

# An Outline of Sublimation from a Freudian Perspective

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## Abstract

This theoretical essay aims to present a metapsychological synthesis for the sublimation concept in a Freudian framework. Two discourses on sublimation are presented and it is proposed that they integrate distinct moments in a general process: secondary sublimation, related to the first drive dualism, in which the sublimation concerns desexualization of drives through object and goal substitution; primary sublimation, related to the second drive dualism, in which the sublimation concerns the erotization of death drives, through narcissistic identifications. The implications for the relation between desire and culture, as well as for the psychoanalytic concept of subjectivity, are discussed.

## Keywords

Psychoanalysis and Culture, Sublimation, Freud, Sigmund (1856-1939)

## 1. Introduction

Sublimation is a psychoanalytic concept usually described as a drive destination in which there is transformation of sexual satisfaction purpose into another, of socially recognized nature. The term stems from two different ideas: the physical process of transforming the state of a substance without passing through its intermediary forms; the aesthetic notion of the sublime, describing a movement of transcendence. This notion is necessary to describe a fundamental passage in human sexuality, from its individual dimension to the collective scope of social life. In this way, it implies an ethical-moral statement for subjectivity as necessarily characterized by the conflict between nature and culture.

Despite its fundamental situation, the concept of sublimation is something that was not systematized in psychoanalysis. In its founder theoretical works, it remains as a general notion that unfolds in diverse scopes, from metapsychological

mechanisms to more general levels of cultural phenomena, coming across the clinical practice itself. It happens because sublimation emerges as a privileged drive destiny as opposed to symptomatic outputs, contributing to the production and maintenance of a shared social reality. In its detailing, however, this notion integrates with other concepts in different ways. At first and in its more general context, it is a kind of destination for drives. However, in its achievements, it is closely related to defensive and identificatory processes, including different modes of psychic representation and drive qualities. The full metapsychological description of these processes, relating topical, dynamic, and economic aspects, were not explicitly developed by Freud and are still open to debate.

It is, as [Laplanche \(1980\)](#) points out, a real cross in Freudian thought: not only in the sense of a difficult burden to carry, but also as the crossroads of theory, clinic and culture. This all justifies the impression that it is more correct to recognize a mosaic of indications and figures comprising the general notion of sublimation rather than a well-defined and organized theory ([Loffredo, 2011, 2014](#)). Nevertheless, in this variety of means and levels, it is possible to account two models for conceptual comprehension, which are supported by two historical moments in Freudian theory ([Birman, 2000, 2008](#)) or at least two descriptions of their metapsychological mechanisms ([Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973 \[1967\]](#); [Roudinesco & Plon, 2006](#)). What is common in both is the permanence of a general notion of desexualization by means of transformations within the scope of drive goal and object, but the mechanisms, instances and qualities in play are different.

Considering this context, the objective of this theoretical essay is to present a synthetic metapsychological description for the sublimation concept in a Freudian framework. This essay summarizes the ideas and propositions we have developed and sustained better in other works we have published earlier in our country and language ([Loffredo, 2011, 2014](#); [Campos, 2013a, 2013b](#); [Campos & Loffredo, 2019](#); [Campos, Bocchi, & Loffredo, 2021](#)). In this sense, the paper is also an attempt to bring the results of our line of research into an international context.

This proposition is justified insofar because contemporary psychoanalysis turns to a new perspective on its conceptual framework which shifts the idea of a psychoanalytical subject into a more proper psychosocial approach, and seeking a more critical and political perspective towards the integration between psychism and society ([Rosa, 2004](#); [Birman, 2010, 2013](#); [Rosa & Mountian, 2013](#); [Dunker, 2018](#); [Frosh & Mandelbaum, 2019](#)). This repositioning, particularly noteworthy in the context of Brazilian psychoanalysis, often involves the revival of the concept of sublimation, to think of it as a fundamental operator in social bonds and linkage of death drives ([Kehl, 2000](#); [Metzger & Silva Junior, 2010](#)). In this sense, rescuing theoretical crossroads of sublimation seems crucial to us to conceive social and cultural phenomena today ([Campos, 2013b](#)).

## 2. First Moment: Desexualization

Mention to sublimation already appears in the pre-psychoanalytic writings of

Freud's work (Masson, 1985), indicating the general notion that will be the key-note for a movement that leads to the first theory of sublimation, namely, the notion of a drive transformation referred to civilizing pressure. In this first moment, fantasy relations with defense and with a certain refinement toward higher and sublime goals are indicated. In a very incipient way, fantasy appears as a way of refining memories in order to defend from the sexual dimension of traumatic experiences.

This conception of a defensive dynamic persists throughout the first period of Freudian work, being relativized only on the essays on sexuality (Freud, 1905), in which the matter of drive outcomes through desexualization procedures begins to be stressed. Starting from the general notion of an original perverse-polymorphous sexuality that develops through the constriction of moral and social impositions, the author arrives at a statement that the constructions of civilization arise at the expense of infantile sexual impulses (Freud, 1905). In this sense, there would be diversion of sexuality to other purposes through sublimation processes. The problem, however, is that at this level of description, the concept remains very close to the general notion of defense, not actually distinguishing itself from repression. In addition, it also overlaps with other concepts that have been defined up to that moment in the work, such as inhibition of the goal and reactive formation.

If the drive theory pointed out that civilization is constructed at the expense of infantile sexual impulses, in the article on modern civilized sexual morality (Freud, 1908) it is emphasized that sublimation would favor cultural formation and it more explicitly address the higher social value of sublimated goals. The main point is the need to repress drives for culture maintenance and how psychoanalysis can contribute to cultural development. The question is this antagonism between disruptive, symptomatic and dystonic elements of drive renunciation that culture demands, as opposed to more harmonious and constructive possibilities of drive destination, conceiving a kind of double face of possible formulations concerning the controversy on conflict between drives and culture. That means that besides the non-adaptative destination of symptoms there would be a more adaptative and integrative way out by means of sublimation. In this way, the ethical-moral dimension concerning sublimatory and symptomatic outcomes for drive conflict is more explicitly constrained, starting a perspective of reflection and criticism on the modern society that will lead to the reflections on the cultural malaise at the last period of Freudian work.

It must be noticed that at this point the tendency is on a possible harmonization perspective between drive nature and social requirements (Birman, 2000, 2008). Regardless, the tension between drive renunciation and socialization requirements by means of repression is defined in a paradigmatic way in this Freudian text, featuring a double face position and paradoxical function for the sublimation mechanism between the cultural ideals and the psychic suffering (Loffredo, 2014). It must also be pointed out that this is where it is found the first explicit definition

of sublimation.

The course on sublimation theorization has in the analysis of Leonardo da Vinci's childhood memory (Freud, 1910) an important point of confluence. This text is the most illustrative example of sublimation appliance in an interpretative analysis, remaining as the great reference in Freudian work on this matter (Castiel, 2010; Loffredo, 2014; Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973 [1967]). In addition, it is the opportunity for the author to focus on the stalemate between symptom and sublimation in repression derivatives. He conceives an interpretation for the artist's infantile memory of having the mouth whipped by a bird tail, revealing same sex attraction fantasies and identification with the mother figure and its influence on Leonardo's creativity and curiosity. In this context, attention is paid to epistemophilic and domain impulses and their relation to sexual impulses, producing a privileged outlet for scientific and artistic interests, notwithstanding the presence of certain symptomatic elements, such as the difficulty of completing works and activities. It is in this derivation of sexual fantasies to the realm of arts and sciences that the inquiry of sublimation is properly posed. Regarding sublimatory process metapsychological description, the emphasis is on modifying the drive goal, from sexual satisfaction to knowledge and aesthetic interests, with emphasis on the former. This transformation integration with value judgment and social recognition also appears explicitly. Modifications in the scope of objects are suggested, but generally indicating that they are mere displaced substitutes for an unconscious object that yielded to repression, with emphasis being on the originality of goal transformation as an alternative to these constraints. In any case, it can be admitted that in this text there is a more effective discrimination between the fates of repression and sublimation, and between repression and sublimatory mechanisms, although they cannot be completely distinguished. That happens because although the defense mechanism operates on sexual phantasies, there is still no dynamic difference established between repression and sublimation. But the difference is that instead of repressing the object to unconscious and its investments being inhibited or returning through displacements and condensations, in sublimation the impulse is desexualized through the transformation of the goal and with that its object investment is conserved. In this way, the sublimatory destination is different from the fate of repression, but the mechanism integrates the full dynamics of the phenomenon. But it takes place in a curious way, since it has the manner of object and drive conservation through transformation of erotic into non-erotic, which produces a paradoxical effect of simultaneously supplanting and preserving the barrier of repression.

In the work on narcissism (Freud, 1914), the notion of ego formation is introduced through the withdrawal of object investments from sexual drive. Within the general framework of metapsychology this problem will be responsible for a general upheaval in the psychic apparatus understanding by erasing the distinction between sexual and self-preservation drives, as well as by transposing the rationality of representational systems—i.e. the topographic model—toward functional

instances—i.e. the structural model (Campos, 2011). Particularly, the notion of an object identification dynamics in ego constitution and its ideal elements is introduced more clearly. Here an important metapsychological distinction is introduced: the ego ideal becomes an important parameter in the regulation of the fates of sexual drives from repression. This means that the ego ideal tends to indicate a path to drive destination towards socially valued objects and, therefore, to a sublimatory way. However, the fact that the ego ideal claims to the ego a sublimatory exit does not necessarily mean that the ego can produce it. In other words, while sublimation may be a process that is stimulated by the ideal, its accomplishment depends on the ego conditions in handling repression and on the favored drive paths connecting unconscious to preconscious systems.

The article on drives and their destinations (Freud, 1915a) summarizes the first drive theory definition, describing its basic elements—source, goal, object and pressure—and presenting the difference between self-preservation and sexual impulses according to their relations to the principles of mental functioning, as well as the support relationship of the second in the first along the psychosexual development. It also presents the destination of drives, which is the most original and innovative point of this characterization and where the question focuses on the subject of sublimation. Freud (1915a) distinguishes four drive destinations, which means a routing of impulse tendencies in its pursuit of satisfaction, modulating itself through dynamics where investments are shifted from one object to another with transformation of affective qualities. In this sense, it is fundamentally a description of the vicissitudes by which impulses make an arc that goes from its source to its satisfaction goal. However, destinations can in general be considered as forms of defense insofar as they represent deviations and delays from the goal of sexual satisfaction, that are ultimately taken by the preconscious system as unpleasant. But the notion of vicissitude is broader than the specific concept of a defense mechanism, inasmuch as defensive operations modulate destinations of drives.

This can be noted in the categories that the author proposes, because, strictly speaking, only one of the destinations is a specific defense mechanism, in this case, repression. Repression can be defined as a mechanism that operates a division between ideational and affective representatives of a libidinal fantasy, causing the idea to be withdrawn into the unconscious system along with the libido attached to it (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973 [1967]). However, the libidinal investment once in the unconscious seeks to return through associative dynamics according to the principles of condensation and displacement, and may erupt in the shape of unconscious derivatives, especially symptoms and among them, anguish or anxiety. In this sense, repression operates by restricting the object of a sexual drive and by affecting the search for a partial substitutive object, that is, it is a defense mechanism that imposes an exchange of the original sexual drive object for an allowed one. In this process, there is no transformation of the satisfaction goal, only its restriction. But more importantly, the active character of impulse also does not

change, nor does the direction of the subject and object relationship. In the same way, there is no transformation in the quality of the affective representative, in the sense of a transformation from love to hatred or vice versa.

Freud (1915a) also describes two other destinations, understood as more primitive and therefore indicating mechanisms that are previous to repression in psychosexual development: the reversion into opposite and the return to oneself. At this point enters the fourth destination, which is properly the sublimation. Even though this destination is not detailed in the text at issue, it is clearly stated that the first two vicissitudes “are dependent on the narcissistic organization of the ego and bear the stamp of that phase” (Freud, 1915a: p. 132). That suggests that the other two are related on another level, and therefore that sublimation is closer to repression dynamics. Later, when describing the strong connection between repression and the unconscious (Freud, 1915b, 1915c) it becomes clearer that sublimation depends on the lifting and shifting of repressed sexual objects by means of a transformation in its goals.

Therefore, it should be pointed out that the four destinations described by Freud are articulated in pairs (Loffredo, 2014; Green, 1999), with repression and sublimation emerging as a privileged combination for understanding the psychic apparatus dynamics, within the scope of Oedipal registry, while the other two destinations yield to the failure of the narcissistic register theoretical development at that moment (Campos, 2011).

In any case, the Freudian articles are an important point of arrival, since they distinguish between sublimation and repression as distinct but connected destinations. The greatest innovation is that it expands the discussion, announcing for the first time in a clear way the question about the sublimated drive object (Loffredo, 2014; Castiel, 2010). This is due to the distinction between sexual and self-preservation drives regarding flexibility in relation to objects, since the self-preservation ones are more fixed whereas the others are more easily displaceable and subjected to transformation.

With these final elements it is properly settled the first sublimation model construction. It explains a master line that has been announced from the beginning, in which sublimation appears as an outlet supported by the ethical-moral values of social life in contrast to the outflow of psychic suffering caused by the need to restrict sexuality. From a means to defense against sexuality to a transformed destination of sexuality that involves both substitution of goal and object, the elements that define the metapsychological concept were indicated. In this first theory, the emphasis falls heavily on the matter of desexualization through transformation of the goal, in which the effective discrimination between its dynamics and that of repression is the focus. Taking into perspective what has been developed within the first topic model and drive theory frame of reference, it can be said that sublimation is this destination of socially valued sexuality through goal transformations and object substitutions that is opposed to symptomatic outcomes. It is an effect and point of arrival for psychic apparatus dynamics that is structured by

the rationality of repression, as a more evolved destination and implicitly as an ideal for normal mental functioning.

### 3. Second Moment: Erotization

The revisionism period of Freudian work is based on the second drive theory introduction, which occurred in the text on beyond the pleasure principle (Freud, 1920). Although in this article there is not really an elaboration of the sublimation concept, being more quoted than worked out, the new dualism statement brings a significant extension for sexuality understanding, formulating a new frame where the matter of sublimation will begin to evolve. In this sense, it can be said that the turning point of the twenties is also the beginning of a fundamental change in the theory of sublimation. The main expansion occurs due to the combination of self-preservation and sexuality aspects into the scope of life drives general category. It will make Eros act in direction of life, integration, and connection, opposing to death drives, which will now occupy the place of the disruptive and disintegrative factor (Campos, 2011; Castiel, 2010). In this sense, death drive brings novelty to impulse economy once it is ruled by nirvana principle as a tendency to complete excitement discharge and by repetition compulsion as a connection demand for traumatic pressure on the psychic apparatus. Therefore, it establishes a fundamental shift on human condition understanding, in so far as it withdraws the emphasis on the renunciation implied in repression and Oedipus complex, putting into perspective an original helplessness horizon (Campos, Bocchi, & Loffredo, 2021).

Some authors (Birman, 2000; Castiel, 2010; Campos, 2011) sustain that in Freudian theory it is from death drive hypothesis that it is announced a condition of structural abandonment for the subject, in the sense that this original position is never surpassed, as well as the satisfaction of sexuality into desire is also never fully guaranteed. These ideas would be the basis for a second Freudian discourse on social phenomena, proper to the revisionism moment, in which the emphasis would be on the impossibility of complete harmonization between people's individual desires and demands, constraints and ideals of cultural formations (Birman, 2000). This register is opposed to the first discourse, where this integration should be acquired by the elaboration of suffering through psychoanalytic treatment and social reform oriented by a transformation in modern culture sexual morality (Freud, 1908).

Therefore, the theoretical path started will result in a broader reflection on culture (Freud, 1930), where individual suffering would ultimately refer to a leading role of death drives in the dynamics inherent to civilizational progress. It can be said that this general reorientation of sexuality will be the tendency of this last period of Freudian work, approaching in a new way the fundamental ethical question of the relation between individuals and society in the domain of desire. In this context, the sublimation concept will gain new densities and orientations, coming out to an overcoming tone of confirmation to the "tragic underlying the



human” (Loffredo, 2014: p. 125). It highlights the fact that sublimation will be named much more in the sense of an “alliance with erotization, than as a process that goes against sexuality” (Loffredo, 2014: p. 126).

A first step into this new path is the work on group psychology (Freud, 1921), where the formation of bonds concerns identification processes, resulting in a significant elaboration towards the proposition of the ego ideal instances in the structural model of the psychic apparatus. In this specific work, group formation is organized by means of a double libidinal bond: members among themselves and each one with the leader. They are sustained by a mechanism of identification with the leader that arises as an ideal parameter for each individual ego. The key to this transformation is the sublimatory process, that operates a deviation from the original goal by a desexualization means and retains some of its original fashion through identification mechanisms. What is new at this moment is the indication that deviation from goal consists in an initiation to sublimation, which would be fixed into the ideal ego composition. In this new twist of theory, the idea of a mechanism that operates from the beginning (Loffredo, 2014) returns, indicating transformations in the goal as a first step toward sublimatory destination, combined to identificatory processes.

This subject development depends on the book that brings structural model full definition (Freud, 1923), where more explicit statements about the sublimation concept appear, but with a very distinct character, allowing us to recognize two different issues, in a kind of double face for sublimation (Loffredo, 2014). The book resumes the sublimation description, now within the scope of the new psychic apparatus instances and the interactions between them. The most important and original contribution for our matter lies in the full enunciation of narcissistic identifications in ego formation. It is at this point that the notion of desexualization in sublimation receives a critical transformation: from a turn of sexual object investment into non-sexual to that of reversing object to narcissistic investment, merging life and death drives into libido. At that point there is a clear and extensive quote that is the core for our argument:

“The transformation of object-libido into narcissistic libido which thus takes place obviously implies an abandonment of sexual aims, a desexualization—a kind of sublimation, therefore. Indeed, the question arises, and deserves careful consideration, whether this is not the universal road to sublimation, whether all sublimation does not take place through the mediation of the ego, which begins by changing sexual object-libido into narcissistic libido and then, perhaps, goes on to give it another aim. We shall later on have to consider whether other instinctual [drive] vicissitudes may not also result from this transformation, whether, for instance, it may not bring about a defusion of the various instincts [drives] that are fused together.” (Freud, 1923: p. 30)

This implies several modifications. At first, it was conceived that sexual drives would bring about a transformation in goals toward non-sexual objects, by means



of support and conjunction with self-preservation impulses. Now, in the new dualism, this confluence operates on a previous level, that of connecting death and life drives into libidinal impulses in order to attenuate the drives at their traumatic entrance into the psychic apparatus. It means that sublimation now begins to operate erotization, no longer opposing it, as it was in the beginning. Erotization is the shift towards life instincts into libido components. Freud used to locate drive origins in the autoerotic activity of the body. However, the conception of a death drive made it necessary to consider the capture and transformation of drives into the pleasure principle and libido. This process is sustained by motherhood care, which takes the baby as an object of desire. It means that seduction from the other is fundamental to the development of the libidinal circuit and the constitution of the ego (Fletcher, 2007). That understanding of the *originary* has been developed better by post-freudian authors, especially from the French school, as Laplanche. Moreover, in this original incident, a process of narcissistic identification would be at stake, a mechanism by which there would be a reversing object investment towards the ego. Therefore, the emphasis would not be so much on its relation to repression, but on a mechanism that apparently would have preceded it.

It seems to us that this brings the proposition of a more original and primary sublimation mechanism, linked to the eroticization and Narcissus domain, with a secondary or later sublimation mechanism, in which there would be substitution of the erotic goal for a more neutral goal within the scope of cultural objects, linked to repression and Oedipus domain. However, at this point in Freudian work the question is obscured because there is no clear discrimination between ideal ego and superego, therefore between moments of narcissistic and oedipal identification. Further, the author makes it clear that the superego is also born of a process of desexualization and sublimation via identification, but through the sadistic component of object investments, by means of unconscious guilt feeling. There is another core quotation:

“The super-ego arises, as we know, from an identification with the father taken as a model. Every such identification is in the nature of a desexualization or even of a sublimation. It now seems as though when a transformation of this kind takes place, an instinctual [drive] defusion occurs at the same time. After sublimation the erotic component no longer has the power to bind the whole of the destructiveness that was combined with it, and this is released in the form of an inclination to aggression and destruction. This defusion would be the source of the general character of harshness and cruelty exhibited by the ideal—its dictatorial ‘Thou shalt’.” (Freud, 1923: pp. 54-55)

By this way, we can sustain that the processing drive goal related to identification for psychic instance formation necessarily takes place through a double path to sublimation processes.

Therefore, general sketches for a second theory of sublimation framework are outlined, remaining operative until the end of the Freudian theory. Following his works, the contribution of the text on the economic problem of masochism

(Freud, 1924) is the more detailed metapsychological description of death drive dynamics producing effects on masochism, with the explicit statement of the nirvana principle, but also with the important definition of the different masochism types: erogenous, feminine and moral. As far as the present discussion is concerned, it must be indicated that the first is the one originally related to mechanisms of death drive attachment into libido. The novelty is that now it is cleared the death drive deflection to the outside throughout the domination of destructive impulses. Nonetheless, fusing and defusing mechanisms are presented in all levels, until its final expression in moral masochism, which is the one that is related properly to the guilt feeling production and the ideal component establishment for superego. It is in this general context that different sublimatory processes can take place, working through erotic and thanatological derivatives throughout the psychic apparatus development.

Much of the general characterization that is made at this point reappears in the text on malaise in culture (Freud, 1930). It addresses questions about deflection of death drives in overcoming primary masochism and libidinal defusing generating both an unconscious guilt feeling as death drive expression and anguish as life drive expression. Concerning the sublimation discussion, it appears initially and mostly in the description of different resolutions towards the basic conflict between desire and social demands. Freud (1930) describes some outcomes for it: self-isolation or society transformation, psychopathological and symptomatic configurations, suppression of drives, and social derivatives in artistic, scientific, and moral institutions. In this context, sublimation appears linked to this last destination, especially in aesthetic pleasure, but also in the scope of love and knowledge. In any case, it is the confluence of drive destination with socialization processes that establishes the essay's main axis. Although the sublimation paths appear in a very diversified way, the emphasis is on a link between sublimation and erotization, which has as its central element the idea of a detour from direct sexual goal.

However, this overall impression in the sense of harmonization is not the keynote of the essay and it is interesting that the problem of sublimation is not taken up significantly to address issues that are confined to the main thesis of the book, which is precisely the destination of malaise. The central question in the second theory of sublimation, as seen, is the various ways of desexualization in psychic instances formation, generating distinct effects on libidinal fusing and defusing, from the earliest level of primary masochism to the results of superegoic sadism (Metzger & Silva Junior, 2010). Although promising, there is little development on this subject by the author at that time. Regarding destructive derivatives of libido, Freud (1930) sustains that it is the privileged outlet for death drives, but also that this deflection for the cultural domain is a complicator of social relationships. Therefore, moral imperatives concentrate on the subject, so that social demands end up causing, through the superego, destructiveness return to the ego. Hence the idea that the death drive destination reflects on the subject in the fashion of malaise and, mainly, that this internalized destructiveness has difficulties of

finding sublimatory exits towards socially valued substitute objects.

The route on Freud's argumentation leads to the indication that death drive could not ultimately be sublimated, since from the onset it opposes the effort of Eros and civilization and then would always remain refractory to any sublimation possibility. This last statement is the other evident contribution of this Freudian essay and perhaps the most controversial point on sublimation discussions, since it is often quoted as the limit for the cooperative elaboration of destructive impulses (Loffredo, 2014; Campos, 2013b; Green, 1999). In any case, it ends by confirming the position that the sublimation mechanism is aligned with adjustment to socially settled moral values.

In this sense, the general line of thought regarding sublimation presented in the essay seems to be related much more to socially valued destinations, as a privileged way of balancing individual desire with moral demands. In addition, the assertions on cultural ideals and death impulses help to restore the framework of sublimation first theory. It is also necessary to point out that the discussion about sublimation itself appears slightly in the essay. It seems contrasting to what was expected, when since the beginning of Freud's work sublimation appears closely related to conflict between individual and society, as well as the ethical and moral dilemma inherent to it. So, it's very suspicious and frustrating, as many pointed out (Laplanche, 1980; Green, 1999; Castiel, 2010; Loffredo, 2014) that sublimation has so secondary role in that essay, even though it would be the key theoretical concept to deal with the dilemma that raises as a byproduct of civilizing process.

Despite this, it is possible to state that there is a significant withdrawal in the second theory of sublimation original points, by which the role of narcissistic identifications in the production of libidinal circuits for ego itself are lost. In fact, following the later Freudian texts, the presentation of sublimation will follow the general lines of the first theory. It will describe it in terms of goal and object, emphasizing its dimension of deviation and transformation in opposition to inhibition of desire. In these final works, even by their synthetic nature, such as the new introductory lectures (Freud, 1933) and the outline of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1940), there is a more descriptive approach, that is, the sublimation definition is further accentuated as the effect of a process than the categorization of the process itself on a metapsychological basis. In addition, there is also an emphasis on the notion of a constitutional provision for the establishment of sublimatory outcomes, which makes it difficult to clarify the meanderings of the process. As a result, it turns up being referred in block to a generic notion of constitution with the risk of affirming an innate character of the drive dispositions as determinant of their individual and social destinations. This is how the question of sublimation reappears in the final outline of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1940), showing that the summary definition of sublimation imposes itself at the end of the Freudian work as a modification of the goal and object in reference to social values and also losing the richness of conceptual enhancement of the second moment of sublimation theory. Therefore, it eclipses the potential to emphasize on identificatory dynamics

and sexualization-desexualization processes.

#### **4. Integrating the Two Moments: Primary and Secondary Sublimation**

At the end of this historical-chronological path one can confirm the “nodal position occupied by sublimation in metapsychological architecture” (Loffredo, 2014: p. 195). It is a concept dealing with the management of drive investments in various ways, involving both individuals and the collective of groups, through transformations in their goals and objects. It is a concept that has not received a theoretical conclusion on Freud’s side and remains in a paradoxical intersection at the outline of the fundamental conflict between desire and culture, having a double face in its general characterization, which refers, in its idea of sublime, to the field of morality and aesthetics. Its theoretical network in metapsychology is very diversified and broad, in the proximity and relation to a series of concepts and notions, constituting a multifaceted range that inspires the metaphor proposed by Loffredo (2011, 2014) of sublimation figures rather than a systematic theory.

The general notion of desexualization stresses the keynote for a process that deals with multiple transformations, including the domain of erotization. What appears to be a contradiction should be better described as a tension network with these two poles in counterpoint. There is a broad and complex net of drive and impulse shifting mechanisms, as we now will attempt to synthesize in a metapsychological description.

At the dynamic level it breaks down to the scope of investments in psychic apparatus representational networks by means of deviation, goal inhibition and object modification. At this level operates the defense mechanisms and their consequences, by the main axis of repression and symptom formation, but also reactive formation and idealization. There are also identifications, on narcissistic and oedipal domains.

At the topical level it is initially articulated to a special mode of passage from unconscious to conscious systems, but later it involves all domains of psychic apparatus shifting and structural transformation: from id to ego, on the constitution of ego itself, also on ideal instances of ego, as well as in a backward way from superego to ego.

At the economic level, it initially involves the supported development of sexuality by self-preservation drives, but then the drive fusing and defusing in various extents, from erotical and aggressive libido to diffused emotional states of anguish and malaise. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify three main axes of referral in this problem: 1) transition from sexual to non-sexual, 2) implications of narcissism, and 3) closeness to repression (Loffredo, 2011, 2014).

Our synthetic approach makes it possible to insist that the Freudian conception of sublimation is much broader and more complex than is usually supposed in its more superficial presentations. First, because it is not a mere descriptive judgment of the value of a drive destiny on an object, that is, sublimation is not only a

description that can be given to a successful exit to psychic conflicts, towards cultural appreciation and recognition. It is not the final effect of a process, but a legitimate and specific dynamic process itself. Therefore, it justifies the need to recover its metapsychological description, as proposed in this article.

Furthermore, from the dynamic point of view, it is not a specific defense mechanism, nor an unfolding effect of repression that is judged valuable and noteworthy. It is closely related to both, but it must not be confused with them, because it is more of a process type than a single feature. Nor is it a mere result of representations and objects investment displacements and transpositions, because it essentially involves a qualitative transformation in drive tendencies, which is precisely the idea of goal transformation and desexualization. But still it does not refer only to transition from a sexual desire to a more sublime one, in fact it consists of a broader process with many distinctions. In this sense, the main contribution of the second sublimation moment is to re-signify the very concept of desexualization, withdrawing the focus of moral value for the genesis of psychic apparatus instances, through identification processes.

Another issue is that the shifting of emphasis towards erogenization turns the general sublimation framework to ontological and ethical-moral implications. As it was pointed out in the beginning, the problem of sublimation focuses on the fundamental dilemma of the human tragic condition as a cultural being. At first, sublimation would indicate this condition of transposing the self-preservation censure barrier to sexual desire, harmonizing individual and social domains. But when the scope of Eros was extended, including these two previous registers and repositioning the problem on a more archaic level—that of helplessness in face of death drive –, the problem of sublimation ends up within the scope of libidinal tracks origins. This not only places the inquiry on the values of creativity in libidinal investments and psychic instances genesis, but also restores a fundamental ethical position. It is through the alteritary mobilization of the human object that libidinal ties can occur both in individual and social domains.

What can be noticed through this course is a wide range of sublimatory operations, which are related to the production of diverse affective outcomes, from the most erotic to the most sadistic and destructive side. This happens because sublimations fundamentally perform procedures on the fundamental drive quality, merging death drive and life drive into libido, but also defusing them. In this sense, sublimation is what allows the overcoming of primary masochism, through the connection in libido and deflection of the death drive to the outside, but also that which produces secondary masochism, through the unconscious feeling of guilt. It is a process that integrates with the production of psychic apparatus structures, such as the ego, through narcissistic identifications, and the superego, via oedipal identifications. In the first case, it is privileged the sublimation of life drives, and the second involves the sublimation of death drives.

An overview of these figures of sublimation that respects its complexity was initially proposed by Loffredo (2011, 2014). Considering what has been explained

so far, we can endorse the proposition to conceive a two-way circuit of sublimation in the dynamics and constitution of the psychic apparatus. In a first moment, there would be a primary sublimation, related to primary narcissistic identifications and the demand of connection and libidinization of death drive through the relation with otherness. At this level, erogenization takes place, through the original attachment in libido as well as the constitution of ego and ego ideal by the dynamics of narcissism. It would implicate the transformation of death drive into libido and the object invested libido into libido of the ego. A second moment is that of secondary sublimation, which would properly occur in the context of triangular relations, establishing itself from the resolution of the Oedipus complex. It would be related both to the logic of repression and to the identificatory paths of paternal ideals settled in superego. In this second level, different configurations of desexualization and re-sexualization of libido in relation to objects would be present, both in the sense of obtaining new object outflows for the libido as well as in the production of anguish, feelings of guilt and malaise.

The integration of these two different perspectives on sublimation by a metapsychological understanding of complex development processes is perfectly possible in the Freudian theory, as indicated in this paper and better sustained in other works we cited. It respects and follows the great structure of the author's work, that is notably organised in binary models and periods, but often not integrated in a systematic model. Despite this, the narrow conception persists from the interpretation of the traditional Freudian perspective. This proposition, however, follows indications that are widely present in the specialized theoretical literature of the matter, although is not usually something that is discussed or properly approached in clinical practice oriented papers.

It is certain that to this extent of discussion we are implying a lot more than Freud delivers directly, but we are certain that these developments are on the horizon of his problematization. In this sense, our reflection endorses other extensive and systematic studies on Freudian metapsychology, beginning with the classical essay of [Laplanche \(1980\)](#) in sublimation. This author, as shown in previous articles ([Campos, 2013a](#)), also focuses on the transformation of sexual to non-sexual drives. But he stresses the shifting turns between levels of impulses elaboration on a dihedron diagram, suggesting an original conception for sublimation: the drive neogenesis. It begins with the notion that "that relationship would be quite a simple one, namely, that sublimation nothing but propping in reverse, the return of the sexual to the non-sexual" ([Laplanche & Miller, 1984](#): p. 22). These processes take place in a general seduction theory context, in which the primal seduction translation is the original process of erotization and sublimation is related to repression on the metabolization and translation of drives ([Fletcher, 2007](#)).

Sublimations take place in every translation level, especially when the two realms of the subjectivity (sexual and non-sexual) are transposed. It can happen in both ways from the sexual to the non-sexual, as usually taken in sublimation, but also from the non-sexual for the sexual. This last mechanism is the one related to the

creation of new sexual drives. It must be pointed out that in Laplanche's theory, all drives are sexual, therefore, there are non-sexual functions and sexual impulses that are divided in life and death drives. Thus, there is sublimation wherever a neogenesis of drives and erotization process takes place.

The widening of sublimation theory and the stress on the idea of a primary level of erotization in sublimation has been also stated by Green (1999, 2005), who supported both a progredient and a regredient ways into the sublimatory process, making it possible to recognize that drives are in the origin of all subjective activity (either individual and social). He also defends a theoretical shift that put sublimation on the side of death drives: "the desexualization Freud observed in such sublimation is a process that follows the same lines as the so-called death instinct [drive]" (Green, 2002: p. 635). However, he stresses its role as a type of "work of the negative", that means the absence of elaboration through denial of the objects (negative hallucination) in order to develop a psychic framework to symbolization.

These metapsychological contributions point to a type of sublimation in a more original level than the two moments that we have shown on Freudian theory. It would consist in an originary level of sublimation, related to defused drives creation, prior to our primary level of linking it into libido and the secondary level of displacement to a symbolic substitute. If we admit going a little further into contemporary psychoanalysis and consider the genesis of drive as result of a general seduction or symbolic violence—i.e. the effect of alterity and culture into the organic body—we could also acknowledge an originary moment of sublimation.

Nonetheless, that shifting of paradigm is very important to the present clinical practice, once the contemporary psychopathologies are addressed to narcissistic levels of personality (Roussillon, 2015). In this level it is critical the effects of violent impulses and traumatic experiences over the self and ideals regulation, as well as the failure on symbolization processes. It is common to relate the narcissistic domain and symbolization processes to the regulation of object relations (Green, 2005). This matter of the ego dynamics is also usually understood in terms of the constitution of a *subject*. By subject we mean not only the sense of the self, but its condition of an agent mobilized by unconscious desire. It is well established in the area that the contemporary type of suffering implies some retrieval of this subjective condition, both on the symptomatic and psychosocial levels (Birman, 2013; Roussillon, 2015). In this sense, it is common to indicate the objectification, fetishism and perversion of the social ties in the contemporary culture of narcissism, but it is not very common to recognize that those dynamics are also referred to as *sublimation*.

Either way, these contributions support the turning to more primary levels of drive shifting of goals and objects, to which we add the symbolization features related to structural changes due to identification on the psychic apparatus. However, this metapsychological turn has also consequences to the ethical and moral issue embedded into sublimation theory. The shift into the originary narcissistic



links also means attention to the creation of social bonds and not only to the ego adjustment to an objective reality.

This is the position promoted by Birman (2000, 2008, 2010), which underlines, as stated in the introduction above, rescuing the political implications of this concept. A first way is to think of sublimation as a means of social bond management by fostering a kind of fraternal function (Kehl, 2000; Campos, 2013b). This proposition comes to operate an alternative to the crisis of the paternal imago and the vertical axis of the paternal function in the identificatory mobilization of groups, which operates an implosion and explosion of violence through drive defusing and regression to masochism (Metzger & Silva Junior, 2010).

A second way is the proposition of Castiel (2007, 2010), whose main thesis is that the development of sublimation theory in its last moment would inaugurate a properly alteritary and creative perspective reflecting clinics: creation of drive destinations in individual and social domains, instead of mere adaptation production. In this sense, the issue of sublimation as a fundamental guideline for clinical practice is taken up again.

In summary, it is important to understand that the contemporary clinical practice in psychoanalysis is very committed to the fostering of the subject condition and the recognition of alterity, as a resistance to the post-modern configuration of perverse social bonds in a narcissistic culture. This negative and reactive position can be only transformed through a positive and erotic narcissism, which involves not only symbolization, but also sublimation. The processes of sublimation in this context are of the primary type—erotization and creation—, precisely the one that is being rescued and stressed in this outline.

This suggests that a renewed perspective on sublimation puts it in a proper intersubjective and psychosocial approach, where an ethical-political basis can be better addressed. Even though it does not directly imply clinical practice, it contributes for the ideological support of contemporary psychoanalysis perspective on subjectivity.

## 5. Final Considerations

We can conclude that sublimation is truly a drive destination and, above all, a process of transformation of drive qualities that is related to all levels of psychosexual development and structuring of the psychic apparatus, with multiple and varied outcomes. Our contribution to this problem lies in trying to outline and sustain the proposition of a broader theoretical model that articulates two distinct times of the sublimation processes: a primary sublimation, which occurs in the direction of the ego and under the domain of narcissism, and a secondary sublimation, which occurs in the direction of cultural objects, under the domain of repression. It is important to emphasize, however, that these dimensions involve both erogenization and attachment operations, as well as the cessation and production of malaise and suffering. This means that sublimation acts both in the direction of linking the most “instinctual” of the drive into the most sublime of

cultural objects, as well as in the opposite direction, in the sense of the disinvestment of the object and drive defusing towards egoic masochism and pure death drive traumatism.

Summarizing a general metapsychological characterization of sublimation, it can be described that it is a drive destiny whose essence is the transformation of its qualities, in a change of its goal of satisfaction by means of variations in its objects. At the topic level, it refers to the dynamics of ego in its relationship of commitment to id demands, superego and reality. At the dynamic level, it is characterized by reference to defensive and identificatory processes that unfold at different moments of development, both in the narcissistic and in the oedipal record, but always indicated by the relations between ego and objects of reality through reference to ideal instances. At the economic level, it occurs through a general notion of “desexualization” and “sexualization”, which unfolds at various levels of life and death drives conflict through libidinal fusing and defusing operations.

Finally, this metapsychological conception has general implications for the Freudian and psychoanalytic conception of human being, pointing to helplessness and alterity dimensions as founders of individual and social libidinal bonds, repositioning the values discussion and shifting it from a merely moralizing or adaptive dimension to a more ethical one of openness to difference and creativity. The sublime and properly paradoxical in the human condition is that the attachment to the socially valued object necessarily occurs through the creation of oneself, showing that psychic and objective reality are not opposed, but are mutually constituted in response to an impersonal pulse that crosses them.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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