



9/2010 (17)

Anxiety and Affect in Psychoanalysis

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Introduction

The concept of affect or emotion poses two difficult questions for psychology. The first is, “How are the subjective and bodily components of an emotion connected?”. The second is, “Given that the bodily components seem to lack clear distinguishing features, how do we differentiate so easily among the feelings themselves?” We easily recognise the difference between, for example, a pleasurable emotion, such as happiness, and an unpleasurable one, such as anxiety. If two distinctly different physiological processes are involved, we do not easily distinguish between them. One of my aims here is to evaluate whether the theory of affect found in psychoanalysis provides answers to these questions.

I am also interested in a quite striking fact I noticed only when writing this paper: the minimal discussion in psychoanalytic literature of intense affects like love and hate or the lesser ones like happiness and sadness. Although it may seem paradoxical, my discussion will begin with and centre on an early and speculative theory from which Freud tried to explain how the individual coped with experiences of pain. I extend that theory to emotion in general and conclude that psychoanalytic theory itself is unable to do so.

Affect in psychology and psychoanalysis

Freud set out the basis for his first theory of affect, a pseudo-physiological one, in an untitled and unpublished manuscript of 1895, which he often called a ‘Psychology for Neurologists’. It

was published in English in 1950 as *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (Freud, 1895/1950, pp. 281-391). Its essential constructs were retained in his second and more psychological theory.

Although basically familiar from Association Psychology, Freud's two theories were unique. In that of the *Project* each mental representation or idea was based a group of *neurones* connected structurally to one another and to other groups of neurones by processes or fibres. Neurones were occupied, invested, or *cathected* (i.e., filled) with *quantities of energy* brought to and carried away from them along the fibres later called *dendrites* and *axons*, respectively. In this system, neurones were governed by *the principle of inertia*, their tendency to discharge the energy they contained as soon as it started to accumulate.

Pathways and links (*Bahnung*) were created among these otherwise isolated neurones and groups of neurones, when quotas of energy transmitted along the fibres breached the contact barriers between them. The first and later breaches successively lowered the threshold for the amount of energy needed for subsequent transmission. Hence the group of neurones representing the idea of the sight of a lamb, for example, did not become connected to those representing its sound until the lamb was seen and heard at the same time. When the sound of the lamb was heard subsequently, the link created by the transmission of energy conjured up the visual image of the lamb, and each later revival required less energy.

When Freud subsequently described the mechanism psychologically, he lost what had given structure to the system and the mechanism that had enabled it to work. Without neurones, how were ideas represented? Memory traces? Without fibres, how were psychological links formed between ideas? Mental bonds? Without a neural energy, what enlivened the mental system? Some kind of psychic energy? Without a principle of inertia, what governed movement through the system? An overarching principle of a purely psychological kind?

All four questions are central to understanding how Freud conceptualised affect in his theory, but his answers are vague and his psychological theory unwieldy. His claim that the causes of neuroses were exclusively sexual made it even more problematic.

The sources of affect in Freudian theory

To begin: how does affect enter psychoanalytic theory? Is it a direct consequence of Bertha Pappenheim's (Anna O's) symptoms disappearing when Josef Breuer got her to express, or *abreact*, the emotions she had once held back? And is Freud's *quota of affect* simply a conceptual refinement of that emotion? The answer to both questions is 'No'.

Breuer does not describe his treatment of Bertha Pappenheim as requiring affect to be expressed. Both in his case notes and in his published account, Breuer's emphasis is on narration – simple talking. Nor is it consistent with the way Freud came to incorporate affect into what he called 'Breuer's method' (Macmillan, 1990a; 1997, pp. 19-24, 69-116; 2007, pp. 53-60, 114-172).

The history of the concept of the 'quota of affect' itself shows that it does not derive from observations made by Breuer. Affect came into Freud's thinking through his consideration of Pierre Janet's analysis of hysterical symptoms. For many years it had been known that those symptoms could not be explained by damage to the nerves supplying the organ or function involved. But, in 1892, Janet pointed out that these non-anatomical peculiarities were determined by the idea of the organ or function as it was understood in popular or everyday language rather than as it was understood in anatomy. Anatomically there could not be, for example, an absolute anaesthesia in that part of the arm between a regular boundary at the shoulder girdle and another at the wrist. But that was exactly what an 'arm' was in the popular sense. Janet believed that the popular idea of the arm had become dissociated from the patient's concept of self. Freud adopted Janet's notion but proposed that it was the excess affect associated with the idea that had caused it to be actively pushed out or repressed from the self or ego.

At the beginning of his therapeutic career, Freud did not ask his patients to express the emotions associated with the memories of events that seemed to have caused their symptoms. By the time he did so later, his therapy was closely aligned with the theory of the *Project*. Symptoms formed from ideas that were unacceptable to consciousness or the ego, and the idea was repressed from consciousness by being stripped of its affect. The affect was then discharged into neuro-muscular channels where it caused symptoms by *conversion*, or directed to a previously

neutral idea where it caused obsessional symptoms by *displacement* (Macmillan, 1997, pp. 163-194; 2007, pp. 230-270).

The transformation of affect into libido

Originally Freud did not describe the unacceptable ideas, and therefore the repressed memories, as having any particular content. They were simply charged with excessive affect. But, by some time in 1894 or 1895 he had convinced himself they were always sexual. Freud gave sexuality this exclusive casual role because he said it was what his patients told him. That was not so.

Prior to investigating hysteria in any detail, Freud had already decided to try to extend to it the exclusive sexual aetiology he believed he had established for neurasthenia and anxiety neuroses (the *actual neuroses*). However, because his conclusion confused necessary with sufficient conditions, he had merely built up his own expectation of a universal sexual causality (Macmillan, 1976). When he did come to hysteria, Freud frequently constructed 'memories' of whole sexual 'scenes' from the fragmentary recollections of his patients and 'confirmed' his hypothesis of sexual causation by foisting the scenes on to them. At the same time he insisted that his expectations had no influence on the fragmentary recollections or other things his patients recalled (Macmillan, 1990b; 1997, pp. 205-229, 636-640; 2007, pp. 282-311, 812-818, 854-855).

Affect and repression had come into psychoanalytic theory as an alternative to Janet's dissociation. However, once Freud had given the neuroses an exclusively sexual aetiology, what became important was sexual affect rather than emotion in general. If what caused an idea to be unacceptable to consciousness was its sexual content, it must have been charged with the energy of the sexual instinctual drive or *libido*, and what had to be stripped from it and converted or displaced into a symptom was exactly that energy.

A psychological mental apparatus?

Let us now return to the essence of the model of the *Project*. The neural energy cathecting the neurones underlying a group of ideas caused an affective response when it was transmitted along the axons leading to where the physiological aspects of

emotional responses were generated – in what we now term the autonomic nervous system. On this view, emotion was the discharge. It occurred in a place different from the ideas giving rise to it and discharge lowered the threshold for subsequent discharge. Consequently, when the neurones underlying the memory were reactivated, the only thing that could prevent the emotion itself being experienced again was for the transmission of the energy to be blocked.

In the *Project*, Freud pictured a neural mechanism that did precisely that. Travel along a pathway likely to cause pain again was halted by a *side-* or *lateral-cathexis* that diverted the energy into the *ego*. Although Freud is here picturing a neural mechanism preventing the re-experiencing of pain, the model is usually taken to apply to repression: repression prevents the revival of an original painful emotional response. Freud conceived the *ego* as a group of well-cathected neurones whose very cathection attracted the energy moving toward the memory of the emotional response. Repression was the diversion into the *ego* itself of the energy potentially capable of causing another autonomic discharge.

Can this pseudo-physiological process be translated into a psychological one? Conceptually, the four critical, and related, problems faced by Freud were: finding a replacement for the neural energy; providing a mechanism by which it created its effects; accounting for the ways in which this new energy was discharged; and explaining how the discharge could be inhibited.

Freud's solution was simple. First, he replaced neural energy with psychological energy which, in the final form he gave it, was derived from the sexual instinctual drive. When sexual physiological processes reached a certain level they became linked with ideas of sexuality. It was that linkage which constituted libido and which, together with its sublimated form, provided the power for all mental life. Second, Freud endowed this mental apparatus with a tendency to avoid unpleasure. He also gave the energy contained in it the ability to accumulate in quantity and so generate unpleasure. It was now memory traces, rather their underlying neurones, that were somehow occupied, invested, or cathected with energy, and it was still increases in energy that somehow caused reactions designed to decrease it in quantity. Neurones filled with energy had somehow given way to similarly occupied memory traces, and the principle of neural inertia had

given way to a psychological pleasure principle. Third, although potential pathways of discharge were basically determined by the strength of the connections along a particular path, those actually travelled were chosen according to the amount of resistance they encountered. Ordinarily that resistance was a simple function of previous experience: the more the path had been travelled in the past, the more likely it was to be trodden the next time. Fourth, of the resistances directing discharge, the most effective was that provided by the force of repression exercising its function of protecting the ego from ideas incompatible with its standards. The well-cathected group of neurones of the *Project* had given way to a psychological force located in the ego.

Affect, anxiety, and repression

Emotion nevertheless remained a process of discharge. And, as many psychoanalysts of varying persuasion argued in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Freud's psychological theory of affects was particularly deficient in explaining how the threatened re-cathection of an earlier memory of an experience of anxiety was prevented from causing unpleasure.

To understand the problem, we need to consider the two stages through which Freud's theory of anxiety developed. Until about the early 1920s he had proposed that repression caused anxiety by preventing the discharge of accumulated toxic sexual substances. After that time he reversed the relation: now anxiety, still conceived of as having a toxic basis, caused repression. Freud's arguments are so intimately intertwined with the revision of his theory of instinctual drives and the concomitant postulation of a psychic apparatus consisting of the *ego*, the *id*, and the *superego* (the so-called structural theory) that evaluating them is too complex a task to be undertaken here. What is most important, and quite simple to do, is to judge the evidence. Not only did Freud adduce nothing to justify the reversal but he actually used the same clinical observations in favour of both the pre- and post-1920s positions (Macmillan, 1997, 459-484; 2005, pp. 596-627).

Where is the problem? It is in the changed functions given the ego in the structural theory. As a consequence of introducing the *death* instinct, or *Thanatos*, the standards once housed in the ego had to be located in a superego. Thanatos there provided

the energy that enabled the superego to scrutinise behaviour and punish infringements of it. The resultant much weakened ego was no longer strong enough to initiate repression by itself. It had only the ability to sense the potential recurrence of an earlier anxiety and emit a signal calling on the superego to inhibit the discharge. How that signal is generated and how the inhibition is brought about are the main problems of the psychoanalytic theory of anxiety. And, as an affect, what applies to anxiety applies to the others.

Attenuating anxiety

For Freud, the foundation of a response to a current anxiety *real hyphen* provoking event was some earlier experience in which there had been an increase in excitation and a discharge that generated the particular unpleasure of anxiety. This he thought was provided by birth. Excessive excitation during birth was directed to stimulating the heart and the lungs and avoiding the catastrophe of toxins accumulating in the blood. Later excess excitation caused the same physiological reactions of fighting for breath, the increased heart rate, and the unpleasurable emotional quality. Developmentally later traumatic anxieties – those of separation, castration, object loss, and superego threat – derived from the core anxiety to which the infant had been subject at birth (Macmillan, 1997, pp. 459-466; 2005, pp. 596-604).

Reducing anxiety of this magnitude to the level of a signal poses several difficulties. First, how can anxiety be sensed other than as a process of discharge? In Freud's theory, an idea became conscious because it had a *word-representation*. Affects lack word-presentations so that anxiety cannot become conscious that way. Neither can it do so through *thing-representations*; they also represent ideas, albeit unconscious ones. Second, what initiates the signal? It cannot be the re-cathection of the memory trace of the original discharge; a discharge leaves no trace to invest. Third, what does an attenuated signal consist of? If it is a smaller discharge, how is that reduction brought about? Freud suggested in the *Project* that the reduction of the intensity of the pain experienced when a painful memory image was re-cathected occurred because the *key neurones* he specially postulated released small quantities of unpleasure in the affect itself, and that unpleasure was

already attenuated. The problem with this explanation is that Freud did not identify the key neurones or what he called the 'roundabout ways' through which the excitation was transmitted to them. Nor has an alternative been formulated since (Macmillan, 1997, pp. 471-474; 2005, pp. 611-614).

Finally, apart from the mechanism by which the signal of anxiety is generated, there is another and quite central problem: if the ego has the ability to anticipate future events, how does it anticipate which of these future events may cause anxiety? And, if it can, why is a signal needed? What Freud describes in both the *Project* and the psychological theory is an ego that has *already* appreciated the possibility of a painful discharge *before* inhibiting or repressing it. The problem is beautifully illustrated in Rangell's 40-year old analogy of the ego as a water-tap: before being turned on, the tap is unable to anticipate whether the water about to flow through it will be hot or cold. Only after the flow begins can it be controlled.

Anxiety and affect more generally

About 30 to 40 years ago, most psychoanalysts writing about Freud's theory of affect did so in the context of trying to explain how a recurrence of anxiety could be prevented. Some went beyond the questions of how, when, and where signal anxiety was generated to remark on the theory of affect itself. Thus, for Applegarth the psychoanalytic theory of affect represented "one of the most total failures," Garza-Guerrero asserted that an adequate theory was "long overdue," and Green posed as the central question the failure of the theory to differentiate the ideational component of an affect from the content of the event with which it was associated (Macmillan, 2005, pp. 605-613).

Green (2002/2005, pp. 125-136) subsequently made a valiant attempt to resolve the difficulties. He distinguished between the discharge, as bordering on the physiological, and the bodily movements, which are translated into psychological perception, and the specific feelings of pleasure or unpleasure accompanying the discharge. He argued that since one cannot deny that the discharge had left traces of the experience causing the discharge, those traces had 'memorised' the discharge itself. He proposed calling this set of memorised traces an 'affect representative' and

giving it the same status as an 'ideational representative,' that is, the memory traces of the experience itself.

Rather than maintaining Freud's sharp division between processes that have representatives (mental traces of ideas) and those that do not (affective discharges), Green believed his concept of affect representative provided a kind of bridge between the two. This intermediate status is undermined, however, by Green's picture of affects as uncontrolled processes of discharge that catastrophically overwhelm psychological life itself. He described affective discharge as "the torrential cathexis that breaks down the dikes of repression, submerges the abilities of linkage and self-control. It becomes a deaf and blind passion, but ruinous for the psychical organisation" (Green, 1970/1973, p. 303, cited in Green, 2005/2008, p. 131). Green's *Project*-like model is one requiring a very strong controlling mechanism, especially were a traumatic memory about to be recalled. Green seems not to discuss one.

It is possible to formulate another mechanism in terms consistent with Freud's pseudo-physiology. Imagine a qualitatively different kind of resistance at the contact barrier between the discharge pathway and the neurones underlying the memory of the trauma. Suppose its resistance was *raised* by the first transmission of excitation rather than lowered. A barrier like that would serve as a natural defence against a recurring threat. The memory of the original experience would be revived but, instead of an overwhelming discharge, there would be exactly the slight revival that could raise the alarm for realistic action to be taken. One could even argue, in the superficial mode of some contemporary evolutionary thinkers, that a mechanism allowing realistic action would be selected for because it had survival value.

Such a resistance would also allow for psychoanalytic theory to explain affects more generally than it does now, both those having the overwhelming and disastrous consequences Green describes and those of lesser intensity. It is quite striking that discussion of the nature of intense affects like love, hate, joy, and grief is minimal in the psychoanalytic literature, and of those like happiness, anger, tenderness, sadness, and envy is almost completely absent. An accompaniment to this sparse mention is the gap pointed to by Enckell (2005) between the centrality of affect in the clinical practice of psychoanalysis and the flimsy theoretical foundation on which it rests. The older literature is no different. Dictionaries like that of Rycroft (1968) mention affects other than anxiety only

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briefly or in passing, and they are completely absent from the exhaustive discussion by Laplanche and Pontalis (1967/1973).

In commenting on what he saw as the reticence of American psychoanalysts to follow “the wild imaginings” of French psychoanalysts who were, in their view, too inclined “to complicate things and express themselves in language lacking clarity,” Green added the snide observation, “There is no philosophy class at end of secondary education in the United States” (Green, 2002/2005, p. 8). Neither is there in Australia. One presumes it is Green’s superior French philosophical training that enables him to perform a sleight of mind that renames the problem but does nothing to solve it.

Conclusion

The inadequacy we have seen in that part of psychoanalytic theory concerned with controlling the re-experiencing of an anxiety situation applies equally to the other emotions. In Freud’s mature theory, feelings of love, hate, and aggressiveness derive from the activities of the two overarching instinctual drives of Eros and Thanatos. Since each action motivated by them leaves a trace that can be re-cathexed, there should also be a theoretically adequate mechanism to attenuate or otherwise control subsequent discharges. But there is not.

The main defects of the psychoanalytic theory of affects are that it treats affects as processes of catastrophic discharge. Nor can it account for the relation between the bodily process (the discharge) and the mental traces related to it (the memory), or give a coherent account of how threatened anxiety generates an attenuated form of itself in order to evoke repression, or account for the phenomenon of unconscious feelings. The great English romantic poet Wordsworth said in 1802 that “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” If that is so, it follows that in a land created by psychoanalysts there will be no poets or, indeed, anything human at all.

→ **KEYWORDS** – ANXIETY, SIGNAL ANXIETY, AFFECT, CONTACT BARRIERS, CATHEXIS, PSYCHOANALYSIS