

Freud's metapsychology – the formal a priori of psychoanalytic experience

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The long-lasting debate over the status of psychoanalysis with respect to its orientation within the natural scientific and human scientific paradigms has been largely centered on the question of how to characterize Freudian metapsychology. Are the basic assumptions of metapsychology to be taken as empirical hypotheses principally verifiable or falsifiable by the results of experimental, natural scientific research? Or is metapsychology better understood as a speculative theory which generates pure ideas without factual referents, ideas that would work as help-constructions, at all times alterable due to pragmatic concerns, and whose value for clinical theory and practice would thus lie on a merely heuristic level? In close dialogue with the transcendental philosophies of Kant, Husserl and Heidegger, the author develops an argument according to which Freudian psychoanalysis should be understood as a science of subjectivity, and according to which metapsychology should be understood as the formal a priori of this science. It is precisely in their capacity as formal concepts – i.e., concepts that do not have their ground in empirical generalizations but rather in transcendental formalizations – that the terms of metapsychology can become, not abstract conceptualizations alienated from our direct experiences of the empirical reality, but rather lived realities for clinical practice and theory.

Key words: *subjectivity — metapsychology — transcendental arguments — formalization/generalization — a priori*

Undoubtedly, the most debated question within the scientific theory of psychoanalysis since the beginning of the 20th century has been whether psychoanalysis itself should be seen as belonging to a natural scientific or a humanistic paradigm¹. Which is the right heading for the theory and clinical practice of psychoanalysis? Is it experimental psychology, neuropsychiatry or medicine? Is its fundamental scientific ambition to primarily explain the problematic expressions of the human

psyche in terms of their underlying causes, and to thus gradually reveal and formulate universal, causal regularities in our psychic life? Or is psychoanalysis closer related to the hermeneutic tradition within the human sciences? And if so, is its ambitions rather to generate a deeper understanding of psychic phenomena through examining, with sensitivity for the individual case, the psychodynamic combination of conscious and unconscious motivations, desires, resistances and fantasies that forms the framework through which these phenomena gain their meaning and significance?

The primary source of this long-lasting and often bitter conflict is, undeniably, the works of Sigmund Freud himself. However, we must continue to ask exactly how Freud's works affect us in this sense. Many

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theorists have claimed – the most well-known is Heidegger (1987) and Sartre (1956), and the last one is Tauber (2010) – that the ambivalent scientific status of psychoanalysis must be traced back to a kind of inner split within Freud’s professional identity and, correspondingly, within his scientific ambitions. According to these critics, we have on the one hand Freud the clinical therapist, guided by humanistic ideals and imagining the psychoanalytic treatment as an interpretive process through which the patient, through an increase of self-understanding, ideally regains his freedom and his status as a moral individual. Then, on the other hand, we have Freud the neutral scientist who tried to create, on the basis of positivistic assumptions, a science of the human psyche that would legitimate its place within the academy along with the other exact sciences. Whereas the first Freud calls for the potential autonomy of the human soul and offers interpretations that are to be verified introspectively or reflexively, the other Freud claims that the human psyche is determined by and incorporated in the natural order of causality, thus proposing theoretical explanations that may only get verified through the characteristic third-person perspective of the positive sciences.

In Freud’s writings, these commentators continue, the double identity we discern here expresses itself concretely in the discursive differences between, on the one hand, the clinical theories involved in Freud’s case-histories, in his technical essays, and in his attempts to outline an etiology for clinical phenomena such as dreams, errors and psychopathological symptoms, and, on the other hand, the metapsychological theories where Freud tries to establish a conceptual infrastructure by building up generalized models for the growth, organization and dynamic way of functioning of the human psyche.

There hardly exists, among the philosophically inclined critics of Freud’s work, a theorist who has failed to notice the, at least on the surface, obvious categorical conflict between the humanistic, intentionalistic and teleological language of the clinical theories, and the mechanically and causally oriented terminology of Freud’s metapsychological works. In the clinical theories, the human psyche is referred to as something that belongs to human subjects or persons that think and act on the basis of a meaningful, complex and often conflict-ridden experience of themselves and their environment. In the metapsychological theories, inversely, we are given explanatory models that are finally referring the psychic phenomena and symptoms back to “the psychic apparatus” and to dynamic relations between unpersonal “systems”, “drives”, “cathexis”, “tensions”, “processes”, “mechanisms”, etc.

The serious aspect of this philosophical conflict is of course that it seems to encompass two ontologically divergent and irreconcilable ways of regarding the human psyche, and that it seems to leave us with a corresponding tension between two different types of knowledge. As one commentator tellingly described it: “To bring these two forms of knowledge together within one science is like trying to square a circle” (Draenos, 1982, p. 7). Freud himself, however, remained intent at regarding psychoanalysis as a scientific unity. According to Freud, psychoanalysis presents “a unity from which elements cannot be broken off at the caprice of whoever comes along” (Freud 1932, p. 138). Or, expressed in more exact terms:

Psycho-analysis is the name (1) of a procedure for the investigation of mental processes which are almost inaccessible in any other way, (2) of a method (based upon that investigation) for the treatment of neurotic disorders and (3) of a collection of psychological information obtained along these lines, which is gradually being accumulated into a new scientific discipline (1923a, p. 235).

And so, if we are to believe Freud, the psychoanalytic method of treatment, the clinical theory and metapsychology are three parts of a whole, irrevocably connected one to the other. Furthermore, Freud himself claims that metapsychology retains a privileged position in so far as it constitutes a theoretical fundament for the other parts of the psychoanalytical science. For even if the metapsychological theories are based upon clinical experiences, the ambition of these theories is no less than “to clarify and carry deeper the theoretical assumptions on which a psycho-analytic system could be founded” (Freud 1917, p. 222).

If we choose to view Freudian psychoanalysis in the way that Freud himself viewed it, i.e., as a unity, as an ontologically and epistemologically consistent science – and it is my conviction that this view is necessary if we are to preserve the distinguishing features of psychoanalysis – if we make this choice, we are of course facing the difficult task of trying to reconcile the seemingly disparate logical structures of metapsychology and, on the other hand, those of clinical theory and praxis. The ambition of the present paper is not to resolve this dilemma once and for all, but at least to outline a direction along with which a fruitful interpretation of it might become discernible. More specifically, my aim here will be to present an interpretation of the function, legitimacy and discursive status of the metapsychological theories in Freudian psychoanalysis.

The long-lasting debate over the status of psycho-

analysis with respect to its orientation within the natural scientific and human scientific paradigms has, understandably, been largely centered on the characterization of metapsychology. It would take up to much space here to recapitulate the full history of all the conflicting views that have been proposed within this field of research, but in order to situate my own interpretation and to clarify its general tendency, I feel it necessary to give a few examples.

Most of those who have tried, over the years, to grasp the function and the conceptual status of metapsychology seem to agree to regard it as a collection of the most general, fundamental assumptions on which Freud based his psychoanalysis. They also seem to admit that it has borrowed a large part of its conceptual framework from the biological and physical sciences of the day. However, when it comes to the exact definition of the nature of those assumptions, interpretations sharply diverge.

Some theorists, and primarily of the tradition of ego-psychology, hold that Freud's metapsychological language is the result of his adhering to a "scientific *Weltanschauung*" (Freud 1932, p. 158) and that the fundamental, metapsychological assumptions are thus to be taken as empirical hypotheses principally verifiable or falsifiable by the results of experimental, natural scientific research. But whereas early ego-psychologists such as Hartmann (1959) and Rapaport (1959) saw this as a possibility for psychoanalysis to become accepted as a science, later generations of ego-psychologists tend to think that precisely the empirical and natural scientific character of metapsychology makes it highly unsuitable as a founding theory for psychoanalysis. For Klein (1975, 1976), Gill (1976), Schafer (1976) and Holt (1985), Freud's metapsychology constitutes a ballast, a discursive universe that, by virtue of its biological, neurophysiological and mechanistic outlook, remains forever opposed to the fundamental attitude of clinical psychoanalysis. Metapsychology strives to raise hypotheses concerning the material substrate of the psychic phenomena and functions, and thus metapsychology and psychology "are not reducible to one another" and they require "different data for confirmation" (Klein 1976, p. 16). Or, to speak with Gill: "metapsychological propositions are not psychological and are not relevant to psychoanalysis as such" (1976, p. 92). Now, if we are to believe these theorists, the solution to this crucial dilemma is to reject metapsychology in its Freudian form and to construct in its place a new metatheory, one exclusively formulated in psychological terms, or as Schafer has it: a metatheory formulated in terms of an intentional "action-language". Along with other critics, I think that this solution would mean

to deny and to threaten the unique nature of psychoanalytic psychology.

Other critics, such as Fulgenico (2005), propose that the biological and physical terminology of metapsychology should not be taken literally. The natural science of Freud's era was only providing him with a metaphorical register from which he could generate "speculative concepts" or "pure ideas" without factual referents, ideas that would work as "help-constructions", at all times alterable due to pragmatic concerns, and whose value for clinical theory and practice would thus lie on a merely heuristic level (p. 109). I sympathize with the thought that Freud's metapsychology is not a theory within natural science, but I find it harder to accept that its concepts and inferences would be purely speculative and exclusively based on pragmatic concerns.

The bases of my own convictions are rather built upon the works of such interpreters as Habermas (1971), Ricoeur (1970, 1981) and, in Sweden, Lesche (1971, 1981). If we are to believe these authors, we must take seriously the fact that the theoretical construction of psychoanalysis is rooted in and springs forth from the self-reflective and self-formative process of its clinical context. This attitude implies that metapsychology can never be understood as long as we see it as a descriptive theory, belonging to natural science. Rather, what these critics have in common is that they suggest that what Freud's metapsychology takes over from physics and from biology is merely a "conceptual skeleton" (Lesche, 1971, p. 18), on the basis of which Freud attempts to establish a system of "pre-conceptions" working as logical "schemata" or "patterns of thought" (Lesche, 1981, p. 69), or as a set of a priori "conditions of the possibility of psychoanalytic knowledge" (Habermas 1971, p. 254).

The philosophically educated reader will readily recognize concepts such as "pre-conception", "schemata" and "conditions of possibility" as belonging to the framework of Kant's transcendental philosophy and from the post-kantian phenomenology of, e.g., Husserl and Heidegger. Ricoeur is the thinker who most explicitly draws on this connection. In one passage, he hints that the theoretical foundation of metapsychology could best be understood as a transcendental argument in the Kantian sense. It is perhaps only in the capacity of being transcendental that the concepts of metapsychology might get accepted, criticized, perfected or rejected (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 375).

I believe Ricoeur to be basically right, and it is my overall ambition to try to work out, in close dialogue with the transcendental philosophies of Kant, Husserl and Heidegger, the further implications of Ricoeur's

hint. My main proposal is that we should regard Freudian psychoanalysis as *a science of subjectivity* and take metapsychology to be *the transcendental apriori of this science*. This means, as I will try to show, that metapsychology is not a theory that distinguishes itself from clinical theory and practice by a higher degree of *generalization*. Rather, it is a theory that is localized, within psychoanalysis, on the highest level of *formalization*. It is – and this might seem paradoxical at first – precisely in their capacity as *formal* concepts that terms such as “drive”, “cathexis”, “energy”, “pleasure”, “id”, “super-ego”, etc., can become, not abstract conceptualizations alienated from our direct experiences of the empirical reality, but rather lived realities in what Pöstényi, with a beautiful phrase, called “the intercourse between the analyst and the *interpretable*” (1996, p. 14).

But in order to prepare for this interpretation of metapsychology, I must first approach the following question: what does it mean to understand psychoanalysis as a science of subjectivity?

PSYCHOANALYSIS – A SCIENCE OF SUBJECTIVITY

According to the canonized, historical version, psychoanalysis was born in 1897 when Freud abandoned his long-upheld seduction- or trauma-theory for the etiologies of hysteria and neurosis, to search instead the ultimate explanation for these symptoms in the suffering subject himself and in his inner dynamics of conflicting forces. Where Freud had previously imagined that the pathogenic material of psychic suffering was induced from the external world by means of sexual acts or downright assaults, he now imagines that the pathogenic material to a large extent is engendered within the individual himself. More specifically, the fundamental etiological elements of psychic suffering are to be found in the archaic, unconscious and, for the developed parts of personality, forbidden clusters of drives whose primary form of manifestation is infantile sexuality.

By abandoning his theory of seduction Freud hence lost, in an etiological perspective, and in his own words, “[t]he firm ground of reality” (1914, p. 17). And thus his theoretical focus was shifting, from the external in the direction of the internal, from the material reality in the direction of the psychic reality, from the interpersonal in the direction of the intra-psychical. But how are we to understand these concepts in a Freudian context: “psychic reality”, “internal”, “intra-psychical”?

When Freud abandoned his theory of seduction, are we to understand his shift of focus from the external to

the internal *in a spatial sense*? As if the meaning of the shift was primarily that an empty space had occurred in the causal and etiological chain of explanation relevant to the psychic symptoms, which were then taken up when Freud turned his theoretical attention from one part of the world to another? And does the intra-psychic itself, thus, constitute a subclass of phenomena included in the general class of worldly beings?

I do not believe that such is the case. A more nuanced interpretation of Freud’s abandoning the theory of seduction would be the following (cf. Eriksson, 2008; Lear 1998, p. 126 ff): having discovered that an act of sexual seduction is not a necessary etiological condition for the break-through of neurosis or hysteria, Freud realized that to understand the psychic suffering as such, a singular event in the real world cannot be the ultimate ground of explanation. Rather, he seemed to think that in order to understand the suffering of the patients, we must – whether the patient’s reports about seduction are true or not – place ourselves on the ground of their intentional or psychic life, to understand *from within* how the reported events (or non-events) were experienced and appropriated by the patient, i.e., how its traumatic significance was constituted in a personal framework of motives, desires, fantasies, defences, and so on.

According to the view indicated here, the concept of “the intra-psychic” does not refer to a domain in the objective world (where “internal” and “external” retain their spatial senses), but rather points to a perspective or a level of reflection where the focus shifts, to put it in a straightforward way, from “the experienced *world*” to “the *experienced world*”. To turn one’s thematic interest from the material to the psychic reality does not mean, hence, to turn one’s interest *away* from the material reality, but rather means to direct one’s attention toward the material reality, *but with a reflexive attention* based on the domain of the psychic reality, on to thereby let material reality shine forth as the kind of condensed *structure of meaning* that it constitutes in each specific case.

The domain for psychoanalytical research – the psychic in its Freudian sense – is thus equivalent to what we may call *our lived experience*. Or, to put it in another way: psychoanalysis is a science of subjectivity. In this, Freudian psychoanalysis adheres, at least in its principal traits, to transcendental philosophy as it was first created by Kant through his “copernican turn” and then developed by phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger. According to Husserl, transcendental philosophy is a kind of research that:

in opposition to prescientific and scientific objectivism, goes back to knowing subjectivity as the primal locus of all objective formations of sense and ontic validities, undertakes to understand the existing world as a structure of sense and validity, and in this way seeks to set in motion an essentially new type of scientific attitude and a new type of philosophy (1934-37, p. 99).

THE FORMAL CONSTITUTION OF SUBJECTIVITY AND THE DYNAMIC UNCONSCIOUS

If psychoanalysis is a science of subjectivity – i.e. *a science which studies the constitution of meaning by taking its departure in the subject/world-unity which we here call our lived experience or our experiential life* – it seems natural that we next ask how to characterize, in a formal and general context, subjectivity and the constitution of a self. To be sure, this seems to be an endless topic for philosophical discussion. But something over which we tend to agree, at least within the Kantian tradition in the broadest possible sense, is that a being that is constituted by subjectivity does not just exist – there is always, through every situation and on all existential levels, a question for the being herself about *how* she exists. *What it is like to be* is always, explicitly or implicitly, an ongoing issue for her. In the tradition following Hegel, this fact is spoken of in the following terms: man is essentially “*for himself*”, while the beings of nature are essentially “*in themselves*.” Expressed in more specific terms: our lived experience is essentially characterized, implicitly or explicitly, by self-accessibility, self-manifestation and self-consciousness, viz., by precisely that trait which Kant initially defined as “the original synthetic unity of apperception.” (Kant, 1781, B 132-140). Experiences are not just something we have, in the same meaning that you can have, e.g., money in the bank. Rather, experiences are always accompanied by a *phenomenal quality*, regardless of the type of the experience: to fall in love, to have a nice meal, to hope for a salary increase, to want to become a psychoanalyst, to panic in the subway, to feel you have thrown away your life, to believe that Tottenham will win the cup final, to become a victim of sexual molestation, etc. (Zahavi, 2005, pp. 116-132).

This principal, phenomenal quality of “how it is” to experience something is in itself not a contingent aspect that could be absent from an experience – lacking such an aspect the experience would cease to exist. The dimension of “how it is” is no auxiliary experience aside from or abstract from the primary experience, but rather an immanent moment or inherent form that any

experience is bound to assume: we cannot experience something unless that very experience, through which this something is experienced, is at the same time accessible to us. But this should not be taken to mean, however, that our lived experience should be dependent on a kind of infallible apperception in each and every instance (our lived experiences form multi-faceted and insurveillable systems!), as though the phenomenal quality would be the result of an objectifying, introspective and objectifying act of our consciousness. No, to emphasize the phenomenal essence of our experiences is rather to point to the fact that there are constitutive and unbreakable ties between our lived experiences and their accessibility or givenness *in a first-person perspective*.

The object of my experience is inter-subjectively accessible in so far as it can be, principally, experienced by others in the same way that it is experienced by me: others, too, can believe that Tottenham will win the cup final or fall in love with the same person as I have fallen for. But when it comes to my experience of the object, it is different. Others can of course observe or become aware that I have fallen in love, or get to know that I think Tottenham will win the cup final, but only I can have this knowledge in terms of my own *self-awareness*. And this is what makes these experiences *my* lived experiences. Put in other words: it is this immediate first-person accessibility that makes experience *subjective* – others can in principle not be conscious of my love and experience it *in the same way* as I do (Zahavi, 2005, p. 122).

But, now, the question arises, if subjectivity and the lived experience are essentially characterized by self-manifestation, self-consciousness and direct apperception, how then can I claim that Freudian psychoanalysis is a science of subjectivity? Especially since the primary field of interest for psychoanalysis seems to be *what is not directly accessible for oneself*, i.e., the dynamic unconscious, that which for me remains “it” rather than “me”? And isn’t it a fact that Freud is inscribed in the history of philosophy as being one of the sharpest critics of our conception of a subjectivity with direct and transparent access to itself?

As the concept of the *un*-conscious is negatively derived from the concept of consciousness, an examination of the latter concept should have bearing on the first. And yet Freud, in his attempts at clarifying the significance and implications of the unconscious, says surprisingly little about consciousness. One thing, however, seems entirely clear to him: if the essence of consciousness is to be understood through its direct accessibility to itself, then it will lead to absurd consequences if we think of the unconscious as a kind of “second

consciousness”, viz., if we imagine it to be a fully developed consciousness with all the relevant traits except for the only exception that it would lack the quality “consciousness”. To cite Freud: “If philosophers find it difficult in accepting the existence of unconscious ideas, the existence of an unconscious consciousness seems to me even more objectionable” (1912, p. 263). Or: “a consciousness of which one knows nothing seems to me a good deal more absurd than something mental that is unconscious” (1923b, p. 16).

How are we to understand the connotations of the expression “something mental that is unconscious”? If we focus on the clinical experience – which for Freud is that through which he perceived himself as having irrefutable evidence for the existence of unconscious processes – the unconscious is nothing beyond, under, independent from or on the side of our subjective, conscious life, but it is only *in* and *for* our conscious, lived experience that the unconscious reveals itself, e.g., through dreams, errors or the symptoms for which the analysand hopes to be helped by the analyst. And it was only for the purpose of attempting to understand such seemingly irrational experiences that Freud was led to assume the existence of something unconscious in the first place (cf., Zahavi, 1999, p. 204). “A gain in meaning” – this was Freud’s reason “for going beyond the limits of direct experience” (1915a, p. 167).

From this, we may conclude that the unconscious neither has the character of an *unconscious consciousness*, nor that of being *something other* than consciousness, as is for example a chemical process in the brain, which is of course “*not conscious*” rather than “*unconscious*”. What Freud claims here is that we “obtain our concept of the unconscious from the theory of repression” (1923b, p. 15). The connection to the theory of repression implies that the dynamic unconscious, in its psychoanalytic sense, by definition and in principle belongs to the realm of subjectivity – otherwise, there would be no motivation for the psychic defense provided by repression, which is something essentially different from flight against external threats, viz, it is precisely: “*turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious*” (Freud, 1915b, p. 147).

Repression as “turning something away” and as “keeping it at a distance” does not primarily mean to make oneself not conscious of, let us say, a forbidden impulse or fantasy, but to avoid *identifying oneself with its content*. Think for example of a defense mechanism like projection – if we agree with the early Freud in letting the concept of repression encompass all types of defense mechanisms. In projection, one is thoroughly conscious of what is being expelled from consciousness, only one is not conscious of it as *belonging to*

oneself. And thus it becomes impossible to perceive the absence of the unconscious from consciousness in the same way as, e.g., when an object is absent from a table. And this also means that there is an essential difference between being determined by the unconscious and being determined by what is not conscious. The effects of the unconscious on our psychic life are not causal determinations from a position beyond or behind the lived experience of the subject. Rather, these effects have their source, not in the not-subjective, but in the *desubjectivized or deidentified deep-structures* of the lived experience; that is, structures that take part, associatively rather than mechanically, in constituting the often multi-faceted, complex and irrational meaning of our conscious experiences (dreams, symptoms, errors, behavioral patterns, etc.).

A chemical process in the brain is an “it” in the sense that it remains forever and in principle inaccessible for reflexive introspection. It is, in other words, impossible to appropriate it in a first-person perspective. By this trait, it is essentially distinguished from the unconscious, which belongs to a totally different categorial order. Even the deepest layers of the unconscious – i.e., the infantile and archaic drives, impulses, tendencies and dispositions, that according to Freud all stem from “the primal repression” and whose associative derivatives are the targets of “the actual repression” (1915b) – these layers are, if not de facto so at least in principal possible to integrate, to subjectivize and to, not only speak about from a third-person perspective, but to *articulate*. Otherwise we would not be able to speak about *my* unconscious, and otherwise the psychoanalytic treatment, and thereby the psychoanalytic science as a whole, would be essentially impossible. For how are we to gain knowledge of the unconscious? Well, according to Freud: “It is of course only as something conscious that we know it, after it has undergone transformation or translation into something conscious” (1915a, p. 166). And this process of transformation or translation – i.e., the often complicated and time-consuming process of subjectivation that enables Freud to define the effects of psychoanalytic treatment in terms of psychic *integration* and thus in terms of personal *development* and *maturity* – this process essentially presupposes, not that the conscious and unconscious layers of the psyche have the same level of complexity and organization, but that they do belong to the same categorial sphere: *subjectivity*.

PSYCHOANALYSIS, PHENOMENOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Despite of all the differences, thus, psychoanalysis resembles transcendental philosophy, and most of all phenomenology, in so far as it is a science of subjectivity and of lived experience and its intricate, dynamic and multifaceted constitution. And, as we have seen, a consequence of this is that the field of research relevant to psychoanalysis is not to be found in the world, in a naturalistic sense. Since subjectivity is, primordially, not intersubjectively accessible – that is, *from out of and as itself*, it is not accessible in the same way as, say, a tree, a glass or the sun – but in principle only accessible in this way in first-person, it is per definition never an object among other objects in the world.

This, however, does not necessarily mean that subjectivity, at least in some sense, could not be studied as a part of the world, which occurs for example in the kind of positive science that is called “empirical psychology” and whose object Husserl calls “the empirical subject”.

The empirical subject is not only central to experimental psychology, that investigates our psychic life in a way inspired by natural science, where behaviors, processes and mechanisms are causally correlated to situational variables, or where psychic experiences and reactions are causally correlated to neurophysiological circumstances. In the different forms of human scientific or social scientific psychology, too, we find the same kind of focus on modifications of the empirical subject. In these scientific disciplines, the subject that is taken into account is not only causally but also intentionally related to the world, but their fundamental perspective is still to study the psychic life of the subject as part of a whole, i.e., as part of an external world, e.g., as “humans”, “persons”, “characters” with habits, interests, opinions, convictions within the framework of a social, political and cultural context.

In relation to these forms of psychology, psychoanalysis stands out not as a science about a new kind of object, but as *a new kind of psychological science*, a science according to which the psychoanalytical situation provides the singular “research laboratory”, and where our psychic life can reveal itself, not as *a part of*, but as *constitutive of* our world. In a way that reflects the methodological operation phenomenologists call “the transcendental-phenomenological reduction” or the “epoché” (Husserl, 1913, pp. 57-62); the psychoanalytical situation – with its specific framework of arrangements, rituals and attitudes – means that we set the non-analytical world, i.e., the external reality and all its dogmatic or unreflected judgements, within pa-

renthesis². By virtue of this de-realization, a (transference) playground is established for the intrapsychic reality, and thus, gradually, a new attitude and a new way of listening may be developed (both for the analyst and the analysand) in which the realities of which the analysand speaks may be regarded as, in Husserl’s terms, “mere phenomena”, phenomena that can be studied reflexively in *the perspective of the experiences themselves*. For example, it will become possible to listen to the sexual urges and the unconscious, infantile wishes and fantasies, in relation to which the outer realities become meaningful, *precisely as meaning-constituting structures of our experiences* rather than as empirical phenomena in an outer or inner world. Put another way: the psychoanalytical situation establishes a kind of listening that is not primarily directed to that which the analysand is talking about, when he or she, for example, is talking about him- or herself, but is directed towards *the one who is talking*, that is, that one in relation to which the object of the speech gains its meaning. The field of research relevant to psychoanalysis is thus not something that occurs in the world, but rather *the occurrence of the world itself*.

This is why I hold that psychoanalysis, on a fundamental level, is much more closely related to transcendental philosophy, and most of all phenomenology, than it is to the established forms of academic psychology. However, we should not forget that there are a lot of differences between psychoanalysis and phenomenology, the most striking being of course that psychoanalysis was developed on the basis of a study of the anomalies of our lived experiences, such as dreams, errors and psychopathological symptoms. Following this route, Freud discovered, in the profound layers of subjective experience, a rudimentary kind of motivation, a proto-intentional, unconscious, archaic and creative activity (resistances, fixations, regressions, associations, reversals, condensations, displacements, etc.), an activity by virtue of which every experience, along with its public meaning, is also replete with idiosyncratic and infantile-tinged layers of meaning. And since these layers of meaning are not constituted on the basis of what Freud calls the logic of the secondary process, their genealogy cannot be traced by means of a phenomenological, reflexive and rational reconstruc-

2 The phenomenological “reduction” or the “epoché” is Husserl’s methodological way of modifying what he calls the “natural attitude” and thereby establishes a philosophical or reflexive attitude on the basis of which it becomes possible to investigate the world *in terms of* how it is given to intentional experience, that is, in terms of the structures of meaning in accordance with which the world is experienced.

tion on the basis of the manifest experience, but may only get revealed within the unique circumstances and with the specific “technique” offered by the psychoanalytical situation (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 393).

This said, it is now time to return to the problem of metapsychology. We ask: how are we to understand the foundational theory of psychoanalysis as a new form of psychological science whose object is to be found neither in the outer nor the inner world, in a spatial sense? Here, too, transcendental philosophy is going to help us on the way.

FREUD’S METAPSYCHOLOGY

According to our definition above, metapsychology denotes the theories by means of which Freud tries to delineate the contours of the general organization, the development, the dynamics, and the functions of the psyche. The aim of metapsychology, thus, is to establish the “principles”, “fundamental concepts” and the “theoretical models” for psychoanalytic psychology (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 250). The purely metapsychological concepts hence do not refer to empirically observable, psychic phenomena but rather, faithful to the Greek meaning of the prefix *meta-*, they refer to something “beyond” or “behind” the level of phenomenal observations, a layer in relation to which the clinical observations are organized.

In his *Selbstdarstellung*, Freud claims that he employed the term “metapsychology” to reach a perspective “according to which every mental process is considered in relation to three co-ordinates, which I described as *dynamics*, *topographical*, and *economic*, respectively” (1925, p. 55, cf. 1915a, p. 181). However, a clear practical delimitation of these three coordinates has in fact never been reached, and some metapsychological concepts that have mainly been characterized as dynamic (for example the concept of “drive”) should perhaps finally be sorted under the economic co-ordinate. Still, the following definitions should provide a reasonable level of clarification as to the categories involved: the dynamic perspective means that our theoretical attention is directed towards the conflictual relation between intrapsychical forces and entails metapsychological concepts like “drive”, “wish”, “resistance”, “repression”, “compromise-formation”. The topographical perspective entails concepts like “consciousness”, “the preconscious”, “the unconscious”, “the ego”, “the id”, “the superego” and focuses on the genealogy and localization of psychic forces. The economic perspective, lastly, entails concepts like “energy”, “lust”, “pain”, “cathexis”, “counter-cathexis”,

“equilibrium”, “displacement” and focuses on the intensity of dynamic forces and on the distribution of energy within the psychic apparatus.

But how are we to understand this nebulous theory formation that Freud once called his “witch” and that he insists must be invoked to be able to cast light upon the clinically observable phenomena: “Without metapsychological speculation and theorizing – I had almost said ‘phantasizing’ – we shall not get another step forward” (Freud, 1937, p. 225)? This much is clear: despite the fact that the concepts of metapsychology fail to denote observable phenomena, the theory has its exclusive origin in the concrete, clinical praxis – “We have arrived at these speculative assumptions [of metapsychology] in an attempt to describe and to account for the facts of daily observation in our field of study” (Freud, 1920, p. 7). What conclusions can we draw from this?

When Freud, as we saw above, abandoned his theory of seduction and directed his etiological interest away from the world of the experiences and to the experiences of the world themselves, psychoanalysis was created as a science of subjectivity, a science that does not regard its primary field of research – the unconscious processes – as empirical occurrences in the inner or outer world, but rather as meaning-constituting and motivationally structured layers of our lived experiences. This was what finally led Freud to establish psychoanalysis as the form of “talking cure” we all know today. The manifest phenomena that we encounter in psychoanalytic treatment (symptoms, behavioral patterns, transference-reactions, dreams, thoughts, daily reports, life-stories) are not regarded as observable facts that would be explained by referring to underlying “causes”, but are regarded as (often overdetermined) *units of meaning*, i.e., as “signs”, as something that “speaks”, or, to speak with Freud, as “drive representative” that can and ought to be *interpreted*.

Thus – if Freud’s own theorizing has its exclusive origins in clinical psychoanalysis as a *discipline of interpretation* – it is then beyond normal borders to read metapsychology as an empirical, scientific theory aimed at systematizing, explaining, predicting and gradually formulating causal laws for the psychic phenomena, a theory that could then in principle be verified or falsified by experimental psychological or neurophysiological research. But what is the alternative here?

One of the fundamentals of Kant’s philosophy, one that has become almost common sense in today’s theory of science, is that every form of knowledge-seeking presupposes certain profound conceptual structures that provide the logical space for that knowledge-seeking – for its way of observing, its way of asking ques-

tions and looking for answers. In Kant's striking wordage: "intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant, 1781, p. A51/B75). If it was not for this frequently implicit and unquestioned pattern of fundamental concepts – i.e., this categorial structure of experiencing and understanding, or this "paradigm" to use Thomas S. Kuhn's famous concept (1970) – then a given scientific research, and its concomitant research-object, would deteriorate and lose its specific meaning; science would become unable to retain its activity as a continuous, coherent and reasonably smooth activity by which hypotheses are tested, controversies arise, results are generated, and so on.

To a large extent, this also applies to psychoanalysis as an interpreting science of subjectivity (Freud, 1915c, p. 117). For example, it is not a scientific hypothesis but a presupposed, conceptual background that the manifest psychic expressions we are encountering in the clinical praxis *carry meaning*, where the term "meaning" is equivalent to the "purpose" of any psychic expression, or the "intention it serves and its position in a psychical continuity" (Freud, 1915-1917, p. 40). If the analyst, in a clinical situation, realizes that his interpretation of a given, psychic phenomenon is incorrect, he does not normally think that the phenomenon fails to have meaning, but rather that it has another meaning than the one he assumed it to have. That the analyst acts under the metapsychological presupposition of taking psychic expressions as bearers of meaning – a meaning based in their motivational or drive-related character – is an essential part of what constitutes his actions as being *psychoanalytic*. And the same goes for the metapsychological and topological distinctions between the conscious and the unconscious layers of the psychic processes. Here, again, we do not see an empirical hypothesis but, as Freud said: this "is the fundamental premise of psycho-analysis. and it alone makes it possible for psycho-analysis to understand the pathological processes in mental life [...] and to find a place for them in the framework of science" (1923b, p. 13).

What is becoming clear here is that metapsychology is not an empirical or descriptive theory. Rather, it represents Freud's attempt to articulate the conceptual and categorial premises that lie "beyond" the observable, clinical expressions which in relation to which these expressions may be organized according to their meaning. And precisely in this – in its explicit attempt at articulating its own conceptual basis, that it incorporates its own transcendental "critique", in the sense Kant gave this word – psychoanalysis essentially differs from the positive, "dogmatic" and empirically oriented sciences. Resembling transcendental philosophy in that it is not oriented toward examining a certain kind of

worldly objects and their causal relations and properties, examining instead the meaningful experience of the world, psychoanalysis can of course not dispense with thematizing the fundamental forms of our lived experiences.

In order to understand more thoroughly the significance of this thematization, let us take a closer look at Kant's transcendental philosophy.

TWO KINDS OF ABSTRACTIONS: TRANSCENDENTAL FORMALIZATION AND EMPIRICAL GENERALIZATION

In his magnum opus *The critique of pure reason* from 1781 – and with the final ambition to show the limits, for speculative reason, in its search for metaphysical insight into the principal order of the world – Kant performs a critical investigation of our overall possibilities of gaining knowledge of the world. The results of his investigation are far from unknown: the objects of our knowledge cannot, in their character and meaning, be independent and lie outside the sphere of our capacities for knowledge; our capacities for knowledge are not passively adjusting to the objects, but do indeed, in a specific sense, take part in constituting them.

Even if knowledge does retrieve its material from the external world, this material must, in order for us to speak of "knowledge", be organized in accordance with space and time, as forms of intuition, and in accordance with the pure, categorial concepts of the understanding, divided by Kant into four main groups: quantity, quality, relation and modality. For example: in order for someone to know that "the table in front of me is brown", the sensual impression of the brown color of the table is not enough. The sensual impression represents knowledge only in so far as it is organized in accordance with the categorial form "substance" (the table) which can be bearer of a certain "quality" (brown). And these fundamental forms do not belong to the table itself, but are only to be found within the knowing subject, or more specifically in his experience of the table in so far as this experience has the character of empirical knowledge. Thus, the categorial forms that Kant establishes, along with space and time as the fundamental forms of intuition, are not empirical, but rather *transcendental* and *a priori* conditions that precede, constitute and provide the possibility of all empirical knowledge. Therefore these a priori conditions structure the logical space of application for predicates on lower levels: in its capacity of being a substance and a potential bearer of a large number

of qualities, the table can be “brown”, “blue”, “large”, “small”, “broken”, “intact”, etc.

But that these preconditions have an *a priori* character and precede every empirical experience (a priori: in latin “that which comes before”) does not mean that we have to know them explicitly before we can acquire knowledge of the world. Nor does it mean that they exist in an autonomous sphere that would precede the empirical experience as in a causal chain. The transcendental categories and forms of intuition rather represent the ideal structure of experience itself, a structure that, out of view so to speak, *acts and functions* in our empirical experiences without us becoming aware of it, directing as we do all our attention to the objects of our experiences.

Therefore, the philosophical character of the investigation of the fundamental conditions of knowledge must necessarily be one of *reminiscence*. And here, we encounter the peculiar kind of argumentation that permeates *The critique of pure reason* as a whole. This argumentation, if we take it just briefly and in its most formal aspects, means neither an attempt to deduce experience and knowledge from more fundamental concepts, nor an attempt to reason according to a positivist schemes like “A is really to be taken as B” or “A has been caused by B”. Rather, it means that the transcendental thinking must start from the unreflected, given experience and find its way back, viz., “remember” and critically determine the preconditions that are necessary in order for the experience to be the meaningful experience that it is.

Here, it also becomes clear that the categorical concepts of reason do not have the character of what Kant calls “real predicates”, i.e., they are not deduced a posteriori from experience (like the concept “table”) but are abstracted and reflected a priori on the basis of the subjectivity of experience. The categories, in other words, do not have their ground in empirical *generalizations* but in transcendental *formalizations*.

In Heidegger’s (1920/1921) series of lectures *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, we get a brief and clarifying explanation of the classical distinction between generalization and formalization as two types of abstraction (pp. 57-62). According to Heidegger, generalization means to gain access to what is general through ordering impressions in terms of genus and species – the writing desk is a kind of table, the table is a piece of furniture, etc. And now, it seems that we could go on like this: a piece of furniture is an object, an object is a substance. However, if we look closer, the chain is broken, because “piece of furniture” defines “table” in another sense than “object” defines “piece of furniture”, or than “substance” defines “object”.

The former abstraction is a generalization, the latter is a formalization.

Generalization is primarily characterized by its process of abstraction being tied to a specific “material domain”, and the succession of abstraction in general levels is determined in accordance with the specific content of this domain. Formalization, in contrast, is free, both in terms of not being tied to a specific content of a material domain, and in terms of not being naturally ordered within a succession of abstractions. If we take, for example, the formal determination “the table is a substance”: this predication has no ground in the content of the material domain, but is founded entirely on the meaning of the experience of the table. “Substance”, thus, is not a general but a formal designation, a reflexive predicate that is not abstracted from the constituted “what?” of the experienced object, but which belongs to the experience itself and its constituting categorical or intentional form – the “how?” of experience.

FREUD’S METSPSYCHOLOGY – THE FORMAL A PRIORI OF PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPERIENCE

What I am proposing is that Freud’s metapsychological theory is to be taken, essentially, as a set of transcendental arguments whose concepts should be taken as formal predicates in the sense defined above. The most important difference from Kant is of course that Kant’s formal categories pertain to experiences of a theoretical kind, and most notably of a natural scientific kind, while Freud’s metapsychological concepts pertain to the specific experiences made in the clinical praxis of psychoanalysis that reveal the dissociated and archaic creativity of the psyche that gives to every experience, on the side of its public significance, an idiosyncratic and infantile-tinged meaning.

The specific assumption of unconscious processes in the concrete clinical situation and in clinical theory, may already be said to appear under a transcendental structure of argumentation. Here, as an example of clinical theory, we may look at the famous passage where Freud discusses the etiology of melancholia (1915d). In this text, Freud proceeds from the clinical experience that some individuals, after the loss of a beloved object, and in contrast to those who go through a normal process of mourning, develop a depressive state which expresses itself in a distinct lowering of the person’s self-esteem. Moreover, he discerns a lack of correspondence between the person’s often explicit self-accusations (“I am worthless”, etc.) and how that

person really is. And lastly, he finds that the person's loud outcries against himself often contain a quality of satisfaction. On the basis of these experiences, and in relation to his concrete work as therapist, Freud then tries to trace the origins and genesis of depression.

Briefly rendered, his argumentation goes somewhat like this: if the normal work of mourning means a gradual readjustment to reality, then this is something that the depressed person fails to accomplish. To protect himself from pain, parts of his psychic life instead regress back to the earliest, narcissistic and omnipotent phase of the psychosexual development, a phase when there was still no firm demarcation between the ego and the world, and when the relation to external objects, primarily the mother, were structured according to oral patterns, primarily those of breast-feeding. Thus, a possibility is opened, on the level of an unconscious fantasy, to deny the loss by incorporating or swallowing the lost object and thereby make it a part of oneself. In this way, a primitive identification arises that means both that the relation to the object is transformed into an intrapsychic self-relation, which now becomes possible to express, in the form of self-derision, the forbidden and infantile aggression provoked by the loss of the object. In other words, the complaints about oneself that form an essential part of depression, on closer inspection have the character of aggressive accusations against an internalized object.

In what way does Freud's reasoning here have the character of a transcendental argument? As "a gain in meaning", as we have seen, was Freud's clinical motivation for "going beyond the limits of direct experience" – and while the manifest psychic expression, in this case depression, in each particular case is regarded as something that *speaks* and that calls for *interpretation* – the hypothesis about unconscious processes is not an empirical one, one that would trace the causal root of the expression (like "depression is caused by a lack of balance in the signal substances of the brain"). Instead, Freud's etiological deduction constitutes a critical attempt to determine the motivationally structured conditions, or the forms of experience and the creative, intentional transformations in relation to which the psychic expression gains the multifaceted meaning or quality that we actually perceive in clinical praxis.

If we compare metapsychology to clinical interpretation and clinical theory, however, the thematization of the former occurs on a higher level of formalization. Virtually all of Freud's reasoning around the etiology of melancholia was implicitly structured in accordance with the context of formal, fundamental concepts in the stage of development it had reached by 1915. For example, dynamic concepts like "drive", "resistance"

and "compromise formation" serve to structure Freud's discussion about the attempts at avoiding pain through regression and incorporation, i.e., attempt both to let the relation to the beloved object survive in the form of an inner self-relation, and to give oneself the opportunity for discharge of aggression. Topographical concepts like "ego" and "superego" (though the latter concept was to be explicitly established only later) denote the localizations or positions in the ambivalent self-relation. And economical concepts such as "energy", "cathexis", "pleasure/pain", "equilibrium", "displacement" structure the argumentation with hindsight to the affective force experienced in the loss and in terms of the distribution of this force, as the relation is transformed from object- to self-relation.

Here, we may add one further perspective that has been, by many interpreters, ranged under the heading of metapsychology, even if Freud did not make this connection – *the genetic perspective* (Gill & Rapaport, 1959). This perspective means that our attention is focused on the origins and genesis of psychic phenomena, and in Freud, its most obvious expression is in the theory of the psychosexual phases of development, entailing concepts like "oral", "anal", "phallic", "genital", "Oedipus complex". And this perspective, of course, takes its part in structuring Freud's reasoning around the etiology of melancholia in so far as the "incorporation", thought to be the central element in the genesis of depression, is taken to have its ground in a regression back to an oral level of psychosexual organization.

Thus, in my reading, the context of fundamental, metapsychological concepts represents the formal a priori of clinical theory and praxis. And this means that, e.g., a dynamic concept like "drive" (along with its closer determinations "source", "pressure", "aim" and "object") is not a general designation of a class of empirically discovered phenomena in the world – as would be, for example, the concept "somatic stimuli". Rather, this concept invokes the motivational *form* that works through and structures the concrete events of our lived experiences: our intentions, volitions, actions, resistances, interests, feelings, etc. In other words: the concept "drive" (along with its nuances on a lower level of formalization: "libido", "self-preserving drive", "death-drive", "life-drive") points to the transcendental condition for the lived experience to become that, in relation to which the world, with all its objects and projects, gains a differentiated structure by being invested, in each particular case, with *significance* in one form or the other.

And the same applies to economical concepts like "pain", "pleasure", "energy", "tension". Pain, defined

as an increased quantity of energy or stimulus, and pleasure, defined as a decrease of quantity – neither of these concepts denote physical occurrences in the body that would, in principle, be possible to discover from a third-person perspective. Rather, these concepts denote, metaphorically, the fundamental, teleological form of the motivationally governed, psychic life (“seek for pleasure”, “avoid pain”). The metapsychological concepts “energy”, “tension” and “quantity” thus have less to do with the concept “force” as is used in physics, than with the concept “value” as used in the science of economy (Boothby, 2001, p. 68).

It is the same with the topological concepts. “The unconscious”, “the preconscious”, “the id”, “the ego”, “the superego”: these concepts by no means refer, let us say, to places in the human brain – “I shall carefully avoid the temptation to determine psychical locality in any anatomical fashion” (Freud, 1900, p. 536). Rather, they refer to the fundamental forms of organization that pertain to all our psychic life, forms that can unite seemingly disparate psychic events according to their finer, qualitative nuances of meaning – whether the events are to be characterized as mature, integrated, inhibited, archaic, rigid, infantile, etc.

And, finally, the genetic perspective. Freud’s theory of the psychosexual phases does not have its roots in experimental, developmental psychology, but is abstracted from his clinical work with adult analysands. Concepts like “oral”, “anal”, “phallic” or “genital” hence do not designate empirically observed patterns of infantile behavior. Rather, I assume, these concepts are names, formulated so to speak from within, designating more or less lingering forms of infantile organization of the lived experiences (“organization of libido”) in relation to which the world, and its objects, gains its pleasurable meaning, in the metapsychological sense. Freud’s reasoning about the corporal zones around which the drives are organized during the different phases – the anus, the mouth, the genitals – thus do not constitute an empirical or descriptive theory about the somatic sources of pleasure, but rather means an attempt at formulating the different ideals, models, or, precisely, *fundamental forms* for what pleasure means during the different phases (eat, hold in, discharge and so on). That Freud at least glimpsed this transcendental tendency of this facet of his own argumentation becomes clear in the end of the case-history of the Wolfman, when he refers his discovery of the Oedipus-complex to “the phylogenetically inherited schemata, which, like the categories of philosophy, are concerned with the business of ‘placing’ the impressions derived from actual experience” (Freud, 1918,

p. 119). The Oedipus-complex here opens up to a new interpretation where it – if we use Nicholas Smith’s striking formulation – “will be understood as an essential structure relevant to all subjectivity, and which precedes every individual conflict, rather than as a generalization gained by empirical means” (Smith, 2003, p. 24).

CONCLUSION: METAPSYCHOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

All in all, and in accordance with the reading presented here, the constantly integrated and intertwined coordinates of metapsychology provide the a priori foundation for clinical theory and praxis. And yet, we have also concluded that metapsychology is established through a transcendental argumentation that *takes its basis in* and is *generated from* the clinical experience. The reason for this seeming paradox is the fact that psychoanalysis, as a science of subjectivity – and since subjectivity is not a worldly entity subjected to causal laws – has no way to shield its complex of a priori concepts as a kind of unquestionable paradigm wherein the scientific research could proceed in a dogmatic and accumulative way (Eriksson, 2010). Instead, in psychoanalysis, a dialectical or hermeneutical relation must always prevail between the complex of fundamental concepts and the clinical experiences which these concepts makes visible by, from within, articulating their inherent forms of meaning. Metapsychology is not a rigid structure of concepts established once and for all, but is, in its optimal form, a creative kind of *theorizing*, constantly changing, tentatively, provisionally, and that always remains partially open to revisions and reformulations due to the nuances and differentiations in the ongoing, clinical experience – nuances and differentiations opened for by the metapsychological theorizing itself. And this is why Freud thinks of metapsychology as, on the one hand, the foundation of a “psychoanalytical system”, but at the same time, with a somewhat misleading formulation, as “a speculative superstructure” where any portion “can be abandoned or changed without loss or regret at the moment its inadequacy has been proved” (1925, p.32f).

While the metapsychological theorizing means a creative attempt at articulating the fundamental, formal structure of our experiences within clinical psychoanalysis, and while the metapsychological concepts do not denote or classify occurrences in the external or internal world in a spatial sense, the theory cannot be taken and appropriated as a kind of “this is how it

works”. A theory of that kind is soon outdated, as later research shows that it works in another way. (And this is why, from the perspective of experimental psychology, it strikes many as very strange that psychoanalytical education, even to this day, devotes so much energy to study something as outdated as Freudian metapsychology!). To study and understand metapsychology requires what Reeder has significantly termed a theoretical “assimilation” (2001, pp. 62-63). Metapsychology, so to speak, is not a research report that provides us with the final results of someone else’s work. To be understandable at all, and to fulfill its function as a generator of psychoanalytical knowledge, the theory has to get reactivated, in each specific case, and then incorporated into the analytical instrument with which the analyst in his clinical practice tries, not to “gain knowledge about”, but to *get to know* the psychic life which he is optimally invited to share (and lets himself be invited to share).

This means that whereas the general knowledge of natural science is inductive – i.e., it is expressing, on the basis of large numbers of observations, general laws thought to cover all particular cases, in a quantitative meaning – psychoanalysis instead tries to articulate forms whose essential function is to *provide us with new perspectives* and to *render us sensitive* to the nuances of psychic life. Optimally, psychoanalytical theories are creations of a dynamic and creative nature, and who’s general knowledge helps us in deepening our understanding of the particular case, rather than subsuming the particular case under general laws which would enable us to predict, from the nature of the circumstances, future occurrences in the psychic life. In other words, psychoanalysis generates a kind of knowledge whose general character serves psychoanalysis in its capacity as a science of subjectivity, *a knowledge of mankind* (*Menscherkenntnis*, to use a word from Wittgenstein), rather than as a science of the object called man (cf. Foss, 2009, pp. 262-265).

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