

University of Leuven

THE CONCEPT OF NARCISSISM AND FREUD'S MISREPRESENTATION OF HIS THEORY OF INSTINCTS

JAN DE LAENDER

Freud's later writings (from 1920 onwards) present us with a rather misleading picture of the development of his theory of instincts. He tries to create the impression that the distinction between the self-preservative and the sexual instincts ceased to exist in 1914, as a result of the introduction of the theory of narcissism. Actually, the distinction was only dropped in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Probably Freud was driven to this misrepresentation by his disagreement with Jung. When the concept of narcissism was introduced, Jung suggested right away that Freud drop the distinction between the two sets of instincts. But this put Freud in a very awkward position: either he had to reduce the self-preservative instincts to sexuality in which case his theory became pansexualistic, or he had to accept Jung's idea of a general, non-sexual psychical energy, in which case his hard-begotten insights into the special etiological role of sexuality lost all value. There was no solution but to cling stubbornly to the existing classification. In 1920, however, a new instinctual category (the death instinct) was introduced which saved Freud from the former dilemma. Now the self-preservative instincts could be reduced to sexuality without falling into the trap of a pansexual theory. Yet it would have been very unpleasant to recall that for six years Freud had argued with Jung *against* this reduction. So Freud chose to 'simplify' the story and to create the impression that the distinction between the self-preservative and the sexual instincts had been dropped in 1914.

In several of his later writings Freud has provided us with a description of the development of his theory of instincts. At least three of them contain a description which – to put it mildly – is not quite accurate. The inaccuracy is the same in all three cases: Freud creates the impression that the introduction of the theory of narcissism (1914) automatically wiped out the distinction between the instincts for self-preservation and the sexual instincts, i.e. that the former were immediately recognized as being libidinal in nature.

I will try 1. to demonstrate that this is a misrepresentation; 2. to show that it was influenced by Freud's disagreement with Jung.

THE THEORY OF NARCISSISM AND THE CLASSIFICATION OF INSTINCTS

At the time he introduced his theory of narcissism Freud was probably aware of the fact that it could have certain repercussions on his classification of instincts. In his *Totem and Taboo* (1913) he had stressed the fact that in the narcissistic phase "the egoistic instincts" (the self-preservative instincts) are indistinguishable from the sexual instincts (1 c, p. 88/G.W. 9, p. 109). The same point is made in the

Introductory Lectures (1916-17). We have to admit, Freud explains there, that our analysis is too coarse to separate the energy of the ego-instincts from the libido, at least during the narcissistic phase of libidinal development. This distinction becomes only possible after object-cathexes have been made (1 g, p. 76/G.w. 10, p. 141).

Thus, the theory of narcissism tended to obscure the distinction between the ego-instincts and the sexual instincts and, consequently, threatened to undermine the existing classification of instincts. The libido as well as the ego-instincts give rise to a strong egoism during the narcissistic phase of development. In this egoism the part contributed by the instinct for self-preservation cannot be separated from this due to narcissism. Love for oneself and the tendency to preserve oneself are aequipollent tendencies which are liable to melt together. Sooner or later one is bound to raise the question: Perhaps the striving towards self-preservation is *nothing but* narcissistic libido?

The thoughts of some of Freud's readers immediately turned into that direction. Ernest Jones e.g., admits that Freud's essay on narcissism disturbed him precisely for that reason:

Now the reason why I called Freud's essay on narcissism a disturbing one was that it gave a disagreeable jolt to the theory of instincts on which psychoanalysis had hitherto worked. The observations on which the new conception of narcissism was founded were so unmistakable and easily confirmed that we had to accept it unreservedly, but it was at once plain that something would have to be done about the theory to which we were accustomed. For if the ego was libidinally invested, then it looked as if we should have to reckon its most prominent feature, the self-preservative instinct, as a narcissistic part of the sexual instinct (2, vol. II, p. 339).

As early as 1911 C. G. Jung seems to have divined, with considerable astuteness, after reading Freud's analysis of the Schreber case, that the idea of a libidinal cathexis of the ego would sooner or later impel Freud to obliterate the distinction between sexuality and the instinct for self-preservation. At any rate, Jung boldly proposed that the distinction between sexual energy and the energy of the self-preservative instinct be dropped from psychoanalytic theory. The disagreement between Freud and Jung which thereupon developed, seems to have exerted a considerable influence on Freud's subsequent ideas about narcissism and about the classification of instincts. It may also explain why Freud gave us a misleading picture of the development of his theory of instincts.

THE SCHREBER ANALYSIS AND THE CONCEPT OF NARCISSISM

The main clinical data sustaining Freud's theory of narcissism were derived from the study of schizophrenia (cfr. 1 d, p. 74/G.w. 10, p. 139 and 1 g, p. 112/G.w. 11, p. 430), especially from the analysis of the Schreber autobiography. It produced a set of findings suggesting that not only might there exist a libidinal cathexis of the ego, but that

such a cathexis may well constitute a normal phase of libidinal development.

The first finding was that homosexual phantasies had played a prominent part in the development of Schreber's illness. The presence of these homosexual phantasies could be explained in a simple and convincing manner with the help of the idea of narcissism. If it is true that every child passes through a phase of narcissism, i.e. a phase in which the libidinal object is the child itself, then later homosexual tendencies can simply be regarded as the result of a fixation to that phase. Due to this fixation the subject can only make a homosexual object-choice: he can only choose a surrogate for himself. He is forced to take as a love object someone possessing at least the same sexual characteristics as he (I b, p. 59-62/G.W. 8, p. 295-298).

The main finding, however, which led to the breakthrough of the theory of narcissism was related to the mechanism of repression in the Schreber case. This mechanism consisted in the withdrawal of libido from the forbidden (homosexual) object, and its investment in Schreber's own ego. According to Freud this was the only way to account for the traces of megalomania which were present in Schreber's and most other cases of schizophrenia. The megalomania, then, reflects the patient's dramatic increase in self-love.

The withdrawal of the libido into the ego constitutes the true pathological moment in the development of schizophrenia. The mere abandonment of a libidinal object is not in itself a pathological process. It will not lead to illness if it is followed by the cathexis of another external object. The illness is caused by *the regressive path* followed by the libido *after* its withdrawal from the object: the libido returns to its former position, the ego. This regression of the libido to a narcissistic position explains on the one hand the patient's megalomania, on the other hand his indifference towards other people and the outer world.

Thus, through a careful application of psychoanalytic principles, the Schreber case produces a double set of findings in favour of the theory of narcissism: 1. the presence of homosexual tendencies; 2. the path followed by the libido after it abandons the object. The first can be explained as the result of a *fixation* to a narcissistic phase, the second as the result of a *regression* to that phase.

THE LOSS OF INTEREST AND THE WITHDRAWAL OF LIBIDO

Schreber's attitude was characterized by a far-reaching indifference towards *the whole world*: for Schreber the world and the people in it had ceased to exist. This seems to indicate that the libido had not only been withdrawn *from the forbidden love-object*, but that we are dealing with a *generalized* withdrawal of libido. This compelled Freud to raise two questions:

1. Should we assume that such a generalized withdrawal of libido is the rule in paranoia, or is a partial withdrawal more common? Freud proposed the following answer. From a theoretical point of view it seems probable that a partial withdrawal is the most common one and precedes an eventual generalized withdrawal. Since the motive for withdrawal is the suppression of an unacceptable homosexual tendency, it seems logical that this tendency should be withdrawn in the first place. But one can imagine that, as the homosexual object-cathexis grows stronger and the danger of its return increases, the necessity of a generalized withdrawal of libidinal energies will also increase. Thus, a general withdrawal of libido, as was found in the case of Schreber, could be thought of as revealing an uncommonly strong homosexual tendency.

2. Can a mere withdrawal of *libido*, even a general one, sufficiently explain the schizophrenic's thorough indifference towards the whole world? Shouldn't we expect that the cathexes made by the ego-instincts (which are not withdrawn) would, on their own, be strong enough to maintain a considerable degree of interest in the world? Freud's answer to this question is rather hesitating. He distinguishes three possible explanations for the total lack of interest in the world. First, one could simply take the viewpoint that "interest" as such coincides with the whole of libidinal cathexes, i.e. that the libido alone is responsible for all the interest in the world and that, consequently, its withdrawal should entail a total lack of interest. Freud discards this explanation because he is not prepared to abandon "the popular distinction" between ego-instincts and sexual instincts and cannot accept that the whole of our interest in the world would be of a libidinal nature.

A second explanation would be that the serious disruption in the distribution of libidinal energies influences the ego-instincts in such a manner that they, too, become subject to a general withdrawal.

There exists a third possibility which cannot be excluded in advance: that a disturbance of the ego in its function of relating to the world would be the primary phenomenon and that it would bring a disturbance of libidinal distribution in its wake.

But these explanations, too, are discarded, because they run counter to the results of careful observation. Freud notes that the schizophrenic, even in the severest of cases, never loses *all* interest in the world. He continues to perceive and observe the world; he takes into account the changes that occur in it and, if necessary, adapts his delusional system to these changes. Accordingly, Freud considers it far more probable that the disturbance in the schizophrenic's relation to the world is exclusively or mainly the result of a withdrawal of purely libidinal interest.

Clearly, the Schreber analysis did not impel Freud to abandon the distinction between sexual and ego instincts. Neither did it force him to change his old etiological formula describing the psychoneuroses as the product of a conflict between the ego-instincts and sexuality. Indeed, the repression of homosexual strivings in paranoia could be understood as a consequence of their incompatibility with the ego-instincts. The fact that a fixation to the narcissistic phase of libidinal development was at the root of the homosexual tendencies, did not necessitate a remoulding of the old viewpoint.

Not everyone, however, was satisfied with Freud's conclusions. The following year they were to be challenged by C.G. Jung. In his *Symbols of Transformation* (1912) Jung took issue with the conclusions Freud had drawn from the Schreber analysis. After citing the passage in which Freud explains that the loss of reality in paranoia can be explained by the withdrawal of purely libidinal cathexes, Jung continues:

It can hardly be supposed that the normal "fonction du réel", to use Janet's term, is maintained only through affluxes of libido or erotic interest. The fact is that in very many cases reality disappears entirely, so that the patient shows no trace of psychological adaptation ... One is compelled to admit that not only the erotic interest, but all interest whatsoever, has completely disappeared except for a few feeble flickers, and with it the man's whole relation to reality ... (3a, p. 134/G.W. 5, p. 172).

Jung goes on to explain these reasons. The Freudian concept of libido, he argues, is far too narrow. He has been forced to acknowledge before that certain functional disturbances which Freud ascribed to the workings of the sexual instinct, seemed rather to belong to the sphere of other instincts. According to Jung, then, Freud has seriously overestimated the significance of sexuality.

The following year, in his *The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (1913) Jung returns to the same question. In a chapter devoted to the concept of libido he reveals that, for some time, he has been convinced of the necessity to give this concept a new meaning and to use it in the sense of "psychical energy". Jung then continues:

Freud himself was forced to admit that his original conception of libido might possibly be too narrow when he tried to apply the energetic view consistently to a famous case of dementia praecox – the so-called Schreber case (3b, p. 119/G.W. 4, p. 144).

Apparently Jung foresaw that the application of the hypothesis of narcissism to the Schreber case would lead to an expansion of the notion of libido. He felt that Freud had overestimated the effects of a libidinal withdrawal in a dangerous manner and that, what Freud had thought to be a libidinal cathexis, was in fact an attachment to the world of a non-sexual nature. It seems, then, that, from 1911 on, Jung already suspected that the theory of narcissism would make the

distinction between the sexual instinct and the instinct for self-preservation shrink away.

But Freud was not prepared to admit that the hypothesis of narcissism should have such far-reaching consequences. His refusal to stretch the hypothesis to the point where it would lead to the collapse of his dualistic classification of instincts is not hard to understand.

THE AWKWARD DILEMMA

At the time of the introduction of the theory of narcissism a monistic classification of instincts could only take two forms. Either the instinct for self-preservation was engulfed by sexuality. In that case Freud's theory became "pansexualistic" and he would have to agree with his many critics who had accused him of "reducing everything to sex". Or Freud could accept the solution proposed by Jung. He could discard the distinction between sexuality and self-preservation, *without* reducing the whole of instinctual life to sexuality, on condition that he no longer regarded the libido as a special psychical force, representing the claims of sexuality, but as "psychical energy" of a non-sexual nature.

But this proposition was even more unacceptable than the first one. It destroyed what Freud saw as one of the most important ideas of psychoanalysis: that the sexual instinct plays a special role in the development of the neuroses as in psychical functioning in general. For many years he had been obliged to wage a lonely and bitter battle to defend this idea. Because of it he had been exposed to abuse and ridicule. Jung's monistic views repealed this idea: if one denaturates the concept of "libido" and gives it the meaning of psychical energy in general, an essential part of Freud's hard-begotten etiological insights would lose all meaning.

Understandably, Freud suspected that Jung's monistic views were an expression of his unwillingness to accept the special role played by sexuality – an unwillingness Freud had already encountered in so many forms and instances.

Thus, in this stage of the development of his theory of instincts, the last consequences of his theory of narcissism were unacceptable to Freud, in whatever form they were proposed. The only solution left to him was to cling to the existing dualistic classification.

FREUD'S REPLY TO JUNG'S CRITICISM

There is little doubt that one of Freud's main concerns in writing the essay on narcissism (1914) was to prove that the concept of narcissism did not necessarily entail the reversal of his classification of instincts. The very definition of narcissism implied that the distinc-

tion between the sexual instinct and the instinct for self-preservation was upheld, since narcissism was defined as "the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct for self-preservation" (I d, p. 73/G.w. 10, p. 139).

In the essay on narcissism Freud wanted to show that Jung's attacks on the Schreber analysis were unjustified. It was written in the same period as the paper on the history of the psychoanalytic movement, on which Freud had started, "fuming with rage", in order to explain his point of view in the polemics which opposed him to Adler and Jung (2, vol. II, p. 341). Even though his anger and excitement are kept under the cover of thoughtful analysis, a considerable part of his arguments is clearly aimed at Jung.

In the first few pages Freud raises a question in which we recognize a gravamen brought forward by Jung:

... if we grant the ego a primary cathexis of libido, why is there any necessity for further distinguishing a sexual libido from a non-sexual energy of the ego-instincts? Would not the postulation of a single kind of psychical energy save us all the difficulties of differentiating an energy of the ego-instincts from ego-libido, and ego-libido from object-libido (I d, p. 76/G.w. 10, p. 141-42)?

In his answer Freud begins by stressing the empirical nature of psychoanalysis. The distinction between the two sets of instincts has evolved from the analysis of the transference neuroses. It is a working hypothesis which is to be maintained until it collapses under the pressure of new evidence. But such evidence has not yet been brought to light. Apart from its empirical origin three other considerations add value to the distinction: 1. it coincides with the popular distinction between hunger and love; 2. it is also sustained by biological thought. From a biological point of view the individual leads a double existence: his individual life, but also an existence at the service of the continuation of the species. The ego-instincts strive to maintain the individual, the sexual instincts to maintain the species; 3. psychical processes are linked to a physiological substratum. It seems probable that special sexual substances and chemical processes exist. We must assume, then, that a special psychical energy, the libido, corresponds to these processes.

Thereupon Freud turns more directly to his disagreement with Jung. He concedes that it is precisely because of Jung's criticisms that he has been stimulated to discuss the value and tenability of the distinction between the two sets of instincts. But he rejects Jung's claim that the findings of the Schreber analysis have forced him to expand the concept of libido to psychical energy in general. This statement is simply untrue. Jung also claims that the loss of reality in schizophrenia cannot be explained as the result of the withdrawal of purely libidinal cathexes. But this is not an argument, it is a decree. Whether and how this is possible is a matter for careful investigation, Freud concludes.

The dualistic classification of instincts was maintained, not only in the essay on narcissism, but it was, either explicitly or implicitly, upheld in at least 5 different writings, published between 1914 and 1920: in the second revision of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1915) (1a, p. 217/G.w. 5, p. 118), in *Some Character-Types Met with in Psychoanalytic Work* (1916) (1f, p. 316/G.w. 10, p. 370), in *A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis* (1917) (1h, p. 138/G.w. 12, p. 4), and finally in *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* (1915) (1e, p. 124/G.w. 10, p. 216) and in the *Introductory Lectures* (1916-17). Even in *A Child is Being Beaten* (1919), which can only have been written a few months before *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), we find a passage implying unmistakably that the self-preservative instinct differs fundamentally from the libido (1e, p. 187/G.w. 12, p. 206).

And yet, in 1920 in *Beyond*, there is a sudden and drastic change of position: the distinction between the instinct for self-preservation and sexuality is looked upon as meaningless and the striving for self-preservation is considered to be libidinal in nature.

That this change was proposed together with the theory of the death instinct is, of course, no coincidence. The introduction of a new instinctual category permitted Freud to reduce the striving for self-preservation to sexuality while avoiding its unacceptable consequence: the emergence of a pansexual theory of instincts. Apparently, only his qualms about a pansexual theory had withheld Freud from proposing the reduction much earlier. This impression is confirmed by the fact that Freud, immediately after having completed the reduction, continues:

But we now find ourselves suddenly faced by another question. If the self-preservative instincts too are of a libidinal nature, are there perhaps no other instincts whatever but the libidinal ones? But in that case we shall after all be driven to agree with the critics who suspected from the first that psychoanalysis explains *everything* by sexuality, or with innovators like Jung who, making a hasty judgement, have used the word 'libido' to mean instinctual force in general. Must not this be so?

But now the hypothesis of the death instinct offers Freud a ready escape from the former dilemma:

Our views have from the very first been *dualistic*, and today they are even more definitely dualistic than before – now that we describe the opposition as being, not between ego-instincts and sexual instincts but between life instincts and death instincts. Jung's libido theory is on the contrary *monistic*; the fact that he has called his one instinctual force 'libido' is bound to cause confusion, but need not affect us otherwise (1j, p. 53/G.w. 13, p. 57).

Now that he had introduced the death instinct, Freud could finally identify the strivings for self-preservation as being libidinal in nature and yet triumphantly conclude that he still adhered to a dualistic theory.

But the strange thing is that Freud tries to convince his readers that the distinction between the instinct for self-preservation and the sexual instinct was dropped at the time of the introduction of the theory of narcissism, six years before, and that it was not, as was really the case, a new decision just arrived at. In a short historical outline of the theory of instincts Freud explains how he set out from an opposition between sexual and self-preservative instincts. He continues :

The next step was taken when psychoanalysis felt its way closer towards the psychological ego ... The ego now found its position among sexual objects and was at once given the foremost place among them. Libido which was in this way lodged in the ego was described as 'narcissistic'. This narcissistic libido was of course also a manifestation of the sexual instinct in the analytical sense of the words and it had necessarily to be identified with the 'self-preservative' instincts whose existence had been recognized from the first (1 j, p. 51-52/G.w. 13, p. 55-56).

This passage encourages the reader to conclude that the identification of the instincts for self-preservation as narcissistic libido had already occurred at the time of the introduction of the theory of narcissism and as its direct consequence.

On at least two later occasions Freud would present the development of his classification of instincts in the same, misleading way. In *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) we find the following passage :

The decisive step forward was the introduction of the concept of narcissism – that is to say, the discovery that the ego itself is cathected with libido ... but the concept of libido was endangered. Since the ego-instincts, too, were libidinal, it seemed for a time inevitable that we should make libido coincide with instinctual energy in general, as C. G. Jung had already advocated earlier. Nevertheless, there still remained in me a kind of conviction, for which I was not as yet able to find reasons, that the instincts could not all be of the same kind. My next step was taken in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* ... (1 k, p. 118/G.w. 14, p. 477).

Again, Freud tries to convince us that the acknowledgement of the libidinal nature of the striving for self-preservation preceded the writing of *Beyond*. And an analogous passage in his *New Introductory Lectures* (1933) reads as follows :

To begin with, the opposition between the ego-instincts and the sexual instincts lay at the base of our libido theory. When later on we began to study the ego itself more closely, this distinction itself lost its foundation ... ego libido is being constantly changed into object libido and object libido into ego libido. But in that case they could not be different in their nature and it could have no sense to distinguish the energy of the one from the energy of the other; we could either drop the term 'libido' or use it as synonymous with psychical energy in general.

We did not maintain this position for long. Our feeling of there being a contrariety in instinctual life soon found another and sharper expression (11, p. 102-103/G.w. 15, p. 109).

This passage even tries to create the impression that Freud, for a certain period of time, abandoned his dualistic classification – be it

with a certain amount of reluctance – and embraced a monistic point of view.

Apparently, the reasons for this misrepresentation are of the kind one sometimes calls “all too human”. In 1920, when Freud finally identified the strivings for self-preservation as narcissistic libido, it would have been embarrassing to recall that in the period between 1914 and 1920 and under the pressure of Jung’s attacks, he had repeatedly asserted that the theory of narcissism had no influence on the distinction between the self-preservative and the sexual instincts. Freud could not resist the temptation to “forget” these complications and to give a “simplified” version of the history of his theory of instincts.

Somewhat harder to understand is the attitude of Freud’s foremost biographer, Ernest Jones, who gives the same inaccurate description of the development of this part of psychoanalytic theory (2, vol. II, p. 288). One can hardly believe that Jones was deceived by Freud’s misrepresentation. This is clearly contradicted by a passage in Jones’s biography stressing the point that the introduction of the theory of narcissism in 1914 in no way undermined the existing classification of instincts. Jones even recounts a strange episode of writing a letter to Freud announcing his apprehension in the matter. Freud’s answer reassured him: narcissism was only to be regarded as the libidinal complement to the egoism of the self-preservative instincts and thus the concept of narcissism would not mean the undoing of the classification of instincts. The whole story is rather bewildering if one realizes that the sentence in Freud’s answering letter which sounded so reassuring to Jones is the very same definition of narcissism we find in the essay itself (2, vol. II, p. 340).

Jones, as well as Freud, seems to have been the victim of a slight amnesia. We can only assume that they were what the French call *des amnésies de convenance*. Clearly, Jones did not think it necessary to reveal Freud’s small subterfuge. Possibly he was of the opinion that even a good biographer may show some measure of indulgence towards his subject.

REFERENCES

1. FREUD, S. *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 vols. London, 1953-1974.
 - a. Three essays on the theory of sexuality (1905), S.E. 7.
 - b. Psychoanalytic notes on an autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (dementia paranoides) (1911), S.E. 12.
 - c. Totem and taboo (1912-13), S.E. 13.
 - d. On narcissism: An introduction (1914), S.E. 14.
 - e. Instincts and their vicissitudes (1915), S.E. 14.
 - f. Some character-types met with in psychoanalytic work (1916), S.E. 14.
 - g. Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis (1916-17), S.E. 15-16.

- h. A difficulty in the path of psychoanalysis (1917), *S.E.* 17.
 - i. A child is being beaten (1919), *S.E.* 17.
 - j. Beyond the pleasure principle (1920), *S.E.* 18.
 - k. Civilisation and its discontents (1930), *S.E.* 21.
 - l. New introductory lectures on psychoanalysis (1933), *S.E.* 22.
- 2 JONES, E. *The life and work of Sigmund Freud*. 3 vols. New York, 1953-57.
- 3 JUNG, C. G. *The collected works of C. G. Jung*. 17 vols. London, 1954-1973.
- a. Symbols of transformation (1912), *C.W.* 5.
 - b. The theory of psychoanalysis (1913), *C.W.* 4.

Bessenlaan 14
3110 Rotselaar-Heikant

Received July 1976