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Wesley Raymond Wells ^a

^a Colby College , USA

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THE SUBLIMATION OF NON-SEXUAL INSTINCTS

By WESLEY RAYMOND WELLS, Colby College

In the midst of certain extreme and even fantastic doctrines that Freudian psychology has been responsible for, there stand several contributions of unquestioned value. Prominent among the valuable contributions is the theory of sublimation. The sublimation of an instinct is the process whereby a new and better object is substituted for the natural or original object of the instinct. When an instinct is sublimated, its expression is elevated to a higher form, morally superior to the unsublimated form of expression, and consequently more acceptable socially. Dr. G. Stanley Hall has suggested (in the *American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 26, 1915, pp. 438-443) that Freudian methods might well be applied to other instincts than the sex instinct, to which Freud has limited his attention; and Dr. Hall has proceeded by an excellent discussion, in Freudian terms, of the instinct of anger, or pugnacity. I propose to apply the single Freudian notion of sublimation to still other instincts that are nearly or quite as fundamental as sex or anger, and to show the extent to which moral education involves the sublimation of these instincts.

Such studies of the instincts as have been made by James, McDougall, Thorndike, and numerous others, have shown the incorrectness of Freud's pansexualism. Sex is, indeed, an important instinct, deep-seated biologically since, without it, the race would not have been able to perpetuate itself. In a sense the food and the sex instincts are more fundamental than the others; but individuals and species, human or pre-human, that lacked such instincts as anger, self-assertion, and fear would not have survived long in the struggle for existence. As a matter of scientific fact there is no normal human being who is without several irreducible instincts, which serve, directly or indirectly, as the basic motivating forces in his life. The instincts are the mainspring of all human activity, without which no effort and no accomplishment would be possible.

Since the instincts exist as one outcome of the biological struggle for existence, their original usefulness is thereby demonstrated. Why, then, it might be asked, should there be any need of restriction of their natural expression? The answer is obvious. Instincts which were bred in the jungle and which were useful and necessary under the conditions of

jungle life, still persist practically unaltered in human nature, while the conditions of civilized life inevitably impose numerous checks and restraints. Education consists primarily in a redirection of primitive instincts into socially acceptable channels. Thus, for example, the child, with its food instinct, has to be taught table manners, or conventional restraints upon the direct snatching of food. There are few, if any, instincts which do not require a somewhat similar training.

One fact that the Freudians have pointed out with regard to the sex instinct, namely, that an attempt at complete suppression or blocking of its expression is always disastrous, holds true equally of the other instincts. The instincts may be checked to some extent, but none of the fundamental ones will wane and disappear completely as a result of disuse. They are like a river, flowing irresistibly. If the natural channel of a river is closed by means of a dam, the water simply flows over the dam, or around it in some new channel. By the construction of a dam, the water of a river may be elevated to a higher channel; and, similarly, if the natural outlet of an instinct is closed, a new and possibly higher form of expression may be produced. Illustrations of this process of sublimation in the case of the sex instinct have become familiar to all readers of Freudian literature. Sex-sublimation is illustrated, for example, by the youth who, at the beginning of adolescence, passes through a religious conversion and thenceforth devotes his life to the pursuit of high moral and religious ideals, or by the person who becomes wedded to a "cause" or to his profession, to the exclusion of more obvious matrimonial alliances. Moral standards in any self-respecting society always have required, and always will require, a severe inhibiting of the natural expression of the sex instinct; but to the redirecting of sexual motivating power into higher channels "we are probably indebted," as Freud says (*Über Psychoanalyse*, p. 61), "for the highest cultural attainments."

Dr. Hall has shown (*loc. cit.*) how anger is frequently sublimated in the form of rivalry in the class-room, competition in the work of the world, etc. He has failed to mention, however, what would seem to be one of the best examples of the sublimation of anger, namely, what is called righteous indignation. The motivating force in the case of righteous indignation is clearly the instinct of pugnacity, but the expression of the instinct is elevated into a form which is wholly good. The individual who feels intense anger at social injustice, preventable vice, and the like, and who puts himself into the fight to eliminate such conditions, is turning to the best of uses an instinct which in its primitive and unsublimated form leads

only to the smashing of people's noses and to the waging of war on enemy nations. William James in his proposed "moral equivalent of war" was speaking of precisely this question—the sublimation of pugnacity. Just as the maintenance of acceptable standards of personal morality depends, first of all, upon the success with which the sex instinct is sublimated, so the maintenance of a stable social order and of peace between nations is conditioned to a large extent by the success which attends the sublimation of the fighting instinct.

Closely connected with the instinct of pugnacity is that of self-assertion. Self-assertion, accompanied by the emotion of elation or pride, has been classified by McDougall (*Social Psychology*, pp. 62 ff.) as one of the seven primary instincts. Though very general, expressing itself in a wide variety of situations, this is still an easily recognized and an important instinct. The individual instinctively seeks approbation through excelling others in some respect. The most natural expression of self-assertion is in the form of physical prowess, where it shows its similarity to the fighting instinct and also its frequent association with the sex instinct. Self-assertion manifests itself most literally in such a situation as that in which one vanquishes a rival and thereby gains the favor of one's admiring lady-love; but it appears in many other forms. The college student, for example, most readily seeks social approbation through achievement on the athletic field or in some other conspicuous college activity. Failing in such directions he may "go in for" grades and may assert himself in scholarship, seeking thereby the approbation of his instructors and of such of his fellow-students as may admire intellectual success. The average college man is content to "make" his "letter" in athletics, *or*, failing to do this, to "make" Phi Beta Kappa. The average man cannot be a conspicuous success in more than a limited number of directions. Similarly the school or college girl may satisfy her instinct of self-assertion through becoming a "social success," making "conquests," and the like, while if such forms of expression are blocked for any reason, she, also, like the unsuccessful athlete among the men, may attempt to assert herself conspicuously in the class-room. Self-assertion, being so closely akin to the fighting instinct, requires inhibition and sublimation. The individual naturally tends to assert himself in selfish and in merely physical ways; but the instinct may be sublimated into intellectual, artistic, and religious channels and into forms of unselfish service. The best example of sublimation of this instinct is in the case of the individual who has learned to take greatest delight in asserting himself in unselfish ways, serving the community

or humanity instead of merely his own personal, material ends. Jung, unlike Freud, has emphasized the instinct of self-assertion.

Fear is an instinct which has been of the highest service in the past. Individual and racial survival have often depended upon it. The natural objects of the instinct have been, in the main, dangerous or harmful objects or situations. Many persons at the present time grow up in so sheltered an environment that fear has little opportunity to express itself in its original form, that of escape from danger. The instinct, however, is lacking in no one, and it may be sublimated and made the source of much that is good in life. It is commendable to fear, and to avoid as one would avoid a dangerous enemy, such conditions as preventable disease, vice, dishonor, etc. An interesting form of sublimation occurs when cowardice becomes the object of the instinct. One may fear cowardice more than one fears the enemy, and consequently not dare to run away.

Curiosity, when allowed free expression, sometimes leads to bad results, and moral education requires a checking of some of its manifestations. Much, however, which is the very best that civilization has produced has been the outcome of this instinct in sublimated form. I refer especially to intellectual curiosity, which has led to many of the highest achievements in science, and to religious wonder, which has played a part in the development of the more refined forms of religion.

The sublimation of instinct may be illustrated, though rather imperfectly, perhaps, by reference to the most vital of all the instincts, that is, the food instinct. This instinct is slightly more fundamental than the sex instinct from the biological point of view since, without it, the individual would perish immediately; while the disappearance of the sex instinct, were this possible, would not lead to the immediate destruction of individuals, but only of the race in the course of a generation. Sublimation of the food instinct may occur in some degree, as when the epicure, who lives primarily to eat, may come to put other objects in life above the pleasures of the palate, and thenceforth may eat to live, remaining no longer an epicure. In at least a figurative sense, also, we may speak of "hunger and thirst after righteousness" or after wisdom as a case of sublimation of the food instinct.

Man cannot live without the primitive instincts, which he inherits from an immemorial past; neither can he live a moral life in modern cultured society with them in their original form of manifestation. They may all be sublimated, however, to some extent, thereby becoming the source of much

that is good in modern life. The development of a moral character depends largely upon the success with which the sublimation process is accomplished. The Freudians have called attention to an important factor in moral training, but the notion of sublimation is not limited to the sex instinct, being equally applicable to the other important instincts.