

XX. Sigmund Freud, "The Sexual Life of Human Beings," 1920.

A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis

ONE might think we could take for granted what we are to understand by the term "sexual." Of course, the sexual is the indecent, which we must not talk about. I have been told that the pupils of a famous psychiatrist once took the trouble to convince their teacher that the symptoms of hysteria very frequently represent sexual matters. With this intention they took him to the bedside of a woman suffering from hysteria, whose attacks were unmistakable imitations of the act of delivery. He, however, threw aside their suggestion with the remark, "a delivery is nothing sexual." Assuredly, a delivery need not under all circumstances be indecent. 1

I see that you take it amiss that I jest about such serious matters. But this is not altogether a jest. In all seriousness, it is not altogether easy to define the concept "sexual." Perhaps the only accurate definition would be everything that is connected with the difference between the two sexes; but this you may find too general and too colorless. If you emphasize the sexual act as the central factor, you might say that everything is sexual which seeks to obtain sensual excitement from the body and especially from the sexual organs of the opposite sex, and which aims toward the union of the genitals and the performance of the sexual act. But then you are really very close to the comparison of sexual and indecent, and the act of delivery is not sexual. But if you think of the function of reproduction as the nucleus of sexuality you are in danger of excluding a number of things that do not aim at reproduction but are certainly sexual, such as onanism or even kissing. But we are prepared to realize that attempts at 2

definition always lead to difficulties; let us give up the attempt to achieve the unusual in our particular case. We may suspect that in the development of the concept “sexual” something occurred which resulted in a false disguise. On the whole, we are quite well oriented as to what people call sexual.

The inclusion of the following factors in our concept “sexual” amply suffices for all practical purposes in ordinary life: the contrast between the sexes, the attainment of sexual excitement, the function of reproduction, the characteristic of an indecency that must be kept concealed. But this is no longer satisfactory to science. For through careful examinations, rendered possible only by the sacrifices and the unselfishness of the subjects, we have come in contact with groups of human beings whose sexual life deviates strikingly from the average. One group among them, the “perverse,” have, as it were, crossed off the difference between the sexes from their program. Only the same sex can arouse their sexual desires; the other sex, even the sexual parts, no longer serve as objects for their sexual desires, and in extreme cases, become a subject for disgust. They have to that extent, of course, foregone any participation in reproduction. We call such persons homosexual or inverted. Often, though not always, they are men and women of high physical, intellectual and ethical development, who are affected only with this one portentous abnormality. Through their scientific leaders they proclaim themselves to be a special species of mankind, “a third sex,” which shares equal rights with the two other sexes. Perhaps we shall have occasion to examine their claims critically. Of course they are not, as they would like to claim, the “elect” of humanity, but comprise just as many worthless second-rate individuals as those who possess a different sexual organization. 3

At any rate, this type among the perverse seek to achieve the same ends with the object of their desires as do normal people. But in the same group there exists a long succession of abnormal individuals whose sexual activities are more and more alien to what seems desirable to the sensible person. In their manifold strangeness they seem comparable only to the grotesque freaks that P. Breughel painted as the temptation of Saint Anthony, or the forgotten gods and believers that G. Flaubert pictures in

the long procession that passes before his pious penitent. This ill-assorted array fairly clamors for orderly classification if it is not to bewilder our senses. We first divide them, on the one hand, into those whose sexual object has changed, as is the case with homosexualists, and, on the other, those whose sexual aim has changed. Those of the first group have dispensed with the mutual union of the genital organs, and have, as one of the partners of the act, replaced the genitals by another organ or part of the body; they have thus overcome both the shortcomings of organic structure and the usual disgust involved. There are others of this group who still retain the genitals as their object, but not by virtue of their sexual function; they participate for anatomic reasons or rather by reason of their proximity. By means of these individuals we realize that the functions of excretion, which in the education of the child are hushed away as indecent, still remain capable of drawing complete sexual interest on themselves. There are still others who have relinquished the genitals entirely as an objective, have raised another part of the body to serve as the goal of their desire; the woman's breast, the foot, the tress of hair. There are also the fetishists, to whom the body part means nothing, who are gratified by a garment, a piece of white linen, a shoe. And finally there are persons who seek the whole object but with certain peculiar or horrible demands: even those who covet a defenseless corpse for instance, which they themselves must criminally compel to satisfy their desire. But enough of these horrors.

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Foremost in the second grouping are those perverted ones who have placed as the end of their sexual desire performances normally introductory or preparatory to it. They satisfy their desire by their eyes and hands. They watch or attempt to watch the other individual in his most intimate doings, or uncover those portions of their own bodies which they should conceal in the vague expectation of being rewarded by a similar procedure on the other person's part. Here also belong the enigmatic sadists, whose affectionate strivings know no other goal than to cause their object pain and agony, varying all the way from humiliating suggestions to the harshest physical ill-treatment. As if to balance the scale, we have on the other hand the masochists, whose sole satisfaction consists in suffering every variety of humiliation and torture, symbolic and real, at the hands of

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the beloved one. There are still others who combine and confuse a number of these abnormal conditions. Moreover, in both these groups there are those who seek sexual satisfaction in reality, and others who are content merely to imagine such gratification, who need no actual object at all, but can supplant it by their own fantastic creations.

There can be not the least doubt that the sexual activities of these individuals are actually found in the absurdities, caprices and horrors that we have examined. Not only do they themselves conceive them as adequate substitutes, but we must recognize that they take the same place in their lives that normal sex gratification occupies in ours, and for which they bring the same sacrifices, often incommensurate with their ends. It is perfectly possible to trace along broad lines as well as in detail in what way these abnormalities follow the normal procedure and how they diverge from it. You will also find the characteristic of indecency which belongs to the sexual act in these vagaries, only that it is therein magnified to the disreputable.

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Ladies and gentlemen, what attitude are we to assume to these unusual varieties of sex gratification? Nothing at all is achieved by the mere expression of indignation and personal disgust and by the assurance that we do not share these lusts. That is not our concern. We have here a field of observation like any other. Moreover, the evasion that these persons are merely rarities, curiosities, is easily refuted. On the contrary, we are dealing with very frequent and widespread phenomena. If, however, we are told that we must not permit them to influence our views on sexual life, since they are all aberrations of the sexual instinct, we must meet this with a serious answer. If we fail to understand these abnormal manifestations of sexuality and are unable to relate them to the normal sexual life, then we cannot understand normal sexuality. It is, in short, our unavoidable task to account theoretically for all the potentialities of the perversions we have gone over and to explain their relation to the so-called normal sexuality.

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A penetrating insight due to Ivan Bloch and two new experimental results will help us in this task. Bloch takes exception to the point of view which

sees in a perversion a “sign of degeneration”; he proves that such deviations from the aim of the sexual instinct, such loose relations to the object of sexuality, have occurred at all times, among the most primitive and the most highly civilized peoples, and have occasionally achieved toleration and general recognition. The two experimental results were obtained in the course of psychoanalytic investigations of neurotics; they will undoubtedly exert a decided influence on our conceptions of sexual perversion.

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We have stated that the neurotic symptoms are substitutions for sexual satisfactions, and I have given you to understand that the proof of this assertion by means of the analysis of symptoms encounters many difficulties. For this statement is only justifiable if, under the term “sexual satisfactions,” we include the so-called perverse sexual ends, since with surprising frequency we find symptoms which can be interpreted only in the light of their activity. The claim of rareness made by the homosexualists or the inverted immediately collapses when we learn that in the case of no single neurotic do we fail to obtain evidence of homosexual tendencies, and that in a considerable number of symptoms we find the expression of this latent inversion. Those who call themselves homosexualists are the conscious and manifest inverts, but their number is as nothing before the latent homosexualists. We are forced to regard the desire for an object of one’s own sex as a universal aberration of erotic life and to cede increasing importance to it. Of course the differences between manifest homosexuality and the normal attitude are not thus erased; their practical importance persists, but their theoretic value is greatly decreased. Paranoia, a disturbance which cannot be counted among the transference-neuroses, must in fact be assumed as arising regularly from the attempt to ward off powerful homosexual tendencies. Perhaps you will recall that one of our patients under her compulsive symptoms acted the part of a man, namely that of her own estranged husband; the production of such symptoms, impersonating the actions of men, is very common to neurotic women. Though this cannot be ascribed directly to homosexuality, it is certainly concerned with its prerequisites.

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You are probably acquainted with the fact that the neurosis of hysteria may manifest its symptoms in all organic systems and may therefore disturb all functions. Analysis shows that in these symptoms there are expressed all those tendencies termed perverse, which seek to represent the genitals through other organs. These organs behave as substitute genitals; through the study of hysteric symptoms we have come to the conclusion that aside from their functional activities, the organs of the body have a sexual significance, and that the performance of their functions is disturbed if the sexual factor claims too much attention. Countless sensations and innervations, which appear as symptoms of hysteria, in organs apparently not concerned with sexuality, are thus discovered as bound up with the fulfillment of perverse sexual desires through the transference of sex instincts to other organs. These symptoms bring home to us the extent to which the organs used in the consumption of food and in excretion may become the bearers of sexual excitement. We see repeated here the same picture which the perversions have openly and unmistakably lain before us; in hysteria, however, we must make the detour of interpreting symptoms, and in this case the perverse sexual tendencies must be ascribed not to the conscious but to the unconscious life of the individual.

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Among the many symptoms manifested in compulsion neurosis, the most important are those produced by too powerful sadistic tendencies, i.e., sexual tendencies with perverted aim. These symptoms, in accordance with the structure of compulsion neurosis, serve primarily as a rejection of these desires, or they express a struggle between satisfaction and rejection. In this struggle, the satisfaction is never excessively curtailed; it achieves its results in the patient's behavior in a roundabout way, by preference turning against his own person in self-inflicted torture. Other forms of neurosis, characterized by intensive worry, are the expression of an exaggerated sexualization of acts that are ordinarily only preparatory to sexual satisfactions; such are the desires to see, to touch, to investigate. Here is thus explained the great importance of the fear of contact and also of the compulsion to wash. An unbelievably large portion of compulsion acts may, in the form of disguised repetitions and modifications, be traced back to onanism, admittedly the only uniform action which accompanies

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the most varied flights of the sexual imagination.

It would cost me very little effort to interweave far more closely the relation between perversion and neurosis, but I believe that what I have said is sufficient for our purposes. We must avoid the error of overestimating the frequency and intensity of perverse inclinations in the light of these interpretations of symptoms. You have heard that a neurosis may develop from the denial of normal sexual satisfactions. Through this actual denial the need is forced into the abnormal paths of sex excitement. You will later obtain a better insight into the way this happens. You certainly understand that through such “*collateral*” hindrance, the perverse tendencies must become more powerful than they would have been if no actual obstacle had been put in the way of a normal sexual satisfaction. As a matter of fact, a similar influence may be recognized in manifest perversions. In many cases, they are provoked or motivated by the fact that too great difficulties stand in the way of normal sexual satisfactions, owing to temporary circumstances or to the permanent institutions of society. In other cases, to be sure, the perverse tendencies are entirely independent of such conditions; they are, as it were, the normal kind of sexual life for the individual in question.

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Perhaps you are momentarily under the impression that we have confused rather than clarified the relation between normal and perverse sexuality. But keep in mind this consideration. If it is true that a hindrance or withholding of normal sexual satisfaction will bring out perverse tendencies in persons who have not previously shown them, we must assume that these persons must have harbored tendencies akin to perversities—or, if you will, perversities in latent form. This brings us to the second experimental conclusion of which I spoke, namely, that psychoanalytic investigation found it necessary to concern itself with the sexual life of the child, since, in the analysis of symptoms, reminiscences and ideas reverted to the early years of childhood. Whatever we revealed in this manner was corroborated point by point through the direct observation of children. The result was the recognition that all inclinations to perversion have their origin in childhood, that children have tendencies

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toward them all and practice them in a measure corresponding to their immaturity. Perverse sexuality, in brief, is nothing more than magnified infantile sexuality divided into its separate tendencies.

Now you will certainly see these perversions in another light and no longer ignore their relation to the sexual life of man, at the cost, I do not doubt, of surprises and incongruities painful to your emotions. At first you will undoubtedly be disposed to deny everything—the fact that children have something which may be termed sexual life, the truth of our observations and the justification of our claim to see in the behavior of children any relation to what is condemned in later years as perversity. Permit me first to explain to you the cause of your reluctance and then to present to you the sum of our observations. It is biologically improbable, even absurd, to assume that children have no sexual life—sexual excitements, desires, and some sort of satisfaction—but that they develop it suddenly between the ages of twelve and fourteen. This would be just as improbable from the viewpoint of biology as to say that they were not born with genitals but developed them only in the period of puberty. The new factor which becomes active in them at the time is the function of reproduction, which avails itself for its own purposes of all the physical and psychic material already present. You commit the error of confusing sexuality with reproduction and thereby block the road to the understanding of sexuality, and of perversions and neuroses as well. This error is a prejudice. Oddly enough its source is the fact that you yourselves were children, and as children succumbed to the influence of education. One of the most important educational tasks which society must assume is the control, the restriction of the sexual instinct when it breaks forth as an impulse toward reproduction; it must be subdued to an individual will that is identical with the mandates of society. In its own interests, accordingly, society would postpone full development until the child has reached a certain stage of intellectual maturity, for education practically ceases with the complete emergence of the sexual impulse. Otherwise the instinct would burst all bounds and the work of culture, achieved with such difficulty, would be shattered. The task of restraining this sexuality is never easy; it succeeds here too poorly and there too well. The motivating force of human society is fundamentally economic; since there is not sufficient nourishment to

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support its members without work on their part, the number of these members must be limited and their energies diverted from sexual activity to labor. Here, again, we have the eternal struggle for life that has persisted from prehistoric times to the present.

Experience must have shown educators that the task of guiding the sexual will of the new generation can be solved only by influencing the early sexual life of the child, the period preparatory to puberty, not by awaiting the storm of puberty. With this intention almost all infantile sex activities are forbidden to the child or made distasteful to him; the ideal goal has been to render the life of the child asexual. In the course of time it has really come to be considered asexual, and this point of view has actually been proclaimed by science. In order not to contradict our belief and intentions, we ignore the sexual activity of the child—no slight thing, at that—or are content to interpret it differently. The child is supposed to be pure and innocent, and whoever says otherwise may be condemned as a shameless blasphemer of the tender and sacred feelings of humanity.

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The children are the only ones who do not join in carrying out these conventions, who assert their animal rights, who prove again and again that the road to purity is still before them. It is strange that those who deny the sexuality of children, do not therefore slacken in their educational efforts but rather punish severely the manifestations of the very thing they maintain does not exist, and call it “childish naughtiness.” Theoretically it is highly interesting to observe that the period of life which offers most striking evidence against the biased conception of asexual childhood, is the time up to five or six years of age; after that everything is enveloped by a veil of amnesia, which is rent apart only by thorough scientific investigation; it may previously have given way partially in certain forms of dreams.

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Now I shall present to you what is most easily recognizable in the sexual life of the child. At first, for the sake of convenience let me explain to you the conception of the libido. Libido, analogous to hunger, is the force through which the instinct, here the sex instinct (as in the case of hunger it is the instinct to eat) expresses itself. Other conceptions, such as sexual

excitement and satisfaction, require no elucidation. You will easily see that interpretation plays the greatest part in disclosing the sexuality of the suckling; in fact you will probably cite this as an objection. These interpretations proceed from a foundation of analytic investigation that trace backwards from a given symptom. The suckling reveals the first sexual impulses in connection with other functions necessary for life. His chief interest, as you know, is directed toward the taking in of food; when it has fallen asleep at its mother's breast, fully satisfied, it bears the expression of blissful content that will come back again in later life after the experience of the sexual orgasm. That of course would be too slight evidence to form the basis of a conclusion. But we observe that the suckling wishes to repeat the act of taking in food without actually demanding more food; he is therefore no longer urged by hunger. We say 17 he is sucking, and the fact that after this he again falls asleep with a blissful expression shows us that the act of sucking in itself has yielded him satisfaction. As you know, he speedily arranges matters so that he cannot fall asleep without sucking. Dr. Lindner, an old pediatricist in Budapest, was the first one to ascertain the sexual nature of this procedure. Persons attending to the child, who surely make no pretensions to a theoretic attitude, seem to judge sucking in a similar manner. They do not doubt that it serves a pleasurable satisfaction, term it naughty, and force the child to relinquish it against his will, and if he will not do so of his own accord, through painful measures. And so we learn that the suckling performs actions that have no object save the obtaining of a sensual gratification. We believe that this gratification is first experienced during the taking in of food, but that he speedily learns to separate it from this condition. The gratification can only be attributed to the excitation of the mouth and lips, hence we call these parts of the body *erogenous zones* and the pleasure derived from sucking, *sexual*. Probably we shall have to discuss the justification of this name.

If the suckling could express himself, he would probably recognize the act of sucking at his mother's breast as the most important thing in life. He is not so far wrong, for in this one act he satisfies two great needs of life. With no small degree of surprise we learn through psychoanalysis how

much of the physical significance of this act is retained through life. The sucking at the mother's breast becomes the term of departure for all of sexual life, the unattained ideal of later sex gratification, to which the imagination often reverts in times of need. The mother's breast is the first object for the sexual instinct; I can scarcely bring home to you how significant this object is for centering on the sexual object in later life, what profound influence it exerts upon the most remote domains of psychic life through evolution and substitution. The suckling, however, soon relinquishes it and fills its place by a part of his own body. The child sucks his thumb or his own tongue. Thereby he renders himself independent of the consent of the outer world in obtaining his sensual satisfactions, and moreover increases the excitement by including a second zone of his body. The erogenous zones are not equally satisfactory; it is therefore an important experience when, as Dr. Lindner puts it, the child while touching his own body discovers the especially excitable genitals, and so finds the way from sucking to onanism.

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Through the evaluation of sucking we become acquainted with two decisive characteristics of infantile sexuality. It arises in connection with the satisfaction of great organic needs and behaves *auto-erotically*, that is to say, it seeks and finds its objects on its own body. What is most clearly discernible during the taking in of food is partially repeated during excretion. We conclude that the nursling experiences pleasure during the excretion of urine and the contents of the intestine and that he soon strives to arrange these acts in a way to secure the greatest possible amount of satisfaction by the corresponding excitement of the erogenous membrane zones. Lou Andreas, with her delicate perceptions, has shown how at this point the outer world first intervenes as a hindrance, hostile to the child's desire for satisfaction—the first vague suggestion of outer and inner conflicts. He may not let his excretions pass from him at a moment agreeable to him, but only when other persons set the time. To induce him to renounce these sources of satisfaction, everything relating to these functions is declared indecent and must be concealed. Here, for the first time, he is to exchange pleasure for social dignity. His own relation to his excretions is originally quite different. He experiences no disgust toward his faeces, values them as a part of his body from which he does not part

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lightly, for he uses them as the first “present” he can give to persons he esteems particularly. Even after education has succeeded in alienating him from these tendencies, he transfers the evaluation of the faeces to the “present” and to “money.” On the other hand, he appears to regard his achievements in urination with especial pride.

I know that you have been wanting to interrupt me for a long time and to cry: “Enough of these monstrosities! Excretion a source of sexual gratification that even the suckling exploits! Faeces a valuable substance! The anus a sort of genital! We do not believe it, but we understand why children’s physicians and pedagogues have decidedly rejected psychoanalysis and its results.” No, you have merely forgotten that it was my intention to present to you infantile sexuality in connection with the facts of sexual perversion. Why should you not know that in the case of many grown-ups, homosexuals as well as heterosexuals, the locus of intercourse is transferred from the normal to a more remote portion of the body. And that there are many individuals who confess to a pleasurable sensation of no slight degree in the emptying of the bowels during their entire lives? Children themselves will confirm their interest in the act of defecation and the pleasure in watching the defecation of another, when they are a few years older and capable of giving expression to their feelings. Of course, if these children have previously been systematically intimidated, they will understand all too well the wisdom of preserving silence on the subject. As for the other things that you do not wish to believe, let me refer you to the results of analysis and the direct observation of children, and you will realize that it is difficult not to see these things or to see them in a different light. I do not even object to making the relation between child-sexuality and sexual perversion quite obvious to you. It is really only natural; if the child has sexual life at all, it must necessarily be perverse, because aside from a few hazy illusions, the child does not know how sexuality gives rise to reproduction. The common characteristic of all perversions, on the other hand, is that they have abandoned reproduction as their aim. We term sexual activity perverse when it has renounced the aim of reproduction and follows the pursuit of pleasure as an independent goal. And so you realize that the turning point in the development of sexual life lies in its subjugation to the

purpose of reproduction. Everything this side of the turning point, everything that has given up this purpose and serves the pursuit of pleasure alone, must carry the term “perverse” and as such be regarded with contempt.

Permit me, therefore, to continue with my brief presentation of infantile sexuality. What I have told you about two organic systems I could supplement by a discussion of all the others. The sexual life of the child exhausts itself in the exercise of a series of partial instincts which seek, independently of one another, to gain satisfaction from his own body or from an external object. Among these organs the genitals speedily predominate. There are persons who continue the pursuit of satisfaction by means of their own genitals, without the aid of another genital or object, uninterruptedly from the onanism of the suckling to the onanism of necessity which arises in puberty, and even indefinitely beyond that. The theme of onanism alone would occupy us for a long period of time; it offers material for diverse observations. 21

In spite of my inclination to shorten the theme, I must tell you something about the sexual curiosity of children. It is most characteristic for child sexuality and significant for the study of neurotic symptoms. The sexual curiosity of children begins very early, sometimes before the third year. It is not connected with the differences of sexes, which means nothing to the child, since the boy, at any rate, ascribes the same male genital to both sexes. When the boy first discovers the primary sexual structure of the female, he tries at first to deny the evidence of his senses, for he cannot conceive a human being who lacks the part of his body that is of such importance to him. Later he is terrified at the possibility revealed to him and he feels the influence of all the former threats, occasioned by his intensive preoccupation with his little organ. He becomes subject to the domination of the castration complex, the formation of which plays an important part in the development of his character, provided he remains healthy; of his neurosis, if he becomes diseased; of his resistance, if he is treated analytically. We know that the little girl feels injured on account of her lack of a large, visible penis, envies the boy his possession, and 22

primarily from this motive desires to be a man. This wish manifests itself subsequently in neurosis, arising from some failure in her role as a woman. During childhood, the clitoris of the girl is the equivalent of the penis; it is especially excitable, the zone where auto-erotic satisfaction is achieved. In the transition to womanhood it is most important that the sensations of the clitoris are completely transferred at the right time to the entrance of the vagina. In cases of so-called sexual anesthesia of women the clitoris has obstinately retained its excitability.

The sexual interest of children generally turns first to the mystery of birth—the same problem that is the basis of the questions asked by the sphinx of Thebes. This curiosity is for the most part aroused by the selfish fear of the arrival of a new child. The answer which the nursery has ready for the child, that the stork brings children, is doubted far more frequently than we imagine, even by very young children. The feeling that he has been cheated out of the truth by grown-ups, contributes greatly to the child's sense of solitude and to his independent development. But the child is not capable of solving this problem unaided. His undeveloped sexual constitution restricts his ability to understand. At first he assumes that children are produced by a special substance in one's food and does not know that only women can bear children. Later he learns of this limitation 23 and relinquishes the derivation of children from food—a supposition retained in the fairy-tale. The growing child soon notices that the father plays some part in reproduction, but what it is he cannot guess. If, by chance, he is witness of a sexual act, he sees in it an attempt to subjugate, a scuffle, the sadistic miscomprehension of coitus; he does not however relate this act immediately to the evolution of the child. When he discovers traces of blood on the bedsheets or on the clothing of his mother, he considers them the proof of an injury inflicted by the father. During the latter part of childhood, he imagines that the sexual organ of the man plays an important part in the evolution of children, but can ascribe only the function of urination to that part of his body.

From the very outset children unite in believing that the birth of the child takes place through the anus; that the child therefore appears as a ball of faeces. After anal interests have been proven valueless, he abandons this

theory and assumes that the navel opens or that the region between the two breasts is the birthplace of the child. In this way the curious child 24 approaches the knowledge of sexual facts, which, clouded by his ignorance, he often fails to see. In the years prior to puberty he generally receives an incomplete, disparaging explanation which often causes traumatic consequences.

You have probably heard that the conception “sexual” is unduly expanded by psychoanalysis in order that it may maintain the hypothesis that all neuroses are due to sexual causes and that the meaning of the symptoms is sexual. You are now in a position to judge whether or not this expansion is unjustifiable. We have expanded the conception sexual only to include the 25 sexual life of children and of perverse persons. That is to say, we have reestablished its proper boundaries. Outside of psychoanalysis sexuality means only a very limited thing: normal sexual life in the service of reproduction.