Editor's Note to "The Economic Problem of Masochism"

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(a) GERMAN EDITIONS:
1924 Das Ökonomische Problem Des Masochismus Int. Z. Psychoanal., 10 (2), 121-33.
1924 Das Ökonomische Problem Des Masochismus G.S., 5, 374-86.
1931 Das Ökonomische Problem Des Masochismus Neurosenlehre und Technik, 193-207.
1940 Das Ökonomische Problem Des Masochismus G.W., 13, 371-83.

(b) ENGLISH TRANSLATION:
'The Economic Problem in Masochism' 1924 C.P., 2, 255-68. (Tr. Joan Riviere.)
The present translation, with a slightly changed title, is based on that of 1924.
This paper was finished before the end of January, 1924 (Jones, 1957, 114).

In this important work Freud gives his fullest account of the puzzling phenomenon of masochism. He had previously dealt with it, but always somewhat tentatively, in his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905d), Standard Ed., 7, 157-60. 1 in the metapsychological paper 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes' (1915c), Standard Ed., 14, 127-30, and, at much greater length in "A Child is Being Beaten" (1919c), which he himself described in a letter to Ferenczi as 'a paper on masochism'. In all these writings masochism is derived from a previous sadism; no such thing as primary masochism is recognized. (See, for instance, Standard Ed., 14, 128 and 17, 193-4.) In Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920g), however, after the introduction of the 'death instinct', we find a statement that 'there might be such a thing as primary masochism' (Standard Ed., 18, 55), and in the present paper the existence of a primary masochism is taken as certain. 2

1 Much of this was in fact only added to the book in 1915; a footnote added in 1924 gives the gist of the present paper.

2 It should perhaps be mentioned that it was only in later writings, beginning with Chapter VI of Civilization and its Discontents (1930a), that Freud turned his attention more particularly to the outward operation of the death instinct—to aggressiveness and destructiveness, though it is discussed to some extent in the later part of the present paper.

The existence of this primary masochism is here accounted for chiefly on the basis of the 'fusion' and 'defusion' of the two classes of instinct—a concept which had been examined at length in The Ego and the Id (1923b), published less than a year previously—while the apparently self-contradictory nature of an instinct which aims at unpleasure is dealt with in the interesting introductory discussion, which for the first time clearly distinguishes between the 'principle of constancy' and the 'pleasure principle'.

Freud's analysis shows that this primary or 'eroticogenic' masochism leads to two derivative forms. One of these, which he terms 'feminine', is the form that Freud had already discussed in his paper on 'beating phantasies' (1919c). But the third form, 'moral masochism', gives him an opportunity of enlarging upon many points that had only been lightly touched on in The Ego and the Id, and of opening up fresh problems in connection with feelings of guilt and the operation of the conscience.
The Economic Problem Of Masochism

The existence of a masochistic trend in the instinctual life of human beings may justly be described as mysterious from the economic point of view. For if mental processes are governed by the pleasure principle in such a way that their first aim is the avoidance of unpleasantness and the obtaining of pleasure, masochism is incomprehensible. If pain and unpleasantness can be not simply warnings but actually aims, the pleasure principle is paralysed—it is as though the watchman over our mental life were put out of action by a drug.

Thus masochism appears to us in the light of a great danger, which is in no way true of its counterpart, sadism. We are tempted to call the pleasure principle the watchman over our life rather than merely over our mental life. But in that case we are faced with the task of investigating the relationship of the pleasure principle to the two classes of instincts which we have distinguished—the death instincts and the erotic (libidinal) life instincts; and we cannot proceed further in our consideration of the problem of masochism till we have accomplished that task.

It will be remembered that we have taken the view that the principle which governs all mental processes is a special case of Fechner's 'tendency towards stability,' and have accordingly attributed to the mental apparatus the purpose of reducing to nothing, or at least of keeping as low as possible, the sums of excitation which flow in upon it. Barbara Low [1920, 73] has suggested the name of 'Nirvana principle' for this supposed tendency, and we have accepted the term. But we have unhesitatingly identified the pleasure-unpleasure principle with this Nirvana principle. Every unpleasantness must coincide with a heightening, and every pleasure with a lowering, of mental tension due to stimulus; the Nirvana principle (and the pleasure principle which is supposedly identical with it) would be entirely in the service of the death instincts, whose aim is to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the inorganic state, and it would have the function of giving warnings against the demands of the life instincts—the libido—which try to disturb the intended course of life. But such a view cannot be correct. It seems that in the series of feelings of tension we have a direct sense of the increase and decrease of amounts of stimulus, and it cannot be doubted that there are pleasurable tensions and unpleasurable relaxations of tension. The state of sexual excitation is the most striking example of a pleasurable increase of stimulus of this sort, but it is certainly not the only one.

Pleasure and unpleasantness, therefore, cannot be referred to an increase or decrease of a quantity (which we describe as 'tension due to stimulus'), although they obviously have a great deal to do with that factor. It appears that they depend, not on this quantitative factor, but on some characteristic of it which we can only describe as a qualitative one. If we were able to say what this qualitative characteristic is, we should be much farther advanced in psychology. Perhaps it is the rhythm, the temporal sequence of changes, rises and falls in the quantity of stimulus. We do not know.

However this may be, we must perceive that the Nirvana principle, belonging as it does to the death instinct, has undergone a modification in living organisms through which it has become the pleasure principle; and we shall henceforward avoid regarding the two principles as one. It is not difficult, if we care to follow up this line of thought, to guess what power was the source of the modification. It can only be the life instinct, the libido, which has thus, alongside of the death instinct, seized upon a share in the regulation of the processes of life. In this way we obtain a small but interesting set of connections. The Nirvana principle expresses the trend of the death instinct; the pleasure principle represents the demands of the libido; and the modification of the latter principle, the reality principle, represents the influence of the external world.

1 [PEP] This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 13, Page 371

2 [Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Standard Ed., 56. Freud had previously given this same principle the name of 'the principle of constancy'. A full discussion of the history of Freud's use of these concepts and of their relation to the pleasure principle will be found in an Editor's footnote to 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes' (1915c), Standard Ed., 14, 121.]

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sought along biological and constitutional lines and it remains incomprehensible unless one decides to make certain assumptions about matters that are extremely obscure. The third, and in some respects the most important, form assumed by masochism has only recently been recognized by psycho-analysis as a sense of guilt which is mostly unconscious; but it can already be completely explained and fitted into the rest of our knowledge. Feminine masochism, on the other hand, is the one that is most accessible to our observation and least problematical, and it can be surveyed in all its relations. We will begin our discussion with it.

We have sufficient acquaintance with this kind of masochism in men (to whom, owing to the material at my command, I shall restrict my remarks), derived from masochistic—and therefore often impotent—subjects whose phantasies either terminate in an act of masturbation or represent a sexual satisfaction in themselves.\(^3\) The real-life performances of masochistic perversels tally completely with these phantasies, whether

\(^1\) [Freud took up this discussion again in Chapter VIII of his Outline (1940a [1938]).]

\(^2\) [This last word is added in English in the original.]

\(^3\) [See Section VI of ""A Child is Being Beaten"" (1919e), Standard Ed., 17, 196 ff.]

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described above, becomes libidinally bound there. It is in this portion that we have to recognize the original, erotogenic masochism.\[1\]

We are without any physiological understanding of the ways and means by which this taming\[2\] of the death-instinct by the libido may be effected. So far as the psycho-erotic field of ideas is concerned, we can only assume that a very extensive fusion and amalgamation, in varying proportions, of the two classes of instincts takes place, so that we never have to deal with pure life instincts or pure death instincts but only with mixtures of them in different amounts. Corresponding to a fusion of instincts of this kind, there may, as a result of certain influences, be a defusion of them. How large the portions of the death instincts are which refuse to be tamed in this way by being bound to adnixtures of libido we cannot at present guess.

If one is prepared to overlook a little inexactitude, it may be said that the death instinct which is operative in the organism—primal sadism—is identical with masochism. After the main portion of it has been transposed outwards on to objects, there remains inside, as a residuum of it, the erotogenic masochism proper, which on the one hand has become a component of the libido and, on the other, still has the self as its object. This masochism would thus be evidence of, and a remainder from, the phase of development in which the coalescence, which is so important for life, between the death instinct and Eros took place. We shall not be surprised to hear that in certain circumstances the sadism, or instinct of destruction, which has been directed outwards, projected, can be once more introjected, turned inwards, and in this way regress to its earlier situation. If this happens, a secondary masochism is produced, which is added to the original masochism.

Erotogenic masochism accompanies the libido through all its developmental phases and derives from them its changing

\[1\] For all of this see Chapter IV of The Ego and the Id (p. 41 above). Cf. also another account in Chapter VI of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Standard Ed., 18, 50.

\[2\] ‘Bändigung.’ Freud takes up the word again in the third section of his late paper on ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’ (1937c). He had much earlier applied the idea to the ‘taming’ of memories in Section 3 of Part III of his ‘Project’ of 1895 (Freud, 1990a).

Let us keep to a habit of our technique and consider first the extreme and unmistakably pathological form of this masochism. I have...
described elsewhere\(^1\) how in analytic treatment we come across patients to whom, owing to their behaviour towards its therapeutic influence, we are obliged to ascribe an ‘unconscious’ sense of guilt. I pointed out the sign by which such people can be recognized (a ‘negative therapeutic reaction’) and I did not conceal the fact that the strength of such an impulse constitutes one of the most serious resistances and the greatest danger to the success of our medical or educative aims. The satisfaction of this unconscious sense of guilt is perhaps the most powerful bastion in the subject’s (usually composite) gain from illness—in the sum of forces which struggle against his recovery and refuse to surrender his state of illness. The suffering entailed by neuroses is precisely the factor that makes them valuable to the masochistic trend. It is instructive, too, to find, contrary to all theory and expectation, that a neurosis which has defied every therapeutic effort may vanish if the subject becomes involved in the misery of an unhappy marriage, or loses all his money, or develops a dangerous organic disease. In such instances one form of suffering has been replaced by another; and we see that all that mattered was that it should be possible to maintain a certain amount of suffering.

Patients do not easily believe us when we tell them about the unconscious sense of guilt. They know only too well by what torments—the pangs of conscience—a conscious sense of guilt, a consciousness of guilt, expresses itself, and they therefore cannot admit that they could harbour exactly analogous impulses in themselves without being in the least aware of them. We may, I think, to some extent meet their objection if we give up the term ‘unconscious sense of guilt’, which is in any case psychologically incorrect,\(^2\) and speak instead of a ‘need for punishment’, which covers the observed state of affairs just as aptly. We cannot, however, restrain ourselves from judging and localizing this unconscious sense of guilt in the same way as we do the conscious kind.

We have attributed the function of conscience to the super-ego and we have recognized the consciousness of guilt as an expression of a tension between the ego and the super-ego.\(^1\) The ego reacts with feelings of anxiety (conscience anxiety)\(^2\) to the perception that it has not come up to the demands made by its ideal, the super-ego. What we want to know is how the super-ego has come to play this demanding role and why the ego, in the case of a difference with its ideal, should have to be afraid.

We have said that the function of the ego is to unite and to reconcile the claims of the three agencies which it serves; and we may add that in doing so it also possesses in the super-ego a model which it can strive to follow. For this super-ego is as much a representative of the id as of the external world.\(^3\) It came into being through the introjection into the ego of the first objects of the id’s libidinal impulses—namely, the two parents. In this process the relation to those objects was de-sexualized; it was diverted from its direct sexual aims. Only in this way was it possible for the Oedipus complex to be surmounted. The super-ego retained essential features of the introjected persons—their strength, their severity, their inclination to supervise and to punish. As I have said elsewhere,\(^4\) it is easily conceivable that, thanks to the defusion of instinct which occurs along with this introduction into the ego, the severity was increased. The super-ego—the conscience at work in the ego—may then become harsh, cruel and inexorable against the ego which is in its charge. Kant’s Categorical Imperative is thus the direct heir of the Oedipus complex.\(^5\)

But the same figures who continue to operate in the super-ego as the agency we know as conscience after they have ceased to be objects of the libidinal impulses of the id—these same figures also belong to the real external world. It is from there that they were drawn; their power, behind which lie hidden all the influences of the past and of tradition, was one of the most strongly-felt manifestations of reality. In virtue of this concurrence, the super-ego, the substitute for the Oedipus complex, becomes a representative of the real external world as well and thus also becomes a model for the endeavours of the ego.

In this way the Oedipus complex proves to be—as has already been conjectured in a historical sense\(^1\)—the source of our individual ethical sense, our morality. The course of child-hood development leads to an ever-increasing detachment from parents, and their personal significance for the super-ego recedes into the background. To the imagos\(^2\) they leave behind there are then linked the influences of teachers and authorities, self-chosen models and publicly recognized heroes, whose figures need no longer be introjected by an ego which has become more resistant. The last figure in the

\(^1\) cf. ‘Neurosis and Psychosis’ (1924b), p. 152 above.
\(^2\) cf. ‘Gewissensangst.’ An Editor’s footnote discussing this term will be found in Chapter VII of Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety (1926d), Standard Ed., pp. 54-5 above.
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series that began with the parents is the dark power of Destiny which only the fewest of us are able to look upon as impersonal. There is little to be said against the Dutch writer Multatuli when he replaces the Μόρα [Destiny] of the Greeks by the divine pair ‘Αόγος Χαι Αναγχη [Reason and Necessity]’, but all who transfer the guidance of the world to Providence, to God, or to God and Nature, arouse a suspicion that they still look upon these ultimate and remotest powers as a parental couple, in a mythological sense, and believe themselves linked to them by libidinal ties. In The Ego and the Id [p. 58] I made an attempt to derive mankind's realistic fear of death, too, from the same parental view of fate. It seems very hard to free oneself from it.

After these preliminaries we can return to our consideration of moral masochism. We have said that, by their behaviour during treatment and in life, the individuals in question give an impression of being morally inhibited to an excessive degree, of being under the domination of an especially sensitive conscience,

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1 In Essay IV of Totem and Taboo (1912-13).
2 [The term ‘imago’ was not often used by Freud, especially in his later writings. Its first appearance seems to be in his technical paper on ‘The Dynamics of Transference’ (1912b), Standard Ed., 12, 100, where he attributes it to Jung (1911, 164). In this latter passage Jung tells us that he partly chose the word from the title of a novel of the same name by the Swiss writer, Carl Spitteler; and we learn from Hanns Sachs (1945, 63) that the psycho-analytic periodical Imago, started by him and Rank in 1912, also owed its title to the same source.]
3 E. D. Dekker (1820-87). [‘Multatuli’ had long been a favourite of Freud’s. He heads the list of ‘ten good books’ which he drew up in 1907, Standard Ed., 9, 246.]
4 [‘Anagkh’ had been named by Freud at least as early as in the Leonardo paper (1910c), Standard Ed., 11, 125. Αόγος, on the other hand, seems to appear for the first time here. Both are discussed, and more especially Αόγος, in the closing passage of The Future of an Illusion (1927c).]
5 [The Ego and the Id, p. 49 ff. above.]
usually presented as though ethical requirements were the primary thing and the renunciation of instinct followed from them. This leaves the origin of the ethical sense unexplained. Actually, it seems to be the other way about. The first instinctual renunciation is enforced by external powers, and it is only this which creates the ethical sense, which expresses itself in conscience and demands a further renunciation of instinct.²

Thus moral masochism becomes a classical piece of evidence for the existence of fusion of instinct. Its danger lies in the fact that it originates from the death instinct and corresponds to the part of that instinct which has escaped being turned outwards as an instinct of destruction. But since, on the other hand, it has the significance of an erotic component, even the subject's destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction.³

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¹ [Cf. The Ego and the Id, p. 54 above.]

² [The subjects discussed in this paragraph were enlarged upon by Freud in Chapter VII of Civilization and its Discontents (1930a).]

³ [Freud discussed masochism in relation to psycho-analytic treatment once more in Section VI of his paper on ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’ (1937c).]