FREUD'S (DE)CONSTRUCTION OF THE CONFLICTUAL MIND

José Brunner

ABSTRACT Freud uses paradoxical and conflictual rhetoric to create an unstable and conflictual picture of the mind. Thus he diverges from both dominant traditions of thought in the West: the Judeo-Christian way of filling all gaps in meaning by putting a single omnipotent divinity in charge of them, and the Enlightenment quest for a final, causal language to describe reality. By both suggesting and displacing a plurality of perspectives on the unconscious, Freud's text mirrors what it claims happens in our minds, in which unconscious impulses undermine the pretense of total rational self-control. Though Freud suggests that a mechanistic description of the mind may bring us nearer to the reality of the unconscious, he also explains that this reality will remain dark. He not only develops an ostensibly mechanistic vocabulary for unconscious mental processes, but also clarifies that his terminology is most fictional precisely when it seems most scientific. Hence, Freud's science of the unconscious cannot be assimilated to an empiricist position; its philosophical underpinnings are both Kantian and Nietzschean, with metaphors and analogies playing a crucial role. Two dramatic images, in which the mind appears as a domain of warring gods and a realm of political conflict, demonstrate that Freud did not regard the unconscious as some kind of true inner self. He depicts the mind in general and the unconscious in particular as a pagan, conflictual universe over which no god or goddess can gain exclusive control and where no rigid dictatorship is possible.

KEYWORDS deconstruction • Enlightenment • Judeo-Christian • mind • pagan • political • psychoanalysis • Sigmund Freud • unconscious

Nobody has seen the mind. It cannot be grasped by the senses, has no smell, shape or texture. A science of the mind is a science of something immaterial, without spatial extension. Hence mental states, forces, structures, processes and events can never be more than hypothetical entities, whose

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existence is inferred speculatively from one's own introspection or from the verbal accounts and the observable behavior of others. Freud's claims concerning the unconscious, too, are speculative hypotheses, suggesting that crucial determinants of our conduct may remain unknown to us because they are barred by a censorship in the mind if they appear to us to be objectionable or reprehensible from an ethical or social point of view (Freud, 1916–17: 138–9). The notion of the unconscious is part of a blueprint of the mind that Freud called 'topographical', which he introduced in the seventh chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900) and developed in later writings. It divides the mind into three layers or systems: consciousness, preconscious and unconscious. For Freud, anything that I perceive at the moment, i.e. that I am conscious of now, belongs to the first layer. Ideational content that is not in my consciousness at present, but of which I can easily become conscious, such as my phone number or what I ate for lunch yesterday, belongs to the preconscious, while the unconscious contains wishes, ideas and other affects that have been banned from consciousness or, to put it differently, that I hide from myself without being aware of the fact that I am doing this.

For Freud, humans are pleasure-seeking creatures; thus he applied the term unconscious primarily to denote wishes, desires and fancies of which we do not want to be aware. In addition, the unconscious also contains related images and ideas, as well as affects that may accompany wishes and desires, such as shame and guilt, envy, fear and anxiety, as well as anger and aggression against anything and anybody who hinders us fulfilling our wishes and satisfying our desires. According to Freud, what is unconscious exercises pressure on the other layers of the mind and interferes with our conscious thoughts, utterances and actions wherever it can. What is in the unconscious may even assume various disguises in order to enter consciousness. In this way, unconscious impulses, intentions or forces are said to lead to thought, speech and observable behavior that cannot be explained by conscious intentions, such as dreams, forgetting, slips of the tongue and neurotic symptoms. It also leads to contradictory states of feeling, such as when people suffer when their wishes are satisfied, but feel satisfied when they suffer, when they get angry at their own desires – and the desires of others – while being satisfied by their anger, when they fear their wishes, while experiencing pleasure when their fears come true.

The work of psychoanalytic interpretation, one might add, is to disentangle such contradictions, make conscious what we hide from ourselves, reveal the methods and techniques by which we deceive ourselves, and draw attention to their detrimental consequences for our ability to live reasonably satisfactory lives.

So far I have provided a short summary of the Freudian picture of the mind and the unconscious, whose basic principles probably are well known. However, Freud's notion of the unconscious also raises a vast number of

questions on a number of levels, some of which will be dealt with in the five sections of this essay:

I. What drove Freud to construe the unconscious as he did, and how does his notion of the unconscious relate to the two dominant traditions of thought in the West, that is, Judeo-Christian monotheism and Enlightenment belief in the power of human reason?

II. In contrast to earlier thinkers, who provided philosophical visions of unconscious impulses, Freud sought to develop a scientific account of the unconscious. What, however, are the philosophical underpinnings of his science?

III. Freud uses dramatic imagery, that is, metaphors and analogies, in which the mind appears as a social space populated by cunning adversaries. What role do these tropes play in his theorizing on the unconscious and what message do they deliver?

IV. In addition to vivid social images of the mind, Freud also uses more scientifically sounding, mechanistic terminology to describe unconscious thought processes and the interaction between conscious and unconscious elements in the mind. Did Freud intend these mechanistic terms as realistic descriptions of the workings of the mind and can they be reconciled with his social imagery?

V. What is the relationship between Freud's text and its subject matter, that is, between Freud's use of conflicting languages and metaphors, on the one hand, and the mental conflicts they portray, on the other?

I. FROM MASTERY TO MULTIPLE MEANINGS, FROM MONOTHEISM TO PAGANISM

Freud's argument for the postulate of unconscious mental acts is transcendental. His argument leads beyond the bounds of experience to mental structures and dynamics that are supposed to explain feelings, thoughts and conduct. It infers from unexplained but striking parts of human experience to unconscious mental acts, i.e. unobservable mental antecedents, whose existence must be assumed to explain the phenomena observed. It is necessary to invoke unconscious explanatory determinants, Freud argues,

> because the data of consciousness have a very large number of gaps in them; both in healthy and in sick people psychical acts often occur which can be explained only by presupposing other acts, of which, nevertheless, consciousness affords no evidence. (Freud, 1915: 166–7)

He concludes: 'A gain in meaning is a perfectly justifiable ground for going beyond the limits of direct experience'.

This quest for meaning led Freud to inquire into domains that had been excluded by the science of his day and to investigate 'the dregs, one might say, of the world of phenomena' such as dreams, neurotic symptoms, jokes,

forgetting and making mistakes (Freud, 1916–17: 27). Time and again Freud stressed as a particular merit of psychoanalysis the fact that it left no realm of mental activity outside its scope. As he pointed out, even in phenomena such as dreams, slips of the tongue, hysterical symptoms or jokes,

> where hitherto nothing but the most freakish capriciousness has seemed to prevail, psycho-analytic research has introduced law, order and connection or has at least allowed us to suspect their presence where its work is still incomplete. (Freud, 1913: 174)

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's interpretation of the motivation underlying the expansionist and totalizing tendency of science, as developed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, may well be applicable to Freud's insistence on the meaningfulness of all human conduct – though with an important difference. They explained the propensity of science to appropriate all realms of life by the fear of anything that might remain outside its control, that is, outside the realm of causal explanation and manipulation, which reduces the variety of the world to one monotonous but manageable principle (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1988).

Horkheimer and Adorno directed their critique against the Enlightenment's quest for universal identity and causality, which they explained by an underlying fear of difference. Reading Freud from this perspective, it seems that rather than a possible absence of causality, it was the possibility of a lack of meaning that aroused fear in him. For him, allowing meaninglessness to play a role even in the slightest and least important of human actions meant leaving the door open to chaos, since such an approach had to accept lacunae in what he called the laws of 'psychic determinism' (Freud, 1916–17: 28). Freud's use of the term 'determinism' may be somewhat misleading, for it does not refer to the causal determination of human action. By 'determinism' he means that all human conduct is motivated and has a meaning. For instance, he accuses those who provide exclusively somatic – i.e. causal – explanations of psychic acts, such as dreams, of abandoning 'scientific determinism' because of their failure to attribute meaning to dreams (Freud, 1916–17: 94).

Thus, though Freud declares psychoanalysis to be scientific, he does not seek to replace the religious quest for ubiquitous meaning by a pervasive causality, as Enlightenment science aimed to do. Rather than emptying human affairs of its alleged secret purposes, as the Enlightenment had done in its struggle against the Church, Freud's hypothesis of unconscious mental acts creates excess of meaning. It not only attributes meaning and intention to all human conduct, but also suggests that as a rule human conduct has many meanings: it is overdetermined. The assumption of unconscious mental acts not only expels meaninglessness, but also generates suspicion of straightforward, manifest and simple meanings, suggesting that they may be covering up the presence of additional, underlying, contradictory, unconscious intentions. Thus it sets in motion a never-ending process of interpretation, where

one layer of meaning can almost always be unmasked as a cover for 'deeper' meanings, where later memories are but 'screens' for earlier ones and one fantasy is but a disguise for another, presumably more unsettling one.

Though Freud seeks meaning, he is not in search of an ultimate one or of a single and final author of all meanings. Moreover, he does not present the psychic world as a realm governed by one omniscient and omnipotent will. The trajectory of monotheist interpretation and conventional scientific explanation leads from the many to one. What the Enlightenment shares with the Judeo-Christian tradition, which it sought to supersede, is a unitary frame of reference in which there is only one ultimate author of meaning, one type of reason, cause or one law which explains a multitude of phenomena. The trajectory of Freud's theory of the unconscious leads in the inverse direction: even minor and seemingly simple events, such as a spelling mistake, a chance thought or the forgetting of a name, involve more factors and carry more meanings than one can possibly fathom. Advocating neither the complete liberation of unconscious forces nor their total conquest by consciousness, the purpose of Freud's theory of the unconscious is both to provide a language to articulate the problems of inner plurality and to tell of the latter's inevitability. Since Freud's theory of the unconscious severely limits the role of consciousness, it undermines Enlightenment notions of human beings as essentially self-transparent, unified, autonomous and capable of free and rational choice. By conceiving the mind in terms of a conflictual plurality, driven by internal contradictions that the conscious subject has to negotiate, but of which it mostly is unaware, choices can no longer be seen to be simple and rational.

In sum, Freud's transcendental argument for the unconscious brings both good and bad news. The good news is that everything I do, feel, think, dream, misspell, imagine or forget has at least one meaning and that, in fact, most of it has more than one meaning. The bad news is that much of my thought, speech and action carries meanings and serves intentions of which I am not aware and mostly cannot be aware without the help of specially trained professionals. The meaningfulness of my dreams, symptoms, forgetfulness and mistakes is gained at a price, for paradoxically, what I have gained in meaning is lost in terms of control and mastery. The comfort of meaning has its costs: I, as a conscious subject, can learn to understand what is going on in myself only if I renounce illusions of complete self-knowledge and self-governance, for only by accepting that I am not master in my own mind can I come to know myself (Freud, 1916–17: 285).

Freud tended to stress the radical, unsettling, wounding effect of his message. In his critique of Freud, Ernest Gellner has stressed its reassuring, comforting or enchanting aspect (Gellner, 1985). In fact, to make a gain in hidden meanings dependent on the renunciation of power and control over oneself and the acceptance of the expertise of a guild of trained hermeneuticists is a familiar move. For centuries the Judeo-Christian tradition asserted

the existence of an immaterial but omnipotent God, situated in a transcendent, heavenly realm, beyond language, space and time, whose secret intentions were declared to be guiding our actions. It proclaimed that there is nothing without meaning in the world; that there is a hidden purpose to all acts and events that seem unexplainable and meaningless – though unfortunately we ordinary humans cannot grasp it without the help of the Church. *Prima facie*, Freud's concept of the unconscious has affinities with the most important attributes of God – such as immateriality, timelessness, procedures that are not bound by principles of logic and a form of expression that is not constrained by the rules of grammar (Freud, 1915: 187).

Is then Freud's theory of the unconscious but a humanized, individualized and psychologized adaptation of the Judeo-Christian tradition – despite the argument that has been made above? Does his conception of the unconscious retrieve the powers attributed to God in the Judeo-Christian tradition and, transposing them from metaphysics to metapsychology, project them into humans whose unconscious he endows with quasi-divine attributes? In other words, has Freud, the self-proclaimed 'completely godless Jew' (Freud and Pfister, 1963: 64), unwittingly created the unconscious in the image of God?

As is well known, Freud regarded monotheism as a collective neurosis and the idea of God as an infantile illusion (Freud, 1933: 168), a result of the incapacity of 'our wretched, ignorant, and downtrodden ancestors' to solve the 'difficult riddles of the universe' (Freud, 1927: 33).[1] He postulated that while in its early developmental stages humanity had no other choice but to produce religious illusions in order to escape anxiety, the advent of the scientific age had made it both possible and necessary to oppose religion. The very possibility of scientific thought and practice indicated that humanity had reached powers of cognition and action that allowed it to transcend the limits that religion imposed on humans. Freud regarded himself as living in a period in which the struggle of the scientific spirit against the religious *Weltanschauung* was still going on, and he styled himself as a warrior fighting for the cause of science (Freud, 1933: 169; cf. Sulloway, 1979; Brunner, 1996). Thus, according to Freud's own argument against religion, if his theory of the unconscious displays religious attributes and can be traced to an underlying anxiety, then it too is suspect of being but an illusionary construct.

A closer look at Freud's rhetoric reveals that while his theory of the unconscious expels meaninglessness from human affairs, as all religions do, it offers a pagan or polytheistic and hence conflictual vision of the inner world rather than a monotheistic one, opposing the illusion of a single God in the skies with rhetoric that posits the mind as a domain divided between warring gods and goddesses (as will be illustrated in detail in section four).

II. FROM SCIENCE TO PHILOSOPHY, FROM KANT TO NIETZSCHE

Freud's theory of the conflictual mind has affinities with views propounded by German philosophical critics of the Enlightenment who preceded him, such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Perhaps these philosophers did not assume unconscious intentions to be as diametrically opposed to conscious ones and as radically different from the latter as Freud did. But this is not the most important feature that distinguishes Freud from his philosophical predecessors. What separates Freud from them, above all, is that he presents his view as scientific.

In the last of his *New Introductory Lectures* of 1933, Freud made the well-known declaration that psychoanalysis 'is part of science and can adhere to the scientific *Weltanschauung*' (Freud, 1933: 181). This and other of Freud's statements concerning the scientific nature of psychoanalysis have been widely quoted and criticized, but usually without properly enquiring and explaining what Freud meant. Moreover, though Freud sought to provide a picture of the mind with scientific validity, this by no means entails that one is justified in paying no attention to the philosophical underpinnings of his scientific project. But without further ado, many of Freud's critics examined his scientific project with an empiricist yardstick, neglecting the fact that Freud's explicit and implicit conception of science departed from the latter in significant aspects.

Some, like Adolf Grünbaum, have been misled, for instance, by Freud's statement that in his view the problems encountered by a science of the mind did not differ, in essence, from those of the natural sciences (Grünbaum, 1984). Critics like Grünbaum have ignored, however, that Freud regarded them as alike, since in his eyes neither of them could do without transcendental reasoning, which, to some extent, has to remain speculative.

Freud explicates the Kantian underpinnings of his transcendental argument in his essay on the unconscious:

> Just as Kant warned us not to overlook the fact that our perceptions are subjectively conditioned and must not be regarded as identical with what is perceived though unknowable, so psychoanalysis warns us not to equate perception by means of consciousness with the unconscious processes which are their object. Like the physical, the psychical is not necessarily what it appears to be. (Freud, 1915: 171)

A passage in the *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, written at the end of his life and published posthumously, provides proof that Freud never abandoned either his Kantian premises or the parallel he drew between the sciences of inner and outer realities: 'the processes with which it is concerned are in themselves just as unknowable as those dealt with by other sciences, by chemistry or physics, for example' (Freud, 1940: 158; cf. p. 196). In this spirit Freud cautioned that all that science could hope for were 'approximations to

certainty' and asserted that science had to achieve its 'constructive work in spite of the absence of final confirmation' (Freud, 1916–17: 51).[2] Thus, shortly after he declares psychoanalysis to be part of science in his *New Introductory Lectures*, he asserts that science – both natural and mental – differs from other forms of *Weltanschauung* in that it 'is not all-comprehensive, it is too incomplete and makes no claim to being self-contained and to the construction of systems' (Freud, 1933: 181–2). For Freud, the imperfection of science is one of its most conspicuous and decisive characteristics, providing the impetus for a continuous and never-ending quest for further knowledge and separating it from philosophy and religion, whose illusionary completeness, stability and coherence turn them into sedatives, lulling their adherents into a dangerous cognitive slumber.

Though there are Kantian elements in Freud's thinking, his science is not Kantian. To understand the philosophical framework of Freud's science of the mind in general and the unconscious in particular, it is necessary not only to become cognizant of the philosophical heritage that is openly acknowledged in his text, but also to be mindful of philosophical affinities and, perhaps, influences, of which it remains silent. Freud was well aware that a science of the mind in general and of the unconscious in particular has to rely on what Nietzsche called 'a mobile army of metaphors' in order to represent the workings of the mind (Nietzsche, 1989: 250). According to Freud, '[w]hat is psychical is something so unique and peculiar to itself that no one comparison can reflect its nature' (Freud, 1919: 161). Already in the early *Studies on Hysteria*, his mentor and co-author Josef Breuer warned of the danger of mistaking metaphors of the mind for actual descriptions of the psyche's reality, of taking vivid portrayals of the unconscious for accurate, literal representations of an only imaginary mental space (Freud and Breuer, 1895: 227–8). A few years later, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud, too, stressed this point, affirming, **'**we are justified . . . in giving free rein to our speculations so long as we retain the coolness of our judgment and do not mistake the scaffolding for the building' (Freud, 1900: 536).

Enlightenment thinkers assumed that science had to represent its objects from an impartial perspective, as they 'truly' are, in order to allow their examination, explanation and manipulation. Probably without being aware of the philosophical roots or affinities of his position, Freud espoused a divergent, Nietzschean view of scientific investigation, suggesting that rather than seeking one disinterested point of view, a variety of situated perspectives and interpretations had to be entertained in order to gain knowledge (Danto, 1980: 68–99).

In a typically Nietzschean fashion, Freud also warns that the perspectives and figures of speech he uses are not to be taken literally. In his *Introductory Lectures*, for instance, he first compares the unconscious to 'a large entrance hall' and consciousness to 'a kind of drawing-room', suggesting that 'on the threshold between these two rooms a watchman performs his

functions' (Freud, 1916–17: 295). After discussing in great detail the activities of this watchman, Freud adds, rather surprisingly, that such similes are not only crude, he even is ready to declare 'that they are incorrect', implying that he already has a better analogy to take their place, without, however, clarifying what he means (Freud, 1916–17: 296).

These statements echo Nietzsche's claim that truth is not the opposite of error, but 'only the position of different errors relative to one another' (cited in Danto, 1980: 74). Since the spirit of Freud's understanding of his project is Nietzschean, though there is no evidence that he took note of this fact, it cannot be accommodated within the boundaries of a conventional, empiricist conception of science.

This, then, is the paradoxical, deconstructive nature of Freud's scientific reasoning: on the one hand, he construes the mind by means of metaphors, on the other he continuously reminds his readers that these metaphors are useful fictions or falsehoods only; they are, at best, to be treated as 'preliminary working hypotheses' that can be helpful to provide a better understanding of what he is referring to (Freud, 1916–17: 296). On the one hand he warns not to take his metaphors of the mind literally or to consider them 'true' in the conventional sense of the word, on the other he declares them to be indispensable to a science of the mind in general and of the unconscious in particular. On the one hand he is aware that his vision of the mind is construed by means of the imagery he uses for it, on the other he assumes that there is no other way to turn mental activity into a scientific object, that is, make it accessible to investigation and therapy.

III. FROM AUTOCRACY TO CONFLICTUAL RELATIONS

If imagery and metaphors play such a central role in Freud's science of the unconscious, it is necessary to examine at least a few of them more closely in order to come to terms with their function in Freud's text. Within the limits of this essay it is impossible to give a comprehensive and detailed account of the variety and intricacy of the analogies and metaphors that structure Freud's discourse; this has been attempted elsewhere (Brunner, 2001a). All that can be provided here is a short discussion of two central metaphors in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Focusing on this work is justified for two reasons: this text provides the groundwork for the psychoanalytic vision of the unconscious, and it undoubtedly constitutes Freud's *magnum opus*.

'*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*' (If I cannot bend the higher powers, I will move the infernal regions). By using this verse of the seventh book of Virgil's *Aeneid* as a motto for *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud compares the unconscious already on the book's title page to the underworld of Greek mythology, represented in the verse by the Acheron, which in the *Aeneid* serves as the name for the forces of Hell.

According to Ernest Jones, Freud had intended to use the quote already

a few years earlier, in a book on hysteria that remained unwritten (Jones, 1953: 360). Freud appears to have been particularly fond of the verse, for he cites it again in the last chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, turning it into a sentence that frames the entire book. Here it also becomes obvious that the verse is meant to represent the intentions of what has been repressed into the unconscious (Freud, 1900: 608).

There can be little doubt that Freud, who had an excellent knowledge of classical sources[3] and was well acquainted with the *Aeneid*, knew that Virgil put these words in the mouth of Juno, queen of the gods and wife and sister of Jupiter. Juno utters them after failing to make Aeneas, a prominent Trojan hero, marry Dido, founder and queen of Carthage. Juno seeks to have Aeneas wed Dido so as to divert him from his journey to Italy and make him stay in Carthage. She knows that the gods destined Aeneas to bring about the founding of Rome, but she favors the city of Carthage, which is fated to be overthrown by the city of Rome. However, Juno's plot fails, for Jupiter sends a messenger to Aeneas, calling him to fulfill his duty, and Aeneas leaves Dido, even though they have fallen in love with each other. Realizing that Jupiter frustrated her plan, the wrathful Juno turns for help to Allecto, a Fury from Hell. Thus, the quote represents the struggle of repressed, unconscious wishes against the forces of repression in gendered terms as that of a frustrated goddess who has to use roundabout means against male gods. In Freud's uses the verse compares unconscious impulses to female passion opposing male authority, and to Carthage – i.e. Semitic Paganism – in a war against Rome and, by implication, with Christianity.[4]

Carl Schorske has highlighted an additional, even more explicitly political dimension that may underlie Freud's use of Virgil's verse. He emphasizes that in the letter of 17 July 1899, in which Freud tells Fliess of his choice of the motto for *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he also mentions that he had taken writings by Ferdinand Lassalle, the founder of the German Democratic Socialist Party, to read on his summer vacation. Although Schorske acknowledges that Freud was acquainted with the *Aeneid* before he read Lassalle, he notes that Virgil's verse also provided the motto of one of Lassalle's booklets, republished in a collection of his writings just before Freud went on vacation. Lassalle, of course, alluded to a political rather than psychical Acheron, that is, to the possibility of stirring up the German proletariat against the rulers of Prussia (Schorske, 1981: 200–1).

It is impossible to know whether the modern political twist that Lassalle gave the verse influenced Freud in the choice of his motto, but it is evident that politics structured much of Freud's thinking on the conflict between the mind's repressive agencies and the repressed forces in the unconscious. For instance, as Freud explains in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the expression 'to repress [*verdrängen*] . . . derived from a set of ideas relating to a struggle for a piece of ground'. His language leaves indeed little doubt that he visualized repression in analogy to a military or political process, even though he

warned, as always, that this should not be done 'in the most literal and crudest sense' (Freud, 1900: 567). This political perspective comes to the fore most strikingly in the book's fourth chapter, where he introduces the notion of a censorship in the mind.

Freud compares forbidden unconscious wishes to a political writer 'who has disagreeable truths to tell those in authority'. As he explains, 'A writer must beware of the censorship, and on its account he must soften and distort the expression of his opinion'. To disguise his actual topic, he may place a controversial political matter in China, for instance. 'The stricter the censorship, the more far-reaching will be the disguise and the more ingenious too may be the means employed for putting the reader on the scent of the true meaning' (Freud, 1900: 141–3).

Significantly, Freud depicts the unconscious not only as censored, but also as censoring itself. By disguising the true meaning of its expressions, it aims at overcoming constraints; self-censorship is designed to enable the political writer to make public his unwelcome views in a fashion that is understood by his readers but seems harmless to the censor (cf. Levine, 1986), just as Juno sought to have her way by all means, despite Jupiter's power and authority. In Freud's text, the political writer is no less clever than the censor and perhaps more so.

Whose cause does Freud advocate in these two analogies? Does he speak as champion of Juno or Jupiter, of the political writer or the censor? Evidently, for Freud, the problem is not that Jupiter rules in the psychic Olympus, and he does not suggest that Juno should govern instead of the king of gods. Similarly, his aim is not to abolish mental censorship or get rid of unconscious wishes that behave like witty political writers. The message of the metaphors is, rather, that posing the question in terms of either-or is mistaken and that therefore psychoanalysis refuses to privilege any side. Instead, Freud positions himself between the conflicting parties, as it were. Freud's vantage point is a precarious one, namely that of the internal relationship itself, rather than of any of its antagonistic members (cf. Ogden, 1994: 18). For Freud, to understand the role of the unconscious in the mind means to become aware of the fact that human acts are never determined by only one agency, will, desire or wish, that the mind is a pagan realm with warring gods, a political domain with conflicting parties. The message of his metaphors is that any attempt to establish an absolute rule in the mind is doomed and that, in fact, it is the origin of most of its troubles. Only when the conflicting parties realize that they have to learn to live with each other and establish an ongoing relationship, albeit a conflictual one, instead of seeking to trick, undermine, exclude, overcome, defeat and extirpate one another, can they provide the mind with the strength necessary to master the demands and obstacles of the outside world.

IV. FROM LIGHT INTO DARKNESS

Most of *The Interpretation of Dreams* dissects the mind in analogy to a social space in which opposing actors confront each other and struggle with one another. Then, in the seventh and last chapter of the book, Freud displaces this social vision of the mind by the introduction of a mechanistic perspective. Thus he demotes his mythological and political metaphors to secondary, dramatic allegories, figurative descriptions of what in reality is an apparatus functioning according to hydraulic principles. Contradictory intentions turn into processes; consciousness and the unconscious are explained by quantities of energy.

Significantly, a warning of the incompleteness of such a scientific explanation, cautioning its readers that it cannot provide enlightenment, also prefaces Freud's first description of mental processes in terms drawn from the vocabulary of the natural sciences. In Freud's words,

> all the paths along which we have travelled have led us towards the light – towards elucidation [*Aufklärung*] and fuller understanding [*zum vollen Verständnis*]. But as soon as we endeavour to penetrate more fully into the mental process involved in dreaming, every path will end in darkness. (Freud, 1900: 511; cf. Brunner, 1994)

Though Freud purports to present at last the mind in general and the unconscious in particular as they really are, he also warns that it is not possible to provide such a presentation. His unequivocal declaration, '[t]he unconscious is the true psychical reality', is followed by the italicized proviso,

> *in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs.* (Freud, 1900: 613)

Moreover, he also admits that 'no psychical apparatus exists which possesses a primary process only and . . . such an apparatus is to that extent a theoretical fiction' (Freud, 1900: 603).

Only after he has drawn attention to the limited, fictional nature of his mechanistic metaphors for the unconscious does Freud take his readers on the path into darkness. In a radical change of rhetoric in comparison with the previous chapters, he now depicts the mind as an 'apparatus', a 'compound instrument' divided into 'systems' that 'stand in a regular spatial relation to one another' (Freud, 1900: 537). His language is permeated by references to psychic hydraulics, leading from 'excitation' to 'discharge' through a 'safety-valve' (Freud, 1900: 579).

Rather than an ultimate, final explanation of what is going on in the unconscious, this mechanistic language serves as a Nietzschean juxtaposition of metaphorical repertoires, destabilizing the theoretical edifice Freud constructs in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Impressing the preferential nature of this terminology on his readers, Freud suggests replacing the earlier, political

metaphor of repression as 'a struggle for a piece of ground' by a different one, 'that seems to correspond better to the real state of affairs'. In reality, he explains, ideas are not 'driven out' of one psychic domain into 'another locality'. In the terms of the seventh chapter, an idea does not move from one place in the mind to another. It either has a certain amount of energy attached to it, which makes it available to consciousness, or has the energy withdrawn from it and thus becomes unconscious (Freud, 1900: 610). Nevertheless, he is unwilling to abandon the earlier repertoire of metaphors, which he has declared to be misleading; as he explains, he considers it 'expedient and justifiable to continue to make use of the figurative image of the two systems', that is, of the spatial analogy for consciousness and the unconscious (Freud, 1900: 611).

The pathos of reality of Freud's mechanistic terminology is more treacherous than might appear at first, for reality – both external and internal, material and psychical – is a dark matter for him. The scientifically sounding language of the seventh chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, with its pretensions to describe reality 'as it is', is no less metaphorical than the dramatic similes of the earlier chapters. As Freud's refusal to give up earlier metaphors evinces, the seventh chapter provides but an additional perspective on the workings of the unconscious; in his own terms, it constitutes by no means an ultimate or conclusive formulation of mental principles with the power to supersede or replace earlier perspectives.

V. FROM DESCRIPTION TO PERFORMANCE

The Interpretation of Dreams constitutes but one example of Freud's way of writing on the unconscious, though certainly a paradigmatic one. Others could be added of course. What is typical of all of them is that Freud has recourse to many languages in order to describe the unconscious and its conflicts with consciousness. He does not seek to impose one perspective at the expense of the others; he continuously shifts his position, suggesting that none of the explanatory frameworks and rhetorical tropes he offers should be mistaken for the ultimate description of mental reality; athough he presents none of his metaphors as true in the conventional sense of the term, he holds them necessary. His text suggests that only a continuous positioning and re-positioning, which persistently destabilizes the seemingly authoritative perspectives that it puts forward, can offer insights into the conflictual relationship in which we as conscious subjects live with our unconscious.

Freud's text continually seeks to articulate plurality and conflict rather than excluding or 'forgetting' unsettling perspectives in order to pretend monolithic one-ness. It thereby diverges from both the Judeo-Christian way of filling all gaps in meaning by putting a single omnipotent divinity in charge of them, and the Enlightenment quest for a final, causal language to describe

reality and enable the individual to achieve complete and rational control of external and internal reality.

Freud's continuous shifts of position in order to describe the conflicts and contradictions within our minds create tensions and paradoxes in the text. Though he suggests that a mechanistic metaphor may bring us nearer to the reality of the unconscious, he also explains that this reality will remain dark. He not only develops an ostensibly observationalist, scientific vocabulary for unconscious mental processes, but also clarifies that his terminology is most fictional precisely when it seems most scientific.

Due perhaps to its multilingual quality, Freud's text performs what it describes. It not only constructs the mind as a conflictual plurality, divided into consciousness and the unconscious; it does so by means of a plurality of incompatible metaphors. It not only suggests that the rule of consciousness is continually undermined by unconscious impulses, but also continually undermines the rule of any one rhetorical repertoire. As we have seen, Freud explains the conflict between consciousness and unconscious impulses with the help of the image of the writer in our minds who seeks to tell us unpleasant truths about ourselves, which we aim to censor and block out, but who overcomes censorship by means of self-censorship, metaphors and analogies. Freud, of course, writes as precisely such an author, offering us disagreeable truths about ourselves, while censoring himself and disguising, for instance, the true identity of patients whose dreams he relates.[5] As we have seen, Freud depicts the mind in general and the unconscious in particular as a pagan, conflictual universe over which no god or goddess can gain exclusive control and where no rigid dictatorship is possible. He does so by means of rhetoric that continuously undermines what it constructs, which allows no exclusive control to any language, perspective or philosophy, taking its readers on an adventurous journey without offering a safe destination.

José Brunner teaches at the Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas and the Buchmann Faculty of Law, both at Tel Aviv University. He has written on contemporary political theory and the politics of psychoanalysis, psychiatry and psychology, including *Freud and the Politics of Psychoanalysis*, published by Blackwell in 1995 and Transaction in 2001. *Address:* Buchmann Faculty of Law, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel. [email: joseb@post.tau.ac.il.]

Notes

1. In this, Freud again follows in Nietzsche's footsteps. Seven decades before Freud, Nietzsche had characterized religion as a neurosis from which humanity had to be freed (Nietzsche, 1976: 58).
2. For detailed discussions of the origins of Freud's Kantian or quasi-Kantian perspective, see Anderson (1962), Galaty (1974), Leary (1980), Leski (1965) and Turner (1977).

3. For Freud as a cultural Hellene, see Loewenberg (1995).
4. Note, however, that in the opening pages of *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud compares the mind to Rome (Freud, 1930).
5. For a performative reading of one of Freud's case studies, see Brunner (2001b).

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