

A DIFFICULTY IN THE PATH OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS - (1917)

I will say at once that it is not an intellectual difficulty I am thinking of, not anything that makes psycho-analysis hard for the hearer or reader to understand, but an affective one - something that alienates the feelings of those who come into contact with it, so that they become less inclined to believe in it or take an interest in it. As will be observed, the two kinds of difficulty amount to the same thing in the end. Where sympathy is lacking, understanding will not come very easily.

My present readers, I take it, have not so far had anything to do with the subject and I shall be obliged, therefore, to go back some distance. Out of a great number of individual observations and impressions something in the nature of a theory has at last shaped itself in psycho-analysis, and this is known by the name of the 'libido theory'. As is well known, psycho-analysis is concerned with the elucidation and removal of what are called nervous disorders. A starting-point had to be found from which to approach this problem, and it was decided to look for it in the instinctual life of the mind. Hypotheses about the instincts in man came to form the basis, therefore, of our conception of nervous disease.

Psychology as it is taught academically gives us but very inadequate replies to questions concerning our mental life, but in no direction is its information so meagre as in this matter of the instincts.

It is open to us to make our first soundings as we please. The popular view distinguishes between hunger and love, as being the representatives of the instincts which aim respectively at the preservation of the individual and at the reproduction of the species. We accept this very evident distinction, so that in psycho-analysis too we make a distinction between the self-preserved or ego-instincts on the one hand and the sexual instincts on the other. The force by which the sexual instinct is represented in the mind we call 'libido' - sexual desire - and we regard it as something analogous to hunger, the will to power, and so on, where the ego-instincts are concerned.

With this as a starting-point we go on to make our first important discovery. We learn that, when we try to understand neurotic disorders, by far the greater significance attaches to the sexual instincts; that in fact neuroses are the specific disorders, so to speak, of the sexual function; that in general whether or not a person develops a neurosis depends on the quantity of his libido, and on the possibility of satisfying it and of discharging it through satisfaction; that the form taken by the disease is determined by the way in which the individual passes through the course of development of his sexual function, or, as we put it, by the fixations his libido has undergone in the course of its development; and, further, that by a special, not very simple technique for influencing the mind we are able to throw light on the nature of some groups of neuroses and at the same time to do away with them. Our therapeutic efforts have their greatest success with a certain class of neuroses which proceed from a conflict between the ego-instincts and the sexual instincts. For in human beings it may happen that the demands of the sexual instincts, whose reach of course extends far beyond the individual, seem to

the ego to constitute a danger which threatens its self-preservation or its self-esteem. The ego then assumes the defensive, denies the sexual instincts the satisfaction they desire and forces them into those by-paths of substitutive satisfaction which become manifest as nervous symptoms.

The psycho-analytic method of treatment is then able to subject this process of repression to revision and to bring about a better solution of the conflict - one that is compatible with health. Unintelligent opposition accuses us of one-sidedness in our estimate of the sexual instincts. 'Human beings have other interests besides sexual ones,' they say. We have not forgotten or denied this for a moment. Our one-sidedness is like that of the chemist, who traces all compounds back to the force of chemical attraction. He is not on that account denying the force of gravity; he leaves that to the physicist to deal with.

During the work of treatment we have to consider the distribution of the patient's libido; we look for the object presentations to which it is bound and free it from them, so as to place it at the disposal of the ego. In the course of this, we have come to form a very curious picture of the original, primal distribution of libido in human beings. We have been driven to assume that at the beginning of the development of the individual all his libido (all his erotic tendencies, all his capacity for love) is tied to himself - that as we say, it cathects his own ego. It is only later that, being attached to the satisfaction of the major vital needs, the libido flows over from the ego on to external objects. Not till then are we able to recognize the libidinal instincts as such and distinguish them from the ego instincts. It is possible for the libido to become detached from these objects and withdrawn again into the ego.

The condition in which the ego retains the libido is called by us 'narcissism', in reference to the Greek legend of the youth Narcissus who was in love with his own reflection.

Thus in our view the individual advances from narcissism to object-love. But we do not believe that the whole of the libido ever passes over from the ego to objects. A certain quantity of libido is always retained in the ego; even when object-love is highly developed, a certain amount of narcissism persists. The ego is a great reservoir from which the libido that is destined for objects flows out and into which it flows back from those objects. Object-libido was at first ego-libido and can be transformed back into ego-libido. For complete health it is essential that the libido should not lose this full mobility. As an illustration of this state of things we may think of an amoeba, whose viscous substance puts out pseudopodia, elongations into which the substance of the body extends but which can be retracted at any time so that the form of the protoplasmic mass is restored.

What I have been trying to describe in this outline is the libido theory of the neuroses, upon which are founded all our conceptions of the nature of these morbid states, together with our therapeutic measures for relieving them. We naturally regard the premises of the libido theory as valid for normal behaviour as well. We speak of the narcissism of small children, and it is to the excessive

narcissism of primitive man that we ascribe his belief in the omnipotence of his thoughts and his consequent attempts to influence the course of events in the external world by the technique of magic.

After this introduction I propose to describe how the universal narcissism of men, their self-love, has up to the present suffered three severe blows from the researches of science.¹

(a) In the early stages of his researches, man believed at first that his dwelling-place, the earth, was the stationary centre of the universe, with the sun, moon and planets circling round it. In this he was naïvely following the dictates of his sense perceptions, for he felt no movement of the earth, and wherever he had an unimpeded view he found himself in the centre of a circle that enclosed the external world. The central position of the earth, moreover, was a token to him of the dominating part played by it in the universe and appeared to fit in very well with his inclination to regard himself as lord of the world.

The destruction of this narcissistic illusion is associated in our minds with the name and work of Copernicus in the sixteenth century. But long before his day the Pythagoreans had already cast doubts on the privileged position of the earth, and in the third century B. C. Aristarchus of Samos had declared that the earth was much smaller than the sun and moved round that celestial body. Even the great discovery of Copernicus, therefore, had already been made before him. When this discovery achieved general recognition, the self-love of mankind suffered its first blow, the cosmological one.

(b) In the course of the development of civilization man acquired a dominating position over his fellow-creatures in the animal kingdom. Not content with this supremacy, however, he began to place a gulf between his nature and theirs. He denied the possession of reason to them, and to himself he attributed an immortal soul, and made claims to a divine descent which permitted him to break the bond of community between him and the animal kingdom. Curiously enough, this piece of arrogance is still foreign to children, just as it is to primitive and primeval man. It is the result of a later, more pretentious stage of development. At the level of totemism primitive man had no repugnance to tracing his descent from an animal ancestor. In myths, which contain the precipitate of this ancient attitude of mind, the gods take animal shapes, and in the art of earliest times they are portrayed with animals' heads. A child can see no difference between his own nature and that of animals. He is not astonished at animals thinking and talking in fairy-tales; he will transfer an emotion of fear which he feels for his human father onto a dog or a horse, without intending any derogation of his father by it. Not until he is grown up does he become so far estranged from animals as to use their names in vilification of human beings.

We all know that little more than half a century ago the researches of Charles Darwin and his collaborators and forerunners put an end to this presumption on the part of man. Man is not a being different from animals or superior to them; he himself is of animal descent, being more closely related to some species and more

distantly to others. The acquisitions he has subsequently made have not succeeded in effacing the evidences, both in his physical structure and in his mental dispositions, of his parity with them. This was the second, the biological blow to human narcissism.

(c) The third blow, which is psychological in nature, is probably the most wounding.

Although thus humbled in his external relations, man feels himself to be supreme within his own mind. Somewhere in the core of his ego he has developed an organ of observation to keep a watch on his impulses and actions and see whether they harmonize with its demands. If they do not, they are ruthlessly inhibited and withdrawn. His internal perception, consciousness, gives the ego news of all the important occurrences in the mind's working, and the will, directed by these reports, carries out what the ego orders and modifies anything that seeks to accomplish itself spontaneously. For this mind is not a simple thing; on the contrary, it is a hierarchy of superordinated and subordinated agencies, a labyrinth of impulses striving independently of one another towards action, corresponding with the multiplicity of instincts and of relations with the external world, many of which are antagonistic to one another and incompatible. For proper functioning it is necessary that the highest of these agencies should have knowledge of all that is going forward and that its will should penetrate everywhere, so as to exert its influence. And in fact the ego feels secure both as to the completeness and trustworthiness of the reports it receives and as to the openness of the channels through which it enforces its commands.

In certain diseases - including the very neuroses of which we have made special study - things are different. The ego feels uneasy; it comes up against limits to its power in its own house, the mind. Thoughts emerge suddenly without one's knowing where they come from, nor can one do anything to drive them away. These alien guests even seem to be more powerful than those which are at the ego's command. They resist all the well-proved measures of enforcement used by the will, remain unmoved by logical refutation, and are unaffected by the contradictory assertions of reality. Or else impulses appear which seem like those of a stranger, so that the ego disowns them; yet it has to fear them and take precautions against them. The ego says to itself: 'This is an illness, a foreign invasion.' It increases its vigilance, but cannot understand why it feels so strangely paralysed.

Psychiatry, it is true, denies that such things mean the intrusion into the mind of evil spirits from without; beyond this, however, it can only say with a shrug: 'Degeneracy, hereditary disposition, constitutional inferiority!' Psycho-analysis sets out to explain these uncanny disorders; it engages in careful and laborious investigations, devises hypotheses and scientific constructions, until at length it can speak thus to the ego:-

'Nothing has entered into you from without; a part of the activity of your own mind has been withdrawn from your knowledge and from the command of your will.

That, too, is why you are so weak in your defence; you are using one part of your force to fight the other part and you cannot concentrate the whole of your force as you would against an external enemy. And it is not even the worst or least important part of your mental forces that has thus become antagonistic to you and independent of you. The blame, I am bound to say, lies with yourself. You over-estimated your strength when you thought you could treat your sexual instincts as you liked and could utterly ignore their intentions. The result is that they have rebelled and have taken their own obscure paths to escape this suppression; they have established their rights in a manner you cannot approve. How they have achieved this, and the paths which they have taken, have not come to your knowledge. All you have learned is the outcome of their work - the symptom which you experience as suffering. Thus you do not recognize it as a derivative of your own rejected instincts and do not know that it is a substitutive satisfaction of them.

'The whole process, however, only becomes possible through the single circumstance that you are mistaken in another important point as well. You feel sure that you are informed of all that goes on in your mind if it is of any importance at all, because in that case, you believe, your consciousness gives you news of it. And if you have had no information of something in your mind you confidently assume that it does not exist there. Indeed, you go so far as to regard what is "mental" as identical with what is "conscious" - that is, with what is known to you in spite of the most obvious evidence that a great deal more must constantly be going on in your mind than can be known to your consciousness. Come, let yourself be taught something on this one point! What is in your mind does not coincide with what you are conscious of; whether something is going on in your mind and whether you hear of it, are two different things. In the ordinary way, I will admit, the intelligence which reaches your consciousness is enough for your needs; and you may cherish the illusion that you learn of all the more important things. But in some cases, as in that of an instinctual conflict such as I have described, your intelligence service breaks down and your will then extends no further than your knowledge. In every case, however, the news that reaches your consciousness is incomplete and often not to be relied on. Often enough, too, it happens that you get news of events only when they are over and when you can no longer do anything to change them. Even if you are not ill, who can tell all that is stirring in your mind of which you know nothing or are falsely informed? You behave like an absolute ruler who is content with the information supplied him by his highest officials and never goes among the people to hear their voice. Turn your eyes inward, look into your own depths, learn first to know yourself! Then you will understand why you were bound to fall ill; and perhaps, you will avoid falling ill in future.'

It is thus that psycho-analysis has sought to educate the ego. But these two discoveries - that the life of our sexual instincts cannot be wholly tamed, and that mental processes are in themselves unconscious and only reach the ego and come under its control through incomplete and untrustworthy perceptions - these two discoveries amount to a statement that the ego is not master in its own house. Together they represent the third blow to man's self-love, what I may call the

psychological one. No wonder, then, that the ego does not look favourably upon psycho-analysis and obstinately refuses to believe in it.

Probably very few people can have realized the momentous significance for science and life of the recognition of unconscious mental processes. It was not psycho-analysis, however, let us hasten to add, which first took this step. There are famous philosophers who may be cited as forerunners - above all the great thinker Schopenhauer, whose unconscious 'Will' is equivalent to the mental instincts of psycho-analysis. It was this same thinker, moreover, who in words of unforgettable impressiveness admonished mankind of the importance, still so greatly underestimated by it, of its sexual craving. Psycho-analysis has this advantage only, that it has not affirmed these two propositions which are so distressing to narcissism - the psychical importance of sexuality and the unconsciousness of mental life - on an abstract basis, but has demonstrated them in matters that touch every individual personally and force him to take up some attitude towards these problems. It is just for this reason, however, that it brings on itself the aversion and resistances which still hold back in awe before the great name of the philosopher.