

Idée Fixe

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An idée fixe is a preoccupation of mind held so firmly as to resist any attempt to modify it, a fixation. The name originates from the French . Although not used technically to denote a particular disorder in psychology, idée fixe is used often in the description of disorders, and is employed widely in literature and everyday English.

Today's usage

As an everyday term, idée fixe may indicate a mindset akin to prejudice or stereotyping:

Here again cognitive psychologists have done miracles in disclosing the well-nigh unlimited capabilities and eagerness of human beings to ward off contradictions inter alia by closing their eyes to data that are at variance with their assumptions. ... people who accept the stereotype...are forever coming up with evidence to support their idée fixe and seem unable to notice any information which might disturb their belief.

-- H. S. Versnel, Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion

However, idée fixe has also a pathological dimension, denoting serious psychological issues, as in this account of Japanese culture for a popular audience:

Although her husband did not reproach her, she became like a woman possessed, continually begging for his forgiveness. This he readily gave, but her guilt -- and his imagined umbrage -- had become for her an idée fixe. Unable to stomach food, she went into a decline and died soon thereafter.

-Jack Seaward The Japanese

The pathology is what is denoted in psychology and in the law, as in this technical article about anorexia nervosa:

The idée fixe -- staying thin -- becomes at its furthest extreme so powerful as to render any other ideas or life projects meaningless. ... "I felt all inner development was ceasing, that all becoming and growing were being choked, because a single idea was filling my entire soul"

-Susan Bordo Toward a new psychology of gender

Idée fixe began as a parent category of obsession, and as a preoccupation of mind the idée fixe resembles today's obsessive-compulsive disorder: although the afflicted person can think, reason and act like other people, they are unable to stop a particular train of thought or action. However, in obsessive-compulsive disorder, the victim recognizes the absurdity of the obsession or compulsion, not necessarily the case with an idée fixe, which normally is a delusion. Today, the term idée fixe does not denote a specific disorder in psychology, and does not appear as a

technical designation in the Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. Nonetheless, idée fixe is used still as a descriptive term, and appears in dictionaries of psychology.

Background

As originally employed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, idée fixe was "a single pathology of the intellect", distinct from monomania, a broader term that included idée fixe, but also a wider range of range of pathologies that did not stem from "a single compelling idea or from an emotional excess". A second difference is that the victim of idée fixe was understood to be unaware of the unreality of their frame of mind, while the victim of monomania might be aware.

At that time, idée fixe was discussed as a form of neurosis or monomania.:

The meaning of monomania in the technical medical sense in which it was first used, was very close to the popular meaning it would soon acquire. It denoted an idée fixe, a single pathological preoccupation in an otherwise sound mind.

The idea of monomania was developed by Esquirol as a diagnostic category in his work *Des Malades Mentales* (1839) and related to the idée fixe by Griesinger (1845) who viewed "every single idée fixe the expression of a deeply deranged psychic individuality and probably an indicator of an incipient form of mania".

The "pathologicalization" of political convictions was used to discredit political anarchists. The further historical evolution of idée fixe was much entangled with the introduction of psychologists into legal matters such as the insanity defense, and is found in a number of texts.

Legal implications

During the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, monomania appears in treatises on criminal law:

Monomania is a state of madness, or derangement of the mind, with respect to one subject only. Homicidal mania is an insane impulse to kill; pyromania is an insane impulse to burn buildings; and kleptomania is an insane impulse to steal. A person, therefore, may be insane and irresponsible as to one subject and at the same time sane and responsible to others. He may be punished unless impelled to crime by his monomania. But many courts hold that monomania causing an irresistible impulse to crime is no defense when the offender knew the act was wrong.

The aberrations of pyromania and kleptomania still are recognized as impulse control disorders or conduct disorders, and the notion of irresistible impulse still plays a legal role in the insanity defense.

Possibly the best example of the role of idée fixe in an insanity defense today is its use in identifying the paranoid personality disorder.

A frequent manifestation of ... paranoid personality is the presence of an overvalued idea ... a fixed idea (idée fixe) ... which might seem reasonable both to the patient and to other people. However, it comes to dominate completely the person's thinking and life. ... It is quite distinct phenomenologically from both delusion and obsessional idea.

The extreme case of paranoid psychosis " ... includes preoccupation with delusional beliefs; believing that people are talking about oneself; believing one is being persecuted or being conspired against; and believing that people or external forces control one's actions."

The legal issues surrounding paranoia include judgment of competence to stand trial, conditions for involuntary hospitalization, involuntary medication, and a focus upon awareness or not of unreality at the moment when the defendant "snapped".

In literature

Idée fixe occurs extensively in literature. Perhaps the most famous example of an idée fixe is in Cervantes's Don Quixote:

Don Quixote reveals his kinship to the most commonly encountered of Cervantes's character types: the head-in-clouds fantasist, obsessed by his idée fixe.

Molière also used the idée fixe repeatedly:

Molière's more celebrated comic characters, Arnolphe, Orgon, Alceste, Harpagon, Monsieur Jourdain, Argan: each of them displays to the very end the obsession or idée fixe which colors his outlook on life. It is a characteristic of Molière's heroes that they are never 'converted': in every case the dénouement, far from curing them of their folly, merely confirms them in it.

Although Melville's Captain Ahab may come to mind as another famous example of idée fixe, and it is sometimes referred to this way, more often Ahab's obsession is referred to as monomania (the more inclusive term), and Melville himself does that. It would seem from the description of Ahab's possession that idée fixe applies quite accurately, as the following description suggests:

"Not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished." ... "Yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose", Ahab has let his mind's guiding and directing power be usurped by the "sheer inveteracy" of a will driven by "one unachieved revengeful desire" (Quotes from Moby-Dick, pp. 990, 1007)

-Thomas Cooley The ivory leg in the ebony cabinet: madness, race, and gender in Victorian

America

However, what makes monomania the better term is that Captain Ahab ... has an inkling of his true state of mind: 'my means are sane, my motive and my object mad.'

The words *idée fixe* also occur explicitly: for example, in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes:

There is the condition which the modern French psychologists have called the '*idée fixe*', which may be trifling in character, and accompanied by complete sanity in every other way. A man might form such an *idée fixe*... and under its influence be capable of any fantastic outrage.

-Arthur Conan Doyle The return of Sherlock Holmes

and in Abraham B. Yehoshua's novel about the Mani family through six generations:

...I had begun to despair of his accursed *idée fixe* which devoured every other *idée* that it encountered...

-Abraham B. Yehoshua Mr. Mani

and in the account of the war on terror by George Bush's counter-terrorism chief Richard A. Clarke:

Iraq was portrayed as the most dangerous thing in national security. It was an *idée fixe*, a rigid belief, received wisdom, a decision already made and one that no fact or event could derail.

-Richard A Clarke Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror