

## **THE PSYCHO-ANALYTIC VIEW OF PSYCHOGENIC DISTURBANCE OF VISION - (1910)**

GENTLEMEN, - I propose to take the example of psychogenic disturbance of vision, in order to show you the modifications which have taken place in our view of the genesis of disorders of this kind under the influence of psycho-analytic methods of investigation. As you know, hysterical blindness is taken as the type of a psychogenic visual disturbance. It is generally believed, as a result of the researches of the French School (including such men as Charcot, Janet and Binet), that the genesis of these cases is understood. For we are in a position to produce blindness of this kind experimentally if we have at our disposal someone who is susceptible to somnambulism. If we put him into deep hypnosis and suggest the idea to him that he sees nothing with one of his eyes, he will in fact behave as though he had become blind in that eye, like a hysteric who has developed a visual disturbance spontaneously. We may thus construct the mechanism of spontaneous hysterical disturbances of vision on the model of suggested hypnotic ones. In a hysteric the idea of being blind arises, not from the prompting of a hypnotist, but spontaneously - by autosuggestion, as people say; and in both cases this idea is so powerful that it turns into reality, exactly like a suggested hallucination, paralysis, etc.

This seems perfectly sound and will satisfy anyone who can ignore the many enigmas that lie concealed behind the concepts of hypnosis, suggestion and autosuggestion. Autosuggestion in particular raises further questions. When and under what conditions does an idea become so powerful that it is able to behave like a suggestion and turn into reality without more ado? Closer investigation has taught us that we cannot answer this question without calling the concept of the 'unconscious' to our assistance. Many philosophers rebel against the assumption of a mental unconscious of this kind, because they have not concerned themselves with the phenomena which compel us to make that assumption. Psychopathologists have found that they cannot avoid working with such things as unconscious mental processes, unconscious ideas, and so on.

Appropriate experiments have shown that people who are hysterically blind do nevertheless see in some sense, though not in the full sense. Excitations of the blind eye may have certain psychical consequences (for instance, they may produce affects) even though they do not become conscious. Thus hysterically blind people are only blind as far as consciousness is concerned; in their unconscious they see. It is precisely observations such as this that compel us to distinguish between conscious and unconscious mental processes.

How does it happen that such people develop the unconscious 'autosuggestion' that they are blind, while nevertheless they see in their unconscious? The reply given by the French researches is to explain that in patients predisposed to hysteria there is an inherent tendency to dissociation - to a falling apart of the connections in their mental field - as a consequence of which some unconscious processes do not continue as far as into the conscious. Let us leave entirely on one side the value that this attempted explanation may have as regards an understanding of the phenomena in question, and let us look at the matter from another angle. As you see, Gentlemen, the identity of hysterical blindness with the blindness provoked by suggestion, on which so much stress was laid to begin with, has now been given up. The hysterical patient is blind, not as the result of an autosuggestive idea that he cannot see, but as the result of a dissociation between unconscious and conscious processes in the act

of seeing; his idea that he does not see is the well-founded expression of the psychological state of affairs and not its cause.

If, Gentlemen, you complain of the obscurity of this exposition I shall not find it easy to defend. I have tried to give you a synthesis of the views of different investigators, and in doing so I have probably coupled them together too closely. I wanted to condense into a single composite whole the concepts that have been brought up to make psychogenic disturbances intelligible - their origin from excessively powerful ideas, the distinction between conscious and unconscious mental processes and the assumption of mental dissociation. And I have been no more successful in this than the French writers, at whose head stands Pierre Janet. I hope, therefore, that you will excuse not only the obscurity but the inaccuracy of my exposition, and will allow me to tell you how psycho-analysis has led us to a view of psychogenic disturbances of vision which is more self-consistent and probably closer to the facts.

Psycho-analysis, too, accepts the assumptions of dissociation and the unconscious, but relates them differently to each other. Its view is a dynamic one, which traces mental life back to an interplay between forces that favour or inhibit one another. If in any instance one group of ideas remains in the unconscious, psycho-analysis does not infer that there is a constitutional incapacity for synthesis which is showing itself in this particular dissociation, but maintains that the isolation and state of unconsciousness of this group of ideas have been caused by an active opposition on the part of other groups. The process owing to which it has met with this fate is known as 'repression' and we regard it as something analogous to a condemnatory judgement in the field of logic. Psycho-analysis points out that repressions of this kind play an extraordinarily important part in our mental life, but that they may also frequently fail and that such failures of repression are the precondition of the formation of symptoms.

If, then, as we have learnt, psychogenic disturbances of vision depend on certain ideas connected with seeing being cut off from consciousness, we must, on the psycho-analytic view, assume that these ideas have come into opposition to other, more powerful ones, for which we use the collective concept of the 'ego'- a compound which is made up variously at different times - and have for that reason come under repression. But what can be the origin of this opposition, which makes for repression, between the ego and various groups of ideas? You will no doubt notice that it was not possible to frame such a question before the advent of psycho-analysis, for nothing was known earlier of psychological conflict and repression. Our researches, however, have put us in a position to give us the desired answer. Our attention has been drawn to the importance of the instincts in ideational life. We have discovered that every instinct tries to make itself effective by activating ideas that are in keeping with its aims. These instincts are not always compatible with one another; their interests often come into conflict. Opposition between ideas is only an expression of struggles between the various instincts. From the point of view of our attempted explanation, a quite specially important part is played by the undeniable opposition between the instincts which subserve sexuality, the attainment of sexual pleasure, and those other instincts, which have as their aim the self-preservation of the individual - the ego-instincts. As the poet has said, all the organic instincts that operate in our mind may be classified as 'hunger' or 'love'. We have traced the 'sexual instinct' from its first manifestations in children to its final form, which is described as 'normal'. We have found that it is put together from numerous

'component instincts' which are attached to excitations of regions of the body; and we have come to see that these separate instincts have to pass through a complicated development before they can be brought effectively to serve the aims of reproduction. The light thrown by psychology on the evolution of our civilization has shown us that it originates mainly at the cost of the sexual component instincts, and that these must be suppressed, restricted, transformed and directed to higher aims, in order that the mental constructions of civilization may be established. We have been able to recognize as a valuable outcome of these researches something that our colleagues have not yet been willing to believe, namely that the human ailments known as 'neuroses' are derived from the many different ways in which these processes of transformation in the sexual component instincts may miscarry. The 'ego' feels threatened by the claims of the sexual instincts and fends them off by repressions; these, however, do not always have the desired result, but lead to the formation of dangerous substitutes for the repressed and to burdensome reactions on the part of the ego. From these two classes of phenomena taken together there emerge what we call the symptoms of neuroses.

We have apparently digressed widely from our problem, though in doing so we have touched on the manner in which neurotic pathological conditions are related to our mental life as a whole. But let us now return to the narrower question. The sexual and ego-instincts alike have in general the same organs and systems of organs at their disposal. Sexual pleasure is not attached merely to the function of the genitals. The mouth serves for kissing as well as for eating and communication by speech; the eyes perceive not only alterations in the external world which are important for the preservation of life, but also characteristics of objects which lead to their being chosen as objects of love - their charms. The saying that it is not easy for anyone to serve two masters is thus confirmed. The closer the relation into which an organ with a dual function of this kind enters with one of the major instincts, the more it withdraws itself from the other. This principle is bound to lead to pathological consequences if the two fundamental instincts are disunited and if the ego maintains a repression of the sexual component instinct concerned. It is easy to apply this to the eye and to seeing. Let us suppose that the sexual component instinct which makes use of looking - sexual pleasure in looking - has drawn upon itself defensive action by the ego-instincts in consequence of its excessive demands, so that the ideas in which its desires are expressed succumb to repression and are prevented from becoming conscious; in that case there will be a general disturbance of the relation of the eye and of the act of seeing to the ego and consciousness. The ego will have lost its dominance over the organ, which will now be wholly at the disposal of the repressed sexual instinct. It looks as though the repression had been carried too far by the ego, as though it had emptied the baby out with the bath-water: the ego refuses to see anything at all any more, now that the sexual interest in seeing has made itself so prominent. But the alternative picture seems more to the point. This attributes the active role instead to the repressed pleasure in looking. The repressed instinct takes its revenge for being held back from further psychical expansion, by becoming able to extend its dominance over the organ that is in its service. The loss of conscious dominance over the organ is the detrimental substitute for the repression which had miscarried and was only made possible at that price.

This relation of an organ with a double claim on it - its relation to the conscious ego and to repressed sexuality - is to be seen even more clearly in motor organs than in the eye: as when, for instance, a hand which has tried to carry out an act of sexual

aggression, and has become paralysed hysterically, is unable, after that act has been inhibited, to do anything else as though it were obstinately insisting on carrying out a repressed innervation; or as when the fingers of people who have given up masturbation refuse to learn the delicate movements required for playing the piano or the violin. As regards the eye, we are in the habit of translating the obscure psychical processes concerned in the repression of sexual scopophilia and in the development of the psychogenic disturbance of vision as though a punishing voice was speaking from within the subject, and saying: 'Because you sought to misuse your organ of sight for evil sensual pleasures, it is fitting that you should not see anything at all any more', and as though it was in this way approving the outcome of the process. The idea of talion punishment is involved in this, and in fact our explanation of psychogenic visual disturbance coincides with what is suggested by myths and legends. The beautiful legend of Lady Godiva tells how all the town's inhabitants hid behind their shuttered windows, so as to make easier the lady's task of riding naked through the streets in broad daylight, and how the only man who peeped through the shutters at her revealed loveliness was punished by going blind. Nor is this the only example which suggests that neurotic illness holds the hidden key to mythology as well.

Psycho-analysis is unjustly reproached, Gentlemen, for leading to purely psychological theories of pathological problems. The emphasis which it lays on the pathogenic role of sexuality, which, after all, is certainly not an exclusively psychical factor should alone protect it from this reproach. Psycho-analysts never forget that the mental is based on the organic, although their work can only carry them as far as this basis and no beyond it. Thus psycho-analysis is ready to admit, and indeed to postulate, that not all disturbances of vision need be psychogenic, like those that are evoked by the repression of erotic scopophilia. If an organ which serves the two sorts of instinct increases its erotogenic role, it is in general to be expected that this will not occur without the excitability and innervation of the organ undergoing changes which will manifest themselves as disturbances of its function in the service of the ego. Indeed, if we find that an organ normally serving the purpose of sense-perception begins to behave like an actual genital when its erotogenic role is increased, we shall not regard it as improbable that toxic changes are also occurring in it. For lack of a better name we must retain the old unsuitable term of 'neurotic' disturbances for both classes of functional disturbances - those of physiological as well as those of toxic origin - which follow from an increase in the erotogenic factor. Generally speaking, the neurotic disturbances of vision stand in the same relation to the psychogenic ones as the 'actual neuroses' do to the psychoneuroses: psychogenic visual disturbances can no doubt hardly ever appear without neurotic ones, but the latter can appear without the former. These neurotic symptoms are unfortunately little appreciated and understood even today; for they are not directly accessible to psycho-analysis, and other methods of research have left the standpoint of sexuality out of account.

Yet another line of thought extending into organic research branches off from psycho-analysis. We may ask ourselves whether the suppression of sexual component instincts which is brought about by environmental influences is sufficient in itself to call up functional disturbances in organs, or whether special constitutional conditions must be present in order that the organs may be led to an exaggeration of their erotogenic role and consequently provoke repression of the instincts. We should have to see in those conditions the constitutional part of the disposition to fall ill of

psychogenic and neurotic disorders. This is the factor to which, as applied to hysteria, I gave the provisional name of 'somatic compliance'.