ON THE SEXUAL THEORIES OF CHILDREN
(1908)

Über infantile Sexualtheorien
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EDITOR’S NOTE

ÜBER INFANTILE SEXUALTHEORIEN

(a) German Editions:
1908 Sexual-Probleme, 4 (12) [December], 763–779.
1924 G.S., 5, 168–185.
1931 Sexualtheorie und Traumlehre, 43–61.
1941 G.W., 7, 171–188.

(b) English Translation:
‘On the Sexual Theories of Children’
1942 C.P., 2, 59–75. (Tr. D. Bryan.)

The present translation is a modified version of the one published in 1924.

This paper was first published in a later issue of the same periodical as the preceding paper (p. 179). Though it made its appearance so unostentatiously, and though there may be little in it to surprise the modern reader, it in fact launched a quite remarkable quantity of new ideas for the first time on the world. The paradox becomes explicable when we realize that this paper was published some months before the 'Little Hans' case history (1909b) (though, as will be seen from footnote 2 on p. 218, that work was probably already in proof) and that the section of the Three Essays (1905d) on 'The Sexual Researches of Childhood' (Standard Ed., 7, 194–7) was only added to that work in 1915, eight years after the publication of this paper, of which in fact that section is little more than an abstract. It is true that in an earlier paper on 'The Sexual Enlightenment of Children' (1907c), Freud quoted some of the material derived from 'Little Hans' (p. 134 f. above)

EDITORISCHE VORBEREMKUNG

Deutsche Ausgaben:
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Obwohl die vorliegende Arbeit wenig enthalten mag, was den heutigen Leser überraschen könnte, hat sie seinerzeit eine beträchtliche Anzahl ganz neuer Ideen erstmals vorgebracht. Das Paradox erklärt sich, wenn wir bedenken, daß diese Schrift einige Monate vor der Falldarstellung des ‘kleinen Hans’ (1909b) heraus kam (obwohl, wie aus Anm. 2 auf S. 178 hervorgeht, letztere damals wahrscheinlich bereits in Fäden vorlag) und daß der Abschnitt in den Drei Abhandlungen über ‘Die infantilen Sexualforschungen’ (s. weiter oben, S. 100–02) erst im Jahre 1915, also acht Jahre nach Veröffentlichung der vorliegenden Schrift, hinzukam und tatsächlich kaum mehr als eine Zusammenfassung dieser Schrift ist.
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and discussed very shortly the sexual curiosity of children. He even mentioned the existence of 'infantile sexual theories' (p. 137); but it was a bare mention without the least specification of their nature.

Here, then, the first readers of the present work were confronted, almost without previous warning, with the notions of fertilization through the mouth and of birth through the anus, of parental intercourse as something sadistic, and of the possession of a penis by members of both sexes. This last notion was the one with the most far-reaching implications, and they in turn find a first mention in these pages: the importance attached to the penis by children of both sexes, the results of the discovery that one sex is without it—the emergence in girls of 'envy for the penis' and in boys of the concept of 'the woman with a penis' and its bearing on one form of homosexuality. Finally, we have here the first explicit mention and discussion of the 'castration complex' itself, which had only been foreshadowed by a single obscure reference to a threat of castration in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900a, Standard Ed., 5, 619).

The peculiar wealth of material contained here is no doubt to be attributed largely to the findings in the 'Little Hans' analysis, the report upon which, recently completed, illustrated and expanded much of the content of the present paper.

So sahen sich die ersten Leser der vorliegenden Arbeit gleichsam unvorbereitet mit Vorstellungen wie der Befruchtung durch den Mund, der Geburt durch den Anus, des elterlichen Geschlechtsverkehrs als etwas Sadistisches und des Penis als eines Besitzes beider Geschlechter konfrontiert. Diese letztere Vorstellung hatte wohl die weitesten Implikationen, die gleichfalls hier erstmals Erwähnung finden: die Wertschätzung, die der Penis bei Kindern beiderlei Geschlechts genießt, die Folgen der Entdeckung, daß das eine Geschlecht keinen Penis hat, das Auftreten des 'Penisneides' beim Mädchen und die Vorstellung der 'Frau mit dem Penis' beim Knaben sowie deren Bedeutung für eine bestimmte Form der Homosexualität. Und schließlich haben wir in dieser Schrift die erste ausdrückliche Erwähnung und Erörterung des 'Kastrationskomplexes' vor uns. Der bemerkenswerte Materialreichtum dieser Arbeit ist fraglos vor allem den Funden zuzuordnen, die Freud bei der Analyse des 'kleinen Hans' gemacht hatte; die kurz vorher beendete Niederschrift des Falles illustrierte und bereicherte den Inhalt der vorliegenden Schrift.
ON THE SEXUAL THEORIES OF CHILDREN

The material on which the following synthesis is based is derived from several sources. Firstly, from the direct observation of what children say and do; secondly, from what adult neurotics consciously remember from their childhood and relate during psycho-analytic treatment; and thirdly, from the inferences and constructions, and from the unconscious memories translated into conscious material, which result from the psycho-analysis of neurotics.

That the first of these three sources has not by itself supplied all that is worth knowing on the subject is due to the attitude which the adult adopts towards the sexual life of children. He does not credit them with having any sexual activity and therefore takes no trouble to observe any such thing while, on the other hand, he suppresses any manifestation of such an activity which might claim his attention. Consequently the opportunity of obtaining information from this, the most unequivocal and fertile source of all, is a very restricted one. Whatever comes from the uninfluenced communications made by adults concerning their own conscious childhood memories is at the best subject to the objection that it may have been falsified in retrospect; but, in addition to this, it has to be viewed in the light of the fact that the informants have subsequently become neurotic. The material that comes from the third source is open to all the criticisms which it is the custom to marshal against the trustworthiness of psycho-analysis and the reliability of the conclusions that are drawn from it. Thus I cannot attempt to justify it here; I can only give an assurance that those who know and practise the psycho-analytic technique acquire an extensive confidence in its findings.

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I cannot guarantee the completeness of my results, but I can answer for the care taken in arriving at them.

There remains a difficult question to decide. How far may one assume that what is here reported of children generally is true of all children—that is, of every particular child? Pressure of education and varying intensity of the sexual instinct certainly make great individual variations in the sexual behaviour of children possible, and, above all, influence the date at which a child's sexual interest appears. For this reason, I have not divided my presentation of the material according to the successive epochs of childhood, but have combined into a single account things that come into play in different children sometimes earlier and sometimes later. It is my conviction that no child—none, at least, who is mentally normal and still less one who is intellectually gifted—can avoid being occupied with the problems of sex in the years before puberty.

I do not think much of the objection that neurotics are a special class of people, marked by an innate disposition that is 'degenerate', from whose childhood life we must not be allowed to infer anything about the childhood of other people. Neurotics are people much like others. They cannot be sharply differentiated from normal people, and in their childhood they are not always easily distinguishable from those who remain healthy in later life. It is one of the most valuable results of our psycho-analytic investigations to have discovered that the neuroses of such people have no special mental content that is peculiar to them, but that, as Jung has expressed it, they fall ill of the same complexes against which we healthy people struggle as well. The only difference is that healthy people know how to overcome those complexes without any gross damage demonstrable in practical life, whereas in nervous cases the suppression of the complexes succeeds only at the price of costly substitutive formations—that is to say, from a practical point of view it is a failure. In childhood neurotic and normal people naturally approximate to each other much more closely than they do in later


life, so that I cannot regard it as a methodological error to make use of the communications of neurotics about their childhood for drawing conclusions by analogy about normal childhood life. But since those who later become neurotics very often have in their inborn constitution an especially strong sexual instinct and a tendency to precocity and to a premature expression of that instinct, they make it possible for us to recognize a great deal of infantile activity more sharply and clearly than our capacity for observation (which is in any case a blunted one) would enable us to do in other children. But we shall of course only be able to assess the true value of these communications made by neurotic adults when, following Havelock Ellis's example, we shall have thought it worth while to collect the childhood memories of healthy adults as well.¹

In consequence of unfavourable circumstances, both of an external and an internal nature, the following observations apply chiefly to the sexual development of one sex only—that is, of males. The value of a compilation such as I am attempting here need not, however, be a purely descriptive one. A knowledge of infantile sexual theories in the shapes they assume in the thoughts of children can be of interest in various ways—even, surprisingly enough, for the elucidation of myths and fairy tales. They are indispensable, moreover, for an understanding of the neuroses themselves; for in them these childish theories are still operative and acquire a determining influence upon the form taken by the symptoms.

If we could divest ourselves of our corporeal existence, and could view the things of this earth with a fresh eye as purely thinking beings, from another planet for instance, nothing perhaps would strike our attention more forcibly than the fact of the existence of two sexes among human

¹ [Cf. Havelock Ellis, 1903, Appendix B. Freud had discussed these narratives in a footnote to the second of his Three Essays (1905d), Standard Ed., 7, 190–1.]

Leben, so daß ich einen

methodischen Fehler nicht darin erblücken kann, die Mitteilungen von Neurotikern über ihre Kindheit zu Analogieschlüssen über das normale Kindheitsleben zu verwerten. Da aber die späteren Neurotiker sehr häufig einen besonders starken Geschlechtstrieb und eine Neigung zur Frühreife, vorzeitiger Äußerung desselben, in ihrer Konstitution mitbringen, werden sie uns vieles von der infantilen Sexualbetätigung greller und deutlicher erkennen lassen, als unserer ohnedies stumpfen Beobachtungsgabe an anderen Kindern möglich wäre. Der wirkliche Wert dieser von erwachsenen Neurotikern herrührenden Mitteilungen wird sich allerdings erst abschätzen lassen, wenn man nach dem Vorgange von Havelock Ellis auch die Kindheitserinnerungen erwachsener Gesunder der Sammlung gewürdigt haben wird.¹

Infolge der Ungunst äußerer wie innerer Verhältnisse haben die nachstehenden Mitteilungen vorwiegend nur auf die Sexualentwicklung des einen Geschlechtes, des männlichen nämlich, Bezug. Der Wert einer Sammlung aber, wie ich sie hier versuche, braucht kein bloß deskriptiver zu sein. Die Kenntnis der infantilen Sexualtheorien, wie sie sich im kindlichen Denken gestalten, kann nach verschiedensten Richtungen interessant sein, überraschenderweise auch für das Verständnis der Mythen und Märchen. Unentbehrlich bleibt sie aber für die Auffassung der Neurosen selbst, innerhalb deren diese kindlichen Theorien noch in Gel tung sind und einen bestimmenden Einfluß auf die Gestaltung der Symptome gewinnen.

Wenn wir unter Verzicht auf unsere Leiblichkeit als bloß denkende Wesen, etwa von einem anderen Planeten her, die Dinge dieser Erde frisch ins Auge fassen könnten, so würde vielleicht nichts anderes unserer Aufmerksamkeit mehr auffallen als die Existenz zweier Geschlechter unter den Menschen,

¹ [Vgl. Havelock Ellis, 1903, Appendix B. S. auch oben, S. 97, Anm.]
beings, who, though so much alike in other respects, yet mark the difference between them with such obvious external signs. But it does not seem that children choose this fundamental fact in the same way as the starting-point of their researches into sexual problems. Since they have known a father and mother as far back as they can remember in life, they accept their existence as a reality which needs no further enquiry, and a boy has the same attitude towards a little sister from whom he is separated by only a slight difference of age of one or two years. A child’s desire for knowledge on this point does not in fact awaken spontaneously, prompted perhaps by some inborn need for established causes; it is aroused under the goad of the self-seeking instincts that dominate him, when—perhaps after the end of his second year—he is confronted with the arrival of a new baby. And a child whose own nursery has received no such addition is able, from observations made in other homes, to put himself in the same situation. The loss of his parents’ care, which he actually experiences or justly fears, and the presentiment that from now on he must for evermore share all his possessions with the newcomer, have the effect of awakening his emotions and sharpening his capacities for thought. The elder child expresses unconcealed hostility towards his rival, which finds vent in unfriendly criticisms of it, in wishes that ‘the stork should take it away again’ and occasionally even in small attacks upon the creature lying helpless in the cradle. A wider difference in age usually softens the expression of this primary hostility. In the same way, at a rather later age, if no small brother or sister has appeared, the child’s wish for a playmate, such as he has seen in other families, may gain the upper hand.

At the instigation of these feelings and worries, the child now comes to be occupied with the first, grand problem of life and asks himself the question: ‘Where do babies come from?’

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[This anecdote appeared in the first edition of The Interpretation of Dreams (1900a), Standard, Ed. 4, 251.]

[See footnote above, p. 135.]
—a question which, there can be no doubt, first ran: ‘Where did this particular, intruding baby come from?’ We seem to hear the echoes of this first riddle in innumerable riddles of myth and legend. The question itself is, like all research, the product of a vital exigency,¹ as though thinking were entrusted with the task of preventing the recurrence of such dreaded events. Let us assume, however, that the child’s thinking soon becomes independent of this instigation, and henceforward goes on operating as a self-sustained instinct for research. Where a child is not already too much intimidated, he sooner or later adopts the direct method of demanding an answer from his parents or those in charge of him, who are in his eyes the source of all knowledge. This method, however, fails. The child receives either evasive answers or a rebuke for his curiosity, or he is dismissed with the mythologically significant piece of information which, in German countries, runs: ‘The stork brings the babies; it fetches them out of the water.’ I have reason to believe that far more children than their parents suspect are dissatisfied with this solution and meet it with energetic doubts, which, however, they do not always openly admit. I know of a three-year-old boy who, after receiving this piece of enlightenment, disappeared—to the terror of his nurse. He was found at the edge of the big pond adjoining the country house, to which he had hurried in order to see the babies in the water. I also know of another boy who could only allow his disbelief to find expression in a hesitant remark that he knew better, that it was not a stork that brought babies but a heron. It seems to me to follow from a great deal of information I have received that children refuse to believe the stork theory and that from the time of this first deception and rebuff they nourish a distrust of adults and have a suspicion of there being something forbidden which is

¹ [The part played in mental development by the ‘exigencies of life’ was discussed by Freud in Chapter VII (C) of The Interpretation of Dreams, Standard Ed., 5, 565, and earlier in his ‘Project’ of 1895 (Section 1 of Part I), Freud, 1950a.]

— die wohl zuerst lautet, woher dieses einzelne störende Kind gekommen ist. Den Nachklag dieser ersten Rätselfrage glaubt man in unbestimmten vielen Rätseln des Mythus und der Sage zu vernehmen; die Frage selbst ist, wie alles Forschen, ein Produkt der Lebensnot, als ob dem Denken die Aufgabe gestellt würde, das Wiedereintreffen so gefürchteter Ereignisse zu verhüten. Nehmen wir indes an, daß sich das Denken des Kindes alsbald von seiner Anregung frei macht und als selbständiger Forschertrieb weiterarbeitet. Wo das Kind nicht bereits zu sehr eingeschüchtert ist, schlägt es früher oder später den nächsten Weg ein, Antwort von seinen Eltern und Pflegepersonen, die ihm die Quelle des Wissens bedeuten, zu verlangen. Dieser Weg geht aber fehl. Das Kind erhält entweder ausweisende Antwort oder einen Verweis für seine Wüßbegierde oder wird mit jener mythologisch bedeutsamen Auskunft abgefertigt, die in deutschen Landen lautet: Der Storch bringt die Kinder, die er aus dem Wasser holen. Ich habe Grund anzunehmen, daß weit mehr Kinder, als die Eltern ahnen, mit dieser Lösung unzufrieden sind und ihr energisches Zweifel entgegensetzen, die nur nicht immer offen eingestanden werden. Ich weiß von einem dreijährigen Knaben, der nach erhaltener Aufklärung zum Schrecken seiner Kinderfrau vermüllt wurde und sich am Ufer des großen Schloßteiches wiederfand, wohin er geellt war, um die Kinder im Wasser zu beobachten, von einem anderen, der seinem Unglauben keine andere als die zaghaftes Aussprache gestatten konnte, er wisse es besser, nicht der Storch bringe die Kinder, sondern der — Fischreiter. Es scheint mir aus vielen Mitteilungen hervorzugehen, daß die Kinder der Storchtetheorie den Glauben verweigern, von dieser ersten Täuschung und Abweisung an aber ein Mißtrauen gegen die Erwachsenen in sich nähren, die Ahnung von etwas Verbotenem gewinnen, das ihnen von
being withheld from them by the 'grown-ups', and that they consequently hide their further researches under a cloak of secrecy. With this, however, the child also experiences the first occasion for a 'psychical conflict', in that views for which he feels an instinctual kind of preference, but which are not 'right' in the eyes of the grown-ups, come into opposition with other views, which are supported by the authority of the grown-ups without being acceptable to him himself. Such a psychical conflict may soon turn into a 'psychical dissociation'. The set of views which are bound up with being 'good', but also with a cessation of reflection, become the dominant and conscious views; while the other set, for which the child's work of research has meanwhile obtained fresh evidence, but which are not supposed to count, become the suppressed and 'unconscious' ones. The nuclear complex\(^1\) of a neurosis is in this way brought into being.

Recently, the analysis of a five-year-old boy,\(^2\) which his father undertook and which he has handed over to me for publication, has given me irrefutable proof of the correctness of a view towards which the psycho-analysis of adults had long been leading me. I now know that the change which takes place in the mother during pregnancy does not escape the child's sharp eyes and that he is very well able before long to establish the true connection between the increase in his mother's stoutness and the appearance of the baby. In the case just mentioned the boy was three and a half years old when his sister was born and four and three quarters when he showed his better knowledge by the most unmistakable allusions. This precocious discovery, however, is always kept secret, and later, in conformity with the further vicissitudes of the child's sexual researches, it is repressed and forgotten.

\(^1\) [Soon after this, e.g. in the 'Rat Man' case history (1909a), Standard Ed., 10, 208 n, Freud was using this term as equivalent to what a little later (1910a), Standard Ed., 11, 171, he called the 'Oedipus complex'. In the present passage, where it first appears, the application is wider.]

\(^2\) [The case history of 'Little Hans' (1909a), which was published shortly after the present paper.]

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\(^2\) [Die Falldarstellung des 'kleinen Hanses' (1909b), die kurz nach dieser Arbeit herauskam.]
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The 'stork fable', therefore, is not one of the sexual theories of children. On the contrary, it is the child's observation of animals, who hide so little of their sexual life and to whom he feels so closely akin, that strengthens his disbelief in it. With his knowledge, independently obtained, that babies grow inside the mother's body, he would be on the right road to solving the problem on which he first tries out his powers of thinking. But his further progress is inhibited by a piece of ignorance which cannot be made good [see below, p. 218f.] and by false theories which the state of his own sexuality imposes on him.

These false sexual theories, which I shall now discuss, all have one very curious characteristic. Although they go astray in a grotesque fashion, yet each one of them contains a fragment of real truth; and in this they are analogous to the attempts of adults, which are looked at as strokes of genius, at solving the problems of the universe which are too hard for human comprehension. What is correct and hits the mark in such theories is to be explained by their origin from the components of the sexual instinct which are already stirring in the childish organism. For it is not owing to any arbitrary mental act or to chance impressions that those notions arise, but to the necessities of the child's psychosexual constitution; and this is why we can speak of sexual theories in children as being typical, and why we find the same mistaken beliefs in every child whose sexual life is accessible to us.

The first of these theories starts out from the neglect of the differences between the sexes on which I laid stress at the beginning of this paper [p. 211f.] as being characteristic of children. It consists in attributing to everyone, including females, the possession of a penis, such as the boy knows from his own body. It is precisely in what we must regard as the 'normal' sexual constitution that already in childhood the penis is the leading erogenous zone and the chief auto-erotic sexual object; and the boy's estimate of its value is logically reflected in his inability to imagine a person like himself who is

Die »Storchfabel« gehört also nicht zu den infantilen Sexualtheorien; es ist im Gegenteil die Beobachtung der Tiere, die ihr Sexualleben so wenig verhüllen und denen sich das Kind so verwundert fühlt, die dem Unglauben des Kindes bestärkt. Mit der Erkenntnis, das Kind wachse im Leibe der Mutter, die das Kind noch selbständig erwirkt, wäre es auf dem richtigen Wege, das Problem, an dem es zuerst seine Denkkraft erprobte, zu lösen. Im weiteren Fortschreiten wird es aber genehm durch eine Unwissenheit, die sich nicht ersetzen läßt [s.S.178 f.], und durch falsche Theorien, welche der Zustand der eigenen Sexualität ihm aufdrängt.


without this essential constituent. When a small boy sees his little sister’s genitals, what he says shows that his prejudice is already strong enough to falsify his perception. He does not comment on the absence of a penis, but invariably says, as though by way of consolation and to put things right: ‘Her—’s still quite small. But when she gets bigger it’ll grow all right.’ The idea of a woman with a penis returns in later life, in the dreams of adults: the dreamer, in a state of nocturnal sexual excitation, will throw a woman down, strip her and prepare for intercourse—and then, in place of the female genitals, he beholds a well-developed penis and breaks off the dream and the excitation. The numerous hermaphrodites of classical antiquity faithfully reproduce this idea, universally held in childhood; one may observe that to most normal people they cause no offence, while the real hermaphroditic formations of the genitals which are permitted to occur by Nature nearly always excite the greatest abhorrence.

If this idea of a woman with a penis becomes ‘fixed’ in an individual when he is a child, resisting all the influences of later life and making him as a man unable to do without a penis in his sexual object, then, although in other respects he may lead a normal sexual life, he is bound to become a homosexual, and will seek his sexual object among men who, owing to some other physical and mental characteristics, remind him of women. Real women, when he comes to know them later, remain impossible as sexual objects for him, because they lack the essential sexual attraction; indeed, in connection with another impression of his childhood life,

1 [This ‘falsified perception’, or, as Freud afterwards named it, this ‘denial’ or ‘disavowal’, was very much later to become the basis of important theoretical discussions. Cf. in particular the paper on ‘Fetishism’ (1927e) and Chapter VIII of the posthumous Outline of Psycho-Analysis (1940a [1938]).]
3 [Freud returned to this in his case history of ‘Little Hans’ (1909b), Standard Ed., 10, 109.]
they may even become abhorrent to him. The child, having been mainly dominated by excitations in the penis, will usually have obtained pleasure by stimulating it with his hand; he will have been detected in this by his parents or nurse and terrorized by the threat of having his penis cut off. The effect of this 'threat of castration' is proportionate to the value set upon that organ and is quite extraordinarily deep and persistent. Legends and myths testify to the upheaval in the child's emotional life and to the horror which is linked with the castration complex—a complex which is subsequently remembered by consciousness with corresponding reluctance. The woman's genitalia, when seen later on, are regarded as a mutilated organ and recall this threat, and they therefore arouse horror instead of pleasure in the homosexual. This reaction cannot be altered in any way when the homosexual comes to learn from science that his childish assumption that women had a penis too was not so far wrong after all. Anatomy has recognized the clitoris within the female pudenda as being an organ that is homologous to the penis; and the physiology of the sexual processes has been able to add that this small penis which does not grow any bigger behaves in fact during childhood like a real and genuine penis—that it becomes the seat of excitations which lead to its being touched, that its excitability gives the little girl's sexual activity a masculine character and that a wave of repression in the years of puberty is needed in order for this masculine sexuality to be discarded and the woman to emerge. Since the sexual function of many women is crippled, whether by their obstinate clinging on to this excitability of the clitoris so that they remain anaesthetic in intercourse, or by such excessive repression occurring that its operation is partly replaced by hysterical compensatory formations—all

1 [The first published appearance of the term is the present one, and not the passage in 'Little Hans', Standard Ed., 10, 8, as is there wrongly suggested in a footnote. The idea of a threat of castration occurs in a single sentence in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900a), Standard Ed., 5, 619.]

this seems to show that there is some truth in the infantile sexual theory that women, like men, possess a penis.\(^1\)

It is easy to observe that little girls fully share their brother's opinion of it. They develop a great interest in that part of the boy's body. But this interest promptly falls under the sway of envy. They feel themselves unfairly treated. They make attempts to micturate in the posture that is made possible for boys by their possessing a big penis; and when a girl declares that 'she would rather be a boy', we know what deficiency her wish is intended to put right.

If children could follow the hints given by the excitement of the penis they would get a little nearer to the solution of their problem. That the baby grows inside the mother's body is obviously not a sufficient explanation. How does it get inside? What starts its development? That the father has something to do with it seems likely; he says that the baby is his baby as well.\(^2\) Again, the penis certainly has a share, too, in these mysterious happenings; the excitation in it which accompanies all these activities of the child's thoughts bears witness to this. Attached to this excitation are impulses which the child cannot account for—obscure urges to do something violent, to press in, to knock to pieces, to tear open a hole somewhere. But when the child thus seems to be well on the way to postulating the existence of the vagina and to concluding that an incursion of this kind by his father's penis into his mother is the act by means of which the baby is created in his mother's body—at this juncture his enquiry is broken off in helpless perplexity. For standing in its way is his theory that his mother possesses a penis just as a man does, and the existence of the cavity which receives the penis remains undiscovered by him. It is not hard to guess that the lack of success of his intellectual efforts makes it easier for

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\(^1\) [Cf. *Three Essays* (1905d), *Standard Ed.*, 7, 230–1. A much earlier hint at some of this occurs in a letter to Fliess of November 14, 1897 (Freud, 1950a, Letter 75).]

\(^2\) [Cf. the 'Analysis of a Five-Year-Old Boy' (1909b) *Standard Ed.*, 10, 139–44].
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him to reject and forget them. This brooding and doubting, however, becomes the prototype of all later intellectual work directed towards the solution of problems, and the first failure has a crippling effect on the child's whole future.¹

Their ignorance of the vagina also makes it possible for children to believe in the second of their sexual theories. If the baby grows in the mother’s body and is then removed from it, this can only happen along the one possible pathway—the anal aperture. The baby must be evacuated like a piece of excrement, like a stool. When, in later childhood, the same question is the subject of solitary reflection or of a discussion between two children, the explanations probably arrived at are that the baby emerges from the navel, which comes open, or that the abdomen is slit up and the baby taken out—which was what happened to the wolf in the story of Little Red Riding-Hood. These theories are expressed aloud and also consciously remembered later on; they no longer contain anything objectionable. These same children have by then completely forgotten that in earlier years they believed in another theory of birth, which is now obstructed by the repression of the anal sexual components that has meanwhile occurred. At that time a motion was something which could be talked about in the nursery without shame. The child was still not so distant from his constitutional coprophilic inclinations. There was nothing degraded about coming into the world like a heap of faeces, which had not yet been condemned by feelings of disgust. The cloacal theory, which, after all, is valid for so many animals, was the most natural theory, and it alone could obtrude upon the child as being a probable one.

This being so, however, it was only logical that the child should refuse to grant women the painful prerogative of giving birth to children. If babies are born through the anus, then

¹ [Freud quoted this last sentence in a footnote to his study of Leonardo (1910c), Standard Ed., 11, 79, where this same subject is discussed. The question had already been approached by Freud (see above, p. 136).]

Über infantile Sexualtheorien

Denn bemüht ihn dann ihre Verwerfung und ihr Vergessen erleichtert, wird man gern annehmen. Dieses Grübeln und Zweifeln wird aber vorbildlich für alle späteren Denkarbeit an Problemen, und der erste Mißerfolg wirkt für alle Zeiten lähmend fort.¹

Die Unkenntnis der Vagina ermöglicht dem Kinde auch die Oberzeugung von der zweiten seiner Sexualtheorien. Wenn das Kind im Leibe der Mutter wächst und aus diesem entfernt wird, so kann dies nur auf dem einzig möglichen Wege der Darmöffnung geschehen. Das Kind muß entleert werden wie ein Excrement, ein Stuhlgang. Wenn dieselbe Frage in späteren Kinderjahren Gegenstand des einsamen Nachdenkens oder der Besprechung zwischen zwei Kindern wird, so stellen sich wohl die Auskünfte ein, das Kind komme aus dem sich öffnenden Nabel oder der Bauch werde aufgeschnitten und das Kind herausgenommen, wie es dem Wolf im Märchen von Rotkäppchen geschieht. Diese Theorien werden laut ausgesprochen und später auch bewußt errichtet; sie enthalten nichts Anstoßes mehr. Dieselben Kinder haben dann völlig vergessen, daß sie in früheren Jahren an eine andere Geburtstheorie glaubten, welcher gegenwärtig die seither eingetretene Verdrängung der analen Sexualkomponente im Wege steht. Damals war der Stuhlgang etwas, wovon in der Kinderstube ohne Scheu gesprochen werden durfte, das Kind stand seinen konstitutionellen koprophilen Neigungen noch nicht so fern; es war keine Degradation, so zur Welt zu kommen wie ein Hausen Kot, der der Ekel noch nicht verdammt hatte. Die Kloakentheorie, die für so viele Tiere ja zu Recht besteht, war die natürlichste und die einzige, die sich dem Kinde als wahrscheinlich aufdrängen konnte.

¹ [Freud zitiert diesen letzten Satz in einer Fußnote zu seiner Leonardo-Studie (1910 c), Studienausgabe, Bd. 10, S. 105 f., wo er das gleiche Thema behandelt. Er hatte die Frage jedoch schon einmal angeschnitten (s. oben, S. 165).]
a man can give birth just as well as a woman. It is therefore possible for a boy to imagine that he, too, has children of his own, without there being any need to accuse him on that account of having feminine inclinations. He is merely giving evidence in this of the anal eroticism which is still alive in him.

If the cloacal theory of birth is preserved in consciousness during later years of childhood, as occasionally happens, it is accompanied too by a solution—no longer, it is true, a primary one—of the problem of the origin of babies. Here it is like being in a fairy story; one eats some particular thing and gets a child from it. This infantile theory of birth is revived in cases of insanity. A manic woman, for instance, will lead the visiting doctor to a little heap of faeces which she has deposited in a corner of her cell, and say to him with a laugh: ‘That’s the baby I had to-day.’

The third of the typical sexual theories arises in children if, through some chance domestic occurrence, they become witnesses of sexual intercourse between their parents. Their perceptions of what is happening are bound, however, to be only very incomplete. Whatever detail it may be that comes under their observation—whether it is the relative positions of the two people, or the noises they make, or some accessory circumstance—children arrive in every case at the same conclusion. They adopt what may be called a sadistic view of coition. They see it as something that the stronger participant is forcibly inflicting on the weaker, and they (especially boys) compare it to the romping familiar to them from their childish experience—romping which, incidentally, is not without a dash of sexual excitation. I have not been able to ascertain that children recognize this behaviour which they have witnessed between their parents as the missing link needed for solving the problem of babies; it appears more

1 [Cf. a similar remark in the case history of ‘Little Hans’, Standard Ed., 10, 95 n. It was only later, especially in the ‘Wolf Man’ analysis (1918b), that Freud drew attention to the close connection that can exist between anal eroticism and a feminine attitude. See, for instance, Standard Ed., 17, 81.]

2 [Vgl. eine ähnliche Bemerkung in der Falldarstellung des ‚kleinen Hans‘, Studienausgabe, Bd. 8, S. 82, Anm. Erst später, besonders in der Analyse der ‚Wolfsmanche‘ (1918 b), wies Freud auf die enge Verbindung hin, die zwischen der Analerotik und einer femininen Haltung bestehen kann. S. z. B. ibid., S. 193.]
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often that the connection is overlooked by them for the very reason that they have interpreted the act of love as an act of violence. But this view of it itself gives an impression of being a return of the obscure impulse towards cruel behaviour which became attached to the excitations of the child's penis when he first began to think about the problem of where babies came from [cf. above, p. 218]. The possibility, too, cannot be excluded that this premature sadistic impulse, which might so nearly have led to the discovery of coition, itself first emerged under the influence of extremely obscure memories of parental intercourse, for which the child had obtained the material—though at the time he made no use of it—while he was still in his first years and was sharing his parents' bedroom.¹

The sadistic theory of coitus, which, taken in isolation, is misleading where it might have provided confirmatory evidence, is, once again, the expression of one of the innate components of the sexual instinct, any of which may be strongly marked to a greater or lesser degree in each particular child. For this reason the theory is correct up to a certain point; it has in part divined the nature of the sexual act and the 'sex-battle' that precedes it. Not infrequently, too, the child is in a position to support this view by accidental observations which he understands in part correctly, but also in part incorrectly and indeed in a reversed sense. In many marriages the wife does in fact recoil from her husband's embraces, which bring her no pleasure, but the risk of a fresh pregnancy. And so the child who is believed to be asleep (or who is pretending to be asleep) may receive an impression from his mother which he can only interpret as meaning that she is defending herself against an act of violence. At other times the whole marriage offers an observant child the spectacle of

¹ Restif de la Bretonne, in his autobiographical work *Monsieur Nicolas* (1794), tells a story of an impression he received at the age of four, which confirms this sadistic misunderstanding of coitus. — [This question came up for lengthy discussion some ten years later, in Freud's 'Wolf Man' case history. (See in particular *Standard Ed.*, 17, 48 ff.)]
an unceasing quarrel, expressed in loud words and unfriendly gestures; so that he need not be surprised if the quarrel is carried on at night as well, and finally settled by the same method which he himself is accustomed to use in his relations with his brothers and sisters or playmates.

Moreover, if the child discovers spots of blood in his mother’s bed or on her underclothes, he regards it as a confirmation of his view. It proves to him that his father has made another similar assault on his mother during the night (whereas we should rather take the fresh spots of blood to mean that there had been a temporary cessation of sexual intercourse). Much of the otherwise inexplicable ‘horror of blood’ shown by neurotics finds its explanation from this connection. Once again, however, the child’s mistake contains a fragment of truth. For in certain familiar circumstances a trace of blood is in fact judged as a sign that sexual intercourse has been begun.

A question connected somewhat indirectly with the insolvable problem of where babies come from also engages the child—the question as to the nature and content of the state called ‘being married’; and he answers the question differently according as his chance perceptions in relation to his parents have coincided with instincts of his own which are still pleasurably coloured. All that these answers seem to have in common is that the child promises himself pleasurable satisfaction from being married and supposes that it involves a disregard of modesty. The notion I have most frequently met with is that each of the married couple urinates in front of the other. A variation of this, which sounds as if it was meant to indicate a greater knowledge symbolically, is that the man urinates into the woman’s chamber-pot. In other instances the meaning of marriage is supposed to be that the two people show their belongings to each other (without being ashamed). In one case, in which education had succeeded in postponing sexual knowledge especially late, a fourteen-year-old girl, who had already begun to menstruate, arrived from the books she had read at the idea that being married consisted

In loserem Zusammenhange mit dem unlösbaren Problem, woher die Kinder kommen, beschäftigt sich das Kind mit der Frage, was das Wesen und der Inhalt des Zustandes sei, den man »Verheiratetsein« heißt, und beantwortet diese Frage verschieden, je nach dem Zusammen treffen von zufälligen Wahrnehmungen bei den Eltern mit den eigenen lustbetonten Trieben. Nur daß es sich vom Verheirateten Lustbefriedigung verspricht und ein Hinweisetze über die Scham vermutet, scheint allen diesen Beantwortungen gemeinsam. Die Auffassung, die ich am häufigsten gefunden habe, lautet, daß »man voreinander uriniert«; eine Abänderung, die so klingt, als ob sie symbolisch ein Mehr wissen andeutet: daß der Mann in den Topf der Frau uriniert. Andere Male wird der Sinn des Heiratens darin verlegt: daß man ein ander den Popo zeigt (ohne sich zu schämen). In einem Falle, in dem es der Erziehung gelungen war, die Sexualerfahrung besonders lange aufzuschieben, kam das vierzehnjährige und bereits menstruierte Mädchen über Anregung der Lektüre auf die Idee, das Verheiratetsein bestehe in
in a 'mixing of blood'; and since her own sister had not yet started her periods, the lustful girl made an assault on a female visitor who had confessed that she was just then menstruating, so as to force her to take part in this 'blood-mixing'.

Childhood opinions about the nature of marriage, which are not seldom retained by conscious memory, have great significance for the symptomatology of later neurotic illness. At first they find expression in children's games in which each child does with another whatever it is that in his view constitutes being married; and then, later on, the wish to be married may choose the infantile form of expression and so make its appearance in a phobia which is at first sight unrecognizable, or in some corresponding symptom.¹

These seem to be the most important of the typical sexual theories that children produce spontaneously in early childhood, under the sole influence of the components of the sexual instinct. I know that I have not succeeded in making my material complete or in establishing an unbroken connection between it and the rest of infantile life. But I may add one or two supplementary observations, whose absence would otherwise be noticed by any well-informed person. Thus, for instance, there is the significant theory that a baby is got by a kiss—a theory which obviously betrays the predominance of the erotogenic zone of the mouth. In my experience this theory is exclusively feminine and is sometimes found to be pathogenic in girls whose sexual researches have been subjected to exceedingly strong inhibitions in childhood. Again, through an accidental observation, one of my women patients happened upon the theory of the 'couvade', which, as is well known, is a general custom among some races and is probably intended to contradict the doubts as to paternity which can never be entirely overcome. A rather eccentric uncle of this patient's stayed at home for days after the birth of his

¹ The games that are most significant for subsequent neuroses are playing at 'doctor' and at 'father and mother'.

Die infantilen Meinungen über das Wesen der Ehe, die nicht selten von der bewussten Erinnerung festgehalten werden, haben für die Symptomatik späterer neurotischer Erkrankung große Bedeutung. Sie schaffen sich zunächst Ausdruck in Kinderspielen, in denen man das miteinander tut, was das Verheiratetsein ausmacht, und dann später einmal kann sich der Wunsch, verheiratet zu sein, die infantile Ausdrucksform wählen, um in einer zunächst unkenntlichen Phobie oder einem entsprechenden Symptom aufzutreten.¹


¹ Die für die spärliche Neurose bedeutamsten Kinderspiele sind das »Doktorskrip« und »Papa- und Mama«-Spilen.
child and received visitors in his dressing-gown, from which she concluded that both parents took part in the birth of their children and had to go to bed.

In about their tenth or eleventh year, children get to hear about sexual matters. A child who has grown up in a comparatively uninhibited social atmosphere, or who has found better opportunities for observation, tells other children what he knows, because this makes him feel mature and superior. What children learn in this way is mostly correct—that is, the existence of the vagina and its purpose is revealed to them; but otherwise the explanations they get from one another are not infrequently mixed with false ideas and burdened with remains of the older infantile sexual theories. They are scarcely ever complete or sufficient to solve the primordial problem. Just as formerly it was ignorance of the vagina which prevented the whole process from being understood, so now is it ignorance of the semen. The child cannot guess that another substance besides urine is excreted from the male sexual organ, and occasionally an 'innocent' girl on her wedding night is still indignant at her husband 'urinating into her'. This information acquired in the years of pre-puberty is followed by a new access of sexual researches by the child. But the theories which he now produces no longer have the typical and original stamp which was characteristic of the primary theories of early childhood as long as the infantile sexual components could find expression in theories in an uninhibited and unmodified fashion. The child's later intellectual efforts at solving the puzzles of sex have not seemed to me worth collecting, nor can they have much claim to a pathogenic significance. Their multiplicity is of course mainly dependent on the nature of the enlightenment which a child receives; but their significance consists rather in the fact that they re-awaken the traces, which have since become unconscious, of his first period of sexual interest; so that it is not infrequent for masturbatory sexual activity and some degree of emotional detachment from his parents to be linked up with them. Hence the condemnatory

sie, daß bei einer Geburt beide Eltern beteiligt seien und zu Bette gehen müßten.
Um das zehnte oder elfte Lebensjahr tritt die sexuelle Mitteilung an die Kinder heran. Ein Kind, welches in ungehemmten sozialen Verhältnissen aufgewachsen ist oder sonst glücklichere Gelegenheit zur Beobachtung gefunden hat, teilt anderen mit, was es weiß, weil es sich dabei reif und überlegen empfinden kann. Was die Kinder so erfahren, ist meist das Richtige, das heißt, es wird ihnen die Existenz der Vagina und deren Bestimmung verraten, aber sonst sind diese Aufklärungen, die sie voneinander entlehnen, nicht selten mit Falschem vermengt, mit Überresten der älteren infantilen Sexualtheorien behaftet. Vollständig und zur Lösung des uralten Problems ausreichend sind sie fast nie. Wie früher die Unkenntnis der Vagina, so hindert jetzt die des Samens die Einsicht in den Zusammenhang. Das Kind kann nicht erraten, daß aus dem männlichen Geschlechtsglied noch eine andere Substanz entleert wird als der Harn, und gelegentlich zeigt sich ein «unschuldiges Mädchen» noch in der Brautnacht entrüstet darüber, daß der Mann «in sie hineinurierte». An diese Mitteilungen in den Jahren der Vorgeschichte schließt sich nun ein neuer Aufschwung der kindlichen Sexualforschung; aber die Theorien, welche die Kinder jetzt schaffen, haben nicht mehr das typische und ursprüngliche Gepräge, das für die frühkindlichen, primären, charakteristisch war, solange die infantilen Sexualkomponenten ungehemmt und unverwandelt ihren Ausdruck in Theorien durchsetzen konnten. Die späteren Denkbemühungen zur Lösung der sexuellen Rätsel schienen mir die Sammlung nicht zu verloren, sie können auch auf pathogene Bedeutung wenig Anspruch mehr erheben. Ihre Mannigfaltigkeit ist natürlich in erster Linie von der Natur der erhaltenen Aufklärung abhängig; ihre Bedeutung liegt vielmehr darin, daß sie die unbewußtgewordenen Spuren jener ersten Periode des sexuellen Interesses wieder erwecken, so daß nicht selten masturbatorische Sexualbetätigung und ein Stück der Gefühlsablösung von den Eltern an sie anknüpfen. Daher das verdammende Urteil der Erzieher,
judgement of teachers that enlightenment of such a kind at this age 'corrupts' children.

Let me give a few examples to show what elements often enter into these late speculations by children about sexual life. A girl had heard from her schoolmates that the husband gives his wife an egg, which she hatches out in her body. A boy, who had also heard of the egg, identified it with the testicle, which [in German] is vulgarly called by the same word [Ei]; and he racked his brains to make out how the contents of the scrotum could be constantly renewed. The information given seldom goes far enough to prevent important uncertainties about sexual events. Thus a girl may arrive at an expectation that intercourse occurs on one occasion only, but that it lasts a very long time—twenty-four hours—and that all the successive babies come from this single occasion. One would suppose that this child had got her knowledge of the reproductive process from certain insects; but it turned out that this was not so and that the theory emerged as a spontaneous creation. Other girls are ignorant of the period of gestation, the life in the womb, and assume that the baby appears immediately after the first night of intercourse. Marcel Prévost has turned this girlhood mistake into an amusing story in one of his 'Lettres de femmes'.1 These later sexual researches of children, or of adolescents who have been retarded at the stage of childhood, offer an almost inexhaustible theme and one which is perhaps not uninteresting in general; but it is more remote from my present interest. I must only lay stress on the fact that in this field children produce many incorrect ideas in order to contradict older and better knowledge which has become unconscious and is repressed.

The way in which children react to the information they are given also has its significance. In some, sexual repression has gone so far that they will not listen to anything; and these succeed in remaining ignorant even in later life—apparently ignorant, at least—until, in the psycho-analysis of

1 [Cf. Prévost, 'La nuit de Raymonde', Nouvelles lettres de femmes.]


Auch die Art, wie die Kinder sich gegen die ihnen zugehenden Mitteilungen verhalten, hat ihre Bedeutung. Bei manchen ist die Sexualverdrängung so weit gediehen, daß sie nichts anhören wollen, und diesen gelingt es auch, bis in späte Jahre unwissend zu bleiben, scheinbar unwissend wenigstens, bis in der Psychoanalyse

2 [Vgl. Prévost, La nuit de Raymond, Nouvelles lettres de femmes.]
neurotics, the knowledge that originated in early childhood comes to light. I also know of two boys between ten and thirteen years old who, though it is true that they listened to the sexual information, rejected it with the words: 'Your father and other people may do something like that, but I know for certain my father never would.'  But however widely children's later reactions to the satisfaction of their sexual curiosity may vary, we may assume that in the first years of childhood their attitude was absolutely uniform, and we may feel certain that at that time all of them tried most eagerly to discover what it was that their parents did with each other so as to produce babies.

1 [This anecdote was repeated by Freud in his somewhat later paper on a special type of object-choice (1910b), Standard Ed., 11, 170, where some further remarks on the present subject will be found.]

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früher Kindheit stammende Wissen zum Vorschein kommt. Ich weiß auch von zwei Knaben zwischen zehn und dreizehn Jahren, welche die sexuelle Aufklärung zwar anhörten, aber dem Gewährsmann die ablehnende Antwort gaben: Es ist möglich, daß dein Vater und andere Leute so etwas tun, aber von meinem Vater weiß ich es gewiß, daß er es nie tun würde. 2. Wie mannigfaltig immer dieses spätere Benehmen der Kinder gegen die Befriedigung der sexuellen Wissbegierde sein mag, für ihre ersten Kinderjahre dürfen wir ein durchaus gleichförmiges Verhalten annehmen und glauben, daß sie damals alle aufs eifrigste bestrebt waren zu erfahren, was die Eltern miteinander tun, woraus dann die Kinder werden.

2 [Diese Anekdote steht auch, nebst einigen weiteren Bemerkungen zum Thema, in der Arbeit über einen besonderen Typus der Objektwahl (1910b), unten, S. 192.]