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May Catholics Be Psychoanalyzed?

JOHN C. FORD, S.J.

Professor of Moral Theology

Weston College

Weston, Mass.

LAST year Monsignor Pericle Felici, a judge of the Roman Rota and a consultor of the Congregation of the Sacraments, wrote an article in which, though not speaking officially for the Church in any sense, he said some rather severe things about psychoanalysis. For instance, a newspaper quoted one of his statements as follows: "It is difficult, therefore, to excuse from mortal sin anyone who knowing all this, adopts this method of cure (psychoanalysis) and voluntarily subjects himself to this form of treatment." He clarified this later by saying that he referred only to a certain kind of Freudian psychoanalysis, not to psychoanalysis in general.

But it was probably because of the discussion and confusion aroused by this article that the Holy Father, six months later, took up the question of psychoanalysis and made an important statement concerning one aspect of it. The Pope was addressing an International Congress of physicians and spoke to them about various limitations which the moral law puts on scientific research and medical practice. He did not condemn psychoanalysis in general, much less psychiatry in general, but he did find fault with a certain technique of a certain school of psychoanalysis. He spoke of it as "the pansexual method of a certain school of psychoanalysis." Undoubtedly some Freudian practitioners are referred to.

Here are the words of the Pope on this topic in their entirety:

"Here is another example (of a limitation placed on medical practice by the moral law): to get rid of psychic repressions, inhibitions, complexes, man is not free to excite within himself, for therapeutic purposes, each and every one of those appetites of the sexual sphere which stir or are stirred within his being, and roll their impure waves in his unconscious or in his subconscious. He cannot make them the object of his fully conscious imaginings or desires, with all the disturbances and repercussions which such a procedure entails. For a man and for a Christian there exists a law of integrity and purity, of personal self-respect, which forbids plunging oneself so completely into the world of sexual images and inclinations. At this point 'the medical and psychotherapeutic interest' of the patient finds a moral

limitation. It is not established, indeed it is inaccurate to say that the psychosexual method of a certain school of psychoanalysis is an indispensable, integral part of all serious psychotherapy worthy of the name; that the fact of having neglected this method in the past has caused serious psychic injuries, mistakes in the theory and practice of education, of psychotherapy, and still more of pastoral care; that it is imperative to fill this gap and to initiate all who are concerned with psychological questions in the leading ideas, and even if necessary in the practical application of this technique of sexuality.

"We speak thus because these assertions are too often made with apodictic assurance. It would be better, in the field of instinctive life, to pay more attention to indirect treatments, and the action of the conscious psychism on the totality of imaginative and affective activity. This technique avoids the above-mentioned deviations. It tends to clarify, to heal, to direct; it influences also the dynamics of sexuality on which so much insistence is made, and which is supposed to be present, or in fact is actually present in the unconscious or the subconscious."*

Why was it necessary for the Holy Father to speak on this topic? Why is there so much talk nowadays about psychiatry and religion? Why is it so often stated or implied that there is some opposition between them? Fifty years ago this was not the case. The "alienist" who treated mental patients, and his method of treating them, caused no particular concern to the clergy. After all, why should psychiatry, the healer of sick minds, be at odds with religion? Is it not in accord with true religious principles and the charity of Christ to do everything we can to heal the sick mind and cure the troubled soul?

The reason why there is apparent opposition and sometimes real opposition between religion and certain schools of psychiatry is this: both the theologian and the psychiatrist are concerned with human nature and human behavior. And some psychiatrists have very different notions from those of Catholic teaching as to the nature of man, his purpose in life, what morality means, and what in the concrete is morally good or morally evil behavior. Where you have two authorities both dealing with the same field—human beings and their human conduct,—and when these two authorities differ radically in their philosophy of human nature and human behavior, it is not strange that at times they come into conflict. And it is not strange either that they misunderstand each other, thus giving rise to seeming conflicts, which closer observation and more accurate understanding will dispel. Some psychiatrists, and in particular some psychoanalysts, do differ radically from Catholic teaching on fundamental points about man and his destiny. When a medical man differs thus it is frequently of no particular importance, because

he is only going to treat the body anyway. But the psychiatrist deals with the mind and the motives and the behavior of his patient.

Psychiatry is the science and the art of healing sick minds. It is a more general term than psychoanalysis, and includes all the different theories and methods of healing sick minds. Psychoanalysis is one type or method of psychiatry. There are various psychoanalytic schools, but all these schools derive originally from Freud and his followers, and all have this at least in common; they attribute to man's unconscious a large, active and dynamic role in his behavior, both normal and abnormal; they use a method of analysis to get at the unconscious; and by means of this analysis try to heal the sick mind, especially in the less severe mental disorders known as neuroses. This method of therapy has become increasingly popular during the last few decades, and even among psychiatrists who would not call themselves analysts the concepts and some of the techniques of psychoanalysis have been found useful and put to work.

The sharper conflicts of modern times have not been between religion and psychiatry in general, but between religion and psychoanalysis in some of its manifestations. The reason is not far to seek. Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, could refer to religion (and morality, too, for that matter) as a "compulsive neurosis." He had a peculiar genius for rubbing people the wrong way and for getting himself misunderstood. But apart from the misunderstandings, it remains incontrovertibly true that Freud had views of religion, morality, of human nature and human behavior, which are radically opposed to the teachings of religion,—not just the Catholic religion, but to Christianity in general, and to all the Theistic religions of the world. Psychoanalysis was born and nurtured in this atmosphere of hostility to religion; and though much of it nowadays has been purged of what is false and objectionable, it should cause no surprise that men of God and believers in God are still somewhat suspicious.

It will help us to understand this opposition, whether seeming or real, between psychoanalysis and religion, if we consider psychoanalysis at three different levels, and criticize it briefly at each of these levels in the light of Catholic teaching. Strictly speaking, psychoanalysis, as mentioned before, is a method of treatment or therapy. But it has come to have a much larger meaning, to include the psychological theories on which the treatment is based, and even the philosophical views that are characteristic of Freud, I shall say a word therefore, about the philosophy of Freud, about the psychology of psychoanalysis, and about the method of treatment itself.

Freud was a materialist. Not a materialist in the sense that he was a person of no ideals or of low ideals. But a philosophical materialist, that is,

one who believes that there is only one thing in the universe and that one thing is matter. Religion teaches that there are two things in the universe, matter and spirit. God is a spirit. The soul of man is a spirit. For Freud man is not essentially different from the other animals; he has no soul or spirit distinct from the matter of which he is composed; he is merely a more highly organized type of brute matter. Obviously there is a definite and irreconcilable conflict between this philosophy of human nature and the Catholic philosophy. If Freud was a genius, he exercised his genius in exploring those instincts, feelings, and emotions which man shares with the lower animals. A Catholic critic and admirer of Freud puts it this way: "The specific nature of the spiritual values eludes the instrument of investigation which Freud's genius created . . . Freud's work is the most profound analysis that history has ever known of the less human elements in human nature." Whether one agrees with this last judgment or not, the fact remains that Freud was a materialist in the philosophical sense.

Freud was an atheist. Obviously a materialist must be an atheist if he is logical, because the personal God who created the world and governs it by His Providence is a pure spirit. To Freud this God whom we worship is a mere myth and a delusion.

Freud was a determinist. He denied that man has a free will. For him man has no more power of free choice than the brute animals have, and all his actions from the cradle to the grave are determined by forces over which he has no freely chosen control. Determinism is also a natural corollary of materialism. It is only a spiritual being that can be endowed with the power of free choice. Here again there is an absolute conflict with Catholic doctrine, according to which man is really free in some of his choices, and hence morally responsible for them, for better or worse, according as he chooses what is good or what is evil.

Materialism, atheism, determinism do not constitute all of Freud's philosophy of man, but they are a very important part of it, and they naturally result in giving him a view of human nature, human destiny and human behavior which is fundamentally at variance with religious teachings. It is silly and futile to try, as some have done, to reconcile these ideas of Freud, considered at the philosophical level, with Catholic teaching. Similar ideas permeate much psychoanalytical writing, and some of Freud's contemporary followers share his philosophy. But others do not. It is possible to subscribe to much of the psychological theory of psychoanalysis, and to make use of many psychoanalytical techniques, without adhering to materialism, atheism or determinism at all. There are many analysts, among them excellent Catholics, who do so. But the difficulty is to try to discover ahead of time whether a given psychoanalyst holds these false doctrines, and especially

whether he allows them to influence his treatment and advice to the sick patient. If men of religion are still somewhat hesitant and suspicious of psychoanalysis, who can blame them? It is not because they are reactionary or obscurantist. The blame lies with Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, who was openly hostile to organized religion, to the Christian revelation in particular, and to conventional morality most of all.

At the psychological level psychoanalysis deals with the unconscious, its dynamic character, the structure of the personality, the nature of emotional drives and instincts, especially the sex instinct. If we leave aside the question of free will there is not much in all this which comes into clear conflict with Catholic teaching. Much of it has found acceptance among competent Catholics critics; much of it has no bearing on questions of faith and morals. If the theologian were to make a general criticism he would probably say that psychoanalytical psychology seems to him to overemphasize the instinctive, emotional and irrational elements in human nature, not paying sufficient attention to the role of the intellect and the will. This overemphasis is most marked where sex is concerned. On the other hand there is a good deal of truth in the following statement, especially where the emotionally sick are concerned: "Though man may be more reasonable than the psychiatrists believe, he is less so than the philosophers think."

But it is not the part of the moralist and theologian to pass judgment on psychological theories, whether of the school of psychoanalysis or of other schools. This is the work of positive science. Up to the present however, it must be noted, the main psychological theories of the various psychoanalytical schools have by no means found universal acceptance in the scientific world. A large number of psychologists and psychiatrists reject or doubt very seriously many of the fundamental theories of depth psychology, not on religious or moral grounds, but on scientific psychological grounds. Different schools of psychoanalysis dispute among themselves as to the nature of the unconscious, the nature of the fundamental drives that underlie human behavior, the amount of influence or control which the unconscious exercises on man's behavior, the nature and origin of neurosis, and the preferred method of treating it. But other, non-analytical, psychologists criticize vigorously and at times quite bitterly, the very foundations of psychoanalysis and what they consider to be the unscientific methods and apodictical dogmatism of certain psychoanalytical writers.

The third level at which we look at psychoanalysis is the therapeutic level. This is the level of the treatment of the patient as it takes place in the doctor's office. Does Catholic teaching have anything to say about this. In a word: May Catholics be psychoanalyzed?

The most important question to ask about any medical treatment is whether it works or not. If it works, if it cures the patient, it is a good treatment, provided always it does not make use of immoral means to do so. The moral law does transcend every other value, and as the Holy Father pointed out the moral law does at times set limits to medical research and medical practice.

The question whether psychoanalytical treatment works is again a question for medical science to settle. Some medical scientists have a rather poor opinion of it, especially considering how expensive a long analysis is. Dr. Frederic Wertham, a New York psychiatrist, was convinced from his experience with psychoanalysis that eight out of ten psychoanalyses should not have been started and that six out of ten were more harmful than helpful. But others are enthusiastic in the claims they make for successful cures through analytical methods. Psychoanalysis is in its infancy. Time and the scientific method will eventually settle this question of its practical therapeutic value.

Meantime the other question does concern the theologian and moralist. Does psychoanalytical treatment offend against the moral law? Does it make use of immoral means to cure the patient?

Not ordinarily; not as a general rule; and not necessarily,—that is, not because of any universally accepted psychoanalytical principles which necessarily come in conflict with the moral law. I answer the question in this way, basing my answer on what I have been able to discover by reading about psychoanalytical methods of treatment and by discussing with various psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and patients what actually happens to the patient undergoing the treatment.

But there are certain dangers connected with psychoanalytical treatment which the moralist cannot ignore. Undoubtedly it was these dangers, and perhaps a misunderstanding of what psychoanalysis normally involves, that led Monsignor Felici to write as strongly as he did.

Here are some of the moral dangers: First, some psychoanalysts give immoral advice. For instance, they advise a patient to masturbate or fornicate for therapeutic reasons. It is a libel on the profession, however, to say that reputable psychoanalysts advise sexual promiscuity. Psychoanalysts have been much maligned in this regard. One should remember also that psychoanalysts are not the only ones who sometimes advise immoral conduct. Lawyers have been known to do it; doctors and non-analytical psychiatrists have been known to do it. But the danger needs to be specifically pointed out in the case of psychoanalysts because of the character of the sexual theories and materialistic views of morality embraced by many

of them. The way to avoid this danger is to choose an analyst whose principles and practices are known not to offend against Christian morality.

Second, psychoanalytic treatment sometimes involves the patient emotionally to a dangerous degree with the analyst. The phenomenon of "transference" as it is called, is not something necessarily immoral, but it can be dangerous. It is said that Breuer, Freud's first colleague in psychoanalytical method, parted company with Freud, because, among other things, he considered the method improper on this account.

Third, in some cases dangerous moral crises may result from revealing to the patient (or helping him to discover) the unconscious sources of his conduct. His moral world may be turned upside down. The analyst helps him to take his mind apart, but who is to put it together again? The analyst? According to what principles? Ideally the Freudian analyst is a passive bystander. But in practice he is often unable to, or does not, maintain a neutral attitude toward the moral values involved in the patient's behavior, past, present, and future. Despite the theory of the thing, the obvious fact is that one cannot spend endless hours in discussing the most intimate problems of one's life and conduct with another human being who, whether he wants to or not, must stand as a guide and mentor, without being influenced by that other's fundamental beliefs about human behavior and conduct. If his philosophy of human nature and human conduct is false, there is real danger to a greater or lesser degree that it will infect the patient.

Fourth, the technique of free association itself, the most characteristic thing about analytical treatment, is not free from danger in certain cases. In free association the patient is encouraged to talk freely to the analyst, expressing whatever comes into his mind, letting the thoughts run from one thing to another, letting one thought freely lead to or associate with another thought. The purpose is to get at the unconscious source of the neurotic trouble, to expose it to the light of day, on the theory that mere exposure, if achieved in the proper emotional setting, will eliminate the trouble, or at least will set the stage for further treatment and emotional re-education. The technique of free association and the emotional "abreaction" which results from it involves "re-living the emotional experiences of the past." It is also a sort of "day-dreaming aloud." Nothing is to be held back: "No modesty, no shame, no duty of charity, can justify the omission of a fact of consciousness." This method of free association may involve grave danger of consent to unchaste desires and of complacent acquiescence in unchaste sexual fantasies. It sometimes involves bodily excitement of a sexual kind.

In my opinion the Holy Father was speaking of certain abuses of the method of free association, and probably, too, of the phenomenon of abreaction where sexual emotions are involved, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this article.

At any rate we can take it for granted that the Holy Father is not enunciating any new moral principles in his discourse. He is simply applying old principles to a new set of facts. What are the principles? They are at least these three. It is immoral deliberately to indulge the desire of unchaste sexual acts. It is immoral deliberately to acquiesce, as it were complacently, in unchaste sexual fantasies. It is immoral deliberately to excite within oneself, or to acquiesce in, unchaste sexual feelings and emotions. To do any of these things even for therapeutic purposes is forbidden by the moral law. It is not permitted to do evil that good may come of it. To the extent that certain psychoanalysts may make use of such measures, on the grounds that they are of therapeutic value, they are in conflict with Catholic morality, and come under the condemnation of the Papal statement.

It is not at all clear, however, that the method of free association or the phenomenon of abreaction in themselves (or necessarily) involve any of these immoral activities. I confess that I find it difficult to find out exactly what happens in the course of free association, and what exactly abreaction is. Probably these techniques and phenomena differ widely in different patients and in the hands of different analysts. Consequently general statements would be misleading. Therefore I think it is enough to be content at present with the statement that Catholic morality forbids the above-mentioned acts, and that at least these are condemned by the Holy Father, even when their purpose is therapeutic.

This does not mean, however, that sex must not be mentioned in the psychiatric interview, or that the patient, especially one whose troubles are sexual, cannot reveal what is going through his mind to the analyst. It is the *deliberate indulgence* of unchaste sexual desires, fantasies and emotions, and the *deliberate exploitation* of them which is forbidden by moral law. A patient with a bodily ailment might find the doctor's examination a source of troublesome sexual thoughts or of sexual excitement. But he is not forbidden on that account to undergo the examination. These manifestations are not desired; they are not directly intended. His attitude toward them is reluctantly permissive. Likewise the neurotic patient may find the psychoanalytic interview, the process of free association, and the necessity of expressing the sexual content of consciousness a source of temptation and excitement. When this is merely incidental to the treatment it is not necessarily immoral. Even when it is foreseen that this will occur it can

be excused by the necessity which occasions it and the hoped for restoration to sound mental health.

Somewhere here a delicate line needs to be drawn. It is not drawn by the Papal pronouncement. Nor have moralists discussed adequately as yet the moral implications of free association and abreaction. The present brief article merely takes the position that the above-mentioned acts are immoral, that psychoanalytical treatment which makes use of these acts as a means of therapy is immoral, and that psychoanalysis is sometimes morally dangerous to the patient precisely because it sometimes involves the danger of acts of this kind.

Because of these various practical dangers it is impossible to over-emphasize the importance, if one is going to choose an analyst at all, of choosing one whose principles and practices are trustworthy from the moral and religious point of view. I have had the good fortune to work with psychiatrists and psychoanalysts of this kind. I have great respect for them, and have received wonderful cooperation from them when I referred clients to their care. And so the last thing I intend is that this article should be taken as a slap at psychiatry, or that it would discourage those who suffer mentally from getting competent psychiatric care. I believe that cooperation between the Catholic clergy and competent psychiatrists is highly desirable and altogether feasible. I look forward to the time when our respective positions are more clearly understood on both sides, and to a time when there are more and more psychiatrists (psychoanalysts not excluded) whom the clergy can recommend with confidence.

But the question "May Catholics be psychoanalyzed?" could not be properly answered without drawing attention to the distinction between psychiatry and psychoanalysis; between the philosophy of Freud, the psychology of psychoanalysis and the therapeutic methods of psychoanalysis with their attendant dangers. Nor could the question be answered without explaining what I consider to be the meaning of the Pope's statement. It is worth while repeating: He said nothing about psychiatry in general, nor did he condemn psychoanalysis in general. He merely pointed out one method of psychoanalytical treatment which offends against the moral law of nature and of Christianity: "For a man and for a Christian there exists a law of integrity and purity, of personal self-respect, which forbids plunging oneself so completely into the world of sexual images and inclinations."

The answer to the question is this: Catholics may be psychoanalyzed provided the analysis does not make use of immoral means or involve undue

moral dangers. The only practical way to guard against these deviations is to choose an analyst whose principles and practices are known not to offend against Catholic morality.

The above article first appeared in *The Vincentian*, April 1953. In reprinting for LINACRE QUARTERLY, Father Ford has asked that the following be added:

* On April 15, 1953, His Holiness addressed the Fifth International Congress of Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology in Rome. He referred explicitly to the above excerpt, reiterating it, and discussed the findings of depth psychology, treating the subject with considerable sympathy but definite reserve wherever traditional moral principles are involved.