

THE PROBLEM OF THE PRECONSCIOUS

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The Unconscious is a rather thoroughly explored domain of the psyche. Having attracted much less interest through the years the Preconscious, in contrast, stands out as a rather empty concept. In practical analytic work preconscious conflicts tend to be treated as if they were unconscious, their special characteristics thereby being over-looked and their technical implications neglected. By outlining the metapsychology of the Preconscious this paper tries to establish its essential technical implications.

DYNAMIC AND TOPOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS

Although Freud uses the concept a few times in his earlier writings, it is not until in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) that the Preconscious is systematically organized as part of the topographic model. Preconscious psychical contents are here characterized as having free access to consciousness, provided they have a sufficient intensity and a proper cathectic state. Preconscious ideas not fulfilling these conditions cannot be recalled, like a name that all of a sudden elusively evades us. Or they are simply not thought about, casually over-looked (as it were, not unlike this concept itself). For Freud preconsciousness 'most of his life' was very much a question of attention cathexis, not one of defensively determined cathectic conditions.

¹ For his final (1938) view, see below!

However, we can hardly fail to notice, that conflicts affected by *splitting*² have a cathectic state quite similar to preconscious ones. The split-off (i.e. the for the moment not expressed part of a conflict defensively handled by splitting) also has access to consciousness and may also be attended to. But even when attended to, the split-off is not properly considered and its significance readily over-looked, because it "has no emotional relevance" (Kernberg 1976, p. 31). It may be questionable whether the split-off at the present state of psychoanalytic theory is to be considered preconscious. However, since our interest here is mainly a pragmatic-technical one, we will leave this question unanswered and rather ask ourselves if, anyway, there are reasons to consider the split-off this way. As psychical contents with access to consciousness the split-off seems to be dynamically closer to the Conscious than to the Unconscious, especially if we consider that with its access to consciousness goes an inherent lack of symbolism. Thus the split-off is either explicit or clearly implicated and readily available by inference; it may be more or less veiled, but it is never encoded. Hence it seems practical to group the split-off as well as the Preconscious proper together with the Conscious as the *(Pre-)Conscious*, which then covers all psychical contents having a non-symbolic form. Then we may say, that *at the neurotic level of structuralization (where splitting is a regressive phenomenon) pathogenic conflicts are unconscious, while at the borderline level they are (pre-)conscious.*

² *Splitting* is throughout this paper used in Kernberg's (1976) limited and restricted sense implying a defence by which conflicting primitive self- and object-representations are kept apart in such a way as to only permit the individual to identify with them alternatively, which means that the complementary and for the moment not expressed part of the primitive object relation has to be projected.

STRUCTURAL ASPECTS

We have arrived at the conclusion that pathogenic (pre-)conscious conflicts are confined to the borderline level and have a non-symbolic form. These qualities indicate that they may involve the Ego and the Super-Ego structures, but not the Id. This is in accordance with Freud, who in *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (1938) recognized that "large portions of the ego, and particularly of the super-ego...cannot be denied the characteristic of preconsciousness" (p. 162), and further, that "the secondary process...governs the course of events in the preconscious, in the ego" (p. 164).

Splitting underlies all pathology on the borderline level. It is regularly combined with other mechanisms of defence, including projective and introjective processes as well as defensive implementation of confusion. These are defences that testify to imperfections of Ego delimitation and Super-Ego structuralization, which confirms that *the (pre-)conscious conflicts involve the Ego and the Super-Ego structures.*

GENETIC ASPECTS

Having decided that pathogenic (pre-)conscious conflicts, based on splitting as they are, belong to the borderline pathology, we may remind ourselves that this pathology is founded in a developmental interval reaching from somewhere in the symbiotic stage to the attainment of object constancy. In other words: *(pre-)conscious conflicts deal with the problems of separation and individuation.* Unsolved residues generally indicate a lack of separation and individuation in the primary objects. ~~That is to say, that it is vir-~~ That is to say, that it is vir-

tually impossible to complete the process of separation and individuation in interaction with more or less merging primary objects, unless there are more developed parental substitutes to draw upon. However, the specific factors and mechanisms responsible for the interference with the developmental processes of separation and individuation are in this principal and general overview felt to be of less interest than *the universal challenges of becoming a subject*, which will be outlined below.

INTERACTIONAL ASPECTS

In the analytic setting (pre-)conscious conflicts first of all come to the fore as *deficiencies of the working alliance*. In my experience such deficiencies are always indicative of a *split relation to the ground rules* of one or both parties of the analytic dyad. On the part of the analysand splitting with regard to the ground rules is but one (though the most important) version of his phase-specific problems confirming that he has not as yet attained object constancy. This version offers the main avenue to the borderline analysand's pathology, and thus it plays a role analogous to that of transference. However, it is of utmost importance to realize that, in contrast to the neurotic conflicts which are transferred symbolically, the (pre-)conscious ones are transferred *directly* (in Winnicott's 1971 sense), i.e. non-symbolically. Such direct transference fortunately assumes characteristic and thus readily identifiable communicative expressions: Type B- and C-communication according to Langs (1978, 1981). In short, Type B is communication by means of projective identification and acting out, both to a minor degree derivative and thus symbolic, while Type C is an almost totally non-derivative attempt at non-communication.

Langs (ibid.) emphasizes the existence of a *spiralling conscious and unconscious interaction* between analyst and analysand supposedly relevant regardless of the degree of structuralization of the parties involved, the unconscious part of which is encoded and to a large extent made up of derivative responses to unconscious perceptions. In opposition to him I maintain that on the borderline level such symbolic interaction only appears in rare flashes, due to the fact that it is a whole object phenomenon (Davidson 1985). When the problems of separation and individuation have been solved to a degree permitting us to claim the attainment of object constancy and whole object relatedness, the unconscious and thus symbolic part of the interaction described by Langs assumes an increasing importance and soon becomes just as decisive as he has demonstrated (1982). But before that, the interplay between analyst and analysand is essentially (pre-)conscious and non-symbolic. In Winnicott's (1971) words, the therapeutic communication is then *direct* in the absence of a *potential space*, and before anything else can be accomplished the patient has to learn *the art of playing*. However, as Ogden (1985) points out in his paper *On Potential Space*, the creation and interpretation of symbols, upon which this art is based, presupposes a *subject*. So, the developmental lack or regressive loss of one's subjectivity corresponds to a non-development or collapse of the potential space, the manifestations of which is either a direct way of communicating by means of projective identifications and acting out or a defensive usage of non-communication (Type C and defensive implementation of confusion). Learning *the art of playing* is then equivalent to going through the process of separation and individuation and becoming a subject. Thus, on the borderline level the analyst's interactional responsibility towards the analysand consists in his maintaining and when necessary his regaining of his

subjectivity³. *Then, on the borderline level the basic difference between a pathogenic and a therapeutic interaction is a question of limits rather than one of symbolic meaning.*

ECONOMIC AND ADAPTATIONAL ASPECTS

Due to the involvement of splitting, acting out, and projective as well as introjective mechanisms (pre-)conscious conflicts have the same deleterious effects upon libidinal economy and adaptation as these processes.

Many authors have described pathological narcissism and moral masochism and the adaptive problems associated with their special kinds of object relatedness. However, to the best of my knowledge no one has ever pointed out that the adaptational problems due to the pre-conscious borderline pathology involved actually belong to one of the two. *Pathological narcissism and moral masochism are, in fact, the main strategies for coping with (pre-)conscious conflicts.* (The choice of strategy seems to depend upon whether the castration anxiety is of a masculine or a female type.)

* (Cf. Baranger et al:s (1983) definition of *process* as matter of detecting and destroying *bastions* of "reciprocally 'castle(d)' subject and object" (p. 91.)

(PRE-)CONSCIOUS CONFLICTS AS EXISTENTIAL

Analysts tend to be divided in relation to existentialism. As an example of this Chessick (1984), upon noting that "Sartre and the existentialists claim we are condemned to be free and 'embrace' this freedom" (p. 237), admits that "intellectually we all lean toward Sartre and would like to believe that man has these powers; but reality seems to lean toward Freud because of the tremendous power of human instinctual drives" (ibid). There are three reasons why this argument does not quite convince me: 1) Both the abstract and the summary of Chessick's paper stress the *epistemological* differences as the real ground for the supposed incompatibility of psychoanalysis and existentialism; (2) Chessick turns these differences into a question of *either - or*, as if one discipline could not come up with anything valid for another; and (3) However strong the drives may be, we all know that there are but very few (if any) drive derivatives that cannot be controlled.

To give but one more example, Avery Weisman (1965) in *The Existential Core of Psychoanalysis* is scornful towards existentialists. Nevertheless he claims that analysts have an existential posture. Analysts are said to realize what existentialists supposedly do not: that responsibility is a function of reality testing. Weisman proves the validity of this rather self-evidential thesis, but he fails to recognize that there is a reciprocity involved. To be held responsible does in fact promote reality testing as far as non-psychotics are concerned. (Kernberg [1976] hints at this when describing different reactions to a confrontational approach to defensive maneuvers: the borderline patient improves his Ego functioning, while the prepsychotic becomes more overt psychotic.) Questions of responsibility are pinpointed in frame issues, but Weisman does not pay them

much attention. It seems to me then, that Weisman unwittingly defends a *self-deceptive core of psychoanalysis*.

Within the existentialist tradition of philosophical thinking there are two names of special importance: Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. The former has inspired Medard Boss and Ludwig Binswanger, the fathers of the *Daseinsanalyse*. According to Boss (1963) the Daseinsanalyst claims to integrate psychoanalysis with Heidegger's *ontological analysis*. But in so doing the libido theory, the concept of neurosis, the transference phenomenon and the interpretation of symbols are discarded, which makes this so-called integration seem more like an attempt at annihilation.

As for Jean-Paul Sartre things are almost completely reversed. He is an outspoken atheist; he is manifestly opposed to psychoanalysis (which he regards as a self-deceptive attempt at exoneration in terms of psychical determinism); and his monumental work *Being and Nothingness* (1943), manifestly an attempt to do away with psychoanalysis, "is, in fact, a fantastic project unconsciously aimed at improving psychoanalysis and its ways of liberating man" (Börjesson 1985, p. 93, my transl.). This applies in particular to Sartre's conception of *man's existential predicaments*, which turn out to be quite a pertinent set of criterions of separation and individuation. These are (Sartre 1943, 1946):

- (1) **Subjectivity**
- (2) **Freedom of choice**
- (3) **Existential responsibility**
- (4) **Existential anguish**

Ad 1: "If God does not exist, there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence ...[and] that being is man ...[whom] to begin with...is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. If...it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is" (Sartre 1946, p. 28-29).

Ad 2: "When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men... To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse" (op. cit, p. 29).

Ad 3: "If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves" (ibid.). "In fashioning myself I fashion man" (op. cit. p. 30). "Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole" (op. cit. p. 29).

Ad 4: "This may enable us to understand what is meant by...anguish, abandonment and despair" (op. cit. p. 30)).

Paradoxically the human freedom is so total and so compelling that it is inescapable; choosing not to choose is, in fact, also a choice. Although choosing is actually unavoidable, we may nevertheless deceive ourselves that we have no choice. Such *self-deception* is invariably based upon *splitting* in various combinations with other mechanisms of defence, such as denial, idealization, projection and fantasies of omnipotence or impotence. Since *splitting* is inherent

in self-deceptive attempts at disregarding man's existential predicaments, the individual's awareness of the split-off part of the conflict may be purely intellectual, remote and dim. This awareness may be reduced to 'knowing that one has known' and the recollection of the split-off may demand considerable effort; but the individual always has some kind of remembrance of it. When confronted with the split-off part of the existential conflict the patient typically responds: "Actually, I have known this all the time but never paid much attention to it."

To sum up, the existential predicaments are the prerogatives of our specifically human kind of existence as separate individuals. Existential conflicts express the human reluctance to accept these predicaments. As clashes between wishful thinking and reality, between illusion and actuality, they constitute the ultimate obstacle⁴ to be overcome before the secondary process is completely and permanently established. The existential is actual⁵ and factual (in contradis-

⁴ This obstacle is Freud's (1915) enigmatic "*second censorship*, located between the systems Pcs. and Cs....proved beyond question" (p. 193, my italics) but nevertheless lost in his further writings. Identified by Basch (1981) as *disavowal* and as such supposedly "the main defence of *narcissistic character disorders*" (p. 171, my italics), and by Sandler & Sandler (1983) as an agency oriented "towards the avoidance of shame, embarrassment and humiliation" (p. 421, italics in the original) by means of *masochistic compliancy* regarding "*the here-and-now thoughts and feelings*" (p. 423, my italics), we are finally in the fortunate position to be able to solve the riddle. *The enigmatic second censorship is simply the will power executed by the subject.*

⁵ Cf. the 'actual' neuroses of Freud!

tion to the neurotic, which is symbolic and illusory); it is irreducible (in contradistinction to the neurotic, which is interpretable); and thus it has to be accepted and lamented. *Existential conflicts are (pre-)conscious and cannot be dissolved through interpretations, only resolved by acceptance and mourning.*

TECHNICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXISTENTIAL CONFLICTS

The existential having been defined as (pre-)conscious and non-neurotic is, of course, then also non-symbolic. This quality is the basis of the first technical implication of the existential conflicts: *they require a non-interpretive approach.* The existential calls for holding, i.e. containing and safe-guarding of the framework.

Containment has been creditably described by Ogden (1982) and others. The importance of the secure frame has been quite convincingly described by Langs (1978, 1982), although his views on safe-guarding of the framework seem somewhat incomplete. Langs fails to distinguish between the unconscious and neurotic on the one hand and the (pre-)conscious and non-neurotic on the other. Then it is only natural, that he also fails to recognize, that there are preconscious conflicts in every frame issue. If this is correct, then the second implication of the existential would be this: *the analysand should be confronted with his conflicts and compromises with the ground rules, and their existential basis should be clarified and mourned.* This is the necessary handling of all conflicts where splitting is involved, because not until the split has been bridged - and the (f-)actual and irreducible has been accepted and lamented - not until then will the neurotic conflicts be accessible for effective interpretation. This gives us the third and fourth interrelated technical implications of

the existential conflicts: *Frame issues should be assigned absolute priority and reality addressed before distortions (Langs 1978).*

There are two main reasons why existential conflicts block the interpretive work with neurotic conflicts (Davidson 1985): (1) Unsettled existential issues tend to impair the working alliance to the point where it fails to provide the necessary basis for the acceptance and integration of interpretations. (This is only natural, since existential or preconscious conflicts crystallizing at the framework constitute the frame issues); and (2) As long as splitting processes prevail, interpretations are likely to be subjected to these. Therefore, part object relatedness is very poor soil for verbalized interpretations (Ogden 1982).

Since the acquisition of whole object relatedness is a gradual process initiated by the onset of the *depressive position*, there is from then on a slow but steady increase in the ability to integrate verbalized interpretations of derivative contents. The appearance of unconscious derivatives in response to verbalized interpretations, by which their validity may be established, indicates that the development of this integrative ability has begun. However, as long as splitting prevails the integration of verbalized interpretations is most incomplete, and the offering of verbalized interpretations may even have disruptive effects. So, I fully share Ogden's (ibid.) view, that the value of offering verbalized interpretations on this developmental level is questionable.

HYPOTHESES

What so far has been said may be summarized in the following hypotheses (Davidson 1986), namely:

(1) that there are problems of an existential (i.e. non-neurotic) nature;

(2) that existential problems are (pre-)conscious and therefore are communicated manifestly and directly;

(3) that the existential belongs to the problems of separation and individuation;

(4) that Type C-communication - and to some extent also Type B - functions as a defence against existential problems;

(5) that existential problems crystallizing around the therapeutic framework are acted out as breaches of and compromises with the ground rules;

(6) that therapeutic work with frame issues above all requires D-interventions (i.e. interventions directed at existential problems manifesting themselves as breaches of and compromises with the ground rules);

(7) that D-interventions must be shaped as confrontations and clarifications;

(8) that therapeutic work with frame issues results in Type D-communication resembling Type C but lacking its defensive properties;

(9) that the process of defining, concretizing, accepting and lamenting the existential predicaments are communicated through Type D-communication;

(10) that Type D-communication works over narcissistic and masochistic problems;

(11) that successful working-over of narcissistic and masochistic problems effects a delimitation of the Ego and a structuralization of the Super-Ego;

(12) that the delimitation of the Ego and the structuralization of the Super-Ego is basic to the process of separation and individuation, which leads to object constancy and the emergence of the subject;

(13) that symbolic communication, symbolic interaction and symbolic transference are functions of the individual's capacity to relate to whole objects and hence is not established as his main way of relating to the analyst until he reaches object constancy;

(14) that it is such symbolic relatedness that renders the neurotic (in its widest sense) accessible;

(15) that Langs' (1978) *trigger decoding* is applicable only to symbolic relatedness;

(16) that before object constancy is reached, *trigger decoding* is applicable only to rare flashes of symbolic relatedness, its main domain being the developmentally later stages;

(17) that the patient's type of communication (Type A, B, C and D) ought to guide the analyst in his choice of technical approach; and

(18) that such *communicative technique* is more effective than traditional psychoanalytic technique with regard to time as well as clinical results.

CONCLUSIONS

In a previous work (Davidson 1986), which included 65 verbatim recorded sessions with a C-communicative borderline patient and an evaluation of 39 consecutive non-psychotic cases treated before and after the conception of the above-mentioned ideas, I was able to validate all the hypotheses listed above, though admittedly the validation of hypotheses numbers 16 and 18 was somewhat incomplete due to the limited material at hand.

The conclusion is drawn, that the careful distinction between what is interpretable and what is not - i.e. between unconscious and neurotic conflicts at the one hand and (pre-)conscious and non-neurotic ones on the other - is of fundamental significance in psychoanalytic work. One way of making sure that due attention is paid to these distinctions is to let one's interventions continuously be geared by the patient's type of communication.

The implementation of Sartre's existential predicaments as criterions of separation and individuation highlights the (pre-)conscious and non-neurotic quality of most of the conflicts involved. In addition they make it easier for the analyst to consistently employ the will power, the freedom of choice, and the responsibility of the patient.

As has been shown in a previous work (ibid.), the communicative technique derived from the ideas presented speeds up the process of separation and individuation and cuts down the generally lengthy treatments of borderline analysands.

SUMMARY

Conflicts subjected to defences involving splitting should be considered preconscious. Indicative of defects in the Ego delimitation and the Super-Ego structuralization they belong to the problems of separation and individuation. Appearing as imperfections of the working alliance they indicate a split relation to the ground rules. B-communication both expresses and defends against such preconscious conflicts, while C-communication is almost totally defensive. D-communication and D-interventions work over pathological narcissism and moral masochism, which are viewed as the two main adaptational strategies for handling unsolved, pathogenic preconscious conflicts. Sartre's existential predicaments furnish the analyst with useful criteria of the challenges involved. Because (pre-)conscious conflicts are non-symbolic, they call for a non-interpretive approach, i.e. containing and safe-guarding of the framework. The preconscious conflictual components of frame issues cannot be interpreted. Their existential contents need defining and concretizing, acceptance and mourning. A continuous gearing of one's interventions by the patient's type of communication and a consistent employment of his freedom of choice, his free will and his responsibility has been shown to speed up the process of separation and individuation and to cut down the lengthy treatments of borderline analysands.

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