



ON THE CLANDESTINE MORAL ORDER EMBODIED IN PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPLANATIONS OF ACTIONS



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ABSTRACT

In many contemporary societies, multitudes have used and are still using psychoanalysis to account for their actions to one another, by attributing to them repressed motives as their causes. The significance of this wide metaclinical use of psychoanalysis remains deeply misunderstood, as searchers predominantly treat psychoanalysis as a pure theory (despite the fact that it transformed social interactions), or as an asocial procedure, achieved by individuals escaping the moral requirements of society. To correct our vision of psychoanalysis, I rely on Michael Polanyi's analysis of moral inversion and Charles W. Mills' sketch of a psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives. An analysis of Freud's theory of repression benefitting from those complementary insights shows that it allows contemporaries to assert backhandedly and indirectly their commitment to the cardinal values of an emerging individualist society.

In many contemporary societies, “everyday life, as expressed in the common speech, has been invaded by the terminology and interpretative schemes of psychoanalysis,” which “have become matter-of-course expressions in broad strata of the population” (Berger 1965, 27-28). Far from belonging exclusively to isolated thinkers or specialists, this theory reached multitudes, who use it to explain myriads of actions by attributing to them repressed motives as their causes. Psychoanalysis is not only widely accepted on

a theoretical level; it is applied to flesh and blood human beings. It does not only offer “a way of understanding the nature of man” but also “an ordering of human experience on the base of this understanding” (Berger 1965, 27).

As this “interpretative system...mediates between members of the group” (Moscovici 2008, 113), we are far from facing a strictly psychological phenomenon, the cluster of separate uses of psychoanalysis by individuals who would each use it without taking other users into account. In fact, we are in the presence of “a social phenomenon of truly astounding scope” (Berger 1965, 26).

And yet, a properly sociological explanation of it largely remains non-existent. In fact, psychoanalysis is mostly considered as if it only belonged to the world of ideas. Even though this phenomenon shows clearly that psychoanalysis is not just “a mode of information,” but also “a tool that can influence people” and “a weapon, a way of controlling and influencing others,” “we talk only about its impact on literature, art, philosophy or the human sciences” (Moscovici 2008, 50, 119 and xxiv); its users are inclined to think it is “pointless, or even pernicious, to take into account their own determinisms and the effects they produce” (Moscovici 2008, xxii). Inspired by John Dewey, who remarks that according to “intellectualism,” theory is born out of an observation by “a spectator beholding the world from without” (1929, 290), I will call this approach of psychoanalysis the intellectualist one. Clearly, the historical study of psychoanalysis cries out for a novel way to conceive psychoanalysis in its historical and social context. A correction of our vision is required to give us the heuristic capacity to get a grip on the historical phenomenon in front of our very eyes.

The most influential intellectualist approach of psychoanalysis is the one articulated by Freud. Psychoanalysis would be an inherently asocial activity, born from the private self-observation of the individual who eliminates “the criticism by which he normally sifts the thoughts that occur to him” (SE IV, 101).¹ The individual would discover in himself hitherto repressed desires (sexual ones) by escaping the pressures of moral requirements of others—i.e., in the margins of the social world. The psychoanalytic witness would develop a purely observational attitude to himself, by observing his internal process “without any reference to other people” (SE V, 672), remaining “completely objective,” observing what comes to mind “whether it [is] inappropriate or not” (SE II, 154).

According to this asocial hypothesis, psychoanalysis, being located beyond moral requirements, would be essentially asocial. Freud is certainly right to think that a social order requires moral requirements. A society “can neither create nor recreate itself without creating some kind of ideal by the same stroke,” for “the hold society has over consciousness owes far less to the prerogative its physical superiority gives it than to the moral authority with which it is invested” (Durkheim 1995, 425 and 209). But, as I will show in this article, psychoanalysis does imply some sort of ideals. The picture of

psychoanalysis Freud offers, as an amoral phenomenon, deeply distorts psychoanalysis' complex dialectic with moral aspirations.

And yet, this picture of amoral psychoanalysis is extremely influential. Many promising contributions endorse it. Peter L. Berger writes that "psychoanalysis gives its adherents the luxury of a convincing picture of themselves without making any moral demand on them" (1963, 62). Charles Wright Mills' suggestive sketch of a psychoanalytic "vocabulary of motives" falls into the same trap: he suggests that the diffusion of this vocabulary is driven by hedonism. This vocabulary would belong to "an upper bourgeois patriarchal group with strong sexual and individualistic orientation" (1940, 912). Needless to say, once one accepts this amoral picture, it is extremely difficult to see how the psychoanalytic idiom could be a truly social phenomenon.

More convincingly, Serge Moscovici suggests that "hidden and involuntary" values and ideals are "embodied" in psychoanalytic accounts of action (2008, 21, 60, 74-75, 149 and 181), but he does not tell us how and why these values and ideals are hidden or involuntary. To get a good grip on the social order which is invoked by this recourse to a psychoanalytic idiom, we must identify the values and ideals on which it relies and the modality of their expression.

In this article, I will argue that Michael Polanyi's analysis of "moral inversion" provides us with the theoretical tools to answer those questions. Our modern societies are inclined to turn their back on ingenuous moral advice and lofty moral ideals. Whereas our predecessors were inclined, when they faced misfortunes, to look for the guidance of priests or ministers, or to identify sinners, we most often consult specialists whose scientific authority appears to be based on the sole examination of facts, and who merely talk about "health" and "illness". Polanyi argues that actually we are also committed to various moral passions, but that we are inclined to assert these passions in indirect ways, most notably by veiling them in "scientific" rhetoric. This hypothesis offers fresh illumination on our problem.

As we will see, Polanyi's hypothesis marks a break with the intellectualist approach of analysis. It implies that the psychoanalytic code offers "a directed change within the world" and that its user is an "active participant" of it (Dewey 1929, 290). Polanyi invites us to pay attention to the actions that Freud and his heirs accomplished by using psychoanalytic theories.

In this article, designed to outline a path for future historical and sociological researches, I will develop a new picture of psychoanalysis, which will help us get a grip on the social phenomenon at hand. I will first present Freud's asocial account of psychoanalysis, by paying particular attention to Freud's declared criticism of morality. Then, relying mostly on Polanyi's and Mills' indications, I will develop a critique of Freud's narrative which will lead to a more realist narrative. We will see that Freud, by creating a psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives, instituted a new way to account for

human action, which orders different social interactions by gauging them against moral principles affirmed backhandedly.

Freud's Declared Theoretical Critique of Moral Motivation

First, let's have a closer look at Freud's declared critique of moral motivation. (In this section, I will mostly present Freud's thought in his own terms.)

The Conflicting Motives of the Patient

Freud notes that the patients of the psychoanalytic cure have lost at least partially the ability to account for their actions by ascribing motives to them. If "we examine with a critical eye the account that the patient has given us," we shall "quite infallibly discover gaps and imperfections in it" (SE II, 293). The psychoanalyst questions "the force ascribed by the patient to his motives" (SE II, 293): when the patient "is asked why he is acting in this way," the reasons he offers are frequently "unconvincing" and "inadequate;" he "feels compelled to invent some obviously unsatisfactory reason" (SE IV, 147-148).

The invented motivation which the patient attributes to his action is only a "rationalization," a "screen motive" (Ernest Jones and Karl Abraham coined these expressions).

The desire that really drives its carrier is not only unavowed: it is also unavowable. The avowal of this desire is "embarrassing or distressing" (SE VII, 251) because it is "repulsive from the ethical, aesthetic and social point of view" (SE XV, 142). On the other hand, the screen motive, conforming to ethical, aesthetic and social requirements, is abundantly confessed, as it allows the justification of action and thus offers manifest benefits.

It is precisely because a desire is unconfessable that it is "repressed". A "wishful impulse" proved "incompatible with the ethical and aesthetic standards" so it "fell a victim to repression, was pushed out of consciousness with all its attached memories, and was forgotten" (SE XI, 24).

The theory of repression is "the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests" (SE XIV, 16), as the repressed "is the prototype of the unconscious for us" (SE XIX, 15). It supposes that someone may repel an undesirable desire out of her "preconscious" into her "unconscious" (SE XVI, 294-296); a "resistance" then prevents the repressed desire from returning to consciousness (SE VII, 251). This process only seems to be successful, for "*the repressed wishful impulse continues to exist in the unconscious. It is on the look-out for an opportunity of being activated*" (SE XI, 27, emphasis original). The repressed desire often succeeds in expressing itself. Various phenomena (dreams, slips of the tongue, illnesses, etc.) are "symptoms" expressing this repressed desire: each of them is an "unrecognizably distorted substitute" (SE XX, 203)

of this desire. Thus, repression prevents a desire “from finding direct expression and diverts it along indirect paths” (SE XIII, 167).

In this way, various phenomena “could be traced to interference by unknown and unavowed motives” (SE VI, 154). By decoding these symptoms, the psychoanalytic cure could identify the unconfessed desires of the patient.

Psychoanalytic therapy is successful when the patient is able to acknowledge the hitherto refused drive as his own (for example by a process of “abreaction that is, an emotional release by which a subject frees himself from the affect attached to the memory of a traumatic event). The hitherto repressed drive can then once again be “being leveled out along the normal path leading to consciousness and movement” (SE XVIII, 236).

An Anthropology

Repression shows that the individual’s psyche is the battleground of “a conflict of motives” (SE VII, 110). The symptoms can be “traced to interference by unknown and unavowed motives—or, as one may say, to a *counter-will*” (SE VI, 154, emphasis original), opposed to the conscious will that the individual recognizes as her own by her declarations.

The “patient’s symptom and pathological manifestations” are

...at bottom motives, instinctual impulses. But the patient knows nothing of these elementary motives or not enough. We teach him to understand the way in which these highly complicated mental formations are compounded; we trace the symptoms back to the instinctual impulses which motive them; we point out to the patient these instinctual motives, which are present in his symptoms and of which he has hitherto been unaware (SE XVII, 159-160).

The human motive has a double aspect, as it is both the driving force behind the action and the reason for it. With his theory of the counter-will, Freud endeavored to split the two dimensions, separating the claimed and professed desires (completely cultural reasons) from the disowned animal drives and appetites which are “the true motive force” behind action (SE XV, 224): time and again, he depicts a sharp opposition between the “wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego” and the “instinct that has been tamed” (SE XXI, 79), which belongs to an “individual will which is identical with the bidding of society” (SE XVI, 311); between “the deeper and the manifest motives” (SE XXI, 23); between the confessed motive, which is at most “a rationalization” of action, and the sexual, unconfessed motivation, which is its “true underlying determination” (SE XVII, 23); between the “secondary motives” which the patient puts forward to account for his actions and “their true significance” (SE X, 192).

In fact, allegedly moral motivations would also be animal and amoral drives, but “sublimated” ones. That is, they would be drives that “are diverted from their sexual aims and directed to others that are socially higher and no longer sexual” (SE XVI, 23). Thus, culture itself “obeys an internal erotic impulsion” (SE XXI, 133).

From the Unconfessable Desire to the Unacceptable Psychoanalysis

The repression of the unacceptable desire would be a necessary condition of the socio-cultural order: “civilization has been created under the pressure of the exigencies of life at the cost of satisfaction of the instincts” (SE XVI, 22-23). For this reason, the social order would just as necessarily be opposed to the psychoanalytic unveiling of the repressed desire. Society “is *bound to offer us resistance*, for we adopt a critical attitude towards it,” it “*cannot respond with sympathy* to a relentless exposure of its injurious effects and deficiencies” (SE XI, 147, emphasis added). So, this psychoanalytic unveiling could only happen in the margins of the social world.

Theory of Repression as a Critical Reinterpretation of Moral Motivation

The theory of repression transforms the way we look at overtly moral motives. Freud claims that the repression of the unavowable desire causes varied “injurious effects and deficiencies”. Theory of repression is thus a critical theory. It leads to an equally critical reinterpretation of the moral motivation which appears to create this inner censorship. When she is observed through psychoanalytic glasses, the person who claims to act for moral reasons rather seems to hide to herself her inner truth, and to be driven by a fear of the interiorized judgment of others and even by the cruelty that she directs against herself. Indeed, in order to inhibit the inner drive of the individual, the culture would use his aggressiveness against himself. His “harsh aggressiveness” is “directed towards his own ego”; it “expresses itself as a need for punishment” (SE XXI, 123).

Moral Inversion: An Overview

Let us now turn to Polanyi’s reflections on moral inversion. One could argue that the critical analysis of this complex phenomenon is at the crossroads of the anthropological, historical, sociological, political, ethical and epistemological reflections of Polanyi:

1. it implies a certain image of the human being and modernity;
2. it involves an explanation of the solidity of the credit given to various “conceptual frameworks” (I will come back to this in my conclusion);
3. it is linked to a reassessment of both political expectations and the “objectivist” epistemology.

Within the limited framework of this text, I will mostly confine myself to the elements necessary for developing an alternative to Freud's account (item #1 in my list).

Polanyi thinks moral inversion appears in a social world that has a deeply ambivalent relationship to moral judgments, due to the conjunction of powerful "moral passions" with "objectivism" (Yeager 2002-2003, offers a clear overview). Moral passions produce a desire to fulfill different moral aspirations: "limitless moral demands...have suddenly spread all over the globe" (Polanyi 1974, 229). Objectivism, this "desperate refusal of all knowledge that is not absolutely impersonal" implies "a mechanical conception of man" (Polanyi 1974, 214), as driven by "Power, Economic Interest, Subconscious Desire" (Polanyi 1998, 6); it creates "a picture of human affairs construed in terms of appetites, checked only by fear" (Polanyi 1998, 34). The conjunction of moral passions and objectivism, as it simultaneously induces modern people to affirm and deny such passions, puts them into an impossible situation. "A generation grew up full of moral fire and yet despising reason and justice" (Polanyi 1998, 6).

In the chapter of the *Sources of the Self* on the reductionist anthropology of the Enlightenment, Taylor offers a strikingly similar analysis.² Reductionist philosophers meet a contradiction, as their utilitarian anthropology discredits the moral aspirations that drive their own thinking. "Theories of Enlightenment materialist reductionism...have two sides—a reductive ontology and a moral impetus—which are hard to combine" (Taylor 1989, 337).

Various conceptual frameworks (notably Marxism and psychoanalysis) appear to resolve this contradiction: Polanyi claims that moral passions can be asserted without creating discomfort, once they are dressed up, thanks to these frameworks, "in purely scientific terms" (1974, 230). Taylor points out that modern people can also assert their moral aspirations indirectly by invoking them in "polemical passages" directed against various moral lackings. "What they are attacked for lacking, or for suppressing, or for destroying expresses what we who attack them are moved by and cherish." (Taylor 1989, 339)

Hence, "the traditional forms for holding moral ideals had been shattered and their moral passions diverted into the only channels which a strictly mechanistic conception of man and society left open to them" (Polanyi 1998, 131). Polanyi (1998, 126; 1974, 233) distinguishes between "spurious" and "actual" forms of moral inversion: in its milder stage, moral inversion merely leads people to give amoral names to their moral actions; in the more extreme stage, moral inversion also induces people to act amorally.

Moral Vocabularies of Motives According to the Masters of Suspicion

As Polanyi's analysis of moral inversion implies a certain picture of human motivations, it possesses an anthropological dimension. "To recognize the existence of moral inversion is to acknowledge moral forces as primary motives of man; it is to deny that

‘sublimation’ underlies (as Freud thought) the creation of culture” (Polanyi 1974, 234). This Polanyian anthropology stands in opposition to reductionist anthropologies, most notably those developed by the authors known as the masters of suspicion: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Freud. Those deniers of moral motivation pursue the critical work developed previously by other authors, such as François de La Rochefoucauld or Jeremy Bentham.

From time immemorial, people have attributed amoral appetites or moral reasons to actions. In doing so, they distinguish the worth of different actions. The masters of suspicion impel us to stop to giving credence to this distinction, by refusing the reality of one of the points of comparison: ostensibly moral actions would also be driven by amoral forces (e.g., by sublimated drives). These authors create a hermeneutics of suspicion, insofar as they offer a method of interpretation of the moral motivation—an exegesis of the apparent meaning by a latent meaning. Polanyi notes that such a hermeneutics reveals “an active principle immanent in a manifest event”, as “material interests...are regarded as immanent in moral aspirations” (1974, 229). The non-moral motivation is considered as immanent to declared moral claims.

This animal reality would not be recognized because the vocabulary we use to describe our motivations penalizes amoral aims and thus make advantageous the avowal of moral motives. The authors of amoral actions would try to veil them behind the moral principles they profess to follow. Hence, the hermeneutics of suspicion claims that the language of action is nobler than the action. To overcome this obstacle, and grasp the true motive of the action, the masters of suspicion endeavored, like Bentham (2007, 104), “to lay aside the old phraseology [of motivations] and invent a new one.”

Turning Freud’s Account of Psychoanalysis Against Itself

According to the masters of suspicion, people hide their animal appetites under moral motivations. Conversely, Polanyi claims that in the contemporary world, it is the moral aspirations of the modern people that are “silenced and repressed” (1998, 130), hidden under the animal appetites that modern people are inclined to invoke to explain various actions and gestures. “The power of Marxism over the mind is based here on a process exactly inverse of Freudian sublimation” (1998, 131).

The critical analysis of moral inversion leads to a critique of its two sources, as Polanyi invites us to question our “extravagant moral demands” (1998, 5) and to abandon the “objectivist” conception of humanity and the universe, most notably by recognizing openly our moral aspirations: “by a kind of inverted Freudian ab-reaction this captive zeal for righteousness may yet be gradually released from its pathological repressions and enter once more into the context of consciously declared moral aspirations” (1974, 243).

The specifically Freudian vocabulary that Polanyi uses here to describe the attempt to free oneself from moral inversion (“repression,” “sublimation,” “ab-reaction”) clearly indicates that his critique of the masters of suspicion redouble the critical gesture performed by their hermeneutics. As we saw, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud thought we struggle to name and recognize our true motivations because our habitual ways to describe our actions distort those motivations. The Freudian vocabulary to which Polanyi resorts implies that the suspicious way to account for human actions caricatures one of our deepest aspirations and leaves us unable to acknowledge it: in the current historical situation, the moral aspiration can “no more confess itself for what it is” (Polanyi 1998, 58); “embarrassed by the traditional language of morals” (Yeager 2002-2003, 29), we can no longer claim with conviction our moral impulses, so we are unable to fully articulate to ourselves our actions. Hence, Polanyi turns upside down the Freudian concepts, which he uses against the phraseologies of motivations invented by the masters of suspicion.

Polanyi’s historical hypothesis implies an anti-intellectualist approach of the hermeneutics of suspicion. It implies that this hermeneutics, far from being a pure theory having no effect on the social world it interprets (as one might think reading so many philosophical commentators on the masters of suspicion), transformed this world by interpreting it; that far from being confined into the specialized field of history of ideas, this reinterpretation of the motivations of human action permeated “popular thought” (Polanyi 1974, 234), changing the way we account for our actions to one another;³ that this transformation made acceptable motives which thus far had been considered unacceptable and unacceptable motives which hitherto had been considered acceptable. This hypothesis can thus help us understand how the supposedly unacceptable repressed desire could become popular.

Furthermore, whereas Freud depicts the contrast of acceptable and unacceptable motives as a contrast essentially identical across societies, Polanyi’s hypothesis implies a historicization of this contrast, and a comparative look at the various ways societies articulate it.

A Psychoanalytic Vocabulary of Motives

Freud, Questioner of Acts

Mills notes that different societies distinguish differently between satisfactory or adequate motives and unsatisfactory or inadequate ones.

A satisfactory or adequate motive is one that satisfies the questioners of an act or program whether it be the other’s or the actor’s. As a word, a *motive tends to be one which is to the actor and to the other members of a situation an unquestioned answer to questions concerning*

social and lingual conduct... The words which in a type situation will fulfil this function are circumscribed by the vocabulary of motives acceptable for such situations. Motives are accepted justifications for present, future, or past programs or acts (Mills 1940, 907, emphasis original).

At first sight, Freud appears to offer a theory of motives quite similar to Mill's, which we could locate on the same level—an academic one. But to avoid placing psychoanalysis on an intellectualist Procrustean bed, we must keep firmly in mind that it practically helped him to negotiate interactions, in ways that led to the unequivocal transformation of the rhetorical context of these negotiations.

Especially in the psychoanalytic setting, Freud repeatedly asked for the motives for different actions. “I asked the patient ‘Why do you do that? What sense has it?’” (SE XV, 261). When he met patients acting “without giving any reason” (SE VII, 28), Freud was inclined to notice it and ask for one. And with the help of psychoanalysis, it was possible to ask for the reasons of “a whole number of actions which were held to be unmotivated” (SE IX, 104): dreams, illnesses, slips of the tongue, etcetera. “Well, what do you do if I make an unintelligible utterance to you? You question me, is that not so? Why should we not do the same thing to the dreamer—*question him as to what his dreams mean?*” (SE XV, 100, emphasis original). Furthermore, as we saw, he claimed that the motive that the patient ascribed to her action to explain it was frequently unsatisfactory—it was not a “sufficient motivation” (SE II, 293). All this amounts to saying that Freud was himself one of the *questioners of an act* which, as Mills notes, are of critical importance in the creation and transformation of vocabularies of motives.

A Harmless Desire

As we saw, Freud declared that the animal motives unveiled by psychoanalysis were deemed “of a reprehensible nature, repulsive from the ethical, aesthetic and social point of view” and thus could not be confessed. For that reason, psychoanalysis could not be socially accepted either.

Now we can observe a contradiction between this Freudian theory of the acceptable and unacceptable motives and the way in which Freud, in practice, reacted to the motives uttered by his patients: for he clearly treated the supposedly acceptable motivation (the rationalization or screen motive) as an “unconvincing”, “inadequate” or “unsatisfactory” motivation and the supposedly unacceptable motivation (the repressed drive) as a satisfactory one. How can we make sense of this contradiction?

We must note, first, that when Freud describes animal motives as ethically repulsive ones, he is being ironic, since they are only repulsive from the point of view of the inner censorship. In reality, as he points out, the wishes “which are censored and given a distorted expression in dreams, are first and foremost manifestations of an unbridled

and ruthless egoism” (SE XV, 142); psychoanalysis shows that the repressed is simply “the initial, primitive, infantile part of mental life.” “We are not so evil as we were inclined to suppose from the interpretation of dreams” (SE XV, 210-211).

In fact, Freud showed that the motives that he claimed were unacceptable should actually be accepted, notably with his own confessions of repressed motives. For Freud staged his confessions in such a way that these motives appear harmless: he stressed that the confession of a desire does not lead to its fulfillment. “If our evil intentions begin to stir, they can, after all, do nothing more than cause a dream, which is harmless from the practical point of view” (SE XV, 218). It is “best” to “acquit dreams” (SE V, 620). In other words, the confessed undesirable desires can be sublimated. Here, Freud showed that his amoral vocabulary of motive could be accepted without actually modifying conduct (in Polanyi’s parlance: the moral inversion he prompted us to undertake was largely *spurious*). In thus redescribing amoral motives, Freud made them more acceptable.

Teaching a New Vocabulary of Motives

Freud instituted a new way to account for human action, which he deliberately taught. The education provided to the patient should “induce him to adopt our conviction” (SE XVII, 159) and “to adopt the analytic attitude” (SE XII, 167). In this way, Freud, and so many psychoanalysts after him, taught his patients a new phraseology of motivations. “When introspecting on the couches of Freud, patients used the only vocabulary of motives they knew; Freud got his hunch and guided further talk” (Mills 1940, 912). That was the impetus for the diffusion of a psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives.

And Freud’s reader, just like his patient, was able to handle psychoanalytic theories easily, “like possessions of his own” (SE XIV, 49). So, when one of those readers, “being familiar with the psycho-analytical method,” wondered whether one of his gestures, at first glance unmotivated, was actually driven by a repressed motive, “he decided to investigate the matter” (SE V, 195).

Beyond the Padded Walls of Therapists

This psychoanalytic vocabulary of motive quickly spread beyond the padded walls of therapists. After a few decades, this psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives was widely diffused in many countries. It gained currency: in many contemporary societies, it became “permissible, or even advisable” to offer psychoanalytic explanations of actions (Moscovici 2008, xxviii); as it were, psychoanalysis became “a partially automatic system of interpretation” (Moscovici 2008, 192).

To those “who have become accustomed to the psychoanalytic terminology of motives, all others seem self-deceptive” (Mills 1940, 912), especially the old *lofty*

vocabulary of motives, which Freud has attacked so ferociously. Freud's followers also developed the habit of looking and asking for motives. Mills (1940, 911) refers to the psychoanalytic "systematic motive-mongering." They questioned the operating power of many professed motives; they attributed repressed drives to the actions of various persons; they invited them to acknowledge as their own these drives (on the complex and methodic orchestration of these avowals, see Lamarche Forthcoming 1); they described the unwillingness to confess alleged repressed desires as resistances, born from repression.

In this way, they willingly explained human actions by animal motives. "Part of the legacy of Freud is that we have all become adept at seeking out the sexual ingredient in many forms of nonsexual behaviour and symbolism" (Gagnon and Simon 1973, 17).

The Backhanded Affirmation of Moral Passions in Psychoanalytic Explanations

To fully explain how this psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives could distinguish satisfactory and unsatisfactory motives, and thus guide and order social interactions, it is necessary to identify the hidden values and norms it embodies. As previously noted, the theory of repression offers a *critical* reinterpretation of moral motivations. Psychoanalysis is "a psychology which discredits as mere secondary rationalization" these moral purposes (Polanyi 1998, 37). But with the help of Polanyi and Taylor, one can realize that this critical attack is only one side of the complex dialectic of this theory to moral aspirations. Borrowing the words that Polanyi applies to Marxism, one could say that "the mechanism" of Freud's theory is "working in two opposite and yet mutually correlated directions." In the case of psychoanalysis, just as in the case of Marxism, the declared attempt to reveal the non-moral motivation immanent to declared moral claims is only "the first kind of immanence, the *negative* branch" (Polanyi 1974, 229, emphasis original) of the theory.

To achieve a complete picture, one must also take account of "the second kind of immanence" the "*positive* branch" (Polanyi 1974, 230, emphasis original) of the theory: undeclared moral aspirations are immanent in apparently non-moral motivations. Indeed, the theory of repression, in spite of the fact that it implies a devastating critique of moral aspirations, offers to those who use it to explain actions and gestures the opportunity to assert their commitment to different values by following precisely the two indirect ways we previously distinguished.

The affirmation of values that the theory of repression allows proceeds, first of all, through the critical description of the moral lackings of the authors of repression, since the act of repression is portrayed as a failure to meet different moral requirements. When Freud attributes different injurious effects and deficiencies to repression, which is itself attributed to the harmful action of a tamed will, created by the constraint of parental education, he indicates the importance of acting in an autonomous way. And

when he describes repression as an inner deceit (an “ostrich policy” (SE V, 600), an “inner dishonesty” (SE XIV, 20), etc.), he indicates the importance of acting in an authentic way. These background moral judgments appear in the very words used to explain the nature of repression. For these words tacitly compare the act of repression with a free, entirely voluntary action, decided in full knowledge of the facts by a person who looks forward and stoically faces one’s own truth, no matter how dark it is. To ascribe a repressed intention to someone’s action is to assign to that person an action that deviates from this ideal action. This amounts to saying that the attribution of a repressed desire to an action indirectly asserts moral expectations (disappointed ones) and that the psychoanalytic interpretation of culture encloses “a disguised imperative” (Polanyi 1974, 180). Furthermore, this attribution, quite often, generates a critical reaction (it develops in two directions: not only as a therapeutic attempt to unveil and lift existing repressions but also as a prophylactic attempt to prevent future ones).

Secondly, the psychoanalytic assertion of values operates through their naturalisation. For the misfortunes generated by the non-observance of the moral requirements we just identified, far from being portrayed as the consequence of the punitive sanctions of the group, is rather attributed to a natural phenomenon (the return of the repressed through the symptom). Psychoanalysis appears to show that the repressed material “has become pathogenic for the very reason of its effort to lie concealed” (SE VII, 24): the values asserted (autonomy and authenticity) are thus enshrined in the cosmos, which appears to be morally sensitive. In this way, the explanations of human affairs which rely on the theory of repression can be presented as pure judgments of facts. So, the psychoanalytic vocabulary of motive *does* allow the affirmation of different moral aspirations. It “impregnates material ends with the fervour of moral passions” (Polanyi 1974, 230).

Turning Freud’s very words against his account of psychoanalysis, one could say that a contemporary censorship prevents moral aspiration “from finding direct expression and diverts it along indirect paths”, in what appear to be purely objective explanations of natural drives. The moral motivations underlying the theory of repression are “safe against unmasking, since they remain undeclared”; they “arouse powerful moral passions in others—without ever pronouncing any moral judgment” (Polanyi 1974, 230).

This critical analysis suggests that the hermeneutics of suspicion is a not only a cause of the contradiction to which Polanyi and Taylor draw attention (by offering a reductive anthropology which induces us to deny the existence of moral passions), it is also a tool which seems to resolve this contradiction, as it provides a way of affirming these moral passions in a clandestine way. Insofar as that this need to affirm moral passions is a collective need, Polanyi’s account is in a position to clarify the broad meta-clinical echo generated by analytical theories.

A Self-Defeating Prophecy

As we saw, this indirect affirmation of values explains that the supposedly unconfessable desire is not only treated as morally acceptable (because it is not harmful): the confession of this desire even seems admirable, as it embodies different virtue; this confession is warmly welcomed because it is treated as a sign of authenticity, of bravery. Following his public confession of a repressed desire, Freud defied the reader: would he dare “being franker than I am” (SE IV, 121)? He was a paragon of authenticity.

Since the author of such a confession appeared to be morally exemplary, Freud was able to complete the reversal of the old constellation of motives. Not only was he treating the lofty moral motives, which until then were deemed satisfactory, as unsatisfactory ones; he was also treating motives which were deemed unsatisfactory as satisfactory ones.

We can glimpse here that Freud used his theory of the acceptable and unacceptable desires to challenge his readers. Would they be honest enough to escape the grip of the social control and stoically face the reality of their animal drive? According to Freud’s narrative, the individual who has repressed his own unacknowledged desire would also be incapable of recognizing the repressed drive of others—as witnessing their drives also arouses his own resistance (Lamarche Forthcoming, 1). So, his readers could signal their willingness to face their own inner depths by favorably accepting Freud’s confessions of supposedly unacceptable desires. This amounts to saying that the theory of the unacceptable avowal (which is the starting point for the asocial theory of psychoanalysis) was used as a self-defeating prophecy: it was uttered in order to be defeated.

Conclusion

With the help of Polanyi’s and Taylor’s minute deciphering of the indirect modes of expression of values prevalent among modern societies, we were able to understand how the psychoanalytic idiom offers to contemporaries the opportunity to assert their commitment to individualist values (authenticity and autonomy) simply by explaining themselves to each other.⁴ So contrary to what Berger, Mills and so many others think, the adoption of the psychoanalytic idiom does not entail an abandonment of moral standards. The use of a psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives enables the affirmation of an inspiring ideal of individual dignity and integrity. We can glimpse here that the psychoanalytic vocabulary of motive offers to contemporaries the occasion to reaffirm in common their commitment to the standards of an emerging modernist society. Undoubtedly, this hypothesis captures several features of the social phenomenon at hand, which the dominant intellectualist paradigm utterly fails to explain: the wide attachment to psychoanalytic theory (“supposedly scientific assertions are...accepted

only because they satisfy certain moral passions” [Polanyi 1974, 230]), the motivation to use it, and the fact that it could be used to question and control others.

Polanyi’s critical reflections on psychoanalysis do not stop there. In a dense passage, he adds that the theoretical systems allowing the clandestine expression of moral values

is also potent in its own defence. Any criticism of its scientific part is rebutted by the moral passions behind it, while any moral objections to it are coldly brushed aside by invoking the inexorable verdict of its scientific findings. Each of the two components...takes it in turn to draw attention away from the other when it is under attack (Polanyi 1974, 230).

Hence, the fact that psychoanalysis makes it possible to express values indirectly could also explain the limited influence of the criticisms directed against its weaknesses. This hypothesis implies a distinction of the contexts: these values could be evoked more strongly at certain times, to dodge theoretical criticisms, while being muted at other times, when psychoanalysis is faced with moral objections. Psychoanalysis could resist moral and theoretical objections which together would invalidate it since psychoanalysis is “a largely conjectural and rather vague doctrine” (Polanyi 1974, 139), if these objections are “met one by one,” that is, “each doubt is defeated in its turn” (Polanyi 1974, 289).

So the rich constellation of Polanyi’s reflections on “moral inversion” includes not only an examination of the complex relationship between modern society and moral passions, broad enough to capture the breadth of the extra-clinical interest elicited by psychoanalysis in the contemporary world, but also an extremely specific historical hypothesis aiming at explaining the solidity of the credit granted to theories driven by moral inversion, against theoretical critiques “which in our view should invalidate it”; moral inversion could at least partially explain the “resistance of an idiom of belief against the impact of adverse evidence” (1974, 288). Turning Freud against himself once again, Polanyi writes that moral inversion thus provides Marxism and psychoanalysis a “defence mechanism” (1974, 291).

But here we are reaching beyond the reflections of Polanyi addressed in this article (his conception of modernity and of human beings). Here we are reaching his sociological analysis of the stability of conceptual frameworks—a reflection openly inspired by Edward E. Evans-Pritchard’s minute description of the permutation in the uses of an idiom, from one context to another (Polanyi 1974, 288-292). A full exposition of Polanyi’s complex analysis of moral inversion, which could throw further light on the puzzling historical destiny of psychoanalytic theory,⁵ will integrate this second hypothesis.

Endnotes

¹The abbreviation “SE” is followed by the volume and page of the *Standard Edition* of Freud’s works (Freud 1986).

²Taylor, who states reservations about Polanyi’s hypothesis of modernity’s limitless moral passions (2017, 39-40), effectively demonstrates, by developing an account of moral inversion which does without this causal hypothesis, that it is not necessary to explain this phenomenon.

³Compared to Nietzsche’s, or even Marx’s, Freud’s hermeneutics has played a significant role in this transformation: psychoanalytic theories have been mostly used in daily life, to account not only for the actions of distant “historic” or public figures but also for one’s own actions and those of close ones.

⁴This avenue of expression does not make these values any less powerful. “Our most deeply ingrained convictions are determined by the idiom in which we interpret our experience” (Polanyi 1974, 287).

⁵Elsewhere, I have shown that this hypothesis successfully accounts for the very effective protection of the Freudian drive theory against various theoretical objections (Lamarche Forthcoming 2).

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