Freud’s dream and ours

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1 The man who never read a book

Years ago a man in his thirties came to see me because he was in ‘big trouble’ and felt depressed and very unhappy. He feared he was going to lose his job because of his extreme social inhibitions. He could not look people in the face or talk to them. Indeed, he did not make eye contact with me. His voice was hardly audible and he could only construct a few brief phrases very slowly, as if speaking were for him a torture.

He had never had a girl friend and he had some perverse sexual thoughts that revolted him. He had visited prostitutes on two occasions but did not feel good about it.

He was a ‘good for nothing’, he told me, and a disgrace to his family. His parents and siblings had completed university degrees and were successful professionals.

Over the years he had seen a number of psychologists and psychiatrists, and even three psychoanalysts. He expressed pessimism about his future and scepticism about psychoanalysis. I wondered to myself why the man wanted to see yet a fourth psychoanalyst (the other three being known to me as very good analysts). Shortly after the first session he rang me to say that he was not coming to see me again, that he did not think that there was a cure for him and that he did not want to waste my time. However, a few days later he telephoned me again and asked me whether I would consider taking him in analysis. Some years later, he is still my patient and analysand.

After a few sessions, and to illustrate his notion that he was hopeless, the patient told me that he had never read a book in his entire life. Minutes later, however, and thanks to one of those brilliant interventions of the unconscious, he said that he had read in a book that a boy is doomed to fall in love with his mother and wish to kill his father, and that this was called the ‘Oedipus Complex or something’. ‘And what is this book that you never read?’ I asked. ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’, he answered, ‘by Freud, you know, Sigmund Freud, the chap who wrote about sex and stuff.’ ‘And you don’t count that as a book?’ I asked. Well, you know, it’s not like a novel or something’, he replied.

I learned later that the analysand had read a few other works by Freud. He concealed the fact, as he compulsively needed to maintain the position of an ignorant man with no trace of a desire to know. Yet this man, who did not sound too promising as an analysand at the start certainly not
as someone with an interest in the lessons taught by the unconscious and whose demeanour and speech were (and continue to be) anything but Freudian, has nevertheless been capable of embarking on and sustaining the experience that Freud created over one hundred and ten years ago.

He discovered that he could speak and learn something (sometimes, quite something) from what he had to say, as soon as he was with someone prepared to listen to him and learn something as well. This patient demonstrated again, as others have before him, that if Freud is not exactly a popular figure, the psychoanalysis that he created is nevertheless an experience that anybody can try, no matter his or her position in society or in psychiatric nosological classifications. It can be tried by anyone, provided he or she is prepared to engage in an experience that is eminently ethical, in that it involves a radical questioning of one’s subjectivity, of one’s position in life concerning the things that have always been at the centre of ethical reflection—one’s relation with the fellow human being, with desire, with truth, with good and evil, love and hatred, happiness and tragedy.

Freud inscribed the ethical dimension of the psychoanalytic experience in what he called its fundamental rule, the rule ironically called ‘free association’, which he formulated as this (I quote a few lines from his paper ‘On Beginning the Treatment’):

> So say whatever goes through your mind. [...] Never forget that you have promised to be absolutely honest, and never leave anything out because, for some reason or other, it is unpleasant to tell it
> (Freud, 1913c, p. 135).

Thousands and thousands of articles and entire books have been published by psychoanalysts of different schools since the birth of psychoanalysis, one hundred and eleven years ago. The most dissonant arguments and discrepancies can be found in those texts. But Freud’s fundamental rule has remained the reference point common to the practice of psychoanalysts of all orientations.

This appeal to truth and to a genuine subjective engagement with another human being has indeed the value of an ethical injunction and requires that the analyst live up to it. For if honesty is demanded of the patient it is also expected of the analyst, who can never assume the position of a mental health technician who would supposedly be neutral on ethical matters. What I am saying is not just a philosophical reflection: human ethics concern eminently practical matters—as one of the fathers of moral philosophy, Immanuel Kant, proposed (Kant, 1956 [1788]). Ethics is practical reason, that is, pure reason applied to human affairs—ultimately to making living together possible. The human being who comes to ask us for help always presents his problems in moral terms, and he or she is right in doing so, as his or her desire and his or her conception of the good are at stake. Thus, my patient defined his position in the world as that of a ‘good for nothing.’ This is not simply a figure of speech: the phrase represented for him an unconscious superego mandate following which he ordained his entire life.

2 Sigmund Freud is being murdered

It is precisely the ethical position of psychoanalysis in our culture, and of the analysand and the analyst, that make psychoanalysis a living reality, responsible for the resistances that it continues to engender among the prevailing ideologies and the administrators of our well-being. All the
mechanisms that Freud identified in Freud’s dream and ours the unconscious as instruments for the rejection of unpalatable truths—repression, disavowal, foreclosure—have been employed in sinister attempts to eradicate psychoanalysis from the lives of individuals and society at large. And it is not a coincidence that those attempts have been most implacable under totalitarian regimes. Even in societies that consider themselves democratic, every fortnight or so we are told that Sigmund Freud is dead. Really? As if we had not noticed that the man born one hundred and fifty years ago passed away at the age of eighty-three. Those who so enthusiastically proclaim the death of Freud do not seem to realize that only those who are alive can be killed. I have wondered about the reasons for this hatred of Freud. For I do not think that hatred is too strong a word to designate this shameful demonstration of human intolerance. Sheer intolerance it is, as psychoanalysis, as a practical experience, is entirely voluntary, and as a theory, one among others which have never been questioned in their right to exist. Why then such a hateful opposition? Of course, it is not only a question of Freud the man. His being Jewish has something to do with it, even if he qualified his Jewishness by calling himself a ‘godless Jew’ (Jones, 1955, p. 507). More importantly, the attempted murder of Freud concerns the revolution that he produced, the unprecedented human experience that he created, the extraordinary body of knowledge that he left for us and the generations to come—the blow to human narcissism that he recognized as having inflicted on our race and that remains the source of the most formidable resistances against psychoanalysis. Who can accept without a struggle that we are not masters of our own thought, that the unconscious rules, that the sublime and the ridiculous in us have evolved from the same humble origins—the state of Hilflosigkeit (helplessness, as Freud called it) which prevails upon us, not only in our infancy, but rather throughout our entire existence? (Freud, 1927c)

3 The compulsion to enjoy and be happy

Psychoanalysis was created at a time when capitalism was well established, at least in the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in the rest of the industrially developed world. Already during Freud’s time the scientific and technological advances that made the expansion of capitalism possible were substantially transforming the lives of many people. In his seminal text of 1929, Civilization and its Discontents, Freud refers to the benefits brought about by technological advances, despite the fact that these advances were already under attack. Thus, he speaks of the ‘muchdespised era of scientific and technical advances’ (Freud 1930a, p. 88).

Since Freud technological advances have been affecting our lives in unprecedented ways, and moulding what in the same essay (Civilization and its Discontents) Freud calls the ‘cultural superego’ (Freud 1930a, pp. 141–2). Normally ‘obscene and ferocious’ (to use Lacan’s terms; Lacan 2006 [1966], p. 517), our contemporary superego is more obscene and ferocious than ever before. It commands us to enjoy, to be happy at any cost and to consume, as consumption (now within the reach of many) is meant to guarantee the access to happiness. It is perhaps rather late that as a culture we have recognized the illusions, delusions and other pathologies engendered by consumption and its greedy promotion. Freud was, however, perfectly aware of the pathogenic effects of the compulsion to be happy. He wrote, also in Civilization and its Discontents:

[Humans] strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so. This endeavour has two sides, a positive and a negative aim. It aims, on the one hand, at an absence of pain and unpleasure, and, on the other, at the experiencing of strong feelings of pleasure. In its narrower sense the word ‘happiness’ only relates to the last. [...] What decides the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle. [...] There can be no doubt about its efficacy, and yet its programme is at loggerheads with the whole
world, with the macrocosm as much as with the microcosm. There is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all the regulations of the universe run counter to it. One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be ‘happy’ is not included in the plan of ‘Creation’. [...] Unhappiness is much less difficult to experience. We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, [...] from the external world [...] and finally from our relations to other men (Freud 1930a, pp. 76–7).

No wonder Freud is not popular. What he wrote (and he wrote essentially on the basis of what he learned from his patients) is bad news for those who are in the business of either selling or buying happiness. For the same people all the human states and conditions that represent a threat to happiness—anguish, depression, grief, loneliness, uncertainty and, in general, all forms of madness, neurosis included—are to be eliminated. For some contemporary ideologies that are dominant precisely among the administrators and professionals who are meant to help those who suffer from those conditions, it is not a question of trying to learn from them (which requires listening to them, and that is what Freud did) but rather to combat them by means of biochemical agents or indoctrination into the merits of positive thinking and the demotion of false beliefs.

4 The boy who lost his smile

A boy, seven years of age, came to see me. I asked him what had brought him to talk with me. He thought for a moment and then said: ‘I lost my smile’. Then he told me many other things.

Later in the day I reflected that I was a very fortunate man, a privileged man privileged to be able to occupy the position that Freud invented, that of the psychoanalyst and privileged to be able to listen to words that are increasingly rare in the world where we live. These words may well be uttered, but normally do not reach any listener—since, in this world where we live, many words are pronounced but very little is said, and even less is heard.

The loss of one’s smile is a tragic loss. Rene Spitz recognized in the smile the first clearly intersubjective act of symbolic communication, not simply an affective response but, more significantly, the infant’s active engagement in a dialogue with his or her mother. The smile is the first word. It serves a symbolic function, in that it is exchanged, and it becomes an instrument of intimate exchange, and belongs in a game played by the infant and the mother involving a binary opposition (as the smile may be present or not). It also refers to a beyond, a satisfaction that the infant can read in the mother’s face and that the mother can read in the infant’s face, a satisfaction that opens an enigmatic dimension, a question in both human beings as to what it is that really satisfies the other —me, or something else?; or me, and something else? To lose one’s smile is to lose the testimony, inscribed in the flesh, of those formative moments, of the experience of desire itself in the primordial relation with the mother. The smile has also been regarded as a mask, but it is a mask very sensitive to what lies behind it. Anybody can distinguish between a forced smile and a genuine smile.

It was this genuine smile that my young patient was mourning. The boy’s parents were going through their divorce at the time. No amount of parental consolation and no amount of technological advances could compensate for the irreversible loss that the boy was suffering, the loss of that all-too-human object, his smile. This object is not for consumption. It cannot be bought or sold. It cannot be imposed, and it cannot be rejected either when it imposes itself.
What was for me remarkable was that, as I got to know the boy better, when he said that he had lost his smile, he knew exactly what he was talking about. This is a rare occurrence even for adults these days. He also knew that he had to say those words to somebody who would receive them as a truthful and very serious statement, and that out of the same words something could be created.

5 A formative discourse

Psychoanalysis is not the only performative discourse—in the sense in which Austin defined the term, that is to say, a discourse which transforms the reality in which the subject lives and with it transforms the subject. As when one says ‘I declare you husband and wife’ or, less formally, ‘I love you’ (Austin 1962). But the analytic discourse is fundamentally performative, not simply narrative or expressive. The human subject who embarks on an analysis undergoes a transformation through what he says to the analyst, who helps him to speak better. What the analysand says is formative. The analysand does not come to analysis to confess but, as Freud puts it in The Question of Lay Analysis:

In Confession the sinner tells what he knows; in analysis the neurotic has to tell more (1926e, pp. 188–9).

The neurotic tells more than he intends. Through his voice the unconscious speaks. Thus the neurotic has the opportunity of getting to know what he has been, the unconscious mandates that have ruled his life in his ignorance and the destructive forms of satisfaction to which he is enslaved. This is the therapeutic aim of psychoanalysis: to make enjoyment compatible with life. But psychoanalysis is a therapy with a difference. It subordinates any therapeutic aims to the ethics that Jacques Lacan has called ‘of speaking well’: an ethics consistent with telling the truth and engaging oneself in a creative, formative bond with others (1990 [1974], p. 41).

6 Freud’s dream

During the night of the 23rd to the 24th of July, 1895 Sigmund Freud had a dream, known as ‘the dream of Irma’s injection’. (1900a, p. 96) For a few psychoanalysts, among whom I count myself, the analysis of this dream marks the birth of psychoanalysis—if one can speak in those terms, which are necessarily arbitrary, as other dates could be chosen. The reason for assigning such a prominent position to this dream in the work of Freud is that Freud himself considered its analysis to be decisive because of his own history, his subjective position vis-a-vis his creation, psychoanalysis, and the invention of the methodology that allowed him to decipher the dream and propose a new theory of human desire. Amidst his vast production, it was The Interpretation of Dreams that he liked most, both because of its scientific significance and its subjective value. He wrote in the preface to the second edition that the book was a portion of his self-analysis, a reaction to his father’s death ‘that is to say, to the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man’s life’ (1900a, p. xxvi). He wrote in the preface to the third English edition that ‘insight such as this falls to one’s lot but once in a lifetime’ (1900a, p. xxxii). And in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, shortly after the publication of The Interpretation of Dreams, he asked, in reference to the analysis of the dream of Irma’s injection and Bellevue, the house where it occurred:

‘Do you suppose that some day a marble tablet will be placed on the house, inscribed with
these words?
In This House, on July 24th, 1895 the Secret of Dreams was Revealed to Dr. Sigm. Freud
At the moment there seems little prospect of it’
(Freud 1900a, p. 121).

Only a few hundred copies of the book were sold over the first five years after publication, although not long after it was translated into several languages and required re-editions of the original.

Freud chose the dream of Irma’s injection to demonstrate how his method of interpretation worked, and how dreams represent the fulfilment of unconscious desires historically originating in childhood. Freud chose this dream as a paradigm on the basis of the importance of its analysis for his own destiny and the destiny of psychoanalysis.

Freud says that the analysis of this dream is incomplete. Yet he exposes what he believes to be the message contained in the dream, a message that represents the realisation and fulfilment of an unconscious desire. I leave aside any objection that may arise—and legitimately so—concerning the fact that we are dealing with a dream dreamt by Freud and analysed by himself. This is a partial analysis in all senses of the term. This could the topic for another paper. Here I am interested in what Freud writes as conclusions and interpretation of the ultimate sense of the dream, in all probability without being fully aware of what he is saying—which illustrates a law of discourse that he himself discovered.

He writes towards the end of Chapter II that the wish fulfilled by his dream concerns his exculpation from Irma’s illness. The diverse ideas that the dream expresses converge into a single preoccupation, Freud’s concern about his own and other people’s health. In response to the accusation that he does not take his medical duties seriously enough, in his dream he produces evidence of how highly conscientious I was, of how deeply I was concerned about the health of my relations, my friends and my patients. It was a noteworthy fact that this material also included some disagreeable memories, which supported my friend Otto’s accusation rather than my own vindication. The material was, as one might say, impartial; but nevertheless there was an unmistakable connection between this more extensive group of thoughts which underlay the dream and the narrower subject of the dream which gave rise to the wish to be innocent of Irma’s illness
(1900a, p. 120).

Reanalyses have been attempted of Freud’s specimen dream in order to identify its real subjective significance. Again, I leave aside questions regarding the epistemological validity of such exercises, which could be found to involve what Freud called wild analysis. What have interested me are the reflections, the after-thoughts and original elaborations that Freud’s dream has stimulated. These are more important than the questions concerning the validity of the interpretation of second-hand material. It is clear that nobody is in a position to analyse Sigmund Freud, but we are all in the position of always being able to learn something new from his works.

Both Erik Erikson and Jacques Lacan have proposed that Freud’s plea for exculpation concerns a fault which is more fundamental than what Freud’s analysis reveals. Erikson suggests that the guilt involved in the dream concerns
the wish to be the one-and-only who would overcome the derisive fathers and unveil the mystery. It helped him in the necessity to abandon well-established methods of sober investigation (invented to find out a few things exactly and safely to overlook the rest) for a method of self-revelation apt to open the flood gates of the unconscious (1954, p. 51).

Lacan re-interpreted Freud’s dream-wish as follows:

I am he who wants to be forgiven for having dared to begin to cure these patients, who until now no one wanted to understand and whose cure was forbidden. I am he who wants not to be guilty of it. [...] Here I am only the representative of this vast, vague movement, the quest for truth, in which I efface myself. I am no longer anything. My ambition was greater than I. No doubt the syringe was dirty. And precisely to the extent that I desired it too much, that I partook in this action, that I wanted to be, myself, the creator, I am not the creator. The creator is someone greater than I. It is my unconscious, it is this voice that speaks in me, beyond me (Lacan, 1988, pp. 170–1).

Because Sigmund Freud was not scared of the unconscious and assumed full responsibility for his desire, he was able to realise his dream. Some desires, he wrote (also in The Interpretation of Dreams), can be fulfilled, if only one gathers enough courage. For years he had to work in what he called splendid isolation, because psychoanalysis did not bring him fame or many friends. It was different later, when the world started to recognize that Freud was one of those rare human beings who Freud’s dream and ours have made the world liveable. Betraying his own desire was for Freud completely out of the question, in the same way that he never betrayed his origins, his history or his convictions. When Max Graf, the father of Little Hans, asked for his advice on whether to convert his son to the Christian faith (concerned as he was about the anti-Semitism prevailing in Vienna), Freud did not hesitate to write to him:

If you do not let your son grow up as a Jew, you will deprive him of those sources of energy which cannot be replaced by anything else. He will have to struggle as a Jew, and you ought to develop in him all the energy he will need for that struggle. Do not deprive him of that advantage (Graf 1942, p. 473).

7 Our dream

In so many ways Freud remains ahead of us. We may complain about the hostility and the indifference with which psychoanalysis has been treated lately, particularly by the public institutions that are responsible for the care of so many fellow human beings whose words have been silenced. But it was not easier for Freud. If he succeeded (although towards the end of his life he declared that the struggle was not over), it was because he defended his creation without giving concessions—that is, without attempting to make it more palatable for those who want only to be happy.

My dream is to have the strength, the dignity and the courage to follow Freud’s path, to live up
to the trust that those who have read some books or who have lost their smiles have placed on me, to help them decipher their dreams and say their words.

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References


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