

THE REPRESSION OF THE SUBLIME

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Presented at a seminar of the Psychosynthesis Research Foundation, on December 15, 1967

The title, "The Repression of the Sublime" comes from the writings of Robert Desoille (1945). In the course of this paper, I am not going to offer you any really new ideas. Instead, I will try to bring together the ideas of a number of others in such a way as to make the concept, the repression of the sublime, so real and compelling to you that you will see it ever more clearly and inescapably in yourselves, in your patients, and in your associates.

I do not think it is necessary to define the concept of repression but I do want to go into the question of what is meant in this instance by the sublime. We can be orthodox-psychoanalytic about it and consider all higher artistic, social and spiritually oriented activities as sublimations of primitive erotic and aggressive drives. These would be sublime activities, but as sublimations of lower drives. But we could also consider that these same higher impulses, desires or motives exist in their own right and that they develop whether or not the sexual and aggressive drives are satisfied. In fact, one might go so far as to claim that the higher and more sublime needs of the person are more likely to be awakened and developed if the so-called lower, carnal drives are satisfied rather than if these are frustrated and 'sublimated'. For it is often out of a sense of boredom and dissatisfaction with the gratification of the senses that we begin to look for higher meanings to our life.

There are still other ways of looking at the term sublime. In its broadest sense it covers all of man's impulses, instincts, drives, urges to be something more, better, greater than he is. Personal growth and differentiation is part of the picture, to be sure, but beyond that, the concept of the sublime involves several other general areas. It refers to the true, the good, the beautiful. We orient ourselves towards the sublime when we disinterestedly seek to know things as they are, when we nurture others for the pleasure of seeing them grow, when we arrange physical events so that they are seen as beautiful or artistic.

Then, there is the tendency towards community, brotherliness, and caring. It is based on the feeling, the belief, the conviction that we all share the same fate, ultimately. In the thinking of Robert Desoille, in whose writings I first came across the conception of the repression of the sublime, the impulse towards the sublime demands that we be concerned with others, that we feel the need to communicate with others with the best of ourselves, and that we find our deepest satisfaction in service to others. I quote in translation the section of his 1945 book in which he says: "There are many forms of service and among them the disinterested efforts of the savant and of the artist are among the highest." The impulse to act in such ways is the expression of a profound urge to trust life, to give freely of oneself, and to forget one's selfish concerns. These are among the traits of the sublime.

There is another aspect of the sublime which is confusingly called the religious. This is the inescapable need of every person to answer the existential questions for himself and to attach himself to a purpose, a goal, an ideal that he sees as greater and more important, more durable than his own transient existence and powers. When we sense the sublime as the feeling of communion with and devotion to something that is greater than ourselves, then we are experiencing this basic religious impulse. It may be theistic, agnostic or atheistic; it does not require a belief in God, but it is consonant with such a belief. According to Desoille it is the therapist's job to help his client to become fully aware of this basic and normal religious impulse and to help the client to clear his mind of any persisting infantile theological conceptions. Finally, the therapist helps the client to develop his primitive religious impulses to the level at which they are converted into reflective thought rather than merely emotionally charged magic thinking.

Now to get back to the title of this paper, "The Repression of the Sublime," I would like to demonstrate that it is an essential part of being fully human to feel the pull and the attraction of the sublime in the several ways that I have described. And it is typically neurotic for us to avoid the responsibility of trying to answer this call of the sublime. However, we often do repress it.

There are many ways in which we evade the call of the sublime. Why do we evade, for example, the challenge of personal growth? We fear growth because it means abandoning the familiar for the unknown, and that always involves risks. I recently came across the same idea in the works of Andras Angyal (1965) where he says "Abandoning the familiar for the unknown always involves risks. When the changes are far-reaching or precipitous they are bound to arouse anxiety. The view that growth is inseparable from anxiety is shared by practically all thinkers who have substantially contributed to our understanding of anxiety...The anxiety felt at the prospect of dissolution of one's current mode of being has been related by some to the fear of final dissolution, of which human beings have the certain foreknowledge; since growth requires the breaking of old patterns, willingness 'to die' is a precondition of living... Excessive fear of death is often a correlate of the neurotic fear of growth and change."

Why do we evade the expression of care and concern for others? Often it is because we fear that we won't know where to draw the line and that we will find ourselves used and exploited by others. In the popular parlance, if you give a person an inch, he'll take a mile. Somehow we lack the stable sense of self which would permit us to have our "yes" and our "no" in such situations. I think that this fear is also related to the fact that as a part of the pattern of modern life, we know too many people too superficially—and we experience too little responsibility for each other.

I suspect that the loss of the security of a sense of community with others, the loss of the feeling of sharing a common fate, has led us to a state in which we are no longer able to commit ourselves to an ideal whose value, in our eyes, transcends that of our personal existence. This is the opposite of the situation that normally exists in primitive tribes. Today, the old tribal claims for loyalty in return for status and security are weak. We seldom experience a close relatedness to others for whose lives we are responsible and on

whom we, in turn, can call for aid when we are distressed or threatened. Because of this loss, the motive for commitment of oneself to something greater than oneself must nowadays attach itself to something more abstract than one's tribe, something harder to define and to keep in mind and heart as a value.

Let's go back to the idea of repression. Desoille's idea that we repress the sublime can be found in the writings of current American psychologists. For example, Angyal (1965) speaks of the defense mechanisms such as repression as exercising their effects not only on neurotic feelings and behavior but on the healthy ones, too. To his way of thinking, two competing organizations or sets of attitudes or systems for attributing meaning to experiences are in competition with each other. One is healthy, the other is neurotic. Each system seeks to dominate the individual, and to do this, it must repress the other competing system. So when the neurotic system is dominant, the healthy system is ipso facto subdued and submerged, i.e., excluded from consciousness, or repressed. Angyal then says,

"This conception is borne out by numerous observations that one can and does repress feelings and wishes that are in no way socially tabooed and are often considered laudable."

He calls this "annexation" or "appropriation," and he gives the example of an analytic patient who misinterprets his own natural and healthy friendliness as a viciously motivated exploitativeness.

There are a number of other current examples of the repression of the sublime. I would like to draw some from Abraham Maslow's writings. Recently he gave a lecture in which he included the notion of the Jonah Complex. To quote from Dr. Maslow (1966):

"I'd like to turn to one of the many reasons for what Angyal has called the evasion of growth! Certainly everybody in this room would like to be better than he is. We have, all of us, an impulse to improve ourselves, an impulse towards actualizing more of our potentialities, towards self-actualization, or full humanness, or human fulfillment, or whatever term you like. Granted this for everybody here, then what holds us up? What blocks us?

"One such defense against growth that I would like to speak about especially, because it has not been noticed much, I shall call the Jonah Complex.

"In my own notes I had at first labeled this defense 'the fear of one's own greatness' or 'the evasion of one's destiny' or 'the running away from one's own best talent'. I had wanted to stress as bluntly and sharply as I could the non-Freudian point that we fear our best as well as our worst, even though in different ways. It is certainly possible for most of us to be greater than we are in actuality. We all have unused potentialities or not fully developed ones. It is certainly true that many of us evade our constitutionally suggested vocations...So often we run away from the responsibilities dictated (or rather suggested)

by nature, by fate, even sometimes by accident, just as Jonah tried in vain to run away from *his* fate.

"We fear our highest possibilities (as well as our lowest ones). We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments, under the most perfect conditions, under conditions of greatest courage. We enjoy and even thrill to the god-like possibilities we see in ourselves in such peak moments. And yet we simultaneously shiver with weakness, awe and fear before these same possibilities.

"Not only are we ambivalent about our highest possibilities, we are also in a perpetual and I think universal, perhaps even *necessary* conflict and ambivalence over these same highest possibilities in other people and in human nature in general. Certainly we love and admire good men, saints, honest, virtuous, clean men. But could anybody who has looked into the depths of human nature fail to be aware of our mixed and often hostile feelings toward saintly men? Or toward very beautiful women or men? Or toward great creators? Or toward our intellectual geniuses? We surely love and admire all the persons who incarnated the true, the good, the beautiful, the just, the perfect, the ultimately successful. And yet they also make us uneasy, anxious, confused, perhaps a little jealous or envious; a little inferior, clumsy. They usually make us lose our aplomb, our self-possession, our self-regard..

"Here we have a first clue. My impression so far is that the greatest people, simply by their presence and being what they are, make us feel aware of our lesser worth, whether or not they intend to. If this is an unconscious effect, and we are not aware of why we feel stupid or ugly or inferior whenever such a person turns up, we are apt to respond with projection, i.e., we react as if he were trying to make us feel inferior, as if we were the target. Hostility is then an understandable consequence. It looks to me, so far, as if conscious awareness tends to fend off this hostility. That is, if you are willing to attempt self-awareness and self-analysis of your own counter-valuing, i.e., of your unconscious fear and hatred of the true, good and beautiful, etc. people, you will very likely be less nasty to them. And I am willing to extrapolate to the guess that if you can learn to love more purely the highest values in others, this might make you love these qualities in yourself in a less frightening way."

In another paper Dr. Maslow (1967) has brought up a different aspect of the repression of the sublime. He calls it desacralizing:

"Let me talk about one defense mechanism that is not mentioned in the psychology textbooks, though it is a very important defense mechanism to the snotty and yet idealistic youngster of today. It is the defense mechanism of desacralizing. These youngsters mistrust the possibility of values and virtues. They feel themselves swindled and thwarted in their lives. Most of them have, in fact, dopey parents whom they don't respect very much, parents who are quite confused themselves about values and who, frequently, are simply terrified of their children and never punish them or stop them from doing things that are wrong. So you have a situation where the youngsters simply despise their elders—often for good and sufficient reason. Such youngsters have learned to make

a big generalization: They won't listen to anybody who is grown up, especially if the grown-up uses the same words which they've heard from the hypocritical mouth. They have heard their fathers talk about being honest or brave or bold, and they have seen their fathers being the opposite of all these things.

"The youngsters have learned to reduce the person to the concrete object and to refuse to see what he might be or to refuse to see him in his symbolic values or to refuse to see him or her eternally. Our kids have desacralized sex, for example. Sex is nothing; it is a natural thing, and they have made it so natural that it has lost its poetic qualities in many instances, which means that it has lost practically everything. Self-actualization means giving up this defense mechanism and learning or being taught to resacralize.

"*Resacralizing* means being willing, once again, to see a person 'under the aspect of eternity,' as Spinoza says, or to see him in the medieval Christian unitive perception, that is, being able to see the sacred, the eternal, the symbolic. It is to see Woman with a capital 'W' and everything which that implies, even when one looks at a particular woman. Another example: One goes to medical school and dissects a brain. Certainly something is lost if the medical student isn't awed but, without the unitive perception, sees the brain only as one concrete thing. Open to resacralization, one sees a brain as a sacred object also, sees its symbolic value, sees it as a figure of speech, sees it in its poetic aspects.

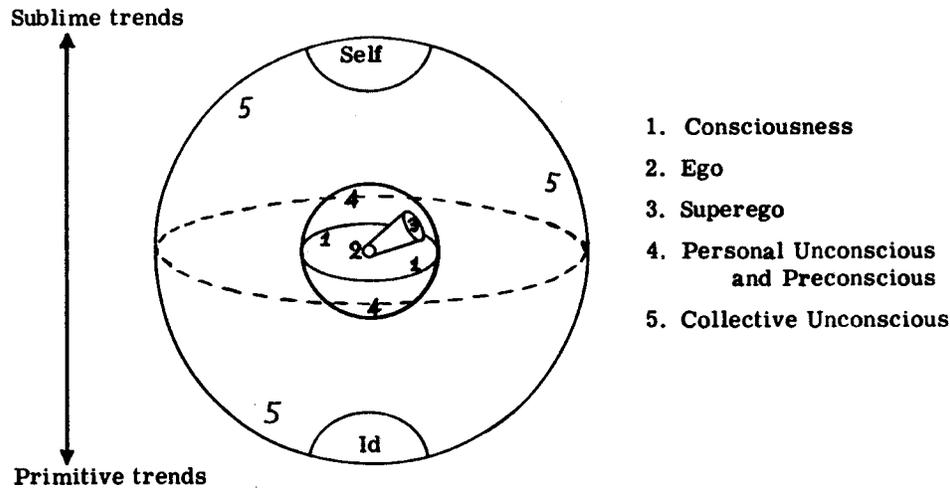
"Resacralization often means an awful lot of corny talk—'very square,' the kids would say. Nevertheless, for the counselor, especially for the counselor of older people, where these philosophical questions about religion and the meaning of life come up, this is a most important way of helping the person to move toward self-actualization. The youngsters may say that it is square, and the logical positivists may say that it is meaningless, but for the person who seeks our help in this process, it is obviously very meaningful and very important, and we had better answer him, or we're not doing what it is our job to do..."

Here is one more quotation from Maslow (1962) on another aspect of the sublime; one that is perhaps more prosaic. The title of the chapter from which it comes is "The Avoidance of Knowledge, as Avoidance of Responsibility":

"...lack of curiosity can be an active or a passive *expression* of anxiety and fear...That is, we can seek knowledge in order to reduce anxiety and we can also avoid knowing in order to reduce anxiety. To use Freudian language, incuriosity, learning difficulties, pseudo-stupidity can be a defense. Knowledge and action are very closely bound together, all agree. I go much further, and am convinced that knowledge and action are frequently synonymous, even identical in the Socratic fashion. Where we know fully and completely; suitable action follows automatically and reflexively. Choices are then made without conflict and with full spontaneity...this close relation between knowing and doing can help us to interpret one cause of the fear of knowing as deeply a fear of doing, a fear of the consequences that flow from knowing, a fear of its dangerous

responsibilities. Often it is better not to know, because if you did know, then you would have to act and stick your neck out."

There is an interesting theoretical explanation of this idea of the repression of the sublime by Robert Desoille (1945), the French engineer who made it his avocation to develop the *rêve éveillé dirigé*, or directed daydream, as a psychotherapeutic tool. Desoille has woven theory and experience into a fairly elaborate explanation of how, why, and by what agency, the sublime is repressed. He has his own topographical description of the psyche, reproduced here.



It includes the usual Freudian trio—the id, the ego, and the superego; but they are now supplemented by a fourth agent, the Self. The area in the center represents consciousness, the ego and the superego. Farther out, one finds the personal preconscious and unconscious. Beyond that is the collective unconscious. It should be noted that the superego does not partake of the collective unconscious.

Desoille borrowed Jung's concept of the self and modified it somewhat. For him, it means a state that represents the far limits of sublimation, a state that is the expression of the highest ideal that a person is able to entertain at any given moment. In this case, the id is the usual concept of our animal drive seeking expression. We experience it as it has been transformed in rising into consciousness, with all the associations that have been called forth by the stimulation of the primitive instincts. Desoille goes on to emphasize the unity of the psyche. The self and the id are considered to be two extreme limits, two opposite poles within the psyche; they never coincide. Each exercises its own attractive effect on the ego at the center; and the ego oscillates back and forth between these two instinctual limits, the primitive and the sublime.

The superego is that arbitrary and infantile outgrowth of the ego that represents the strictures and demands of the parents and other authority figures as they were experienced primarily in childhood. Desoille sees it as a temporary structure that must eventually be dissolved and whose role must be taken over by the Self in the mature personality.

At this point, I would like to digress into a description of the types of imagery that Desoille has habitually found to occur in the directed daydream. As you may know, Desoille uses the imagery of ascending and descending in order to evoke images at different levels of the psyche, or different levels in the archetypal chain, as he puts it. The idea of ascending to heavenly heights he finds associated with sublimation, euphoria, serenity, and ultimately, with spiritual growth. But it frequently happens that the patient's ascent is blocked by a monster of some sort, perhaps a dragon. Desoille calls this character the "guardian of the threshold" and considers it to be an agent of the superego, whose function had been in the past to frustrate a part of the child's self-expression, e.g. sexual behavior. It is now the adult patient's task in his daydream to struggle with and to overcome this superego figure. If he succeeds in doing this in his daydream, he thereby nullifies the arbitrary restrictions set up by his parents and other authority figures, and in so doing, accepts responsibility for directing his sexual and aggressive strivings according to his own judgments. At this point, the ego becomes animated by an intense aspiration to attain a sublime objective, which is still only glimpsed. The superego, which had been constructed from the introjects of the parents as a bulwark against oedipal desires and the like, becomes superfluous as the individual develops autonomy. The Self, with its higher, more sublime goals, supplants the superego.

Desoille (1945) draws an important point from Jung. He points out that Jung, among others, has emphasized the necessity of shedding one's own instinctive egotism. On this matter, Jung said that the ancient mystical precept, "Get rid of all that you have and then you will receive" means, in effect, that one must abandon the bulk of one's most cherished illusions. Desoille says:

"It is only then that something more beautiful, deeper, and more comprehensive will develop in one. For only the mystery of the sacrifice of oneself makes it possible for one to find oneself again with a renewed soul. These are precepts of very ancient wisdom which are brought back to light during psychotherapy... This aspiration, which must come to us from a region of the unconscious, arises from a deeper layer than the superego. That is why it needs a special name. We will go along with Jung and call it the Self.

"The conflict breaks out between the id and the Self. The Self tries to get the ego to satisfy its needs (for the sublime, its yearnings for growth) and the id, in opposing itself to the Self's desires, takes on the role of the repressive agent (and becomes) the expression of a new form of censorship, the *repression of the sublime*, in this case, of the urge to spiritual growth."

When the patient accedes to these intense aspirations of the Self which we mentioned earlier and attains certain levels of sublimation, the symbol of the guardian of the threshold changes. It is no longer that of a threatening dragon but takes on a different appearance in the daydreams. It generally appears now as a creature who is both kindly and firm, but still bars the route upward. In this situation the patient no longer feels threatened, but he does feel called upon to make a conscious choice between two equally possible attitudes. According to Desoille this is what is taking place. During the previous sessions the subject has become aware of the possibility of developing something more

beautiful, deeper, more comprehensive within himself. There has been an intimation of the sublime, a call to become a finer person than he is. But for that to take place, the subject realizes now that he must renounce old habits and stop following lines of least resistance. He must give up the gratification of impulses from the lower unconscious, *all of which have been tolerated and even encouraged by the superego* in the past, and accepted by the conscious ego. But the patient hesitates to take this path upward because he feels that it will restrain his freedom and diminish his range of activities. In some cases, the patient may even feel that these suggested renunciations have an *inhuman* character to them. This is when the guardian of the threshold appears—but no longer in a repulsive form. This time, it may take on the form of an angel, for example. The conflict between the Self and the id for possession of the ego, one might say between the sublime and the base, is no longer unconscious. It is now also taking place between the ego on the one hand, whose habit has been to accede consciously to those of the id's impulses that had been accepted by the superego, those impulses conforming to the lowest moral restraint of everyday life, and on the other hand, the Self, represented by the guardian of the threshold, the angel, whose call is felt to be ever more imperative.

In this case, we see that the id, acting through the ego and with the collusion of the superego, struggles against the demands of the Self. But at this stage, the struggle has become quite conscious; and the ego now seeks to suppress the sublime just as it represses what seemed to it to be base and vile.

Desoille says that there are three ways in which the patient may react to the image of the guardian of the threshold with its call towards the sublime:

1. During that very session, the subject may suddenly decide to give up his old habits because they now appear to him to represent non-values. These must be replaced by new values, which must be found and possessed. They are symbolized in the subsequent directed daydreams by such images as treasures that are hidden or guarded. Once this decision is made, the patient is again able to see himself ascending to greater heights in his directed daydream.

2. The subject may hesitate and the session may come to a halt at that point. Subsequently, while the subject is alone, during the interval between sessions, he may decide to take on the struggle. In subsequent sessions he is then able again to progress as a result of that decision.

3. Alternatively, the subject may flatly refuse, consciously or not, to give up his illusions. With this refusal he makes a negative transference on his therapist. Generally, it is rather discrete and of short duration, says Desoille, except in difficult cases.

Psychosynthesis (Assagioli, 1965) makes much of the fact that we suppress and deny our impulses toward the sublime. One possible reason why we do this is because the more that one is conscious of one's positive impulses, of one's urges toward the sublime, the more shame one feels for one's failure to give expression to these impulses. There ensues a painful burning of the conscience, a sense of guilt at not being what one could be, of not

doing what one could do. This is not superego guilt but rather the cry of the Self for its actualization.

But we have available an "easy-out," an escape from this sense of guilt, if we accept those popular intellectual arguments which reduce the call of the higher unconscious to nothing but sublimation of the impulses of the lower unconscious. Jung (1933) decried this reductionism more than 30 years ago, but we still find it soothing and comforting to deny these instincts of the higher unconscious and to settle for a degraded self-image because, in some ways, it is an easier one to live with.

This is the self-image of the well-psychoanalyzed man; he has undergone a sort of psychoanalytical lobotomy of the spirit, a deadening of his normal sensitivity to the higher unconscious and to the possibility of spiritual growth. The key to this denial is probably to be found in Freud's concept of sublimation with its emphasis on aim-inhibited sexual and aggressive drives as the source of the kindly and generous acts of men. This emphasis denied the existence of autonomous impulses towards goodness, toward community. This dogma was especially useful for the reduction of anxiety because it automatically relieved the patient who accepted it of all sense of responsibility for spiritual growth, and of the normal anxiety attendant on this quest.

Thus, the psychoanalytic theory of neurosis can be seen as a truncated theory of personality which, in an ideological way, tends to relieve neurotic symptomatology by amputating or anesthetizing a portion of the psyche, the highest and most valuable functions, those which urge us on to be the most that is within our potentiality.

But perhaps it is better for the severe neurotic to temporarily put aside his impulses to the sublime. These impulses, if misused, can lead to ego inflation and solidification of one's pathological self-image. One classical picture of this is rigid self-righteousness. It may be that the severe neurotic should be prohibited from dwelling on thoughts of the sublime until he has uprooted the core of his neurosis, just as the aspirant is not initiated into the secrets of the society until he has developed the discipline with which to respect the facts and the skills with which to use them.

The problem that psychosynthesis faces, and which I think that psychoanalysis in the classical sense avoids, is to provide a therapy for both the lower and the higher aspects of the personality. The needs of the lower unconscious are met more or less successfully by conventional forms of psychotherapy. Religious guidance seeks to enlarge the scope and effectiveness of the higher unconscious. Psychosynthesis provides a philosophy that aims to reach both the id and the Self. Psychosynthesis aims to help man to recognize all of his impulses, to accept the responsibility of deciding which to express and which to renounce, and to deal with the anxiety that is an inescapable aspect of the process of self-actualization.

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