

Depression and Fixations

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THE QUESTION OF FIXATIONS

Freud often uses the term 'fixation'. It first appears in the context of the seduction theory, in Draft L, enclosed with the letter to Fliess of 2 May 1897, where he links fixation with pain and refers to 'intentional repetition' of a fixation (Freud, 1892–99). He employs the term 'fixation to the trauma' in *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916–17), a phrase he was to employ again in 1920, this time in connexion with the compulsion to repeat.

In fact, the idea of fixation already existed in Freud before the term itself was used and it constitutes one of his central ideas: he was even to link primal repression with this concept of fixation. Fixations are the *fueros*, ancient Spanish laws surviving from another age, mentioned in the letter to Fliess of 6 December 1896 (Freud, 1892–99); Freud describes them more explicitly in the *Three Essays*: 'The importance of all early sexual manifestations is increased by a psychological factor of unknown origin ... an increased *pertinacity* or *susceptibility to fixation* in persons who are later to become neurotics or perverts ...' (p. 242, my italics). Later on, Freud mentions 'the preponderance attaching in mental life to memory-traces in comparison with recent impressions' (Freud, 1905).

Subsequently Freud was to mention the connexion between fixations and development, for instance in 'Types of onset of neurosis': 'inhibition in development, which coincides, of course, with inflexibility of fixations' (Freud, 1912, p. 237). How should we today conceive the mechanism of fixations, the 'factor of unknown origin'? Freud has suggested a number of different approaches: (1) the concept of regression; (2) the idea of a maturational gradient put forward in 'The disposition to obsessional neurosis' (1913); (3) the role of seduction; and (4) the theory of fetishism.

The concept of regression

Freud writes: 'It is plausible to suppose that fixation and regression are not independent of each other' (1916–17, p. 347). Regressions take place to previously fixed positions of the libido; Freud uses the metaphor of advanced military detachments which, if defeated, retreat to join up with the detachments left behind at earlier stopping places, and he adds that the more troops there are bogged down at these stopping places, the fewer the advance parties will be in number and the less chance they will have of succeeding.

The question to be answered is: Why have so many forces remained behind? In our view, libidinal regression as a response to trauma is not in itself sufficient to explain the mechanism of fixation.

Marty (1976) approached the question as follows: the trauma which interrupts the movement of evolutionary organization entails 'a counter-evolutionary movement of disorganization', which is in turn interrupted by a 'reorganizing regression' (the effect of the life instincts), and the latter may then constitute the point of departure for a resumption of the evolutionary movement. The successive failures, the 'renewed summonings' (of the life instincts), confer on the functions affected by regression a value which becomes increasingly fixed. Marty thus understands the phenomenon of fixation 'in its linkage with a regression which constitutes its core'. 'The attachment of a secondary regression

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to a primary fixation is a commonplace of psychoanalysis. Conversely, the necessary presence of a regression for the constitution of a fixation gives rise to a new hypothesis'.

I subscribe to this new hypothesis, which does indeed account for the conditions of appearance of a fixation; however, I differ from Marty on the actual mechanism of this fixation. Marty considers fixation to be the result of a 'summoning effect', but my hypothesis is different: the regression will organize a fixation only if it is accompanied by a depressive movement.

Hypothesis of a maturational gradient between libido and ego

Freud's most elaborate hypothesis on the formation of fixations is to be found in 'The disposition to obsessional neurosis' (1913). Here he connects the concept of fixation, or 'point of fixation', with the idea of 'inhibitions in development': 'Thus our dispositions are inhibitions in development'. However, in addition to his central thesis of 'a chronological out-stripping of libidinal development by ego development' in obsessional neurosis, he makes the following important point:

A precocity of this kind would necessitate the choice of an object under the influence of the ego-instincts, at a time at which the sexual instincts had not yet assumed their final shape, and a fixation at the stage of the pregenital sexual organization would thus be left (Freud, 1913, p. 325).

I wish to emphasize that Freud here connects the fixation with '[a necessitation of] the choice of an object'.

The role of seduction in the genesis of fixations

This was a factor adduced by Freud from the very beginning of his career; it was taken up by Ferenczi and is obviously significant in many clinical cases. Seduction may suffice to give rise to 'fixation', but its role remains facultative and the seduction theory cannot by itself provide an understanding of the ways in which fixations occur. On the contrary, we should consider *how* seduction can engender a fixation.

In two analytical patients who had had incestuous relations with their fathers during adolescence, I could see how far this event had in effect broken down the psychical agencies and in both cases given rise to the organization of a depressive system. In parallel with this depressive aspect, the 'cold nucleus' of the trauma in Claude Janin's (1985) phrase, both of these patients tended to become disorganized in response to excitation.

I would postulate that seduction causes the agencies to break down, so that the ego ideal merges with a de-idealized object and the prohibiting parental image disappears; the agencies are replaced by a hypercathexis of entities resulting from the incestuous contact—objects which have lost their brilliance, shadows of themselves, which organize a depressive system. The 'cold nucleus' of the trauma would thus be organized on the model of depression, and according to my hypothesis it is this depressive movement that is responsible for the 'fixation to the trauma'.

Theory of fetishism

I consider it essential to my argument to link together two points from Freud's paper on fetishism.

Firstly, perversion on the one hand and, in particular, fetishism on the other, are for Freud typical examples of fixation; the concept of fixation is used explicitly to account for the genesis and permanence of fetishistic behaviour.

Secondly, Freud associates fetishism and object loss: in his paper on 'Fetishism', he connects the split affecting the fetishist's ego with that observed in two patients who had lost their fathers and 'scotomized' these deaths. He writes:

Thus a piece of reality which was undoubtedly important had been disavowed with the ego, just as the unwelcome fact of women's castration is disavowed in fetishists ... It was only one current in their mental life that had not recognized their father's death; there was another current which took full account of that fact. The attitude which fitted in with the wish and the attitude which fitted in with the reality existed side by side. (Freud, 1927, p. 156).

From here we need take only one more step to consider the refusal and inability to mourn

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observed in depression as a variety of moral fetishism. I shall transpose the model offered to us by Freud when he writes, of the child who has noted the absence of a penis in women, that in that child's mind women still possess a penis but 'this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor'; again: 'this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute' (p. 154).

Reading these words, I feel they can be applied directly to object loss. This leads me to the following proposition: something else has taken the place of the lost object and has been appointed its substitute; it has inherited the interest formerly directed to its predecessor and this interest has suffered an extraordinary increase because the horror of object loss has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute, which will be found in the core of depression. It is 'the shadow of the object' which constitutes this substitute or memorial; it is its fetishistic cathexis which sets it up as an object of depression, or 'depressive object' (Denis, 1987).

Similarly, the link between object loss and fetishism is manifest for an author such as Pasche (1971), who considers that the fetish is derived from what he calls 'the appendices of the mother's body'. He writes, for example, that for the child, the mother is 'the skin of the world', and that all fetishes are skins, but ones made of dead matter, 'a dead structure which retains the skeleton of its organization'; 'the fetish is a skin without a look'; 'what is missing is the

mother's reflection, or in other words, her look'. As the skeleton of a dead relationship, the depressive object does indeed have the appearance of an internal fetish.

It is therefore 'on the basis of Freud' that I am led to hypothesize that fixations are organized during depressive phases in childhood. Alternately, in order for fixation to have occurred, there must have been depression: fixations are anchored depressively.

This proposition implies a theoretical conception of depression, which will now be presented.

A THEORY OF DEPRESSION

Depression begins when the object loses its organizing value for the ego, when the shadow of the object becomes the only substrate of the subject's cathexes. 'The shadow of the object fell upon the ego ...', Freud tells us (1915, p. 249); what is this shadow and its power and what effects does it have? The theoretical propositions set out below follow from this question.

If we define depression on the basis of Freud's formula reproduced above, we can accept that a mode of depressive functioning may have onset at any time during life. We are induced to contemplate the organization of early depressive phases and to ask what effects they have on mental development.

In accordance with the views of Guillaumin (1976), we must look for a formulation which accounts for the common factor in all depressive experiences. He writes: 'Depression must be considered in its phenomenological and even profound dynamic unity ...'

Whether the depressive experience is a phase or a lasting organization, it is organized around a cold star, the 'depressive object' mentioned earlier, the shadow of the object set up as a substitute, which the subject hypercathexes with every ounce of his psychical strength. It is this mode of functioning which unifies the different aspects of depression. 'My only star is dead and my spangled lute bears the black sun of melancholy', writes Gérard de Nerval. The depressive universe is organized around a 'black sun', which replaces the lost star.

But that is not all: the universe of depression creates and indeed organizes this 'depressive object', which proves to be the result of a particular work of the ego.

The work of depression

In clinical examples reported in the literature, 'the lost object', or 'the bad object', is often stated to be at the heart of the depression. However, the use of these two terms does not allow a distinction to be drawn between the object of mourning and that of depression, or between persecution and depression.

The mental functioning of depression contrasts

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with that of mourning. Freud refers to the work of mourning as a work of detachment from the object. I believe that the opposite is the case in depression: there is a refusal to contemplate any detachment. The work of depression is in fact intended to preserve a broken link at any cost. Paul Auster's novel *The Invention of Solitude* includes the following passage: 'There has been a wound, and I realize now that it is very deep. Instead of healing me as I thought it would, the act of writing has kept this wound open ... Instead of burying my father for me, these words have kept him alive'.

The work of mourning can therefore be contrasted with the 'work of melancholia', in Freud's phrase to which Rosenberg (1986) has drawn attention. In mourning, the ego is induced to subject the loss to reality testing and piece by piece to detach itself from the lost object by the work of gradually identifying with certain aspects of the object, this work ultimately leading to an enrichment, an extension, of the ego. In general terms, the ego may be said to develop in mourning. Conversely, in depression the ego becomes spent; all its cathetic capacity is devoted to upholding the structure threatened by the absence of the object.

Yet Freud does not contrast mourning and melancholia so radically. He speaks of an 'essential analogy between the work of melancholia and of mourning', and writes that, 'just as mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live' (p. 257), so in melancholia the conflicts of ambivalence, by way of debasement, ultimately kill the object, thereby opening the way to mourning. Following Rosenberg, I must accept Freud's ideas and admit that such a movement exists in melancholia because there are spontaneous recoveries from depressive episodes.

Rosenberg refers to the work of 'detachability' necessary for resolution of the melancholic situation in order for the detachment of mourning to become possible. For some authors, however—e.g. Grunberger (1966)—suicide is the outcome to which the melancholic process tends, and we observe daily in depressed patients a work of debasement directed against the subject's ego, taken to such a pitch that Freud might well have written: 'Just as mourning impels the

ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live, so melancholia leads the ego to give up life in order to declare the object alive, by way of debasement even going to the extent of killing itself.

Freud (did his pessimism fail him?) did not write this, and yet he may well have thought it; in view of his reference to a struggle of ambivalence, he seems to be implicitly postulating a work having the aim of keeping the object alive.

I therefore hypothesize that there are two tendencies in depression: the first, which Freud explicitly mentions, is towards mourning, aiming at reality testing and hence the death of the object—'detachability' in the sense used by Rosenberg; and the second, specific to melancholia and only implicit in Freud, endeavours to disavow the loss of the object and to preserve its existence even at the cost of the life of the ego or indeed of the subject's life itself. 'Love for the object', Freud tells us, 'cannot be given up', and there is a 'setting up of the object inside the ego' (p. 251).

But what transformation does this setting up cause the object to undergo? What is set up is a memorial, a statue: does it have a sexual value and does it make the image of the object a place of tension and excitation? Yes indeed, but the essential point here is that the loss of the object is at one and the same time acknowledged and disavowed: the consequences of acknowledgement of the loss are denied by the setting up of an idol which takes the place of the object. A decree of external reality is refused and its messengers are killed, but this disavowal of the loss necessitates a complete reshaping of mental functioning. The analogy with fetishism is inescapable.

As in the state of being in love, where the object takes the place of the ego ideal, in depression the shadow of the object set up in the ego takes the place of the ego ideal. One of my female patients, who had lost her mother at the age of 8, says: 'When things go wrong, I do not pray to God, I pray to my mother'. Here, as Guillaumin puts it, 'the object is identified with the ideal'.

As Pasche (1961) has shown, it is the feeling of inferiority that is characteristic of depression. The subject debases rather than reproaches himself;

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when guilt reappears, when the superego again assumes a significant function, the subject has abandoned the register of depression proper.

The depressive object

In the absence of a better term, I suggest calling the result of this setting up of the object in the ego, this object of depression, the 'depressive object'. I speak of a depressive object rather than a lost object in order to emphasize that it is a construction proper to the ego, an entity which includes representative elements borrowed from the lost object but whose assembly, composition and coherence belong to the subject. It is a 'shadow of the object', i.e. a ghost of the object.

The internalization in the ego of a living image of the object (introduced but not 'set up') would then be the source of a form of mental functioning that gives pleasure, of a play of imagos and auto-erotisms on which the ego could find support. In depression, what is incorporated is the object *in its attributes of absence*. As Bergeret (1976) says, 'the feeling of loss is a way of preserving a certain representativeness of the permanence of the object'. The subject's cathexis of his own feeling helps to preserve the effigy he wishes to retain.

The depressive object is thus the product of a process of psychical work with a representative aspect and an affective aspect. The representative organizer of the depressive object, the cold star at the hub of the system, derives from an image of the psychically absent mother, an image of the 'dead mother' in André Green's (1980) sense. A mother who is psychically 'somewhere else' displays to her child by her face alone a configuration of absence—of an inescapable absence.

A physical absence of the mother, a separation, would at least allow her presence to be hallucinated, but this hallucination is prohibited by the perception of an absent face. Whatever the result of the psychical work—an icon, a 'stone dream' or 'decomposing corpse' as in Baudelaire—the representation of the mother's absent face appears as 'the black sun of melancholy' and the nodal point of psychical pain.

However, this representation cannot but be virtual: confronted by the threat of disorganization, the subject organizes himself by cathecting what he is able to perceive in himself and as a result sets this up as an object. In this way, affective and bodily states may be cathected as surrogates of an external object. There is then a kind of teratological construction which builds up an internal object, a weird composition of bits and pieces, pains and shreds.

'The last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one is retained as a fetish', writes Freud (1927, p. 155); this is an important formulation which uses the word 'impression', thus encompassing the affective elements in the organization of the fetish. The fetish is not a thing but a system. David (1972) used the term 'affective perversion' to describe almost fetishistic forms of hypercathexis of the affective state itself and of the 'process of self-allocation'. I

believe that such mechanisms are involved in the organization of the internal fetish that is the depressive object.

Freud's Draft K (1896) contains some striking formulations of this view: 'Repression does not take place by the construction of an ... antithetic idea but by the intensification of a boundary idea, which thereafter represents the repressed memory in the passage of thought'. This boundary idea belongs to the conscious ego and 'forms an undistorted portion of the traumatic memory ... If the traumatic event found an outlet for itself in a motor manifestation, it will be this that becomes the boundary idea and the first symbol of the repressed material' (Freud, 1892–99, p. 229).

The depressive object is therefore made of composite material which is both perceptual and affective; it combines the representative elements and the cathexis of the affects present in the subject at the time of perception of the absence of the object, a moral fetish composed in a similar way to what Freud described in the fetishist: the election of a fetish from the last perceptions before the actual observation of the absence of a penis in women—an item of clothing, fur, hair or something else.

The depressive economy

It is this concept of psychical pain which allows me to introduce the economic point of

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view; this is essential to an apprehension of the different clinical aspects of depression—in particular, the exhaustion which crushes these depressed subjects and gives rise to phrases such as 'libidinal haemorrhage' or 'depression that drains the ego'.

The hypercathexis of the depressive object, which is necessary to the ego in order to maintain its cohesion, absorbs the subject's entire energy.

The internal object may be regarded essentially as the result of cathectic processes; the internal object is at the same time moulded by the instinct, defined as a psychical movement tending towards satisfaction; the external object is the guardian of this cathexis, and the satisfactions found in it reinforce the subject's instinctual organization. If the external object declines to accept its role as the organizer of satisfactions, it disqualifies itself in its libidinal function while retaining the cathexis fixed on itself; at the same time it disqualifies the instinct and its cold presence disrupts instinctual functioning and, simply by virtue of the economics of the situation, prevents recourse to an efficient auto-erotism, which would require a turning back of the cathexis on to the subject himself. The external object becomes a mere object of mastery and ceases to be an object of instinctual satisfaction.

We can now consider the fate of excitation in the depressive economy. The hypercathexis of an object which gives nothing back, from which no relational or auto-erotic satisfaction can be drawn, leads to a build-up of excitation, an 'unseated' excitation deprived of the instinctual channels and the elaborate system whereby it could have been controlled. Being disorganized, this excitation becomes disorganizing and traumatic for the subject, who attempts to master it by strengthening the cathexis of the only object within his reach: his depressive object; this hypercathexis and anticathexis are necessary for negation of the intolerable decree of reality.

The ego exhausts itself in preserving this indispensable object and in the sacrifices it offers to it to guarantee its presence and obtain the grace of a return. A vicious circle thus becomes established and maintains the depression. The build-up of anxiety without any possibility of resolution leads to the kind of anxious exasperation observed in melancholics.

Psychical pain arises when the anxiety focused on the shadow of the object, the cathexis of 'longing' referred to by Freud (1925), becomes chronic. In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud associates psychical pain with the concentration of cathexis on the lost object; he says that this concentration 'tends, as it were, to empty the ego'. The suffering established in turn undergoes anticathexis and is integrated in the system; there then appears a magic, religious conception of the pain: the object will be reborn from my sufferings; it will arise like a Phoenix from my own ashes; and time ceases to have any meaning because, as Paul Valéry wrote, 'Anything can be born, here on Earth, of endless waiting ...'

Depression as psychical 'black hole'

The substance of depressive functioning in its dynamic and economic aspects can be neatly conveyed by a comparison. Astronomers have described 'black suns', improperly called 'black holes', gigantic heavenly bodies of such enormous mass that their own gravitation prevents the tiniest particle from escaping from them. Their attractive force absorbs everything. Similarly, the depressive object absorbs the subject's entire energy without any return whatsoever; it exhausts the ego and distorts the functioning of the psychical apparatus. A depressive object occupies the whole of space, and the ego ideal and the superego disappear inside it. The end result is 'the obliteration of the psychical structures' described by Guillaumin.

Depression and fixations

Using the framework described above, we can therefore define depression in functional terms and account for the fact that a depressive movement may appear at any point in a subject's development, perhaps very early in life, whatever the subject's libidinal organization relative to his external objects.

This model also accounts for the fact that the experience of depression is universal, even if often only transitory. Every child has experienced a decathexis by its mother or maternal environment and has lived through shorter- or

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longer-term depressive movements, which in my opinion are the organizers of fixations and the prototypes of subsequent moments of depressive functioning.

This leads me to continue with the hypothesis foreshadowed earlier: in order for fixation to have occurred, there must have been a depressive movement. What establishes the fixation is the hypercathexis of a 'depressive object' by the complex of instinctual elements involved at the time of its organization. The '[necessitation of] the choice of an object' mentioned by Freud (1913) thus amounts to a depressive movement, the constitution of a depressive object, needed to counter the threat of disorganization, the uncanny, a traumatic experience. Freud's formulation, 'would necessitate the choice of an object under the influence of the ego-instincts' (p. 325), appears to indicate a diversion of the energy of the ego in favour of the object, as we have noted in the depressive economy.

The instinctual elements, excited by the disorganizing and traumatic absence of the object, become reorganized around this 'depressive object', and it is in my view this depressive reorganizing movement which is responsible for fixation. I differ from Marty in holding that regression results in fixation only if organized depressively. Mere regression to an early phase of organization will, if that phase had afforded satisfactions, carry with it possibilities of autoerotic mental functioning in relation to an internal object that is sufficiently present, or, in Winnicottian terms, 'good enough'.

Regressive functioning of this kind allows sufficient economic regulation and autonomy for it to be possible to await the return of the object or to choose other external objects. It is only if the external object fails to reappear, or if another object which affords satisfactions is not cathected before the subject's capacity for autonomy is exhausted, that the subject will embark on a depressive movement, the internal object becoming degraded and transformed into a depressive object on which the subject becomes fixated in a masochistic economy.

It is important to note that this depressive movement, because it obliterates the psychological agencies, gives rise to a deeper regression than a mere libidinal regression. This is because the masochistic economy is degraded as compared with the register of moral masochism organized under the auspices of an efficient superego. The external object, in its presence, in the reality of its exchanges with the subject, organizes a living internal object, and it allows and indeed compels movement; conversely, cathexis of the depressive object halts movement and maintains psychological functioning in a dead end, inducing it to become organized in immobility.

'The most important of these limitations', Freud says, 'is evidently that upon the mobility of the libido' (1916-17, p. 346). In my proposed model, depressive functioning is made up precisely of this limitation on the mobility of the libido, because of its cathexis on a fetishized internal object. The constitution and cathexis over a period of time of a depressive object establish the latter's components in the mind as a bulwark against disorganization. The commitment of all the forces of the mind to the creation and maintenance of such an internal object gives them a mutual polarization and organization that make up what we call fixation. Hence something permanent is imprinted, engraved or 'fixated' by the effort of the depressive work.

As a final metaphor of the relations between fixation and depression, I suggest the link that forms between Sisyphus and his rock. The depressive object, the bedrock of depression, is cathected by the subject with all his might, as he is condemned to tie himself to it in order not to become disorganized, and the rock is no sooner relinquished than it is taken up again, as the strength of Sisyphus can no longer be devoted to anything else. 'We must imagine Sisyphus happy', said Albert Camus; however odd this emphasis on the power of the will, it invites us to contemplate the sombre pleasure, and also the omnipotent hope of changing the world, sought by our patients within depressive suffering.

SUMMARY

The concept of fixation occupies an important position in psychoanalytic theory. The mechanism of fixations cannot be explained solely by means of the notions of regression and repetition. On the basis of a theory of depression in which depression is seen as the outcome of a

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fetishistic cathexis of the 'shadow of the object' set up in the ego as a 'depressive object', the author postulates that fixations become organized during the depressive movements of childhood.

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