

### Compulsion to Repeat (Repetition Compulsion)

(c) Cf. the thought expressed as early as a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated October 15, 1897: '... the Greek legend seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he feels its existence within himself' (3).  
(f) Cf. the commentary on 'Obsessional Neurosis', particularly note  $\alpha$ .

- (1) FREUD, S., 'The "Uncanny"' (1919*b*), G.W., XII, 251; S.E., XVII, 238.
- (2) FREUD, S., G.W., XVII, 119; S.E., XXIII, 192.
- (3) FREUD, S., *Abf.*, 238; S.E., I, 265.

### Compulsion to Repeat (Repetition Compulsion)

= *D.*: Wiederholungszwang. - *Ex.*: compulsión a la repetición. -  
*Fr.*: compulsion de répétition. - *I.*: coazione a ripetere. - *P.*: compulsão à repetição.

I. At the level of concrete psychopathology, the compulsion to repeat is an ungovernable process originating in the unconscious. As a result of its action, the subject deliberately places himself in distressing situations, thereby repeating an old experience, but he does not recall this prototype; on the contrary, he has the strong impression that the situation is fully determined by the circumstances of the moment.

II. In elaborating the theory of the compulsion to repeat, Freud treats it as an autonomous factor which cannot ultimately be reduced to a conflictual dynamic entirely circumscribed by the interplay between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. It is seen, in the final analysis, as the expression of the most general character of the instincts, namely, their conservatism.

The notion of the compulsion to repeat is at the centre of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920*g*), an essay in which Freud reappraises the most fundamental concepts of his theory. So important is the part played by this idea at this crucial moment that it is difficult either to lay down its strict meaning or to define its own particular problematic: the concept reflects all the hesitations, the dead ends and even the contradictions of Freud's speculative hypotheses. This is one of the reasons why the discussion of the repetition compulsion is so confused - and so often resumed - in psycho-analytic literature. The debate inevitably involves fundamental options regarding the most vital notions of Freud's work, such as the pleasure principle\*, instinct\*, the death instincts\* and binding\*.

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It is quite obvious that psycho-analysis was confronted from the very beginning by repetition phenomena. In particular, any consideration of symptoms reveals that a certain number of them - obsessional rituals for instance - are repetitive in character; furthermore, the defining property of the symptom is the very fact that it reproduces, in a more or less disguised way, certain elements of a past conflict (it is in this sense that Freud, at the beginning of his work, described symptoms as mnemonic symbols\*). In a general way, the repressed seeks to 'return' in the present, whether in the form of dreams, symptoms or acting-out\*.

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'... a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unladen ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken' (1). Transference phenomena emerging during the treatment serve to confirm this necessity for the repressed conflict to be re-enacted in the relationship with the analyst. In fact it was the ever-increasing consideration demanded by these phenomena, and the technical problems they gave rise to, which led Freud to complete his theoretical model of the cure by introducing transference repetition and working-through\*, alongside recollection, as major stages of the therapeutic process (see 'Transference'). When, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud brought the notion of the repetition compulsion (which dated from his paper on 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through' [1914g]) to the fore, he grouped together a certain number of examples of repetition which had already been recognised, while further identifying other cases where it is to be observed in the forefront of the clinical picture (as, for example, in fate neurosis\* and traumatic neurosis\*). These were phenomena which in Freud's view warranted a new theoretical analysis. The fact is that when what are clearly unpleasant experiences are repeated, it is hard to see at first glance just what agency of the mind could attain satisfaction by this means. Although these are obviously irresistible forms of behaviour, having that compulsive character which is the mark of all that emanates from the unconscious, it is nonetheless difficult to show anything in them which could be construed—even if it were seen as a compromise—as the fulfilment of a repressed wish.

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The set of Freud's thinking in the first chapters of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* does not come down to a simple rejection of the basic hypothesis according to which what is sought under the cloak of apparent suffering—as in the symptom—is the realisation of desire. He goes much farther, for it is in these pages that he puts forward the well-known thesis that what is unpleasure for one agency of the psychical apparatus is pleasure for another one. Such attempts at an explanation, however, still fail to account in Freud's opinion for certain residual facts. To make use of a terminology proposed by Daniel Lagache, we may sum up the question raised here as follows: must we postulate the existence, alongside the *repetition of needs*, of a *need for repetition*, the latter being both radically distinct from and more basic than the former? Although Freud acknowledged that the repetition compulsion is never to be encountered in a pure state, but that it is invariably reinforced by factors which are under the sway of the pleasure principle, he nevertheless continued to invest the notion with an increasing significance right up to the end of his work (2, 3). In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926d) he deems the repetition compulsion to be the very epitome of that resistance\* which is peculiar to the unconscious: it is described as 'the attraction exerted by the unconscious prototypes upon the repressed instinctual process' (4).

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Although the compulsive repetition of what is unpleasant and even painful is acknowledged to be an irrefutable *datum* of analytic experience, there is disagreement among psycho-analysts as to the correct theoretical explanation of it. Schematically speaking, the debate may be said to turn on two questions.

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First, what is the tendency towards repetition a function of? Is it a matter of attempts made by the ego, in a piecemeal fashion, to master and abreact excessive tensions? Repetitive dreams following mental traumas would especially tend to bear this out. Or must we accept the idea that repetition has, in the last analysis, to be related to the most 'instinctual' part—the 'daemonic' aspect—of every instinct—to that tendency towards absolute discharge which is implied by the notion of the death instinct?

Secondly, does the compulsion to repeat really cast doubt on the dominance of the pleasure principle, as Freud contended? The contradictoriness of Freud's own pronouncements, together with the diversity of the solutions attempted by other psycho-analysts, would best be cleared up, in our view, by a preliminary discussion of the ambiguity surrounding terms such as 'pleasure principle', 'principle of constancy'\* and 'binding'. To take just one case in point, it is obvious that if the place of the pleasure principle is 'to serve the death instincts' (5), then the compulsion to repeat—even understood in the most extreme sense proposed by Freud—can not be situated 'beyond the pleasure principle'.

These two questions, moreover, are intimately connected: a particular type of reply to the one implies a corresponding answer to the other. A whole gamut of possible solutions have been put forward, ranging from the thesis which treats the repetition compulsion as a unique factor to attempts to reduce it to previously recognised mechanisms or functions.

The approach adopted by Edward Bibring furnishes a good illustration of an attempt to find a *via media*. Bibring proposes a distinction between a *repetitive tendency* defining the id and a *restitutive tendency* which is a function of the ego. The former can certainly be said to be 'beyond the pleasure principle' in so far as the repeated experiences are as painful as they are pleasant, yet it does not constitute a principle antagonistic to the pleasure principle. The restitutive tendency is a function working by various means to re-establish the situation which had existed prior to the trauma; it exploits repetitive phenomena in the interests of the ego. From this standpoint, Bibring differentiates between the *defence mechanisms*, where the ego remains under the domination of the repetition compulsion without any resolution of the internal tension; the *abreactive processes* (see 'Abreaction') which discharge the excitation, whether in an immediate or a deferred way; and finally what he calls '*working-off*' mechanisms\* whose 'function is to dissolve the tension gradually by changing the internal conditions which give rise to it' (6).

(1) FREUD, S., 'Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy' (1909b), G.W., VII, 355; S.E., X, 122.

(2) Cf. FREUD, S., 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' (1924c), *passim*.

(3) Cf. FREUD, S., 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' (1937c), *passim*.

(4) FREUD, S., G.W., XIV, 192; S.E., XX, 159.

(5) FREUD, S., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920g), G.W., XIII, 69; S.E., XVIII, 63.

(6) BIBRING, E., 'The Conception of the Repetition Compulsion', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 1943, XII, 502.

### Condemnation (Judgement)

= *D.*: Verurteilung or Urteilsverwerfung  
*Fr.*: jugement de condamnation.—*J.*  
*P.*: julgamento de condenação.

Operation or attitude whereby the himself to fulfil it, as a rule either ness. Freud considers condemnation of defence than repression. Daniel a process of 'working-off' of the treatment.

The terms '*Verurteilung*' and '*Ur.*' synonyms (*1a*), are to be met with condemnation as occupying one goes from the most primitive reflex (in the case of an external internal threat) to condemnation (seems at times to share the same good method to adopt against the the condemning judgement is defined. 'The subject only succeeded in this because he himself was at that time his present-day maturity and still hostile to him with complete success.

It is this positive side of the judgement in the closing pages of his '*An.*' (1909b). He poses the question of conscious of his Oedipal, incestuous does not have the effect of impel of his wishes is that it 'replaces the and excessive one, by a tempera highest agencies of the mind. In *derivation*' (3).

It may be remarked here that Freud's eyes on this occasion in the structuring function of the pre the latency period.

At all events, condemnation is in Freud, and it still bears the mark of judgement is the intellectual substitution of repression, a certificate of origin. What is expressed above all in the the contradiction which is inherent not made possible until the creation thinking with a first measure of and, with it, from the compulsion