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The Latest, the Last, and the Least: Freud, Salomé, and the Freudian Method

The Question of Metapsychology

Some questions are impossible to pose directly. Or rather: some questions can be posed directly only retroactively, only at the moment when, by way of detours and various more or less fabricated points of entry, we have produced an answer that is relatively independent of the question itself. One such question is: what is metapsychology – Freud's metapsychology?

The concept as such is indeterminate and elusive, yet it readily invites a certain theoretical grandiloquence, both in Freud and in later psychoanalytic literature. As a result, its content and its scope oscillate between almost everything and almost nothing. Where, then, are we to look for it at all, and how are we to delineate the field within which it is to be sought? Can metapsychology *in actu* be delimited to the unfinished, or partially destroyed, 1915 mega-study *Zur Vorbereitung einer Metapsychologie*, of which only five published papers remain, along with a draft of a sixth text discovered much later? Should this corpus be expanded to include at least those few theoretically decisive texts from the period 1911–1914, in which Freud, contrary to his customary restraint, allows the speculative tendency a certain latitude, and which function as an actual *Vor-bereitung*, a pre-preparation, so to speak, for the more systematically conceived studies of the unconscious, repression, the drive, melancholia, and dreams?

Should we also include those writings Freud published several years later, after he had already abandoned the project of a systematic metapsychology, from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) to *Fetishism* (1927)?¹ Should we reach even further back, to the beginnings, to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, or perhaps even to the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*? Should we, on the other hand, also designate as metapsychological, or at least meta-psychological, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *The Future of an Illusion*, and *Moses and Monotheism*, that is, those texts that are hardly psychoanalytic any longer and are the product of a “regressive development,” when Freud’s interest, “after a lifelong detour through the natural sciences, medicine and psychotherapy, returned to the cultural which had fascinated ... a youth scarcely old enough for thinking,” as he himself wrote in the 1935 Postscript to *An Autobiographical Study*?² In other words, was metapsychology also being produced after the shift in focus from psychoanalysis to the problem of culture, in a period when Freud himself claims that he “made no further decisive contributions” to psychoanalysis and that most of what he wrote was “either unessential or would soon have been supplied by someone else”? And if we move onto more strictly conceptual ground: is metapsychology really nothing more than a “psychology of the unconscious,” as Freud suggests in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*?³ If so, which concept of the unconscious is actually at stake here? And if not, what, then, is its proper object?

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- 1 Freud himself understands these studies as a displaced, unsystematic continuation of a project that he gradually abandoned: “What has happened to my *Metapsychology*? In the first place it has not yet been written. The systematic working through of material is not possible for me; the fragmentary nature of my experiences and the sporadic character of my insights do not permit it. But if I still have ten years to live and remain capable of work in this period, do not die of starvation, or meet a violent end, nor am too severely afflicted by the misery of my family or of the world around me – a bit too much to ask – then I promise to make further contributions to it. A first example of this will be found in an essay of mine titled *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.” Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Letters*, 95.
 - 2 Sigmund Freud, “An Autobiographical Study,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20, 72.
 - 3 See Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 6, 258–59.

There is, to be sure, a fairly elegant and almost self-evident way out: to equate metapsychology with psychoanalytic theory as such and, precisely because it encompasses “the whole” of psychoanalytic theory, to reduce it to the “nothing” of a concept. In this case, metapsychology becomes an optional signifier that can occasionally add flavor to our discussions but disappears as a problem. This solution is not entirely misguided, however: if one proceeds in the manner of Richard Boothby in his *Freud as Philosopher*, where the equation between psychoanalytic theory and metapsychology is posited as an almost-equation, where identity is described as “virtual,” it is also possible to construct a rather good provisional framework:

Metapsychology thus refers to the assumption of the unconscious itself, as well as to the structures that condition its relations with consciousness. It comprises the distinction of primary and secondary processes, the tripartite division of ego, id, and superego, and the activities of defense, repression, resistance, and symptom formation. Metapsychology is therefore the most comprehensive and all-encompassing viewpoint, one that seeks to coordinate the battery of psychoanalytic concepts into an integrated theoretical architecture. ... The question of metapsychology is nothing less than the question of psychoanalytic theory itself.⁴

In short, rather than positing an identity between metapsychology and psychoanalytic theory at the level of the concept, we should locate their relation at the level of the question that guides our inquiry. More precisely, metapsychology can be defined as the point from which it becomes possible to pose an adequate and sufficiently radical form of the question of psychoanalytic theory. And yet, once the first step has been taken, once one rehearses the practically unavoidable anecdotal passages from the letters to Fliess, in which metapsychology appears surprisingly early, almost as if projected into a future in which it will, or perhaps will not, acquire adequate content, the initial impetus quickly comes to a halt. If one does not wish to abandon the search altogether, this is the point of choice, namely

⁴ Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan*, 3.

the choice of the most productive possible detour, even if it cannot be absolutely grounded.

Recently, I have tentatively attempted to think metapsychology on the model of Freud's major case studies; granted, not simply as a meta- or auto-case, but rather as a search for orientation in the universal, one burdened by the concreteness of a subjective disposition. Given the markedly ambivalent relation Freud maintains toward the concept of metapsychology, which in practical use is always accompanied by a certain discomfort and by an excessive proximity to philosophical as well as paranoid speculation, it is probably not entirely unproductive to approach metapsychology as one would a clinical case. The case of metapsychology, too, has its own prehistory, its distinct developmental phases that cannot be entirely eliminated and that exist alongside one another, its fantasies, its symptoms, its moments of fetishistic disavowal, its compromises, its contingency and its necessity, and a multitude of figures involved in the formation of its disposition – whereby those who appear, at first glance, to be the most essential figures prove to be marginal, and vice versa.

At a practical level, this approach entails the following: although there is no doubt that Freud's metapsychology, whatever it may designate, is primarily inscribed in his published writings, reconstructing its framework and guarding against a slide into pre-given reductive schemata requires that other sources also be brought into the discussion. Metapsychology, too, has its "original notes," and in them, even more than in the official case record, a very specific figure comes to dominate, one who entered the story largely by chance and from the side, yet nevertheless left an indelible impression. This figure is the person whom Freud described in a letter to Ferenczi as a "woman of dangerous intelligence,"⁵ and whom, in a letter addressed to her, he described as an "understander par excellence," who "understands more and better than what was presented to her," or whose comments, as the English translation renders this passage, are "an amplification and improvement of the original."⁶ Her name is Lou Andreas-Salomé.

⁵ Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi*, Vol. 1, 422.

⁶ Freud and Andreas-Salomé, *Letters*, 45; see also Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, 50.

Salomé came into contact with psychoanalysis relatively late, but she clearly found in it a terrain on which she could activate, in a new way, a theoretical disposition that had already been largely developed. She and Freud first met at the congress in Weimar in September 1911, which she attended together with her then partner, the psychiatrist Poul Bjerre, a Swedish outpost of the psychoanalytic movement toward which Freud harbored certain reservations. By the end of the following summer, however, she arrived in Vienna, where she was a regular presence at the Wednesday meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. In addition to the extensive correspondence that she maintained with Freud until her death, she also demonstrated understanding, in the strong sense of the word to which Freud refers, in her diary entries, in which she mostly recorded her reflections on the discussions and practices of the Freudian circle. It is precisely an account of one of the first sessions she attended that we shall take in the next section as the starting point for yet another detour, one that may lead us back to the question of metapsychology.

As stated, I have approached metapsychology as a case, but metapsychology itself also has its own case. It has its object, one that is concrete, present in a specific way within particular empirical material, yet at the same time necessarily universal, implicated in every human being. Within the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis, I argue, the object of metapsychology can only be one and the same, equally concrete, equally universal, and equally elusive as metapsychology itself, namely the psychic apparatus, the soul entirely marked by reason, translated into a material and dynamic structure, one that cannot exist without the unconscious.

Yet for metapsychology to be meaningful not merely as a systematic descriptive edifice but as a theoretical practice, two further conditions must be met. On the one hand, metapsychology must conceptualize the psychic apparatus at the level of generality, that is, it must be able to grasp the shared properties of every psychic apparatus; on the other hand, it must open up space for its maximal capacity, that is, it must be able to grasp every expression of any psychic apparatus, including its most extreme forms. In short, if this speculative practice specific to psychoanalysis is not to remain merely an abstraction disguised in wild concreteness,

it is necessary to delineate its method, a method that, in its essential features, will be nothing other than a speculative intensification of the general psychoanalytic method. And it is precisely the question of Freud's general method that will be approached through the detour opened up by Lou Andreas-Salomé.

The Method of Psychoanalysis

In her report on the meeting of October 30, 1912, Salomé writes:

Freud seated me at his side and made a very sweet remark. He gave the paper. During the discussion we talked quietly together on various matters. I was surprised how readily he acquiesced to a view of neurosis as a conflict between libido and ego instead of proceeding unilaterally from the libido. When I commented that it read otherwise in his books he said, "My latest formulation." And that corresponds with my general impression: that the theory is by no means hidebound [*festgenagelt*], but is adjusted to further findings [*sich weiter nach den Erfahrungen regelt*], and, further, that this man is great simply in that he is the man of research advancing quietly and working tirelessly. Perhaps the "dogmatism" with which he is reproached derives from the necessity to establish guidelines in the course of his tireless advance, if only for the sake of his fellow-workers.⁷

Let us begin with the final observation. The orientational markers that Freud stakes out in order to assist his collaborators and followers have a primarily negative function. On the basis of abstract postulates, such as the unconscious, infantile sexuality, or the so-called fundamental rule of analytic technique, namely the rule of free association, it is not possible to construct a psychoanalytic system. As soon as these postulates are understood as foundational stones, as building blocks of a standard theoretical system, rather than as markers that provide rough orientation and prevent

⁷ Lou Andreas-Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 37.

the most obvious deviations from the psychoanalytic trajectory, they are transformed into dogmatism, into self-sufficient idealist axioms. Taken as true in advance, they are, at best, resistant to possible corrections arising from experience and bring further research to a halt; at worst, they are hyper-applied to experience and begin to designate virtually anything.

Yet, as Salomé recognizes, the charge of dogmatism is unfounded, precisely because (positive) dogmatism runs counter to Freud's basic stance, namely that of a consistent and, consequently, at times counterintuitive empiricism.⁸ In Freud's work, theoretical premises are, as is characteristic of empiricism more generally, in principle flexible and subordinated to experience. As we shall see in what follows, however, his specificity lies in the fact that this subordination to experience is extended, as it were, to theory itself. In other words, it is not merely the case that priority is always given to the latest observation, that is, to the empirical finding that comes into contradiction with the theoretical articulation of a given problem up to that point; the same holds for the latest theorization, the latest formulation. Even if it may be less well-grounded and perhaps less durable than one of the earlier formulations was, and perhaps will again be, Freud adopts it with full confidence, with full confidence in the provisional.

Freud's method can be articulated in terms of three relatively autonomous moves, or three distinct attitudes toward the material.

First, *the affirmation of provisionality*, which entails a principled openness to the temporary suspension of the truth of past judgements, inter-

⁸ The best example is probably to be found in the lecture on dreams and occultism from the *New Introductory Lectures*: "We are faced by a question of fact: is what the occultists tell us true or not? It must, after all, be possible to decide this by observation. At bottom we have cause for gratitude to the occultists. ... Not every case, of course, is equally convincing and in not every case is it equally possible to exclude more rational explanations; but, taking them as a whole, there remains a strong balance of probability in favour of thought-transference as a fact. ... No doubt you would like me to hold fast to a moderate theism and show myself relentless in my rejection of everything occult. But I am incapable of currying favour and I must urge you to have kindlier thoughts on the objective possibility of thought-transference and at the same time of telepathy as well." Sigmund Freud, "New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 22, 34, 42–43, 54.

pretations, or theoretical constructs upon the emergence of a new observation, insight, or a new recombination of existing material, provided that this emergence produces in the observing subject a sense of greater certainty. For Freud, the version of the object of observation or thought that appears most recently as true is, provisionally and, as it were, for a limited time, released from the usual pressure to be harmonized with or distinguished from earlier positions. What presents itself as true at the latest stage is provisionally treated as more true in relation to earlier positions, indeed as the only true one. Yet because provisionality itself is affirmed, the subject remains open to the emergence of an even more recent position, as well as to the possible rehabilitation of one of the earlier positions or to their different synthesis.

Second, *the affirmation of definitiveness*, that is, the affirmation of the possibility that what initially appears as provisionally true may, at a certain moment, assume the status of the last in the strict sense, that is, of something final, optimal, irreplaceable, and non-revisable. Put differently, although Freud in principle continuously develops his thinking and remains open to new observations, he does not foreclose the possibility that certain formulations or conceptualizations may at some point become something final in this strict sense.

Third, *the minimalism of speculation*, through which Freud expresses modesty, even humility, in relation to the material of observation. Speculation in Freud is always forced; he consents to it only in rare moments, when he is compelled to do so. "I have learned how to tame speculative tendencies and to follow the unforgettable advice of my teacher Charcot: to look at the same things again and again until they speak for themselves,"⁹ he writes in *The History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, precisely the text in which, in 1914, he draws a line under his break with Jung and Adler, and which can be read as a clearing of the ground on which Freud can, and almost must, explicate his own, that is, genuinely psychoanalytic metapsychology. Genuine psychoanalytic speculation is not a replacement for

⁹ Sigmund Freud, "On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 22.

observation; rather, it is the opening up of the full potential of observation, its extreme point, at which things begin to speak for themselves, in a language that is no longer “our” language and which, moreover, is not even a language that could ever be “understood” in the standard sense.

In principle, then, all three moves of Freud’s method are committed to empiricism, to a specific type of empiricism. And it is here, of course, that the core of Freud’s reserve, even his resistance, toward philosophy is to be found, including, or above all, toward that particular kind of philosophy that insinuates itself into psychoanalysis. For psychoanalysis, this philosophical tendency represents a constant danger that, as a science, it will slide into a worldview heterogeneous to itself – a reproach that Freud, incidentally, also directs at Adler and Jung.¹⁰

As he writes a good decade later in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*:

I must confess that I am not at all partial to the fabrication of Weltanschauungen. Such activities may be left to philosophers, who avowedly find it impossible to make their journey through life without a Baedeker of that kind to give them information on every subject. Let us humbly accept the contempt with which they look down on us from the vantage-ground of their superior needs. But since we cannot forgo our narcissistic pride either, we will draw comfort from the reflection that such “Handbooks to Life” soon grow out of date and that it is precisely our short-sighted, narrow and finicky work which obliges them to appear in new editions, and that even the most up-to-date of them are nothing but attempts to find a substitute for the ancient, useful and all-sufficient Church Catechism.¹¹

And yet, the difficulty lies in the fact that the philosophical tendency is not merely an occasional subjective caprice that would leave the object of psychoanalytic science untouched by simply adding a further layer of reflection. On the contrary, speculation is something that Freud, precisely as an absolutely consistent empiricist, must from time to time recognize

¹⁰ Freud, “On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement,” 58, 60.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20, 96.

as an immanent necessity, one that on the one hand emerges from observation and on the other hand makes its continuation possible in the first place. The real question, therefore, is not whether speculation should be admitted or rejected, but whether there exists a form of speculation proper to psychoanalysis, a non-philosophical, or if one prefers, anti-philosophical speculation, one that precisely preserves the threefold structure of the method outlined above. Or must psychoanalysis, on the contrary, at a certain point recognize its own limitation, even its inadequacy in relation to the surplus of reality, and withdraw in favor of philosophy, or indeed transform itself into philosophy? Is there something in psychoanalytic experience that can compel psychoanalysis to become something other than itself, even if only temporarily, to split itself off from itself and, even if only temporarily, allow itself to be guided by a logic that is not its own?

Lou Salomé and the *Grenzbegriff*

In order for psychoanalysis to remain psychoanalysis and to preserve its own distinctive type of speculation, one that is essentially determined by the principle of non-redundancy, it nevertheless had, as a first step, to borrow at least one concept from philosophy, namely the concept of the *Grenzbegriff*, the concept of the limit concept. When Freud employs the term in *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, where he defines the drive as “a concept on the frontier [*ein Grenzbegriff*] between the mental and the somatic,”¹² it is spontaneously understood as a concept situated at the boundary between two sciences, biology and psychology, as a concept that belongs to both and yet to neither. This understanding of the limit concept may well be the end of the story for Freud – though with Freud one can never be quite sure – but it certainly does not exhaust the full potential that this concept is capable of opening up in its own right.

¹² Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 121–22.

And here we encounter once again the point at which Lou Andreas-Salomé intervenes. In a diary entry dated November 2, 1912, she activates the potential inherent in Freud's basic understanding of the limit concept:

Apropos of the concept of instinct [*Trieb*], Freud made use of the customary definition that it “rests on the organic.” As long as the instinct theory remains merely something that physiologists and psychologists toss back and forth between themselves, no further enlightenment can emerge from it, even with Freud. It remains a mere crutch, an unwilling inconsistency in our knowledge of nature and of mind. Perhaps it is to this predicament that one may attribute the fact that Adler ultimately could classify instinctual life among the other symbolic forms of his “psychic rules of the game.” For if “instinct” is only, so to speak, a limiting concept [*Grenzbegriff*] viewed from two aspects, then a specific property can be attributed to it only by means of a bilateral optical illusion. Once again, however, it is a mark of greatness in Freud that, untroubled by such philosophical worries, he simply proceeds to action in the face of such questions. Thus he was able to sketch out a map of an entire country on the basis of this border region, before anyone even knew whose land he was entering, with the sole aid of a few straggling trespassers driven by necessity to disregard border regulations. In mental illness, he seized life by the coat-tails, precisely there where it appears to us squeezed helplessly into a cleft, unable to escape into the organic alone (the organic into which everything escapes and becomes “physical” when we are unable to understand it in psychological terms), and there he put it to the question.¹³

A few months later, following a debate on the problem of narcissism, Salomé goes one step further by using the term *Grenzbegriff* in a much more standard philosophical sense. In doing so – and she is, after all, an “understander par excellence” – she draws on Freud in two distinct ways. At the beginning of her entry, she first summarizes Freud, emphasizing that narcissism must be understood as a “vestigial phenomenon [*Restphänomen*] ...

¹³ Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 39–40.

which for the time being will remain just that,"¹⁴ and that "one must avoid attempting to use it as a key to unlock a great many things that still remain undisclosed."¹⁵ She then continues:

Narcissism in its creative form is no longer just a stage to be transcended; it is rather the persistent accompaniment of all our deeper experience, always present, yet still far beyond any possibility of hewing its way from consciousness into the unconscious. In narcissism the Ucs. still exists only *en bloc*, the primordial form not simply of a foundation but of the all-inclusive. Freud is perfectly right in speaking of it, as he now does, as a limiting concept [*Grenzbegriff*], which serves as a receptacle for what remains unsolved and not a key to its solution.¹⁶

This formulation is repeated almost verbatim in a letter from early 1915, in which she comments on Freud's then already published essay. Especially the first type, i. e., primary narcissism, she writes,

cannot be pursued further empirically, and indeed at this point analysis comes to a halt altogether – exactly as you say in words which you repeated in conversation: "The concept of narcissism is a borderline concept [*Grenzbegriff*], which should not be used indiscriminately as a key to everything, but should remain a reservoir for residual problems, as yet unsolved and perhaps insoluble." Certainly, it is very important not to turn it into something mysterious, for it does after all designate a fact which is accessible; and in my view, it is this concept which in the last resort really differentiates the Freudian "unconscious" in its essential nature from those elements of it which are utilized here and there by Adler ("fiction") and Jung (*his* "symbolic").¹⁷

The core of the Freudian concept of narcissism – which, in the broadest sense, denotes the ego's inability ever to be libidinally absolutely unin-

¹⁴ Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 108.

¹⁵ Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 108.

¹⁶ Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 110.

¹⁷ Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 24.

vested, that is, its inability to be autonomous with respect to libido and to manage it at will – is identified by Salomé in this letter in the fact that the ego “as a product of development ... is first differentiated from that subject-object uniform life, which we then rediscover as ‘libido’ in the self-developing ego.”¹⁸ But as she points out in her diary entry of March 1913, it is absolutely essential that the construction of primary narcissism serve us not as an answer, not as a key, but, once again, as a *Grenzbegriff*, and more precisely as *the limit concept of psychology*, that is, as a concept in which psychology, on the one hand, presses up against biology and, on the other hand, against philosophy:

Unquestionably, this point will come to be a burning issue, and it can only be settled philosophically. It is precisely here where Adler’s organ concept begins, his leap from the psychological into another realm of knowledge requiring other methods. To hold fast instead to Freud’s present concept of narcissism means, in effect, to hold fast to psychology’s right to its own media and methods no matter what. And that means to be allowed to write with appropriate obscurity, its personal mark of X, even there where the psychic organization eludes it, instead of defecting into the alien clarity belonging to another side of existence called the “physical.” It means to take seriously the principle stating that psychic and physical *stand for each other ... but neither determine nor explain* the other and hence cannot substitute for each other. ... The right to an *obscurity of its own* is very important: only the eye turned toward it can find even the tiniest ray of illumination, not the eye diverted to an alien light. So it has come to Freud, here and there; for this reason, too, the greatest emphasis must remain on the direction of discovery, and the purpose of philosophic argument would be to secure its place and its justification. In Freud’s cause, philosophy can and ought to be merely ancillary to practical matters; but in them, it has now become essential and is no longer to be circumvented.¹⁹

¹⁸ Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 24.

¹⁹ Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 110–11.

For psychology (and thus for psychoanalysis), narcissism as a *Grenzbegriff* functions as a provisional concept that simultaneously loosens and reinforces the boundary. By means of this concept, psychology manages, as it were, to step with the very tip of its nose into a field that is unintelligible to it, yet in such a way that it preserves its own perspective and gazes into an *almost* absolute darkness.

And here the decision is fundamentally an ethical one: although psychology is almost completely blind in this field, it must, as a science, insist on its right to remain active and recognized despite this near-total limitation. Yet this is not merely a matter of rights grounded in past merits, nor of the sheer academic caprice of psychologists who insist on probing inaccessible terrains; nor is it simply a matter of psychology, or psychoanalysis, claiming the right, on the basis of its previous achievements in a field where other sciences are entirely blind, to make occasional visits to the edge of foreign territory armed with its own Baedeker.

Two further ethical elements are at stake here. First, there is the question of perseverance, of a given science's decision not to withdraw in a situation in which it becomes aware of its present, and quite possibly also its future, inadequate equipment in a yet unexplored field. This decision is made not out of fixed ideas or arrogance, but in the name of, and for the benefit of, science in general. Even though it itself gropes about under conditions of near-total blindness, other sciences – even those that will one day illuminate this field with spotlights – are at this moment even more impaired, at an even lower level of preparedness than psychology itself. Thus, for example, Freud, in a clear echo of Lou Andreas-Salomé's considerations, reflects in "On Narcissism" (1914):

Since we cannot wait for another science to present us with the final conclusions on the theory of the instincts, it is far more to the purpose that we should try to see what light may be thrown upon this basic problem of biology by a synthesis of the psychological phenomena. Let us face the possibility of error, but let us not be deterred from pursuing the logical implications of the hypothesis we first adopted of an antithesis between ego-instincts and sexual instincts (a hypothesis to which we were forcibly led by analysis of the

transference neuroses), and from seeing whether it turns out to be without contradictions and fruitful, and whether it can be applied to other disorders as well, such as schizophrenia.²⁰

The third ethical element – Freud is an empiricist, after all – concerns fidelity to the material, that is, the responsibility to keep its representation as minimally distorted as possible. As Freud writes in a letter of 30 January 1915, in response to Salomé’s reflections that led her to speak of a “right to obscurity,” the problem with moving too quickly into another science or into philosophical speculation is that such a move never proceeds without further distortion:

I do not interpret your remarks on narcissism as objections, but rather as a stimulus to attempt a further conceptual and factual clarification of the subject. I am in agreement with what you say without being able to solve the problems you have raised. I even acknowledge that Adler has an advantage over me in this matter; it is the advantage of someone imposing a system of thought upon things, compared with someone who observes them and is anxiously concerned to do them justice. I comfort myself with the thought that it is not the task of science to simplify the world, or at least not its first task.²¹

Narcissism, conceived as a *Grenzbegriff*, fulfils a dual function in Freudian psychoanalysis. On the one hand, it prevents psychoanalysis, at the very moment it oversteps the boundaries of its native field, from being immediately absorbed by another science; on the other hand, it nevertheless marks the inescapable fact that psychoanalysis has at this point effectively reached its own limit – a limit that it can loosen, but not erase. Once the psychoanalyst becomes aware of having arrived at a boundary at which standard methods no longer hold, it is precisely in virtue of his or her commitment to empiricism (an empiricism that has critically

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 79.

²¹ Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 26.

detected its own limit) that a shift in approach becomes necessary: a shift from observation to provisional, temporary speculation. In this sense, narcissism is a concept that is not merely a *Grenzbegriff* of psychology, but one that, at a certain moment, also assumes the status of a provisional – and I emphasize: provisional – *Grundbegriff*, a foundational concept of metapsychology.

On the subject itself I would like to observe that my account of narcissism is in the first place what I shall one day describe as “metapsychological,” i. e., purely conditioned by “topographical-dynamic” factors without relation to the conscious processes. The cases in which you are interested refer pre-eminently to conditions where this process becomes conscious, which cannot apply to genuine and naive narcissism. Warning voices, by which I am always guided, have restrained me from pursuing these problems further, until light has been shed in other dark places. The disregarding of conscious conditions and the acceptance of the metapsychological way of thought are as difficult as they are indispensable.²²

At the point at which Freud, after more than a decade, reactivates the very term *metapsychology* and acknowledges, perhaps more clearly than ever before, its inevitability, it may be useful to take a step back. Let us recall the first quotation from Lou Andreas-Salomé, in which she cites Freud’s remark about his latest formulation and comments on the misguided charge of dogmatism. As a corollary to this observation, one may turn to Freud’s own words in a letter dated 7 July 1914. In this letter, Freud first offers a few personal remarks about Adler – describing him as a person of “specific venomousness” and as a “loathsome individual” – before continuing in a more general vein:

I have never objected to differences of opinion among members of the psycho-analytic circle, especially as I myself usually have several views on a matter, until, that is to say, I have expressed one of them in print. But one

²² Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 27.

must stick to the fundamental core [*an der Einheitlichkeit des Kerns muss man aber festhalten*]; otherwise it becomes something else.²³

Freud emphasizes that he does not take issue with a plurality of opinions, primarily because he himself is undecided with respect to certain details – at least until the latest formulation prevails, that is, the formulation which, at the moment of its articulation, to a certain degree emancipates itself and comes to dominate the others. There is, in short, no automatism whatsoever in the interpretation of phenomena: an individual problem in external reality does not find a direct reflection in thought but rather generates a series of approximations that the observer weighs against one another.

At another level, however, there exists a single, unified, indivisible, and uncontested core that must be followed if one wishes to remain within psychoanalysis. A clear distinction must therefore be drawn between opinions – one of which becomes temporarily the last and temporarily prevails over the others – and a core which, once constituted, acquires perhaps not a comprehensive, but certainly a definitive, truly last form. This form cannot be altered unless one wishes – and this is Freud's entire point – to exit psychoanalysis by one's own volition.

Formulation of the Core

But what does this core actually look like? Is it composed of those orientational markers that are mistakenly taken for Freud's dogmatism? Is the core made up of fundamental concepts and their interrelations? Is a refined familiarity with the conceptual architecture already a sufficient condition for remaining on the trajectory of psychoanalysis? How is this core formed at all?

I would argue that in psychoanalysis this core is not formed but *formulated*. There are formulas that were produced at a certain point and

²³ Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 19.

that will remain within psychoanalysis forever. And it is not merely that they cannot be entirely eliminated or forgotten; as formulas, they are also inaccessible to critique, even to the critique of their own author. This is most evident in Lacanian psychoanalysis. It is impossible to imagine Lacan saying: “I’ve thought about it and done some research, and I’ve come to realize that I no longer believe that the big Other does not exist”; or: “I’m beginning to think that the signifier is not really what represents the subject for another signifier”; or, again: “It has just occurred to me that I was in the wrong all along ... there is a sexual relation.” And clearly, it is just as difficult to imagine a Lacanian daring to discard any specific formula as such. A Lacanian may endlessly work through the content and meaning of a formula, seek out its context, even pursue its most counterintuitive and contradictory interpretations – but it would never occur to them to deny and discard the formula itself as entirely invalid or worthless. In psychoanalysis, formulas are strictly irrefutable.

As I have already shown some years ago, Freud at a certain point himself produced this stance, this disposition – namely when he decided to act as a faithful Freudian and to persist in a particular formula, even though it would have been far easier to abandon it or to relax its scope. The fundamental formula of psychoanalysis, the one that introduced the very logic of the formula, was invented in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Briefly put, *The Interpretation of Dreams* is built on two hypotheses. The first holds that (every) dream has a meaning. With this hypothesis, Freud situates the problem of dreams within the basic framework of the then-emerging psychoanalysis, which follows the guiding principle that nothing can be declared neutral or irrelevant in advance. On the basis of this principle, Freud decides to attend to every element of the dream report and to avoid any prior ranking among its elements. Every dream, and every element of every dream, can be included within the field of meaning (including the manner in which they are presented in the analytic situation).

And yet, this hypothesis constitutes a necessary, but still insufficient condition. For Freud to have written *The Interpretation of Dreams* in the way he did – and its crucial components include the speculative, perhaps even metapsychological chapters on dream-work and on the psychology

of dream processes – a second hypothesis was required, namely the one he formulates at the conclusion of the interpretation of the dream of Irma's injection: *dreams are the fulfilment of a wish*.

It is more difficult to persist in this hypothesis, this formulation, this formula. When confronted with dreams that obviously, or so it seems, do not function as wish-fulfilments, two temptations arise. The first impulse is to negate its generality; the second is to supplement or refine the formula itself, to translate it into a more elaborated version – namely, into the formula that dreams are the fulfilment of an unconscious wish. While yielding to the first impulse unleashes an avalanche of description and classification, yielding to the second carries the risk of reducing the very concept of the unconscious (of wish), which thus, as it were, closes in on itself and acquires the status of a second reality entirely cut off from consciousness – in short, the status of the subconscious. As a result, precisely the apparently simplest and most direct cases of wish-fulfilment drop out of consideration.

If we attend closely, this formula contains all three moves of Freud's method outlined above. First, Freud relies fully on the formulation that appears to him last, even though it is less consolidated and, at this embryonic stage, also less convincing than the competing hypothesis that every dream has a meaning. Second, in this specific sense the formula is last – final, irreplaceable – and yet, precisely as such, still active. Third, as a formula it is, by its very nature, reduced to a minimum, and it persists at this minimum.

And yet, this formula is not yet metapsychological in the proper sense; it is not formulated “without relation to conscious processes.” Its greatest strength – namely, the fact that it was posited as a universalization of a feature that presents itself as obvious in the simplest dreams, those closest to consciousness – is at the same time its limitation. “Dreams are the fulfilment of a wish” is a formula modelled on a standard conscious judgement, and it acquires its unconscious dimension only retrospectively. In a certain sense, this formula produces Freud; it produces the theoretical disposition of psychoanalysis, but it is itself not yet grounded in a metapsychological perspective. Such a perspective is, once again, “without relation to

conscious processes," yet not simply in the sense that the observer would be wholly situated within the field of the unconscious as opposed to consciousness, but because the observer is placed in a field in which the very distinction itself is suspended – and with it the entire logic of uncovering.

A Metapsychological Insight

An example of a genuine metapsychological insight – an insight which, without Freud yet being aware of it, is already metapsychological, already “without relation to conscious processes,” and which, once recognized as such, calls for an effort of speculation – is to be found in the essay to which I have already referred, namely in the treatise on narcissism, more precisely in its third section, where Freud introduces the notion of the ego ideal (which at that moment he does not yet distinguish from the ideal ego):

This ego ideal is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject's narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ego ideal, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value. As always where the libido is concerned, man has here again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he has once enjoyed. He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when, as he grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgement, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in a new form, that of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood, in which he was his own ideal.²⁴

Primary narcissism, which in the subject's prehistory appeared as a form of perfection, resists withdrawal – and under conditions in which perfection is “disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of one's own judgement,” it finds a substitute that enables its continued

²⁴ Freud, “On Narcissism,” 94.

survival. Yet when the ego attempts to outwit external reality and to take control of its own satisfaction, control is, quite literally, surrendered to it: "It would not surprise us if we were to find a special psychological agency which performs the task of seeing that narcissistic satisfaction from the ego ideal is ensured and which, with this end in view, constantly watches the actual ego and measures it by that ideal."²⁵

It is precisely the anticipation of what will soon come to be known as the superego that, I would argue, constitutes an example of a genuinely metapsychological insight, an insight that is "without any regard for conscious processes." An instance of this kind cannot be discovered; it is not a matter of *Entdeckung*, of removing a surface in order to reveal a hidden content. Rather, it can only be recognized, as Freud puts it, seen as something that we have long known, but have not, until this point, recognized as the manifestation of a specific, autonomized psychic instance. The verb Freud uses in the original is *agnoszieren*, which denotes an assertion in which emphasis is placed on exteriority, on the surface character of perception and of the act of recognition – for example, when, on the basis of dentition, we recognize, identify a corpse, connect it to a person, yet in the strict sense say nothing else about them than that this corpse is indeed that person.²⁶

In short, we have always known of the instance we call conscience; we have always known that conscience exists in some way. Yet we have never recognized it as merely one of the expressions of an instance that stands above it; we have never recognized it in its pure form; we have never seen its formal condition, the existence of the pure possibility of being seen, of being observed, of being compelled to do something that presents itself as our own choice (even if only as the choice to yield to pressure). This instance, which will come to bear the name of the superego, is without any regard for our conscious processes – and is in fact indifferent to what

²⁵ Freud, "On Narcissism," 95.

²⁶ The fact that Freud uses this very term in the title of the concluding section of the essay "The Unconscious," where it designates a shift from standard psychoanalytic theory to a logic that can be described only as metapsychological, will be addressed elsewhere. See Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 196–204.

we want. And what is perhaps even more crucial: this act of recognition is, in a certain sense, more universal than the instance of the superego that is derived from it. Freud continues that

recognition of this agency enables us [also] to understand the so-called “delusions of being noticed” or more correctly, of being watched, which are such striking symptoms in paranoid diseases and which may also occur as an isolated form of illness, or intercalated in a transference neurosis. Patients of this sort complain that all their thoughts are known and their actions watched and supervised; they are informed of the functioning of this agency by voices which characteristically speak to them in the third person (“Now she’s thinking of that again,” “now he’s going out”). This complaint is justified; it describes the truth. A power of this kind, watching, discovering, and criticizing all our intentions, does really exist. Indeed, it exists in every one of us in normal life.²⁷

This act of recognition, this *Agnoszierung* of the self-observing instance, is, once again, an example of a genuinely metapsychological insight – one that, contrary to the schema we have followed so far, captures all three moves in a maximally reduced temporality. What appears last is the barest, least subjective observation, one that is so certain that, in its very appearance, it is already inevitably last, final, irrefutable, and irreversible – and, as such, a minimal speculation. What we observe is almost nothing new: merely a bare form that imposes itself upon us against our will and speaks for itself, in the language of the very instance that we can do no more than name. Nothing of what has been said, will be said, or could be said about the superego in the future can surpass the effect of this formal inscription of the presence of that instance.

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²⁷ Freud, “On Narcissism,” 95.

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