



About Sublimation

Interview with Antoine Vergote

Philippe Van Haute

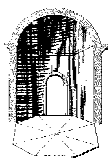
Philippe Van Haute: Sublimation is a key concept in psychoanalysis. It is the articulating link between the psychology of the drives (sexuality) and the theory of culture. This is exactly the reason why sublimation can serve as a point of departure for your reformulation of Freud's conception of these two domains. The fact that it is a key concept, however, does not necessarily mean that it is elaborated in a coherent manner in Freud's thought. You accuse him specifically of not being able to see clearly the problematic of sublimation because of his positivist philosophy and his famous principle of the crystal (the so-called pathological point of view). Perhaps we could begin with this last point. In what sense did the pathological point of view prevent Freud from seeing clearly the problematic of sublimation?

Antoine Vergote: Freud himself mentions — in *The Ego and the Id* for example — that he needed to liberate the theoretical concepts of psychoanalysis from the pathological point of view, more than he had done already. He introduced the concept of the *Es* (id) among other reasons because until then he had practically identified the unconscious with repressed representations of drives. It seems that he did not draw out all the consequences of what he had shown in the sixth chapter of the metapsychological text, *The Unconscious* (on *Agnoszierung*, identification of the unconscious). Freud had begun by developing an explanation of the neuroses. In rejecting Breuer's organic explanation of hysterical symptoms, he constructed his own theory, one that explains those symptoms using processes of repression, which constructs the unconscious in the pathological sense. Reflecting on the particularity of language in psychosis, however, Freud noticed that

in such cases the linguistic signifier has the characteristics of a 'representation' subjected to the primary processes (examined in the *Interpretation of Dreams*). One has to assume then that, before the repression which is responsible for neuroses, there is a particular inscription in the psyche which makes possible both the meaningful (normal) assimilation of linguistic signifiers and repression. In psychosis, this missing inscription is substituted by linguistic signifiers. In order to designate the activity that organizes these primary inscriptions by differentiated investments, Freud coins the expression 'originary repression', by derivation from the expression designating the constitutive action of neurosis. The originary unconscious consists of 'thing-representations' of objects, i.e., representations lacking the quality of the linguistic signifier (which lends itself to secondary processes). One already finds a certain preliminary hint of this idea in the letters to Fliess.

My thesis concerning the originary unconscious shocked some members of the Freudian School, yet it formulates quite precisely a very important idea in Freud. In one exceptional text, it designates the essential difference separating 'transfer neuroses' from schizophrenia. The so-called 'return to Freud' demands that we clarify the terms 'unconscious' and 'repression' — currently the focus of much psychological gossip — and that we refrain from answering our questions by using the word 'signifier' at every turn.

So Freud clearly identifies the unconscious when, after some confused exploration, he suddenly realizes that psychosis has a completely different psychological structure from neurosis, precisely because it lacks the sort of unconscious that would make possible the unconscious in the



sense of neurotic repression. Even before narcissistic constitution, this originary unconscious is composed of primary investments at work in the bodily and affective contact with things and persons: the domain of life that supports the differentiation between hot and cold, light and dark, rhythm and tone of voice, the agreeable and the disagreeable, hunger and repletion, etc.

Freud puts forward a similar idea in *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, where he outlines an entire initial phase of psychic structuration. What he sketches there has nothing to do with pathology. Those who would reject any reference to the normal-pathological distinction, through an ideological confusion fashionable in certain circles, understand nothing of these fundamental texts. For a perverse (pathological) masochism to be possible, there must already be a psychological structure which allows a subsequent construction of the pathology. There is an obvious analogy to be drawn with narcissistic constitution. From the moment that one returns to the origins, Freud states explicitly, the diagnosis of pathology no longer applies. Of course this does not rule out the psychic composition being conflictual. Conflict is not yet pathology, however, whether it occurs in the psyche or in society.

Freud himself had great difficulty in maintaining all the consequences of the principle he formulates in *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*. The task of explaining pathology tends towards the pathological point of view. In addition, Freud had grown up in a 19th century impregnated with positivist ideas, where complex phenomena were explained as compositions obtained by adding up their basic elements. Recall what an innovative attack against positivism was launched by the psychological concept of the *Gestalt*: this dynamic structure cannot be explained by assembling its bits and pieces. Contemporary neurology, as well, has overcome the positivism of reflexology (also used as a model by Freud): they demonstrate that a neurobiological organism constructs and develops 'strategies' of action. This is why I think that

the Freudian metaphor of the shattered crystal is misleading. It incites us to think of pathology as the breaking of something, leading us to try and gather up the original bits and pieces. Freud regularly succumbs to this sort of positivism against which, nonetheless, he invented psychoanalysis.

Still too much a disciple of the 19th century, Freud had great difficulty in his theoretical constructions in maintaining the idea that, before the distinction between an identified pathology and normality, there was already a normality in the process of constituting itself and lending itself to a pathological restructuring (or destructuring). When he speaks of the polymorphously perverse child, he uses a positivist language that projects perverse pulsional desires back into the infantile psyche where the distinction had not yet been able to constitute itself. At other moments, by contrast, he says for instance that an 'idealization' of the partial drives was necessary in order for them to have become perversions. Pathology is the result of an unconscious work carried out on the drive in the process of constituting itself.

PVH: In what sense did this principle of the crystal and this tendency to begin with pathology make it difficult or impossible to comprehend the real nature of sublimation?

AV: The principle of the crystal can be one illustration of the positivist *a priori*, if one does not expose the risks of this metaphor. In the same way that Freud speaks of infantile perversions as tendencies that must be overcome, he also speaks of 'the sexual drive' as something that is present from the beginning and that might even be identified some day by chemical analysis! Whereas all of psychoanalysis was elaborated in order to give an account of the normal clinical observation that human sexuality is constructed psychologically by way of drives and their ends. Lacan aptly remarks that it is difficult to see how one could transform 'the sexual drive' by sublimation. This is of



course true for the drive as Freud conceives it, since for Freud the auto-eroticism that precedes the 'psychical action' constitutive of narcissism is already an activity of the sexual drive, while the latter still remains to be constituted, if one follows Freud, as an object drive, homosexual or heterosexual, etc.

PVH: You speak of an originary unconscious that would not be the result of neurotic repression. I was struck by the fact that your entire book is structured around a new conception of the body, or better put: around what you thematize as 'the libidinal body'. You speak of this libidinal body as a body subject that initially functions in an auto-erotic manner, and subsequently forms itself in contact and in dialogue with the world. You have just spoken of Lacan, but I have the impression from what you say about this 'libidinal body' that you are more on the side of phenomenology — Merleau-Pontian in this case — than on the side of Lacan. What you refer to as the libidinal body has a certain power and plays a decisive expressive role in the creation of meaning. Such a conception would not have been acceptable to Lacan. But if the body has this positive role in the creation of meaning, it is because it is, in your view, the privileged agent of sublimation. Here again, it seems you are very close to Merleau-Ponty.

AV: Concerning Lacan, I can be quite brief. I think that the body is a real problem for Lacan. There are various historical reasons for that. Lacan began thinking of psychoanalysis — one can see this clearly in his doctoral thesis — on the basis of a whole American culturalist social philosophy, and subsequently in the context of structuralist linguistics for which bodily experience poses problems. It is also very significant that Lacan took psychosis as a model. But let us leave all this aside, however important it may be. As Lacan had taught us to do, I made a return to Freud with the assistance of the human sciences.

It is clear that, for the human sciences, phenomenology was just as important as structural linguistics. Structuralism was first of all a social movement before it really became an anthropology of the personality.

When Freud speaks of auto-eroticism — not 'auto-sexuality', since that would have no meaning for him — he understands quite well that there is a body animated by drives, but it does not yet really have an object recognized as such. Unfortunately, there is the entire problem that Laplanche has elaborated, that of a certain monadic thought in Freud. I would not be inclined to say, as you do, that the psychism discovers the world afterwards, but there is a certain moment at which the world is not yet articulated as a world organized into object and subject. Phenomenology is obviously of some help in understanding this. Against a certain psychology that tended to misperceive it, Husserl, just as Freud, saw very well the *Ichlichkeit* of phenomena which are psychical, but which are nevertheless not conscious. Every psychical phenomenon has the character of 'egoity'. Freud constantly emphasizes that there is only a psychological experience when there is some activity carried out by an active centre that lives it, and lives it in a way that one could describe as 'egoic', *ichlich* as Husserl says. Moreover, when Freud, in *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, developed the first psychical articulations outside of any pathology, he spoke of the ego (*Ich*), but it was obviously not yet the ego as an entity constituted by narcissism and by language. In this context, it is absolutely essential to say that all initial symbolization is carried out by the body.

PVH: And these initial symbolizations are already sublimations?

AV: Yes, insofar as they are cultural. Take the example of the child playing with the bobbin. What does the child do? The first syllables, *Fort* and *Da*, on which Lacan places so much impor-



tance, only accentuate and more consciously articulate what is already present in the movement of the human body, a body that invests, takes distance, rejects, retains, and constructs a symbolic game which Freud has great difficulties explaining. With this auto-erotic body — i.e., a body animated by drives — an activity is accomplished libidinally by an ego that is everywhere present but nowhere completely fixed and that, in this sense, does not take a distance from its own body. It is an ego that animates the body, since it is already a psychical, egoic body. This is what Merleau-Ponty had caught sight of and elaborated in certain texts from *Signs* and especially in the texts published posthumously, relying on Husserl's analysis of 'passive associations'.

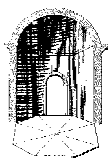
PVH: You underline the fact that this is an auto-erotic body rather than an auto-sexual body. You also emphasize in your book that what is sublimated is never sexuality as such. What should we understand by this claim?

AV: What is 'sexuality as such'? It is shaped by a process of (neuro)biological maturation, among other things. I would be the last to deny that. Sexuality is extremely complex because it is also shaped by the perception of the presence or absence of a phallus, i.e., by sexual difference (phallus or no phallus), which already presupposes an ability to affirm an absence, hence narcissism and a language that is subsequent to narcissism. But what is it that is sublimated? Freud insists on the importance of what he calls the 'pre-genital sexual drives'. Let us leave aside the question of why he calls them 'sexual'. It is clear that these are tendencies, experiences, representations, feelings, interests, etc., which have a libidinal, erotic character before being formed and differentiated by the genital stage, things like oral pleasure or the pleasure of expulsion or anal retention, or the pleasure associated with touching another's body. Now I think that one should apply to pre-genital eroticism what Freud says in

Instincts and their Vicissitudes about the pleasure of aggression directed outside oneself or returning imaginarily onto oneself. If the original diagnosis is not legitimate, simply identifying the erotic drive as sexual is not legitimate either. It is only insofar as there is eroticism that there is a possibility of transforming it through sublimation, just as there is the possibility of integrating it into constituted sexuality or realizing one of its active possibilities by becoming a perversion, for instance, with the possibility of subsequently repressing this perverse representation. This is the reason why Freud particularly insists on the sublimation of the 'pre-genital drives', and if he affirms that every drive can be sublimated, it is because the libido animates it and gives it the erotic character of pleasure or displeasure.

Can the sexual drive as such be sublimated? In answering this question, one should recall that, when Freud poses the question in this manner, he utilizes energetic, hydraulic metaphors that are rather rudimentary: he says it is a diversion from the sexual aim (as if this did not contradict the definition of the sexual drive). 'Diversion towards cultural values' also carries a positivist stamp: the drive is conceived as if it were emptied of any cultural content. But I think it is clear that since the libidinal body is impregnated by the contact with the human environment, the drive is from the outset shaped by human reality, hence it is cultural. Nothing in man is merely instinctual, and no drive is free of what human contact deposits in it. Initially there is a sensitivity to the perceived difference between mother and father, between persons and the wood of the cradle. Melanie Klein understood this very well, but she tends to suppress the Oedipus event in the formation of sexuality. Of course, through the narcissistic constitution of the ego and the I-other differentiation, the early perception of the man-woman difference is affirmed, but it will be even further taken up and articulated in the Oedipus event.

PVH: Along the same lines, you quite firmly



reject the idea of a death drive. What is striking, though, is that in the pages where you discuss this problem, you hardly mention the major clinical motives for Freud's introducing the idea, namely the repetition compulsion and its many clinical manifestations.

AV: This is obviously a crucial question. Yet, what exactly is repetition? We need to draw a distinction. Freud introduced this problem in a brief study of traumatic neurosis. Traumatic neurosis, however, does not have the structure of a neurosis, neither in its symptoms nor in its formation. It is a quasi-hallucinatory repetition, in dreams and daydreams, of the incident undergone. This is a very special clinical category. When it comes to a real neurosis, there is repetition because the drives continue to exert pressure. It is the repressed libidinal activity combined with the activity of the repressing agents that bring about repetition. Neurosis remains an activity (unless it results in a lethargic state) and that is why it can be treated in a talking cure. This process is reproduced in life and particularly in transference. I do not see why something new needs to be introduced. The child's play analyzed in the second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, understood as a 'great cultural achievement', has nothing in common with these two forms of repetition. There, repetition is a way of affirming mourning and the formation of a new narcissistic relation to the mother. In his interpretation, Freud nevertheless falls back into a pathological schema, and the numerous pages devoted to an outdated biology present arguments that are just as bad as the appeal to chemistry in identifying the sexual drive. One observes a psychobiology that implicitly admits the major defect of Freudian thought concerning the pleasure principle, a defect that I have discussed at length. This pleasure principle obviously ends in death, but because it is a death to which the libidinal drive leads, Freud invokes the ambiguous idea of nirvana, an idea that was dear to certain Romantic

souls in Freud's cultural milieu. We must bear in mind Freud's obstinate positivism which tried to construct language, even the linguistic symbol of negation, on the basis of pre-linguistic animal behaviours. I can quite understand that some people are fond of the dramatic, even Romantic idea of the death drive, but they rarely examine the reasons why Freud introduced the concept nor the reasons why Lacan, drawing implicitly on Hegel and Heidegger, maintained it. After studying these reasons, I found the concept to be not very useful, even dangerous if it stifles one's critical sense. One should also recall something that seems to have escaped the proponents of the death drive. According to Freud, this drive does not possess its own energy, and it is resistant to observation, remaining within eros except in pathological cases such as schizophrenia where it is manifest as a 'pleasure of negation' (*Verneinungslust*), an expression that nevertheless insinuates a pathological diversion of the libido.

PVH: Do you think there is a negative moment in the libido itself?

AV: Of course. The libido is formed through differentiation from need, on which it nonetheless is based, by establishing the pleasure-displeasure dichotomy. The originary unconscious is instituted by the difference between the pleasant and the unpleasant. The child affirms its first autonomy through the gesture of saying 'no'. The action that constitutes narcissism is a differentiation that introduces a double negativity and renunciation: ego ideal, ego-other. So the formation of the libidinal drive arises from a series of negative moments that enter into the very constitution of the libido.

PVH: Let's talk about the relation between idealization and sublimation. In your book you make a sharp distinction between these two processes, taking inspiration from Freud. But in a previous book, *Guilt and Desire*, particularly in the chapter



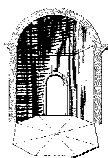
on Theresa of Avila, you seem to suggest that idealization, while remaining different from sublimation, is a kind of preparation for sublimation and is subsequently integrated into true sublimation. This book makes a less sharp distinction between the terms, and I wonder if there are not certain texts by Freud that are less categorical, less absolute regarding this difference than the texts mentioned in your book on sublimation. How are these procedures related to each other? Are they simply opposed, or can one be, under certain circumstances, a preparation for the other?

AV: We must begin by distinguishing them, just as we distinguish the normal and the pathological. One can always say that nothing is ever absolutely normal — everyone knows this. But to go on to say ‘there is nothing really pathological’ would be idiotic, since then there would no longer be any need for psychoanalysis or psychotherapy. So we have to start by distinguishing them, and then we can see that they both have the characteristics of a process which, insofar as it is a pathological process, means that they are difficult to dissociate. While I distinguish the meaning of the processes of idealization and sublimation, I recognize that in reality there are states where the two are confused. As Freud says, idealization concerns the object. I think that I have sufficiently demonstrated that one cannot simply dissociate the libidinal tendency and the object. Indeed, Freud regularly contradicts himself in this matter. It cannot be the case that there is not a certain reciprocal inherence of the drive and the object. Clearly, idealization is an idealization of the object, but at the same time the subject is narcissistically implicated — with his drive — in what he idealizes. In sexual love, where the other person is idealized, the subject experiences an enlargement of himself through the affective participation with the idealized other. He is enlarged, or he idealizes his own love. This self-idealization of the libido, through the mediation of the idealization of the other, can open a path to the hu-

manization, even the sublimation of sexuality. The subject can also remain captivated by this idealization or self-idealization, in which case the process becomes an imaginary enlargement (Lacan) of the other and of oneself. If this attitude is not surpassed, there will be no sublimation, and the attachment will turn into resentment and hate. Idealization is only a preparation for sublimation when it submits to the symbolic law. You mentioned Theresa of Avila. What is impressive about this woman is also her courage in accepting the disappointment, the sufferings and the silences inflicted on her by a God whom she obstinately loves, and who is thereby revealed as Other than what she feels and thinks initially. She accepts a renunciation of the imaginary pleasure of idealization. But to make her for this reason into a spiritual ancestor of de Sade would be an even greater imaginary *tour de force*.

PVH: Let us conclude with this problem of the renunciation demanded by culture. This brings to mind what you have said in your important chapter on the cure and the importance of sublimation for the cure. You say that from the moment there is free association — from the moment there is analytic work, in other words — there is already sublimation. So one does not have to await the end of the cure in order to see an increased capacity for sublimation. On the contrary, sublimation occurs in the cure insofar as it is a talking cure.

AV: Freud states that there is no therapy without sublimation. For him, this is obvious. But is sublimation produced automatically when repression is finished, dissolved or removed by the cure? This raises the problem of the difference between illness and normality. For Freud, what is repressed are all the perverse tendencies, so the subject must be able to do something with them once the repression is removed. This is only possible through the work of sublimation. I asked myself the question, what does it mean that subli-



mation is produced automatically *after* repression is removed? Is repression simply removed after the cure? Does not the entire cure consist of a progressive work that removes repression? In what way is the repression removed? I went back and looked at the way in which Freud understands the cure and the therapeutic process. It is not so simple. There is a lot of talk about psychoanalysis, but what is really therapeutic in the analytic cure? What struck me most of all was the contrast between the way Lacan — rightly — criticized a polarized analysis of transference and the way in which many analysts centre their interpretations on transference, because they believe that the removal of repression is done by an analysis of the feelings regarding the analyst. This seems to be almost an orthopedagogic way of working: you correct the feelings that you should have regarding others.

Following Lacan's criticisms, I studied the process of repression, appealing to something that is almost absent from Lacan: what English philosophy of language calls the modalities of the *speech act*. This is something that is not at all recognized in the structuralist movement. Saussure had great difficulties with the act of speech. The philosophy of language developed all the different activities that are present in speech

as living speech. What the analysand does is to speak on the basis of what *makes* him speak: fantasies. But it is also speech in which he is engaged in order to clarify his representations of drives and desires, and to correctly perceive the other and himself. There are many things going on when the analysand expresses what he experiences, when he speaks of his past, and when repression 'is removed'. One must analyze all this in order subsequently to understand that it is already in the cure itself, in speech as speech act, that repression is removed and that the sublimation process already takes place. It is nothing but the affective differentiation between self and other, man and woman, mother and father, and the appropriation of the cultural order in which one lives and in which all memories and all traumatizations are floating. To organize all this is already to introduce the symbolic order, to use an expression from contemporary anthropology. It is already sublimation, and this also opens the way to a creativity that is expressed, for instance, in painting or in scientific research or in the capacity for sexual love. The recovery of this capacity in the cure is often extremely significant — it is already a sublimation accomplished from inside the therapeutic process.