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# Metapsychology and Metaphysics of the Self

John Shannon Hendrix

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In his essay “The Unconscious” in 1915, Sigmund Freud defined metapsychology as the description of a mental process. Freud introduced two metapsychologies. The first, described as topographic, defined mental processes in a triadic landscape of unconscious, preconscious, and conscious. The second, described as structural, defined mental processes in a triadic architecture of das Es or the It, das Ich or the I, and das Uber-Ich, or the over-I. English translators gave these categories the names id, ego and super-ego. The It is the other, what is alien in the psyche. For my purposes here I will focus on the topographical metapsychology, and the definition of the unconscious. The Freudian unconscious should not be seen as “merely the seat of instincts”<sup>1</sup> in the words of Jacques Lacan, Freud’s most important follower. Freud considered *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900, to be his most important contribution to psychoanalysis. Freud rejected philosophy as a basis for understanding the human mind, and insisted that psychoanalysis is a science. The fact is that psychoanalysis is based on metapsychology, which is a metaphysical philosophy.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the unconscious element of the dream is the latent content or dream thought. The conscious element of the dream is the manifest content, the pictorial imagery in the memory of the dream. The dream image is formed from visual residues, thing presentations or Sachvorstellungen, and auditory residues, word presentations or Wortvorstellungen. These are combined in a double inscription or Niederschrift with a concern for representability or Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit. The transition from unconscious to conscious in the process of dream work or Traumarbeit is the result of primary processes in the unconscious, which result in distortions in the dream, through condensation or Verdichtung and displacement or Verschiebung.

All this is clear, but one element of Freud’s description of the transition from the unconscious to conscious is not, and is the source of much controversy. In *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, published in 1940, Freud summa-

rized his theory: “The process of something becoming conscious is above all linked with the perceptions which our sense organs receive from the external world....But there is an added complication through which internal processes in the ego may also acquire the quality of consciousness. This is the work of the function of speech...” (34–35).<sup>2</sup> In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, once “a dream has become a perception, it is in a position to excite consciousness” (614),<sup>3</sup> but in *The Ego and the Id* in 1923, “How does a thing become conscious?...Through being connected with the word presentations corresponding to it” (12).<sup>4</sup> And “The part played by word-presentations now becomes perfectly clear. By their interposition internal thought-processes are made into perceptions” (16). So only a thought which begins as a mnemonic residue of perception can resurface to consciousness from the preconscious through language, and any thought arising from the unconscious must be transformed into an external perception, through the memory-trace, in order to become conscious.

So which is it? Do unconscious thoughts become conscious through language, or through perception? Lacan tried to solve the problem by suggesting that Freud used the word *Sache* rather than *Ding* for thing-presentation because *Sache* connotes a thing as an *eidos* while *Ding* connotes a thing as a *morphe*, thus the *Sachvorstellung*, the visual residue, is already constructed by language, and is not outside of perception.<sup>5</sup> The problem comes down to the distinction between *eidos* and *morphe*, at the core of Platonic and Idealist philosophy. Lacan argued that psychoanalysis is opposed to any form of philosophical idealism, because there is no true subject,<sup>6</sup> but I think it would have served both Freud and Lacan well to read Plotinus in particular. The very identity of unconscious thought is not resolved in the writings of Freud and Lacan, and it is not taken up in any other psychoanalytic theory. A better understanding can be found in Plotinus. In the *Enneads*, the word and the image are intertwined in a dialectical relationship in both conscious and unconscious thought.

In the *Enneads*, mental images are not entirely dependent on sensible forms, because mental images play a role in the determination of sensible forms to begin with, and the result is not just the sensible form imprinted in the mind’s eye, but a combination of the sensible form and the intelligible form. Impressions are received by discursive reason from sense perception, but discursive reason can only respond to them with the help of memory. Memory serves the image-making faculty to preserve images and translate them into words, so that the images which are a product of sense perception

can play a role as the vocabulary elements of thinking activity in discursive reason.

The intellectual act in mind is only then apprehended when it is brought into the image-making faculty of mind through the logos or linguistic articulation. Judgment in discursive reason is based on the perception of the eidos of the sensible object, as it is subjected to the mechanisms of combination and division in apperception, which are the same mechanisms which Freud attributed to the image-making faculty of unconscious thought in the formation of dream images from dream thoughts, what he called condensation and displacement. The judgment in discursive reason for Plotinus is also based on the perception of the image connected to thoughts from Intellect or noetic thought, as the objects of sense perception are processed through the unconscious mechanisms of imagination and memory which make the sense perception possible in the first place, then translate the objects of sense perception into a totality, even through the combinations and divisions.

In Plotinus the dialectical process involves the imprint of the sense object, sensible form or morphe in perception, and the imprint of the idea of the object, intelligible form or eidos in the imagination or image-making faculty, then the memory or recollection of past thoughts and perceptions in relation to the present thought, then the transformation of the image, both sensible and intelligible, into the word in language, both the spoken word, logos pro-phorikos, and the word prior to speech in Intellect, the logos endiathetos, and then the fitting together of sensible image, intelligible image, recollected sensible image, recollected intelligible image, sensible word and intelligible word, in a process which requires the anticipation of the perception of the image or word in relation to the recollection of the intelligible image or word in Intellect or unconscious thought, as it is perceived as a reflection or imprint in mind.

Following Aristotle, the intellectual act is not possible without an accompanying mental image, according to Plotinus. The power to form the image in the mind's eye is conversely always accompanied by the verbal expression (IV.3.30),<sup>7</sup> or more accurately, the logos endiathetos, the word in thought. The intelligible image, and thus the sensible image, is not possible without the linguistic expression of it, and linguistic expression is not possible without the intelligible image. Perception of sensible objects is only possible after the idea of the sensible object is articulated in language in intellection. As Plotinus says, while the "intellectual act is without parts," as it has not been differentiated in discursive reason, and thus in perception, it "has not, so to

speak, come out into the open, but remains unobserved within,” as unconscious thought.

But “the verbal expression unfolds its content and brings it out of the intellectual act into the image-making power,” allowing imagination to form the intelligible image which corresponds to the sensible image in memory. In doing so, the linguistic articulation, what Freud would call the *Wortvorstellung*, “shows the intellectual act as if in a mirror,” as a mirror reflection might represent a sensible object, but the linguistic articulation in discursive reason does not contain the intellectual act; the intellectual act remains separated from sense perception and sensible reality. The intellectual act itself is inaccessible, as the unconscious. Conscious thought contains a reflection or representation of unconscious thought, what Freud called the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, but conscious thought does not contain unconscious thought; unconscious thought is inaccessible to conscious thought.

The reflection of the intellectual act in the imagination, in the image-making faculty in language and discursive reason, or conscious thought, might be described as Plotinus’ royal road to the unconscious, as dream images, which are also translations of unconscious intellectual acts into images in the imagination, the *Sachvorstellungen*, through the medium of articulated thoughts in language, the *Wortvorstellungen*, were Freud’s royal road to the unconscious as described in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud described the dream image as being derived, unconsciously, from the dream thought, which is a product of the unarticulated intellectual act during sleep. The dream image is transformed in dream work from the unarticulated idea in unconscious thought, through words in thought which mimic words in conscious thought, and the *logos* is then translated into the images in the dreams, exactly as it was for Plotinus.

The intellectual act, the intelligent activity of the soul, is only apprehended, through a reflection or representation, “when it comes to be in the image-making power” (IV.3.30), as an intelligible form in the imagination produced through perception, language and memory, or as a dream image. For Freud the dream image as formed in the imagination is a *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, a representation of a representation, as it was for Plotinus. According to Plotinus, “the intellectual act is one thing,” inaccessible in the unconscious, but “the apprehension of it another,” through the representation in the mirror reflection of the representation in the *logos* or word in thought.

In the *De anima* of Aristotle, the soul “never thinks without a mental image” (431a17),<sup>8</sup> but “for the thinking soul images take the place of direct per-

ceptions,” as mind must be separated from body in order to function properly. Plotinus followed Aristotle in asserting that it is not sensible objects themselves that are perceived, but rather their images or impressions, as he said “soul’s power of sense-perception need not be perception of sense-objects, but rather it must be receptive of the impressions produced by sensation on the living being; these are already intelligible entities” (I.1.7). Perceived forms of sensible objects are not possible except as a consequence of the corresponding intelligible forms which precede them in the process of perception, which is a function of the process of intellection, and a tenet of philosophical idealism which could inform psychoanalysis.

According to Aristotle in *De memoria*, memory, like thought, requires an image, and while the image, both sensible and intelligible, is not possible without the form perceived in perception, memory must be a function of perception, as he says “memory, even memory of intelligible things, is not without an image, and the image is an attribute of the common receiving power” (450a13).<sup>9</sup> Memory is not of sensible objects themselves, but of their images: memory is “an active holding of an image as a likeness of that of which it is an image...” (451a18). According to Plotinus, memory of thoughts occurs when the contents of the thoughts are unfolded or articulated, but not verbally, and are presented to the imagination as images, as if they are reflected in a mirror in the mind’s eye. The medium of the unfolding of the thought is the logos. Consciousness in thought comes about when the logos articulates the thought as an image in imagination, as Freud contended. The logos is produced in discursive reason and the image is produced in imagination in its connection to sense perception.

The logoi are the objects of dianoetic thought and discursive reason, the product of divided intellect. In order to signify dianoetically it is necessary to “use the forms of letters which follow the order of words and propositions and imitate sounds and the enunciations of philosophical statements” (*Enneads* V.8.6), as described by Plotinus. The spoken word is an imitation of that in the soul (I.2.3) as the logos prophorikos is an imitation of the logos en-diathetos. The underlying realities of that which is grasped by sense perception are not accessible to sense perception; the underlying realities are only known in Intellect or the unconscious. The logoi are the products of the “rational formative principle” (III.2.2) flowing from Intellect. The logos represents a thought and unfolds it and makes it visible to imagination, accompanied by an image, in a combination of the Wortvorstellung and the Sachvorstellung. The apprehension of the thought by the imagination is re-

sponsible for conscious thought, as Freud said; it is connected with the consciousness of sense perception, although that consciousness is deceptive, as sense perception is made possible by the underlying realities or intelligibles that form the intelligible world, a philosophical tenet that escaped Freud and Lacan.

Conscious thoughts, according to Plotinus, “by means of sense-perception—which is a kind of intermediary when dealing with sensible things—do appear to work on the level of sense and think about sense objects” (I.4.10). Awareness, or conscious thought, “exists and is produced when intellectual activity is reflexive and when that in the life of the soul which is active in thinking is in a way projected back,” as a representation formed by logos, a *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*. The content and activities of Intellect are always present, but it is necessary for them to be unfolded by logos and be reflected by imagination in order for them to come into consciousness from unconscious thought. Only the function of imagination, the power to form images, provides conscious thought with a glimpse of the presence and activities of unconscious thought. It is only when the activities of intellect are shared with perception that “conscious awareness takes place” (V.1.2), corresponding to the manifest content in dream work. As, according to Plotinus, “not everything which is in the soul is immediately perceptible, but it reaches us when it enters into perception” (V.1.12), perception involves both sensible perception and the perception of images by imagination. Imagination operates on several different levels: it produces images in sense perception, it synthesizes images in dianoetic thought, and it produces images in correspondence with the articulation through logos or noetic thought.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud gave the name of imagination to the mechanism of the transposition from dream thoughts to dream images, latent content to manifest content, in the concern for representability in the dream. Dreams appear to be irrational, but it is not the unconscious which is irrational, it is the mechanisms of the imagination in the dream work that transpose dream thoughts into dream images. The mechanisms which are irrational are the image-making faculty or the imagination, exactly as in the thought of Plotinus. As Freud described, “the mental activity which may be described as ‘imagination’” is “liberated from the domination of reason and from any moderating control” (116). Dream imagination “makes use of recent waking memories for its building material,” in mimesis and repetition, and “it erects them into structures bearing not the remotest resemblance to those of waking life.” Dream imagination is “without the power of conceptu-

al speech” and has “no concepts to exercise an attenuating influence,” thus being “obliged to paint what it has to say pictorially.”

Dreams have “no means at their disposal for representing these logical relations between the dream-thoughts” (347), rational unconscious thought, or for representing logical relations between conscious thoughts, the relations created by syntactical rules. Thinking does not occur in the manifest content of the dream. Diachronic sequences, as they are understood in conscious or discursive reason, may be compressed into synchronic events or images, in condensation, or they may be fragmented, or reversed, in displacement. Condensation and displacement, the mechanisms of imagination, are responsible for the fact that dream images do not correspond to conscious reason, and cause the dream to be seen as a distortion of reason, while the dream has no intention of communicating anything.

In conclusion, there are many correspondences between Freudian metapsychology and Neoplatonic metaphysics. Many of Freud’s ideas seem to be rooted in classical philosophy, although acknowledgement is rarely given. A thorough reading of Plotinus may have provided Freud with additional insight into how the mind works, and may have allowed him to avoid the contradictory account of how unconscious thoughts become conscious. Unconscious words become conscious images, and unconscious images become conscious words, but these processes do not happen independently of each other. They are wrapped up in a dialectical process that was thoroughly explained by Plotinus. Plotinus seems to have provided a more comprehensive understanding of unconscious thought than has been accomplished by psychoanalysis.



- <sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits, A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977, p. 147.
- <sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis, The Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1949.
- <sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey, New York: Avon Books, 1965.
- <sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id, The Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1960.
- <sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., p. 45.
- <sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: W. W. Norton, 1977.
- <sup>7</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, The Loeb Classical Library, 1966.
- <sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul (De anima)*, trans. W. S. Hett, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, the Loeb Classical Library, 1964.
- <sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul and On Memory and Recollection (De memoria)*, trans. J. Sachs, Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 2001.