

Formulations on the Two Principles of Psychic Functioning

We have long observed that every neurosis has the effect, and so probably the purpose, of forcing the patient out of real life, of alienating him from reality. Such a fact could not escape Pierre Janet's attention; he spoke of a loss '*de la fonction du réel*' as a specific characteristic of neurotics, although without uncovering the connection between this dysfunction and the basic conditions of neurosis.¹

We have gained some insight into this connection by introducing the process of repression into the aetiology of neurosis. The neurotic turns away from reality because he finds either the whole or parts of it unbearable. The most extreme type of this turning away from reality is exhibited in certain cases of hallucinatory psychosis where the patient attempts to deny the event that has triggered his insanity (Griesinger). Actually, though, every neurotic does the same thing with some fragment of reality.² Thus we are presented with the task of studying the development of the relationship of neurotics – and mankind in general – to reality, and so of assimilating the psychological significance of the real outside world into the framework of our theories.

We psychologists grounded in psychoanalysis have become accustomed to taking as our starting point unconscious psychic processes, the peculiarities of which we have come to know through analysis. We consider these to be the older, primary psychic processes, remnants of a phase of development in which they were the only kind. The highest tendency obeyed by these primary processes is easy to identify; we call it the pleasure-unpleasure principle (or the pleasure principle for short). These processes

strive to gain pleasure; our psychic activity draws back from any action that might arouse unpleasure (repression). Our dreams at night, our tendency when awake to recoil from painful impressions, these are vestiges of the rule of this principle and evidence of its power.

I am relying on trains of thought developed elsewhere (in the general section of *The Interpretation of Dreams*) when I postulate that the state of equilibrium in the psyche was originally disrupted by the urgent demands of inner needs. At this stage, whatever was thought of (wished for) was simply hallucinated, as still happens every night with our dream-thoughts.³ It was due only to the failure of the anticipated satisfaction, the disillusionment as it were, that this attempt at satisfaction by means of hallucination was abandoned. Instead, the psychic apparatus had to resolve to form an idea of the real circumstances in the outside world and to endeavour actually to change them. With this, a new principle of psychic activity was initiated; now ideas were formed no longer of what was pleasant, but of what was real, even if this happened to be unpleasant.⁴ This inception of the *reality principle* proved to be a momentous step.

1) First, the new demands necessitated a series of adjustments in the psychic apparatus, which, due to our insufficient or uncertain knowledge, we can deal with only in passing here.

The increased significance of external reality heightened in turn the significance of the sense organs directed towards that outside world, and also of the *consciousness* attached to these, which now learnt how to discern sensory qualities in addition to the qualities of pleasure and unpleasure, previously its only concern. A specific function of *attention* was set up with the task of periodically scanning the outside world in order to assimilate its data in advance, should an urgent inner need arise. This activity seeks out sensory impressions rather than waiting for them to occur. Probably at the same time, a system of *retention* was set up with the task of storing the results of this periodic activity of consciousness, an element of what we call *memory*.

In place of repression, which excluded certain of the emerging

ideas – those deemed unpleasurable – from being invested with energy, there arose a process of impartial *judgement*, whose task it was to decide if a particular idea was true or false – that is, corresponded with reality or not – a decision reached via comparisons made with memory traces of reality.

Motor discharge, which under the rule of the pleasure principle had served to relieve the psychic apparatus from increases in stimulation by means of innervations sent inside the body (physical gestures, expressions of emotion), was now given a new function, being deployed to make expedient alterations to external reality. It was transformed into *action*.

It now became necessary to hold motor discharge (action) in check, and this was achieved via the *thought process*, which evolved from basic ideation. Thought became endowed with qualities that enabled the psychic apparatus to tolerate the increase in tension from stimuli while discharge was deferred. A thought process is essentially a trial run of an action, displacing smaller quantities of invested energy and involving a low expenditure (discharge) of these. For this purpose, freely displaceable investments of energy had to be converted into fixed ones, which was achieved by raising the level of the whole process of energy investment. Thought – in so far as it went beyond simple ideation and dealt with the relations between object-impressions – was probably originally unconscious and did not acquire qualities perceptible to consciousness until it became linked to the memory traces of words.

2) A general tendency of our psychic apparatus, which can be traced back to the economic principle of conserving expenditure, seems to manifest itself in the tenacity with which we cling to existing sources of pleasure and the difficulty we have in giving these up. At the inception of the reality principle, one kind of thought activity split away, remaining exempt from reality-testing and continuing to obey only the pleasure principle.⁵ This is *fantasizing*, which begins with children's play, then later, as *daydreaming*, ceases to rely on actual objects.

3) The transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle with all its ensuing ramifications for the psyche, schematically

confined here to a single sentence, is actually achieved neither all at once nor along a uniform front. While the ego drives are undergoing this development, the sexual drives diverge in a highly significant way. The sexual drives initially behave auto-erotically, finding their satisfaction in the subject's own body and therefore never experiencing the state of frustration that necessitated the introduction of the reality principle. Later, when they do begin the process of finding an object, this is promptly interrupted by the long latency period that delays sexual development until puberty. As a result of these two factors – auto-erotism and latency – the sexual drive is arrested in its psychic development and continues to be ruled for much longer by the pleasure principle, in many people never managing to free itself from this at all.

As a result of these conditions, a closer relationship is established, on the one hand, between the sexual drive and fantasizing and, on the other, between the ego drives and the activities of consciousness. This relationship strikes us, in healthy and neurotic people alike, as a very intimate one, even if the above considerations of developmental psychology show it to be *secondary*. The continuing effects of auto-erotism make it possible for the easier, instantaneous satisfaction of fantasizing about the sexual object to be retained for so long in place of real satisfaction, which involves making efforts and tolerating delays. Repression remains all-powerful in the realm of fantasy; it is able to inhibit ideas *in statu nascendi* – before they reach consciousness – if their being invested with energy could cause a release of unpleasure. This is the weak spot in our psychic organization that can be used to bring already rational thought processes back under the sway of the pleasure principle. Thus an essential element in the psyche's predisposition to neurosis results from the delay in educating the sexual drive to take account of reality, and from the conditions that make this delay possible.

4) Just as the pleasure-ego can do nothing but *wish*, pursue pleasure and avoid unpleasure, so the reality-ego has no other task than to strive for what is *useful* and to protect itself from what is harmful.⁶ By taking over from the pleasure principle, the reality

principle is really just safeguarding it, not deposing it. A momentary pleasure with uncertain consequences is given up, but only in order to obtain, by the new approach, a more secure pleasure later on. Still, the endopsychic impact of this transition has been so powerful that it is reflected in a specific religious myth. The doctrine that the – voluntary or enforced – renunciation of earthly pleasures will be rewarded in the afterlife is simply the mythopoetic projection of this psychic transformation. Following this principle to its logical conclusion, religions have been able to bring about the absolute renunciation of pleasure in this life in return for the promise of recompense in a future existence; by so doing they have not conquered the pleasure principle. Science comes closest to achieving this conquest, but scientific work, too, provides intellectual pleasure and promises practical gain eventually.

5) Education can without question be described as an impetus to overcoming the pleasure principle and replacing it with the reality principle; thus it assists the process of development undergone by the ego. For this purpose, it uses the educators' love as a form of reward, and therefore goes awry when a spoilt child believes it possesses this love anyway and cannot lose it under any circumstances.

6) Art brings about a reconciliation of the two principles in a unique way. The artist is originally someone who, unable to come to terms with the renunciation of drive satisfaction initially demanded by reality, turns away from it and gives free rein to erotic and ambitious wishes in his fantasy life. Thanks to special gifts, however, he finds his way back to reality from this fantasy world by shaping his fantasies into new kinds of reality, which are appreciated by people as valid representations of the real world. Thus in a certain way he actually becomes the hero, king, creator, favourite he wanted to be, without having to make the enormous detour of actually changing the outside world. But he can achieve this only because other people feel the same dissatisfaction he does at the renunciations imposed by reality, and this dissatisfaction, a result of the transition from pleasure principle to reality principle, is itself an aspect of reality.⁷

7) As the ego undergoes the transformation from *pleasure-ego* into *reality-ego*, the sexual drives undergo the changes that lead from initial auto-eroticism, through various intermediate phases, to object-love in the service of the reproductive function. If it is true that every stage along each of these two courses of development can become the site of a predisposition towards subsequent neurotic illness, it seems likely that the form this illness takes (*the choice of neurosis*) will depend on which phase of ego or libido development the predisposing arrest occurred in. The – as yet uninvestigated – chronological characteristics of these two developments, the possible variations in their respective rates of progress, thus take on a whole new significance.

8) The strangest characteristic of unconscious (repressed) processes, to which the investigator can become accustomed only by dint of great self-discipline, results from their total disregard for reality-testing; thought-reality is equated with external reality, the wish with its fulfilment, just as occurs spontaneously under the rule of the old pleasure principle. For this reason it is extremely difficult to distinguish between unconscious fantasies and memories that have become unconscious. But we should never be tempted to apply the criteria of reality to repressed psychic formations by, say, underestimating the role played by fantasies in the creation of symptoms just because they are not real, or by attributing a neurotic feeling of guilt to some other source because no actual crime can be ascertained. We have to use the currency that prevails in the country we are exploring – in our case, the *neurotic currency*. Suppose, for example, we try to decipher the following dream. A man, who had looked after his father during his long and agonizing fatal illness, reports having repeatedly dreamt in the months following his death: *his father was alive again and was talking with him as usual. But at the same time he felt extremely distressed that his father was indeed dead and was just unaware of the fact.* The only way to make this absurd-sounding dream comprehensible is to add, after 'that his father was indeed dead', the words 'as he had wished' or 'as a result of his wish', and, at the end, the words 'that he had wished for it'. The dream-thought, then, is as follows: It

distresses him to remember how he was driven to wishing for his father's death (as a release) while he was still alive, and how awful it would be if his father had sensed this. So we are dealing with the familiar case of self-reproach after the loss of a loved one, the reproach in this instance stemming from the significance of the death-wish against the father in infancy.

The shortcomings of this little essay – more introduction than exposition – are perhaps only slightly excused if I insist they were inevitable. In the few sentences on the psychic consequences of adapting to the reality principle, I had to touch on ideas that I would have preferred to hold back for now, and which will certainly require a great deal of effort to substantiate. Still, I hope well-disposed readers will recognize where in this work, too, I have had to bow to the reality principle.

(1911)

Notes

1. [P.] Janet [*Les névroses*, Paris] (1909).
2. Otto Rank has recently pointed out a remarkably clear intimation of this causality in Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. (See Rank ['Schopenhauer über den Wahnsinn', *Zentbl. Psychoanal.* 1], 1910.)
3. The state of sleep replicates psychic life as it was before the recognition of reality, a prerequisite of sleep being the deliberate shutting out of reality (the sleep-wish).
4. I shall try to flesh out this schematic account with a few further remarks: It will rightly be objected that any organization devoted entirely to the pleasure principle, neglecting the reality of the outside world, could not survive for even the shortest time and so could not have arisen in the first place. Our recourse to a fiction like this can, however, be justified if we point out that the suckling infant very nearly embodies just such a psychic system, if we just include the maternal care. It probably hallucinates the fulfilment of its inner needs, then betrays its displeasure at the increasing stimulus and continued absence of satisfaction through the motor discharge

of crying and flailing about, upon which it actually receives the satisfaction it had hallucinated. Later as a child it learns to use these discharge outlets as a deliberate means of expression. Since nursing is the prototype of all subsequent child-care, the rule of the pleasure principle can really come to an end only with a complete psychic detachment from the parents. – A nice example of a psychic system cut off from the stimuli of the outside world, able to satisfy even its nutritional requirements autistically (to use Bleuler's term), is offered by the bird embryo with its food supply enclosed within the eggshell, maternal care being restricted to the provision of warmth. – I shall regard it as less a correction than an elaboration of the above scheme if it is required to include devices that enable the system living by the pleasure principle to withdraw from the stimuli of the real world. These devices simply correspond to 'repression', which treats inner unpleasurable stimuli as if they were external, projecting them into the outside world.

5. Just as a nation whose wealth is based on exploiting its natural resources sets aside a specific area, like Yellowstone Park, to be preserved in its wild state and spared from the changes brought about by civilization.
6. The superiority of the reality-ego over the pleasure-ego is aptly expressed in Bernard Shaw's words: "To be able to choose the line of greatest advantage instead of yielding in the direction of least resistance." (*Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy*.)
7. Cf. similar in O. Rank [*Der Künstler, Ansatz zu einer Sexualpsychologie*, Leipzig and Vienna] (1907).