

THE WORK OF THE NEGATIVE. By *André Green*; translated by *A. Weller*.  
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*The Work of the Negative* is a difficult book, hard to read, infused with Continental philosophy and Freudian metapsychology, containing almost no clinical material. Yet, in my view and that of others, it is of vital importance to psychoanalysis, both theoretically and clinically. Green's writing style can be infuriating; like Freud, he wanders from subject to subject, rarely providing a coherent outline of his thinking, assuming an intimate acquaintance with Freud, with Lacan, and with Hegel, among others, asking the reader to form conclusions and pull together clinical implications. French psychoanalysis has always been in dialogue with French philosophy, and it would be important for the reader to have some familiarity with Hegel, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and Sartre. One could skip the chapter on Hegel, but the rest of the book is deeply imbued with philosophical terminology. In dialogue with Freud, especially his aborted beginnings and uncompleted late thoughts, Green aims to complete Freud's project, suggesting where he thinks Freud might have gone. I do not think Green presents a finished theory in this book; rather, he is still reaching and trying out different points of view. Freud never fully developed a theory of objects, and this is Green's central focus, the interplay of external and internal objects, internal objects as representations, and their various uses within the psyche.

There have been, I believe, three revolutionary turns in psychoanalytic theory. The first, of course, occurred with Sigmund Freud. His theory is largely intrapsychic, focusing on psychic conflict, repression as the chief method of inhibiting instincts, and symptoms resulting from the return of the repressed. Of particular importance to Green is the concept of representation: Freud uses *Darstellung*<sup>1</sup> to refer to something actually

<sup>1</sup>Both *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung* were translated by Strachey as "representation," thus blurring the distinction between the concepts.

present, a presentation, while *Vorstellung* refers to something to re-presented in the mind. For Freud, the presence of representations is a developmental achievement: the ability to keep present in mind what is not perceptually available. Like Freud, Green thinks of representation as a defense against object loss, but for Green it is also the beginning of the work of the negative.

The second revolutionary turn in psychoanalysis Melanie was initiated by Melanie Klein and her followers. Klein presents a theory of connection to objects and their clinical expression as unconscious fantasy. Going beyond Freud, she describes a primitive paranoid anxiety characterized by splitting and projective/introjective defensive processes in which there is constant interaction between internal and external objects. Unlike Freud, Klein assumes the presence of representations at birth.

The third revolutionary turn in psychoanalysis came with the recognition of unrepresented or weakly represented mental states, a turn memorialized in a recent collection edited by Howard Levine, Gail Reed, and Dominique Scarfone (2013). This was a turn away from the Kleinian formulation back to the Freudian idea. Perceptual registrations are present but are transcribed into stable representations only as the psychic apparatus matures. I believe we are in the beginning stages of working out a theory of these unrepresented mental states and how they manifest clinically.

Green's phrase *the work of the negative* entails a psychoanalytic theory of unrepresented states and their genesis and mechanisms. I will try to pull together an outline of his theory, which I understand as foundational in scope (for a useful summary of his ideas, see Green 2005). I will necessarily leave out the richness and brilliance of Green's digressions, which often appear as little gems in a vast sea.

Green starts *The Work of the Negative* with a chapter on Hegel<sup>2</sup> and Freud. The term *the negative* is loosely drawn from the German philosopher; Green calls him an inspiration providing "elements for an improbable comparison" (p. 26). By improbable, Green means that Hegel was searching for consciousness as an historical achievement of Absolute Knowledge, while Freud was searching for consciousness as an individual

<sup>2</sup>Hegel's philosophy had enormous influence on subsequent Continental philosophy, inspiring both further development and reaction. He is perhaps most well known for his teleological account of the history of reason. His first major work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, published in 1807, serves as Green's inspiration here.

achievement of the forces of instinct and repression. Green follows Hegel in thinking of negation as having a more active meaning. Things and concepts can actively negate each other, assimilating and destroying through the active opposition of the other. Then, in the negation of the negative, there is a new start, in which what is negated becomes assimilated into the new start, a unity of opposites, finding a new reality.

Green notes that it is difficult to grasp what means by the negative. It cannot be found in sense-certainty, it is elusive and ephemeral, another mode of being. We must concern ourselves with what not only is unapparent in consciousness, but is unapparent also in the dynamic unconscious. Green wants to see the effects of the negative in a series from the neurotic to the most primitive. What I find most compelling is the use of the negative as a progressive loss of meaning and the experience of holes in the psyche. Nothing can refer to either “having been so and being so no longer” or “never having come into existence” (p. 17). Green is more concerned with the former, where there is an inhibition of pleasure itself and the rise of the death drive.

Green thinks that traces of the negative are found only in late Freud, when he starts to consider that repression is but one form of defense. First Freud speaks of negation (*Verneinung*) as linked to the destructive drive by splitting: “I should like to eat that, or I should like to spit it out” (1925, p. 369). There are two kinds of judgment made by the psyche. Here the judgment is of something good or bad that belongs to the original pleasure ego: everything good is retained inside and everything bad is placed outside.

Freud in his paper on fetishism (1927) then goes further in the concept of disavowal (*Verleugnung*), now seen as both a splitting and a denial of a perception, a defense against the claims of reality. In the construction of a fetish as a substitute for the female genital, the male has two split views; he disavows the reality of castration and, at the same time, acknowledges the castration, but only in its displaced form. Here the judgment regards not goodness or badness but rather whether something thought about actually exists. If the psyche can disavow the reality of a thought, then it never existed. Only later would Freud generalize the concept of disavowal to include psychosis and splitting.

The Freudian term *foreclosure* (*Verwerfung*, translated as “repudiation” in the *Standard Edition*) was reintroduced by Jacques Lacan to denote a specific mechanism held to lie at the origin of the psychotic

phenomenon and to consist of a primordial expulsion of a fundamental “signifier.” Foreclosure is deemed to be distinct from repression; it is a “corresponding hole at the place of the phallic signification” (Lacan 1966, p. 201).

Green sees all of these defenses as a move away from repression. Repression has to do with suppression of drives or objects, while disavowal or foreclosure has to do with the rejection of perception. It is a primitive refusal to see something. In this refusal to see, nonexistence becomes a possibility and ultimately becomes an abolition of something inside.

Green introduces several pathways toward a theoretical understanding of the negative. The first pathway is a developmental description. In this conception, the infant initially exists in a raw and concrete unmentalized state and gradually develops various levels of mentalization, representation, and symbolization. Such unrepresented states have been called thing-representations by Freud, beta elements by Bion, and deadened transitional states by Winnicott. Green calls these unrepresented states psychic or blank holes.

Green hypothesizes a state before differentiation between subject and object, where the most primitive sorting of pleasure and pain is between incorporation and *excorporation*, a mechanism that precedes both projection and repression. Here the infant is faced with “loss involving pains of interminable mourning” (p. 153), what can be coped with and what cannot be. Green thinks that object loss at this point is experienced as a narcissistic loss, a narcissistic tear in the fragile bond between subject and object; pieces of the self are lost as well. Green asks what happens to the space when something is expelled. Since objects are fleeting at best, what is left are psychic holes. These holes can be plugged if there is a maternal object that can spare the infant what is most unpleasant. Temporal considerations play a part here; if there is not a significant delay in maternal care, the psychic holes can be repaired. But if there is a lack or delay in providing containment, despair can set in and defenses based on denial of reality can be activated.

The heart of Green’s argument is his interpretation of the death instinct. For Freud, the death instinct can be found clinically in the compulsion to repeat without evident pleasure or mastery; rather, there is a move toward reduction and elimination of tension (the Nirvana principle). Later, Freud thought that there are two forms of the death drive: one silent, masochistic, directed toward the self, and the other noisy, directed

toward the world in the destructiveness of hatred and sadism. Klein, ignoring Freud's formulation of the Nirvana principle, took the death instinct to be a pure form of aggression directed from the beginning of life toward objects.

Green returns to Freud's original formulation of the death instinct as a move to reduce internal tension. He takes his inspiration from "An Outline of Psycho-Analysis," Freud's last word on the instincts (1940). Here Eros is called the love drive, suggesting a subtle shift toward objects. Green thinks that the primary function of Eros is what he calls an *objectalising* function. By this he means a connection to objects and an investment of meaning. It is not just objects, both internal and external, that are invested but structures of the mind that are objectified and become meaningful. Green's major criticism of Klein is that she is too attached to the object as object, and ignores the interplay of the instincts, especially binding and unbinding. Green is inspired by Freud's expansion of the concept of binding in the Outline to include the work of Eros in all its connections and of unbinding as the work of destroying connections.

On the contrary, the death drive has a *disobjectalising* function by means of unbinding. It is not just the objects that are under attack but the very structures of the mind by a withdrawal of meaningful investments. Green opposes paranoid investment to schizoid withdrawal (p. 86), the latter aiming for a total shutdown of the psychic system to eliminate any tension. It is an ego capable of both destroying the cause of its frustration and the frustration itself by means of a radical suppression, hating both the ego and the object whenever there are demands or expectations. The death instinct, then, is manifested in massive defenses involving a shutting down of the psychic apparatus. The subject "runs for his life" from the drive cyclone (p. 128).

Narcissism has been a problematic concept from the beginning, as it pulls together a vast array of ideas, both metaphysical concepts and experiential observations (for an elaboration, see Green 2001). Freud defines narcissism as libidinal investment in the ego and differentiates between narcissistic libido and object libido. Primary narcissism becomes a developmental stage between autoeroticism and object love. Rosenfeld (1964) redefines Freud's primary narcissism as a primitive object relation in which an omnipotent fantasy of incorporating the breast as part of the self abolishes any sense of separation and thus any anxiety about loss and rejection. Rosenfeld (1971) goes on to describe a destructive narcissism,

closely tied to the death instinct, in which an idealization of the omnipotent destructive parts of the self are directed against any need for dependency on objects. Rosenfeld's latter view is very close to Green's.

Green notes that interest in narcissism waned with the introduction of the second topography, but that it remains an important concept in French psychoanalysis. As a result of narcissistic wounds, the ego's sexuality transforms desire for the object into desire for the ego, what Green calls the desire for the One. In *positive narcissism*, the ego aims for an illusion of self-sufficiency and to free itself from dependency on objects by finding idealized objects to merge with, objects that will never frustrate. Green characterizes *negative narcissism* as a move toward level zero, a manifestation of the death drive. It is directed to the total ego and the objectalizing process itself, aiming for a total shutdown of the psychic system. The aim is not pleasure but finding refuge in narcissistic withdrawal and a fantasy of anesthesia and inertia. It is a solution to the problem of destructiveness by dissociating from aggression, by abolishing both aggression and connection.

*Darstellbarkeit* is a term Freud used only in relation to dreams, a term the French translate as *figurabilité*, perceptual representation. The dream represents a perceptual solution to the quest for meaning through hallucinatory wish fulfillment. Green prefers the term *negative hallucination*. Negative hallucination was a common concept in French psychiatry in the time of Bernheim but never became a technical term for Freud. Green draws his inspiration from a remark by Freud (1917): "any attempt to explain hallucination would have to start out from *negative* rather than positive hallucination" (p. 232). A negative hallucination is the nonperception of an object, a representation of the absence of representation. The negative is the theoretical blankness upon which sit dreams and thoughts. Green thinks that negative hallucinations are a silent and everyday experience, usually momentary and unnoticed. They are found in the perceptual field, where an "intolerably excessive perception" (p. 192) is rejected, what he calls "*an inadmissible recognition or the repression of reality*" (p. 191). An unbearable perception leads to a wish to reject it, a need to deny its very existence. Internally, the unconscious representation of the wish is denied consciousness and the space occupied by the denied perception is left vacant. As Green says, "hallucinations decompose whereas dreams condense" (p. 227); it is as if the psyche says "not known, cannot be caught" (pp. 205–206). The experience of pain leaves the

subject exposed and provokes a gradual spread of destructiveness. Drive intrusions quickly fill the blank space.

This book should be read in conjunction with Green's *Private Madness* (1996), in which he moves to clinical manifestations of the negative and, in particular, discusses what triggers the negative, object loss, abandonment, failures of satisfaction, and what covers over aspects of the negative, especially rage. The nothingness is usually silent and covered over by various forms of hate and paranoia, but can be activated in the transference if the analyst can withstand his own hate of the patient. If Green is correct in these theoretical ideas, and I believe he is, the clinical implications are far-reaching. States of nonrepresentation lie at the core of all mental structures, hidden behind a network of representations. In response to anxiety, there are three broad states of defense. Repression blocks painful affects but preserves in the unconscious a connection to objects via displacement and return of the repressed. Paranoid defenses sort objects into good and bad but retain an active connection to hateful and idealized objects. Disinvestment wants to destroy connections and retreat inside a narcissistic wall.

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