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A psychoanalytic enquiry on symbolic function

Giuseppe Iurato

University of Palermo, IT

E-mail: giuseppe.iurato@community.unipa.it

Abstract. In this contribution, on the basis of the recent psychoanalytic clinic, we would like to deepen the underlying psychoanalytic bases to human symbolic function which might be the outcome of the dialectic interplay between two concomitant Ego's subagencies always present in every human being which, in turn, would be the outcome of an Ego's splitting mainly according to the last 1938 Freudian thought based on disavowal mechanism¹ and supported by the thoughts of other authors, above all H. Nunberg, D. Lagache, J. Lacan, F. Dolto and M. Recalcati.

The main idea around which revolves this note is as follows. Putting the disavowal mechanism as a general psychic mechanism extended to all the possible painful perceptions, its outcomes are mainly two basic subagencies of Ego agency, opposed of each other, to be precise the Ideal Ego and the Ego's Ideal, from whose dialectic interaction, also with the involvement of the Super-Ego agency, takes place most of the subsequent psychic life, including symbolic function as well as degenerative behaviours. In particular, disavowal mechanism is closely involved in the formation of *bodily image* which takes place during the pre-genital phases of human psychosexual development (mainly, from the anal phase to the (Edipus one) in the discovery of the primary sexual gender difference from which the child, when he or she gives pre-eminence to symbolic elaboration, is able to build up his or her personal bodily image, so instituting relationships between its component elements together with the assignment of the related meanings.

This psychoanalytic pattern of Freud's theory, as also extended by other scholars who remained faithful to Freudian orthodoxy, and worked out with a historical methodology², might explain a wide range of aspects of human psychic life and modern society phenomena, as confirmed by recent psychoanalytic clinic.

1. A brief sketch on symbolism in psychoanalysis

Symbolism is an indirect form of representation. *Symbolization* is a psychic function typical of human beings, through which a mental representation refers to another one according to a not well defined link. Differently from the *sign*, which ties together representations whose meanings are both conscious and related by a conventional but rigid link, the *symbol* is characterized by the fact that the meaning of one representation belongs to unconscious realm (*latent meaning*), the other to consciousness (*manifest meaning*). One of the main hypotheses is that symbolization is prior to any other form of sign function, like language (Moore and Fine 1990, 1993).

¹ This basic psychic mechanism has been, wrongly in our view, quite underestimated in respect to Freudian work, as Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) pointed out, who, inter alia, would want to consider it a general psychic mechanism of the mental formation and development of every human being.

² Indeed, notwithstanding we have argued within Freudian theory, we also have homogeneously and coherently taken into account, at the occurrence, some other psychoanalytic models by those authors who have been, however, faithful to Freudian orthodoxy. This, in agreement with the basic historicist epistemological nature of psychoanalytic theories (Carotenuto 1982, 1991).

In psychoanalysis, the first interest towards symbols dates back to Freud's work *The Interpretation of Dreams* of 1899, considered still valid by most of psychoanalysts (Fossi 1988, p. 41). Freud conceived symbols as all springing out from unconscious, as a result of primary process whose main aim is to reduce anguish, removing unacceptable ideas and desires. Symbolic formation, in its widest sense, allows the deferment of the discharge of psychic tensions or conflicts produced by stimuli, interposing mental mediators (symbols) between stimuli and responses, so postponing the gratification, or else shifts desires from forbidden objects to their licit (often material) substitutes, so allowing an immediate gratification (Moore and Fine 1990, 1993). The main aim of the present paper is just to give a psychoanalytic pattern, worked out within Freudian theory, explaining these latter two aspects.

To be precise, the first result of symbolic formation meant as above, gives rise to sublimation, hence to civilization and (non-material) culture just in the Freudian sense, while the second result of symbolic formation, reduces to (symbolic) reification at simple and immediate materiality (material culture³). Since at the basis of symbolic formation there is, anyway, a compromise between opposite tendencies (in accomplish pleasure and reality principles, as well as life and death principles), we have identified such a basic dialectics in the relationships between two main opposite structural parts of Ego agency arising from a certain division (*Ego's splitting*), namely the subagency Ideal Ego on the one hand, and the subagency system Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego on the other hand. Just from their dialectic opposition, springs out sublimation phenomena on the one side, and materialistic practices on the other side.

The pattern described herein, is mainly supported by the fact that symbolism, in psychoanalysis, is considered closely related to somatic components of Self experience (Fossi 1988, p. 101), as well as by the latest psychoanalytic clinic which has shown the emergence of new pathologies which may be laid out within this framework based on Ego's splitting.

2. On Ego's splitting: first outlines

Through a rapid analysis of the psychoanalytic literature on fetishism (Khan Masud 1970, 1979), it will turn out that in the fetish formation process the first forms of condensation and displacement mechanisms take place, which are the two main psychodynamic processes underlying any symbolic formation. Fetish formation and (D.W. Winnicott) transitional object, have pathways which meet frequently, starting from common origins in the childhood until they become different to each other with psychic maturation, distinguishing between two possible choices, namely normality and pathology (perversions⁴). As already said, these two entities, i.e., fetish and transitional object, have many common points among them in the first stages of human psychosexual development.

At the same time, according to the last 1938 Freudian thought (Freud 1938, 1999), an Ego's splitting takes place with the formation of two subagencies which will be called *Ego's Ideal* and *Ideal Ego* (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973; Chasseguet-Smirgel 1975). Nevertheless, both these names are due to Hermann Nunberg (1932) and Daniel Lagache (1961), and not to Freud who explicitly introduced and used only the name Ego's Ideal in his 1914 *On Narcissism. An Introduction* to denote an autonomous intrapsychic formation to which the Ego refers itself to

³ Understood in its widest sense, beyond anthropological meaning.

⁴ In this regard, it is useful to remember the incisive Freudian expression according to which "perversions are, in a certain sense, the 'negative' of neuroses". Herein, we refer to the widest meaning of the term "perversion" (Moore and Fine 1993).

evaluate its effective realizations or representations (Galimberti 2006). Nevertheless, Freud himself, in the 1914 *On Narcissism. An Introduction*, as well as in the 1922 *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* and in the 1923 *The Ego and the Id*, speaks too of an Ideal Ego (*Idealich*) but identifies it with the Ego's Ideal (*Ichideal*) and this, in turn, with the Super-Ego, even if, in some points of his discussion, a certain distinction between them seemed already to be possible.

The Ideal Ego has in-depth narcissistic origins going back to the primary identification (of primary narcissism) and that precedes all further object relations; it was also called the *ein einziger Zug* (i.e., the *unary trait*) by Freud, the unavoidable and unchangeable basis upon which to build up all the next secondary identifications (of the Ego's Ideal and Super-Ego, in secondary narcissism stage). Such a first, infant narcissistic state is overcome thanks to parents' criticisms toward the child and the internalization of idealized objects.

The interiorization of such criticisms gives rise to agencies of self-observation and to other secondary identifications (of secondary narcissism), belonging to Ego's Ideal and Super-Ego agencies, which allow the rising of the first psychic components of subjectivity. Subsequently, other authors, such as Nunberg in 1932, Lacan in 1936 and Lagache in 1958, retook two such Ego's agencies as distinct from each other⁵. On the other hand, as already said above, in the last period of his work, Freud himself implicitly started to distinguish between these two Ego's subagencies. Their interplay will play a key role in the following psychic behaviour of every human being.

3. Further elementary considerations on symbolism

According to Abbagnano (1998) and Galimberti (2006), the word *symbol* derives from the Greek noun σύμβολου (with Latin transliteration *symbolum*), this from σύμβᾶλλον, in turn derived from the verb συμβάλλειν (with Latin transliteration *sým bállein*) which, in composition, means “throw together”. It is characterized, like the *sign*, by an a priori *postponement* which, on the one hand, includes the symbol in the sign's order as a specific case of it (as a conventional symbol), whereas, on the other hand, it is opposed to the sign itself because the latter has a predetermined relationship with what it denotes or connotes (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*⁶), whereas the *symbol*, instead, in evoking its corresponding part, refers to a given reality which is not decided by some form of convection but by the recomposition or assembling of a whole (in respect of its original etymological meaning, as a non-conventional symbol). Roughly speaking, there is no rigid link between a symbol and what it symbolizes.

Nevertheless, the relationships between sign and symbol are never well delineated in a clear manner. The psychoanalytic perspective might yet provide useful clarifications, above all that of the Kleinian trend and that of the British *middle group* headed by Donald W. Winnicott, if one takes into account the early etymological meaning of the term “symbol” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973), i.e., the one that refers to the “assembling of a set of things”. Following Petocz (2004, Ch. 1), which quotes a Lévi-Strauss consideration, the concept of meaning is so difficult to define perhaps because of its intimate reciprocal connection with the notion of symbol. On the other hand, the noun σύμβολου, i.e., a “tally”, originally referred to each of the two corresponding pieces of some small object which contracting parties broke between them and kept as proof of identity when rejoined

⁵ Also important and valuable is the next work of J. Chasseguet-Smirgel (1975, 1985).

⁶ In other words, “something stands for something else”.

together.⁷ That meaning subsequently expanded to include a diversity of meaning such as other kinds of tokens, seal, contract, sign, code, etc. (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973).

4. First historical outlines on disavowal mechanism

Following Roudinesco (1995, Part VI, Ch. V) and Petrini et al. (2013), Freud, for the first time, used the term *negation* or *denegation*⁸ (*Verneinung*) in 1917 after a personal re-elaboration of the term *negative hallucination* due to H. Bernheim following his 1914 reclassification of psychoses, neuroses and perversions based on castration theory made in *On Narcissism: An Introduction*. The term was then explicitly used by Freud in 1925. By *Verneinung*, Freud meant a verbal mechanism through which the repressed material is recognized in a negative logical manner by the subject, but without being accepted. So, denegation implies a contestation, that related to the recognition of a repressed thought by the patient. Freud says that every “not” comes from unconscious (Petrini et al. 2013).

Together with this mechanism, Freud also used the term *disavowal* (*Verleugnung*) after 1923, to indicate the refusal, by the subject, to recognize the reality of a negative or traumatic perception, like the lack of a female penis; afterwards, Freud extended this, to all the possible painful perceptions which, contrasting with pleasure principle, lead to not recognize reality or to transform it, in a hallucinatory manner, to fulfil desire. The *Verneinung* is connected to a mechanism typical of neuroses, whereas the *Verleugnung* is connected to a mechanism typical of perversions⁹. Finally, according to Freud, the *Verdrängung* is a term which indicates a mechanism related to *repression*. Thereafter, in the 1914 *Wolf Man*, Freud also used the term *Verwerfung* to indicate the *rejection* of a reality presented as non-existent, and to be meant as distinct from the previous ones.

In France, there were some heated debates about the relations of the term *scotomization*, first proposed by E. Pichon-Rivière in 1928 to indicate an unconscious mechanism through which a subject makes disappear from the consciousness those facts which are unpleasant, with the previous terms. For instance, R. Laforgue proposed consideration of scotomization as comprising either the *Verleugnung* and another repression mechanism typical of psychoses, whilst Freud considered it as distinct both from *Verleugnung* and *Verdrängung*. Laforgue wanted to indicate an annulment of a perception whilst Freud wished to keep the perception within a framework supported by negation, that is to say, not complete closure of a perception in front of a misunderstanding of reality, but rather activation of a perception put between a denegation and a repression. In a nutshell, the real problem consisted in the lack of a specific term to indicate the rejection mechanism typical of psychoses.

In short, even Freud had a certain moment of uncertainty between all these terms, *Verleugnung* (disavowal), *Verdrängung* (repression) and *Verneinung* (negation), in relation to psychosis mechanisms. Finally, as we will see later, Freud opted for denegation or disavowal. *Disavowal* (or *denial*, of the reality), is a term that Freud began to explicitly use, in a specific sense, after the 1925 paper entitled *The Negation*, until it attained a more general sense in the last of his works, namely the 1938 *Abriss der Psychoanalyse*¹⁰ (Freud 1938), even if such a primary notion did not have a

⁷ So that its meaning refers to something, like an object, and, through its fragmentation, to the idea of a link or bond. This will be coherent with what is pursued in this paper about bodily image formation in fetishism, Ego's splitting and their relations with symbolism.

⁸ This denomination was due to J. Hyppolite in the 1950s.

⁹ The *Verleugnung* has to do with external reality, but in an opposite manner with respect to repression. It is the first step towards psychosis. If neurotic is aimed to repress instinctual drives of *Id*, the psychotic refuses reality. After 1927, Freud started to consider *Verleugnung* as a psychic mechanism specifically related to fetishism, until up 1938, when Freud settled up a theory of Ego's splitting just based on this mechanism.

¹⁰ This last (partially unfinished) work may be considered as Freud's spiritual testament of his (orthodox) doctrine, in which he almost axiomatically tried to delineate the main lines of his theory as it historically evolved from its first ideas to the final form together with some of its unsolved questions to which the author was not able to give a relevant answer.

definitive characterization, for which reason it will be retaken by his followers to be studied more deeply. According to O. Mannoni,¹¹ Freud began to implicitly use the notion of disavowal after the 1890s in discussing the concept of splitting the Ego, both these notions being closely related to one another.

As stated above, disavowal (*Verleugnung*) is different both from negation (*Verneinung*) and from repression (*Verdrängung*), as will become clear later. Following the last Freudian ideas exposed in Freud (1938, Part III, Chs. 8 and 9), we may consider disavowal as a fundamental psychic mechanism which relies on the primary basis of any other possible relation with the external reality. Indeed, in this last work of his, Freud fully re-examined all his previous ideas about the Ego agency and its functions in the light of the fundamental psychic process of Ego's splitting. In this 1938 work, Freud also states that a certain degree of fetishism is part of normality, particularly during romantic love.¹² The above-mentioned 1925 Freud work *The Negation* has played a primary role in subsequent studies on consciousness.

Following De Mijolla (2005), negation dramatizes a situation of interpretative conflict and is related to a dialogical situation. Negation, unknown at the level of the unconscious, needs to be situated on a secondary level, and we can gain access to it only by way of the symbol. The study of the interrelation between oral instinctual motions and the establishment of negative and affirmative behaviour has been further investigated in the works of R.A. Spitz (1957). Then, following Akhtar and O'Neil (2011), any elementary content, according to Freud, becomes conscious only in its inverted and negated forms. Subsequent epistemological analysis (Chemama and Vandermersch 1998) have shown that this 1925 Freudian paper dwells above all on the disavowal mechanism and not only on the negation one, so that his main theses were much more related to the former rather than to the latter.

On the other hand, with his notion of splitting of the Ego, Freud showed his 1938 last thoughts especially concerning fetishism and psychosis. It also enlightens his ideas on the basically non-unified structure of the ego. He moreover focused on the question of the possible relationships between the Ego agency and the reality, introducing another model different from that of repression and of the re-emersion of the repressed content, by establishing the notion of disavowal as a specific psychic mechanism regarding Ego agency (Bokanowski and Lewkowicz 2009). The initial motivations for the introduction of the disavowal mechanism were mainly due to attempts to give a satisfactory explanation of the psychoses which remained until then out of the psychoanalytic theoretical framework which was mainly turned to explain the neuroses.

Roughly speaking, disavowal is a defence mechanism through which the individual denies the recognition of painful experiences, impulses, reality data or aspects of herself or himself. Such a notion should be understood as a first generalization of a particular initial denial, precisely the one experienced by the individual in recognizing that traumatic perception which consists in the occurred awareness of the lack of a female penis, with consequent supervention of the related castration anxiety. According to the initial 1924 Freudian conception, at the first impressions of this lack of a penis, the baby boy disavows this absence and *imagines* to see, in an equal manner, a penis which formerly there was but that afterwards has been cut off (castration).

According to Freud (1938), this process seems to be quite normal and widespread in children, but it might become dangerous in adult age giving rise either to a psychosis or a paraphilia, even if, in these last cases, it is quite unclear in what specific manner these take place (Pettrini et al. 2013). Girls, instead, reject the acceptance of the *facto datum* of their own castration, persisting in the conviction of having a penis, being therefore forced, later, to behave as if they were males (penis' envy¹³). Subsequently, this first disavowal conception was extended to all the painful perceptions which, contrasting with the pleasure principle, lead to not recognizing the reality and to

¹¹ See the Introduction to the Italian translation of Freud (1938), that is to say, Freud (1999, Foreword, pp. 7-12).

¹² This psychic phenomenon is almost ubiquitous in childhood if it is laid out in the Winnicott framework of transitional objects and their relations with fetish.

¹³ On this, Lacan will speak of the child as a prolongation of the mother penis.

transforming it, through hallucinatory modalities, to fulfil the desire. Fetishism, besides homosexuality, is the most frequent amongst the paraphilias (Greenacre 1971, Ch. XVII) even if it is the most difficult one to diagnose due to the fact that it is asymptomatic. In any event, fetish may be determined too by a symbolic unconscious association often dependent on the sexual experiences of childhood (Petrini et al. 2013).

5. Towards the Ego's splitting

The 1927 Freudian paradigm of fetishism, which was initially laid down to explain the formation of fetishes by means of castration anxiety due to the observation of the lack of a female penis, has gone beyond the context of sexuality, due to the rigour with which it was formulated by Freud himself. Subsequently, such a paradigm underwent further improvements until a definitive 1938 model centred around the basic notion of Ego's splitting (Freud 1938). According to the latter, most people overcome such a castration complex through *symbolic elaboration*,¹⁴ accepting the gender sexual differences (the basis of the sense of *otherness* or *alterity* (Gilliéron and Baldassarre 2012), whereas those who do not overcome such a complex will have neurotic developments with possible paraphilic degeneration (Piscicelli 1994, Ch. IX).

In fetishism, the perception that disproves the infant's belief in a female penis is not rejected but is, as some say, displaced upon an object, the *fetish*. It therefore does not imply a hallucination or an alteration of the representation of reality (like in psychoses), but simply it repudiates the reality. After having detected the lack of a female penis, the child has, in a certain sense, modified its initial belief about the female penis, retaining it and, at the same time, abandoning it (*Aufgeben*). He or she believes that, despite everything, the female has a penis, even if this is no longer that of before, because something has taken its place or replaced it, that is to say, it has been named a "symbolic substitute" for it upon which it will be possible to cathexis the desire to avoid the strong anxiety's pressures due to the castration principle. But, in doing so, the child inevitably goes into a conflict created by the load of the real undesired perception of a penis lack against the force of a counter-desire opposed to this, thereby reaching a basic ambivalence whose resolute compromise will be possible only thanks to the action of the unconscious thought which dialectically operates through its own primary processes.¹⁵

In short, the fetish is, yes, a symbolic substitute for the phallus, not always an iconic reproduction, but rather a kind of reification of it. Such a fetish reflects, at the same time, the denial and the affirmation of the female castration, this also corresponding to the coexistence of two opposite attitudes in respect of the fetish, which Freud tries to explain by means of a particular psychic mechanism, called *Ego's splitting* (*Ichspaltung*). This splitting takes place when the child undergoes a conflict between the initial instinct's claim (*Anspruch*) and the objection made by reality (*Einspruch*), but does not choose either one or the other, or else chooses both. In such a manner, the formation of the Ego's synthetic function is perturbed.

Thus, to sum up, a fundamental characteristic of fetishism is that it allows reality to be recognized and, at the same time, disclaimed. It gives rise to the fundamental creation of opposites whose separation, thanks to this splitting mechanism (if correctly operating), is at the basis of first

¹⁴ The degree of this is directly correlated with (and proportional to) the emotive content associated with it.

¹⁵ See Smirnov (1970) and Khan Masud (1970, 1979).

consciousness formation.¹⁶ Such a mechanism, however, is different from the psychotic one because the latter is a mere and simple repudiation of the reality¹⁷ which is never recognized. Nevertheless, the (paraphilic) fetishist cannot avoid a degenerative Ego splitting when this splitting does not give rise to that compensative symbolic elaboration recalled above.

6. On Ego's splitting, fetishism and transitional phenomena

By means of the disavowal mechanism, Freud glimpses the origins of an intrasystemic Ego's splitting¹⁸ (*Ichspaltung*) through which, within the Ego agency, two distinct and conflictual psychic attitudes take place of which one takes into account the reality denied by the other, and substitutes it with the content of a desire. Or else, following Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), through this intrapsychic division, an Ego's splitting takes place both into a part which observes and into a part which is observed.

This last perspective is widely but implicitly used by Freud in his final works, above all to denote a certain dichotomic or separated nature of human psyche. Throughout this paper, when we refer to the notion of Ego's splitting, we mean this last perspective, coherently with the Freudian work in which such a notion starts to be used with the celebrated works *Fetishism* (1927), *Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence* (1938) and in *Abriß der Psychoanalyse* (1938). Above all, we will follow the Freudian thought of this last work. According to Freud, disavowal would allow us to explain the typical features of psychoses and fetishism.

Following Galimberti (2006), as stated above, the original 1925 Freudian concept of disavowal was extended to all the painful perceptions that, being in contrast with the pleasure principle, lead to not recognizing the reality, transforming it in a hallucinatory manner to satisfy the desire. Hence, disavowal is a very fundamental psychic mechanism which has to do with the external reality, and whose main result is this Ego's splitting. It is the first psychic agency to form for detecting reality. The Ego's splitting is a basic psychic mechanism preliminary to others, like introjective and projective identification, etc.

Following Greenacre (1971, Ch. XI), in the formation of Ego's agency, a remarkable role is played by pre-Œdipus phases. In the 1930s, there was a considerable need for a deeper knowledge of Ego. In this regard, the author, thanks to her professional psychiatrist activity, had the opportunity to examine many clinical cases of psychosis which turned out to be of great usefulness just to study the Ego's function. After the studies of W. Hoffer, P. Schilder, M. Ribble, M.E. Fries, R.A. Spitz and M.S. Mahler, it had been possible to ascertain that the first formations of this agency (i.e., the Ego) are of a corporal or somatic nature (bodily Ego).

Greenacre herself (and B. Lantos) pointed out a certain primitive predisposition to anxiety, mainly related to the elaboration of primal scenes, which will play a notable role in the Ego's formation, if properly cathexed, together its next splitting. According to Greenacre, the classical 1927 and 1938 Freudian works on fetishism were the best ones on fetishism and perversions. In these works, Freud foregrounds the Ego's splitting which takes place in consequence of the strong castration anxiety when a child has recognized the gender sexual differences. Above all, the kid refuses to recognize

¹⁶ The constitution and separation of opposite pairs, as already said, is a fundamental and characterizing task for consciousness (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973). Here, we have discussed such psychodynamic processes from the Freudian perspective, but they also play a fundamental role in the Jungian theory of consciousness (Iurato 2015).

¹⁷ Which has mainly external sources.

¹⁸ Which should be kept distinct from the analogous notion related to schizophrenia in which it is preferable to use the term *dissociation*.

the reality of this painful situation. Nevertheless, he assigns a penis to his mother, symbolically represented by the fetish (material¹⁹ or merely symbolic) whose specific form is largely due to the displacement of that energetic amount which has been determined in concomitance with the appearance of castration anguish.

The fetish formation must therefore provide these incongruities in the corporal image formation through suitable surrogates. These may be physical parts of the body (material fetish) or may be abstract formations like more or less complex fantasies (Greenacre 1971, Ch. XVII). The pathological cases mainly take place during the passage from the normal childish fetish of three- to four-year-olds to the latency phase, characterized by the deterioration of the capacity to establish object relations. In Greenacre (1971, Ch. XII), the author contributed further interesting considerations on fetishism. According to her, the fetish has mainly a phallic meaning, but also a bisexual one.

Fetishism is a disorder which is mainly due to an imperfect development of corporal image and of the bodily Ego, from which derive disorders of reality sense, of identity sense and of object relations. The adult's fetish has something in common with the Winnicott childhood's *transitional object* which, usually, has a certain role in the constitution and development of the reality and of the object relation, and concerns both sexes. The formation of a transitional object takes place within the so-called (Winnicott-Spitz) *transitional space*, which is the space around which the mother-child relationship and related *transitional* phenomenology take place (Vegetti Finzi 1976, Part II).

The persistence in adult age of the fetish reveals a chronic defect of psychosomatic structure, while the transitional object is usually abandoned with the dawning of genitality, at least in normal cases. In most cases, the fetish itself is something of a secret to the fetishist himself (or herself), which is strictly related to the primary meaning of the Oedipus complex, that is to say, the uncovering of the enigma sphinx, to confirm the basic relationships existing between fetish formation and pregenital phases. Following Greenacre (1971, Ch. XVI), in the phallic phase a consolidation of the recognition of genital organs takes place and, in the case of disorders and failures in the formation of corporal Ego, the fetish formation may cope with this, with a narcissistic reinforcement of Ego itself through it.

7. On Ego's Ideal and Ideal Ego

Following Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), Freud, as mentioned above, put disavowal as the main psychic mechanism involved in the Ego's splitting. He started from the previous notion of *Spaltung* due to J. Breuer and P. Janet, but gradually reached his original generically oriented conception to indicate an intrapsychic division, above all in the last part of his life, in reference to a splitting of the Ego into an *observing part* (Ego's Ideal) and into an *observed part* (Ideal Ego). Later, from his above-mentioned 1927 works on fetishism, gradually Freud posed the disavowal mechanism at the basis of this splitting phenomenon that he wanted, in turn, to put at the basis of psychoses and perversions. Freud however pointed out that in psychoses a full separation from reality never takes place; in every psychosis, even the deepest ones, two antithetic psychic attitudes always exist: the one that takes into account the reality in the normal attitude, and the other that, under the drive influence, detaches the Ego from reality, giving rise to delirious thoughts.

¹⁹ In this case, the (material) fetish may be considered as a materialized effect of screen memory (related to implicit memory – cf. Mancina (2007)) or cover memory.

The outcomes of this Ego's splitting are therefore two opposite psychic settings,²⁰ of which each subsists, throughout life, alongside the other and never singly of each other, but with the prevalence, from time to time, of only one of these two, to the detriment of the other. Out of these, there is a normal self-observing component which takes into account the external reality (and is prodromic to the formation of the system *Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego*) mainly through opposition to the contrary subagency (the Ideal Ego), while the other, under the Es' instinct influence, tears out the Ego from the reality (and is prodromic to the unconscious formation of the *Ideal Ego*) assuming a prevalent narcissistic formation on the basis of primary identifications as a result of the mother-child relation from which starts to develop the Super Ego-Ego's Ideal agency pair, which, in its formation stage taking place along the first fusional, symbiotic and incestuous relationship mother-child, has an ambivalent, invasive and archaic maternal feature strongly charged of aggressivity and superpower, viscous tie which, indeed, will be broken by the Father's action (*d'après* Lacan) and that, just through the intervention of the *Father's* (or *Name-of-the-Father*) law, gives rise to the Œdipal agency system Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego (Rossi et al. 2008; Iurato 2014).

According to Nunberg and Lagache, the Ideal Ego, genetically prior to the Super-Ego, is the first Ego's component to be formed from the symbiotic mother-child state, upon which the subject will build up her or his further psychic development, and to which he or she comes back in psychotic states (and not only in these). According to Lagache, the Ideal Ego has sadomasochistic implications: in particular, hand in hand with Ideal Ego starting its formation, the negation of the Other, by the basic agency pair Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego, is correlative to the affirmation of Self, thus giving rise to opposite pair formation and to the next separation of their elements (consciousness process – cf. Iurato (2015)). Thus, following Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), we have two basic Ego's psychic components, the one that observes (Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego) and the other that is observed (Ideal Ego²¹).

Human psychic behaviour will be the dialectic result of the concomitant action of these two opposite and inseparable, but independent from each other, Ego's (sub)agencies, hence by the prevalence of one of these two upon the remaining one. However, there is, always, a dialectic interaction²² between them. Freud put this splitting mechanism at the psychodynamic basis of psychoses and other disorders (including neuroses), justifying the assumption of such a mechanism as one of the main dynamic processes of psychic formation, which basically allows us to relate ourselves to reality. In short, the basic opposition between the (narcissistic) Ideal Ego and the (social) Ego's Ideal is the early source of any further dialectic process of consciousness (Iurato 2015). Furthermore, within the Lacanian work, disavowal has been the first psychic mechanism involved in a complex epistemological evolution that reached the composite notion of *forclusion* which lies at the basis of the celebrated binomial *O/o* (that is, *discourse of the Other* versus *discourse of the other*) that Lacan derives from the previous binomial Ideal Ego/Ego's Ideal.

As mentioned above, these two Ego's components are not present in the Freudian thought, which introduced only the notion of Ego's Ideal and to which was brought back then the notion of Super-Ego. The history of the agency pair Ideal Ego-Ego's Ideal has undergone quite a hard-working evolutionary history. Following Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), Freud introduced the notion of

²⁰ Which might be considered as forming the first precursor of an opposite pair (or else the source of any other possible philosophical pair), which will play a fundamental role in the dialectic reasoning, as already stated above.

²¹ In passing, we recall that these two Ego's agencies, as the result of an intrasystemic agency separation (i.e., the Ego's splitting), play a fundamental role in Lacan's theoretical framework.

²² Which is not present in psychoses.

Ego's Ideal in *On Narcissism. An Introduction* (1914) to indicate an agency as resulting from the convergence of infantile narcissism and omnipotence (which will form the idealizations of the Ego) and the parental (hence social) agencies and identifications; later, first in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), then in *The Id and the Ego* (1923), the Ego's Ideal was identified with the Super-Ego agency, whose function is put in the foreground in the formation of critical sense, of prohibition and self-observation agencies and of interpersonal relations. Nevertheless, the psychoanalytic literature identifies a certain difference between the Super-Ego agency and the Ego's Ideal one even if they overlap one another somewhat.

The system Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego is, however, related to social and prohibition agencies as well as to self-observation, moral and critical functions, even if there is no unanimous consensus in the respective attribution of these. As early in *On Narcissism. An Introduction* (1914), Freud used the term *Ideal Ego* but substantially as synonymous with Ego's Ideal. These subagencies would be retaken by Nunberg in 1932, of which we will outline some related ideas in the next section, and, in 1958, by Lagache, who identifies a main opposition between the Ideal Ego and the system Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego. According to Lagache, the Ideal Ego has a narcissistic character of omnipotence which is mainly due to a primary identification with the mother; it is irreducible to the Ego's Ideal agency, and its formation has sadomasochistic implications, including the negation of the Other in correlation to the affirmation of Self, on the basis of the main opposition between the Ideal Ego and the Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego system.

But, following Roudinesco (1995, Part VI, Ch. V), it was Lacan that, in 1954, but without quoting Nunberg, in his own way considered these two Ego subagencies as distinct from each other, putting them at the foundation of his theoretical framework, highlighting their relevant nature and function. The Ideal Ego is a narcissistic formation belonging to the imaginary register and formed during the *mirror stage* (theorized by Lacan since 1936), whereas the Ego's Ideal refers to a symbolic function that is able to organize the set of the relationships of the subject with others. The institution of the dualism *O/o* is therefore a consequence of the establishment of the dualism Ego's Ideal/Ideal Ego. In this system, Lacan laid out the celebrated Lévi-Straussian splitting from nature to culture operated by universal incest prohibition (Gilliéron and Baldassarre 2012) because this allowed Lacan to conceive a basic opposition between the *symbolic function* of the *Father* (corresponding to the Ego's Ideal or to the *Other*), representing the culture and incarnation of the law, and the *imaginary position* of the *Mother* (from whom derives the Ideal Ego or the *other*), depending on the order of Nature and destined to merge with the child meant as the phallic object of a missing penis.

It is thanks to the mirror stage that the Œdipus phase starts, in such a manner that, through the paternal metaphor (*Name-of-the-Father*), the child is separated from the mother, giving rise to the Ego's Ideal formation. Therefore, it is just by *naming* the missing mother penis – that is to say, the child – by means of the paternal metaphor (the *phallus*) that the *symbolic register* takes place (Ego's Ideal or *Other O*, or *signifier*), which is related to a secondary process, through disengaging from the *imaginary register* (the Ideal Ego or *other o*, or *signified*), which is strictly related to the primary process.

The consequent *lack of being*, due to this disengaging from the mother womb,²³ creates, amongst other things, the unsatisfiable *desire* of the *other* of the imaginary order which will try to be

²³ Just at this point occurs the *forclusion*, a specific Lacanian splitting mechanism based on reality's *rejection* (*Verwerfung*) and derived both from the Freudian *spaltung* and from Laforgue and Pichon-Rivière's *scotomization*. This mechanism roughly consists in the primordial rejection of a fundamental signifier (the name-of-the-father, hence the symbolic phallus) out of the symbolic register of the subject, so giving rise to a psychotic state. Therefore, the

satisfied with other maternal substitutes that she or he will find in the symbolic order of the *Other*. The symbolic register will allow her or himself to be perceived and recognized from the Ideal Ego to the Ego's Ideal, that is to say, through the symbol, whose notion starts from Lévi-Strauss and F. de Saussure's structuralistic theories. However, for Lacan, what is fundamentally important is the signifier structure of the symbolic order and not the link of symbol with the symbolized (or signified), which concerns with the imaginary order, as in Freud.

8. An outline of Hermann Nunberg's Ego psychology

Although little-known, the work of Hermann Nunberg (1932, 1955, 1975) contains a great number of new ideas and insights on psychoanalysis besides being one of the most important treatises²⁴ on orthodox psychoanalytic theory, as remembered by Freud himself in his preface to this work. For our purposes, we only recall here some points of his work which may have some usefulness for what is expounded here. For instance, in Nunberg (1975, Ch. 5), a clear and complete discussion of Ego psychology is presented, of which we here outline those main points that are useful for our studies. In it, the primary role of bodily Ego is highlighted, as well as understood as the first central core around which will revolve and build up all the following psychic representations. The perception is the first and basic element for establishing the *reality exam* which develops with great slowness but upon which will depend all the following psychic formation. The Ego will accomplish both internal and external requests, with a suitable right energy distribution.

According to Nunberg, the Ego initially is in an unorganized phase within the Id, whose delimitation identifies a subagency called *Ideal Ego*, which has a full narcissistic and omnipotent character turned only toward the satisfaction of the own needs.²⁵ It springs out from the fusional relationship child-mother of primary narcissism, in which child has a primary, archaic identification with mother, endowed of omnipotence. During the psychic development, this subagency gradually leaves its role in place of the other rising subagency, with which it will enter in a dialectic relation, called the *Ego's Ideal*, even if, particularly in psychotic states, the individual intends to come back to the Ideal Ego when fantasies of "coming back to the maternal womb" predominate. Children and schizophrenics have great difficulty in disengaging from their strong narcissistic and omnipotent Ideal Ego which has an unconscious nature and is ruled by the principle of pleasure, trying to satisfy every need also in a hallucinatory manner in case of non-immediate satisfaction.

Hence, the main defence mechanisms of Ideal Ego are negation, projection and hallucination to avoid any unpleasantness. Nevertheless, in normality, it is not always possible to disregard the reality, thus giving rise to the formation of the reality principle, which is often mediated by the thought. Between the perception of reality and the action adapted to the perceived reality gradually the thought is inserted, which prepares the action, eventually substituting it. The judgment function of *negation*, according to Freud, is the first transition step from ignorance to recognition. To be precise, recognition takes place thanks to a state of spiritual protection which seeks stimuli from the external world which, in turn, will be apperceived and accepted by the Ego. Therefore, recognition

(symbolic) phallus is a cornerstone of Lacanian theory basically because it is the primordial symbol to enter into the symbolic order. Hence, also in the Lacan theory of the symbolic, the phallus, with related castration phenomena, plays a fundamental role (Recalcati 2003, Sect. 2.7; Macola 2014).

²⁴ Together the well-known treatise of O. Fenichel (1945).

²⁵ Subsequently, Lagache (1958) will bring back this subagency to the maternal predominance or to the phallic mother. He brings back to it possible deviant behaviours.

undergoes the influx of impulses which are aimed at establishing a link with the external world and its objects, drawing its energy from life instincts. Ignorance, instead, comes from a state which feels the stimuli of the external world as unpleasant, so perturbing the ever desiderated quite. Thus, the Ego definitively closes the perceptive system against them.

Negation, instead, takes a further step, in the sense that it recognizes what is unpleasant, and, at the same time, eliminates, expels and annihilates (in the unconscious, by repression) all that. Ignorance and negation are energetically supported by death instincts. Therefore, the relationships between the external and internal world are ruled by the interplay between life and death instincts by means of the own bodily image and its borders. The gradual adaptation to reality takes place to inhibit the aggressiveness (Thanatos) through life instincts (Eros) which provide energy for libidinal investments of the first object relationships. In this regard, Nunberg considers the depersonalization states and schizophrenia as patterns to infer as a reality sense starts to form. In pursuing this, as we will see, the last 1938 Freudian thought seems to be re-evoked.

In both cases, there is a retirement of libido from the lost-love object to which are also associated the world's destruction feelings with related aggressiveness tendencies that Nunberg attributes to the anxieties of castration. Furthermore, in these pathological cases, Nunberg detected a certain increase of narcissistic components that he would want to bring back to an identification of the Ego with the phallus due to the retirement of the libidinal cathexis from objects to the Ego, with consequent loss of the reality sense. Therefore, Nunberg deduces two main consequences: first, that the recognition of reality takes place thanks to a certain capacity of the Ego to turn the libido toward external objects; second, that there is a component of the Ego that does not want to recognize the perceived reality, notwithstanding this is just perceived. It seems that this part of the Ego does not want to know of the perceptions, notwithstanding these are rightly perceived. And the remaining perceiving part of the Ego seems as well to be suffering from this denial.

Therefore, there are two subagencies of the Ego, one that perceives and acts, the other that judges the Ego's experiences which need to be approved in order that these may have a sense of reality. This might explain why it is immoral to deny the reality and not instead say the truth. Thus, Nunberg deepens this self-observing and critical agency of Ego which is located in the preconscious system. The first bodily Ego's percepts will be undergone to the critical and observational modalities of the Ego. They will be recognized or denied according to modalities which have no sensorial character and are absent in schizophrenic patients where a deep self-observation prevails, but not over percepts of the external world. In normality, the perceiving and self-observing Ego's subagencies harmonically and constructively co-operate with the critical one; often, these two Ego's subagencies are not easily distinguishable inasmuch as they overlap with one another, becoming quite differentiated or separated only when a conflict arises between them.

These critical and self-observing agencies will form the substrate to the next merely psychic *Super-Ego* agency, which will reach its most complete formation with the end of the Oedipus complex. The Super-Ego will begin to intervene between the Id and the narcissistic Ideal Ego agencies, making itself bearer of the social and reality agencies; it will be the result of successive identifications but, in turn, it is also susceptible to influences from the first ones. Nevertheless, this mediation role is often failed by the Super-Ego because of its extreme difficulty in conciliating the Id and Ideal Ego agencies. Nevertheless, Nunberg highlights that both life and death instincts contribute to determining the structure of the Super-Ego. To be precise, its structure mainly stems from the inhibition of immediate instinctual satisfaction to account for reality needs, and this may take place both from death and life instincts.

The death instincts concur to determine such an inhibition of the rigid, prohibitive and authoritarian structure of the Super-Ego, whereas the life instincts concur to determine another particular structure classified as *Ego's Ideal*, which is carried out as follows. When, for love,²⁶ one gives in to an instinctual satisfaction for fear of losing a loved object, the latter will be taken on into the Ego domain and cathected by the libido, so becoming a part of Ego which will be called *Ego's Ideal*. It is for love of her or his own ideal that the individual remains emotionally bound to it and undergoes to its requests. So, the Ego obeys both the Super-Ego for fear of a punishment and Ego's Ideal for love. This last love is not sexual because it is the outcome of a transformation of an object libido into an Ego's libido, so that a desexualization takes place, that is to say, a sublimation,²⁷ so that the narcissism of Ego's Ideal has a *secondary* nature, as it is linked to secondary process (secondary narcissism), while that of the Ideal Ego is a narcissism having a primary nature (primary narcissism).

According to Nunberg, the system Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego provides the representation of the external world to the Ego. Therefore, instinctual renunciations may take place either for hate or for fear of a punishment and for love, so that the dual system Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego is characterized by an ambiguous or ambivalent nature moulded on the fundamentally opposite love-hate pair. Nunberg puts in evidences the historical evolution of these notions since the Freudian work: indeed, as stated above, Freud mainly conceived the Ego's Ideal as being synonymous with Super-Ego, hence pointing out its prohibitive agencies and not the loving aspects. Instead, Nunberg retook the system Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego and deepened the distinction between these two agencies, although it is very difficult to describe a net distinction between them.

According to Nunberg, the Ego's Ideal has mainly a maternal libido (as it is a heir of Ideal Ego), while the Super-Ego has mainly a paternal libido, even if there is a certain merger of both. The Ego's Ideal²⁸, due to its basically maternal nature, starts to form from pregenital phases, while the Super-Ego²⁹, due to its mainly paternal nature, starts to form during the genital phase because of the castration fear which puts at risk the whole Ego due to its genital identification. The Super-Ego is responsible for the sense of guilt, while the Ego's Ideal is responsible for the sense of inferiority. The Ego's Ideal springs out from the renunciation, by the child, of her or his omnipotent narcissistic position acquired along Ideal Ego formation, so replacing the love for herself or himself with a relationship with an ideal, a model to be reached and pursued (Other), so opening the way to the subjective existentiality of the child (Petrini et al. 2013).

The Ego's Ideal is an agency of personality coming from the convergence of narcissism given by all the idealizations of Ego (Ideal Ego) with the next identifications coming from others (parents, caregivers, etc.) after the breaking of archaic symbiotic tie child-mother with the action of the Name-of-the-Father law (Iurato 2014). So, Ego's Ideal is a model to which child tries to conform. In such a manner, the identification process and its structuring action on personality, takes place from the pre-Œdipal phases to Œdipal complex, till to the emergence of the agency system Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego with the renunciation to the (incestuous) Œdipal desires for the identifications with others (Petrini et al. 2013).

²⁶ Here, when one speaks of love, we refer to the wider general sense of this term, not only to the sensual one.

²⁷ Subsequently, Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985) identified various possible outcomes for the Ego's Ideal, perverse as well as creative.

²⁸ It is linked to narcissism, to perfection, to undifferentiation, and to the desire in restoring symbiotic union with mother (Petrini et al. 2013).

²⁹ It is linked to reality, to object world, to temporality, to separation, to the father (Petrini et al. 2013).

Nunberg stresses the complexity of the system Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego, the first subagency being provided by life instincts and characterized by a prevalence of love while the second subagency is underpinned by death instincts and mainly ruled by severity, austerity and by a general asceticism just to stem these destructive instincts. The internal structure of this system is quite complex and variously subdivided into itself, with continuous oscillations from one component to another: for instance, in certain cases the more severe Super-Ego may prevail, in others the rather milder Ego's Ideal may prevail. The Ego will therefore accomplish control, mediation and synthetic functions in regard to the various requests coming from all these agencies, namely the Id, the system Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego and the Ideal Ego, which are mostly in opposition with each other.

9. Conclusions

From an epistemological viewpoint, therefore, Freud reached the conception of an Ego's splitting by studying a particular psychopathological model, that of fetishism. This is mainly meant to be a male perversion in which there is no recognition of the female penile lack since this is a fact that, if it were denied, would turn out to be potentially anxiogenic because of the castration complex which is experienced by most people (due to its universal character, as recalled above). He (or she³⁰) therefore recuses his (or her) own sensorial perception³¹ which has shown to him (or her) that the female genital apparatus lacks a penis, firmly keeping to the opposite conviction. Nevertheless, this denied perception does not remain without any psychic consequence since he (or she) does not have the courage, or the dishonesty, to affirm seeing a penis, unless he (or she) stays in a psychotic state.

Thus, to compensate for this, he (or she) either turns towards a further general *symbolic elaboration*³² (as in most normal cases) or clings to something more material, like a part of the body or an object to which he (or she) ascribes the penis role or considers it to be acting as a material symbolic replacement for this. All this (*fetish creation*) is due to the fact that he (or she) does not admit this lack of a penis, notwithstanding the evidence thereof. However, Freud (1938) himself pointed out that this fetish creation does not provide the exact paradigm of the Ego's splitting mechanism, since the former belongs to the proper psychopathological context whereas the castration complex, with its possible effects (including this Ego splitting), basically concerns normality – that is to say, it concerns every human being, as we shall see later – but without excluding possible pathological degenerations (just like in fetishism).

Subsequently, Freud was led to consider disavowal (as already seen, essentially based on castration anxiety) as concerning, in pathological cases, the full recusation of external reality by the psychotic, as opposed to the repression carried out by the neurotic. Indeed, the former completely recuses the external reality (due to a structural deficit of the pair Ego's Ideal–Super-Ego), whereas the latter removes the (internal) Es' needs. In the first case, as already said, we have an Ego splitting (with a complete prevalence of the narcissistic Ideal Ego) that is different from other splitting phenomena due to the neurotic repression, because the latter concerns an internal conflict between two distinct agencies, the Ego against the Es, in regard to an internal (and not external) reality.

³⁰ We have intentionally given precedence to males over females because these phenomena mainly concern the former, although not exclusively. Only for this reason have we put the female third person individual pronoun “she” within brackets.

³¹ Which still turns out to be not compromised.

³² Considering this in the general framework describing the crucial passage from nature to culture, that is to say, we regard the symbolic function as the main landmark of this. Sublimation therefore has to be meant as a consequence of it.

Hence, only the former has some relationship with the external world, and Freud put it at the source of every other form of disavowal of reality that yet may be symbolically reconceived or rebuilt up. Thus, disavowal mainly has to do with primary relationships between these two Ego's subagencies, the Ideal Ego and the Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego, due to the above-mentioned Ego splitting.³³

Anyway, this first Freudian model of fetishism, based on disavowal, was then supposed to be valid for all the possible painful and anxiogenic perceptions, either for males and females, so generalizing disavowal mechanism and Ego's splitting to all painful perceptions. In this case, in regard to consciousness, as mainly identified by Ego agency, we still have the formation, by Ego's splitting, of the dual subagency pair *Ideal Ego* vs. the system *Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego*, as characterized, around the end of (Freudian) psychosexual development of every human being, by the fundamental persistence (inheritance of the basic conflictual nature of human psyche) of a primary functional dialectic opposition between them, a feature coming from the handling of desire and its satisfaction with respect to reality, according to Eros and Thanatos basic drives as well as to pleasure and reality principles.

We wish to bring back what is said in Dolto (1998), within the above psychoanalytic pattern. To be precise, F. Dolto (1998) says that psychic development of child mainly take place through successive *castrations* (which she calls *symbologenous*, i.e., yielding symbols) each corresponding to one phase of the Freudian psychosexual development, until up Œdipus stage in which there is a kind of bifurcation of drives into sublimation on the one hand, and perversion³⁴ on the other hand (Dolto 1998, pp. 84-90). Thus, we would like to explain theoretically these Dolto's arguments in terms of Ego's splitting as sketchily described above. Precisely, the sublimation branch corresponds to the prevalence of the action of the system Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego upon the Ideal Ego subagency, while, vice versa, perversion branch corresponds to the prevalence of the action of the Ideal Ego subagency upon the system Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego, with the occurrence of fetishistic phenomena.

Nevertheless, both these two opposite tendencies, arising from the above bifurcation process (in turn, springing out from Ego's splitting through disavowal mechanism), are always present in every human being although in different ratio and in inverse proportion of each other. The prevalence of the sublimation branch with the system Ego's Ideal-Super-Ego, corresponds to the rising of non-material culture, while the prevalence of the perversion branch with the subagency Ideal Ego entails the rising of material culture³⁵. This pattern, mainly worked out within Freudian theory, is able to explain comprehensively most of the new pathologies identified by the current psychoanalytic clinic as claimed by M. Recalcati (2010) who, inter alia, put at the centre of his theoretical treatment, the well-known 1969 *Discourse of the Capitalist* by Lacan, very close to what has been said above.

³³ Which is a mechanism in some respects quite similar to the above-mentioned *scotomization* of Pichon-Rivière and Laforgue (Rycroft 1968a).

³⁴ Meant in its widest sense (Moore and Fine 1993).

³⁵ Applications of this pattern to economic anthropology, are briefly outlined in (Iurato 2016), also on the basis of what is suggested in (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002).

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