



## On the subject of homosexuality: What Freud said

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*The article explores Freud's writing on homosexuality, from his early hypotheses, expressed in his letters to Fleiss to his last observations in The Outline of Psychoanalysis, published in 1940 after his death. We trace the continuities as well as changes in his thinking, and have organized the paper conceptually, under the headings: 1) Bisexuality 2) Narcissism and Object choice, 3) On Normality and Pathology, and 4) The Quantitative factor and Aggression. We show that Freud was the first to confirm the existence of homosexualities, that he offers no black and white solution to the question of normality and pathology, although he contributes to the understanding of the vehemence that surrounds the subject, and that, in the considerable body of work, he has offered a rich and varied foundation for further thinking on the subject.*

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Overall, what we have taken away from an exploration of Freud's thinking about homosexuality is a profound sense of the complexity of his attitudes, his sometimes contradictory stance as he locates homosexuality within an ever-widening, but also changing and developing, theoretical frame. There is indeed too much: too much to pin down, to simplify, to find a rule of thumb. As Freud's interests change and develop over a lifetime of revolutionary intellectual and clinical pursuits, the subject of homosexuality appears frequently in his writings, informing and reflexively being informed by different discoveries, different clinical problems. From the seminal and key discussion of the nature of sexual development, specifically the role of infantile sexuality in the construction of adult sexuality (1905), to the role of narcissism in directing object choice (1910), to the nature of oedipal identifications in the structuring of the psyche, the subject of the *Ego and the Id* (1923), to the nature of female sexuality (1931), to the contribution of aggression in the conflict between bisexual trends within the personality (1937, 1930), the ground shifts from which the subject is observed, light is thrown from different directions. And even when with some certainty he identifies a pattern in a number of homosexual developmental histories, he frequently offers a disclaimer, this is but one trend, one process he has noted.

Yet Freud generally remains true to the position taken in 1905, that every form of adult human sexuality is the product of a complex evolution, devel-

oping over time, beginning in earliest infancy, in the first relation with the mother, the first seducer. The understanding of the potential for complexity in this wide frame is made richer, deeper, more certain over the years of study, and at the same time, the large body of work contains a sense of limits, not only is there much more to learn from a psychoanalytic perspective, there are limits to psychoanalytic understanding. Popular culture and common sense, against which Freud posed the *Three Essays* (1905), cannot be escaped. As in his discussion of feminism, feminine sexuality, Freud is not immune from betraying a vernacular prejudice in his writing, although, in relation to homosexuality, he is often at pains to identify it, illuminate it, and distance himself from it. In principle, he takes a distanced and non-judgmental position, however much he is aware of the fact that the subject is coloured always by social attitudes, the cultural life which is always informing the researcher and his subject. What follows is an endeavour to capture the variety of views Freud puts forward about homosexuality, with specific attention both to the constancies and to the contradictions. The paper is divided into four sections, the first, on bisexuality, the second, on narcissism, object choice and identification, the third, on the question of normality and pathology, and the fourth, on the quantitative factor and aggression. We hope to have organized his thinking, conceptually and historically, in a way that is illuminating, at the same time, cautionary.

### On bisexuality

The most significant relevant consistency in Freud's thinking about homosexuality lies in the assumption, never proven or very thoroughly explained, that every individual is endowed with an innate bisexuality which is both biological and psychological in its foundations. As stated in 1925, as well as earlier (Freud, 1905, pp. 143–144) this bisexuality is related to homosexuality: "homosexuality can be traced back to the constitutional bisexuality of all human beings" (Freud, 1925b, p. 38). Homosexuality develops, but bisexuality, in all its ambiguity, is bedrock. From the Fliess papers to *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (Freud, 1937) bisexuality recurs, with emphasis on psychological or physical manifestations, but usually implicitly both. It is Fliess who originally asserted the notion, and the notion constitutes a lasting legacy of this early, formative intellectual friendship. In 1896 Freud wrote in a letter to his intellectual confidant, as he puzzled over what he understood to be different responses to premature sexual experience, "I avail myself of the bisexuality of all human beings" (Freud, 1950, p. 238). That is to say, he availed himself, or in an alternative translation from the German, he 'helped' himself to Fliess's theory, which remained on the plate for the duration of his life. At the time of this first appropriation, he was writing to Fliess about what he deemed to be the consequence, perverse or neurotic, of premature sexual experience. He identified perverse in this context as the compulsive enactment of pleasure seeking, here associated with masculinity, whereas neurotic inhibition, in this context, is identified as feminine. In this early affirmation of bisexuality he is linking different

psychological attributes with bisexual potentiality, masculinity regarded as active, femininity as passive. Interestingly, in this early discussion, pure feminine or pure masculine orientations are treated as arbitrary constructions. He will explicitly affirm this much later, in 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes' (1925a) when he states that "all human individuals, as a result of their bisexual disposition and of cross-inheritance, combine in themselves both masculine and feminine characteristics, so that pure masculinity and femininity remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content". (Freud, 1925a, p. 258).

Three years after availing himself of Fliess's theory, he wrote in a more convinced and less speculative way, again in a letter to Fliess, "Bisexuality! I am sure you are right about it. And I am accustoming myself to regarding every sexual act as an event between four individuals" (Letter 113 of August 1, 1899 in Masson, 1985, p. 364). The emphasis here is more visceral and specifically sexual, articulating the double orientation of every individual, and by invoking the reference to individuals, implying that there is almost the equivalent of a complete male and female 'individual' within each person. Many years later this conceptualization will be central to his understanding of the Oedipus complex and the identifications with male and female which are its product, most significantly in 1923, in *The Ego and the Id*. By then, he has become more knowledgeable about the complexities of identification. But as early as 1905, he wrote that "since I have become acquainted with the notion of bisexuality I have regarded it as the decisive factor, and without taking bisexuality into account I think it would scarcely be possible to arrive at an understanding of the sexual manifestations that are actually to be observed in men and women" (1905, p. 220).

The concept of bisexuality is not limited in its application to our specific concern with the subject of homosexuality. But bisexuality is always present when homosexuality is considered. Freud postulates in 1905 in the *Three Essays*: "a bisexual disposition is somehow concerned in inversion, though we do not know in what that disposition consists, beyond anatomical structure" (1905, p. 143). As he goes on to explore manifestations of homosexuality, he considers the case of male homosexuals who are masculine, in that they "retain the mental quality of masculinity", but seek in their objects feminine attributes, like the Greeks of the past. Here he notes a compromise, "between an impulse that seeks for a man and one that seeks for a woman, while it remains a paramount condition that the object's body (i.e. genitals) shall be masculine. Thus the sexual object is a kind of reflection of the subject's own bisexual nature" (the last sentence added in 1915) (1905, p. 144).

Here, through the lens of bisexuality he has discovered an element of heterosexuality in the homosexual object choice. In 1920, when he addresses the possibility of a reversal of homosexual object choice in a patient, he cautions against it, though recalls one case where analysis made access to the opposite sex possible, the effect of which was to restore for the patient his "full bisexual functions" (1920, p. 151). The ordinary, the normal, the baseline from which a sexual identity and in most cases a preference evolves, is bisexual. Bisexuality is the start of all sexuality, including homo-

sexuality. And the attraction to a member of the same sex is universal, though usually relegated to the unconscious, for a variety of reasons. But as he writes when considering ‘The psychogenesis of a case of homosexuality’ in a woman, one must always “keep in mind the universal bisexuality of human beings” (1920, p. 157). In the case of the young woman who is central to this paper, he again shows the heterosexuality within a homosexual object choice, in the choice of a masculine female object, disclosing again a more subtle aspect of Freud’s use of the notion of bisexuality, here considering the sexual life of a homosexual. And here, as elsewhere, when considering a homosexual object choice, Freud’s conceptualization of bisexuality proves as elusive as it is firmly confirmed.

It is not for psychoanalysis to solve the problem of homosexuality. It must rest content with disclosing the psychical mechanisms that resulted in determining the object-choice . . . psychoanalysis has a common basis with biology, in that it presupposes an original bisexuality in human beings (as in animals.) But psychoanalysis cannot elucidate the intrinsic nature of what in conventional or in biological phraseology is termed ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. It simply takes over the two concepts and makes them the foundation for its work. When we attempt to reduce them further, we find masculinity vanishing into activity and femininity into passivity, and that does not tell us enough.

(1920, p. 171)

So the psychological dimension of bisexuality, asserted as firmly as the biological, proves difficult to define.

It is in the *Ego and the Id*, in 1923, when the bisexuality of the individual is shown to intertwine with the process of identification, and in particular identification with lost objects of oedipal attachment, the internalization of the parental couple and the elaboration of the super ego, that the notion of bisexuality takes on a dynamic role. Describing the outcome of the oedipal complex, he writes:

It would appear therefore, that in both sexes the relative strength of the masculine and feminine sexual dispositions is what determines whether the outcome of the Oedipus situation shall be an identification with the father or with the mother. This is one of the ways in which bisexuality takes a hand in the subsequent vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex. The other way is even more important. For one gets the impression that the simple Oedipus complex is by no means its commonest form, but rather represents a simplification or schematization which, to be sure, is often enough justified for practical purposes. Closer study usually discloses the more complete Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children, that is to say, a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother. It is this complicating element introduced by bisexuality that makes it so difficult to obtain a clear view of the facts in connection with the earliest object-choices and identifications, and still more difficult to describe them intelligibly. It may even be that the ambivalence displayed in the relations to the

parents should be attributed entirely to bisexuality and that it is not, as I have represented [earlier], developed out of identification in consequence of rivalry.

(1923, p. 34)

Finally, he will affirm that “The relative intensity of the two identifications in any individual will reflect the preponderance in him of one or other of the two sexual dispositions.” Dispositions are innate, they are the bisexuality with which each child is endowed or gifted (1923, p. 34) and which will inform all the developmental steps the child takes, all the variations of influence and accident in every individual history. The residue of hostility linked to identifications developing out of the rivalries central to the oedipal situation as understood in this seminal work will inform later preoccupations in relation to conflicted sexual identity but here, the bisexual nature of any individual is identified as the fertile foundation for ambivalent sexual identifications.

Freud will continue to affirm the importance of bisexuality after the crucial integration with the structural model in 1923. He will also confirm, again, and more explicitly, that along with the firmness of the commitment to the ideal of the principle, bisexuality remained a shadowy concept. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) he wrote:

The theory of bisexuality is still surrounded by many obscurities and we cannot but feel it as a serious impediment in psychoanalysis that it has not yet found any link with the theory of the instincts. However this may be, if we assume it as a fact that each individual seeks to satisfy both male and female wishes in his sexual life, we are prepared for the possibility that those [two sets of demands] are not fulfilled by the same object.

(1930, p. 106)

So this fundamental paradigm with which Freud grounds his thinking about homosexuality, remains opaque theoretically, and scientifically speculative, however theoretically useful. It is, moreover, a great equalizer, inasmuch as everyone is implicated in the bisexuality which plays a part in any specific homosexual outcome to the development of a sexual identity.

### **Narcissism and object choice, narcissism and identification**

In the *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy*, Freud wrote in 1909, “There is absolutely no justification for distinguishing a special homosexual instinct. What constitutes a homosexual is a peculiarity not in his instinctual life but in his choice of an object” (1909, pp. 109–10). This is a firm and unambiguous statement. In a footnote of 1915 added to the *Three Essays* (1905) he states that “all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious (1905, p. 145). And in ‘Leonardo’ (Freud, 1910a) he asserts in a footnote added in 1919, that this everyman or woman “either still adheres to [homosexual object choice] in his unconscious or else protects himself against it by rigorous

counter attitudes” (1910a, p. 99). The question of object choice is declared with firmness, as the defining characteristic of homosexuality, but the distinction is also qualified, inasmuch as it is disclosed to be a choice made by everyone, at least unconsciously. Something happens in development, whereby ‘rigorous counter attitudes’ militate against the homosexual object choice that at some time or another is understood to have occurred in everyone’s erotic and emotional life. Such complication of certainties occurs frequently in Freud’s discussion of homosexuality.

Although object choice remains a definitive element in identifying what is essential to homosexuality, Freud later restates the relation of object choice to homosexuality, in 1920 enlarging the field and distancing himself from the singular definition he had reinforced in his own writing up to that time. Significantly, when considering a female homosexual in ‘The Psychogenesis of a case of Homosexuality in a Woman’ (1920) Freud states that homosexuality is a question of now three sets of characteristics, one of which is object choice. The others have to do with physical characteristics “physical hermaphroditism”, literally the possibility of one person bearing the physical attributes of both sexes, the most extreme being the possession of both male and female genitals, and “mental sexual characters, or masculine or feminine attitudes” linked to one or the other sex (1920, p. 170). These are physical and psychical qualities which go beyond object choice, including attitudes of mind and experiences of identity suggesting the qualities usually gathered under the rubric of gender today. By 1920, object choice does not stand alone as the defining characteristic of homosexuality, although it remains central to the definition. By 1920, Freud is concerned with questions of identity.

A decisive turn in Freud’s thinking about homosexuality and the nature of object choice came as he developed a theory of narcissism. Here he was able to offer a dynamic psychological understanding of one path leading to homosexual object choice, as well as homosexual identity. In a footnote added in 1910 to the *Three Essays* (1905) he asserts,

future inverts, in the earliest years of their childhood, pass through a phase of very intense but short lived fixation to a woman (usually their mother) and after leaving this behind, they identify themselves with a woman and take themselves as their sexual object. That is to say, they proceed from a narcissistic basis, and look for a young man who resembles themselves and whom they may love as their mother loved them.

(1905, p. 145)

This was the pattern discovered and elaborated in the long biographical essay on Leonardo da Vinci. The boy child, illegitimate in Leonardo’s case, alone with a mother Freud pictured to be abandoned by his father, is “kissed by her into precocious sexual maturity” (Freud, 1910a, p. 131) the “too early maturing of his eroticism [robbing] him of a part of his masculinity” (1910a, p. 117). The mother in the hypothetical reconstruction elaborated here is a phallic mother, a penetrating mother who informs the phantasy expressed by Leonardo as an early memory, in which a vulture

(or kite) is remembered by him to have come “down, and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me many times with its tail against my lips” (1910a, p. 82). Sucking at the mother’s breast has become passive, ‘being suckled’, and transformed into a passive homosexual phantasy. The eventual repression of this excited state of affairs facilitates the identification with the mother, and it is this identification with the mother which becomes in Freud’s reading the basis of the narcissistic object choices, in Leonardo’s case, the young men who circulated in his studio and workshops, whom he would love as his mother loved him.

In 1914, when he is exploring the subject of narcissism, Freud expands the field, stating that a narcissistic “allocation of the libido might claim a place in the regular course of human sexual development. Narcissism in this sense would not be a perversion but the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature” (1914, p. 73). When Freud identifies narcissism as the libidinal complement of the instinct of self-preservation, he opens the way to considerations of how narcissistic vulnerability and the possibility of life or death, eventually, anxiety about life or death, might inform the development of sexual object choice, that is, lead to the narcissistic object choice identified in this paper and elsewhere with homosexual object choice.

In this paper he, again, characteristically tempers the generalization linking homosexuality with narcissistic object choice immediately after asserting it: “we have not concluded that human beings are divided into two sharply differentiated groups, according as their object choice conforms to the anaclitic or to the narcissistic type; we assume rather that both kinds of object choice are open to each individual, though he may show a preference one to another” (1914, p. 88). The complexity again develops in this picture, the illuminating generalization followed by a caution, a disclaimer, an insistence on keeping the question open, in line with the consistent assertion of the complexity of his subject, here, the relationship between homosexuality and narcissism. He continues, “we say that a human being has originally two sexual objects – himself and the woman who nurses him – and in doing so we are postulating a primary narcissism in everyone, which may in some cases manifest itself in a dominating fashion in his object choice” (1914, p. 88). He is here adding to the understanding of the factor located in the paper on Leonardo and expressed in the footnote to the *Three Essays*, that the powerful immersion in the first relationship with the mother is a potential foundation for the establishment of a homosexual object choice. A too intense, overwhelming attachment is maintained and yet ameliorated by taking as an object a lover based on the self, while the subject identifies with the caring but overwhelming and powerful mother.

Freud more often links the specific narcissistic anxiety associated with sexual object choice with fears of castration. Writing in 1909 (of Little Hans) but repeating the point later, In ‘Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia’ (Freud, 1911) and in ‘Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality’ (Freud,

1922) he states that “owing to the erotogenic importance of their own genitals, [homosexuals] cannot do without a similar feature in their sexual object. In the course of their development from auto-eroticism to object love, they have remained fixated at a point between the two – a point which is closer to autoerotism” (1909, p. 109). ‘Erotogenic importance’ signals primarily the importance of libidinal gratification. But castration anxiety and autoerotism both can be linked to the narcissistic “egoism of self-preservation” (1914, p. 73), the issues of survival awakened in early object relations, the threat of castration not only a threat to erotic object ties, but to narcissistic integrity.

Homosexual object choice is one solution to the castration anxiety of the male; the significance of castration in the erotic life of women is central to Freud’s ideas about female development generally, with a specific reference to female homosexuals. He notes the disparagement of women, “regarded as castrated”, which informs some homosexual object choices in men, and then he addresses the “effects of the castration complex in the female”. One line of development, not the only one possible, “leads her to cling with defiant self-assertiveness to her threatened masculinity. To an incredibly late age she clings to the hope of getting a penis some time. That hope becomes her life’s aim; and the phantasy of being a man in spite of everything often persists as a formative factor over long periods.” This “masculinity complex” in women can result in a manifest homosexual choice of object (1931, pp. 229–230). Not, Freud asserts, that it necessarily does. The narcissistic injury to women is seen here to emanate from the narcissistically driven disparagement coming from narcissistically challenged men, as well as from the woman’s own recognition of a lack. In his paper considering the homosexual object choice of a young woman, he adds the narcissistic threat associated with child bearing as another thread potentially driving a homosexual object choice, a flight from the ‘disfigurement’ of maternity, understood as a threat to bodily integrity (1920, p. 169).

In most of his considerations of narcissism and homosexual object choice, Freud remains true to the theme of the *Three Essays* (Freud, 1905), in which he shows a sexual development that starts in a primary relation with a mother, and moves through phases of differentiation and development. The primary relation to the mother gains emphasis, as explored with Leonardo (1910a) where Freud observes that the homosexual object choice understood as narcissistic, replicates and at the same time supports a separation from a primary object loved with an intensity, a too muchness, which in its intensity might be understood as a threat to self-preservation before it becomes a threat to heterosexuality. When illuminating the paradox linking the intense object love of earliest experience with a narcissistic homosexual object choice, Freud, in characteristic fashion, acknowledges that this process, ascribed to Leonardo and linked to other cases he has known, is “perhaps only one among many, and is perhaps related to only one type of ‘homosexuality’” (1909, p. 101). Freud has opened the field, from homosexuality to that of homosexualities, a field entirely in keeping with the complexities he has affirmed since the *Three Essays* of 1905.



## On normality and pathology

It follows that Freud does not offer unequivocal support for any firm position in a debate about the normality or pathology of homosexuality, although he acknowledges intermittently the cultural context in which this debate, like his research, is situated. His commitment was, from the beginning, to deepen understanding rather than take a position in a debate, to which he nonetheless refers. In addressing the subject of sexuality, he often makes reference to the social forces which influence and impinge on the individual's sexual development, and which impinge inevitably on any study, any debate. He does not explicitly link this cultural context with the super ego, which he might have done, following his own metapsychology, at least after 1923. More often he seems to want to clear the way for science, sometimes subtly making reference to the cultural context in which his explorations are embedded, for example, through the use of quotations when addressing the question of homosexuality, referring to "perverse" people (1916–17, p. 304) or distancing himself yet more, referring to developmental inhibitions, "described as perversion" one of which is homosexuality (Freud, 1940, p. 155).

The results of his exploration from the time of the *Three Essays* (Freud, 1905) was to deconstruct common assumptions about normality, undermining any simple notion of normality and pathology, masculinity and femininity. The variety of sexual activity found in adult life, explored and publicized by a number of researchers in the latter half of the 20th century and elaborated by Freud in the first chapter of the *Three Essays*, were discovered by Freud to originate in an infancy that is universally sexual, and developmentally complex. Normality is in every instance disclosed to be an intricate integration and compromise. A demand for a black and white position, in relation to normality and pathology, implies a widespread resistance to Freud's fundamental position.

In the compendium called *Aberrations*, the first chapter in the *Three Essays*, Freud calls homosexuality an "inversion", not a perversion, using here the less pejorative term introduced by Havelock Ellis, whose 1897 book was in fact entitled *Inversion*. The word invert and the conceptualization of homosexuality as essentially related to the choice of object, not anything specific in the drive, or aim, supports one of Freud's key theoretical positions, repeated throughout this relatively early work, repeated later by him in different contexts, but first illustrated and explored in relation to homosexuality. Homosexuality is an aid to his conceptualization of instinct, or the drives, loosening a conventional assumption of the inseparability of instinct and object. Its normality in childhood, as well as its illustrative help in the deconstruction of the notion of instinct, or drives, are repeated in a famous passage relating to Little Hans and referred to earlier. Focusing on homosexuality as related to object choice rather than instinct, Freud preserves for the instinct or drives an aspect of normality:

There is absolutely no justification for distinguishing a special homosexual instinct  
What constitutes a homosexual is a peculiarity not in his instinctual life but in his

choice of an object. Let me recall what I have said in my Three Essays to the effect that we have mistakenly imagined the bond between instinct and object in sexual life as being more intimate than it really is. A homosexual may have normal instincts, but he is unable to disengage them from a class of objects defined by a particular determinant. Hans was a homosexual (as all children may very well be), quite consistently with the fact, which must always be kept in mind, that he was acquainted with only one kind of genital organ – a genital organ like his own.

(1909, pp. 109–110)

In the *Three Essays*, he wrote:

Psychoanalytic research is most decidedly opposed to any attempt at separating off homosexuals from the rest of mankind as a group of a special character . . . psycho-analysis considers that a choice of an object independently of its sex – freedom to range equally over male and female objects – as it is found in childhood, in primitive states of society and early periods of history, is the original basis from which as a result of restriction in one direction or the other, both normal and the inverted types develop.

(1905, pp. 144–146)

There is a normalizing trend in the focus on the specificity of object choice. Later, in a similar vein (Freud, 1916–17), he writes of homosexuals as a “class of perverts [who] behave to their sexual objects in approximately the same way as normal people do to theirs” (pp. 307–308). Here Freud is referring to homosexuals as a ‘class of perverts’, dropping the object relational term ‘invert’, keeping homosexuality within an umbrella identified as perverse, but set aside, here, a different class, the behaviour is approximately the same as that of ‘normal people’.

He elaborates on the separation of object and aim in 1905, why it is that he cannot specify a particular aim for homosexual relationships:

The important fact is that no one single aim can be laid down as applying in cases of inversion. Among men, intercourse *per anum* by no means coincides with inversion; masturbation is quite as frequently their exclusive aim, and it is even true that restrictions of sexual aim – to the point of its being limited to simple outpourings of emotion – are commoner among them than among heterosexual lovers. Amongst women too, the aims of inverts are various.

(1905, pp. 145–146)

Freud acknowledges explicitly that homosexuality is a matter of “homosexualities”. The variety here lies in the aims. In a footnote added in 1915, he elaborates object choice and considers the sexual aim: “In inverted types, a predominance of archaic constitutions and primitive psychological mechanisms is regularly to be found. Their most essential characteristics seem to be a coming into operation of narcissistic object-choice and a retention of the erotic significance of the anal zone” (1905, p. 146). As for the “intercourse *per anum*” and the “disgust which stamps that sexual aim as a perversion”, Freud writes that

people who try to account for this disgust by saying that the organ in question serves the function of excretion and comes in contact with excrement – a thing which is disgusting in itself – are not much more to the point than hysterical girls who account for their disgust at the male genital by saying that it serves to void urine. The playing of a sexual part by the mucous membrane of the anus is by no means limited to intercourse between men; preference for it is in no way characteristic of inverted feeling.

(1905, p. 152)

When inclusively documenting perversions in the *Aberrations* (Freud, 1905), he acknowledges a descending continuum, “Certain of them are so far removed from the normal in their content that we cannot avoid pronouncing them pathological” (1905, p. 161). And so he describes paedophilia, necrophilia, sadomasochism, none of which are specifically implicated in the inversions. Homosexuality is not regarded in this light as pathological, although it is linked in the *Three Essays* with a developmental failure, one amongst many arrests and inhibitions which complicate the evolution towards adult heterosexuality (1905, p. 207).

He argues for a definition of perversion as less a matter of content than a relation to the heterosexual intercourse that is the last step in a developmental process, and understood by him to be the crucial requirement for procreation. Writing in a context in which he has explored the evidence for all manner of perversions integrated into heterosexual life, he states that “if the perversion has the characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation, then we shall usually be justified in regarding it as a pathological symptom” (1905, p. 161). Notwithstanding the “usually” which gently invokes the ambiguity so frequently colouring this subject, homosexuality is by this definition pathological in as much as it does not move toward heterosexual intercourse, and does not subordinate the sexual drive to “the reproductive function”. The failure to achieve adult heterosexuality is seen as a failure to “serve the aims of reproduction” (1908, pp. 189–90), it is putting pleasure before the social good, something which any “number of people are, on account of their organization, not equal”. Whatever the variations in the inhibitions of an achievement of adult heterosexuality, Freud’s definition of perversion usually turns on the aforementioned relationship to reproduction; “the abandonment of the reproductive function is the common feature of all perversions. We actually describe a sexual activity as perverse if it has given up the aim of reproduction and pursues the attainment of pleasure as an aim independent of it” (1916–17, p. 316). The giving-up of the aim of reproduction becomes also a threat to the society which requires the services of reproduction. The issue of homosexuality becomes a social issue, a problem for society as a whole, which has reason to harness the powerful sexual drives to the service of society, in the form of reproduction.

In the context in which he addresses this failure to reproduce, he writes of

groups of individuals whose ‘sexual life’ deviates in the most striking way from the usual picture of the average. Some of these ‘perverse’ people have, we might say, struck the distinction between the sexes off their programme ... They are men and

women who are often, though not always, irreproachably fashioned in other respects, of high intellectual and ethical development, the victims only of this one fatal deviation.

(1916–17, p. 304)

Inasmuch as he is entering into a discourse about contribution to the social good, Freud writes of the contribution made by homosexuals to society, implying a sublimation of the socially useful reproductive capacity, a concern for the wider culture.

The capacity for reproduction of course only appears in adolescence, and that is when according to Freud, in 1905, the achievement of adult sexuality is accomplished, or not. Repeating the fundamental understanding of sexual development established in 1905, Freud wrote at the very end of his life:

The complete organization [of the sexual function] is only achieved at puberty, in a fourth, genital phase ... This process is not always performed faultlessly. Inhibitions in its development manifest themselves as the many sorts of disturbance in sexual life. When this is so, we find fixations of the libido to conditions in earlier phases, whose urge, which is independent of the normal sexual aim is described as perversion. One such developmental inhibition, for instance, is homosexuality when it is manifest ...

(1940, p. 155)

It is noticeable that Freud has moved here to include homosexuality with perversions of sexual aim, and not kept it separate, as he had done in the *Three Essays* and for many years after that (1905, 1909). By 1940, homosexuality has lost a bit of its protected status, and the aim as well as the object has entered more clearly into the definition. At the same time, Freud repeats the deference to social attitudes, writing of “fixations to conditions in earlier phases ... described as perversion” (1940, p. 155).

However, insistence that homosexual object choice is normal in origins, that homosexual object choice is a fact of every infantile experience, does not fade from Freud’s thinking, it is firm in 1915 when Freud added in the famous footnote to the *Three Essays*, already quoted, affirming the child’s “freedom to range equally over male and female objects” (1905, p. 145). Later, in 1925, he affirms: “The most important of these perversions, homosexuality, scarcely deserves the name. It can be traced back to the constitutional bisexuality of all human beings and to the after-affects of the phallic primacy. Psychoanalysis enables us to point to some trace or other of a homosexual object-choice in everyone” (1925b, p. 38). He never stops reminding readers of the homosexual element in everyone: “In all of us, throughout life, the libido normally oscillates between male and female objects, the bachelor gives up his men friends when he marries and returns to club life when married life has lost its savour” (1920, p. 158).

However, as he writes to the worried mother, famously quoted by Jones, “Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced of a certain arrest of sexual development” (A letter from Freud to a Mother, 1935, in Jones,

1957, p. 195). To the worried mother, he has referred to “a certain arrest of sexual development”. The homosexual object choice remains harnessed to a narcissism which precludes the movement into adult heterosexuality (1905, pp. 144–145, footnote 1910) and the generative heterosexuality which is the final developmental achievement and also the servant of social reproduction. The homosexual, who requires genitals of the same sex in his object, whose sexuality is closer to narcissism and autoeroticism (1911, p. 61, 1916–17, pp. 426–427) is precluded from the object choice understood as necessary for the aims of reproduction.

Although the language of developmental arrest is sustained throughout Freud’s writing, it is important to recall that, regarding the achievement of a final normal sexuality, Freud remained circumspect. He has confirmed that without social pressure, many more would adopt a homosexual position (1905, pp. 229–30). And the path toward adult sexuality is rarely straightforward. “We must reckon with the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavourable to the realization of complete satisfaction.” He then names the factors, the diphasic onset of sexuality, the interposition of the barrier against incest and the renunciation of pleasures, particularly anal and sadistic, the price exacted by civilization (1912, pp. 188–189).

As if to answer the question of what is so urgent and disturbing in the discussion of homosexuality, particularly in thinking about normality and pathology, Freud poses the question, late in his lifetime: Why is it that “A man’s heterosexuality will not put up with any homosexuality, and vice versa . . . there is no greater danger for a man’s heterosexual function than its being disturbed by his latent homosexuality” Why is there an independently emerging tendency to conflict? (1937, pp. 243–244). We leave his exploration of this conflict to the next section of this paper, but think it important to acknowledge in this conflict a source of difficulty informing the enquiry into the normality and pathology of homosexuality, or by this time, what we might acknowledge, the normalities and pathologies of homosexualities. As a general rule, Freud takes the position that it is a phenomena, like others to explore, and to illuminate through psychoanalysis, when it is possible. “It is not for psycho-analysis to solve the problem of homosexuality. It must rest content with disclosing the psychical mechanisms that resulted in determining the object-choice, and with tracing back the paths from them to the instinctual dispositions” (1920, p. 171).

### **The quantitative factor and free aggression or destructiveness in relation to homosexuality**

In the ‘Five Lectures on Psycho-analysis’ (Freud, 1910b) referring to the constitutional bisexuality in every human being, Freud stated that “. . . every child could be said to be gifted with *a portion* of homosexuality without doing him injustice” (1910b, p. 44). In *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1923), many years later, following the discussion of the complex development of the oedipal situation which ends with an identification with one parent, taking the other, usually the other sex, as an object, he wrote “In both sexes

the *relative strength* of the masculine and feminine dispositions ... determines whether the outcome of the Oedipus situation shall be an identification with the father or the mother (1923, p. 33). He is implying a quantitative factor over and above the relationships in themselves, an innate quantity of masculinity and femininity which influences the relationships and above all, the identifications which mark the outcome of the Oedipus complex, both positive and negative. The endowment is a priori preconflictual, and informs the movement, finally, of the drives, the loves and hatreds, the attachments and rivalries, the dialectics resulting in an adult sexual orientation and a sexual identity which is only relatively stable. The quotas of the bisexual endowment inform the struggle between positive and negative Oedipus, and in 1923, he writes that it “determines” heterosexual or homosexual identifications.

In 1910, the same year as the ‘Five Lectures’ quoted above, and the same year as Freud made a study of Leonardo, he added a footnote to the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, adding consideration of a dynamic but also quantitative element, stating the “future inverts ... pass through a phase of *very intense but short lived fixation to a woman*” (1905, p. 145). This intense passion is given up, and an object choice is made on a narcissistic basis, as described in this paper in the section ‘Narcissism and object choice, narcissism and identification’. Freud does not hypothesize the cause of this move, other than acknowledging in the passionate intensity, a quantitative element, implying that the homosexual movement is away from an intensity that is short lived, is too intense, the combination of arousal and helplessness, by implication, too difficult to contain. The subject puts himself into the role of the parent, the mother, and gains some mastery over the situation of dependency. It is, as discussed elsewhere, a narcissistic solution to an early anxiety situation.

In ‘Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality’ (1922), Freud looks directly at the role not of excessive love or attachment to a primary object, but to the function of aggression arising out of the attachment, and its influence in the development of homosexual object choice, again, in the male. He writes of “early impulses of jealousy, derived from the mother-complex and of *very great intensity*” (1922, p. 231) which arise in the boy, against rivals, other boys, admired by the mother, leading to powerful, overwhelming death wishes against the rivals. “Under the influence of upbringing – and certainly not uninfluenced also by their continuing powerlessness – these impulses yielded to repression and underwent a transformation so that the rivals of the earlier period became the first homosexual love-objects” (1922, p. 231). The object of a hatred of “very great intensity” becomes an object of desire, by inference, a required object, a necessary confirmation of the failure of the aggression to destroy the former rival, or for that matter, to be destroyed in turn. The transformation of hate into love in a triangular situation could equally describe an oedipal event. The point we wish to emphasize here is how strikingly the quantitative factor is included in Freud’s understanding of processes leading to homosexual object choice. An emotional situation of “continuing powerlessness” implicit in the situation of the child, the experience of helplessness

before a quantity of aroused affectivity “of very great intensity”, in excess of the psychic capacity to bring about satisfaction or containment drives a psychic shift, a transformation of hate into love. Examining further this move from hate to love in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud hypothesizes the expediency of this shift, the opportunity for discharge, the greater “prospect of satisfaction” if there is a shift in the direction of love (1923, p. 44). In the process described in 1922, it becomes imperative that the object is the same sex, whereby the intensity of rivalry for the maternal object is overcome. He links this move with fear of castration in relation to the father as well as the move away from rivalry with a boy. The withdrawal from a rivalry with the father, and therefore from the danger of castration, relieves the narcissistic vulnerability derived from again, a quota “of quite exceptional strength” which is the “high value set upon the male organ (1922, p. 230). In both this version of a homosexual evolution, where excessive rivalry and hostility drives a conversion of hate and fear into love, and the homosexual evolution posited, as in the case of Leonardo (Freud, 1910a), where an excessive intensity of love in relation to the mother becomes a less threatening love for an object mirroring the self, the move toward the homosexual object choice is understood as a solution to an experience of being psychically overwhelmed, either by too much love, or by too much hate.

Although Freud was always concerned with the emotional history of hatred, and the evidence of sadism in erotic life, the focus became more pronounced in the years after 1920 and the introduction of the death drive, a concept which he maintained up to the end of his working life: “There is so often associated with the erotic relationship, over and above its own sadistic components, a *quota of plain inclination to aggression*” (1930, p. 106). An inclination to aggression had been identified in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) in which Freud hypothesized an element of aggression left over after the ego manages to give up its objects. In the giving up of the erotic attachment which is followed by an identification, there is, he says, always something left over, “free aggression”, described as a quantity of aggression circulating in the psyche, and not bound by sublimation or identification or an object relation. Writing of the formation of the super-ego, he states that

Every such identification is in the nature of a desexualization or even a sublimation. It now seems as though when a transformation of this kind takes place, an instinctual defusion occurs at the same time. After sublimation the erotic component no longer has the power to bind the whole of destructiveness that was combined with it, and this is released in the form of an inclination to aggression and destruction.

(1923, p. 54)

In this comment on the process of identification in the formation of the superego, we see Freud disclosing a quantitative conceptualization which has some bearing on the development of erotic life, implying here that the repression of gratification involved in the development of sexual identifica-

tions and the establishment of the super ego, fundamentally, the oedipal task, always leaves some aggression free. At the same time, he again notes that the most efficient binder of quantities of aggression in the psyche is the erotic drive, which he illustrated in the 1922 paper ('Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality') with an explanation for the development of a homosexual object choice. Some potential back and forth between identification and the attempted binding of the left-over aggression with renewed erotization might be drawn from this conceptualization.

Still later, Freud hypothesized the impact of quantities of aggression, or destructiveness or death drive, in the intrapsychic conflict between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Writing in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937), Freud ponders once again the issue of bisexuality, here within a context of conflict, informed by the wider consideration of the death instinct, or destructiveness, and its role in creating difficulties in the therapeutic success of psychoanalysis:

At all periods there have been, as there still are, people who can take as their sexual objects members of their own sex as well as the opposite one without the one trend interfering with the other. We call such people bisexuals, and we accept their existence without feeling much surprise about it. We have come to learn, however, that every human being is bisexual in this sense. But we are struck by the following point. Whereas in the first class of people the two trends have got on together without clashing, in the second and more numerous class, they are in a state of irreconcilable conflict. A man's heterosexuality will not put up with any homosexuality, and vice versa ... there is no greater danger for a man's heterosexual function than its being disturbed by his latent homosexuality. We might attempt to explain this by saying that each individual only has a certain *quota of libido* at his disposal, for which the two rival trends have to struggle. But it is not clear why the rivals do not always divide up the available quota of libido between them according to their relative strength, since they are able to do so in a number of cases. We are forced to the conclusion that the tendency to a conflict is something special, something which is newly added to the situation, irrespective of the quantity of libido. An independently emerging tendency to conflict of this sort can scarcely be attributed to anything but the intervention of an element of free aggressiveness.

(1937, p. 244)

Freud here discloses the impact of aggression informing every sexual development, any compromise, conflict or integration of the bisexual disposition. Present from the start, the bisexuality will be susceptible to the influence of aggression. The presence of that aggression will not only inform both the nature of any individual's sexuality, and include a resistance to a psychoanalytic treatment, it will also inform any discussion of homosexuality. As Freud has made clear from the beginning of his discussion of sexual development, the cost of the demands of civilization, which favours the development of a life engendering heterosexuality, is high. His last formulations note that the death drive will inform that development. And he has shown elsewhere that the demands of development itself, including the renunciations and identifications of the oedipal conflict, will give rise to



more or less free aggression, which in turn will inform the outcome of that sexual development. The project of binding both the innate aggression and the aggression which is a result of the civilizing renunciations required to live in society, to face the oedipal conflict, is a difficult task, as Freud acknowledged in 1905, and continued to elaborate and explore up until his last years. He never rested content that he had fathomed the problem completely which he acknowledged, with an air of melancholy in *Civilization and its Discontents*, as we have recalled earlier in this paper:

The sexual life of civilized man . . . sometimes gives the impression of being in process of involution as a function, just as our teeth and hair seem to be as organs . . . Sometimes one seems to perceive that it is not only civilization but something in the nature of the function itself which denies us full satisfaction and urges us along other paths. This may be wrong, it is hard to decide.

(1930, p. 105)

### In conclusion

Freud offers no comfort to the wish for a black and white clarity on the subject of the normality or pathology of homosexuality. He is, throughout his life, clear that we are all born with bisexual endowment, albeit differently endowed, and all have been homosexual in infancy and childhood, which homosexuality lives on in the unconscious life of the adult. He is also clear that the route to adult heterosexuality is complex, full of hurdles, and that it is enforced, sometimes brutally, by the demands of civilization, the pressure to reproduce essential to the continuity of society. Without social pressure, he confirms, there would be much more homosexuality. The retreat from or rebellion against this pressure, is expressed in the homosexuality he never stopped regarding as developmentally closer to narcissism and autoeroticism than is heterosexual object choice. Although he explored several routes to homosexual object choice, he was clear that there are many, and from very early, he confirmed that there are many different forms of homosexual object love (Freud, 1905). He was, in this, the first psychoanalytic author to confirm the existence of homosexualities.

Threaded throughout his explorations of homosexualities and heterosexualities and certainly gaining in importance in later writing, is the role of aggression. At first hypothesizing the threat of the demands of too much love as a determiner of homosexual object choice (Freud, 1910a), he later notes the equally overwhelming problem of too much hate, leading to a homosexual object choice aimed specifically at transforming hatred into libido, a narcissistic solution to an unbearable intensity of rivalry (Freud, 1922). In the *Ego and the Id* (1923), considering the multiple identifications resulting from an Oedipus complex driven by experience but informed or even determined by bisexual endowment, he notes that there is a quantity of aggression left unbound in every renunciation, every developmental step towards sexual individuation. And in his last consideration of the internal conflict that often rages between the heterosexual and homosexual aspects

within the same individual, he hypothesizes the role of “free aggression” informing this conflict, destructiveness identified with the death instinct, colouring the internal conflict (Freud, 1937).

The presence of that destructive drive not only informs the nature of any individual’s sexuality but also informs any discussion of homosexuality. Recognition of its presence may help us to understand the vehemence of some of these discussions, within the psychoanalytic community as well as outside, where homophobia is often accompanied by murderous attitudes, overt or covert. Freud challenges us continually to maintain a humility along with a scientific curiosity in exploring the complex subject, mindful of contextual pressures always impinging on research, or interwoven in the results of that research.

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