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A Thomistic Explanation of the Neurosis

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The purpose of this paper is to show how repression, the fundamental cause of the neurosis, can be explained in the light of the principles of Thomistic rational psychology. Such an explanation seems to be more satisfactory than that of Freud. To establish this, we will begin with a brief exposition of Freud's position.

I. THE FREUDIAN POSITION ON MAN'S MENTAL STRUCTURE

In order to explain the Freudian notion of repression, it is necessary to give a synopsis of Freud's concept of man's mental structure. Freud distinguished three basic elements in this structure, namely, the id, the ego, and the super-ego; although he did not consider them to be distinct powers or faculties.\(^1\)

The id is the most fundamental element of the structure, the ego and super-ego being merely its extensions. The id is the unconscious, unknown source of the instinctual drives. It is governed by the pleasure principle, seeking satisfaction of these drives regardless of any demands made by external reality. The repressed is part of the id and is cut off from the ego by the resistance of repression.

The ego, an extension of the id, is the "surface" of man's mental structure. Although unconscious elements are present even in the ego, it constitutes what may be called man's conscious self. By its connection to the system of perception, the ego comes into contact with the external world and as a result is guided by the reality principle. The modification introduced by this influence is what essentially distinguishes the ego from the id proper.

The ego serves as a mediator between the id and the external world. It seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and tries to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrainedly in the id. Since the ego controls motor activity which must be utilized if the drives of the id are to attain their goal, the ego can act as a repressive factor.

According to Freud, the ego represents reason and common sense in contrast to the id, which is the source of the passions. He compares the relationship of the ego and the id to that of a rider and his horse.

Although the rider controls the horse to a certain extent, at times he is forced to go where the horse desires.

The super-ego is the last part of the mental structure to come into existence. It is an extension of the ego, but maintains a close relationship to the id and is less firmly connected to consciousness than the ego proper.

The origin of the super-ego lies in the individual’s first and most important identification, his identification with his parents, principally with his father who is taken as a model. Through the super-ego, parental influence is given lifelong expression. As the child matures, the father’s role is carried on by teachers and others in authority. Even in later years, their instructions and prohibitions remain powerful in the super-ego and exercise moral censorship in the form of conscience. Although accessible to later influences, the super-ego always preserves the characteristic derived from its parental origin, namely, its capacity to dominate the ego. As the child was once under a compulsion to obey its parents, so the ego submits to the super-ego. It is generally at the command of the super-ego that the ego carries out its repressions.

The tension between the demands of the super-ego and the actual performances of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt. But the super-ego’s independence of the conscious ego and its link with the unconscious id make possible an unconscious sense of guilt. The ideals of the super-ego can to a great extent remain unconscious and inaccessible to the ego, and there is often communication between the super-ego and unconscious instinctual impulses.

II. THE FREUDIAN THEORY OF REPRESSION

Having considered Freud’s analysis of man’s mental structure, we may now proceed to an explanation of his theory of repression. It is not surprising that Freud’s theory of repression, based as it was upon clinical observation, should have evolved over the years.

In an early work entitled Repression1 written in 1915, Freud states that the essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting something and of keeping it out of consciousness. Repression occurs when the satisfaction of an instinct, which in itself is pleasurable, would be irreconcilable with other claims and purposes. Thus, it would cause pleasure in one part of the mind and pain in another. If the desire to avoid pain is greater than the desire for gratification, the instinctual impulse meets a resistance which seeks to impede it.

Repression occurs in two stages. The primary stage excludes from consciousness the mental presentation of the instinct, i.e., the

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image representing the object which aroused the impulse. The secondary stage consists in an extension of the repression to include mental derivatives of what has been initially repressed. In other words, any closely associated images or trains of thought are likewise repressed and thereby rendered unconscious.

However, repression does not hinder the repressed impulse from continuing to exist in the unconscious and from exerting an influence in the individual’s mental life. Moreover, being withdrawn from conscious influence, repression proceeds to the secondary stage, including more and more derivatives in the repressed material. The impulse itself, cut off from the attainment of its natural goal, may find expression in bizarre forms.

An important aspect of Freud’s theory is that repression is not an event that occurs once, but a continuous process. Since instincts are continuous by nature, the repressed impulse keeps straining toward its goal. Consequently, maintaining the repression requires a constant expenditure of energy, and if this were to cease the repression would fail.

Since Freud did not clarify his views on the structure of the mind until 1923 in his work *The “Ego” and the “Id,”* we do not find these distinctions applied to his initial explanation of repression. However, in his work *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,* written in 1926, they appear prominently.

In the latter work, Freud states that repression occurs when the ego, perhaps at the command of the super-ego, refuses to consent to an instinctual impulse proceeding from the id. As a result, the impulse is inhibited and cannot follow its natural course.

Because of its connection with the perceptual system and the resulting phenomenon of consciousness, the ego exerts considerable influence over processes in the id. The ego receives stimuli not only from the external world, but also from within, and it endeavors by means of the resulting sensations of pleasure and pain to direct the course of mental events. When the ego is opposed to an instinctual process in the id, it has only to utilize the pleasure principle which governs the id and give a “signal of unpleasure” in order to attain its aim.

Just as the ego controls the path to action in regard to the external world, so it controls access to consciousness. In repression it exercises its power in both directions, on the one hand acting upon the instinctual impulse itself impeding the attainment of its goal, and on the other, upon the image arousing the impulse.

Repression is an indication of the strength of the ego, but also of its weakness. If the ego succeeds in protecting itself from a dangerous instinctual impulse through the process of repression, it has certainly

inhibited and damaged the particular part of the *id* concerned; but it has at the same time given the *id* some independence and has renounced some of its own sovereignty. For the repressed material maintains its existence outside the organisation of the *ego* and independently of it. The *ego* loses control over this impulse which is then free to influence mental life unchecked. This is inevitable from the nature of repression, which is, fundamentally, an attempt at flight.

Thus far, Freud has merely developed his theory of repression as stated in his earlier work, but *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* contains two important innovations. One is the recognition that repression does not necessarily involve relegating something to the unconscious. Freud had been led to this conclusion because his early observations were limited to the hysterical neurosis, where this is indeed the case. He found that the perceptual content was forgotten and debarred from being reproduced in memory. But later, when he became familiar with obsessional neuroses he found that pathogenic occurrences are not always forgotten. Because of this discovery, the distinction made earlier between the conscious and the unconscious was diminished in importance.

A second noteworthy innovation regards the origin of anxiety. Earlier, Freud had been of the opinion that anxiety is the result of repression, i.e., that the energy of the repressed impulse is transformed into anxiety. But a further study of phobias enabled him to see that anxiety is the cause of repression, not its effect. The *ego* experiences anxiety because of the instinctual demands of the *id* and as a result initiates the repression.

### III. CRITICISM

Although Freud’s discovery of the mechanism of repression was an indispensable contribution to the understanding of the neurosis, his explanation of repression leaves much to be desired.

We do not find in Freud’s writings a clear distinction between rational and sensory powers, but he attributes to the *ego* certain characteristics of a rational power. Nevertheless, the *ego* cannot simply be equated with a rational power in the Thomistic sense, for Freud considers the *ego* to be merely a portion of the *id*.

Difficulties arise when we consider that man’s rational nature demands subordination of his sensory powers to reason. If this is so, why should conflict between the *ego* and the *id* result in repression and the consequent production of a definitely pathological state? Furthermore, everyone experiences at times rational opposition to certain sensory inclinations. Yet, such resistance does not usually result in a neurosis.

As we have seen, we cannot solve these difficulties by stating that repression results only when something is pushed out of consciousness.
In fact, it seems that there are no satisfactory answers to such questions in the Freudian system.

It appears that what is needed to clarify these obscurities is a more adequate concept of man’s nature and of the distinction among his powers, a concept such as that found in the philosophy of St. Thomas. Here we find clear distinctions between knowing and appetitive powers, between rational and sensory powers, and even between two sensory appetites, the concupiscible and the irascible.

IV. A THOMISTIC EXPLANATION

St. Thomas explains the instrumentality of the irascible appetite with regard to the concupiscible appetite, indicating how the emotions of the irascible appetite rise and terminate in the emotions of the concupiscible appetite and serve to overcome obstacles to the attainment of its goal. Both sensory appetites are subject to reason, which enjoys a “political” rule over them through the operation of the cogitative sense. This is the natural and normal functioning of these powers, and this order must be preserved if man is to maintain his emotional well-being.

A clue as to how such distinctions can legitimately be applied to explain repression may be found in Freud’s contention that anxiety is a cause of repression. Now anxiety is a type of fear, and fear is an emotion of the irascible appetite. It is clear that what is sought by the concupiscible appetite because it is seen as a good may at the same time be feared by the irascible appetite, if from another point of view it is considered an evil.

If this conflict is resolved through rational control, i.e., by the application of a rational judgment, the process is entirely normal because in accord with man’s rational nature. But if the concupiscible appetite is denied its object solely or primarily on the basis of the emotion of fear, this amounts to repression; for one emotion is blocking another, and this is unnatural. By such a procedure, the irascible appetite has usurped the directive function which is the prerogative of the rational powers.

It is in the light of these principles that Dr. Anna Terruwe, a Dutch psychiatrist, explains repression in terms of a conflict between emotions of the two sensory appetites. This conflict usually results in the suppression of a concupiscible emotion by an irascible emotion.

This explanation is well in accord with observations made by Freud. It accounts for the fact that true neuroses originate in child-

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1. Cf. Ia, q.81, a.2.
2. Cf. ibid., a.3.
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hood, for at this time rational control is weak at best, and the child is
governed by his emotions. It explains Freud's contention that the
ideals of the *super-ego*, such as moral precepts, may exert a repressive
influence. This may well happen. The child's difficulty in under­
standing such matters in a rational fashion may lead to adverse emo­
tional reactions. The remedy, of course, is not to eliminate moral
instruction, but to exercise care in the presentation of such precepts to
children.

Lastly, an explanation in terms of Thomistic principles furnishes
greater insight into the pathological character of the neurosis. As
Freud had observed, the repressed emotion, although impeded from
attaining its natural goal, continues to exist in a state of endless
striving. Such a state of unrest does not occur when natural rational
control is exercised. Although the sensory appetites are only imper­
fectly subordinated to reason, the application of rational considera­
tions enables the eventual resolution of any conflict between the sensory
appetites and the rational powers. It is only the unnatural suppres­
sion of one emotion by another that results in a pathological condition.

But there is another factor which contributes to neurotic tension.
The repressing emotion is generally an emotion of the irascible appe­
tite, and as St. Thomas explains,\(^1\) the irascible emotions are by nature
mobile. Since the purpose of the irascible appetite is to overcome
difficulties in the attainment of good and in the avoidance of evil, the
irascible emotions find their natural termination in concupiscible emo­
tions. An irascible emotion always tends toward something else; it
never denotes rest.

Now in the neurosis the repressing emotion must constantly exert
pressure in order to maintain the repression. This means that it, too,
cannot follow its natural course. Hence we see that the tension and
unrest characteristic of the neurosis has a twofold source.

From what has been said, it is clear that the neurosis is the result
of a serious disorder among man’s faculties. Not only has the repress­
ing emotion usurped a prerogative of the rational powers, but the
very mechanism of repression renders impossible any subsequent
rational control over repressed material. Moreover, if the repressing
factor is an irascible emotion, as is generally the case, there is a further
disorder inasmuch as the irascible appetite is by nature meant to
serve as an instrument of the concupiscible appetite. On the sensory
level, primacy belongs to the concupiscible appetite.

In conclusion, the fruitfulness of the application of Thomistic
principles to an understanding of the neurosis is evidenced by the
clinical work done over a period of several years by Dr. Terruwe.
Not only was she able to distinguish two different repressive factors
in obsessive compulsive neuroses, namely, fear and energy (courage),

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1. Cf. *Ia Iae*, q.25, a.1.
and to discover a third type of neurosis which she named the fear neurosis camouflaged by energy, but also to devise a specific method of treatment for each type.

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