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Translated by Peggy Papada

[The Taboo on Touching](#)

By [Gil Caroz](#) | 31st October 2020 | [LRO 253](#)

The Taboo on Touching

The obsessional is guilty. He is a “big criminal”. Mainly because he enjoys too much. This unavoidable guilt lodged in the structure is to be distinguished from the legal conviction of an individual for such or such a criminal act. No court of law can touch this guilt of the obsessional. A tribunal of the Other: he has one, personal, with whom he is in direct and permanent contact. Except he doesn’t know what he’s guilty of. He finds a false pretext for his guilt, which minimises his fault. Thus, the Rat Man finds himself a criminal for not having been at his father’s bedside at the time of his death, having gone to rest during the night. Freud approves. In fact, Ernst is guilty, but not about what he thinks he is. What he is guilty of is more serious. It was because, from a young age, he wanted his father to die [1].

To illustrate this, Freud recounts a clinical anecdote extracted from the first case of an obsessional who he had in analysis and which allowed him to understand this “disease”. This man, a scrupulous civil servant, used to pay for his sessions with banknotes which he had previously ironed at home because “It was a matter of conscience with him, not to hand anyone dirty paper florins; for they harboured all sorts of dangerous bacteria and might do some harm to the recipient”[2].

This ritual is in line with the “taboo on touching,” which Freud speaks of in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* and which is “one of the oldest and most fundamental commands of obsessional neurosis”[3]. The avoidance of contact and contamination is very often constructed as a complex system of prohibition, involving precise ceremonies which have the allure of a personal religion. It is counter to the investment of the object by an erotic or aggressive *melée* into which the subject is pushed by the tendency toward the union of Eros, as well as by the force of destructive impulses. This interweaving between Eros and aggressiveness is the reason why “to ‘touch’ a woman has become a euphemism for using her as a sexual object” [4].

Nevertheless, this patient had fewer qualms with regards to his sexual life. With a certain ease, he recounts to Freud a sexual assault which he practices regularly. “I play the part of a dear old uncle in a number of respectable families, and now and then I make use of my position to invite some young girl to go out with me for a day’s excursion in the country. Then I arrange that we shall miss the train home and be obliged to spend the night out of town. I always engage two rooms—I do things most handsomely;

but when the girl has gone to bed I go in to her and masturbate her with my fingers.”[5] Today, such conduct, if discovered, would lead our official to court. The airiness with which he speaks of it, undoubtedly indicates the fact that we are in the middle of the patriarchal era of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. But for Freud there is no lightness there. He qualifies this practice as an abuse and is surprised at the contrast between the scruples of this subject regarding banknotes and the lack of scruples regarding the abuse of young girls. He explains it by a shift in remorse which makes the subject very scrupulous in relation to trivial matters, allowing him on the other hand to continue without embarrassment this practice which gives him sexual satisfaction.

This compartmentalization that allows the subject to keep the scruples separate from abuse is one of the activities of the obsessional ego which are formative of its symptoms. It is about isolation. Where in hysteria the trauma is treated with amnesia, in obsessional neurosis “it is not forgotten, but, instead, it is deprived of its affect” [6]. The obsessional knows his traumas in the sense that he has not forgotten them, but he does not know them in the sense that he does not realize their value [7]. The event, and in the case we are talking about here, the event of *jouissance*, is relayed with indifference, as if it was not important.

The lived experience is not only isolated from its affect, but also from its associative connections with other ideas [8]. This technique of the ego allows the subject to concentrate on a point, without being perturbed by other significations, mainly sexual, which could intrude. But it makes it particularly difficult for the obsessional neurotic to follow the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis, that of free association [9]. Thus, isolation responds to the same principle as the taboo on touching of the obsessional hygiene, with the difference that it is not an avoidance of touching the body of the other, but a partitioning of ideas and thoughts. The obsessional ensures that thoughts remain compartmentalized, that they do not touch each other.

Let us learn from the way in which Freud treats this account of the subject, which cannot fail to challenge the analyst. He could have said to the patient to come back only when he would have stopped this practice. This would hardly shock us because the analyst cannot be the silent accomplice of a rascal *jouissance*. But Freud is much more subtle. He interprets this practice of touching by using the adjective “dirty” and the verb “harm” that the subject pronounced concerning the banknotes. Speaking about the effects that this touching can have on a young girl, he said to him: “But aren’t you afraid of doing her some harm, fiddling about in her genitals with your dirty hand?” This interpretation goes against the isolation in order to provoke a collusion between ideas which the subject wishes to leave absolutely compartmentalised. There, where he isolates the abuse and puts it in the shelter of scruples, Freud brings them together by shifting the signifiers of hygienism concerning the banknotes towards the subject’s sexual habits.

The interpretation is precise. The patient gets angry, “Harm? Why, what harm should it do her? It hasn’t done a single one of them any harm yet, and they’ve all of them enjoyed it. Some of them are married now, and it hasn’t done them any harm at all” [10]. Following this session, the subject does not come back and Freud does not tell us he regrets it. This interpretation was a bet: either the subject confirmed and accepted to put his mode of *jouissance* to work (which Freud tells us is driven by “powerful infantile determinants” [11]), or analysis stops there. This is what happened.

Translated by Peggy Papada

[1] Freud, S., "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis" (1909d), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. X, pp. 151-318.

[2] *Ibid.*, p 197.

[3] Freud, S. "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (1926), SE, V. XX, p. 121.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 122.

[5] Freud, S. (1909d), *op. cit.*, p. 197.

[6] Freud, S. (1926), *op.cit.*, p. 122.

[7] Freud, S. (1909d), *op. cit.*

[8] Freud, S. (1926), *op. cit.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Freud, S. (1909d), *op. cit.*, p. 197.

[11] *Ibid.*, p.197.

By [Gil Caroz](#) | October 31st, 2020 | [LRO 253](#)

Availability of Sigmund Freud's texts

Sigmund Freud: Notes upon a case of Obsessional Neurosis (The 'Rat Man') :1909d: SE X : p155 or Penguin Freud Library (PFL) : Vol 9 : p31

Published bilingual at www.Freud2Lacan.com See [here](#)

https://www.freud2lacan.com/docs/RAT_MAN.pdf

Original Notes of the Case (The 'Rat Man') : 1907-1908 : Sigmund Freud
SE X : p253-319

Published bilingual at www.Freud2Lacan.com See [here](#)

https://www.freud2lacan.com/docs/RAT_MAN_ADDENDUM.pdf

Inhibitions, Symptoms & Anxiety : 1926d : Sigmund Freud
SE XX p75-175 :

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