

## NEGATION IN FREUD

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### I. *Introduction*

At first sight so little attention has been paid in psychoanalysis, and specifically in Freud's work, to the problem of negation that it seems hardly worthwhile to take it as a subject for study. If one decides to do so, it seems to be logical to take Freud's essay of 1925 'Negation' (1925h) as a starting point. Judged by the fact that Freud was nearly 70 years old when he wrote the essay, negation would be a topic to which he turned late in life and which occupies little room in the totality of his writings: the whole essay amounts to a bare 5 pages.

This negative impression is moreover confirmed when looking up in Grinstein's 'Index of psychoanalytical writings' <sup>(1)</sup> what can be found on the subject of negation: the only contributions one can find there are two texts in J. Lacan's 'Ecrits', viz. J. Hyppolite's comment on Freud's essay and Lacan's own comment on Hyppolite's comment <sup>(2)</sup> ! Apparently, all this does not seem to amount to very much.

And yet, on closer scrutiny it is strange that an important psychoanalytical writing on human communication and specifically on negation as R. Spitz' major work <sup>(3)</sup> is not listed in Grinstein's index s.v. negation. Its title should speak for itself and leave no doubt as to Spitz' intentions, when he published this book. Moreover, it must be considered as an addition — and indeed a most valuable one — to Freud's theory on the matter.

Therefore we have decided to write this analysis of negation in psychoanalysis, starting with Freud and finishing with Spitz. Freud is not treated here, because he happens to be the founder of psychoanalytic theory or out of sheer hero worship, but because negation had been mentioned in his work several times

long before 1925 and, more essentially, because the concept of negation is quite important in Freud's theoretical formulations. Moreover, Freud claims for his psychological explanation of negation a general validity. Therefore, the present author thought it worthwhile in the light of the interdisciplinary approach of this volume that scientists from other fields (logics, linguistics, etc.) should consider the Freudian theory and argument.

Because of the fact that negation forms an intrinsic part of the general Freudian theory of the psychical apparatus it seems impossible to analyse the former without saying something about the latter. This implies that one has to start from the very beginning, viz. from Freud's first formulations of his theory of the human mind. There is indeed a connection between the early writings and the more mature: a right understanding of the latter is difficult, if not impossible, without knowledge of the former.

## II. *Negation in Freud.*

### 1. *Negation in the writings before 1925*

The first theoretical writing, in which Freud expounded his ideas on the structure and the functioning of the psychical apparatus, is the famous 'Project' of 1895. It was no more to Freud than a working paper and was not to be published until some ten years after its author's death.

Nevertheless, it contains the essence of later theory to a considerable extent. Freud wanted to be as exact as possible in writing his Project; in fact he intended it as a physiological psychology. For this very reason it seems to offer an excellent point of departure for our analysis.

The psychical apparatus has a structure and a dynamics: these are the exact data from which Freud starts his theoretical construction. As to dynamics, the apparatus is driven by energy: exogenous and endogenous stimuli activate the apparatus. As to structure, Freud in this respect a follower of Mey-

nert, his Viennese teacher in psychiatry, distinguishes two sub-systems: the primary and the secondary system. The primary system is given from the very beginning (innate), it functions according to the reflex model and tends to keep the psychical apparatus free from any energy. When the apparatus is stimulated, the primary system sees to it that incoming stimuli are immediately discharged. It can do so perfectly as far as exogenous stimuli are concerned, but this does not apply to endogenous stimuli. In fact, the latter give rise to needs, which can only be eliminated by specific action.

The bitter experience of life (the constant flow of endogenous excitation) and the child's dependence on the outer world for the satisfaction of his needs (the possibility of performing the specific action) necessitate the development of another system. This secondary system inhibits the reflex action of the primary system. Indeed, the primary system will react inefficiently to the incoming stimuli (wishes) by discharging energy at random. This, however, does not bring satisfaction, if the specific action was not performed. E.g. if the wish for food is raised and the child hallucinates the wish object (the mother, the breast), so that perceptual identity arises in the psychical apparatus between the wish and its object, the primary system will discharge energy. This discharge is inadequate, because there was no real (objective) identity, but only hallucinatory (subjective) identity. The specific action (nutrition) failed to come and the result of the action of the primary system is unpleasure (increase of the level of energy in the whole system) instead of pleasure (decrease of the level of energy in the system).

As the primary system alone proved to be unable to guarantee a good functioning of the psychical apparatus the secondary system (thinking, the Ego) must be inserted: it no longer functions according to the reflex model, but accumulates energy (field model) to regulate and control discharge in the whole apparatus. This system strives at thought identity instead of perceptual identity (primary system).

In this view of the structure and the functioning of the psychical apparatus negation is already imbedded, if not mentioned explicitly. Indeed, the first system, the unconscious,

according to Freud's own words, can do nothing but 'wish'. By that he means that the primary system is exclusively capable of recording the income of endogenous excitation (wishes) and its prompt discharge. It is in fact directed by the pleasure principle, i.e. the tendency to keep the level of energy in the system as low as possible. This implies that the primary process in the system Ucs. cannot negate: there is just a constant flow of energy and negation, according to Freud, precisely means the breaking through of this continuity, i.e. the inhibition of the reflex action of the primary process.

Negation is connected with the development of the secondary system. This system will be directed by the reality principle, which means that it will consider the requirements of external reality, though it should be added at once that in the last resource the reality principle also serves a better functioning of the pleasure principle. Let us explain: when the baby feels hungry (accumulation of endogenous excitation of a specific kind) the primary system will react automatically and try to discharge the energy. The baby will cry or flounder. By this action no satisfaction is obtained, because endogenous excitation can only be discharged by means of specific action. For this specific action the baby is entirely committed to the intervention of an adult person, in other terms to the external world. This implies that the baby — and future man — will have to take external reality into account in order to satisfy his wishes and needs; if not, internal tension will be rising constantly and man will have to live in a situation, which is incompatible with the pleasure principle i.e. the ruling principle of the psychological apparatus. For this reason a secondary system is needed: it breaks with the reflex action of the primary system and makes the negation of immediate gratification of needs possible. The immediate, but often inadequate, response of the primary system is replaced by a reaction, which enables a more durable satisfaction, even if it is not immediate. Thinking is called in and it has among its functions to deny some of the wishes and impulses of the primary system.

To illustrate this line of thought I quote the following, rather extensive, but very revealing passage from 'The Interpretation

of Dreams': 'It is true that, so far as we know, no psychical apparatus exists which possesses a primary process only and that such an apparatus is to that extent a theoretical fiction. But this much is a fact: the primary processes are present in the mental apparatus from the first, while it is only during the course of life that the secondary processes unfold, and come to inhibit and overlay the primary ones; it may even be that their complete domination is not attained until the prime of life. In consequence of the belated appearance of the secondary processes, the core of our being, consisting of unconscious wishful impulses, remains inaccessible to the understanding and inhibition of the preconscious, the part played by the latter is restricted once and for all to directing along the most expedient paths the wishful impulses that arise from the unconscious. These unconscious wishes exercise a compelling force upon all later mental trends, a force which those trends are obliged to fall in with or which they may perhaps endeavour to divert and direct to higher aims. A further result of the belated appearance of the secondary process is that a wide sphere of mnemonic material is inaccessible to preconscious cathexis.

Among these wishful impulses derived from infancy, which can neither be destroyed or inhibited, there are some whose fulfilment would be a contradiction of the purposive ideas of secondary thinking. The fulfilment of these wishes would no longer generate an affect of pleasure but of unpleasure, and *it is precisely this transformation of affect which constitutes the essence of what we term 'repression'*. The problem of repression lies in the question of how it is and owing to what motive forces that this transformation occurs (...). It is enough for us to be clear that a transformation of this kind does occur in the course of development and (...) that it is related to the activity of the secondary system' (4).

From the preceding we can already draw some preliminary conclusions regarding Freud's view on the psychical apparatus and on negation:

1. The psychical apparatus has a double structure to which a double functioning corresponds. Primarily, man is a being

that strives for pleasure, that does not accept a postponement of the satisfaction of his wishes and needs, that does not know negation. Such a being, however, is unable to survive in (Western) social reality. Therefore, man must — in order to survive in our culture — develop another system: he must adapt to reality i.e. he must think and negate.

The secondary system is genetically younger, but it adds the essentially human dimension to the apparatus. It raises man from an automatic being, reacting mechanically and reflexively, to the level of a being, able to think and to consider the concrete possibilities of a given situation.

2. Dreams and neurotic symptoms belong to the domain of primary function. 'Dreaming is a piece of infantile mental life that has been superseded', Freud tells us. And he goes on: 'These methods of working on the part of the psychical apparatus, which are normally suppressed in waking hours, become current once more in psychosis and then reveal their incapacity for satisfying our needs in relation to the external world' (6). Both phenomena are the expression of the psychical apparatus regulated by the pleasure principle but dreaming is innocent, because of the fact that during sleep access to motility is impossible.

If our view on negation in Freud is correct this implies that negation would not exist in dreams, dreams being a modus of the primary functioning of the psychical apparatus. And indeed, in 'The Interpretation of Dreams' we come across these lines: 'The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictories is highly remarkable. It is simply disregarded. 'No' seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned. They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing. Dreams feel themselves at liberty, moreover, to represent any element by its wishful contrary; so that there is no way of deciding at a first glance whether any element that admits of a contrary is present in the dream-thoughts as a positive or as a negative' (6).

Ontogenetically negation should be absent in the young child as long as it behaves according to the pleasure principle. In the

'Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning' (1911b) this view seems to be implied: the pleasure-ego can nothing but wish, only when the reality-ego is developed one can strive for utility and consider the requirements of reality.

Phylogenetically Freud thinks that it must be possible to find correlates for this phenomenon; it is well-known that Freud always was an adept of Haeckel's biogenetic law. His interest for linguistics helped him here, for he thought to have found correlates in the development of language. In 1909 Freud read the essay 'On the antithetical sense of primal words' (1884) by the German linguist K. Abel. Immediately afterwards he wrote his own comment, bearing the same title (1910c). In this paper he starts from the observation he already made in 'The Interpretation of Dreams', viz. that interpreters of dreams have held since antiquity that certain representations in dreams meant exactly their opposite. In Abel's essay there is a striking similarity between the situation in dreams and that in the oldest known languages. Here as well we have the phenomenon that a considerable number of words exists which carry a double and antithetical meaning. Examples are given from Egyptian, Indo-Germanic and Arabian.

In the framework of an interdisciplinary approach of the concept of negation it deserves to be mentioned that Abel in his paper quotes the English philosopher, A. Bain. He refers to the following passage from his 'Logic' (1870, I, 54): 'The essential relativity of all knowledge, thought or consciousness cannot but show itself in language. If everything that we can know is viewed as a transition from something else, every experience must have two sides; and either every name must have a double meaning, or else for every meaning there must be two names'. Freud himself uses this quotation<sup>(7)</sup>, because he considers it as a support from the philosophical side for his hypothesis of the double meaning of some representations in dreams.

He concludes his short paper with the following words: 'And we psychiatrists cannot escape the suspicion that we should be better at understanding and translating the language of dreams if we knew more about the development of language' <sup>(8)</sup>. Freud



obviously thinks of the development of language as a macro-cultural phenomenon, but to our mind and in the light of the study of negation we can render his words as follows: if we knew more about the genesis of language in the child this could throw some light on the problem which preoccupies us.

It is obvious that R. Spitz, whose contribution to negation will be considered later, has taken such a surmise as his starting point.

## 2. *Negation (1925h)*

So, we have come to the specific essay which Freud devoted to negation in 1925. To begin with let us state that Freud, at the time nearly 70 years old, was still in full possession of his creative power, but that on the other hand he had by the time formulated all his essential ideas (including the famous and much discussed death instinct). We shall try to follow Freud's line of thought as closely as possible: the work consists of only 5 printed pages and is very condensed. In J. Hyppolite's words 'ce texte est d'une structure absolument extraordinaire, et au fond extraordinairement énigmatique' <sup>(9)</sup>. ('this text is of an absolutely extraordinary structure and fundamentally extremely enigmatic'). Only a thorough analysis of the text will allow the reader to evaluate Hyppolite's assertion.

Freud starts from clinical observation. In the course of a psychoanalytical session it often happens that patients present their associations in the following form: 'Now you'll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I've no such intention'. Freud explains this as a repudiation of an association by means of projection. Or the patient says: 'You ask who this person in the dream can be. It is not my mother.' Upon which the analyst emends to: 'So it is your mother'. He considers only the subject-matter of the association and disregards the negation.

An easy way to obtain access to the unconscious repressed material is, according to Freud, by putting the question: 'What would you consider the most unlikely imaginable thing in that situation? What do you think was furthest from your mind at



the time ?' If the patient falls into the trap and gives an answer, then the analyst nearly always has found what he was looking for.

From these examples Freud concludes that a repressed representation or idea can make its way into consciousness on condition that it is negated by consciousness. 'Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed' (<sup>10</sup>).

If we consider this definition — or rather circumscription — of negation in the light of earlier formulations, we obtain the following results. Negation belongs to the secondary system, the repressed to the primary. The repressed keeps on exerting its permanent influence from the unconscious upon consciousness. This influence can only be annihilated — and this is the purpose of psychoanalytical therapy — by incorporating the repressed in consciousness. By negating the context of the repressed the censorship of the preconscious (the censorship between the systems unconscious and conscious) is avoided: the repressed is as matter of fact rationally negated, i.e. its true meaning is made innocent by and for the secondary system, so that consciousness can take cognizance of it, but must not accept it in its real meaning. On the cognitive level things are thus put right, but not on the affective level :in order to obtain full acceptance and possible elimination of the repressed other conditions (transference) have to be fulfilled. This, however, is a topic which need not be dealt with in this study.

Freud continues as follows: negation causes a separation between the intellectual and the affective process (there is indeed intellectual cognizance of the repressed, but no affective experience of it: it is not lived through again). The analyst often reaches a further stage with the patient: he succeeds in convincing the patient of the fact that negation is only a way of taking cognizance of the repressed. So, the patient fully accepts the intellectual meaning of the repressed material, but this does not imply that repression is therefore eliminated, as the other level — the affective — must be reached to obtain that result.

The function of intellectual judgement really is, according to Freud, to affirm or to negate the content of thoughts. His preceding remarks have therefore led him to the psychological origin of this function. To negate something in judgement fundamentally means: 'This is something which I would prefer to repress'. The negative judgment is the intellectual substitute for repression. With the help of the symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions put upon it by repression and enriches itself with contents that are indispensable for its proper functioning. In this view negation is of vital importance for proper thinking.

The function of judgment has two kinds of decisions to make: first, it has to decide whether or not an attribute is possessed by a thing; second, it asserts or disputes that a presentation exists in reality.

The attribute, over which it has to decide, may originally have been good or bad, harmful or useful. In the language of the oldest, oral instinctual impulses this means: 'This I want to eat or to spit out' or, more generally, 'I want to incorporate this or to exclude it'. For the original pleasure-ego everything that is inside it is good, the external world is bad: introjection and ejection are its fundamental modes of reaction.

As to the second task of the function of the judgment, the decision over the existence in reality, Freud thinks that this belongs to the domain of the reality-ego, which developed from the original pleasure-ego by means of reality testing. It now has to be decided whether something is inside the ego or not (whereas in the preceding case the decision was about incorporation into or exclusion from the ego). So, it is once more a question of 'internal' or 'external'. The unreal, the represented, the subjective is only inside the ego; the real, the objective is also present outside the ego. It is not only important to the ego to know if something (e.g. an object of satisfaction) is good or bad, but also if it is really present in the external world.

The point Freud tries to make here is perhaps elucidated, when we consider his view that all presentations stem from perception, are in fact repetitions of perceptions. Originally the

existence of a presentation therefore guarantees the existence of an observation and of an object itself. Only later the problem arises to distinguish an observation from a presentation. This is achieved by a specific property of thinking, viz. reproduction. By means of reproduction it becomes possible to recall what was once perceived, so that the necessity arises to distinguish this presentation from real perception. Reality testing for this reason resides in the ability to *refind* an object in reality.

Freud concludes his essay in the following way: judgment is an intellectual action deciding over the choice of motor action; it constitutes a transition between thought and action. Originally it is nothing but the further development of the purpose of the pleasure principle (incorporation into or exclusion from the ego). The polarity of judgment (assertion-negation) seems to coincide with the polarity of the instincts: the assertion (the unification) belongs to the Eros, the negation (the exclusion) belongs to the destructive or death instinct.

Judgment can only fulfil its function by the creation of the negation symbol. This indeed grants to thinking a certain degree of independence from the consequences of repression and so, from the constraint of the pleasure principle. To his view of negation fits, according to Freud, the fact that one never meets in analysis a 'no' from the unconscious and that the recognition of the unconscious by the ego is expressed in a negative formulation. The final sentence of 'Negation' states: 'There is no stronger evidence that we have been successful in our effort to uncover the unconscious than when the patient reacts to it with words 'I didn't think that', or 'I didn't (ever) think of that' ('1).

### III. *Some conclusions and problems with reference to negation in Freud*

1. From the very few examples of cases of negation which Freud offers from psychoanalytical practice we can derive that he only considers negation of intellectual contents. His theory

of negation (negation constitutes a possibility to take cognizance of repressed material) implies that negation is related to repressed material. We think that it is going too far to derive from this that Freud's explanation would cover *all* kinds of negation. It seems to be in line with Freud's trend to quick generalisation<sup>(12)</sup> that he gives the impression of offering an explanation for every negation, whereas he only deals with a specific form of it.

For this reason it would be useful to come to an agreement first about the different *types of negation*. Only after having done so we can proceed to study for which form or forms the Freudian theory could bring an explanation.

2. The Freudian view of negation is *genetic*. Negation is introduced at a specific moment of the individual's development. Freud did not study this topic empirically, but Spitz has tried to fill in the gap by his investigations. We shall turn to his work in this field later.

3. For Freud negation is the expression of a *dynamic* conflict. Assertion would be a phenomenon belonging to the Eros, the libidinal, unifying instinct; negation is considered as the expression of the destructive or death instinct, is expulsive. It is quite impossible to go into the problems and criticisms of Freud's death instinct in the scope of this paper. Let it suffice to state that the acceptance of Freud's theory of instincts does not constitute a necessary condition for the acceptance of his view of negation. We have shown that his main ideas on the problem of negation were already formulated long before he phrased his theory of instincts. It seems logical that Freud afterwards tried to integrate his views of negation into his views of instincts, but they are by no means inseparably linked together.

It, however, would be useful to investigate to some detail the relation between negation (or certain forms of it) and repression, as this relation is fundamental to Freudian theory. It could for instance be checked in published psychoanalytical interviews and/or in other material, if this relation really exists. It is clear that in such an analysis the problems of interpretation would be considerable.

4. In his essay of 1925 Freud has introduced several innovations compared to his earlier theories. At first negation was a tool by which thinking temporarily could deny satisfaction to unconscious wishes. In 1925 things become more complicated: negation is a cognitive act, by which a judgment is passed over presentations (their existence, their usefulness for the ego).

Thus, negation gets a double function in Freud's theory:

a. socio-moral, because it will have to see to it what is acceptable to the ego and what is not. The ego, as emanation of social reality decides by means of negation which unconscious wishful impulses are acceptable to consciousness;

b. epistemological, because negation will decide what belongs to objective reality and what to subjective, once the reality-ego has developed. We think that we have thus given the essential ideas of Freud on negation. We do not doubt that his views are open to criticism or further investigation, but we believe on the other hand that they often offer unexpected perspectives.

(<sup>1</sup>) GRINSTEIN, A., *The Index of psychoanalytic Writings*, New York, Int. Univ. Press, 1956-66, 9 vols.

(<sup>2</sup>) LACAN, J., *Ecrits*, Paris, du Seuil, 1966.

(<sup>3</sup>) SPITZ, R. A., *No and Yes. On the Genesis of Human Communication*, New York, Int. Univ. Press, 1957.

(<sup>4</sup>) SE. V, 603-4. SE. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by J. STRACHEY, London, Hogarth, 1955, 24 vols.

(<sup>5</sup>) SE. V, 567.

(<sup>6</sup>) SE. IV, 318.

(<sup>7</sup>) SE. XI, 159.

(<sup>8</sup>) SE. XI, 161.

(<sup>9</sup>) In LACAN, J., o.c., p. 879.

(<sup>10</sup>) SE. XIX, 235-6.

(<sup>11</sup>) SE. XIX, 239.

(<sup>12</sup>) Cfr. BUELENS, J., *Sigmund Freud, kind van zijn tijd. Evolutie en achtergronden van zijn werk tot 1900*, Boom, Meppel, 1971, pp. 63-4.