

### III

## NOTE ON THE SEXUAL INSTINCT

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THE rôle of the sexual instinct is almost universally admitted to be of great importance in both normal and abnormal psychology. In the normal child the sexual instinct seems at an early age to color the activities and the interests; at puberty it causes turmoil; at adolescence it adds glamour and intensity to the world; throughout the prime of life it influences conscious motives and unconscious driving forces. In the neurotic patient the symptoms are often found to be the disguised expression of the sexual instinct; behind the delusions and hallucinations of the insane the sexual instinct is often detected subtly manipulating the wires.

With such universal agreement as to the importance of the sexual instinct, it is disconcerting to find universal disagreement as to the meaning of the term instinct, and the significance of the word sexual.

To some the behavior of the adult human being can, to a large extent, be resolved into a limited number of components, each of which consists of a definite mechanism reacting to definite stimuli in modes conducive to the well-being of the individual or the preservation of the species; the actual behavior of the adult is admittedly complicated by the presence of less definite mechanisms whose manifestations are seen in reasoned judgment, and in ethical strivings.

That there are in most animals in response to environmental stimuli certain patterns of reaction, which are obviously serviceable, is undeniable; the guiding force behind the evolution of these useful reactions is a problem perhaps as insoluble as the problem of life itself, one which involves philosophical considerations which go beyond the scope of a mechanistic biology. The uniformity of the reactions, their usefulness, and the fact that they are not the product of individual experience give these instinctive reactions their special stamp. The life of the insect is brief; there is no period of careful schooling for the adult tasks; nature has therefore somehow or other furnished a useful substitute for this training.

In the adult man or woman, too, we meet certain patterns of reaction, more or less serviceable, presenting a certain uniformity, but apart from a few simple reactions, such as those of fear or anger,

the problem continually arises of determining how much of this uniformity is due to the prolonged moulding of the individual by the uniform forces of the environment.

The temptation to transfer the simple formulæ of the lower biological levels, formulæ which cover much that is mysterious, to the complex human levels is great. Human conduct can then be easily compounded from a variety of instinctive elements, the number and nature of which are liable to vary with the different observers. One need never be in difficulty over any complicated behavior, any more than the practical endocrinologist is over any problem of physique. There are instincts for most purposes; to be a good hospital registrar, one needs to have "the instincts of the lexicographer."

The complexity of a concrete case, such as a wayward adolescent, is often impossible to formulate in terms of any disordered balance of a group of instincts. One is forced to admit that while in the total complexity one can trace here and there certain familiar elements, such as anger reactions, self-assertion, etc., there is a large residual which cannot be thus analyzed. The concept of instinct only carries us a short distance in the analysis of the case, unless one is willing to indulge in speculative formulations.

In a discussion of the sexual instinct, it may therefore be wise at the beginning to lay little stress on the term instinct, which, after all, is merely an abstraction from a complex whole.

If the term instinct lend itself to abuse, the term sexual is still more elusive. To associate it closely with reproduction would be to eliminate many reactions, where reproduction is out of the question, as in the homosexual manifestations; the adaptive or biological criterion of reproduction does not suffice to denote what we shall call sexual.

There are certain activities which all will call sexual; no one would hesitate to call the familiar masturbation of puberty sexual. It may not be so easy to qualify analogous manipulations in infancy. The casual gropings and manipulations of the child may involve the genitalia as well as the toes, but to apply the term sexual to the manipulations in the former case usually involves the assumption that there is a *specific*<sup>1</sup> pleasure connected with the activity.

Of this specific pleasure there may however be indications only in a small proportion of cases. On the other hand there may be

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<sup>1</sup> Some may take exception to the term *specific pleasure* and maintain that pleasure is always an identical quality, no matter with what activity or state it is associated.

evidence of this specific pleasure in relation to manipulations which are not directly connected with the genitalia, e. g., thumb-sucking. To assume that there *must* be this specific pleasure in thumb-sucking, and that this action is always of sexual character is to make an unwarranted generalization. A similar situation arises in relation to many other activities or functions. The emptying a full bladder or rectum yields a definite relief or pleasure; the pleasure may be sufficiently definite for the repetition of it to be more or less a determinant of the infant's conduct in relation to the formation of habits of cleanliness. So far there seems to be no special basis for calling these activities nor the pleasure sexual. In some cases, however, one finds a very close relationship between the pleasure associated with these acts and the pleasure associated with a definite condition of the sexual organs. Thus one little patient got great pleasure, which most would admit to have a sexual quality, from the distended bladder which gave her the feeling of "an electric current coming out of the batteries." <sup>2</sup>

It is again an unwarranted generalization to assume that in normal development the pleasure associated with these systems always has a sexual quality, or that it always attains a degree of intensity which makes it an important determinant of conduct.

To claim that the pleasure derived from a great variety of organic sources, from cutaneous sensations, from rhythmic movements, from distension of bladder and rectum, is essentially sexual is to assume the major premise that all organic pleasure is sexual. This is to beg the question and such an abuse of words makes mutual understanding difficult. To a large extent this *petitio principii* is involved in the use of such terms as muscle-eroticism, anal-eroticism, etc.

In all such terms the essential quality of the erotic is obviously held to be the pleasure element. The emphasis of some authors on the pleasure or hedonic aspect of sexual activity is quite disproportionate and leads to a peculiarly distorted formulation of human conduct in general.

One reason for this distorted formulation is that in the lives of many of the patients examined the more or less deliberate hunt for sexual pleasure as a goal in itself has been an important element; the hedonist, utilizing the machinery of reproduction for the maximum of individual pleasure, is an individual likely, from an early age, to squeeze the last drop of pleasure from all possible organic sources,

<sup>2</sup> Vid. Psychoanalytic Review. Vol. V, No. 3; July, 1918.

and may well have been a diligent thumb-sucker, obstinately constipated, a rhythmic voluptuary. That does not make these latter activities sexual, nor does it make the eager hunter for sex-pleasure the paradigm of human behavior.

The above remarks are in criticism of the unwarranted extension of the term sexual to embrace a great variety of activities, merely because a certain pleasure is associated with these activities. In another direction one sees an equally unwarranted extension of the term; this time the emphasis is laid not on the hedonic but on the energetic aspect of sexual activities. In this second formulation not only are the generally accepted sexual activities grouped under the term sexual, but many activities which *prima facie* have no sexual quality whatever. It is assumed that there is a fixed quantum of a specific sexual energy, and that if this does not have a direct outlet it of necessity has an indirect expression, and all activities resulting from the repression of the specific sexual energy are *ipso facto* sexual. Here we have the assumption of a specific sexual energy, often called Libido. Libido is like the chameleon; its true colour is not easy to determine. It sometimes flaunts its sexual nature, again it prudently denies it, claiming only to be a generalized interest, or it may even claim to be the equivalent of the *élan vital*.

It is not easy to operate with such a concept, which at one time seems to represent the hunt for sexual pleasure, and again to be merely a focal manifestation of cosmic force.

To assume that, where a specific sexual activity is repressed, the alternative activities must necessarily be sexual, is not sound. The hungry man, recognizing that no personal efforts yield any immediate chance of a meal, may, to distract himself, plunge into some interesting study, and while he is engrossed in this the tendency to hunt for food may be temporarily in abeyance. The study, however, is not a nutritive activity, nor a sublimated expression of the hunger instinct. While hunting for food he may find himself in danger and all his energy be mobilized to escape this danger, the hunt for food no longer showing any trace of its activity. Here again the actual activity superseding the earlier one is not to be looked on as a derivative of the hunger instinct, but as an entirely different mode of utilization of the energy and the mechanisms of the individual.

Activity of obviously sexual nature may be superseded by other activity without the latter activity showing any special sexual quality; the energy of the individual, potentially available for sexual activity,

may be actually utilized for other purposes. It is true that, in many cases where sexual activity has been repressed, the substitutive activity may be definitely modified by the repressed factor, and that its control of the reactive mechanisms of the individual may be only partial, often shows traces of a compromise, and in some cases is only a disguised expression of the apparently repressed trend. In other cases however it may utilize all the energy of the individual, with complete, if temporary, abeyance of any sexual activity.

The above remarks form a plea for a less schematic and dogmatic formulation of the facts of human behavior, which are related to the sexual life. In calling attention to certain one-sided formulations, it is not meant to minimize the extremely valuable contributions to human psychology made by those who have pushed their formulations to an extreme. The time has come for a sober evaluation of these contributions in full recognition of the complexity of the facts. It is easy to juggle with clean-cut instincts and with a docile libido, but satisfaction with such juggling is apt to warp our observation, and lead to rigid formulæ.

We are far from understanding in detail the constitutional and environmental influences which determine the rôle played by sexual factors in the life of the child, and of the adult. The physiological conditions of the sex life are poorly understood, the nature of individual variations can only be expressed in rather general descriptive terms. In some individuals a placid equilibrium is difficult to maintain in view of the disproportionate organic demands made by this side of the organism; in others the organic demand seems much less but the balancing forces and other outlets of energy seem inadequate.

In one child unequivocal sexual manifestations appear at a very early age, the child seems early sensitized to stimuli of this order and soon begins to accumulate experiences which load its later character; in another child the same stimuli may cause little response, and the sexual life only manifests itself much later and in less disturbing fashion. We are not entitled to take the more sensitive and precocious child as the type and to assume that in the other child there has been the same evolution, repressed and disguised. Affection and emotional dependence on relatives and friends are attitudes much too complex to be expressed in simple sexual terms, they contain important factors which are not necessarily disguised or modified expressions of sexual forces. In different individuals the hedonic and the energetic aspects of the sex life vary considerably; it is not only a question of

plus or minus, of repression or expression, of sublimation or vicarious indulgence.

The mode in which the individual meets the tests of life, deals with the endogenous demands of his cravings, with the situations which occur during puberty, adolescence and adult life, whether celibate or married, is a function not merely of one single system but of the total personality. There is perhaps no better test of the general stability of the individual than the demands associated with the sex life; in analyzing the successes and failures in regard to this adaptation there is a danger of abstraction and simplification, and of over-emphasis on what is merely one component in the complex forces which make up the total personality.