



"The Interpretation of Dreams" by Sigmund Freud

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Source: *Daedalus*, Winter, 1974, Vol. 103, No. 1, Twentieth-Century Classics Revisited (Winter, 1974), pp. 91-96

Published by: The MIT Press on behalf of American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024191

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TALCOTT PARSONS

The Interpretation of Dreams by Sigmund Freud

FREUD'S *The Interpretation of Dreams* seems particularly appropriate for discussion in the present issue of *Dædalus* because it was first published in the opening year of the twentieth century, 1900, when Freud was forty-four years old. It was the first major publication of what came to be known as psychoanalytic theory. This field, if not his unique creation, is overwhelmingly dominated by the figure of Freud. The main outline of psychoanalytic theory is clearly present in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and, indeed, in a surprisingly subtle and fully developed form. In preparation for writing the present article, I entirely reread the book in its seventh German edition, since I had not read it for a good many years.[1] I was more profoundly impressed by it than I was originally, essentially because, on the one hand, I have a much better understanding of psychoanalytic thinking than I did, and secondly, because I now connect Freud's book with a great many theoretical preoccupations of my own which have undergone very substantial development since I first read Freud.

In a great many respects this is a unique book. Although there was a rather extensive literature on dreams in his day, which Freud meticulously reviews in his first chapter, there was surely nothing of a scope and depth comparable to his interpretations. Another unusual aspect of this book is the fact that, as Freud himself points out, many of the theoretical problems it deals with are adaptations of the problems he had encountered in trying to understand his own field of the psychoneuroses over a series of years before writing it. So far as we know, Freud himself was not in any gross or obvious sense a neurotic. Through a variety of channels—notably through his recognition of the phenomenon called *transference*—he became increasingly aware that a person who attempts to treat the

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neuroses of others through the psychoanalytic procedure must first acquire a very unusual knowledge of himself. This requirement has, within the psychoanalytic movement, been institutionalized in the didactic analysis which is a primary condition to admission to psychoanalytic practice. Freud was the only psychoanalyst, however, who ever carried out the procedure of psychoanalysis on himself. Among its other features, *The Interpretation of Dreams* is the primary documentation of this self-analysis.

The Interpretation of Dreams contains, as far as I know, Freud's first published statement about the Oedipus complex, which was to figure so very prominently in his general theory. It is, I think, highly significant that Freud's father died in 1896, four years prior to the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.[2] Painful and disturbing as it was at the time, there is reason to believe that the death of his father had the long-run effect of freeing Freud from a good many of the inhibitions that had impeded his work of self-analysis. In the book, he recounts and analyzes a considerable number of his own dreams, as well as those recounted to him by his patients then subjected to analysis in the course of a therapeutic program. He also draws, though not so heavily, on dreams from the more general literature.

One might ask why Freud chose, as the primary subject matter of his first major theoretical work in psychoanalysis, the study of dreams rather than the direct study of neurotic symptoms and the conditions of their resolution through therapy. Part of the answer lies in his conviction concerning the importance of his self-analysis for the furtherance of his work. Through his psychiatric practice, he had come to realize that neurotic symptoms were very generally connected with dreams. Since he was personally, for the most part, free of neurotic symptoms, dreams provided a particularly appropriate vehicle for his self-analysis. At the same time, he surely realized that in the history of science, indirect attacks on fundamental theoretical problems have frequently proven more fruitful than direct ones. In addition, as a responsible physician, Freud may have considered the very fact that the study of dreams was at one remove from the focus of his clinical responsibilities as an argument in its favor since it enabled him to concentrate on psychological problems as such, rather than on the balancing of therapeutic successes and failures.

The Nature of Psychoanalytic Theory

There can be no doubt about the tremendous impact of psychoanalytic theory on the culture of the twentieth century, nor about Freud's preponderant creative role in establishing it as part of our culture. The big main outline of the conceptual scheme was already quite fully developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, although Freud was clearly not a man to rest content at one stage in the development of his thinking. On the contrary, through the rest of his long life—he died in 1939—he never ceased to extend and modify his theories. He did not, however, turn aside to any radically different line of thinking, and there is a fundamental continuity between *The Interpretation of Dreams* and all of his subsequent writings.

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It is often said that Freud's greatest discovery was that of the Unconscious. Seen in the proper perspective, I think this is correct. In more general terms, his great achievement was to have worked out, with considerably greater theoretical sophistication than his predecessors, an account of the structure and functioning of the human person as a psychological entity operating as a self-regulating system. In the formulation of this scheme, the Unconscious was already, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, one of three subsystems in his total psychological system, the other two being the Conscious system and the Preconscious system. Many years later, he modified this tripartite division slightly, calling the new subsystems the Id, the Ego and the Superego, but the continuity between the two formulations is patent.

Freud's discourse throughout the book deals with the *meaning* of psychic events—meaning, that is, in some kind of subjective rereferable sense, rather than simply as an index of somatic processes. Thus he decisively repudiates any form of somatic reductionism. Freud's concept of the Unconscious is built primarily around his concept of psychic energy, in German, *Triebe*, usually mistranslated into English as "instinctual." This energy is basically a common pool, not irrevocably attached to particular objects of "desire." It is transferable through various processes, one of the most important of which is called, in psychoanalytic vocabulary, *displacement*, or, in later statements, *cathexis*. The tendency of this psychic energy source is unidirectional, tending always toward the achievement of states of gratification. This is the focus of the concept, *wish*, which figures so prominently in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, especially in Freud's dictum that a wish-fulfillment component is present in every dream and, in fact, provides the motive force for dream activity.

Freud attributes the property of *unconsciousness* to things which are not remembered because they are protected by certain mechanisms from gaining access to the conscious components of the personality. The Unconscious is clearly, in his view, not a competely fluid pool, but one distributed in relation to what might be called the unconscious cathexis of a system of objects. Freud adheres rigorously to the psychic character of the Unconscious and strongly emphasizes the importance of childhood experience. My rereading of the book has reinforced my conviction[3] that its primary structure at the object level is the internalized object system of childhood experience, which is, of course, very heavily affected by the social structure of the human family. This is closely connected with Freud's own emphasis on the sexual—or better, perhaps, erotic—component in the motivation of unconscious wishes. In the development of the individual, this has roots in the very special role played by eroticism in childhood, eroticism connected primarily with the child's motivational attachment to human objects in his environment, but transferable to nonhuman objects such as animals and indeed physical objects. Freud's contribution to the understanding of the eroticism of childhood is crucial. Fellow members of the child's family are clearly the most important of these objects, followed by nonfamilial household members. Central to Freud's analysis is the significance of these objects as potential sources of pleasure or fulfillment gratification, and of the blocking of such gratifications. This is the main axis of the famous Freudian concepts of *pleasure* and *unpleasure*. The arousal of an impulse or desire always induces unpleasurable

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feelings, but in the process of gratification the unpleasure is converted into pleasure; when the cycle is complete, however, with full consummation, the whole *affective tone*, as he calls it, disappears.

In his remarkable final chapter, Freud speaks of the Unconscious as tending to maintain a rather stable equilibrium of energy potential and allocation. Only in rather carefully regulated ways and in relatively small doses is its underlying energy released into the Preconscious and the Conscious sectors of the personality. It can be released through dreams, or through what later came to be called *ego-activity*, or through pathological symptoms. It is important to realize that there is a cognitive component in the structure of the Unconscious.[4] Objects on the one hand, and wishes on the other, clearly fit into the paradigm of goal-orientation, a paradigm familiar in the sciences of human action and behavior and in biology as well. The processes of the Unconscious, however, are not primarily those of cognitive reasoning; rather, they are what Freud calls *affective processes*, essentially those which deal with the "investment of psychic energy" in wishes and the objects through which they can be gratified, and the reallocation of such energy within systems of objects. The relevant system of objects extends past the boundaries of the Unconscious into the Preconscious and eventually into the Conscious subsystems.

The endowment of an object with psychic energy is what has come to be known as *cathexis* (German *Besetzung*). Freud's term for the paths by which energy is transmitted from one object to another is *association*. This kind of association—quite different from the processes of logical inference in conscious thinking and reasoning—connects objects with primarily affective meanings according to their symbolic properties. These may be either resemblances or contrasts, and actual reversal is a very common phenomenon in dream processes. Freud is insistent on the difference between what he ends up calling the *primary* process of the Unconscious and the *secondary* process of the Conscious world. One of his most important propositions in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is that the objects which enter the manifest content of actual dreams should be regarded as the nodes where several complex association paths intersect. By these association paths the dream content is related in turn to the latent "dream thoughts" which he contends are predominantly of preconscious origin—though some are actually conscious, notably references to the previous day's experiences. The main task of dream interpretation is tracing out these paths of association to significant objects and events.

The principles of organization of the Unconscious and the Conscious sectors of the personality are radically different. I think that it is because of this difference that Freud holds that unregulated interchange and interpenetration between them cannot fail to be disorganizing on both sides of the boundary. Since Freud's own approach as therapist and analyst of dreams had necessarily been from the point of view of the consciousness system, he was particularly impressed by the functioning of agencies which prevented components of the Unconscious from crossing the boundaries to the Conscious and vice versa in an unregulated manner. First he formulated the concept of an agency which he called the *censor*, which essentially prevented boundary crossings from the Unconscious to the Conscious, then he

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developed the concept into what he called *repression*. Especially in the field of pathological symptom formation, he was greatly impressed by the amount of conflict which could be generated in this area of boundary relationships. He seems to have felt, however, that, in the relatively integrated and mentally healthy adult personality, the elements of conflict could at least be minimized to the point where they were tolerable. In the dream, he clearly saw a kind of safety valve which, under the protection of sleep, permitted expression of unconscious wishes and thus a kind of gratification of them which would result in minimal disturbances to the conscious life. It is important to realize that there are direct parallels here to the process of psychoanalytic therapy. In the analytic relation the therapist encourages the verbal expression of any and all thoughts, deliberately seeking to stimulate the expression of those which belong primarily in the Unconscious. There is, however, a fundamental distinction in psychoanalytic procedure between verbal expression on the one hand and what is called "acting out" on the other. Thus, to use a familiar example, if a patient has displaced his hostility toward his father onto his analyst, he may express his hostility verbally in very bitter terms without its leading to retaliation. However, a physical attack on the analyst is strictly forbidden and would be promptly suppressed. Sleep seems to provide an analogous situation in that, motor activity having been suspended by sleep, the acting out of dream wishes is precluded.

The Integration of Psychoanalytic Theory in the Sciences Dealing with Living Systems

It is not clear to me how far Freud was aware of the similarity of the theory of the human psyche he developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and the parallels which have just been sketched to certain more general movements in the theoretical analysis of living systems, both organic and human, at the psychological, social, and cultural levels. It strikes me quite forcibly that there is an important parallel between Freud's conception of the Unconscious as a relatively stabilized and rather tightly controlled system and the conception of the internal environment of the organism developed in physiology, especially by Freud's contemporary Claude Bernard and Bernard's successor Walter B. Cannon. The forces and mechanisms are different but the main theoretical format is strikingly similar. Both are subsystems which, because of their effective insulation in certain fundamental respects from fluctuations in the environment, are able to maintain a higher level of constancy than free interchange with the environment would permit.

Such a parallel throws light on the sharp differences which Freud himself emphasizes between primary and secondary processes—processes which he connects directly with affective process and cognitive process respectively. The cognitive function organizes a set of mechanisms which enhance the individual's chances of coping successfully with the contingencies—dangers as well as the opportunities—inherent

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in the environment external to his own personality. Though the psychic components of the environment and the internal system may in certain respects be the same, their combinations are quite different. The components we associate with such conceptions as rationality and reasoning are far more prominent in relation to the environment than they are to the internal system.

This is only one of a number of similarities which suggest themselves between Freud's analytical schemes and those developed in a variety of neighboring disciplines. Somewhat similar theoretical constructs have appeared in the fields dealing with human societies and cultures. Particularly prominent beginnings are found in the work of Emile Durkheim, who sees society as a "reality sui generis," functioning as the internal environment of a general system of human action.[5]

Conclusion

Psychoanalytic theory has, of course, been highly controversial ever since its first massive promulgation through *The Interpretation of Dreams.* Indeed, it is still drastically repudiated in some quarters. There can be little doubt, however, that it has been one of the most important intellectual movements of the century. It is my own view that, far more than is generally realized, it is in accord with the main movement of science, extending all the way from sciences on the biological side and psychology to those dealing with human phenomena at the social and cultural levels. In tackling the task of systematically analyzing the individual human personality, Freud stood at a particularly crucial nodal point in this larger intellectual movement. He made advances in theoretical penetration, comprehensiveness, and clarity far beyond the points reached by any of his predecessors. Certainly I regard *The Interpretation of Dreams* as one of the great landmarks in the intellectual development of the twentieth century.

REFERENCES

1. My rereading was done, as I noted, in the 7th German edition (Wien: Franz Deuticke, 1945).
2. Freud's relation to Wilhelm Fliess was particularly important to Freud. On this and the whole background of Freud's life, see the monumental biography in three volumes by his close English associate and friend Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Basic Books, 1953, 1955, 1957). The relation to Fliess is discussed in Vol. I, ch. 13.
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4. Marshall Edelson, "Dreams and Language," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child,* ed. Ruth S. Eissler *et al.* (New York: International Universities Press, 1973).
5. Talcott Parsons, "Durkheim on Religion Revisited: Another Look at the Elementary Forms of the Religious Life," *Beyond the Classics? Essays in the Scientific Study of Religion,* ed. Charles Y. Glock and Phillip E. Hammond (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1973), pp. 156-180.

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