

On Time and Timelessness in Psychoanalysis

Mankind inhabited a cosmos, deeply rooted in belief and perceptual experience, of sub lunar time and celestial timelessness until the revolutionary discoveries in astronomy of Copernicus and Galileo. This experience of time was taken for granted by the cosmologies constructed by Plato and Aristotle. Motion in the sub lunar terrestrial world was thought and seen to be rectilinear having a beginning and an end and, therefore, finite and temporal; whereas celestial motion was thought to be circular without beginning or end and, hence, infinite, unchanging and timeless. Thus it was that, when our ancient and medieval ancestors of the western world gazed into the night sky, they were looking at, as they thought, “the moving image of eternity”. Sun, moon, planets and stars unchanging in themselves, as they believed, change their location relative to the earth in space by means of a changeless, unending motion. The discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo brought an end to this way of experiencing and thinking about nature. Nevertheless, we still hunger after evidence of the unchanging and timeless in our mutable universe. The two questions I propose to consider are: does the timeless make its appearance in psychoanalysis? if so where, how and to what effect? For this purpose I shall limit my discussion to Freud.

What are we to make of Freud’s often repeated idea of the timelessness of the unconscious? Apart from some earlier hints, Freud (1900) first states “...it is a prominent feature of unconscious processes that they are indestructible. In the unconscious nothing can be brought to an end, nothing is past or forgotten.” (p. 577) and later (Freud, 1901 in a footnote added in 1907), “In the case of repressed memory-traces it can be demonstrated that they undergo no alteration even in the course of the longest

period of time. The unconscious is quite timeless.” and again, “The processes of the system Ucs. are timeless; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all. Reference to time is bound up, once again, with the work of the system Cs.”(p.187), later Freud (1918) counseled patience with the timeless unconscious of the Wolf Man and finally Freud (1920) tells us once more, after referring to the Kantian notion of time and space as “necessary forms of thought”, (to be correct, Freud should have said “necessary forms of perceptual experience”), “We have learnt that unconscious mental processes are in themselves ‘timeless’. This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in any way and that the idea of time cannot apply to them” (p.28).

The crucial summary text is Freud (1932), “There is nothing in the id that could be compared with negation; and we perceive with surprise an exception to the philosophical theorem that space and time are necessary forms of our mental acts. There is nothing in the id that corresponds to the idea of time; there is no recognition of the passage of time and - a thing that is most remarkable and awaits consideration in philosophical thought - no alteration in its mental process is produced by the passage of time. Wishful impulses which have never passed beyond the id, but impressions, too, which have been sunk into the id by repression, are virtually immortal; after the passage of decades they behave as though they had just occurred. They can only be recognized as belonging to the past, can only lose their importance and be deprived of their cathexis of energy, when they have been made conscious by the work of analysis, and it is on this that the therapeutic effect of analyst treatment rests to no small extent” (p.74).

Let me first take up an issue of philosophical scholarship. Kant's (1781) theory is that space and time are necessary forms of perception and, in particular, that time is an a priori (prior to experience, non-empirical) pure (unmodifiable by experience) form of inner sense, grounded in the cognitive activities of the mind. After 1929, with the completion of her analysis with Freud, Marie Bonaparte who was keenly interested in Kant's ideas rekindled Freud's interest, although his thinking about Kant's idea of time dates back to 1907. Here Freud (1932) offers a refutation of the Kantian notion. If unconscious mental processes and contents are timeless, then time cannot be a necessary "form of our mental acts". However, Freud's refutation is unsound.

Kant did not claim that mental acts are necessarily temporal. On the contrary, Kant believed that the moral activity of the will is a manifestation of the timeless noumenal self. Kant's idea was rather that time is a necessary condition for experiencing internal mental activity or the activity of persons and things external to the mind. Freud had forgotten his earlier position, consistent with Kant's idea of time, that "...time is bound up with the work of the system Cs" i.e. with the experiential, cognitive work of conscious sensory activities. Kant thought that it is the perceptual system that systematically assigns temporal relations of simultaneity and succession to internal and external events. According to Kant, these events are not intrinsically temporal; they acquire their temporality from being subjected to a law (a pure, a priori form) imposed by the mind as a necessary condition for experiencing any thing, event or activity.. Unconscious mental processes are rendered temporal by being made conscious. Consequently, Freud's assertion that unconscious processes do not recognize time does not refute Kant's notion of time. These processes are not conscious; they are not

experienced, although their derivatives are and their derivatives are temporal. When, for example, a memory becomes conscious it is immediately located in time as being before, after or simultaneous with other remembered events in the individual's life even though the exact location of an event relative to others may not be clear.

Although Freud's argument does not refute the Kantian notion of time, Freud's thought is profoundly incompatible with Kant's subjective idealism. I believe that Freud was correct in rejecting Kant's concept of time, although mistaken in the grounds he chose to justify the rejection. A more powerful argument was available to Freud at the time in Einstein's physics in which time is a dynamic property of the physical universe, relative to proximity to mass and to velocity (Hawking, 1988) and, therefore, not in the least reducible, as Kant thought, to a pure form of inner-perception.

Unconscious processes are made up of contents – memories, thinking by means of images, wishes, aversions and fears and their combination into phantasies which have agency (motivational efficacy) on account of the sexual and aggressive drives that invest them. Among these contents Freud mistakenly included archaic residues which, if they existed, would have a trans-generational genetic immortality dating from the origins of mankind. But this Lamarckian hypothesis is scientifically untenable. In addition, immortality is not timeless, since it will end with the extinction of our species (Hanly, 1997). Moreover, as powerful as the hypothesis would be as an explanation of the universality of the Oedipus Complex, if it were true, it is not at all essential to psychoanalytic theory since the inevitability of the Oedipus Complex can be satisfactorily explained without it.

The father whom a small boy wishes to have out of the way is not the echo of the primitive father of the primal horde; he is the real father or his surrogate. But what of the phantasy father, the father who is symbolized by a dangerous monster in an unconscious phantasy against whom, in a further phantasy elaboration, he pits himself in a test of strength? These symbolic substitutes of the father are not in the real world, although certain symbolic equivalents may be in the worlds of movies, comic strips and literature. What of the phantasy mother represented by witches? What of the princess who symbolizes the small girl who is rescued by prince charming from the toils of the cruel step-mother? Are these unconscious contents and the processes that give rise to them a-temporal and immune to mutability? What is the nature of their “virtual immortality”? Has Freud, having accepted the loss of cosmic timelessness, introduced into his idea of the psyche a repetition of the ancient time-timelessness dualism of the description with which we began? Freud would not be alone in finding such mysterious depths in the psyche. Such a view would be a Kantian noumenal element in the theory of the psychic unconscious. Let us explore Freud’s meaning by means of a typical example of repressed unconscious processes.

A common calamity of childhood is the birth of a sibling, especially when a child is under three years of age and remains very close to the special pleasures of infancy: the oral pleasures of breast feeding and the narcissistic pleasure of being the baby and of feeling herself to be the unique object of her mother’s love. When a sibling arrives, the newborn appears to the child, if she is a girl, to have taken from her the love of the mother that vouchsafes these pleasures, pleasures that have nourished her well being and upon which her survival depends. The child’s profound anaclitic attachment to her

mother is disturbed and may be traumatically disturbed. Even the efforts at separation and autonomy of a two-year-old are grounded in the mother's love, which when a new baby arrives can seem to have been lost to the rival. It is not surprising under these circumstances that a two-year-old would develop an ambivalent attitude of love and hate toward the baby. The child's destructive hate thrusts her into a painful dilemma. The child hates the baby because she recognizes that the mother loves the baby, as she so recently loved her; she fears that the baby will take away the mother's needed love. Thus the child becomes anxious lest the mother who loves the new baby will hate her for hating the baby. An internal conflict is generated. One way of resolving the conflict is to psychologically deny her hatred for the baby by intensifying her affection for and identification with the baby. This reaction formation has the effect of repressing the memory of the hostile, destructive feelings for the sibling and all the phantasy and real experiences to which they had given rise. Henceforth, the jealous child is only able to experience affectionate feelings toward the baby. A precarious relief from the jealousy will have been achieved. Relations with the baby will become more peaceful. The child may well become mother's helper in caring for the baby. The child's destructive hostility will no longer be experienced as such. The pleasure that the parents take in this development, reward it. For the child, it is as though the painful episode with its tantrums, sulks, regression to thumb sucking, difficulties with sleep, bungled efforts to get rid of the intruder had never happened, although symptoms are likely to continue. We have been imagining the life of a girl. Gender difference does not immunize boys from the same experiences and consequent difficulties in life.

A personality is formed that does not take this important episode into account and which experiences as alien within itself the seemingly haphazard manifestations of destructive aggression in phantasies, dreams and play. If the latency child finds that the parents take pleasure in some activity of the younger sibling, the older one may shy away from engaging in it because of vague anxiety about being in competition even though it is an activity which the older child enjoys. When, in adulthood he marries and has a child of his own, he may find himself beset with obsessional thoughts about being guilty of some terrible crime. Although he knows that he has not committed a crime in reality, he feels himself to be a criminal. He is horrified by thoughts that he might push the carriage with his infant son in it into the path of a car on the road when he is taking his newborn for a ride in the carriage. This father may find himself becoming overtly upset when an older child behaves aggressively toward a younger child as though he feared that some terrible violence was about to erupt. Children, he believes, are supposed to only love and care for younger siblings as he proudly remembers having cared for his younger brother.

In this history we have evidence of the continuing activity of the repressed memories, impulses and feelings from childhood. It was this sort of evidence that Freud had in mind when he spoke of the virtual immortality of repressed memories. It is evident from these facts, that Freud used the words “timeless” and “immortal” poetically in order to express a narcissistic wish or a stoical irony. The essential psychoanalytic meaning of the terms refers us to the continuity and durability of unconscious organizations of the kind we have been considering. It indicates the failure of repression and other defenses to obliterate memories and phantasies or to extinguish libidinal and aggressive investments in them and, hence, their capacity to cause dreams, symptoms and

parapraxes, to interfere with reality testing, to distort character, to inhibit the ego and to disturb object relations. The third essential meaning is that unconscious processes are indifferent to time. Repression has caused the memories and phantasies “to stand still” in time by remaining unchanged in their substance and action. The wish to get rid of the unwanted sibling remains contemporary; it continues to seek satisfaction in the here and now; it refuses, as it were, its location in the past. The father in our example feared that he would harm his son because he had once wanted to harm his mother’s baby. In this way it has the appearance of an “eternal now”. However, this appearance is an illusion of consciousness in the way in which the impression of uncaused choice is an illusion of consciousness. In using the words “timeless” and “immortal” Freud is drawing on an ancient identification of the timeless with the unchanging found in the Parmenidean idea of being, the Platonic idea of forms, the Aristotelian idea of completely actualized matter, the Cartesian idea of mental substance and the Kantian idea of noumena.

However, the three intrinsic meanings of timelessness in the psychoanalytic theory of unconscious contents and processes bear none of the metaphysical ontological freight of these philosophical ideas of the timeless. Unconscious processes are not themselves timeless contrary to Freud’s (1920, 1901) assertions that they are intrinsically timeless and that time does not apply to them. Unconscious contents originate with developmental or object relational calamities (usually both inter-twined); they have a beginning; they will have a variable history according to their influence in the life of the individual and of the individual’s relational life on them; and they will end with death. In themselves unconscious processes are no less temporal than conscious psychic processes. It is just that they function differently and one of the differences is that they are not, once

established, easily subject to the influences of development and relations. But they are not at all immune to change in the sense in which, for example, Kantian noumena are. Moreover, they can be changed either by good fortune in life of an appropriate kind (the inheritance of wealth will not do, luck in love might) or by psychoanalysis. What cannot be changed by time, what has not been changed by life, still can be changed by psychoanalysis as Freud (1923) recognized. Trauma can cease causing psychopathology. Memories can cease to act as though they were current rather than past experiences. When they do, they take their place in the temporal sequence of the individual's life experience that they always had. The irony of Freud's use of the term "timeless" to characterize unconscious processes is that it makes timelessness and immortality directly proportional to the extent to which the psyche is neurotic. No doubt Freud's atheism could have taken an ironical satisfaction in the implication.

However, the subtle exaggeration in Freud's use of the term and his preoccupation with Kantian subjective idealist ideas might also suggest an element of wishful thinking. Freud (1923) had already identified the super-ego with Kant's Categorical Imperative. A more correct identification would have been with moral reason and will, since, for Kant, categorical imperatives are the instruments by which moral will acts just as the super-ego is the source of the demand that we act according to ideals and moral obligations. Moral will, according to Kant, is also the expression of the noumenal (immortal) in man. The philosophical foundations of Kant's moral theory are completely at odds with Freud's developmental explanation of the origins of morality. Was Freud's assimilation of the super-ego to an antithetical philosophy inspired by a narcissistic need seeking satisfaction in the possibility of psychic immortality in the

obscure depths of the unconscious despite his atheism? It is possible, but given the fundamental premise of psychoanalysis that the brain is the organ of the conscious and unconscious mind and owes its existence to it, the timelessness and immortality of unconscious processes would have to be bound by the finitude and mortality of the brain that sustains them. It is possible that Freud's narcissism protested against a truth despite his deep awareness of it precisely on account of his discovery of psychoanalysis and despite his knowledge that his discovery had offended human narcissism no less than those of Copernicus, Galileo and Darwin.

In the end, we are driven to seek out "intimations of immortality" to console ourselves with phantasies of future opportunities to find the satisfactions and happiness that life has denied us on account of failed object relations in which they might have been but were not found. Often enough the intimations involve a turning back to childhood or even before it as in Plato's theory of knowledge used by Wordsworth in his poem

"Intimations of Immortality",

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting

The soul that rises with us, our life's Star,

Hath had elsewhere its setting

And cometh from afar

.....

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God who is our home.

Compare this poetry of narcissistic mystical belief with these lines motivated by object love from a poem by Marvell, "To his Coy Mistress"

“And at my back I always hear
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.”

.....

The grave’s a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

Our attitude to time betrays our attitude to death and the degree to which we seek narcissistic consolation in a life after death is inversely proportional to the consolation of object love in life that we have known. Unconscious phantasies may temporarily possess a virtual immortality but the truth, from which we seek to escape, when the satisfactions of object love are not enough, is that immortality is itself only a phantasy.

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