

A Review of Complex Theory

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A REVIEW OF THE COMPLEX THEORY¹

¹⁹⁴ Modern psychology has one thing in common with modern physics, that its method enjoys greater intellectual recognition than its subject. Its subject, the psyche, is so infinitely diverse in its manifestations, so indefinite and so unbounded, that the definitions given of it are difficult if not impossible to interpret, whereas the definitions based on the mode of observation and on the method derived from it are—or at least should be—known quantities. Psychological research proceeds from these empirically or arbitrarily defined factors and observes the psyche in terms of their alteration. The psyche therefore appears as the *disturbance* of a probable mode of behaviour postulated by one or other of these methods. This procedure is, *cum grano salis*, that of natural science in general.

¹⁹⁵ It goes without saying that in these circumstances almost everything depends on the method and its presuppositions and that they largely determine the result. The actual object of investigation does, of course, have some say in the matter, yet it does not behave as an autonomous being would behave if left

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undisturbed in its natural conditions. It has therefore long been recognized in experimental psychology, and above all in psychopathology, that a particular experimental procedure does not apprehend the psychic process directly, but that a certain psychic condition interpolates itself between it and the experiment, which one could call the "experimental situation." This psychic "situation" can sometimes jeopardize the whole experiment by *assimilating* not only the experimental procedure but the purpose underlying it. By "assimilation" we mean an attitude on the part of the subject, who misinterprets the experiment because he has at first an insuperable tendency to assume that it is, shall we say, an intelligence test or an attempt to take an indiscreet look behind the scenes. Such an attitude disguises the process which the experimenter is struggling to observe.

¹⁹⁶ Experiences of this kind were very common in the association tests, and it was discovered on these occasions that what the method was aiming at, namely to establish the average speed of the reactions and their qualities, was a relatively subsidiary result compared with the way in which the method was *disturbed* by the autonomous behaviour of the psyche, that is, by assimilation. It was then that I discovered the feeling-toned complexes, which had always been registered before as *failures to react*.

¹⁹⁷ The discovery of complexes, and of the phenomena of assimilation caused by them, showed very clearly on what a weak footing the old view—dating back to Condillac—stood, that it was possible to investigate *isolated* psychic processes. There are no isolated psychic processes, just as there are no isolated life-processes; at any rate, no means have yet been found of isolating them experimentally.² Only with the help of specially trained attention and concentration can the subject isolate a process so that it appears to meet the requirements of the experiment. But this is yet another "experimental situation," which differs from the one previously described only because this time the role of the assimilating complex is taken over by the conscious mind, whereas before this was done by more or less unconscious inferiority complexes.

¹⁹⁸ Now this does not mean that the *value* of the experiment is

² Exceptions to this rule are the processes of growth in tissues that can be kept alive in a nutrient medium.

put in question in any fundamental sense, only that it is critically limited. In the realm of psychophysiological processes—for instance, sense perceptions or motor reactions, where the purpose of the experiment is obviously harmless—pure reflex mechanisms predominate, and there are few if any assimilations, so that the experiment is not appreciably disturbed. It is very different in the realm of complicated psychic processes, where the experimental procedure cannot be restricted to certain definite possibilities. Here, where the safeguards afforded by specific aims fall away, unlimited possibilities emerge, and these sometimes give rise right at the beginning to an experimental situation which we call a “constellation.” This term simply expresses the fact that the outward situation releases a psychic process in which certain contents gather together and prepare for action. When we say that a person is “constellated” we mean that he has taken up a position from which he can be expected to react in a quite definite way. But the constellation is an automatic process which happens involuntarily and which no one can stop of his own accord. The constellated contents are definite complexes possessing their own specific energy. If the experiment in question is an association test, the complexes will influence its course in high degree by provoking disturbed reactions or—more rarely—by hiding behind a definite mode of reaction which, however, can be recognized by the fact that it no longer corresponds to the meaning of the stimulus word. Educated subjects with strong wills can, through verbal-motor facility, screen off the meaning of a stimulus word by short reaction times in such a way that it does not reach them at all. But this only works when really important personal secrets have to be protected. Talleyrand’s art of using words to conceal thoughts is given only to a few. Unintelligent people, and particularly women, protect themselves with the help of *value predicates*. This often presents a very comical picture. Value predicates are attributes of feeling, such as *beautiful, good, dear, sweet, friendly*, etc. One often notices, in conversation, how certain people find everything *interesting, charming, good, lovely*, or—if they are English—*fine, marvellous, grand, splendid*, and (a great favourite!) *fascinating*, all of which serve either to cover up their total lack of interest or to hold the object at arm’s length. But the great majority of subjects cannot prevent their com-

plexes from picking on certain stimulus words and furnishing them with various symptoms of disturbance, the chief of these being delayed reaction time. One can also combine these experiments with the electrical measurement of resistance, first used by Veraguth,³ where the so-called psychogalvanic reflex phenomenon provides further indications of reactions disturbed by complexes.

¹⁹⁹ The association test is of general interest in that, like no other psychological experiment of comparable simplicity, it reproduces the psychic situation of the *dialogue*, and at the same time makes fairly accurate quantitative and qualitative evaluation possible. Instead of questions in the form of definite sentences, the subject is confronted with the vague, ambiguous, and therefore disconcerting stimulus word, and instead of an answer he has to react with a *single* word. Through accurate observation of the reaction disturbances, facts are revealed and registered which are often assiduously overlooked in ordinary discussion, and this enables us to discover things that point to the unspoken background, to those states of readiness, or constellations, which I mentioned before. What happens in the association test also happens in every discussion between two people. In both cases there is an experimental situation which constellates complexes that assimilate the topic discussed or the situation as a whole, including the parties concerned. The discussion loses its objective character and its real purpose, since the constellated complexes frustrate the intentions of the speakers and may even put answers into their mouths which they can no longer remember afterwards. This fact has been put to practical use in the cross-examination of witnesses. Its place in psychology is taken by the so-called repetition experiment, which discovers and localizes the gaps in the memory. After, say, a hundred reactions, the subject is asked what answers he gave to the individual stimulus words. Gaps or falsifications of memory occur with average regularity in all spheres of association disturbed by complexes.

²⁰⁰ So far, I have purposely avoided discussing the nature of complexes, on the tacit assumption that their nature is generally known. The word “complex” in its psychological sense has

³ Das *psycho-galvanische Reflexphänomen*.

passed into common speech both in German and in English. Everyone knows nowadays that people "have complexes." What is not so well known, though far more important theoretically, is that complexes can *have us*. The existence of complexes throws serious doubt on the naïve assumption of the unity of consciousness, which is equated with "psyche," and on the supremacy of the will. Every constellation of a complex postulates a disturbed state of consciousness. The unity of consciousness is disrupted and the intentions of the will are impeded or made impossible. Even memory is often noticeably affected, as we have seen. The complex must therefore be a psychic factor which, in terms of energy, possesses a value that sometimes exceeds that of our conscious intentions, otherwise such disruptions of the conscious order would not be possible at all. And in fact, an active complex puts us momentarily under a state of duress, of compulsive thinking and acting, for which under certain conditions the only appropriate term would be the judicial concept of diminished responsibility.

201 What then, scientifically speaking, is a "feeling-toned complex"? It is the *image* of a certain psychic situation which is strongly accentuated emotionally and is, moreover, incompatible with the habitual attitude of consciousness. This image has a powerful inner coherence, it has its own wholeness and, in addition, a relatively high degree of autonomy, so that it is subject to the control of the conscious mind to only a limited extent, and therefore behaves like an animated foreign body in the sphere of consciousness. The complex can usually be suppressed with an effort of will, but not argued out of existence, and at the first suitable opportunity it reappears in all its original strength. Certain experimental investigations seem to indicate that its intensity or activity curve has a wavelike character, with a "wave-length" of hours, days, or weeks. This very complicated question remains as yet unclarified.

202 We have to thank the French psychopathologists, Pierre Janet in particular, for our knowledge today of the extreme *dissociability* of consciousness. Janet and Morton Prince both succeeded in producing four to five splittings of the personality, and it turned out that each fragment of personality had its own peculiar character and its own separate memory. These fragments subsist relatively independently of one another and can

take one another's place at any time, which means that each fragment possesses a high degree of autonomy. My findings in regard to complexes corroborate this somewhat disquieting picture of the possibilities of psychic disintegration, for fundamentally there is no difference in principle between a fragmentary personality and a complex. They have all the essential features in common, until we come to the delicate question of fragmented consciousness. Personality fragments undoubtedly have their own consciousness, but whether such small psychic fragments as complexes are also capable of a consciousness of their own is a still unanswered question. I must confess that this question has often occupied my thoughts, for complexes behave like Descartes' devils and seem to delight in playing impish tricks. They slip just the wrong word into one's mouth, they make one forget the name of the person one is about to introduce, they cause a tickle in the throat just when the softest passage is being played on the piano at a concert, they make the tiptoeing latecomer trip over a chair with a resounding crash. They bid us congratulate the mourners at a burial instead of condoling with them, they are the instigators of all those maddening things which F. T. Vischer attributed to the "mischievousness of the object."⁴ They are the actors in our dreams, whom we confront so powerlessly; they are the elfin beings so aptly characterized in Danish folklore by the story of the clergyman who tried to teach the Lord's prayer to two elves. They took the greatest pains to repeat the words after him correctly, but at the very first sentence they could not avoid saying: "Our Father, who art not in heaven." As one might expect on theoretical grounds, these impish complexes are unteachable.

203 I hope that, taking it with a very large grain of salt, no one will mind this metaphorical paraphrase of a scientific problem. But even the soberest formulation of the phenomenology of complexes cannot get round the impressive fact of their autonomy, and the deeper one penetrates into their nature—I might almost say into their biology—the more clearly do they reveal their character as *splinter psyches*. Dream psychology shows us as plainly as could be wished how complexes appear in personified form when there is no inhibiting consciousness to

⁴ Cf. *Auch Einer*.

suppress them, exactly like the hobgoblins of folklore who go crashing round the house at night. We observe the same phenomenon in certain psychoses when the complexes get "loud" and appear as "voices" having a thoroughly personal character.

204 Today we can take it as moderately certain that complexes are in fact "splinter psyches." The aetiology of their origin is frequently a so-called trauma, an emotional shock or some such thing, that splits off a bit of the psyche. Certainly one of the commonest causes is a moral conflict, which ultimately derives from the apparent impossibility of affirming the whole of one's nature. This impossibility presupposes a direct split, no matter whether the conscious mind is aware of it or not. As a rule there is a marked unconsciousness of any complexes, and this naturally guarantees them all the more freedom of action. In such cases their powers of assimilation become especially pronounced, since unconsciousness helps the complex to assimilate even the ego, the result being a momentary and unconscious alteration of personality known as identification with the complex. In the Middle Ages it went by another name: it was called possession. Probably no one imagines this state as being particularly harmless, and there is in fact no difference in principle between a slip of the tongue caused by a complex and the wildest blasphemies; it is only a difference of degree. The history of language provides innumerable illustrations of this. When some one is in the throes of a violent emotion we exclaim: "What's got into him today?" "He is driven by the devil," "hag-ridden," etc. In using these somewhat worn metaphors we naturally do not think of their original meaning, although it is easily recognizable and points without a doubt to the fact that naïver and more primitive people did not "psychologize" disturbing complexes as we do, but regarded them as beings in their own right, that is, as demons. Later levels of conscious development created such an intense ego-complex or ego-consciousness that the complexes were deprived of their original autonomy, at least in ordinary speech. As a rule a person says: "I have a complex," or the admonishing voice of the doctor says to the hysterical patient: "Your pain is not real, you merely imagine it hurts you." Fear of infection is, apparently, an arbitrary fancy of the patient's, at any rate everybody tries to convince him that he is cooking up a delusional idea.

805 It is not difficult to see that the ordinary modern conception of the problem treats it as though it were certain beyond all doubt that the complex was invented and "imagined" by the patient, and that it would not exist at all had the patient not gone to the trouble of deliberately bringing it to life. As against this, it has now been firmly established that complexes possess a remarkable degree of autonomy, that organically unfounded, so-called "imaginary" pains hurt just as much as legitimate ones, and that a phobia of illness has not the slightest inclination to disappear even if the patient himself, his doctor, and common speech-usage all unite in asseverating that it is nothing but "imagination."

806 Here we have an interesting example of "apotropaic" thinking, which is quite on a par with the euphemistic names bestowed by the ancients, a classic example of which is the *πόντος εὐξείνιος*, the 'hospitable sea.' Just as the Erinyes ("Furies") were called, cautiously and propitiatingly, the Eumenides ("Kindly Ones"), so the modern mind conceives all inner disturbances as its own activity: it simply assimilates them. This is not done, of course, with an open avowal of apotropaic euphemism, but with an equally unconscious tendency to make the autonomy of the complex *unreal* by giving it a different name. Consciousness behaves like some one who hears a suspicious noise in the attic and thereupon dashes down into the cellar, in order to assure himself that no burglar has broken in and that the noise was mere imagination. In reality he has simply not dared to go up into the attic.

807 It is not immediately apparent that fear could be the motive which prompts consciousness to explain complexes as its own activity. Complexes appear to be such trivial things, such ridiculous "nothings," in fact, that we are positively ashamed of them and do everything possible to conceal them. But if they were really "nothing" they could not be so painful. Painful is what causes pain—something decidedly unpleasant, therefore, which for that reason is important in itself and deserves to be taken seriously. But we are only too ready to make anything unpleasant *unreal*—so long as we possibly can. The outbreak of neurosis signalizes the moment when this can no longer be done by the primitive magical means of apotropaic gestures and euphemisms. From this moment the complex establishes itself

on the conscious surface; it can no longer be circumvented and proceeds to assimilate the ego-consciousness step by step, just as, previously, the ego-consciousness tried to assimilate it. This eventually leads to a neurotic dissociation of the personality.

208 Such a development reveals the complex in its original strength, which, as I said, sometimes exceeds even that of the ego-complex. Only then can one understand that the ego had every reason for practising the magic of names on complexes, for it is obvious enough that what I fear is something sinister that threatens to swallow me up. There are, among people who generally pass for normal, a large number who have a "skeleton in the cupboard," the existence of which must not be mentioned in their presence on pain of death, so great is their fear of the lurking spectre. All those people who are still in the stage of making their complexes unreal use any reference to neurosis as proving that this obviously applies only to positively morbid natures, to which category, of course, they do not belong. As though it were the privilege only of the sick person to become sick!

209 The tendency to make complexes unreal by assimilation does not prove their nugatoriness but, on the contrary, their importance. It is a negative admission of the instinctive fear which primitive man has of invisible things that move in the dark. With primitives, this fear does in fact set in with the fall of darkness, just as, with us, complexes are swamped by day, but at night raise their voices all the more clamorously, driving away sleep or filling it with bad dreams. Complexes are objects of inner experience and are not to be met in the street and in public places. It is on them that the weal and woe of personal life depends; they are the *lares* and *penates* who await us at the fireside and whose peaceableness it is dangerous to extol; they are the "little people" whose pranks disturb our nights. Naturally, so long as the evil falls only on our neighbours, it counts for nothing; but when it attacks us—then one must be a doctor in order to appreciate what an appalling menace a complex can be. Only when you have seen whole families destroyed by them, morally and physically, and the unexampled tragedy and hopeless misery that follow in their train, do you feel the full impact of the reality of complexes. You then understand how idle and unscientific it is to think that a person can

"imagine" a complex. Casting about for a medical comparison, one could best compare them with infections or with malignant tumours, both of which arise without the least assistance from the conscious mind. This comparison is not altogether satisfactory because complexes are not entirely morbid by nature but are *characteristic expressions of the psyche*, irrespective of whether this psyche is differentiated or primitive. Consequently we find unmistakable traces of them in all peoples and in all epochs. The oldest literary records bear witness to them; thus the Gilgamesh Epic describes in masterly fashion the psychology of the power-complex, and the Book of Tobit in the Old Testament gives the history of an erotic complex together with its cure.

210 The universal belief in spirits is a direct expression of the complex structure of the unconscious. Complexes are in truth the living units of the unconscious psyche, and it is only through them that we are able to deduce its existence and its constitution. The unconscious would in fact be—as it is in Wundt's psychology—nothing but a vestige of dim or "obscure" representations, or a "fringe of consciousness," as William James calls it, were it not for the existence of complexes. That is why Freud became the real discoverer of the unconscious in psychology, because he examined those dark places and did not simply dismiss them, with a disparaging euphemism, as "parapraxes." The *via regia* to the unconscious, however, is not the dream, as he thought, but the complex, which is the architect of dreams and of symptoms. Nor is this *via* so very "royal," either, since the way pointed out by the complex is more like a rough and uncommonly devious footpath that often loses itself in the undergrowth and generally leads not into the heart of the unconscious but past it.

211 Fear of complexes is a bad signpost, however, because it always points away from the unconscious and back into consciousness. Complexes are something so unpleasant that nobody in his right senses can be persuaded that the motive forces which maintain them could betoken anything good. The conscious mind is invariably convinced that complexes are something unseemly and should therefore be eliminated somehow or other. Despite overwhelming evidence of all kinds that complexes have always existed and are ubiquitous, people cannot bring them-

selves to regard them as normal phenomena of life. The fear of complexes is a rooted prejudice, for the superstitious fear of anything unfavourable has remained untouched by our vaunted enlightenment. This fear provokes violent resistance whenever complexes are examined, and considerable determination is needed to overcome it.

²¹² Fear and resistance are the signposts that stand beside the *via regia* to the unconscious, and it is obvious that what they primarily signify is a preconceived opinion of the thing they are pointing at. It is only natural that from the feeling of fear one should infer something dangerous, and from the feeling of resistance something repellent. The patient does so, the public does so, and in the end the analyst does so too, which is why the first medical theory about the unconscious was, logically, the theory of repression worked out by Freud. By drawing conclusions *a posteriori* from the nature of complexes, this view naturally conceives the unconscious as consisting essentially of incompatible tendencies which are repressed on account of their immorality. Nothing could offer a more striking proof that the author of this view proceeded purely empirically, without being in the least influenced by philosophical considerations. There had been talk of the unconscious long before Freud. It was Leibniz who first introduced the idea into philosophy; Kant and Schelling expressed opinions about it, and Carus elaborated it into a system, on whose foundations Eduard von Hartmann built his portentous *Philosophy of the Unconscious*. The first medico-psychological theory of the unconscious has as little to do with these antecedents as it has with Nietzsche.

²¹³ Freud's theory is a faithful account of his actual experiences during the investigation of complexes. But since such an investigation is always a dialogue between two people, in building up the theory one has to consider not only the complexes of the one partner, but also those of the other. Every dialogue that pushes forward into territory hedged about by fear and resistance is aiming at something vital, and by impelling the one partner to integrate his wholeness it forces the other to take up a broader position. He too is impelled towards wholeness, for without this he would not be able to push the dialogue deeper and deeper into those fear-bound regions. No investi-

gator, however unprejudiced and objective he is, can afford to disregard his own complexes, for they enjoy the same autonomy as those of other people. As a matter of fact, he *cannot* disregard them, because they do not disregard *him*. Complexes are very much a part of the psychic constitution, which is the most absolutely prejudiced thing in every individual. His constitution will therefore inexorably decide *what* psychological view a given observer will have. Herein lies the unavoidable limitation of psychological observation: its validity is contingent upon the personal equation of the observer.

²¹⁴ Psychological theory therefore formulates, first and foremost, a psychic situation that has come about through a dialogue between one particular observer and a number of observed persons. As the dialogue moves mainly in the sphere of resistances set up by complexes, the character of these complexes will necessarily become attached to the theory, that is to say it will be, in the most general sense of the word, offensive, because it works on the complexes of the public. That is why all the views of modern psychology are not only controversial in the objective sense, but provocative. They force the public to react violently either for or against and, in scientific discussions, give rise to emotional debates, outbursts of dogmatism, personal vituperation, and so forth.

²¹⁵ It can easily be seen from all this that modern psychology with its investigation of complexes has opened up a psychic taboo area riddled with hopes and fears. Complexes are the real focus of psychic unrest, and its repercussions are so far-reaching that psychological investigators have no immediate hope of pursuing their work in peace, for this presupposes some consensus of scientific opinion. But complex psychology is, at present, far indeed from any such agreement, much further, it seems to me, than even the pessimists suppose. For, with the discovery of incompatible tendencies, only *one* sector of the unconscious has come under review, and only *one* source of fear has been revealed.

²¹⁶ It will no doubt be remembered what a storm of indignation was unleashed on all sides when Freud's works became generally known. This violent reaction of public complexes drove Freud into an isolation which has brought the charge of dogmatism upon him and his school. All psychological theoreticians in this

field run the same risk, for they are playing with something that directly affects all that is uncontrolled in man—the *numinosum*, to use an apt expression of Rudolf Otto's. Where the realm of complexes begins the freedom of the ego comes to an end, for complexes are psychic agencies whose deepest nature is still unfathomed. Every time the researcher succeeds in advancing a little further towards the psychic *tremendum*, then, as before, reactions are let loose in the public, just as with patients who, for therapeutic reasons, are urged to take up arms against the inviolability of their complexes.

²¹⁷ To the uninitiated ear, my presentation of the complex theory may sound like a description of primitive demonology or of the psychology of taboos. This peculiar note is due simply to the fact that the existence of complexes, of split-off psychic fragments, is a quite perceptible vestige of the primitive state of mind. The primitive mind is marked by a high degree of dissociability, which expresses itself in the fact, for instance, that primitives assume the existence of several souls—in one case, even six—besides an immense number of gods and spirits, who are not just talked about, as with us, but are very often highly impressive psychic experiences.

²¹⁸ I would like to take this opportunity to remark that I use the term "primitive" in the sense of "primordial," and that I do not imply any kind of value judgment. Also, when I speak of a "vestige" of a primitive state, I do not necessarily mean that this state will sooner or later come to an end. On the contrary, I see no reason why it should not endure as long as humanity lasts. So far, at any rate, it has not changed very much, and with the World War and its aftermath there has even been a considerable increase in its strength. I am therefore inclined to think that autonomous complexes are among the normal phenomena of life and that they make up the structure of the unconscious psyche.

²¹⁹ As can be seen, I have contented myself with describing only the essential features of the complex theory. I must refrain, however, from filling in this incomplete picture by a description of the problems arising out of the existence of autonomous complexes. Three important problems would have to be dealt with: the therapeutic, the philosophical, and the moral. All three still await discussion.

II

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONSTITUTION
AND HEREDITY IN PSYCHOLOGYPSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS
DETERMINING HUMAN BEHAVIOUR