

Repression

disappearing completely as Freud claimed—“repression” (as I now began to say instead of “defence”); (4)—and it preserves the same generic meaning. Freud continues to speak of ‘mechanisms of defence’, ‘defensive struggle’, etc.

As for ‘repression’, it never loses its *specificity* so as to become simply a comprehensive concept connoting all the defensive techniques used for dealing with psychical conflict. It is significant, for example, that in his treatment of ‘secondary defence’—defence against the symptom itself—Freud never refers to it as secondary ‘repression’ (5). In the paper which he devoted to the notion of repression in 1915, it retains at bottom the meaning we have outlined above: ‘... the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious’ (6a). In this sense, repression is sometimes looked upon as a particular ‘defence mechanism’—or rather as an ‘instinctual vicissitude’—liable to be employed as a defence. It plays a major part in hysteria, while in obsessional neurosis it is embedded in a more complex defensive process (6b). One should not therefore argue—as the editors of the *Standard Edition* do (7)—that, since repression is described as present in several neuroses, ‘repression’ and ‘defence’ may therefore be treated as synonymous. The fact is that repression is to be met with in each condition as one moment of the defensive operation—and this in its precise sense of repression into the unconscious.

It is true, nonetheless, that the mechanism of repression studied by Freud in its different stages does constitute in his eyes a sort of prototype of other defensive operations. Thus in his account of the case of Schreber (1911c), while actually trying to isolate a defence mechanism specific to psychosis, he refers to the three phases of repression and exploits the opportunity to present his theory of this process. It is no doubt in such a text as this that the confusion between the concepts of repression and defence is at its greatest—and it is more than terminological confusion, for it gives rise to basic problems (see ‘Projection’).

c. Finally, it should not pass unnoticed that Freud, after subsuming repression under the category of the mechanisms of defence, wrote as follows in his commentary on Anna Freud’s book: ‘There was never any doubt that repression was not the only procedure which the ego could employ for its purposes. Nevertheless, repression is something quite peculiar and is more sharply differentiated from the other mechanisms than they are from each other’ (8).

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The theory of repression is the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests (9). The term is already to be met with in Herbart (10) and some authors have suggested that Herbart’s work was known to Freud through Maynert (11). Be that as it may, it was as a clinical datum that repression imposed itself from Freud’s earliest treatment of hysterics onwards. Freud found that his patients did not have certain memories at their disposition, although these were perfectly vivid once they *had* been recalled: ‘... it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget, and therefore intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and suppressed’ (12).

It is clear from this, the formative moment of the notion of repression, that it appeared from the beginning in correlation to the concept of the unconscious (in fact the word ‘repressed’ remained a synonym of ‘unconscious’ right up until the introduction of the idea of unconscious defences of the ego). As for the

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qualification ‘intentionally’, Freud does not make it unreservedly even at this period (1895): the splitting of consciousness is only *initiated* by an intentional act. In fact the repressed contents escape the control of the subject and they are governed—as a ‘separate psychical group’—by their own laws (the primary process*). A repressed idea itself constitutes a ‘nucleus of crystallization’ capable of attracting other incompatible ideas without the intervention of any conscious intention (13). To this extent the operation of repression itself bears the mark of the primary process. Indeed, this is what distinguishes it as a pathological form of defence as compared with a normal type of defence such as avoidance (3b). Lastly, repression is described from the outset as a dynamic operation implying the maintenance of an anticathexis*, and liable at any moment to be defeated by the strength of the unconscious wish which is striving to return into consciousness and mortality (see ‘Return of the Repressed’, ‘Compromise-Formation’).

In the years 1911–15, Freud endeavoured to develop a detailed theory of repression by distinguishing different phases of the process. It should be noted in this connection, however, that this was not in fact his first theoretical elaboration of the matter. In our view, his *theory of seduction** must be looked upon as a first systematic attempt to account for repression—an attempt which is all the more interesting in that this mechanism is not described in isolation from its object *par excellence*—namely, sexuality.

In his article on ‘Repression’ (1915d), Freud makes a distinction between repression in a broad sense, comprising three phases, and in a more restricted sense which refers to the second phase taken alone. The first phase is a ‘primal repression’* not directed against the instinct as such but against its signs or ‘representatives’, which are denied entrance to the conscious and to which the instinct remains fixated. In this way a first unconscious nucleus is formed which acts as a pole of attraction for the elements due to be repressed.

Repression proper (*eigentliche Verdrängung*) or ‘after-pressure’ (*Nachdrängen*) is therefore a dual process, in that it adds to this attraction a repulsion (*Absstossung*) operating from the direction of a higher agency.

The third and last phase is the ‘return of the repressed’ in the guise of symptoms, dreams, parapraxes, etc. What does repression act upon? It must be emphasised that it acts neither upon the instinct* (14a) which, in so far as it is organic, escapes the split between conscious and unconscious, nor upon the affect*. The affect may undergo various transformations as an indirect result of repression but it cannot become unconscious in any strict sense (14b) (see ‘Suppression’). It is only the ideational representatives* of the instinct (ideas, images, etc.) that are repressed. These representative elements are bound to the primal repressed material, either because they originate from it or because they become connected with it fortuitously. The fate reserved for each one by repression is quite distinct and ‘highly individual’, according to its degree of distortion, its remoteness from the unconscious nucleus or its affective value.

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The repressive operation may be viewed in the triple perspective of meta-psychology*:

First, from the *topographical** point of view: although repression is described