

The Logic of Paranoia

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In his analysis of the Schreber case Freud makes the decisive claim that paranoia is not characterised by the content of its symptomatology but “by the mechanism by which the symptoms are formed or by which repression is brought about”.¹ In psychosis, symptoms are the result of a specific mechanism of repression and take the form of delusion—in paranoia, delusions of persecution.

Freud believes what is repressed is a homosexual wish-phantasy. What is of special importance is that he offers a propositional analysis of the symptom-formation mechanism. The homosexual wish-phantasy is represented in the mind as a proposition—linguistically. The proposition in question is:

$$L(s,o) = \text{I love him}$$

L: love as a mode of relating; verb

s: subject

o: object

The subject proceeds to disavow the initial proposition and negate it. This is because the initial proposition is unacceptable and unbearable to the subject.

$$\neg L(s,o) = \text{I do not love him}$$

Negation of the initial proposition leads to the formation of a new one which represents a different way of relating:

$$H(s,o) = \text{I hate him}$$

Hate is not the opposite of love. It is an active negation, or, rather reactive. It is not mere absence or privation. Psychoanalytically speaking, hate is the result of repression.

The final step of this intrapsychic process leads to the inversion of the positions of subject and object:

$$H(o,s) = \text{He hates me}$$

Through the mechanism of projection, the repressed material returns as something external, coming from the outside.

The overall logical process is as follows:

$$L(s,o) \rightarrow \neg L(s,o) \rightarrow H(s,o) \rightarrow H(o,s)$$

In fact, all types of paranoia can be generated by systematically operating on different components of the original proposition—subject, verb, or object:

- 1. Persecutory delusion:** verb negation & subject/object inversion
- 2. Erotomania:** object substitution
- 3. Jealousy delusion:** subject substitution
- 4. Megalomania:** object collapse

It seems, then, that paranoia operates logically and propositionally. The delusion is factually false, yet it is not arbitrary. It follows from a set of necessary transformations of the original proposition. What appears as external persecution is, for Freud, the inverted return of repressed desire. Here truth does not consist in correspondence with external reality but in the persistence of what has been disavowed. Paranoia is not simply an error. It is a distortion of an underlying truth.

¹ Freud, S., “Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)” (1911), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XII, London: Hogarth Press, 1958, p. 59.