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Sublimation Introduction to the Theme

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The term *sublimation*, which had originally been used in Chemistry to describe the transition of matter from a solid to a gaseous state (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973), was first employed by German poets, particularly Goethe, in order to metaphorically convey a transformation of feelings and of the soul akin to a kind of purification.

S. Freud subsequently adopted the term in order to describe processes involved in human activities that have no apparent connection with sexuality, yet are considered to be motivated by the force of the sexual instinct. The principal forms of activity described by Freud as products of sublimation are artistic activity and intellectual inquiry (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973). Freud also regarded sublimation as a destiny of the drive characterized by a displacement of the original sexual aim and a transformation of its object, and included it among successful defensive operations. Objects and instinctual aims that have undergone sublimation both permit the overcoming of intrapsychic conflicts and are valued by society (Parat, 2008).

More specifically, in the case of Dora (1905), Freud viewed sublimation as one of the destinies of the drive, within his broader conception that all destinies of the drives originate from the child's undifferentiated sexual predispositions, which may either remain unchanged, be repressed, or be sublimated. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), sublimation is defined as a redirection of the energy of instinctual forces, a transformation that lies at the root of the most significant achievements of civilization. The possibility of changing the aim is regarded as evidence of the plasticity of the drive. Moreover, sublimation, like perversion, is linked to an excess of instinctual quantity, thus emphasizing the economic dimension of the process.

In *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914), sublimation is differentiated from the ego ideal, which, by increasing the demands imposed upon the ego, requires an even stronger repression. In contrast, sublimation represents the libidinal outcome that allows satisfaction of the ego's demands without the intervention of repression (Parat, 2008). Thus, unlike idealization, which is an elevation of the object, sublimation is a transformation of the drive itself.

In *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes* (1915), sublimation is presented as one of the four possible destinies of the drive (the others being reversal into the opposite, turning against the self, and repression), sharing with the others the property of serving as a defense against instinctual demands.

In *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916–1917), Freud, speaking of the means employed by the subject in order not to fall ill because of deprivation and the frustration of wishes, and after emphasizing the plasticity of drives—particularly erotic drives—stresses the distinctive contribution of sublimation in this regard. He describes it as the abandonment by the sexual impulse of its aim of obtaining satisfaction through partial or genital pleasure and

the attainment of another form of pleasure genetically linked to the abandoned one, though no longer sexual and therefore to be considered social.

He continues:

“We call this process sublimation, in accordance with the general estimate that places social aims above sexual aims, which are essentially of individual interest.”

And he further states:

“The plasticity or free mobility of libido is by no means equally available to everyone, and sublimation can only deal with a portion of libido. Moreover, many individuals possess only a limited capacity for sublimation. The individual balance in relation to the demands of civilization depends on the portion of libido that can be transformed.” (Freud, 1916–1917)

In *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex* (1924), Freud, discussing the dismantling of the Oedipus complex and the replacement of object cathexes by identifications with objects, emphasizes that:

“The libidinal trends belonging to the Oedipus complex (that is, object cathexes) are partly desexualized and sublimated (which probably occurs in every transformation into identification), and partly inhibited in their aims and changed into impulses of tenderness.” (Freud, 1924)

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud becomes particularly concerned with the fact that civilization is built upon instinctual renunciation and raises the issue of the risk of severe disturbances if this loss of satisfaction is not compensated for within the subject’s psychic economy. While the issue of sublimation is revisited as the capacity for displacement of libido—a function providing considerable flexibility to the psychic apparatus—and the possibility of sublimating aggressive drives is also raised, Freud reiterates his view that sublimation offers one possible path but is not a solution for everyone.

He links this to his observation that satisfaction derived from a “wild,” ego-unrestrained instinctual impulse is incomparably stronger than the satisfaction of a drive that has been tamed. For Freud, sublimation cannot lead everyone to creativity; it is primarily a solution available to artists and intellectuals.

Freud states characteristically:

“Professional activity is a source of special satisfaction if it has been freely chosen, if, through the sublimation of impulses that persist or are constitutionally reinforced, it becomes possible to make use of pre-existing inclinations. Yet work, as a path to happiness, is not highly valued by human beings. They do not seek it as they seek other possibilities of satisfaction. The great majority of people work only under the pressure of necessity, and this natural human aversion to work gives rise to particularly difficult social problems.”

This observation is later somewhat moderated by Freud’s idea of the free choice of work, an idea that he associates with inspiration in one’s professional activity. Freud nevertheless adds that free choice is, in any case, available only to a limited number of people (Freud, 1930).

To summarize this extensive review of Freud’s thinking, I would highlight two central points in the development of his psychoanalytic perspective on sublimation:

– Freud maintained until the end the conviction that sublimation is one possible destiny of the partial drives, a conviction that developed alongside his later view that sublimations are related to post-Oedipal identifications and the desexualization implied by them.

– At the same time, sublimations are linked to external reality through a living bond and are thereby distinguished from fantasy-based pleasures or aesthetic enjoyments, which are mainly associated with drives inhibited in relation to their aim.

In subsequent psychoanalytic literature, references to sublimation increasingly concern creations—and especially artistic creations—following the line of Freud’s writings on artistic work (Freud, 1908, 1910, 1928).

M. Klein (1929) connected creativity, and indirectly sublimation, with the process of reparation of the attacked object, suggesting that depressive feelings mobilize powerful creative and reconstructive impulses. This position was later developed by H. Segal, who linked artistic creation to the depressive position and the process of mourning (Segal, 1952).

P. Heimann (1957–1959) argued that successful sublimation depends upon a state of intrapsychic freedom that allows the ego to become self-determining and self-fulfilling with respect to its own capacities. The hallmark of successful sublimation is a conscious feeling of achievement and satisfaction, whereas sublimation becomes impaired when the ego is consumed by conflicts with its internalized objects. A related issue of considerable importance for sublimation concerns the need and capacity to be alone, since creative activities require a degree of freedom from objects. Heimann emphasizes that sublimation presupposes, however neurotic the artist may be, a sound sense of reality regarding the material with which one works. Thus, intellectual sublimation leads to scientific concepts with relatively broad applicability to diverse phenomena, while artistic sublimation expresses an emotional truth shared by others. She concludes that sublimation expresses the life instinct. She proposes retaining the term sublimation to refer to a secondary process, while introducing another term—for example, “primary creativity of the ego”—to designate the ego’s inherent primary capacities, capacities expressed from very early on at the sensorimotor level (Heimann, 1957–1959).

Winnicott argued that genuine creativity emerges from the process of the omnipotent need for reparation and viewed creativity as the child’s capacity to explore aggression in relation to a mother who has not been damaged by it (Winnicott, 1988, pp. 105–106).

J. Chasseguet-Smirgel, referring mainly to artistic creation, returns to Freud’s two approaches to sublimation and argues that, in the absence of secondary Oedipal identifications (identification with the father), one cannot properly speak of sublimation. What we observe in many artistic creations, she suggests, is rather an idealization of the drive, relating to pregenital sexuality with its erotogenic zones and partial objects. In such cases, Smirgel argues, the ego and the ego ideal converge, bypassing the process of sublimation that would normally arise from paternal identification. While clearly distinguishing sublimation from the idealizing actions of pre-Oedipal sexuality, she bridges her position with the Kleinian notion of reparation, emphasizing that the more painfully individuals experience the separation between the ego and the ego ideal—or the more they fear exposure of this distance—the more they will attempt to use creativity in order to repair what they experience as a profound wound (Smirgel, 1974).

Remaining within the Freudian framework, A. Green considers sublimation as one of the four destinies of the drive and, on the basis of the idea that sublimation concerns the desexualization of the subject's libidinal tendencies, connects sublimation with the processes of the negative. Green argues that:

"Since the work of sublimation performed by the ego results in drive defusion and in the release of aggressive impulses into the superego, its struggle against libido exposes the ego to the danger of mistreatment and death."

Speaking of works of art and artists, Green further suggests that:

"In reality, sublimation guarantees nothing, protects against nothing; it merely allows one to find satisfaction 'otherwise,' through a shared experience of emotions, creating a special territory of 'civilized' relationships, but without possessing the power to suppress other, cruder forms of satisfaction... Perhaps, then, we should regard sublimation as a work of the negative, constantly torn between psychic—or even biological—forces of life and death." (Green, 1999)

Finally, H. Parat points out that sublimation may constitute the inevitable destiny of the thinking and desiring human being, condemned to sublimate and yet very often unable to succeed in doing so. Furthermore, in a dialectical attempt to reconcile the duality inherent in Freud's concept—namely sublimation of partial drives, whether pre- or post-Oedipal (first topography), and sublimation of post-Oedipal drives linked with identifications (second topography)—Parat proposes, that we refer to sublimation in the plural, as sublimatory processes (Parat, 2008).

In recent years, sublimation has increasingly been viewed not as an exceptional capacity possessed by extraordinary individuals or "great men," as Freud tended to conceive it, but rather as a process shared by many more people than he believed. In this sense, sublimation plays a role across all professions and occupations.

Thus, C. Dejours emphasizes that "the psychodynamics of work offers an avenue for the study of the metapsychology of sublimation, in which work, the body, and sexuality play a major role." Work, Dejours argues, contributes to narcissism, among other things, because it enables us to spend our lives pursuing one of our most fundamental and intrinsic goals: self-realization. Within this perspective, and in contrast to an idealizing, messianic psychoanalysis, the issue of the analyst's sublimatory function in his or her work is also raised, viewed as a profession or craft (*métier*) that transmits its distinctive technique from one generation to the next (Dejours, 2020).

In concluding this introduction, I would like to leave us with a number of questions for further exploration:

- What is the relationship between sublimation and secondary symbolization?
- Ultimately, is there one sublimation or many sublimations?
- What distinguishes creativity driven by the ego ideal and functioning as a means of repairing early traumas from creativity functioning as a sublimatory process?
- How does sublimatory functioning, through the realization of the subject's aims—what is also referred to as self-realization—contribute to the stable constitution of secondary narcissism?

- What is the role of the analyst's sublimatory function in the practice of psychoanalysis?
- Finally, although sublimation undoubtedly protects civilization, can it also protect the subject, or might it instead become a vehicle for self-destructiveness?

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