9

Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Masochism

Freud gave two successive accounts of sado-masochism, the first in relation to the duality of the sexual and the ego-instincts, the second in relation to the duality of the life and the death instincts. Both accounts tend to treat sado-masochism as a particular entity within which transitions occur from one component to the other. We want to examine to what extent these two accounts are really different, to what extent they both imply a 'transformist' attitude on the part of Freud, and finally to what extent the hypothesis of a duality of instincts limits in both cases the 'transformist' argument.

In the first account, masochism is seen as deriving from sadism by a process of reversal. Every instinct is thought to include aggressive components which are directed upon its object and necessary to the realization of its aim; sadism would, in this view, have its origin in the aggressive component of the sexual instincts. In the course of its development the aggressive-sadistic component may become conditioned in such a way that it is turned round against the subject's own self. The factors determining this turning round are of two main types: aggression against the father and mother may be turned round upon the self either under the effect of 'fear of loss of love' or as the result of guilt-feelings (linked with the formation of the superego). These two conditions of masochistic 'turning round' are quite distinct—as B. Grunberger pointed out—the first having a pregenital and the second an Oedipal source.1 But in either case the father-

1 B. Grunberger, in ‘Esquisse d’une théorie psychodynamique du masochisme’, Revue Française de Psychanalyse, 1954, disagrees with
Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Masochism

For this we require some material basis, some peculiar link which the masochist experiences between his pain and his sexual pleasure. Freud suggested the hypothesis of 'libidinal sympathetic coexitation', according to which processes and excitations overstepping certain quantitative limits become erotically charged. Such a hypothesis recognizes the existence of an irreducible masochistic basis. This is why Freud, even in his first interpretation, is not content with saying that masochism is a reversed form of sadism; he also maintains that sadism is a projected form of masochism, since the sadist can only take pleasure in the pain he inflicts upon others to the extent that he has himself experienced 'masochistically' the link between pleasure and pain. Freud nevertheless maintains the primacy of sadism, while distinguishing between (1) a purely aggressive sadism, (2) a turning round of sadism upon the self, (3) the masochistic experience, (4) a hedonic sadism. But even if one maintains that the intermediary masochistic experience presupposes a turning round of aggression upon the self, this turning round must be regarded as one of the conditions for discovering the masochistic experience of a link between pain and pleasure and cannot be said to constitute this link, the very possibility of which must point to a specific masochistic basis.¹

There is yet a third reason: the process of turning round upon the self may be regarded as a reflexive stage, as in obsessional neurosis ('I punish myself'), but since masochism implies a passive stage ('I am punished, I am beaten'), we must infer the existence in masochism of a particular mechanism of projection through which an external agent is made to assume the role of the subject. This third reason is clearly connected with the first: resexualization is inseparable from projection (conversely the reflexive stage is indicative of a sadistic superego which remains desexualized). It is in terms of this projection that psychoanalysis tries to account for the role played by the mother-image. Since, according to the theory, the masochist's aim is to escape from the consequences of the transgression against the father, he proceeds to identify with the mother and offers himself to the father as a sexual object; however, since this would in turn renew the threat

¹ 'The instincts and their vicissitudes' in Papers on Metapsychology.

Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Masochism

of castration which he is trying to avert, he chooses 'being beaten' both as exorcism of 'being castrated' and as a regressive substitute of 'being loved'; at the same time the mother takes on the role of the person who beats, as a result of repression of the homosexual choice. Alternatively, the subject shifts the blame on the mother ('It is not I, it is she who wishes to castrate the father'), either in order to identify with the bad mother under the cover of projection and thus take possession of the father's penis ( perverse masochism); or else on the contrary to make any such identification impossible by maintaining the projection and substituting himself as the victim (moral masochism: 'It is not the father, it is I who am castrated').¹

For these various reasons we must reject as inadequate the formula 'sadism turned round upon the self' as a definition of masochism. It needs to be supplemented by three other considerations: the sadism must be (1) resexualized, (2) the resexualization must be grounded in a new erogenity and (3) the sadism must be projected. These three determinations correspond to the three aspects of masochism which Freud distinguishes even in his first interpretation: an erotogenic aspect, as a basis for sexual excitation, a passive aspect, accounting in a very complex manner both for the projection on to the woman and for the identification with her, and a moral aspect or sense of guilt, to which the process of resexualization is related.² But the question is whether we save the Freudian theory by supplementing it in this way or whether on the contrary we severely affect its validity. Reik, who maintains throughout the idea that masochism is derived from sadism, nevertheless points out that masochism 'springs from the denial that meets the sadistic instinctual impulse and develops from the sadistic, aggressive or defiant fantasy which replaces reality. It remains incomprehensible as long as one assumes its derivation directly from sadism by a facing about against the ego. Much as psychoanalysts and sexologists may oppose such an opinion, I maintain that the birthplace of

¹ This second explanation, which was offered by Grunberger, traces masochism back to a pre-Oedipal source.

² These three aspects are formally distinguished in an article written in 1924, 'The economic problem of masochism', but they are already indicated in the first interpretation.
masochism is phantasy. In other words the masochist has renounced his sadistic impulse, even turned round upon himself. What he does is to neutralize his sadism in phantasy, substituting the dream for action; hence the primary importance of phantasy. Given these conditions, the violence that the masochist inflicts or causes to be inflicted upon himself can no longer be called sadistic since it is based on his particular type of suspension. The question, once more, is whether we can still affirm the principle of a derivation when the derivation has ceased to be direct and therefore disproves the hypothesis of a straightforward turning round.

Freud maintains that no direct transformation can take place between impulses or instincts that are qualitatively distinct; their qualitative difference precludes any transition from one to the other. This is certainly true of the sexual and the ego instincts. Undoubtedly sadism and masochism, like any other psychic formations, represent particular combinations of the two instincts, but any ‘passage’ from one combination to the other as, for instance, from sadism to masochism, can only occur by a process of desexualization and resexualization. In masochism the locus or theatre of this process is phantasy. Are we to say that the same subject participates in both sadistic and masochistic sexuality, given that the one implies the desexualization of the other? Is this desexualization an actual process experienced by the masochist (in which case a transition could be said to occur, however indirectly), or is it on the contrary a structural presupposition of masochism which severs it from all communication with sadism? When we are given two stories, it is always possible to bridge the gaps that separate them, but in the process we arrive at a third story of a different quality from the other two. The psychoanalytical theory of sado-masochism appears to be doing just this: for instance, the image of the father, in view of its importance in sadism, is regarded as still continuing to operate in masochism, disguised under the mother-image and determining its role. This method has a serious drawback in that it displaces the emphasis and gives crucial importance to secondary factors. For example, the theme of the bad mother does indeed appear in masochism, but only as a marginal phenomenon,

the central position being occupied by the good mother; it is the good mother who possesses the phallus, who beats and humiliates the subject or even prostitutes herself. If we ignore this and give prominence to the bad mother it is all too easy to re-establish the link with the father, and the corresponding link between sadism and masochism. The existence of the good mother on the other hand implies the existence of a gap or blank which stands for the abolition of the father in the symbolic order. Again, while the sense of guilt has great importance in masochism, it acts only as a cover, as the humorous outcome of a guilt that has already been subverted; for it is no longer the guilt of the child towards the father, but that of the father himself, and of his likeness in the child. Here again we come across a ‘blank’ which is hurriedly filled in by psychoanalysis for the purpose of deriving masochism from sadism. The fallacy is to treat as an ongoing process a state of affairs which must already obtain, which must already be presupposed for masochism to be possible. When guilt is experienced ‘masochistically’, it is already distorted, artificial and ostentatious; similarly the father is experienced as already abolished symbolically. In trying to fill in the gaps between masochism and sadism, we are liable to fall into all kinds of misapprehensions, both theoretical and practical or therapeutic. Hence our contention that masochism can neither be defined as erotogenic and sensuous (pleasure-pain), nor as moral and sentimental (guilt-punishment): each of these definitions implies the possibility of any manner of transformation. Masochism is above all formal and dramatic; this means that its peculiar pleasure-pain complex is determined by a particular kind of formalism, and its experience of guilt by a specific story. In the field of pathology every disturbance is characterized by ‘gaps’ and it is only by grasping at the structures demarcated by these gaps and taking the greatest care not to fill them in that we may hope to avoid the illusions of ‘transformism’, and make progress in our analysis of the disturbance.

Doubts about the unity and inter-communication of sadism and masochism are further reinforced when we come to Freud’s second interpretation. The qualitative duality is now that of the life and the death instincts, Eros and Thanatos. Let us immedi-

1 Reik, p. 186.
Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Masochism

ately note, however, that the Death Instinct, which is a pure principle, can never be given as such; all that is given or can be given are combinations of the two instincts. Accordingly, the Death Instinct manifests itself in two different ways, depending on whether, under the action of Eros, it is turned outwards (sadism) or whether part of it remains as a residue libidinally ‘bound’ within the organism (masochism). In the latter case we have masochism of the erogenous type, which is primary and no longer derived from sadism. Nevertheless, we re-encounter the previous theory in terms of ‘turned round’ sadism which produces the other types of masochism (the passive and the moral), and we are faced once again, even more starkly, with our previous doubts. For it now appears that the passage from sadism to masochism implies not only the process of desexualization and resexualization but equally a defusion of instincts as well as their combination. Both sadism and masochism imply that a particular quantity of libidoal energy be neutralized, desexualized, displaced and put at the service of Thanatos. Thus we never have a direct transformation of one instinct into another, but a ‘displacement of cathetic energy’. This is what Freud means by ‘defusion’. He isolated two fundamental occurrences of defusion, narcissism and the formation of the superego. The whole problem lies in the nature of these processes of defusion and in how they are related to the combination of the instincts (fusion). Everywhere we meet with a combination of the two instincts, but at the same time defusion is at work everywhere.

10

The Death Instinct

Of all the writings of Freud, the masterpiece which we know as Beyond the Pleasure Principle is perhaps the one where he engaged most directly—and how penetratingly—in specifically philosophical reflection. Philosophical reflection should be understood on ‘transcendental’, that is to say concerned with a particular kind of investigation of the question of principles. It soon becomes apparent that in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud is not really preoccupied with the exceptions to that principle; they are not what he means by the ‘beyond’ of the title. All the apparent exceptions which he considers, such as the unpleasure and the circuitousness which the reality-principle imposes on us, the conflicts which cause what is pleasurable to one part of us to be felt as unpleasure by another, the games by means of which we try to reproduce and to master unpleasant experiences, or even those functional disturbances or transference phenomena from which we learn that wholly and unequivocally unpleasurable events are nevertheless reproduced with obstinate regularity—all these are treated by Freud as merely apparent exceptions which could still be reconciled with the pleasure-principle. In other words there are no exceptions to the principle—though there would indeed seem to be some rather strange complications in the workings of pleasure. This is precisely where the problem arises, for though nothing contradicts the pleasure-principle and everything can always be reconciled with it, it is far from obvious that it can account for all the various elements and processes which go to make its application so complicated. Everything might well be governed by the pleasure-principle without therefore being finally dependent on it, and since the demands of the reality-principle are no more adequate to account for the complications in-
The Death Instinct

volved, these being more often the products of phantasy, we must conclude that the pleasure-principle, though it may rule over all, does not have the final or highest authority over all. There are no exceptions to the principle but there is a residue that is irreducible to it; nothing contradicts the principle, but there remains something which falls outside it and is not homogeneous with it—something, in short, beyond... 

At this point we need to resort to philosophical reflection. What we call a principle or law is, in the first place, that which governs a particular field; it is in this sense that we speak of an empirical principle or a law. Thus we say that the pleasure-principle governs life universally and without exception. But there is another and quite distinct question, namely in virtue of what is a field governed by a principle; there must be a principle of another kind, a second-order principle, which accounts for the necessary compliance of the field with the empirical principle. It is this second-order principle that we call transcendent. Pleasure is a principle in so far as it governs our psychic life. But we must still ask what is the highest authority which subjects our psychic life to the dominance of this principle. Already Hume had remarked that though psychic life clearly exhibits and distinguishes between pleasures and pains, we could never, no matter how exhaustively we examined our ideas of pain and pleasure, derive from them a principle in accordance with which we seek pleasure and avoid pain. We find Freud saying much the same: we continually encounter pleasures and pains in psychic life, but they are found scattered here and there in a free state, ‘unbound’. That the pleasure-principle should nevertheless be so organized that we systematically seek pleasure and avoid pain makes it imperative that we should look for a higher type of explanation. For there is in short something that the pleasure-principle cannot account for and which necessarily falls outside it, namely its own particular status, the fact that it has dominance over the whole of psychic life. In virtue of what higher connection—what ‘binding’ power—is pleasure a principle, with the dominance that it has? Freud’s problem, we may say, is the very opposite of what it is often supposed to be, for he is concerned not with the exceptions to the principle but with its foundation. His problem is a

transcendental one: the discovery of a transcendental principle—a problem, as Freud puts it, for ‘speculation’.

Freud’s answer is that the binding of excitation alone makes it ‘resolvable’ into pleasure, that is to say makes its discharge possible. Without the process of binding, discharges and pleasures would still no doubt occur but only in a scattered, haphazard manner, with no systematic value. It is the binding process which makes pleasure as the principle of mental life possible. Eros thus emerges as the foundation of the pleasure-principle behind the twin aspects of the binding process—the energetic which binds excitation, and the biological which binds the cells (the first being perhaps dependent on, or at least helped by specially favourable conditions obtaining in the second). The ‘binding’ action of Eros, which is constitutive of the pleasure-principle may, and indeed must, be characterized as ‘repetition’—repetition in respect of excitation, and repetition of the moment of life, and the necessary union—necessary indeed even in the case of unicellular organisms.

It is in the nature of a transcendental inquiry that we cannot break it off when we please. No sooner have we reached the condition or ground of our principle than we are hurled headlong beyond to the absolutely unconditioned, the ‘ground-less’ from which the ground itself emerged. Musil wrote: ‘What fearful power, what awesome divinity is repetition! It is the pull of the void that drags us deeper and deeper down like the ever-widening gullet of a whirlpool... For we knew it well all along: it was none other than the deep and sinful fall into a world where repetition drags one down lower and lower at each step...’ We remarked earlier that repetition characterized the binding process inasmuch as it is repetition of the very moment of excitation, the moment of the emergence of life; repetition is what holds together the instant; it constitutes simultaneity. But inseparable from this form of the repetition we must conceive of another which in its turn repeats what was before the instant—before excitation disturbed the indifference of the inexorable and life stirred the inanimate from its sleep. How indeed could excitation be bound and thereby

1 Musil, The Man without Qualities. (Translator’s note: this passage does not seem to be included in the English translation of this work.)
The Death Instinct

discharged except by this double action of repetition, which on the one hand binds the excitement and on the other tends to eliminate it? Beyond Eros we encounter Thanatos; beyond the ground, the abyss of the groundless; beyond the repetition that links, the repetition that erases and destroys. It is hardly surprising that Freud’s writings should be so complex; sometimes he suggests that repetition is one and the same agency, acting now demoniacally, now beneficently, in Thanatos and in Eros; elsewhere he contradicts this by insisting on the strictest qualitative difference between Eros and Thanatos, the difference being that between union and the construction of ever larger units, and destruction; elsewhere again he tones down the strictly dualistic hypothesis by suggesting that what probably underlies the qualitative difference is a difference in rhythm and amplitude, a difference on a time-scale—according as repetition is repetition at the origination of life, or before. It should be understood that repetition as conceived by Freud’s genius is in and by itself a synthesis of time—a ‘transcendental’ synthesis. It is at once repetition of before, during and after, that is to say it is a constitution in time of the past, the present and even the future. From a transcendental viewpoint, past, present and future are constituted in time simultaneously, even though, from the natural standpoint, there is between them a qualitative difference, the past following upon the present and the present upon the future. Hence the threefold determination which we brought out in Freud’s treatment: a monism, a qualitative dualism and a difference in rhythm. If it is possible to add the future (i.e. after) to the other two dimensions of repetition (i.e. before and during), it is because these two correlative structures cannot constitute the synthesis of time without immediately opening up to and making for the possibility of a future in time. To repetition that binds—constituting the present—and repetition that erases—constituting the past—we must add a third, that saves or fails to save, depending on the modes of combination of the other two. (Hence the decisive role of transference as a progressive repetition which liberates and saves—or fails.)

We saw that repetition came before the pleasure-principle as the unconditioned condition of the principle. If we now return to experience, we find that the order is reversed, and repetition subordinated to the principle; it is now at the service of the pleasure, since we tend to repeat what has been found to be pleasurable, or is anticipated to be. Our transcendental inquiry showed that while Eros is what makes possible the establishment of the empirical pleasure-principle, it is always necessarily and inseparably linked with Thanatos. Neither Eros nor Thanatos can be given in experience; all that is given are combinations of both—the role of Eros being to bind the energy of Thanatos and subject these combinations to the pleasure-principle in the Id. This is why Eros, although it is no more given in experience than Thanatos, at least makes its presence felt; it is an active force. Whereas Thanatos, the ground-less, supported and brought to the surface by Eros, remains essentially silent and all the more terrible. Thanatos is; it is an absolute. And yet the ‘no’ does not exist in the unconscious because destruction is always presented as the other side of a construction, as an instinctual drive which is necessarily combined with Eros.

What then is the meaning of defusion of the instincts? We may put it differently and ask what becomes of the combination of the instincts when we no longer consider the Id but the ego, the superego and their complementariness. Freud showed how the formation of the narcissistic ego and of the superego both implied a ‘desexualization’. A certain quantity of libido (Eros-energy) is neutralized, and becomes undifferentiated and freely mobile. The desexualization process would seem to be profoundly different in each case: in the first it is the equivalent of a process of idealization, which can perhaps constitute the power of the imagination in the ego; in the second it is the equivalent of identification, which would constitute the power of thought in the superego. Desexualization has two possible effects on the workings of the pleasure-principle: either it introduces functional disturbances which affect the application of the principle, or else it promotes a sublimation of the instincts whereby pleasure is transcended in favour of gratifications of a different kind. In any case it would be a mistake to view defusion in terms of invalidation of the pleasure-principle, as though the combinations that are subject to it were destroyed in favour of the emergence of Eros and
Thanatos in their pure form. Defusion, with respect to the ego and the superego, simply means the formation of this freely mobile energy within the various combinations. The pleasure-principle in itself is not in the least invalidated, however serious the disturbances which may affect the function responsible for its application. (Thus Freud could still maintain his wish-fulfilment theory of the dream, even in those cases of traumatic neurosis where the dream function is most seriously perturbed.) Nor is the pleasure-principle overturned by the renunciations which reality imposes upon it, or by the spiritual extensions brought about by sublimation. We may never encounter Thanatos; its voice is never heard; for life is lived through and through under the sway of the empirical pleasure-principle and the combinations that are subject to it—though the formulae governing the combinations may vary considerably.

Is there no other solution besides the functional disturbance of neurosis and the spiritual outlet of sublimation? Could there not be a third alternative which would be related not to the functional interdependence of the ego and the superego, but to the structural split between them? And is not this the very alternative indicated by Freud under the name of perversion? It is remarkable that the process of desexualization is even more pronounced than in neurosis and sublimation; it operates with extraordinary coldness; but it is accompanied by a resexualization which does not in any way cancel out the desexualization, since it operates in a new dimension which is equally remote from functional disturbances and from sublimations: it is as if the desexualized element were resexualized but nevertheless retained, in a different form, the original desexualization; the desexualized has become in itself the object of sexualization. This explains why coldness is the essential feature of the structure of perversion; it is present both in the apathy of the sadist, where it figures as theory, and in the ideal of the masochist, where it figures as phantasy. The deeper the coldness of the desexualization, the more powerful and extensive the process of perverse resexualization; hence we cannot define perversion in terms of a mere failure of integration. Sade tried to demonstrate that no passion, whether it be political ambition, avariciousness, etc., is free from 'lust'—not that lust is their mainspring but rather that it arises at their culmination, when it becomes the agent of their instantaneous resexualization. (Juliette, when she discoursed on how to maximize the power of sadistic projection, began by giving the following advice: 'For a whole fortnight abstain from all lustful behaviour; distract and entertain yourselves with other things...'). Although the coldness of the masochist is totally different from the sadist's, the desexualization process in masochism is equally the precondition of instantaneous resexualization, as a result of which all the passions of man, whether they concern property, money, the State, etc., are transformed and put at the service of masochism. The crucial point is that resexualization takes place instantaneously, in a sort of leap. Here again, the pleasure-principle is not overthrown, but retains its full empirical dominance. The sadist derives pleasure from other people's pain, and the masochist from suffering pain himself as a necessary precondition of pleasure. Nietzsche stated the essentially religious problem of the meaning of pain and gave it the only fitting answer: if pain and suffering have any meaning, it must be that they are enjoyable to someone. From this viewpoint there are only three possibilities: the first, which is the 'normal' one, is of a moral and sublime character; it states that pain is pleasing to the gods who contemplate and watch over man; the other two are perverse and state that pain is enjoyable either to the one who inflicts it or to the one who suffers it. It should be clear that the normal answer is the most fantastic, the most psychotic of the three. So far as the structure of perversion is concerned, given that the pleasure-principle must retain its dominance here as elsewhere, we must ask what has happened to the combinations which are normally subject to the principle. What is the significance of the resexualization, the leap? Earlier we became aware of the particular role played by the function of reiteration in masochism no less than in sadism: it takes the form of quantitative accumulation and precipitation in sadism and qualitative suspense and 'freezing' in masochism. In this respect the manifest content of the perversion is liable to obscure the deeper issues, for the apparent link of sadism with pain and the apparent link of masochism with pain are in fact subordinate to the function of reiteration. Evil as de-
fined by Sade is indistinguishable from the perpetual movement of raging molecules; the crimes imagined by Clairvil are so intended as to ensure perpetual repercussions and liberate repetition from all constraints. Again, in Saint-Fond’s system, the value of punishment lies solely in its capacity for infinite reproduction through the agency of destructive molecules. In another context we noted that masochistic pain depends entirely on the phenomenon of waiting and on the functions of repetition and reiteration which characterize waiting. This is the essential point: pain only acquires significance in relation to the forms of repetition which condition its use. This is pointed out by Klossowski, when he writes with reference to the monotony of Sade: ‘The carnal act can only constitute a transgression if it is experienced as a spiritual event; but in order to apprehend its object it is necessary to circumscribe and reproduce that event in a reiterated description of the carnal act. This reiterated description not only accounts for the transgression but it is in itself a transgression of language by language.’ Or again when he emphasizes the role of repetition, in relation to desire and masochism the frozen scenes of masochism: ‘Life reiterating itself in order to recover itself in its fall, as if holding its breath in an instantaneous apprehension of its origin.’

Such a conclusion would nevertheless seem to be disappointing, in so far as it suggests that repetition can be reduced to a pleasurable experience. There is a profound mystery in the *bis repetita*. Beneath the sound and fury of sadism and masochism the terrible force of repetition is at work. What is altered here is the normal function of repetition in its relation to the pleasure-principle: instead of repetition being experienced as a form of behaviour related to a pleasure already obtained or anticipated, instead of repetition being governed by the idea of experiencing or re-experiencing pleasure, repetition runs wild and becomes independent of all previous pleasure. It has itself become an idea or ideal. Pleasure is now a form of behaviour related to repetition, accompanying and following repetition, which has itself become an awesome, independent force. Pleasure and repetition have thus exchanged roles, as a consequence of the instantaneous leap, that is to say the twofold process of desexualization and resexualization. In between the two processes the Death Instinct seems about to speak, but because of the nature of the leap, which is instantaneous, it is always the pleasure-principle that prevails. There is a kind of mysticism in perversion: the greater the renunciation, the greater and the more secure the gains; we might compare it to a ‘black’ theology where pleasure ceases to motivate the will and is abjured, disavowed, ‘renounced’, the better to be recovered as a reward or consequence, and as a law. The formula of perverse mysticism is coldness and comfort (the coldness of desexualization on the one hand and the comfort of resexualization on the other, the latter being clearly illustrated by Sade’s characters). As for the anchoring of sadism and masochism in pain, this can hardly be understood so long as it is considered in isolation: pain in this case has no sexual significance at all; on the contrary it represents a desexualization which makes repetition autonomous and gives it instantaneous sway over the pleasures of resexualization. Eros is desexualized and humiliated for the sake of a resexualized Thanatos. In sadism and masochism there is no mysterious link between pain and pleasure; the mystery lies in the desexualization process which consolidates repetition at the opposite pole to pleasure, and in the subsequent resexualization which makes the pleasure of repetition seemingly proceed from pain. In sadism no less than in masochism, there is no direct relation to pain: pain should be regarded as an effect only.

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