

Article

Safety Valves of the Psyche: Reading Freud on Aggression, Morality, and Internal Emotions

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Abstract: This article argues for a Freudian theory of internal emotion, which is best characterised as key “safety valves of the psyche”. After briefly clarifying some of Freud’s metapsychology, I present an account regarding the origin of (self-)censorship and morality as internalised aggression. I then show how this conception expands and can be detailed through a defence of a hydraulic model of the psyche that has specific “safety valves” of disgust, shame, and pity constantly counteracting specific sets of Freudian drives. This model is important for explicating Freud’s crucial concept of sublimation, which continues to have key therapeutic and normative relevance today, which I show through the case of jokes. I finish with the argument that largely happy, productive lives can be seen as in a dynamic between the release of too much (perversion) and too little (neurosis) psychical pressure through these mechanisms.

Keywords: aggression; disgust; emotion; Freud; jokes; morality; pity; shame; sublimation



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1. Introduction

This article argues that an interpretative rereading of some key Freudian themes will make some important insights with regard to the nature of human aggression; the origins of (self-)censorship and morality; the role of internal emotions therein, not least disgust, shame, and pity; and how these elements are crucial for understanding Freud’s key concept of sublimation in a therapeutic, normative, and interpersonal manner, not least with regard to jokes.

The paper is broken into five main sections. The first briefly presents my understanding of key early Freudian metapsychological elements necessary for this article, namely the different types of unconscious, the basic nature of drives, the type of repression under focus here, and a discussion of any possible difference between “affect” and “emotion” in Freud. The second section explains a later theory of Freud regarding how a study of his conception of aggression highlights an important account of (self-)censorship, which is also closely linked to the origin of human morality in its most basic form according to this theory. This, thirdly, is actually a defence of the “hydraulic model” of the psyche, which needs to be spelled out more by detailing specific “safety valves” of the psyche—not least disgust, shame, and pity—that keep many of our more unacceptable drives under wraps, but also are able to have some affective release. I then, fourthly, show how these elements are all crucial for understanding Freud’s key concept of sublimation as an essential and more widespread mechanism that is largely pleasant and socially acceptable, even though sublimative activities in things, such as jokes, necessarily demonstrate some remaining tensions. I conclude by briefly arguing for a balanced way forward that is aware of our extremes, claiming it is naive and unhealthy to try and bottle up too many of our aggressions through too few sublimative acts (i.e., neuroses), just as it is harmful to release too many (certain perversions).

Although the philosophy of emotion has burgeoned in the last few decades, and although it is now clear that many of our emotions automatically engage and interact with the world and its people—in short, it is not all “just in the head”, to borrow Noë’s [1] well-known phrase—this article will return to “the head” somewhat, i.e., the psyche, and

show how some basic internal feelings, affects, and emotions go a long way in formatting some of our rudimentary personal (and interpersonal) structures, which, in turn, format not only our characters and behaviours, but parts of human morality and society more generally. In this manner, although I am returning to studying some internal emotion thanks to Freud viewed as a philosophical anthropologist, this in no way means to discount or detract from more “externalist” or phenomenological accounts of emotion, including my own [2–5]. The two sides can be seen as interesting and even complementary avenues of study in a colossal and highly complex domain of human behaviour and study.

2. Freud’s Metapsychology: The Unconscious, Drives, Repression, and “Affect” and “Emotion”

Although Freud changes a lot over the years of his writings, and his theories by no means remain consistent, he was also not afraid to develop something even if it went against the letter of things that were said before. This article intends to continue in a similar spirit through an interpretative rereading, although this section is more concerned with his early theory, and the next with some of his later. Then, in the fourth section, I present a reading that is indicated in some literature, even given the apparent inconsistencies and changes throughout Freud’s theoretical journey.

One main theme Freud is well known for is his insistence on an unconscious reality that governs much, if not all, of our lives. Freud never states that we can be somehow conscious of the unconscious [6] (p. lii); he does, however, say that, through our conscious experiences, we are led to presuppose a realm of which we cannot be directly conscious, but which nevertheless holds great sway over the former. In fact, Freud states that our conscious lives are full of so many “gaps” [7] (p. 166), such that “both in healthy and in sick people psychological acts often occur which can be explained only by presupposing other acts” [7] (p. 166). Positing an unconscious aspect of the psyche is, thus, “necessary” [7] (p. 166) because it affords us great explanatory power for understanding the real meaning of a great number of our psychological processes. Moreover, it is also “legitimate” [7] (p. 166) for Freud because we already do it all the time with other people.

The history of the unconscious in Freud is a rather complicated affair. Generally speaking, there are three different conceptions. First is the “descriptive” unconscious, which means not currently present to conscious awareness [8] (pp. 13–14). Second, “topographically”, the descriptive unconscious can be further divided into the “preconscious (*Pcs.*)”, which is that which is out of the mind’s eye for the moment, but can, however, be recalled with relative facility; whereas the “dynamic” unconscious (*Ucs.*), while being descriptively unconscious, is also “dynamically” so, because these elements cannot be easily called to consciousness due to their status as repressed materials. Thirdly, by 1923 and due partly to Freud’s discovery that “all that is repressed is *Ucs.*, but not all that is *Ucs.* is repressed” [8] (p. 18), Freud detailed another conception of the unconscious, namely the “structural” model, which divides the psyche not into *Ucs.*, *Pcs.*, and *Cs.*, but into the functions of id, ego, and super-ego. In the topographical and dynamic sense, the id is wholly unconscious, but the ego and the super-ego also have significant parts submerged. All in all, in all of the three conceptions, consciousness is merely a “quality of the psyche” [8] (p. 13); the psyche is a much grander realm than that which we are immediately aware of (the descriptive unconscious), but also that which we can possibly be aware of (the dynamic unconscious).

The unconscious contains one very significant type of process: “instincts” or drives (*Triebe*). Famously defined as “a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic” [9] (pp. 121–122), drives are *the* powers of the unconscious. With their fourfold characterisation as always having a pressure (*Drang*), an aim (*Ziel*), an object (*Objekt*), and a source (*Quelle*), drives totally govern nonconscious life—and, as we shall see, go a long way in governing our conscious lives too, albeit in much modified form.

In the unconscious, drives play themselves out in a totally originary manner; it is a primordial realm that has remained, even with all of our cultural developments. Structurally and functionally speaking, this is the id, while, topographically, Freud posits a

“nucleus of the *Ucs.* consist[ing] of instinctual representatives which seek to discharge their cathexis; that is to say, it consists of wishful impulses” [7] (p. 186) that ceaselessly strive for satisfaction regardless of any societal or personal considerations. Freud further explicates such radicality by saying drives in their original domain know “no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty” [7] (p. 186). They are extremely “mobile” [7] (p. 186) because they can condense, displace, and transfigure with great facility. Moreover, these processes are “timeless” [7] (p. 187), “do not contradict each other” [7] (p. 186), and are also exempt from considerations of reality [10]. This paints a picture of a realm where pure, mobile *Wunsch* reigns supreme.

How, then, are our everyday psychical lives so different from such a purely libidinal logic? One main explicative tool is Freud’s conception of repression. Repression is an incredibly complex topic in Freud. Zepf claims there are four different meanings for the term: “interchangeably with defense, as a consciously intended forgetting, as a specific unconscious mechanism of defense, and to describe the consequence of defence mechanisms leading to substitutive formations” [11] (p. 397). Madison [12] devotes a whole book to all of its definitions, relations, permutations, and developments throughout Freud’s well-known revisionary style and career. Included in all of this is a rather basic distinction between the “primal”, original repressions of infancy and childhood, and then the concrete instances of “adult repression”—or “repression proper”—later on in life that still, nevertheless, rely on the former category [12] (pp. 7–8, 89, 93, 98–100). I will focus on normal adult repression here, which is best outlined in another metapsychological paper [13]. In a nutshell, repression is a subcategory—and a particularly strong one—of resistances or “defence mechanisms” in general. Freud begins this paper by saying repression is “[o]ne¹ of the vicissitudes an instinctual impulse may undergo” [13] (p. 146), whereby the drive “meet[s] with resistances which seek to make it inoperative” [13] (p. 146). Because actual (i.e., spatial) flight from a drive is not possible (it being a ceaseless internal force), repression is “a preliminary stage of condemnation, something between flight and condemnation” [13] (p. 146). In other words, although we cannot flee a given drive, and although repression does not outright condemn and negate it, one can still flee it to a certain extent in the sense that one does not have to deal with it, or even be aware of it, at least for the time being, and at least in its crudest form.

Over time, “resistance” came to be discussed usually in a treatment context. What I am interested in here is how Freud continues by asking how repression is even possible when one considers that all drives seek satisfaction and, therefore, the affect of pleasure. Freud answers at this stage that, although the drive in and of itself always aims for pleasure, attainment of pleasure can result in displeasure with regard to “other claims and intentions” [13] (p. 147). In fact, repression occurs precisely when the displeasure of other wishes outweighs the pleasure that would be attained from the drive in question. Thus, simply put, a drive or aspect thereof is repressed when other claims and intentions run counter to it with enough force.

Freud goes on to note that “[r]epression only actually disturbs the relation to one psychical system, that of the conscious” [13] (p. 149). Thus, it is only from the point of view of consciousness that (the representative of) the drive is repressed; the drive continues to subsist, at least in some form, in the unconscious realm (topography), which is to say structurally in the id. This means the drive is free to develop in an untrammelled manner; the repressed drive “proliferates in the dark” [13] (p. 149), gaining in force.

What effect does this have for the conscious subject? Repression does initially resolve a problem, namely an unwanted (aspect of a) drive, precisely by repressing it. However, as time passes, and as the unwanted drive remains to its own devices, the latter augments in power and stature. Couple this with drives’ great facility for mobility and transfiguration (through displacement, condensation, and the like), the repression never remains complete, if it ever was. This is precisely when modified aspects of the repressed item can start to manifest themselves as symptoms (a phobia, a loss of voice, a compulsion). Thus, the initial escape often results in neuroses, which always have the hallmark signs of symptoms.

The latter, going untreated, can become progressively worse as the drives continue to subterraneously develop and exert their influence, thus, the onset of illness and the need for treatment.

Considering these points, repression only usually works for a certain period of time. Moreover, repression, especially over time, never fully eradicates the unwanted impulses but only buries their crudest forms. Neurotic symptoms are one way originally repugnant drives are transformed into diluted, displaced manifestations. However, there are also other psychical mechanisms that transform these original drives into more pleasurable forms, thereby usually escaping the neurotic designation. These transformations would obviously be more desirable than neurotic symptoms, and yet it is still not too clear how some transformations result in neurotic symptoms, while some others result in more pleasurable thoughts and practices. To discover this latter mechanism in more detail, we will have to turn to Freud's concept of sublimation. This, however, can only be done once I have completed some other steps first, not least an explication of the rather enigmatic "counter forces" and "reaction formations" (*Reaktionsbildungen*) that are *constantly* at work in the mechanism of repression.

Freud's text on repression is replete with allusions to these forces: "repression demands a persistent expenditure of force" [13] (p. 151); "balance must be maintained through an unceasing counter-pressure" [13] (p. 151); repression makes use of "*reaction-formation* for this purpose [of withdrawing libido], by intensifying an opposite" [13] (p. 157). Thus, the phenomenon of repression requires one to posit "a constant guard" [13] (p. 153, fn. 1) over the door; this actually makes repression possible in the first place. What precisely is this guard (or guards)? I will show that they are specific internal emotions.

Freud uses the terms "affect" and "emotion" throughout his work. Although there is no dedicated treatment of either, research on the former has shown that it, in its most basic and simple apparition, is a pleasure–displeasure indicator of something, either conscious or unconscious [14–16]. With regard to emotion, Freud seems to undulate between stating that emotion, by definition, must be consciously felt, and yet other scholars have noted [17] how he also repeatedly refers to "unconscious emotions", such as repressed loves and hates. Be these nuances as they may, I think that, although I do not wish to equate "affect" and "emotion" completely, and although I will indeed be focusing on some instances of the latter, I think one can still more generally settle that "affect" in Freud is the larger umbrella term for the spectrum of pleasure–displeasure feelings, with emotions (examples: love, hatred, excitement, anger, fear, disgust, shame, pity) being the more specific tonalities in or under this spectrum, often with particular external (e.g., a person) or internal (e.g., a thought or affect, conscious or not) objects, and so I will argue and show.

Before I get to three very significant internal emotions in Freud, I still need to first map out the place of aggression in his thought, how it relates to or might be different from anger, and how this leads to an interesting and important thesis regarding (self-)censorship and the origin of morality.

3. The Problem of Aggression and Its Internalisation and Censorship as the Origin of Morality

I think it is safe to say that everyone gets angry from time to time, whether at themselves, others, or things and situations in the world. What is less clear, however, is the nature of aggression and its massive role in our personal and social lives, as well as its link to more particular bouts of anger.

As should be clear already, aggression and anger in Freud's later system must be parts of feelings and affects, which actually simplifies things somewhat when it comes to the nature of the unconscious and its relation to other realms. This is because, from a topographical perspective, the preconscious (*Pcs.*) is significant only for ideas and their associated "word-presentations" for Freud [8] (pp. 21–23); with feelings, "the distinction between *Cs.* and *Pcs.* has no meaning [. . .]; the *Pcs.* here drops out—and feelings are either conscious or unconscious" [8] (p. 23). Generally then, feelings and affects resulting from drives in the unconscious (topography) or the id (structure) traverse from unconscious

directly to conscious in a topographical manner—or, structurally and functionally, they originate in the id, but can then also be taken up and transformed by the ego into a super-ego, and thereby directed against the ego and the id, not least in order to repress undesirable aspects.

In order to understand these elements more concretely, we need to get to the root of human aggression according to Freud. First, when I speak of aggression, I do not equate it with anger; the latter is a more straightforward emotion for me, whereas aggression I find considerably more complex, or at least more nebulous and subterranean to capture—even more of a “disposition” than a particular episodic emotion of anger, hatred, or something else. Aggression might be more akin to a mood [3], or even have a deeper source, as we shall see Freud maintains. Our angers, by contrast, are usually explicit and episodic, with a particular object at a particular moment, and for a particular (perceived) reason. I get angry *at* someone or something—it has a one-on-one correlation that can be explained well phenomenologically [4,18] (pp. 10–15, 26–27; pp. 13–28). Aggression, for its part, may not only have deeper and less certain roots, it most likely is also a precondition for our more pointed and explicit angers. In a word, whereas anger can be clearly captured as a basic emotion, aggression is a more general possible state or (pre)disposition. This is, therefore, less accessible to straightforward phenomenological description, but is thankfully where psychoanalysis can come in.

I think a first observation must be that aggression is a main disposition—or, in Freudian terms, a drive—we have. I have already defined the basic structure and dynamic of Freudian drives; what I may add now is that Freud is also well known for dividing them into ego (self-preservative) and sexual (species-preservative) ones earlier in his career [19] (pp. 95–96), and then his later theory changes to an opposition between life and “death” drives, within which an opposition between sexual and aggressive ones is also prominent [19] (pp. 104–105), even though these latter two are often combined [20] (p. 15). Considering this, aggression, according to Freud’s later thought, makes up a very dominant class of the unconscious (topography) or id (structure), which, in turn, according to the rules of psychoanalysis, means it also makes up an enormous portion of our lives, both directly and not.

Freud even goes as far to say it is likely that, when it comes to the formation of our societies, our tendency towards aggression has to be stifled even more than many of the more sexual elements: “[r]estriction of the individual’s aggressiveness is the first and perhaps the severest sacrifice which society requires of him” [19] (p. 110). Moreover, structurally and functionally speaking, we have a part of the mind—the super-ego—which “takes over the dangerous aggressive impulses” [19] (p. 110), makes them its own as it were, thereby turning them against the individual and transforming them into feelings of guilt, conscience, and a general moral surveillance and castigation. This is explained very well by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*:

“[A]ggressiveness is introjected, internalized; it is, in point of fact, sent back to where it came from [. . .]. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest of the ego as super-ego, and which now, in the form of ‘conscience’, is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals. The tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it, is called by us the sense of guilt [. . .]. Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual’s dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it[.]” [21] (pp. 123–124).

Our inborn tendency towards aggression seeks release in the world and its object [22] (p. 28). Due, however, to society and its many rules and regulations, this is not allowed much of the time and, thus, these forces are often turned against their own origin, thereby becoming the agency and power for (self-)censorship. Further, if morality is nothing other than “instinctual control” [8] for Freud, then this internationalisation of aggression as the beginning of (self-)censorship is a watershed moment for morality too.

For me, this is an idea that has not been given enough thought in ethics, philosophical anthropology, or the philosophy of emotion; rather than some set of virtues and vices, rather than some utilitarian gains or some categorical imperative, the origin of all morality here is aggression turned inwards. Within societies—which are by definition structured and law-governed—if basic peace and consideration for others is to be maintained, something must be done with much of our quite natural aggressive urges. Considering this, what better than to take these urges themselves and use them to subdue many of our more antisocial and destructive tendencies?

In his later writings, Freud seems to have jumped [23] (p. 125) somewhat from these crucial insights on aggression to a more wholesale theory of a “death drive”. The latter was introduced in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [10] as a response to the problem of compulsions and traumas, and then later, in the 1920s, it was also related to more explicitly destructive impulses, as we have just seen in *Civilization and its Discontents*. In all of this, Freud did set the psychological and anthropological stage for a general theory of aggression and how it does, and must, morph in many ways if we are to more or less get along in our social systems. In fact, we have just seen that it is an essential ingredient for these systems.

A dedicated journal issue for the *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* in 1982 investigated the matter of aggression more, both developing upon, as well as critiquing, Freud’s observations. One of the many points is that aggression is tied in with many other phenomena, not all destructive. Marcovitz’s contribution [20] (pp. 12–14) details a “first category” wherein “actions [. . .] are not necessarily hurtful or destructive”, including very broad activities, such as “activity toward an object” and “exploration”, but also more directly related phenomena, such as “self-assertion”, “dominance”, and “exploitation”. A second category is where “injury, destruction, and violence are integral parts” and can be “instrumental or pro-active, in which force is used to accomplish some other goal”, “reactive”, or “defensive”. There is then, thirdly, a final category Marcovitz names “hatred”, which has the aim of destroying or humiliating the object.

Rochlin, for his part, observes [23] (p. 130) that “[w]hen it [aggression] is not urgently called upon directly for defenses against feared or actual narcissistic injury, it is freely engaged in a variety of functions, such as the mastery of skills, invention, and creativity.” Here, too, the conception of aggression is extremely broad and ties in with anything from basic assertions and acts of creativity to self-defence and intentional violence.

Lastly and importantly, there has also been debate whether destructive behaviour is wholly innate or was triggered and developed by frustrations and other situations in life and the world. Most [20,24–26] (pp. 15–19; p. 34; p. 92; p. 101) end up agreeing that it is *both*: aggression is a basic, inborn tendency we all have, and yet it is also greatly conditioned, and even augmented, by our particular environments and upbringings. To put it succinctly, “[h]uman aggression is one of the most fundamental phenomena with which we must deal” [27] (p. 53); “all individuals must contend with aggressive feelings and find ways to modulate them” [28] (p. 299).

It is indeed useful to consider aggression’s nature in a broad manner. One might even argue it must be considered so if one is to take a Freudian perspective seriously, where it is ultimately a big part of one of only two main classes of drives. Here, though, the notion of aggression I have in mind is primarily in its more destructive and harmful guise, whether against ourselves or others.

4. Safety Valves of the Freudian Psyche: The Hydraulic Model and the Internal Emotions of Disgust, Shame, and Pity

In Freud’s later theory, internalised aggression, a super-ego, and a general social morality therefrom have more detailed roots still. Here, it is time to expand and interpret the theory more concretely and specifically in order to show that there are, in fact, certain “safety valves” at work between the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind in the topographical sense, as well as between the id and the super-ego or ego in the structural and functional sense. These valves all help keep much of our drives at bay, not least our

(worst) aggressive ones, while also allowing some energy and pressure to be used through the affects.

The hydraulic model of the mind has fallen almost completely out of scientific vogue. Nonetheless, I contend it still has great explanatory power from a more psychological and philosophical anthropology perspective. To start, Rochlin mentions [23] (p. 124) how the “theory is built around a popular belief that if or when aggression is dammed or otherwise obstructed, it will exert itself and spill out. [. . .] The discharge [. . .] is pitted against forces that would hinder, inhibit, or otherwise cramp full release”. We will see that it is these “forces” which are key to explain.

Additionally, Morreall, the foremost scholar when it comes to a philosophy of laughter and humour [29–31], also notes how Freud, on the back of Herbert Spencer, had a “theory of laughter and humor [. . .] based on the “hydraulic” theory of psychic energy popular in the nineteenth century” [30] (p. 111), which, in the philosophy of laughter and humour, is known as the “Relief Theory”; laughter relieves aggressive, sexual, or other tension built up throughout our psychic system, which can also tap into other elements of laughter and humour, not least what is known as the “Superiority Theory” [30,32,33]).

Morreall explicitly notes that laughing, under the relief theory, is also ultimately like “opening [. . .] a safety valve in a steam pipe” [29] (p. 26). However, he, like many others, also takes the analogy too literally [29] and, ultimately, dismisses Freud’s version because “it is hard to get a grasp on his notion of the energy of inhibition” [29] (p. 30). It is precisely this “energy of inhibition” that is crucial to capture.

Before doing so, I need to also briefly dwell upon Solomon’s critique of Freud and the hydraulic model. In his 2007 book, *True to Our Feelings*, which takes an ultimately cognitive view to emotions, he also has a whole part [18] (pp. 115–200) outlining eight supposed “myths” regarding our emotions. One such myth, Solomon claims, is the hydraulic model. Even though Solomon admits, *especially for anger*, that the language of a pressure cooker is incredibly apt—

“We often talk about anger in terms of cooking metaphors: “heating up,” “simmering,” and “boiling over.” The hot fluid metaphors fit rather plausibly with both the red-faced appearance of anger and the feeling of “heating up” as one flushes and tenses one’s muscles. When one gets really angry, one “explodes” with rage, or, with a lot of self-control, one can “bottle up” the anger. One might also let it out through gritted-teeth “hisses” or perhaps more rapidly (as in “having a hissy-fit”). Occasionally, the metaphor turns centrifugal (as in “flying off the handle”), but most often the images are of filling and heating up, of pressure and overflowing of containment and explosion.” [18] (p. 143.)

—he ultimately dismisses the model because it, for him, seems overly mechanistic [18] (p. 146) and passive [18] (p. 149) for his active cognitivist leanings. Indeed, although admitting the theory has a “distinguished history” [18] (p. 144) from the Medievals up through Descartes and into the 19th century, Solomon, like Morreall, also seems to have a problem of taking a metaphor too literally:

“The hydraulic model captures the dynamism and energy of our emotions, which is why it so appealed to Freud and so many others. And it certainly explains the urgency of many of our emotions and the fact that some of them, at least, do feel as if they are forcing themselves upon us rather than emanating from us. Thus the hydraulic model represents an important part of the phenomenology of at least some emotions. But it is not to be taken literally nor should it be accepted as a general model of emotion. Its representation of passivity, in particular, is something that we should vigorously resist, not that we are never “pressured” by our emotions [. . .]. But that is very different from finding oneself as a cauldron or a boiler and the victim of forces not at all our own doing.” [18] (p. 149.)

Even though much of our language shows that we are often under the sway of the magic of emotions [4] (pp. 23–40) in a way that makes us feel like a passenger, even though a proper

phenomenology would show that not all of our feelings can and should be subsumed under a cognitive and rationalistic idea of emotions, and even though the hydraulic model does not even argue for treating all feelings, let alone emotions, in this manner, these are all points that we should somehow “resist”. Moreover, with more respect to Freud’s theory, he was actually presenting a model of the forces of the psyche and how they are dealt with in our personal and social lives, not least the problem of aggression. Considering this, this model, as we will see, also gives a crucial place to some internal emotions which are the precise counter-forces and affective psychical tools we have against our more aggressive and other socially damaging tendencies and drives.

Along with a general and watchful super-ego, which is the individual embodiment of a social morality and conscience stemming from transformed and redirected aggression, there are also, I contend, more specific “safety valves” or “internal emotions” constantly surveilling and suppressing various unconscious drives, primarily from the stance of the super-ego (that is its job), but also from the ego. These “valves” are also able to utilise some energy from the emotions themselves, as well as provide the more general mechanism for much more energy to be “sublimated”, as we shall see in the next section.

The id, with its drives, is a primordial realm that has remained, even with all of our cultural developments. Put otherwise, this realm is often in direct conflict with many of the demands of civil societies, which have left their ineradicable mark on individuals through the super-ego and also the feelings and anxieties of the ego. If this is the case, there must be various mechanisms and forces that give rise to morality as a form of “instinctual control”.

References to psychical counter-forces occur very often, and, importantly, become more specific in Freud’s earlier work, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [34]. Most commonly referred to as “mental forces”, “dams”, and “reacting impulses”, in this text, Freud names no fewer than six such powers: disgust, shame, pain, morality, pity, and horror. On top of this, one can add critical reasoning, as addressed in his work on jokes also from 1905, as well as a note on Freud’s later account of anxiety.

Although scholars generally agree that “reaction formations” in Freud’s early works around 1905 are (primarily) about “organic repression” [35] (p. 20); the former term appears extremely rarely, if at all, in the original version of *Three Essays* [36]. Indeed, it seems Freud speaks once of “reaction-forming” when erecting “subsequently developed barriers against sexuality” [36] (p. 109). Here, there is no mention if these barriers have to be fully “organic”. Furthermore, the idea later comes up when Freud briefly speaks of sublimation, in which case he calls the former “presumably a sub-species of sublimation” [36] (p. 113) in that the “perverse sexual disposition of childhood can [. . .] be regarded as the source of a number of our virtues” [36] (p. 113) later on in life. In this manner, “reaction-formation” and other terms Freud uses (such as “counter-forces”) seem more than compatible with the reading of internal emotion and affect I will give here, even given admittedly significant changes in theory over the years in Freud, as well as more established scholarly readings. Indeed, in order to corroborate this last point, with regard to disgust, shame, and the like, in 1905, they are seen by many as original bodily and seemingly automatic reactions to autoerotic pleasures, and, in this reading, they have nothing originally to do with anything external, intersubjective, or moral. This may be the case in very early childhood, although I doubt it even there, and, in any case, I personally am more interested in presenting the picture once others and morality have entered the fray a lot more, namely after very early infancy. This reading seems warranted and productive, especially when considering that Van Haute and Westerink [35] (p. 21) valuably point out that “[i]t is such formations that provide the basic patterns and outline for the later internalization of cultural morality”. In this sense, what might be originally “organic” reactions are later, through later childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood, merged with factors, feelings, and thoughts influenced from outside, not least emotions, morality, and elements of Freud’s later theory. This is the compatible reading I would like to now present regarding “safety valves of the psyche”, which thereby grow upon and develop from these original reactions.

We have already seen how morality in general acts as a powerful repressive force against many aggressive and other personally or socially unacceptable drives. Equally, if not more, broad is the idea of pain, which often approaches the more physiological side [37] (pp. 51–53). Here, it does indeed make sense that any drive tested out that results in (too much) pain, whether physical or more psychological, could be subject to repression.

Of more interest here is how the more specific counter-forces of disgust, shame, pity, and horror might match up against more specific pulsional forces in Freud's metapsychology. Explained in this way, they would be the more specific and tangible affects and feelings—and, therefore, characterisable as “internal emotions”—which, moreover, can be seen to largely make up Freud's initial morality of “instinctual control” in the detail. Here, I will stress three, discounting horror because it has a very marginal significance in the text, and it can arguably be subsumed into the others.

The triplet of disgust, shame, and pity, when studied closely, seem to counter pressures to specific sets of drives in Freud's theory. Freud himself notes that “shame and disgust are the most prominent” [9] (p. 163). To this list, I add pity (or sympathy or empathy—*Mitleid*) because I contend that one can group Freud's drives here into three broad categories, counterpoising a specific counter-affect or internal emotion with each one. Freud himself gives signs that such groupings may be possible, and, although I by no means want to insist on any strict—i.e., nonfluid—correlation, I think it may help to categorise the drives and the general reactions they give rise to. It should be noted that these counter-forces come about because they take up the pulsional energy coming from the id and, through the transformation enacted by the super-ego, they can also direct counter-force back against the very source.

We, thus, have a first group of the more bodily aspects of the drives. Here, I am particularly focused upon all partial drives relating to oral, anal, and other forms of bodily sexuality. These partial drives are “partial” because they begin in childhood and are not necessary for the ultimate (societal) aim of the sexual drives (i.e., coitus and procreation). Here, *disgust* is precisely that internal feeling that usually arises against such drives, especially when considering oral and anal sexuality. Secondly, there is a group of scopical drives that revolve around voyeurism and exhibitionism in all their forms (sexual and nonsexual). The main correlative emotion here is *shame*, which counteracts and makes unconscious many tendencies we might have to these behaviours. Lastly, with regard to our aggressive and sadistic drives, I counterpoise *pity* (or sympathy or empathy—*Mitleid*), which, indeed, is our capacity to consider others and thereby quell our more destructive and hateful capacities. In this manner, we have original (anal and oral) sexual drives that have energy transformed into disgust; original scopical drives that are transmuted into feelings of shame; and aggressive, destructive, and sadomasochistic tendencies that are combatted through our emotive capacity for sympathy and pity.

I need to pause here a moment to bring up the issue of anxiety. This is another complex and longstanding issue in Freud's work. Nevertheless, to simplify here, the earlier work had *angst* as an effect and affect of repression; it was transformed libido [38] (p. 109). Later, he largely abandons this model and classes anxiety (or fear—[38] (p. 165)) as an initial and automatic reaction to danger that then goes on to develop into a general danger-signalling system, for both external and internal items [38] (p. 134). The pointed question here is whether either of Freud's models of anxiety function in the same way as the three specific safety valves of disgust, shame, and pity that I have just delineated. On the earlier model—*anxiety as transformed libido*—the simple answer is no; anxiety is rather a product of repression than a mechanism directly constituting it. However, on Freud's later model, anxiety does actively counteract internal, as well as external, dangers, potential as well as actual ones. Freud essentially says as much in the *New Introductory Lectures*: “[i]t was not the repression that created the anxiety [older theory]; [. . .] it was the anxiety that made the repression” [19] (p. 86). In this sense, anxiety too can be viewed as a more general emotive safety valve against all kinds of potentially dangerous internal impulses—not least sexual, scopical, and destructive ones that continuously worry the ego, especially with regard to

one's social and moral beliefs and interactions. The difference here would be that disgust, shame, and pity each seem to directly counteract specific sets of drives, whereas anxiety is more an affect and counter-pressure against worrying and unsettling desires in general.

Why are these counter-pressures needed? Otherwise put, how can we posit a brute realm of the id, full of primordial and crude desires that need almost constant counter-pressure, in the first place? Freud's answer lies in the reality of perversions.

Perversion is a technical and vital term in Freud. They occur when a partial drive (oral, anal, scopic, sadomasochistic, fetishistic) becomes so strong that it supplants or derails the ultimate societal aim of sexuality, coitus, and procreation. Because childhood sexuality is nothing but a collection of partial drives for Freud, and because we all have had and retain a childhood, we are all left with a tendency to perversion in this technical sense. This tendency can become a full reality if one's actual adult sexuality does not follow the societal aim of sexuality. For example, a person who enjoys oral sex is not perverse in this technical sense; however, a person who enjoys oral sex to the extent that they no longer have an interest in coitus, is.

These claims have very significant consequences, not least with regard to the fact that our concept of (ab)normal sexuality plays itself out on a sliding scale between extreme perversion on one hand, and extreme neurosis on the other. "Normal" sexuality is, thus, a kind of imaginary point between perversion and neurosis in Freud. Indeed, Freud himself repeatedly refers to the latter as "*the negative of perversion*" [9] (p. 165).

With this, one should be able to see that civilisation—and a mature non-perverse adult for that matter—only become possible once safety valves of disgust, shame, pity, and the like take on structural and structuring forms within the very borderlines of the psyche, both topographically between Cs. and Ucs., as well as functionally between the super-ego and the ego with the id. This has the consequence that our lives are a constant balancing act between originally acultural drives and their social manifestations. We have just seen that perversion indicates cases where more of the original drives break through, whereas neuroses are cases when not enough do. In short, perversion involves relatively little pressure with regard to one's desires, and neurosis too much. These internal emotions, therefore, characterised best as "safety valves of the psyche", are, thus, absolutely essential elements in the sense that they can be responsible for releasing too much pulsional pressure, leading to perversion and social condemnation (at least from some), or releasing too little, resulting in neurotic illness. Is there something in between? I believe Freud's concept of sublimation is key in this regard.

5. Sublimation and the Case of Jokes

Although there are numerous detailed works [39–41] on sublimation that show how it makes the "higher psychical activities" [21] (p. 97) possible, as such, I intend to show that it is a broader, more dynamic, and crucial category than often conceived, which I will show through the case of jokes.

Firstly, although sublimation is normally associated with the so-called higher achievements of human civilisation (art, philosophy, religion, science), Freud's *general* definition—namely, a "diversion of sexual instinctual forces [*Triebkräfte*] away from sexual aims and their direction to new ones" [34] (p. 178)—actually shows that it has a much wider spectrum than simply these. Indeed, in the *New Introductory Lectures*, Freud specifically states that sublimation occurs when the aim and object of the drive modifies through taking "social valuation [. . .] into account" [19] (p. 97). In other words, there are many drives that are socially conditioned to change objects and aims precisely because they are not socially acceptable in their original forms. Considering this, it will come as no surprise that many destructive, aggressive drives are sublimated along with "desexualized" ones [8] (p. 30). Moreover, this occurs because the internal emotions of disgust, shame, pity, and anxiety or fear that I have highlighted in the preceding section are precisely the affective counter-pressures which impel the psyche to either repress or to sublimate by finding a more socially acceptable form.

Gemes [42] argues that sublimation is an overly fuzzy concept in Freud, often not distinguishable from neurotic symptoms, even though he also acknowledges that sublimations are activities that are social and enjoyable in Freud, whereas neurotic symptoms are not [43] (p. 74). For my part, I maintain this is more than enough to distinguish sublimations from neurotic symptoms generally. Moreover, just like normality is a kind of imaginary point between perversion and neurosis, so too do our sublimations play out in this middle ground without, however, excluding other elements absolutely. We all have small perversions and tendencies thereto; we all also display various neurotic traits to varying degrees. In the middle of all of this, we are all also constantly sublimating in our daily lives. Actually, one can argue it is essential to remaining healthy. In this manner, sublimation is that crucial capacity we have to take socially unacceptable and ultimately painful wishes and to plough their energy into useful, social, and enjoyable pastimes, thereby providing much-needed reliefs in tensions from the pressure cooker of the unconscious and id we all have simmering beneath. There is indeed a whole world here: along with the high arts, there are also, perhaps even more importantly, other sublimative acts, such as playing and watching sports; going to a violent, romantic, or other type of film; telling a joke and having a laugh; or campaigning for a societal wrong [44] (pp. 83–87). In all these activities, aggressive, sexual, and other drives that would be left dangerously frustrated are allowed to transform and find outlets—something which Fanon calls a “*collective catharsis*” [22] (p. 112).

Sublimation is, thus, an absolutely crucial mechanism for surviving in our civilisations, and yet it is, of course, not without its tensions and controversies. This should be unsurprising seeing as our lives, under this model, remain a perennial balancing act between amoral drives seeking incessant release on one hand, and the stringent dictates of society on the other—with the internal emotions often playing the mediator between the two. In various activities, we are allowed to release aggressive and other tensions by reducing our disgust, shame, pity, and other valves momentarily. However, if we do this too much, we are in danger of receiving social reprimands; and, if we do not do it enough, we are likely to neurotically implode.

I take the specific case of jokes here, which Van Haute and Geyskens note [45] (p. 68) that Freud’s 1905 work is “*the book on sublimation.*” I agree; the materials for jokes emanate from drives that go through various “transforming processes” [46] (p. 28), resulting in two broad categories: innocent jokes, which take a pure pleasure in returning to a childlike enjoyment in the mere play of words (or even nonsense); and “tendentious” (*tendenziös*) jokes, which have a purpose (*Tendenz*) that makes the joke go beyond mere wordplay. Both types of joke have a common factor in that they rebel against our learned tendencies to seriousness, criticism, and logic. In fact, precisely because of this Freud states that, ultimately, jokes are “never non-tendentious” [46] (p. 132) because even the most supposedly innocent ones override our more predominant adult disposition for seriousness and critical reflection. Jokes, thus, release childlike inclinations in us that have, for the most part, been subdued as we have matured.

A formal similarity of certain words (one of Freud’s examples is “*Traduttore—Traditore!*” [“Translator—Traitor!”]” [46] (p. 34)) often allows various sexual or aggressive drives to piggyback upon them. Here, although the purely formal similarities allow for a basic release, tendentious jokes are enjoyed more precisely because they allow for an additional, *measured* release of blocked, aggressive, and other tendencies. Thus, through jokes, our safety valves—including our adult proclivity for critical reasoning—are momentarily relaxed.

Why was there tension at all? Precisely because of the safety valves of disgust, shame, pity, and also rationality, which often hold in drives and thoughts that would be too crude, offensive, or senseless to share. Jokes are, thus, a mechanism where just enough pressure is released in the form of laughter. However, because the release takes place in a modified—and, therefore, diluted—manner, there is often not enough open aggression or obscenity to cause real offence. In fact, a joke that goes too far and, therefore, fails is precisely one that has offended its listener for being too obscene, disgusting, and so on—the safety valves

have been opened too much. On the other side, jokes that do not harness any suppressed sources will probably leave one cold and bottled up—in short, unsatisfied.

In this manner, jokes—and most humour, for that matter—are essentially sublimative acts that allow brute aggressive, sexual, and nonsensical tendencies to find *some* release in modified and relatively acceptable forms, thereby finding the medium pleasurable ground between unpleasurable neurotic symptoms on one side and perverse manifestations that will only reap societal opprobrium on the other.

Context and situation are also very important: what is funny in one's social context (at university, in a bar, at home); or with one's social group (strangers, friends, family, colleagues); or even depending on one's own personal tastes and values, can alter matters greatly. There is, quite obviously, an infinite amount of variability in this respect. Take one of Freud's examples of an obscene joke:

“A well-known University teacher who was in the habit of peppering his unattractive special subject with numerous jokes, was congratulated on the birth of his youngest child, who was granted to him when he had already reached an advanced age. “Yes”, he replied to his well-wishers, “it is remarkable what human hands can accomplish.”” [46] (p. 59.)

Some may have laughed, some smiled, some not at all, and some might even have been (slightly) disgusted or annoyed. Regardless of the particular reaction, however, Freud's points should be relatively clear: a joke is “a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once” [46] (p. 155) in the sense that an ambiguity of a certain phrase (“remarkable what human hands can accomplish”) has a non-obscene meaning (the general power of human production), *as well as* an obscene one (an old man masturbating). The joke works when the second meaning breaks through simultaneously with the first, provided that the safety valve of disgust (the image of an old man masturbating, in this case) has been sublimated.

Those who have locked up their drives tightly will find little funny and most things revolting; and those who are too free, too often, and in the wrong context are going to run afoul of social policing. All in all, the precise amount of pressure allowed, through our internal emotions, in each individual person—and at each individual moment—can vary greatly and endlessly, and yet it should also be clear that sublimative acts, such as jokes, seem to be necessary mechanisms if one is to walk the tightrope between perversion and neurosis. This means sublimation, as the general name for any mechanism that allows repressed forces to find some release through socially enjoyable practices, is key for human mental health. From jokes to philosophy, from Hollywood films to art, Freud's mechanism of sublimation accounts for that tightrope named “normality”.

6. Final Remarks

I have explicated Freud's early metapsychology relevant to my purposes. I then argued for a rather novel thesis that shows the genealogy of morality in the later Freud as the internalisation of aggression. These insights were then spelled out by showing how disgust, shame, and pity in Freud function as three crucial “safety valves of the psyche” in this context, or what can also be termed internal emotions. I lastly showed how these emotions work in unison with the mechanism of sublimation in order for pulsional pressure to be moderately released in socially enjoyable practices, not least in the case of jokes. These emotions and the mechanism of sublimation are, thus, crucial to understand to see how we can get along in our daily lives, without falling victim to too much perversion on one side or too much neurosis on the other.

The lessons to be learned here are that aggression is and will remain with us, and so we will have to continue honing our sublimative skills in our ever-evolving societies if we are to avoid the extremes of perversion and neurosis. On top of this, there is also aggression and oppression from social groups, organisations, and even governments, which make these (historically) oppressed groups less easily able to sublimate than others [47] (pp. 125–126). In many societies, this situation is gradually improving, with the options beginning to grow for many, and, generally, our aggressive tendencies can be ploughed into anything, from

activism to jokes to sports, although more social support and development is admittedly still needed for ongoing marginalised groups [47] (p. 129). In all of this, proper dialogue and education in a seemingly ever-polarised world need to be a key focus, as well as a general attention to our internal emotions—i.e., what disgusts, shames, and makes us feel pity or anxiety, and why. A middle, flexible ground must be sought and maintained, where obviously not everything should be permitted, but neither can or should everything be policed. In short, we all need to be aware of our internal Freudian emotions and how these go a long way in formatting very significant parts of our affective, emotional, and moral psyches. We need to protect and punish obvious crimes, but also be aware of our complex and multicoloured social-psychological worlds, where the strange mixtures of our drives and our morals are responsible for many of the most creative and beautiful phenomena in our lives, but also some of the most challenging and destructive.

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Notes

- ¹ Along with reversal into an opposite (e.g., love into hate); inverting upon one's self (sadism into masochism; voyeurism into exhibitionism); and sublimation (more on this later).

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