

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF FREUD'S THEORY OF NEGATION

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Freud's theory of negation implies a particular position on the epistemological problem about self-knowledge.¹ Freud accepts that there are effective limits to self-knowledge even though these limits can be changed. It therefore follows that a person can make mistakes in the description of his own self or in the description of the meaning of his acts or his products (dreams, gestures, etc.). Thus not all errors in the description of the self are to be interpreted as lies or as bad faith.

In this paper I should like to develop five points. First, and very briefly, I will give a map of the Freudian concepts that point to erroneous forms of self-expression or self-description such as: lies, hypocrisy, mistakes, illusions and disavowals. Second, I should like to draw attention to the phenomena that Freud wants to explain by this theory of negation. These phenomena range from the obvious to the puzzling. Third, I wish to demonstrate that these facts are central in psychotherapy and that Freud gradually perceived their central function. In the oeuvre of Freud one can find vestiges of Freud's emerging awareness of the importance of these facts or events.

I. A Map of Freud's Concepts for Erroneous Forms of Self-descriptions

In this section of the paper, I want to prepare the analysis of Freud's approach to negation (denial) by taking a look at a number of other concepts. The concepts which can be useful for our study are those which label different forms of self-expression and self-interpretation. I propose to classify these concepts in four categories: the morally negative; the morally neutral; the morally ambivalent; the morally positive. Candidates for the first category, the morally negative ones, are: *Lüge* (lies); *Heuchelei* (hypocrisy); *Selbstverrat* (self-betrayal). Candidates for the second category, the morally neutral ones, are: *Fehlleistung* (parapraxis); *Irrtum* (mistake); *Illusion* (illusion); *Täuschung* (error). Candidates for the third

category, the morally ambivalent ones, are: *Leugnung*, *Verleugnung* (disavowal); *Verneinung* (denial). Candidates for the fourth category, the morally positive ones, are: *Glaubwürdigkeit* (credibility).

A look at the cross reference between these concepts puts in question, however, the validity of the above classification.² Thus the morally negative concepts (lies or hypocrisy) refer respectively to a morally ambiguous concept (disavowal) or a morally neutral one (mistake). The morally neutral concept (error) refers to two other morally neutral concepts (illusion and mistake) and to two morally negative concepts (hypocrisy and self-betrayal). A closer look at the meaning of the concepts is thus advisable.

In the category of morally negative concepts, a closer examination reveals that the typical psychoanalytic use of them is not so clearly morally negative. Although the concept 'lie' is used by Freud at least once in the commonsense meaning for a morally negative act, where it is used in an enumeration with such other morally concepts as 'fraud' and 'calumny',³ more often Freud uses the concept 'lie' in a specifically psychoanalytic way where the concept of lie is explained as a sign of emotional impotence. This is the case when Freud talks about "the lying poetic fancies of prehistoric times" (S.E. XVIII, p. 136) or when he talks about lies of children (S.E. XII, p. 305 ff; or S.E. X, pp. 102-3).

In his article "Two Lies Told by Children,"⁴ Freud presents and analyzes the case of a girl who denied having stolen fifty 'pfennigs' and of another girl who denied to her teacher having used a pair of compasses for a freehand drawing of a circle.

In the first case, Freud discovered that the anger of the father about the theft had become a turning point in the girl's life. Before the incident, she had been "wild, self-confident." Afterwards she had become "shy and timid." Freud discovered that taking money from the father was, for the girl, associated with the case of her nursemaid who gave her money to buy her silence about the nursemaid's erotic relations with a doctor. Freud then interprets the incident to have the following meaning. To take money from the father was associated in an unconscious way with an offer of tenderness. The anger of the father meant that her offer was rejected.

In the second case Freud discovered that his patient as a young girl could not deal with the fact that her father was less powerful than she thought. She adored and identified with her idealized father. One of the talents the girl admired very much in her father was his drawing talent. Her attempt to make a perfect circle was then an attempt to show how good a drawer she and her father were. She could therefore not acknowledge anything that would diminish the achievement.

In his introductory and concluding remarks, Freud writes that such lies should not be interpreted morally; rather, educators should become concerned with the child.

In the main text, Freud links the lie of the child to a hidden meaning of the lie. About the first case, Freud writes: "She could not admit, however, that she had appropriated the money; she was obliged to disavow it, because her motive for the deed which was unconscious to herself, could not be admitted" (p. 307). The reason why it could not be admitted becomes clear when Freud summarizes the two cases at the end of his paper: "an admission was impossible for the same reason that was given in the first of the observations: it would inevitably have been an admission of her hidden incestuous love" (pp. 308-9).

Clearly, Freud intends in this article to argue that a lie is to be interpreted in some cases as the *incapability* of self-knowledge.

Hypocrisy too is not so much interpreted as a conscious lie as it is a failure to live up to an ideal. Such a failure Freud infers from a mistake often unconsciously made by the patient. Thus, in his article "Thoughts for the times on war and death,"⁵ Freud defines hypocrisy as that attitude which tries to follow cultural prescriptions even if one's own drives are really desiring something different. Hypocrisy is then described as follows: "Anyone ... compelled to act continually in accordance with precepts which are not the expression of his instinctual inclinations, is living, psychologically speaking, beyond his means, and may objectively be described as a hypocrite, whether he is clearly aware of the incongruity or not." The sign that a person is living beyond his means is "the perpetual readiness of the inhibited instincts to break through to satisfaction at any suitable opportunity" (p. 284).

Clearly, failure to live up to an ideal is not so much an act of deceit as it is failure.

On the other side of the spectrum, a word used for a morally positive attitude "Glaubwürdigkeit" (credibility), is not so unequivocally morally positive either. Indeed, Freud derives his certainty of patients' answers not from the patients' explicit statements, but from a series of side phenomena such as the difficulty of resistance that had to be overcome or indirect techniques of confirmation.⁶ Thus credibility is not connected with the moral use made of a patient's freedom.

If lies, hypocrisy and credibility are non-moral categories, if self-expressions or statements about the self can be true or false, then the very conception of a false statement about the self or false self-expression becomes problematic. We believe that Freud's theory of negation is a crucial contribution to solving this problem.

II. Phenomena to Be Explained by Freud's Theory of Negation

Freud's theory of negation is used to clarify at least four different kinds of events.

The first kind of event to be explained by the theory of negation is the usage by Freud's patients of negation as a mechanism of denial. Freud gives three examples. The first is a remark that Freud's patients must have used often: "Now you'll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I've no such intention." The second example is the case of a patient's interpretation of dream material: "You ask who this person in the dream can be. It's *not* my mother." The third example is that of an obsessive neurotic saying: "I've got a new obsessive idea, ... "and it occurred to me at once that it might mean so and so. But no, that can't be true, or it couldn't have occurred to me."

In all three examples there is a negation: "I've no such intention," "It's not my mother," "That can't be true." One of these three examples (the second one) is explained in detail by Freud, who writes: "In our interpretation, we take the liberty of disregarding the negation and of picking out the subject-matter alone of the association." Freud's statement can be reinterpreted more abstractly as follows: in a denial, the negation has no truth function and should therefore be dropped. The truth lies in the denied content.⁷

The second kind of event to be explained by Freud's theory of negation is the psychological truth of the popular belief that boasting is dangerous. Thus he writes that the patient's statement: "How nice not to have had one of my headaches for so long" should be interpreted as "the first announcement of an attack, of whose approach the subject is already sensible, although he is at yet unwilling to believe it."⁸ This example includes a negation, but does not make the statement untrue. In as much as Freud's theory of negation claims that the same process is at work in the first kind of example as in this example, we cannot claim that Freud's theory of negation is a theory to deal with the truth of false statements about the self. It is a theory about the function of negation regardless of whether or not this negation makes the statement true or false. It is therefore a theory of the non-epistemological function of negation.

The third kind of event to be explained by Freud's theory of negation is the success of a technical artifice in therapy to gather information about the patient's unconscious. The technique is to ask "What" ... "would you consider the most unlikely imaginable thing in that situation? What do you think was furthest from your mind at the time?" Freud states that "if the patient falls into the trap and says what he thinks is most credible, he almost always makes the right admission."⁹

In as much as Freud's theory of negation can explain the success of this technical artifice, Freud's theory of negation is not just a theory of negation but a theory about a puzzling phenomenon related to the emergence of truth. The puzzling phenomenon is that some truths emerge only if the subject is allowed to obfuscate the real meaning of the emergent truth. The

obfuscation tool can be a negation or some other linguistic expression such as: "what is most unlikely," "what is the furthest from your mind." Clearly, this does not exhaust the possible obfuscation tools. In Freud's writings we find another obfuscating tool that the patients often use and that Freud interprets as an instrument for the emergence of the truth.¹⁰ That technique is the use of examples related to the patient's experience, but where the subjects are taken from literature or from persons other than the patient. These examples often convey the unconscious feelings of the patient even though the patient explicitly defends the opposite position.

The fourth kind of event that Freud's theory of negation must explain is Freud's experience that he never discovered "a 'no' in the unconscious and that recognition of the unconscious on the part of the ego is expressed in a negative formula."¹¹ This kind of event suggests that negation is a product of consciousness.

Clearly, the four kinds of events that Freud wants to explain or to clarify with his theory are different in kind. The first and second are observed phenomena. The third is an invented technique which proves to be successful. The fourth is a theory induced statement.

III. Freud's Emerging Awareness of the Function of Negation

The first kind of event that Freud wants to explain in his theory of negation is the appearance of a linguistic expression (i.e., a negation) which fallaciously changes the meaning of statements.

Freud observed this phenomenon already in the treatment of Emmy v. N. (1888-89) (1893).¹² Thus in a footnote Freud suggest a relation between a negative statement and repression.¹³

In his analysis of the 'Rat-man' (1907) (1909),¹⁴ and again in a footnote, Freud shows that he is already more familiar with the curious phenomenon of denial. Indeed, he writes: "This is a common type of reaction to repressed material which has become conscious: the 'No' with which the fact is first denied is immediately followed by a confirmation of it, though, to begin with, only an indirect one."¹⁵ This leads Freud to make, some ten pages later, a distinction between two forms of knowing:¹⁶ "It must therefore be admitted that ... there are two kinds of knowledge, and it is reasonable to hold that the patient 'knows' his traumas as that he does *not* 'know' them. For he knows them in that he has not forgotten them, and he does not know them in that he is unaware of their significance."

In his study about Judge Scheber (1911), Freud mentions the use of negation as one of the techniques by which the patient indirectly reveals the truth.¹⁷

Finally, we should mention that Freud again discusses the problem of

negation twelve years after his article on negation, in his study "Constructions in Analysis" (1937). Here Freud adds a further idea: a denial is an indication that the labor of uncovering the truth is *incomplete*, a negation is not to be interpreted as an indication that the proposed statement is false.¹⁸

The second kind of event, that of premonition expressed in the form of a euphoric "How nice that is has not happened for a long time," is already mentioned by Freud in his *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), in a footnote: "This curious kind of premonition occurred regularly in the case already mentioned ... of Frau Cäcilie M. If, for instance, while she was in the best of health, she said to me, 'It's a long time since I've been frightened of witches at night', or 'how glad I am that I've not had pains in my eyes for such a long time', I could feel sure that the following night a severe onset of her fear for witches would be making extra work for her nurse or that her next attack of pains in the eyes was on the point of beginning."¹⁹

The idea that obfuscation is a help for the emergence of truth, and the insight that obfuscation techniques and negation are related, are already expressed in Freud's case study of the Rat-man (1909). There Freud mentions that the Rat-man explicitly denied having had death-wishes against his father and that the patient then remembers a story of Sudermann's novel in which one person wishes another person's death in order to be able to marry. Then suddenly, the Rat-man says: "He could understand this ... and it would be only right if his thoughts were the death of him, for he deserved nothing less."²⁰ In a footnote, Freud writes: "This sense of guilt involves the most glaring contradiction of his opening denial that he had ever entertained such an evil wish against his father. This is a common type of reaction to repressed material which has become conscious: the 'No' with which the fact is first denied is immediately followed by a confirmation of it, though, to begin with, only an indirect one."²¹

The idea that unconscious truth can emerge only indirectly, in an obfuscated way, is also already mentioned in the case of Dora (written in 1901, published in 1905). Here Freud mentions that he told Dora that he "could not avoid supposing that her affection for her father must at a very early moment have amounted to her being completely in love with him."²² To Freud's suggestion, Dora replies "I don't remember that," but then she recalls the story of a seven-year-old cousin who after a dispute between her parents whispered in Dora's ear: "You can't think how I hate that person!" (pointing to her mother), "and when she's dead I shall marry Daddy." After reporting this event, Freud explicitly mentions the obfuscation necessary for the emergence of unconscious truth: "I am in the habit of regarding associations such as this, which bring forward something that agrees with the content of an assertion of mine, as a confirmation from the unconscious of what I have said. *No other kind of 'Yes' can be extracted from the unconscious.*"²³

The later Freud is so familiar with the need for obfuscation in his patients that he almost casually remarks, in a prelude to his interpretation of the Scheber case (1911): "...we have only to follow our usual psycho-analytic technique – to strip his sentence of its negative form, to take his example as being the actual thing, or his quotation or gloss as being the original source – and we find ourselves in possession of what we are looking for..."²⁴

The idea that negation is absent in the unconscious is mentioned already in the case of Dora (written in 1901, published in 1905):²⁵ "there is no such thing at all as an unconscious 'No'." In a footnote added in 1923, two years before his article on negation, Freud writes: "There is another very remarkable and entirely trustworthy form of confirmation from the unconscious, which I had not recognized at the time this was written: namely, an exclamation on the part of the patient of 'I didn't think that,' or 'I didn't think of that.' This can be translated point-blank into: 'Yes, I was unconscious of that.'"²⁶

In his 1915 publications on "The Unconscious" Freud mentions this idea in a broader context: "There are in this system no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty: all this is only introduced by the work of the censorship between the *Ucs* and the *Pcs*. Negation is a substitute, at a higher level, for repression. In the *Ucs*, there are only contents, cathected with greater or lesser strength."²⁶

Finally, in his 1915 publication, "Thoughts for the times on war and death," Freud writes: "What we call our 'unconscious' – the deepest strata of our minds, made up of instinctual impulses – knows nothing that is negative, and no negation; in it contradictions coincide. For that reason it does not know its own death, for to that we can give only a negative content."²⁷

Another source of arguments in favor of the thesis that negation is not present in the unconsciousness can be built from the fact that dreams – the royal path to the unconsciousness – contain no negatives. Thus in a somewhat guarded way, Freud writes in two places: "'No' seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned."²⁸ He will however point out that there are roundabout methods of expressing negatives and contradictions such as failing to achieve something notwithstanding serious attempts.²⁹ Ten years later Freud writes about his remark concerning negations and contradictory elements in dreams: "I did not then understand [it]. I did not succeed in understanding the dream-work's singular tendency to disregard negation and to employ the same means of representation for expressing contraries..."³⁰ In 1916 Freud writes then more precisely: "This connects with the further fact that a representation of 'No' – or at any rate an unambiguous one – is not to be found in dreams."³¹

IV. Freud's Theory of Negation

Freud's theory of negation stresses the fact that negation can only be explained within a dual frame-work: an archeology and a teleology.

Thus the archeological aspect comes through clearly in the following sentence: "To negate something in a judgement is, at bottom, to say: 'This is something which I should prefer to repress.' A negative judgement is the intellectual substitute for repression; its 'no' is the hall-mark of repression, a certificate of origin — like, let us say, 'Made in Germany.'" ³² Thus without a prior repression, negation would be deprived of the function of being a substitute, of the function of being a hall-mark, of the function of being a certificate of origin. Negation can therefore not be fully understood without an appreciation of the phenomenon of repression.

The teleological aspect comes through when Freud writes, "With the help of the symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions of repression and enriches itself with material that is indispensable for its proper functioning," ³³ or when he writes toward the end of his essay, "But the performance of the function of judgement is not made possible until the creation of the symbol of negation has endowed thinking with a first measure of freedom from the consequences of repression and, with it, from the compulsion of the pleasure principle." ³⁴ Thus according to this line of reasoning, negation is a creation with the purpose of freeing thought, or with the purpose of enriching thought with contents that were previously the domain of the unconscious because of repression.

The linguistic signifier "negation" is thus a pivotal instrument whereby a "telos" can become the partial victor over an undesirable "arche."

The rest of Freud's article on negation brings us several unexpected turns in the argumentation. A very abrupt one comes in Freud's attempt to demonstrate that his theory of negation is valid both for attributive and existential judgements. In the course of his argument, Freud ties his epistemological argument to an anthropological one.

The anthropological view, presented as a companion thesis, is that the self constitutes itself even in its epistemological capacities. Concerning the epistemological task of making attributive judgements, this anthropological thesis claims that the self develops successively three attitudes towards attributes. The key text for our claim is: "What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external are, to begin with, identical." ³⁵

We interpret this text to mean that in the historical development of the individual, there is a period in which the self creates a fictitious distinction between the outside world and the self (i.e., the inside). The criterion used by the self to classify something as outside is whether or not something has the attribute of being good or bad for the ego. It is a purely narcissistic criterion in as far as the self fictitiously identifies all bad things with the

outside world and all good things with itself.

Such a move by the self must be thought of as being preceded by a period in which the ego did not make the distinction between inside and outside on the basis of its narcissistic criterion. (In the article on negation, Freud says it is on the basis of the pleasure principle.) Where the self is not yet using a narcissistic criterion to construct the distinction between outside and inside, the self lives in a world where it has not yet established the distinction between outside and inside and where it thus lives in the feeling of oceanic unity with everything.

The period after the narcissistic distinction between inside and outside would then be the period in which the self is capable of recognizing good elements in the outside world and bad elements in the self.

Concerning the epistemological task of making existential judgements, the anthropological thesis claims "that a precondition for the setting up of reality-testing is that objects shall have been lost which once brought real satisfaction." ³⁶ Freud arrives at this anthropological thesis by way of two intermediate epistemological claims. The first epistemological claim is that the problem of existential judgements related to finding an object is a kind of dialogue between a perception and a representation. The second epistemological claim is that finding an object is thus always a matter not of finding an object but of *re-finding* such an object. ³⁷ Given this anti-Kantian epistemology, where the constitution of an object is not explained by the use of a priori categories, Freud is forced into interpreting finding an object as re-finding an object. This epistemological vision requires then a particular anthropology: i.e., that there was such a thing as a primal object which was available to the subject from the beginning. More positively, the anthropological thesis is that the self experiences the unity with the world prior to it experiencing its difference. Within such a view, the anthropological prerequisite for the epistemological possibility of existential judgements is that "objects shall have been lost," and that the self has the strength and the tools to overcome the dictates of the pleasure principle which in the second period of the self-constitution of the self requires that all good objects — be they lost or not — be imaginatively classified as part of the ego. In the period of the dominance of the pleasure-ego therefore the real loss of an object is encountered by the illusionary presence and identification with the object. In that period, objects can thus subjectively not be lost.

Towards the end of his paper, Freud then complements his epistemological and anthropological claims with an ontological one. The argument is presented by the introduction of three parallel pairs of concepts. ³⁸ The three pairs of concepts are: the epistemological actions of affirmation and negation; the ontological entities Eros — instinct of destruction; the concepts by which Freud relates the epistemological and the ontological

concepts, substitute for uniting — successor to expulsion.

The vulnerable claim I would like to make concerning these three pairs is that the dissymmetry in the concepts that relate the epistemological pair of concepts with the ontological pair of concepts is a possible key to Freud's ontology. Indeed, Freud says that affirmation is a substitute for uniting, whereas negation is a successor to expulsion. The word expulsion presupposes a prior unity, and an action that breaks this unity. Negation relates to that action as a successor. The word substitute (*Ersatz*) is more often used to point to a thing replacing another thing, not to an action following upon another action. Affirmation is then said to be a substitute for another non-action, i.e., the primal situation of unity.

This vulnerable claim about Freud's ontology finds confirmation in the fact that such a claim makes it possible to explain the sentence immediately following the introduction of the parallelism of the three pairs of concepts. The sentence to be explained is: "The general wish to negate, the negativism which is displayed by some psychotics, is probably to be regarded as a sign of a defusion of instincts that has taken place through the withdrawal of the libidinal components."³⁹ According to our reading this would mean that the psychotic has become psychotic because of a fatal move made in his development. The fatal move is the withdrawal of libidinal components. Within Freudian terminology, this means that whereas the self was originally psychologically united with somebody because of his libidinal investment in him(her), the self now separates himself by means of withdrawal. Now that the forces of Eros (libidinal investments) are neutralized, the only effective force that remains is the instinct of destruction. One of the products of that instinct, as Freud just claimed, is negation. The psychotic's overproduction of negative sentences thus becomes intelligible.

In order to make our understanding of Freud's theory of negation complete, we need to reflect more upon two points: the loss of the original object and the relation between negation and repression.

Let us start with the relation between negation and repression. According to Freud, negation in a denial is a substitute for repression. Within the Freudian oeuvre, the concept of repression has a central function. It involves a double aspect. Repressed material is refused access to consciousness but it is at the same time attracted to and retained by the already repressed. Freud argued for this latter aspect of repression because the self seemed unable to undo what it might have suppressed before. But this interpretation of the concept of repression required Freud to postulate some first repressed which, although not attracted to a prior repressed, nevertheless remained out of reach of the conscious self. Freud coined therefore the concept of primal repression. This concept was originally only a theoretical term.⁴⁰ Later Freud linked the concept of primal repression to the idea of fixating instincts to a representation. Laplanche,

Leclaire and De Waelhens have attempted to clarify further this concept.⁴¹ This is done by means of a connection with the idea of loss of the original object and Freud's analysis of the "fort-da" game of the child.⁴²

The explanation runs as follows: the child is very much in need of the first love object — the mother. The absence of the mother creates unrest, anxiety and often produces tears. This was not the case with the child observed by Freud. This child had succeeded in substituting first a toy and then words for the real disappearing mother. The child was able to master its "instinctual need" for the mother, its first object, by investing libidinally its toys. Such an inscription of the libido means a fixation of the libido. This inscription is at the same time a repression of the immediately desired gratification of the libido and an accepted — albeit sublimated — loss of the first love object.

Clearly this act of primal repression sets the child on its way to the constitution of itself as a self, i.e., as independent of others. This act of primal repression is not a conscious act. It is an act that makes awareness of an other than the self possible. As such the self emerges out of an act of the subject which is logically prior to consciousness. All that falls under the power of primal repression shares this inaccessibility for consciousness. Consciousness can and should attempt to recuperate contents from repression. This is a task whose fulfillment is an achievement. The non-fulfillment of this task, however, should be interpreted as lack of activity, not as a morally wrong activity. Thus a denial is not a lie; it is a testimony to the uncompleted task of recuperating contents from the repressed.

V. Conclusion

Freud's epistemological view of negation is thus linked with an anthropology of the self as self-constituting. It is further linked with the idea that consciousness must labour in order to make available for itself contents which it does not possess naturally, but which are possessed by the unconscious.

It might be worthwhile to draw attention to the fact that Freud's theory — although he does not say so — is first of all relevant to the domain of self-knowledge.

Freud's theory of negation thus implies that the self does not necessarily possess true knowledge about itself. Logically wrong statements about the self are therefore not necessarily lies. They are only a testimony to the fact that this concrete self has not yet advanced far enough in the labour of self-possession in order to know its own self. A conscious lie is an act of deceit. A denial is an act of impotence.

Freud himself provides an argument to the effect that real self-knowledge (knowledge wrested from the unconscious) is a victorious

achievement by the following statement: "There is no stronger evidence that we have been successful in our effort to uncover the unconscious than when the patient reacts to it with the words: 'I didn't think that' or 'I didn't (ever) think of that'." ⁴³ Self-knowledge is available which previously was not available to consciousness.

The above interpretation of Freud's theory of knowledge faces two problems, both theoretical and practical.

The theoretical problem is the one formulated most sharply by Sartre. If a content is really unconscious, how can my consciousness know that a particular content is precisely that one which I was looking to uncover. ⁴⁴ Sartre's solution is that of a general theory of bad faith. The unconscious is only that which I refuse to know.

The practical problem is that our interpretation might not square with other statements of Freud. Indeed, Freud wrote also: "It happens particularly often that, after we have laboriously forced some piece of knowledge on a patient, he will declare: 'I've always known that, I could have told you that before.'" ⁴⁴ Clearly this statement by Freud would falsify my whole interpretation of Freud's theory of repression and would allow us almost to equate Freud's concept of repression with Sartre's concept of bad faith.

What are we to do with this apparent paradox? First of all we stress that the equation of Freud's concept of repression with Sartre's concept of bad faith is not acceptable because it would make it impossible to incorporate other parts of Freud's oeuvre.

Second, we do have a direct statement from Freud to help us. Indeed, Freud says that the statement "I've always known that, I could have told you that before" is an act of ungratefulness and is recognized as such by some patients: "Those with some degree of insight recognize afterwards that this is a piece of self-deception and blame themselves for being ungrateful." ⁴⁵

Interestingly enough Freud then explores the ways the ego enriched by new contents conquered upon the unconscious relates itself to its previous self. He notices that the patients say about these new contents: "But I can't remember having thought it." ⁴⁶

Freud then continues by asking the theoretical question as to how this non-availability of thought contents must be interpreted. Freud proposes two possibilities. The first is that the patient is simply withholding recognition of his own thought. (He would be in bad faith.) The second possibility is the following: "...are we to suppose that we are really dealing with thoughts which never came about, which merely have a *possibility* of existing, so that the treatment would lie in the accomplishment of a psychological act which did not take place at the time?" ⁴⁷

To this question Freud answers in the text written prior to 1895: "It is clearly impossible to say anything about this — that is, about the state

which the pathogenic material was in before the analysis — until we have arrived at a thorough clarification of our basic psychological views, especially on the nature of consciousness." ⁴⁸

I believe that I succeeded in demonstrating that the later writing of Freud allows us to conclude that the repressed and the conscious are two different things. If the self succeeds in the task of conquering the contents of the unconscious, it establishes for itself a unity it did not have before. The self inscribes then an unconscious thought in a new register, i.e., consciousness. Thus the later Freud provides evidence that his second possibility is the correct one; that a thought had merely a *possibility* of existing as conscious thought and that the psychotherapeutic treatment lies in the accomplishment of a psychical act which did not exist before.

In the same year that Freud wrote his article on "Negation," he wrote another article: "A note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad.'" In that article Freud explicitly confirms our interpretation. Indeed, Freud compares the unconscious and consciousness with two methods of writing down ideas. One method achieves permanence (writing in ink on a piece of paper). Another method allows men to write down always new ideas if only one erases the previous ones (the black-board). Freud now draws attention to a new device that achieves the two methods at once: it is the "Mystic Writing-Pad." This device has three layers. The lower layer is a slab of dark brown resin or wax. The middle layer is a translucent waxed paper. The upper layer is a transparent piece of celluloid. The function of the upper layer is to protect the translucent waxed paper. For purposes of clarifying methods of writing down ideas, it can be overlooked. Writing occurs when by means of a stylus the translucent waxed paper is pressed on the dark brown slab. The points of contact provide the letters. This "Mystic Writing-Pad" can be used over and over again. One simply has to lift the translucent waxed paper away from the dark brown slab, and one can write down a new message. The "Mystic Writing-Pad" is thus like the black-board.

However, if we look at the dark brown slab, the first message remains inscribed in it, although we now need special light to see it.

Freud now compares the system of perception with the translucent waxed paper and the protective celluloid. He compares the unconscious with the dark brown slab. Consciousness occurs according to Freud when the translucent waxed paper and the dark brown slab touch each other.

Freud adds one further correction which addresses the Sartrean objection. The correction is that one must see the writing in the system consciousness—unconsciousness not as resulting from an external hand but from internal energy emanating from the dark brown slab which makes the translucent waxed paper receptive for the external stimuli. Interruption of the energy emanating from the unconscious (i.e., libidinal withdrawal) is

similar to separating the translucent waxed paper from the dark brown slab. This leads to the destruction of the writing in consciousness without the writing being destroyed in the unconscious. Therapeutic efforts can thus be understood as efforts of bringing together two layers. One had preserved the writing, but in an invisible way. The other is the layer by which the writing alone can become visible. Unconscious thoughts are thus only potentially available for the conscious self.

Thus labelling as lies all mistakes about one's self involves a category mistake. It considers mistakes as being the result of an act, whereas they are the result of the lack of an act. Mistakes about the self need not be the result of an act of deceit; they can as well be the result of lack of self-possession.⁴⁹

NOTES

1. Freud presented his theory about negation in a very dense but short paper: "Negation." S.E. XIX, pp. 233-39.
2. I used the cross-references of Vol. XVIII of the German edition of Freud's works (Gesammelte Werke).
3. S.E. XXI, p. 12. Another such common sense usage can be found in S.E. VI, p. 221: "my being scarcely able to tell lies anymore..."
4. S.E. XII, pp. 303-9.
5. S.E. XIV, pp. 273-300.
6. See "Psycho-analysis and the establishment of the facts in legal proceedings" S.E. IX, pp. 97-114; and "Constructions in Analysis," S.E. XXIII, pp. 255-69.
7. In his paper Freud makes an effort to explain how the patient might believe in the truth of the negation. This is not now the point we are discussing, e.g.: "We realize that this is a rejection, by projection, of an idea that has just come up." S.E. XIX, p. 235.
8. S.E. XIX, p. 236, n. 1.
9. S.E. XIX, p. 235.
10. S.E. XII, p. 35. "He himself not infrequently presses the key into our hands, by adding a gloss, a quotation or an example to some delusional proposition in an apparently incidental manner, or even by expressly denying some parallel to it that has arisen in his own mind. For when this happens, we have only to follow our usual psycho-analytic technique - to strip his sentence of its negative form, to take his example as being the actual thing, or his quotation or gloss as being the original source - and we find ourselves in possession of what we are looking for..."
11. S.E. XIX, p. 239.
12. The first date is the date of analysis. The second the date of publication of the data.
13. S.E. II, p. 52, n. 2.
14. S.E. X, p. 183, n. 2.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 196, n. 1.
16. S.E. XII, p. 35.
17. S.E. XXIII, p. 263.
18. S.E. II, p. 76, n. 1.
19. S.E. X, p. 183.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 183, n. 2.
21. S.E. VII, p. 57.

22. Underlining is ours [W.V.E.].
23. S.E. XII, p. 35.
24. S.E. VII, p. 57.
25. S.E. XIV, p. 186.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
27. S.E. IV, p. 318; S.E. V, p. 661.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
29. S.E. XI, p. 155.
30. S.E. XV, p. 178.
31. S.E. XIX, p. 236.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p. 333.
40. De Waelhens, *Schizophrenia*, pp. 49-56.
41. S.E. XVIII, pp. 14-17.
42. S.E. XIX, p. 239.
43. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 703.
44. S.E. II, p. 299.
45. *Ibid.*
46. S.E. II, p. 300.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*
49. Our thesis should not be construed as meaning that psychoanalysis would make the moral dimension superfluous. The psychoanalytic point of view is valid only when someone how responsibility for the real is taken care of. This is the case with children who are protected and guarded by their parents. This is also the case with psychoanalytic patients who promise not to make important decisions during the therapy.

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