THE NATURE OF DESIRE.

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To judge from the history of science in general, it is highly probable that criticism emanating from other departments of knowledge will appreciably modify—and perhaps extensively so—the avowedly tentative formulations of psycho-analytic doctrine. To this statement a proviso must be added which is so self-evident that it should be unnecessary to mention it; experience, however, unfortunately shows that this is not so. The proviso is, of course, that the criticism must be both informed and unprejudiced. Up to the present, it must be admitted by any impartial onlooker that the amount of criticism of psycho-analysis with which this proviso is fulfilled is quite negligible in comparison with the volumes of the other sort. No one has regretted this state of affairs more than psycho-analysts themselves, who are keenly aware of the extent to which they need both criticism and assistance from workers in allied fields. It was, therefore, with a feeling of hopeful expectation, tempered perhaps by the memory of repeated disappointments in the past, that one read the opening passages in a recent editorial in the *JOURNAL OF NEUROLOGY AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY*,¹ where a distinction was drawn between criticisms of psycho-analysis that are trivial and often based on prejudice, and those that are important.

Two criticisms based on Mr. Bertrand Russell's writings are mentioned. The first of these is not easy to answer, because it is expressed in such general and not explicit terms; the second one, which is clearer, will be dealt with presently. The summary given of the first is that "it is considered that (the new facts which have been discovered) should be capable of being understood without assuming the existence of a mythical entity endowed with anthropomorphic qualities". It is not specified what 'entity' is here referred to; but I take it to refer to Freud's conception of an intrapsychic censorship, for the simple reason that the identical phrase is used by Dr. Rivers in the dislike he expressed for this conception. I have not yet discovered any objection to it beyond a dislike of the word itself, a matter of the utmost unimportance. Freud found it to be a convenient term—one, however, which can at any moment be replaced by a more suitable one—to denote the sum total of the various inhibitions that may tend to prevent the free passage of mental

processes from one part of the mind to the other, notably from the unconscious to the conscious. I find it hard to imagine a conception more thoroughly in accord with all modern neurological physiology, a province in which similar conceptions are completely current, nor one to which one could less appropriately apply the terms of 'mythical' and 'anthropomorphic'. The very next sentence, however, made me doubt whether I had correctly understood the reference of the preceding one, for the editorial goes on to say, "It is obviously undesirable to personify so intangible a concept as the 'wish' or desire if it can be avoided". Here I must confess myself to be quite at sea, for, familiar as I am with Freud's writings, I can recall no single instance of his ever personifying a wish or desire. In consequence I remain uncertain about what the criticism really is.

In the same connection the following passage from Mr. Russell is quoted on the general question of 'desire': "Freud and his followers, though they have demonstrated beyond dispute the immense importance of unconscious desires in determining our actions and beliefs, have not attempted the task of telling us what an unconscious desire actually is, and have thus invested their doctrines with an air of mystery and mythology". Do we not see here the difference between a philosopher and a man of science? However much definite knowledge the latter may contribute on a subject, it is always open to the former to complain that the research has not revealed the 'inner nature' of the phenomena studied. A philosopher could thus sweep away the whole of neurology by saying, "But you have not told us what *is* the nervous system". One might have thought that if psycho-analysts "have demonstrated beyond dispute the immense importance" of something, they surely must have told us something about this thing, even though they may humbly admit that they have very much more to learn about it. In a new branch of science exact definitions are postponed as long as possible until a considerable body of knowledge has been accumulated, the reason being that observation and investigation are found to be more profitable occupations than the arid quibblings into which arguments about definitions so often degenerate.

In spite of this general consideration, however, an attempt may be made to meet the wishes of those who feel the need of a definition of desire. I take it that the word has two distinct connotations, which I shall venture to designate as the 'supernatural' and the 'naturalistic' respectively. In the former sense the word refers to a conception of some new idea, the elements of which have not previously existed, which is usually of an ethical or 'lofty' order; it is then thought that an organism is moved to act in a certain direction by the attracting force of this idea. In its second meaning a desire

is an appreciation by an organism, either as a whole or in part, of a sense of unrest or uneasiness due to psychical, and probably also neural, tension; this may or may not be accompanied by an appreciation of the kind of experience which would allay the unrest, or of the most suitable way to achieve this experience, but the attempts made to allay the unrest, i.e., to gratify the desire, are dictated by the discomfort of the tension. It need hardly be said that it is to this second meaning of the term that psycho-analysis, like the rest of psychology and neurology, subscribes. We would fully agree with the statement cited from Mr. Russell according to which "the thing which will bring a restless condition to an end is said to be what is desired".

So far I have not discovered in the editorial article any very definite difference with psycho-analysis. The second line of criticism proves to be equally unfruitful, because it is easily shown to be based on nothing but misapprehension. To quote from the article: "A consideration of desire as exhibited in animals makes it clear (and this is the essence of Mr. Russell's theory) that *unconscious desire is the natural and primitive form of desire*. Such a view would seem to differ fundamentally from those of Freud". Permit me to say quite simply that it does not; it is quite identical with Freud's own views. Mr. Russell himself seems to be under a similar misapprehension, for he is quoted as saying, "It is not necessary to suppose, as Freud seems to do, that every unconscious wish was once conscious." I am bound to say that it needs but a very cursory acquaintance with Freud's writings to know that he has never supposed anything of the sort. On the contrary, although, it is true, he considers that expulsion of an idea from the conscious into the unconscious *may* occur, he also considers that the most important of the unconscious wishes—important both for normal character-formation and for mental disorder—have *never been conscious*; furthermore, that when the expulsion just indicated does occur, it is probably always dependent on an association between the idea in question and one belonging to the latter group, to what he terms the 'primal repressed' (*Unverdrängte*).

It might not be out of place to expand this point by showing the resemblance between Freud's view of the unconscious and Mr. Russell's. Both agree that all wishes are primarily unconscious; Freud would go even further, and maintain that every single mental process is primarily unconscious. I do not think Mr. Russell explains clearly why some of these wishes subsequently become conscious and why some do not, but apparently he would not agree with the explanation given by Freud. According to Freud, there is an inherent, though very variable, tendency on the part of unconscious wishes to

strive forwards towards consciousness, a feature probably connected with the much greater control of emotivity, and especially of motor activity, associated with consciousness. An important group of these wishes is prevented from entering the conscious mind by the inhibiting action—working on the pleasure-pain principle—that is associated with their incompatibility, largely on moral and æsthetic grounds, with conscious elements. Freud's conception of the unconscious is thus wider than his conception of repressed material; it includes the latter, but is not co-extensive with it.

The readers of this journal may judge of the extent to which the criticisms here considered belong to the category of informed criticism.

REFERENCE.

¹ *Jour. Neurol. and Psychopathol.*, 1922, Nov., 274.

[In the course of his paper Dr. Ernest Jones states that he is unable to discover in our editorial any very evident difference with psycho-analysis. If he had done so, the article would have incorrectly represented Mr. Russell's views, as these are, broadly, in harmony with those of Freud. Mr. Russell takes a similar objective attitude to the human being to that of Freud; he recognizes that consciousness is not the essence of life and mind; and he makes it clear that individuals tend to be habitually unaware of the real nature of their desires. The divergence of views consists mainly in the language in which desire is described; Mr. Russell exhibits it as "a causal law of our actions", and "not as something existing in our minds" after the manner of Freud. Furthermore, the language in which Freud expresses his conception of unconscious desire is of such a character that the 'unconscious' tends to be spoken of as if it were a personality with similar attributes to the conscious personality, with the exception of consciousness. Hence our observations on the personification of desire to which Dr. Jones takes exception. As regards the misapprehension to which Dr. Jones refers in the latter part of his paper, we are inclined to think that this is shared by a number of students of psycho-analytical literature. It is true that Freud makes the statement referred to in his recent lectures, and that he has always held that *some* unconscious wishes may never have been conscious; but the impression gained from the perusal of authoritative works on psycho-analysis is that the primitive impulses in childhood, to which Freud attaches so much importance for character formation, are at one time conscious and become repressed early in life. We drew the attention of our readers to Mr. Russell's work because we regarded it of great importance to theoretical psychology. Those who read this work will be able to judge for themselves the value or otherwise of the views expressed therein.—ED.]