

## NEGATION

THE manner in which our patients bring forward their associations during the work of analysis gives us an opportunity for making some interesting observations. 'Now you'll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I've no such intention.' We realize that this is a rejection, by projection, of an idea that has just come up. Or: 'You ask who this person in the dream can be. It's *not* my mother.' We emend this to: 'So it is his mother.' In our interpretation, we take the liberty of disregarding the negation and of picking out the subject-matter alone of the association. It is as though the patient had said: 'It's true that my mother came into my mind as I thought of this person, but I don't feel inclined to let the association count.'<sup>1</sup>

There is a very convenient method by which we can sometimes obtain a piece of information we want about unconscious repressed material. 'What', we ask, 'would you consider the most unlikely imaginable thing in that situation? What do you think was furthest from your mind at that time?' If the patient falls into the trap and says what he thinks is most incredible, he almost always makes the right admission. A neat counter-part to this experiment is often met with in an obsessional neurotic who has already been initiated into the meaning of his symptoms. 'I've got a new obsessive idea,' he says, 'and it occurred to me at once that it might mean so and so. But no; that can't be true, or it couldn't have occurred to me.' What he is repudiating, on grounds picked up from his treatment, is, of course, the correct meaning of the obsessive idea.

Thus the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is *negated*.<sup>2</sup> Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is

<sup>1</sup> [Freud had drawn attention to this in (among other places) the 'Rat Man' analysis (1909d), *Standard Ed.*, 10, 183 n.]

<sup>2</sup> [The German '*verneinen*' is here translated by 'to negate' instead of by the more usual 'to deny', in order to avoid confusion with the German '*verleugnen*', which has also in the past been rendered by 'to deny'. In this edition 'to disavow' has in general been used for the latter German word. See the footnote on this point in 'The Infantile Genital Organization' (1923e), p. 143 above.]

## DIE VERNEINUNG

## (a) GERMAN EDITIONS:

- 1923 *Imago*, 11 (3), 217-21.  
 1926 *Psychoanalyse der Neurosen*, 199-204.  
 1928 *G.S.*, 11, 3-7.  
 1931 *Theoretische Schriften*, 399-404.  
 1948 *G.W.*, 14, 11-15.

## (b) ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

## 'Negation'

- 1925 *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 6 (4), 367-71. (Tr. Joan Riviere.)  
 1950 *C.P.*, 5, 181-5. (Revision of above.)

The present translation is a modified version of the one published in 1950. The translation of 1950 is reprinted in D. Rapaport, *Organization and Pathology of Thought*, New York, 1951.

We are told by Ernest Jones (1957, 125) that this was written in July, 1925. The subject had, however, evidently been in Freud's thoughts for some time, as is shown by the footnote added by him to the 'Dora' case history in 1923. (See p. 239 below.) The paper is one of his most succinct. Though primarily it deals with a special point of metapsychology, yet in its opening and closing passages it touches upon technique. It will be seen from the references in the footnotes that both of these aspects of the paper had a long previous history.

Extracts from the earlier (1925) translation of this paper were included in Rickman's *General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud* (1937, 63-7).

already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed. We can see how in this the intellectual function is separated from the affective process. With the help of negation only one consequence of the process of repression is undone—the fact, namely, of the ideational content of what is repressed not reaching consciousness. The outcome of this is a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists.<sup>1</sup> In the course of analytic work we often produce a further, very important and somewhat strange variant of this situation. We succeed in conquering the negation as well, and in bringing about a full intellectual acceptance of the repressed; but the repressive process itself is not yet removed by this.

Since to affirm or negate the content of thoughts is the task of the function of intellectual judgement, what we have just been saying has led us to the psychological origin of that function. To negate something in a judgement is, at bottom, to say: 'This is something which I should prefer to repress.' A negative judgement is the intellectual substitute for repression;<sup>2</sup> its 'no' is the hall-mark of repression, a certificate of origin—like, let us say, 'Made in Germany'.<sup>3</sup> With the help of the symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions of repression and enriches itself with material that is indispensable for its proper functioning.

The function of judgement is concerned in the main with two sorts of decisions. It affirms or disaffirms the possession by a thing of a particular attribute; and it asserts or disputes that a presentation has an existence in reality.<sup>4</sup> The attribute to be

<sup>1</sup> The same process is at the root of the familiar superstition that boasting is dangerous. 'How nice not to have had one of my headaches for so long.' But this is in fact the first announcement of an attack, of whose approach the subject is already sensible, although he is as yet unwilling to believe it. [Freud's attention had first been drawn to this explanation by one of his earliest patients, Frau Cécilie M. Cf. the long footnote on the subject in the first of Freud's case histories in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895d), *Standard Ed.*, 2, 76.]

<sup>2</sup> [Freud's earliest statement of this idea seems to have been in his book on jokes (1905c), *Standard Ed.*, 8, 175. It re-appears in the paper on 'The Two Principles of Mental Functioning' (1911b), *ibid.*, 12, 221, and in the metapsychological paper on 'The Unconscious' (1915e), *ibid.*, 14, 186.]

<sup>3</sup> [In English in the original.]      <sup>4</sup> [This is explained below, p. 237.]

decided about may originally have been good or bad, useful or harmful. Expressed in the language of the oldest—the oral—instinctual impulses, the judgement is: 'I should like to eat this', or 'I should like to spit it out'; and, put more generally: 'I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.' That is to say: 'It shall be inside me' or 'it shall be outside me'. As I have shown elsewhere, the original pleasure-ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad. What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external are, to begin with, identical.<sup>1</sup>

The other sort of decision made by the function of judgement—as to the real existence of something of which there is a presentation (reality-testing)—is a concern of the definitive reality-ego, which develops out of the initial pleasure-ego. It is now no longer a question of whether what has been perceived (a thing) shall be taken into the ego or not, but of whether something which is in the ego as a presentation can be re-discovered in perception (reality) as well. It is, we see, once more a question of *external* and *internal*. What is unreal, merely a presentation and subjective, is only internal; what is real is also there *outside*. In this stage of development regard for the pleasure principle has been set aside. Experience has shown the subject that it is not only important whether a thing (an object of satisfaction for him) possesses the 'good' attribute and so deserves to be taken into his ego, but also whether it is there in the external world, so that he can get hold of it whenever he needs it. In order to understand this step forward we must recollect that all presentations originate from perceptions and are repetitions of them. Thus originally the mere existence of a presentation was a guarantee of the reality of what was presented. The antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist from the first. It only comes into being from the fact that thinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind once more something that has once been perceived, by reproducing it as a presentation without the external object having still to be there. The first and immediate aim, therefore, of reality-testing is, not to *find* an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to *re-find* such an object, to

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion in 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes' (1915e) [*Standard Ed.*, 14, 136.—Freud took up this question again in the first chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930a).]

convince oneself that it is still there.<sup>1</sup> Another capacity of the power of thinking offers a further contribution to the differentiation between what is subjective and what is objective. The reproduction of a perception as a presentation is not always a faithful one; it may be modified by omissions, or changed by the merging of various elements. In that case, reality-testing has to ascertain how far such distortions go. But it is evident that a precondition for the setting up of reality-testing is that objects shall have been lost which once brought real satisfaction.

Judging is the intellectual action which decides the choice of motor action, which puts an end to the postponement due to thought and which leads over from thinking to acting. This postponement due to thought has also been discussed by me elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> It is to be regarded as an experimental action, a motor palpating, with small expenditure of discharge. Let us consider where the ego has used a similar kind of palpating before, at what place it learnt the technique which it now applies in its processes of thought. It happened at the sensory end of the mental apparatus, in connection with sense perceptions. For, on our hypothesis, perception is not a purely passive process. The ego periodically sends out small amounts of cathexis into the perceptual system, by means of which it samples the external stimuli, and then after every such tentative advance it draws back again.<sup>3</sup>

The study of judgement affords us, perhaps for the first time,

<sup>1</sup> [Much of this is foreshadowed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)<sup>4</sup>, *Standard Ed.*, 5, 565-7, and, more particularly, in the 1895 'Project' (Freud, 1950a; Section 16 of Part I). Here the 'object' to be refound is the mother's breast. Cf., too, a sentence which occurs in a similar connection in Section 5 of the *Three Essays* (1905d), *Standard Ed.*, 7, 222: 'The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it']

<sup>2</sup> [See *The Ego and the Id* (1923b), p. 55 above. But Freud made the point repeatedly, beginning with the 'Project' of 1895 (at the end of Section 17 of Part I). A list of references will be found in Lecture XXXII of the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933a). Incidentally, the whole topic of judgement is discussed at great length and on much the same lines as the present ones, in Sections 16, 17 and 18 of Part I of the 'Project']

<sup>3</sup> [See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920g), *Standard Ed.*, 18, 28, and 'A Note upon the "Mystic Writing-Pad"', (1925a), p. 231 above. It may be remarked that in this last passage Freud suggests not that the ego but that the *unconscious* 'stretches out feelers, through the medium of the system *Pept.-Cs.*, towards the external world']

an insight into the origin of an intellectual function from the interplay of the primary instinctual impulses. Judging is a continuation, along lines of expediency, of the original process by which the ego took things into itself or expelled them from itself, according to the pleasure principle. The polarity of judgement appears to correspond to the opposition of the two groups of instincts which we have supposed to exist. Affirmation—as a substitute for uniting—belongs to Eros; negation—the successor to expulsion—belongs to the instinct of destruction. The general wish to negate, the negativism which is displayed by some psychotics, is probably to be regarded as a sign of a defusion of instincts that has taken place through a withdrawal of the libidinal components.<sup>1</sup> But the performance of the function of judgement is not made possible until the creation of the symbol of negation has endowed thinking with a first measure of freedom from the consequences of repression and, with it, from the compulsion of the pleasure principle.

This view of negation fits in very well with the fact that in analysis we never discover a 'no' in the unconscious and that recognition of the unconscious on the part of the ego is expressed in a negative formula. 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 the words 'I didn't think that', or 'I didn't (ever) think of that'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Cf. a remark in Chapter VI of the book on Jokes (1905c), *Standard Ed.*, 8, 175, footnote 2.]

<sup>2</sup> [Freud had made this point in almost the same words in a footnote added in 1923 to the 'Dora' analysis (1905e), *Standard Ed.*, 7, 57. He once more returned to it in his very late paper on 'Constructions in Analysis' (1937d).]