many ways had a deeper insight than Freud into the thematic of repression. Kierkegaard notes that when one doesn’t want to do what one knows one should – e.g. make a confession or confront someone – one seldom goes ahead and does the opposite to what one should. Rather, one “allows some time to elapse, an interim called: ‘We shall look at it tomorrow’”; one “stretches things out” until one’s “knowing has become duly obscured” and perhaps almost forgotten. This, Kierkegaard says, is “how perhaps the great majority of men live: they work gradually at eclipsing their ... ethical-religious comprehension, which would lead them out into decisions and conclusions that [they do] not much care for” (1980, 94).

Are we conscious of engaging in such manoeuvres of self-obfuscation? Well, in a way one knows what one is doing. On the other hand, what one is avoiding is precisely knowing oneself. One knows one’s predicament in a vague way, but the prospect of making this knowledge any less vague gives one a very distinct sense that one doesn’t want to make it any clearer. It’s as if one said: “I know that if I went in there, the person behind that door would force me to think about matters I’d rather not think about, and so I’ll stay outside”. But again, it’s only ‘as if’ it were so: one doesn’t of course really say this to oneself, clearly and distinctly, for then the comprehension of oneself that one is working to obscure would become too painfully clear. When we are trying to keep uncomfortable realities at a distance, equivocation, vagueness, doubt and uncertainty are excellent tools, as Freud brings out (REF). Thus, when someone says “I don’t know what I want” or wavers constantly between options, “On the one hand I would... but on the other...”, they are generally not simply...

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15 Further striking examples of this kind of case are given by Freud in SE 18:166–7, where the abortion-example is also mentioned, but not elaborated.

16 Kierkegaard called it despair, and defined it as the essentially impossible wish to be rid of oneself, which expresses itself as “an impotent self-consuming that cannot do what it wants to do” (The Sickness unto Death, Princeton: PUP, 1980, 18). In despair, one cannot stand one’s self and so is always “throwing it away – but it comes again” (ibid., 17), it always returns just as Freud notes that the repressed does, because one cannot rid oneself of oneself (cf. the whole initial definition, ibid., 13–21). I can’t go into the comparison between despair and repression further here; I merely note in case readers want to explore it further for themselves.

17 In this passage, Kierkegaard actually speaks in terms of “the lower nature of man” that is supposedly the part of us that wants to stretch things out. This seems to me a metaphysical and misleading notion, however, and quite unnecessary to make Kierkegaard existential-psychological point.
reporting on their actual state of ignorance or indecision; rather, these utterances are in themselves a way of keeping oneself from coming to know or to decide.

On the other hand, Freud also notes how another way of keeping insights away is precisely to present oneself, to oneself and others, as explicitly accepting them (REF). Here we need only think of the person whom Kierkegaard described as “stretching things out”. When we’re doing that, we may well assure ourselves and others again and again that we know that we must do x – and yet never do it, or that of course we realise than y isn’t the important thing in life – and yet spare no effort trying to get it (e.g. respectability or success). By affirming in principle that we know what’s what and that our priorities are in order, we as it were give ourselves permission to treat our actual behaviour as insignificant, even though it goes against all our principles. Thus, one can well imagine a prison officer in some dictatorship telling a political prisoner “Of course, I don’t believe in all this nonsense any more than you do!” and then proceeding to send him to be tortured with an eased conscience, as though he and the prisoner were really on the same side against the system that he is in fact diligently working for, simply because he too “knows” how bad and crazy things are.

As this last example shows, if (unconscious) repression can hide in (conscious) suppression, there are other ways of repressing things where there is no need for deliberately suppressing thoughts or impulses. This is also how repression through emotion generally works. For instance, I might keep self-knowledge away through indignant anger at any suggestion that threatens to shatter my falsified view of myself. There is no need or opportunity for me to start pushing the uncomfortable thought you suggest out of mind, because my angry indignation immediately presents your very suggestion as preposterous and insolent. I don’t need to push any thought away from consciousness because I never let it form. It is through this emotional reaction that I accomplish the repression of my guilty conscience.

In the same way, I might find your suggestion so disgusting, ludicrous or upsetting that I cannot seriously consider it – or again so boring that I simply cannot keep my attention focused on it. All these emotional or affective reactions can be used as ways of blocking the very formation or bringing into focus of a thought. If they are, it doesn’t imply that they are consciously and deliberately used to this end, of course. There is no such thing as deliberately deciding to get (as opposed to merely pretending to be) angry or bored, say. Rather, we really get bored or angry; these emotions overcome us quite spontaneously, but nonetheless their function can be seen by others, often very clearly, to be defensive – and sometimes we ourselves later come to acknowledge that getting angry, bored and so on was our way of repressing inner conflicts and defending ourselves against self-revelation.

In general, we should remember that repression is not the outcome of a process of rational deliberation in which we decide to take certain measures in order to achieve certain goals. If that is how we picture it, the whole thing will appear completely incomprehensible. But repression should rather be seen as a series of panic-reactions in which a person, overwhelmed by anxiety in face of her own affective responses, launches into a series of desperate counter-measures. She has no rational plan, but a desperate determination to keep “it” away, where it is part of the picture that she cannot bear to make it clear to herself what “it” is that she fears. Thus there is purposiveness and spontaneous, fierce activity, but no overview, on the part of the person who represses things. The situation here is precisely analogous to the understanding of political developments: we don’t need a conspiracy theory to explain how it can be that decisions are taken that systematically play into the hands of certain interests.

This comparison should also alert us to the way that generalised attitudes and habitual ways of acting can be used as “automatic” blocking strategies. Take the example of a person who habitually approaches all situations in an attitude of egoistic, manipulative thinking. He generally looks out to further his own interests, emotional, material and so on: the opportunities for that are what strike him in every situation. This means that he does not, like some other people, need to suppress or repress the realisation that he should help a neighbour in distress, for instance. No such realisation occurs to him, preoccupied as he is with assessing how his neighbour’s distress will affect his interests (“Now that he seems to be forced to sell his house, I might be able to get it cheap”). I would characterise his constant alertness and machinations to further his interests as a defensive posture through which he represses his fear of real human contact. It can be compared with someone who produces a constant flood of small-talk and small occupations in order never to have to look others in the eye, or face the silence of her own company. The point is that insofar as these postures have become well ingrained and habitual, they work to block uncomfortable situations or perceptions from even arising. Nonetheless, they work only in the habitual circumstances, and it is always possible that a situation arises – it may be dramatic, like a serious illness, or apparently trivial, like a chance encounter with a childhood acquaintance not seen for many years – which suddenly brings the repressed anxiety that was more or less invisible to the fore.

17 18
5. Instinct, conflict, sexuality and love

The point of the previous section was to give a concrete, if rough, sense of the various ways in which repression may “work”, the different physiognomies it may show. In the end, however, it doesn’t seem very important exactly which strategies or tactics of repression one uses: the result is what counts. More to the point, the important question is not how one tries to get away, but what it is one is running from.

For Freud, the answer seems clear: what we repress are instinctual and more specifically sexual impulses, insofar as they are “in some way or other … distressing … either alarming or painful or shameful by the standards of [our] personality” (SE 20:29; cf. 2:268–9). For a neurosis to be generated “there must be a conflict between a person’s libidinal wishes and the part of his personality we call the ego” (SE 14:316). Neurotic troubles “originate from the ego’s refusing to accept a powerful instinctual impulse from the id”, that metaphorical ‘place’ where Freud supposes our instincts to ‘reside’. The ego “defends itself” against these instinctual impulses by the mechanism of repression, and in so doing it is “at bottom following the commands of its super-ego”, i.e. commands and ideal demands that express the internalised, but originally external, so-called moral authority of parents and the culture at large. Illness results because repression never quite succeeds, as “the repressed material struggles against [its] fate” and creates for itself substitutive ways of gaining expression and thus satisfaction for the instinctual impulse: these are the symptoms, which manifest ‘the return of the repressed’ (SE 19:149–50).

As I will try to show, this way of conceptualising repression (and illness) as the result of a conflict between instinctual impulses, conceived of as spontaneous, simply “given” urges, and internalised prohibitions and commands, breaks down. To see how, let’s start with an example that would seem, on the face of it, to conform rather well to Freud’s idea, namely the way we learn as children to suppress the impulse to belch after eating. The impulse is surely as instinctual as they get, a biological given, while the need to suppress it is quite the reverse: a variable cultural norm. In some places, one is supposed to belch after a good dinner! Here, then, we have a case where a natural impulse comes to be seen as ‘bad’, as something to be suppressed, even though “a person’s own feelings would not have led him along this path” (i.e. no one feels spontaneously that there is anything wrong about belching); what happens is therefore that the person, in suppressing his belches, submits to an “extraneous influence” (CD, 71). This case seems, then, to fulfil the first criterion that Freud thinks a situation has to meet in order to lead to repression and illness, namely that there is “a frustration, a non-fulfilment, of one of those childhood wishes which are forever undefeated” – a frustration that is “in the last resort always an external one”, even if it may “proceed from the internal agency (in the super-ego) which has taken over the representation of the demands of reality” (SE 19:151).

However, as Freud underlies, this is merely “the first condition” for the generation of repression and possibly neurosis; “it is far from being the only one” (SE 14:316). Clearly, to learn to control one’s impulses to belch does not in itself demand, or lead to, repression. How might a need for repression come into the picture? It seems clear that looking at the belching-impulse itself will get us nowhere: the ‘instinct’ itself is as it were mute, and the whole question is how the demand that it be suppressed can come to acquire such an emotional charge, induce such anxiety, that the child feels unable to cope with it, and so is driven to repress it. Obviously, this charge depends on, is created and expressed in, the relations between the child and those – parents and others – who make the demand. In other words, the difficulty is to be located in this relationship, not in a conflict between the ego and the impulse, as Freud would have it. The impulse itself can come to be charged with meanings and anxieties, but this simply means that it has come to be taken, by the child and the parents, a symbol for the conflict and struggle between them. The whole charge comes from this struggle, not from the impulse itself.

Thus, a child may express its rebellion against a domineering parent by belching, or it may try, by misbehaving, to get the attention of a parent who neglects it. It may also happen that the love-trouble in the family – of which neglect and domineering are two forms – gets as it were permanently crystallised around the belching, which thereby becomes a problem, and is as it were ritualised. For instance, it may be that the only time the family is gathered together is around the dinner-table, and so all the conflicts – partly concerning precisely the fact that this is the only time they spend together – will be played out there, one recurrent motif of this family drama being the “quite outrageous” belching that the child engages in, and which always causes uproar and punishment.

The main point, to repeat, is that the difficulty is to be located in the relationship between the child and the parents, not in a conflict between the ego and the impulse, as Freud claims. The same point can be made by noting that if something is repressed here, it is
certainly not the belching-impulse: although the belching keeps “returning” at dinner, it does so only as the symbolic vehicle of the emotional conflicts within the family.

Freud would no doubt object against taking the impulse to belch as an example of “one of those childhood wishes which are forever undefeated” and the frustration of which may lead to repression. What we should look at is the child’s “libidinal”, i.e. broadly speaking sexual impulses or wishes. Fine, but the difficulty inherent in conceptualising repression as a conflict between the ego and instinctual impulses arises just the same even if one calls the impulse ‘sexual’. Thus, the sexual perversions, so-called, analysed at some length by Freud, become a problem insofar as they are socially stigmatised and therefore connected with shame and other kinds of misery (and no doubt with an extra excitement, too). In itself, however, a desire for oral sex – to take an example that in Freud’s Vienna was still considered “perverse” (REF) – is just as unproblematic an inclination as the impulse to belch after eating. If a person represses this desire, the reason is, just as in the case of the belch, that it has become charged with anxieties concerning her relationship to others.18

In reading Freud, one may fail to see how unsatisfactory is his conceptualisation of repression as targeting libidinal instinctual impulses, because when he speaks of sexuality in his actual clinical descriptions rather than his theoretical pronouncements, he is actually speaking of problems in inter-personal relationships. Thus he talks about one person’s repressed homosexual longing for another which wreaks havoc with her marriage, or of the way a certain man always chooses to be with women he can despise (REF). Most tellingly, the Oedipal conflict, which forms the very centre of Freud’s view of the human condition, while certainly a sexually charged drama is first of all precisely a drama, a tale of terrible tensions and difficulties between family-members. The drama certainly isn’t driven by mere sexual attraction, but by the dynamics of possessiveness, rivalry and jealousy in the situation, which arises only because there is both love and a great fear and mistrust of love between the people involved. Again, the crucial point is that ‘sexuality’ is a problem only insofar as the desires, thoughts and behaviours that we designate as such are entangled in and expressive of our conflicts and difficulties with others and ourselves.

Of course our life-problems will also find manifestations in overtly sexual settings, e.g. a general submissiveness or again disgust with weakness will also create problems in the bedroom. Freud’s claim, however, is that the relation of priority goes the other way: it is the problems in the bedroom, or rather the sexual problems in the nursery, that explain why a person feels a general disgust with weakness, say. If his claim is to hold, however, we must see to it that the life-problems which are supposed to be explained in terms of the sexual trouble are not smuggled into the very description of that trouble. This is in fact what happens in Freud’s account, however, and will inevitably happen in any account that tries to explain life-problems by reference to ‘sexuality’.

Take the Oedipus-constellation again. I would say it is a drama about the difficulties with love. While love in many of its manifestations involves desires that are clearly sexual, love cannot be reduced to sexual attraction. That would mean reducing it to something on a par with a mere desire for sweets or exercise, and such desires could obviously never lead people to tragic conflicts. It might be objected that sexual attraction is different from a desire for sweets. I agree, but the point is that it is different precisely because or insofar as it essentially involves a desire for another person, with all the difficulties that such a desire potentially involves. In other words: if sexuality appears special, different from more humdrum desires, that is because it is already inextricably involved with desire for others, i.e. with love. But for that very reason, of course, love cannot be reduced to sexuality: one cannot reduce a thing to something in which the thing is already essentially involved.

Leaving sexuality aside, there are other grave problems in Freud’s claim that repression arises as a response to a conflict between an instinctual impulse and the ego with its internalised ‘moral’ ideals. On the one hand, there is the question of how an external (parental, cultural) authority can be internalised, how it is that I come to feel that some impulse of mine is somehow terrible and wrong, since on this supposition my own feelings would not have led me to feel this way (cf. CD, 71). For notice that mere external pressure, which one in no way identifies with and finds authoritative, cannot, however powerful it may be, lead to the inner conflict that one then tries to flee by repressing. If a violent bully tells me to hand over my money, I might do so out of self-preservation, but I’m not in the least divided about how I feel about him and about doing it, so there is nothing for me to repress. On the other hand, we must ask how it is that anything like an inner conflict could ever arise if one “party” to the conflict was, as Freud supposes, a mere instinctual impulse. The two questions are in fact intimately connected. I will start with the second.

Freud’s always insists that there is no contradiction in the unconscious (or the id). Its “nucleus”, he says, “consists of wishful impulses”;

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18 I should note that the cases are different insofar as the belching is a reflex, a brute impulse, whereas here we have a desire for oral sex, something that is in itself already articulated, and tied up with thoughts, fantasies and so on. This difference doesn’t affect the point made in the text, however, and far from helping Freud’s case, it indicates the impossibility of conceiving of sexual desire as “instinctual” at all.
These instinctual impulses ... exist side by side without being influenced by one another, and are exempt from mutual contradiction. When two wished impulses whose aims must appear to us incompatible become simultaneously active, the two impulses do not diminish each other or cancel each other out, but combine to form an intermediate aim, a compromise. (SE 14:186, emphasis added)

This ‘compromise’ is not to be conceived of as the result of some sort of unconscious negotiation; rather, the picture here is of various instinctual impulses all striving to bring about their own satisfaction and pulling us in opposite directions, the result being that the course of our behaviour isn’t exactly or only directed to the satisfaction of any single ‘force’. We don’t need to decide now how far this picture of human behaviour is intelligible; it’s enough to note that insofar as we allow ourselves the abstraction of thinking of our life in terms only of the various things we want, there really will be no contradiction between them: I simply note that I want this and this and this... In fact, daydreaming has something of this quality: in it we allow ourselves to eat our cake and have it too, we don’t think through what it actually is we want. If we did, contradictions would appear insofar as we will realise that wanting certain things is incompatible with wanting others. This may be so for contingent reasons, as when I realise that I don’t have enough money to buy both lunch and the book I want, so satisfying the one wish makes satisfying the other impossible. This impossibility is contingent insofar as it can easily change through a change in external circumstances (e.g. I might find some additional money in my pocket, so that now can satisfy both my wishes; I can have the cake and eat it!), or through an equally contingent change in my wishes, as when I realise that I’m not in fact that hungry, although this is my usual lunch time.

This kind of weighing and consideration of how far one’s various wishes can be satisfied under given circumstances might well be described as “reality testing”. That is the only kind of thinking that Freud conceives of as opposing the wishful fantasising of the unconscious where the blind striving for immediate satisfaction reigns supreme (REF). However, reflection may also reveal an internal contradiction between two impulses, which means that there simply is no such thing as satisfying both. The conflict between love and hate is an example of this – although calling love and hate ‘impulses’ or ‘wishes’ is completely misleading, as those terms indicate precisely a perspective which ignores the internal relations, the connections of meaning, between our attitudes. Clearly, I cannot satisfy my hateful feelings towards A, i.e. my urge to make her suffer, humiliate her and so on, without eo ipso betraying, denying my love for her. No amount of reality testing will help me come to terms with this contradiction: it’s not, for instance, as though a lover could accept some humiliation of her beloved, as long as it isn’t excessive, or as long as she can be loving “in between” the humiliations. What this means is that, in the case of an internal contradiction, if one is unwilling to give up the incompatible attitude, e.g. one’s hatefulness, the only thing one can do is to pretend to oneself that it doesn’t exist, to repress it in some way, perhaps by displacing it onto another person.

Love and hate cannot, then, be lived out together, other than in a life torn by internal contradiction and deformed by repression. Now why is this? Is the fact of the incompatibility of love and hate itself somehow contingent, a “mere fact”? No. The point is that hate is a response to the love, an impossible wish to destroy it. This comes out in the perversity, the self-contradictoriness of hate itself: in the way in which the person who hates claims to want nothing more than to be rid of the person he hates, but at the same time cannot stop thinking about her, is completely obsessed with her in a perverse caricature of the lover’s complete openness to the beloved. This is also seen in the fact that hate, unlike mere impulses or wishes, is insatiable. If love never gets enough of the beloved, hate is unable to let go of the hated person, to stop hating her. There is a crucial difference, however. While love opens us to live, hate consumes a person, eventually, if she allows it to take over, robbing her life of all joy and meaning. Hate is a refusal of love and life which expresses itself in destruction. It is an attempt to make this very refusal and destruction the meaning of one’s life. In this very attempt the self-contradiction of hate persists, however, as the very urge to destroy can get its energy, its meaning and perverse satisfaction, only from a sense – consciously denied and repressed, to be sure – of the preciousness of what is destroyed. And only love can see life as precious. In other words, what we hate is at bottom the inescapable reality of our own love.

Love and hate are, then, internally related, the latter being a repressing response to the former, and so when there is hate, there is eo ipso inner conflict. This conflict does not arise from the intervention of an external ‘moral condemnation’, but from the dynamic relation of meaning between love and hate themselves. It is not that love condemns hate, but rather that hate ‘condemns’ itself – a ‘condemnation’ that expressed itself as the self-consuming, insatiable unhappiness of the person who hates.

It seems to me that only internal contradictions like the one between love and hate can motivate repression, and that repression is also an aspect of their very logic. Unless the person who hates opens herself in love and remorse to the one she now hates, and so truly stops hating him, the only way for her to live her hate is by repressing the love which nonetheless secretly motivates it.

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23 Perhaps I should add that this is so for hate in the full sense of the word, hate of another human being, not for the various attenuated senses, as when we speak of “hating” (or again “loving”) one’s job or the cold of winter.
I would further suggest that internal contradictions and repression are conceivable only as destructive denials of love. The denial may not take the form of hate, it can also appear as jealousy, envy, shame or disgust, but what is denied is always the same: love. By contrast, the mere fact of being, for contingent reasons, unable to satisfy a wish will produce frustration but not repression. No inner conflict can arise from the mere existence of wishes that for contingent reasons hamper one another.

Indeed, Freud himself admits as much when he says that there is no contradiction between unconscious wishes. He claims, however, that an inner conflict leading to repression can arise if one ‘party’ to the conflict is an instinctual impulse which is rejected and opposed by the super-ego. It now remains to see how Freud attempts to explain the internalisation of the external authority, which is necessary if the conflict is to turn into an inner one, in which the person feels that she herself cannot accept a certain impulse of hers (repression will then be called up insofar as she cannot even bear admitting that she has this impulse).

Freud in fact tries to explain this transformation of internalisation precisely by reference to the conflict between love and hate. His insistence on the crucial “part played by love in the origin of conscience” (CD, 79), is the point at which his theory departs radically from standard reductionist theories which also see morality as the result of internalisation of originally external demands. Conscience or the super-ego arises, Freud says, not simply from the parents hammering some ‘values’ into the child, but rather from “the primordial ambivalence of feeling towards [them]”, from the fact that the child feels both love and hate towards the parents (CD, 79). Freud’s thought is roughly this: when parents, in bringing up their children, deny them various satisfactions, the children resent this, they ‘hate’ their parents for it, and give vent to this hate in aggressive and destructive thoughts and behaviour. However, the children love their parents, too, and so

After their hatred [has] been satisfied by their act of aggression, their love [comes] to the fore in their remorse for the deed. It set[s] up the super-ego by identification with the [parents] ... the sense of guilt is an expression of the conflict due to ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death [which] is set going as soon as men are faced with the task of living together. (CD, 79)

What Freud says here is in some ways very close to what I said above, although the language of instincts in which it is expressed seems quite misleading in this context. It makes it impossible for Freud to articulate how hate is a response to love: because instincts are supposed to be independent of each other he can only see their conflict as a kind of de facto opposition between two strivings that happen to be opposed. Nonetheless, the introduction of the dynamism of love and hate seems to me to undermine Freud’s whole account of repression. There was supposed to be no contradiction in the unconscious – and no ambivalence either, as the unconscious wishes are supposed to coexist quite without contact with each other – but now we find that the unconscious is ruled by precisely a conflict, an “eternal struggle”, between love and hate, life and death! Correlatively, the condemnation of the instinctual impulse by the super-ego was supposed to be the first condition of conflict and repression, but now it turns out that the super-ego itself is simply an expression or outgrowth of the conflict between love and hate. The fact that destructive, hateful actions are “painful or shameful by the standards of our personality” does not seem to be what is decisive for repression to occur; rather, the condemnation of our hate by our love (in the indirect manner I sketched above) would be the important thing.