

is diverted from it? How far does the conscious intention to avoid self-betrayal affect reactions in different people?

Just because the situations on which your investigations are based can be so manifold, psychology takes a very lively interest in its results, and one would like to suggest that you should not too readily doubt their practical value. Although my work lies so far from the sphere of your legal practice, allow me to make one other suggestion. In spite of the fact that experiments in class are essential for your training and for the examination of witnesses, you will never be able to reproduce in your experiments the same psychological situation as in the examination of a guilty person in the criminal court. They remain 'mock trials', and no practical conclusions can be based on them for use in a criminal case. If we do not wish to give up experimental study, the following alternative suggests itself: it might be arranged for you, even to the extent of becoming a duty, to undertake such examinations for a series of years in all actual cases of accusation *without your conclusions being allowed to influence the decision of the judge.* It would, indeed, be best if the latter never knew the conclusions which you drew from your experiments with regard to the guilt of the accused. After years of collecting and comparing the results thus obtained, all doubt with regard to the value of this psychological method of examination should be solved. I know, however, that the realization of this proposal does not rest only with you or with your eminent teachers.

II

OBSESSIVE ACTS AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES¹

(1907)

I AM certainly not the first to be struck by the resemblance between what are called obsessive acts in neurotics and those religious observances by means of which the faithful give expression to their piety. The name 'ceremonial', which has been given to certain of these obsessive acts, is evidence of this. The resemblance, however, seems to me to be something more than superficial, so that an insight into the origin of neurotic ceremonial may embolden us to draw by analogy inferences about the psychological processes of religious life.

Persons who are addicted to obsessive acts or ceremonials belong to the same class as those who suffer from obsessive thoughts and ideas, obsessive impulses and the like, and form with them a definite clinical group, the customary term for which is *obsessional neurosis*.² But one should not attempt to deduce the character of the disease from its name, for, strictly speaking, there are other morbid psychological phenomena which have an equal claim to the 'obsessional character', as it is called. In place of a definition we must for the present be content with a detailed description of these conditions, for it has not yet been possible to demonstrate the essential feature which probably lies at the root of the *obsessional neurosis*.

¹ First published in the *Zeitschrift für Religionspsychologie*, Bd. I, 1907; reprinted in *Sammlung*, Zweite Folge. [Translated by R. C. McWatters.]

² Cf. Löwenfeld, *Die psychische Zwangsercheinungen*, 1904.

though one seems to find indications of it at every turn in clinical manifestations of the disorder.

The neurotic ceremonial consists of little prescriptions, performances, restrictions, and arrangements in certain activities of every-day life which have to be carried out always in the same or in a methodically varied way. These performances make the impression that they are mere 'formalities'; they appear quite meaningless to us. Nor do they appear otherwise to the patient himself; yet he is quite incapable of renouncing them, for every neglect of the ceremonial is punished with the most intolerable anxiety, which forces him to perform it instantly. Just as trivial as the ceremonial performances themselves are the occasions which give rise to them, and the kind of actions which are thereby caricatured, hindered, and invariably also delayed, *e.g.* dressing and undressing, going to bed, and the satisfaction of bodily needs. The carrying out of a ceremonial may be described as the fulfilment of a series of unwritten rules; for example, in the bed ceremonial the chair must stand in a particular place by the bed, and the clothes must be folded and laid upon it in a particular order; the coverlet must be tucked in at the bottom, and the bedclothes evenly spread; the pillows must be arranged in such and such a manner, and the body must lie in a particular position—only when all is correct is it permissible to go to sleep. In slight cases the ceremonial appears to be only an exaggeration of an ordinary and justifiable orderliness, but the remarkable conscientiousness with which it is carried out, and the anxiety which follows its neglect, gives the ceremonial the character of a sacred rite. Any disturbance of it is tolerated with difficulty, and the presence of other persons during the performance of it is almost always out of the question.

Any activities whatsoever may become obsessive acts in a wide sense if they become elaborated by petty modifications or develop a rhythmic character by

pauses and repetitions. A sharp distinction between 'obsessive acts' and 'ceremonials' is not to be expected; as a rule an obsessive act develops from a ceremonial. Besides these, prohibitions and hindrances (*aboulia*) complete the picture of the disorder; the latter only carry further the work of the obsessive acts, for in the one case a certain activity is interdicted altogether, and in the other it is only possible when the patient follows the prescribed ceremonial.

It is remarkable that both compulsions and prohibitions (that one thing must be done and another may not be done) originally relate only to the solitary activities of the persons concerned; for a long time their social activities remain unaffected, so that for many years such patients can treat their affliction as a private matter and hide it from others. Moreover, far more persons suffer from these forms of the obsessional neurosis than ever come to the knowledge of physicians. For many patients, too, concealment is not a difficult matter, because it is quite possible for them to fulfil their social duties during part of the day, after having devoted several hours to their secret performances in Melusina-like seclusion.

It is easy to see wherein lies the resemblance between neurotic ceremonial and religious rites; it is in the fear of pangs of conscience after their omission, in the complete isolation of them from all other activities (the feeling that one must not be disturbed), and in the conscientiousness with which the details are carried out. But equally obvious are the differences, some of which are so startling that they make the comparison into a sacrilege: the greater individual variability of neurotic ceremonial in contrast with the stereotyped character of rites (prayer, orientation, etc.); its private nature as opposed to the public and communal character of religious observances; especially, however, the distinction that the little details of religious ceremonies are full of meaning and are understood symbolically, while those of neurotics seem silly

and meaningless. In this respect an obsessional neurosis furnishes a tragic-comic travesty of a private religion. But this, the sharpest distinction between neurotic and religious ceremonials, disappears as soon as one penetrates by means of psycho-analytic investigation to insight into obsessive actions. By this process the outward appearance of being foolish and meaningless, which is characteristic of obsessive acts, is completely demolished, and the fact of their having this appearance is explained. It is found that obsessive acts are throughout and in all their details full of meaning, that they serve important interests of the personality, and that they give expression both to persisting impressions of previous experiences and to thoughts about them which are strongly charged with affect. This they do in two ways, either by direct or by symbolic representation, so that they are to be interpreted either historically or symbolically.

I must here give a few examples to illustrate these remarks. Those who are familiar with the results of the psycho-analytic investigation of the psychoneuroses will not be surprised to learn that what is expressed in an obsessive act or ceremonial is derived from the most intimate, and for the most part from the sexual, experiences of the patient.

(a) A girl of my acquaintance was under the compulsion to rinse out the basin many times after washing. The significance of this ceremonial lay in the proverbial saying, 'Don't throw away dirty water until you have clean'. The action had the meaning of a warning to her sister, to whom she was much attached, not to separate from her unsatisfactory husband until she had established a relationship with a better man.

(b) A woman who was living apart from her husband was subject to a compulsion to leave the best of whatever she ate; for example, she would only take the outside of a piece of roast meat. This renunciation was explained by the date of its origin. It appeared the

day after she had refused marital relations with her husband, that is to say, had given up the best.

(c) The same patient could only sit on one particular chair, and could leave it again only with difficulty. In connection with certain details of her married life the chair symbolized to her her husband, to whom she remained faithful. She found the explanation of her compulsion in the sentence, 'It is so hard to part from anything (chair or husband) in which one has once settled oneself.'

(d) For a long time she used to repeat a very curious and senseless obsessive act. She ran out of her room into the next, in the middle of which stood a table with a cloth upon it. This she pulled straight in a particular manner, rang for the housemaid, who had to approach the table, and then sent her off again on some indifferent errand. During her efforts to explain this compulsion it occurred to her that at one place on the tablecloth there was a stain and that she always arranged the cloth so that the housemaid was bound to see it. The whole scene proved to be a reproduction of an incident in her marriage. On the wedding-night her husband had met with a not unusual mishap. He found himself impotent, and 'many times in the course of the night came hurrying from his room to hers' in order to try again. In the morning he said he would be shamed in the eyes of the hotel chambermaid who made the bed, so he took a bottle of red ink and poured its contents over the sheet; but he did it so clumsily that the stain came in a place most unsuitable for his purpose. With her obsessive act, therefore, she was reproducing the bridal night. ('Bed and board' indeed comprise marriage.)

(e) She started a compulsion to note the number of each currency-note before parting with it, and this also was to be interpreted historically. At a time when she had still had an intention to leave her husband if she could find a more trustworthy man, she allowed herself to become the object of the attentions of a man

she met at a watering-place, but was in doubt whether he was altogether in earnest. One day, as she was short of small change, she asked him to change a 5-kronen piece for her. He did so, and put the large coin in his pocket, saying with a gallant air that he would never part with it since it had passed through her hands. At their later meetings she was frequently tempted to challenge him to show her the 5-kronen piece, as if to convince herself that she could believe in his attentions. But she refrained, for the good reason that one cannot distinguish coins of the same value. Her doubts therefore remained unsolved; they left her with a compulsion to note the number of each currency-note by which each one can be distinguished from others of the same value.

These few examples, selected from many I have met with, are intended merely to illustrate the statement that in obsessive acts everything has its meaning and interpretation. The same is true of ceremonials in the strict sense, only that the evidence for this would require a more detailed presentation. I quite realize, however, how far we seem to be getting from any connection between this interpretation of obsessive acts and the line of thought peculiar to religious practices.

It is one of the features of the disease that the person who is affected with a compulsion submits to it without understanding its meaning—or at any rate its chief meaning. It is only under the influence of psycho-analytic treatment that the meaning of the obsessive act, and therewith of the impelling motive underlying it, becomes conscious. We express this important fact by saying that the obsessive act serves to express *unconscious* motives and ideas. Here we seem to find a further departure from religious rites; but we must remember that as a rule the ordinary religious observer carries out a ceremonial without concerning himself with its significance, although priests and investigators may be familiar with its meaning,

which is usually symbolic. In all believers, however, the *motives* impelling them to religious practices are unknown, or are replaced in consciousness by others which are advanced in their stead.

The analysis of obsessive acts has already given us some sort of insight into their causes and into the network of motives which bring them to effect. One may say that a sufferer from compulsions and prohibitions behaves as if he were dominated by a sense of guilt, of which, however, he is ignorant—an unconscious sense of guilt, as one must call it in spite of the apparent contradiction in terms. The sense of guilt has its origin in certain early psychological occurrences, but is constantly revived by temptations which are renewed at every present opportunity; it gives rise, moreover, to a state of anxious expectation, or anticipation of misfortune, which through the idea of punishment is linked with the inner perception of temptation. When the compulsion is first being formed, the patient is conscious that he must do this or that lest misfortune occur, and as a rule the nature of the expected misfortune is also recognized in consciousness. But the relation between the occasion which gives rise to this anxiety and the danger to which it refers is already hidden from him, though it is always capable of demonstration. Thus a ceremonial begins as an act of defence or security—as a *protective measure*.

The protestations of the pious that they know they are miserable sinners in their hearts correspond to the sense of guilt of the obsessional neurotic; while the pious observances (prayers, invocations, etc.) with which they begin every act of the day, and especially every unusual undertaking, seem to have the significance of defensive and protective measures.

Deeper insight into the mechanism of the obsessional neurosis is gained when the primary factor underlying it is taken into account: this is always the repression of an impulse (one component of the sexual instinct) which is inherent in the constitution of the person, and

which for a while found expression in his childhood but succumbed later to suppression. In course of this repression a special type of conscientiousness directed towards opposing the aim of the impulse is developed; but this mental reaction is felt to be insecure and constantly threatened by the impulse which lurks in the unconscious. The influence of the repressed impulse is felt as a temptation, and anxiety is produced by the process of repression itself, which is dealt with by directing it towards the future in the form of anxious expectation. The process of repression which leads to the obsessional neurosis must be described as imperfectly carried through and as constantly threatening to break down. It may be compared, consequently, with an insoluble conflict; fresh mental efforts are continually required to counterbalance the constant forward pressure of the impulse. Thus the ceremonial and obsessive acts arise partly as a defence against temptation and partly as a protection against the misfortune expected. Against the temptation the protective measures seem to become rapidly ineffective; then the prohibitions come into play, for these are intended to keep at a distance situations which give rise to temptation. We thus see that prohibitions replace obsessive acts just as a phobia serves to hold off an hysterical attack. From another point of view a ceremonial represents the sum of all the conditions under which something not yet absolutely forbidden becomes permissible, just as the marriage ceremony of the Church signifies a sanction of sexual enjoyment, which is otherwise sinful. It is in the nature, moreover, of the obsessional neurosis—as of all similar affections—that its manifestations (symptoms, including also the obsessive acts) fulfil the condition of a compromise between the opposing forces in the mind. Thus they always reproduce something of the identical pleasure they were designed to prevent; they serve the repressed impulse no less than the repressing element. Indeed, as the disease develops the performances which at

first were concerned chiefly with defence approximate ever more and more nearly to those proscribed actions in which the impulse was able to find an outlet in childhood.

This state of things has some counterparts in the sphere of religious life, as follows: the structure of a religion seems also to be founded on the suppression or renunciation of certain instinctual trends; these trends are not, however, as in the neurosis, exclusively components of the sexual instinct, but are egoistic, antisocial instincts, though even these for the most part are not without a sexual element. The sense of guilt in consequence of continual temptation, and the anxious expectation in the guise of fear of divine punishment, have indeed been familiar to us in religion longer than in neurosis. Possibly on account of the sexual elements which are also involved, possibly on account of some characteristic of instincts in general, the suppression active in religion proves here also to be neither completely effective nor final. Unredeemed backslidings into sin are even more common among the pious than among neurotics, and these give rise to a new form of religious activity, namely, the acts of penance of which one finds counterparts in the obsessional neurosis.

We saw a curious feature of the obsessional neurosis, one that seems to render it unworthy and trivial, in the fact that these ceremonials are concerned with such petty performances of daily life, and are expressed in foolish regulations and restrictions in regard to them. One first understands this remarkable feature of the clinical picture when one finds that the mechanism of the psychological displacement, which I first discovered in the formation of dreams,¹ dominates the mental processes in the obsessional neurosis. It is already clear from the few examples of obsessive acts given above that their symbolism and the details of their execution are effected as if by a displacement from the actual important thing on to an insignificant one which

replaces it, *e.g.* from the husband to the chair. It is this tendency to displacement which progressively changes the clinical picture of the symptoms, and eventually succeeds in turning apparently trivial matters into those of great and urgent importance. It cannot be denied that in the religious sphere also there is a similar tendency to a displacement of psychical values, and indeed in the same direction, so that petty ceremonies gradually become the essence of religious practices, and replace the ideas underlying them. It is for this reason that religions are subject to retro-active reforms which aim at the re-establishment of the original relative values.

The element of compromise in those obsessive acts which we find as neurotic symptoms is the feature least easy to find reproduced in corresponding religious observances. Yet here, too, one is reminded of this trait in the neurosis when one recalls how commonly all those acts which religion forbids—expressions of the instincts it represses—are yet committed precisely in the name of, and ostensibly in the cause of, religion.

In view of these resemblances and analogies one might venture to regard the obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart to the formation of a religion, to describe this neurosis as a private religious system, and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis. The essential resemblance would lie in the fundamental renunciation of the satisfaction of inherent instincts, and the chief difference in the nature of these instincts, which in the neurosis are exclusively sexual, but in religion are of egoistic origin.

A progressive renunciation of inherent instincts, the satisfaction of which is capable of giving direct pleasure to the ego, appears to be one of the foundations of human civilization. Some part of this repression is effected by means of the various religions, in that they require individuals to sacrifice the satisfaction of their instincts to the divinity. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' In the development of the

ancient religions one seems to find that many things which mankind had renounced as wicked were surrendered in favour of the god, and were still permitted in his name; so that a yielding up of evil and asocial impulses to the divinity was the means by which man freed himself from them. For this reason it is surely no accident that all human characteristics—along with the crimes they prompt—were freely attributed to the ancient gods, and no anomaly that it was nevertheless not permissible to justify one's own misdeeds by reference to divine example.

THE INTERNATIONAL PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL LIBRARY

EDITED BY M. MASUD R. KHAN

No. 8

Sigmund Freud, M.D., LL.D.

COLLECTED PAPERS

VOLUME II

Authorized Translation by
JOAN RIVIERE

LONDON

THE HOGARTH PRESS

AND THE INSTITUTE OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS