Not Even Wrong

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Metaphor and metonymy are the primary and crucial cognitive tools of unconscious thought. Acknowledging this function of metaphor and metonymy might provide a unifying bridge between the disparate schools and factions of contemporary psychoanalysis. I suggest that we are more likely to find common ground, both within psychoanalysis and neighboring disciplines, if we view the unconscious mind as the area within which meaning is processed by means of metaphor, rather than the locus of a battleground between repression and instinctual forces.

The title of this article refers to a judgment attributed to the quantum physicist, Wolfgang Pauli. A friend showed him the paper of a young physicist that he suspected was not of great value, but he, nevertheless, wanted Pauli’s views. Pauli remarked sadly, “It’s not right; it’s not even wrong.” To claim that a scholarly or scientific paper is “not even wrong” suggests that the author and the critic do not share the same conceptual system so that a judgment is not even possible. I’m afraid this can be said of the sorry state of affairs that separate the various schools and factions of psychoanalysis at this time. A classical Freudian ego psychologist, a Kohutian self-psychologist, a Sullivanian interpersonalist, and a Lacanian cannot communicate with each other, as they do not share in common a set of conceptual assumptions. Conceptualizing the unconscious in terms of the Freudian instinctual id is unacceptable to most of us, and is certainly incompatible with contemporary neuroscience. I suggest that a revised concept of the Freudian unconscious, where metaphor is the major cognitive tool, might be a starting point that will provide some basic shared assumptions. If we can agree on fundamental assumptions, perhaps we can begin to talk to each other.

WHY I AM NOT AN EGO PSYCHOLOGIST

In our field, at the start of our careers, our basic assumptions and beliefs usually follow from our identification with an idealized mentor; hence, we describe ourselves as Freidians, Kleinians, Kohutians, Sullivanians, Bionians, Lacaniens, etc. But as we gain clinical experience, we should begin to question those assumptions that we have uncritically adopted from our mentors. Although I would still describe myself as a Freudian, I would more specifically claim to

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be an early Freudian, inasmuch as I reject Freud’s instinct theory and many aspects of ego psychology, especially the idea of defense mechanisms. Of course, I don’t reject the idea of defense but I do reject the impersonal concept of mechanism. The machine metaphor is totally incompatible with the highly individualized, self-organizing, self-selecting function that unconsciously chooses a specific mode of defense at any given point in time. What I fully embrace, and identify with, is the Freud of The Interpretation of Dreams (1900). As I shall describe, Freud’s early concept of the unconscious processing of memory and feeling as illustrated by the formation of dreams is significantly and radically different from the concept of the unconscious that he later elaborated in The Ego and the Id (1923). If we return to Freud’s early idea of the unconscious as a meaning-making system and not a battleground between instictual wishes and those agencies that oppose their expression, we have, I believe, a better chance of finding a common conceptual ground between the various disparate schools that characterize contemporary psychoanalysis.

I believe that ego psychology has proved to be a major divisive force that has contributed to the separation that exists between the various schools of psychoanalysis. Freud’s conception of the id has prevented us from viewing the unconscious not as that area of the mind in which instictual forces are held in check by repression, but as that area of the mind concerned with the unconscious processing of meaning.

Not surprisingly, the development of my beliefs and conceptual assumptions were influenced by the impact of my clinical experience. After my graduation from the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute in 1961, I tried to test the limits of the psychoanalytic method by accepting patients for psychoanalysis who were seriously ill, such as the so-called borderline case, as well as some patients who were diagnosed as schizophrenic. I soon discovered that their relationship to me was central to their treatment and that interpretation of their unconscious thoughts and feelings was not always useful and at times was counterproductive. Such an observation is, today, self-evident. I would think every clinician knows that with the sicker patient, the holding effect of the therapeutic relationship transcended the result of interpreting unconscious content. But at that time, this two-person relational understanding could not be easily integrated into Freud’s third person concept of the mind as a mental apparatus. Nor could this two-person relational understanding be reduced to or understood simply under the rubric of transference. We know, of course, that this gap between clinical observation and Freudian theory was subsequently filled with the emergence of various relational and interpersonal schools of psychoanalysis.

To continue with this account of my conceptual development, I discussed this issue of a two-person psychology and its relation to Freudian theory in Psychoanalysis in New Context (Modell, 1984) where I stated that Freud essentially oscillated between a one-person stance, for example, dream interpretation, and a third-person scientific account of human psychology. In that volume I wrote:

The process that occurs between two people, between the subject and the object in psychoanalysis is referred to the mind of the subject, who is the patient. This produces in us a certain intellectual unease when, for example, we describe dependency, a process occurring between two people, as an event in the mind of one person. Traditional psychoanalysis has not yet acquired theoretical language that would enable it to describe process occurring between two separate personalities in terms encompassing the events in both individuals [Modell, 1984, p. 11].

Freud, of course, was not unaware of a two-person dialogical perspective, as such a perspective is implicit in Freud’s recognition of the unconscious communication that occurs in transference
and in the process of free association. For example, in his encyclopedia article, Freud (1923) understood free association to be a "means to catch the drift of the patient's unconscious with his own unconscious." But this implicit two-person system could not easily be fit into his instinct theory or his structural ego psychology. Furthermore, Freud thought that the third-person perspective, of a mental apparatus, a concept central to ego psychology, supported psychoanalysis' claim to be a scientific discipline.

To find mentors whose work was consistent with my clinical experience, I turned to Winnicott, as I did in my 1968 book, Object Love and Reality (Modell, 1968). There I applied Winnicott's concept of the transitional object to certain aspects of the relationship that one experiences in the treatment of borderline and schizophrenic patients. The concept of the transitional object can be thought of as a conceptual metaphor that is a shared imaginative construction, present in the minds of both parent and child. In a transitional object relationship, the person of the analyst is treated as a protective magical agent that is interposed between the individual and one's existence of the world. There is a clear analogy here to the child's creation of the transitional object, where a real object such as a blanket or teddy bear is, by means of the imagination, magically transformed. The child who makes use of a transitional object has already mastered the use of metaphor. In a broader context, this process can be thought of as an interplay between the real and the imagined. Imagination is not possible without metaphor. The transitional object illustrates the interplay between the real, the actual object, and its transformation by means of metaphor. This interplay also reflects the synergy between metonymy and metaphor. The real object (blanket, etc.) is a metonymic object, in that the part substitutes for the whole—the whole being the mother. This real object is then magically transformed by means of metaphor. This interplay of metaphor and metonymy, the real and the imagined, is a crucial process that determines the unconscious construction of the other person. As this process is not limited to the therapeutic relationship, this can be described as the transference of everyday life. In our imaginative transformation of the other person, we invariable respond to actual perceptions, something that is real. Metaphoric process always requires the of metonymy (Jakobson, 1995). This formulation is consistent with a broader view of the perceptual process, including other species, where a distinction is made between raw sensations and their subsequent interpretation by the unconscious self (Pincus et al., 2007).

RECONSTRUCTING THE FREUDIAN UNCONSCIOUS IN THE LIGHT OF NEUROSCIENCE—HOPEING TO FIND COMMON CONCEPTUAL GROUND

Anyone who identifies themselves as a psychoanalyst would, I trust, unquestionably accept the idea of unconscious determinism. But how unconscious processes are conceptualized is a subject of much discord and disagreement. How one understands unconscious process is linked to several other theoretical controversies. One such controversy is the extent to which one believes that unconscious processes are neurobiologically determined. Another is the extent to which one believes that unconscious processes are determined by the past unconscious, that is to say, fantasy and memory, or the extent to which one believes in the importance of the present unconscious that is embedded in the intersubjectivity of the present moment. As you know, there are analytic schools of thought that minimize the importance of the past and, therefore, the significance of unconscious memory and fantasy in determining the meaning of current experience. Some
claim a relative autonomy for the present moment. I am thinking, for example, of the Boston Change Process Study Group (2008). They have also reconstructed the Freudian unconscious from the perspective of infant research and systems theory. It is not that I deny the importance of the present moment, which I take to be an aspect of the real, but this view omits a consideration of an unconscious metaphoric process that organizes the affective memories of the past through which the present moment is interpreted. I will suggest, as I described in *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain* (Modell 2003), that an unconscious metaphoric process, analogous to dreaming, occurs in the waking state.

It is my belief that Freud went down the wrong path when he reframed human psychology in terms of instinct theory. Originally, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900) viewed the unconscious as a knowledge processing system that gave metaphoric expression to the unconscious wish. This view of the unconscious was radically altered with Freud's elaboration of instinct theory and the development of ego psychology. This is, as I noted earlier, one of the root causes for the divisions that separate the various schools of contemporary psychoanalysis. Freud never disclaimed his description of unconscious processing of meaning, but he put it aside when he recharacterized the unconscious, not as an area of the mind in which meaning is processed and organized by means of metaphor and metonymy, but as an area of the mind in which there is a conflict between instincts seeking discharge and the forces of repression that prevent instinctual derivatives, thoughts, feelings, and fantasies, from being from becoming conscious. The primary function of this revised unconscious was not the processing of meaning but to prevent unacceptable impulses, wishes, and fantasies from becoming conscious. In his introduction to his 1915 paper, *The Unconscious*, Freud states that everything that is repressed must remain unconscious, but he also noted that the unconscious has a wider compass, that the repressed is only one part of the unconscious and does not cover everything. But Freud does not say what this part consists of. Freud (1915) writes in that paper, "The nucleus of the unconscious consists of instinctual representatives which seek to discharge their cathexis; that is to say, it consists of wishful impulses" (p. 186). Freud further states that "the content of the unconscious may be compared with aboriginal population of the mind. If inherited, the mental formation exists in human beings—something analogous to instincts in animals—these constitute the nucleus of the unconscious." At the end of his life, when he wrote *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud (1940) now viewed unconscious process not as potentially adaptive but as a danger to the self. The id was seen as the ego's internal enemy, he said: "Immediate and unheeding satisfaction the instincts, such as the id demands, which all would often lead to perilous conflicts with the external world and to extinction" (p. 198). Had Freud retained his earlier view of the unconscious as a meaning processing system, there would today be fewer theoretical divisions among psychoanalysts.

Let me now turn to another conceptual area that has contributed to the divisions that exist between various schools of psychoanalysis. There are those who claim that psychoanalysis should have nothing to do with neuroscience because of the problem of reductionism (Blass and Carmeli, 2007). As a consequence, those psychoanalysts who were interested in neuroscience have of necessity formed yet another separate school. In 1976, Merton Gill in his influential paper, "Psychology vs. Metapsychology," observed that "metapsychology deals with neurology and biology, with the physical substrate of psychological functioning while clinical psychoanalysis is a pure psychology which deals with intentionality and meaning." Gill's belief that intentionality and meaning, the heart of psychoanalytic understanding, is a subject that is divorced from any biological substrate is no longer true. Some neuroscientists (Freeman,
1999), but I grant you not many, describe neural events that serve the function of meaning construction and intentionality. It should be noted, however, in Gill’s defense, that his paper that was written in 1976 prior to the expansion of cognitive science and neurobiology. However, I believe that there are many psychoanalysts today who still wish to keep psychoanalysis pure, that is, uncontaminated by neuroscience. There are even some analysts who have recently argued that being influenced by neuroscience is actually dangerous for psychoanalysis (Vivona, 2009).

One of the aims of this article is to show that this problem of reductionism can be avoided if we recognize that there are separate and different levels of unconscious processing so that unconscious psychological processes are not to be confused with neurophysiological events.

As unconscious processes cannot be observed directly, they can only be noted by inference and analogy. As Freud (1900) famously noted, the dream is the royal road to the unconscious. We can be conscious of the dream itself, but the process that created the dream is undeniably unconscious. You will recall that Freud (1923) understood that the metaphoric processes observed in dream formation was the same unconscious process that contributed to symptom formation in hysteria. The physical symptoms of hysteria Freud interpreted as the metaphoric expression of an unconscious wish. The dream was also interpreted as a metaphor expression of an unconscious wish. Metaphor is, therefore, a fundamental cognitive tool that is central to unconscious mental process. Freud described dreams as a factory of thought, but to follow the analogy of a factory, the basic machinery that this factory employs is predominantly that of metaphor. The transfer of meaning between different domains and the multiplicity of different meanings that can be attributed to a single dream element, what Freud described as condensation, attests to the ubiquity of the metaphoric process in dreaming. As I have repeatedly maintained, metaphor is the currency of the (unconscious) mind (Modell, 2003). This means that unconscious thoughts, whether in the dream or whether in response to sensory inputs in current time, are cognitively organized through the use of metaphor.

UNCONSCIOUS METAPHORIC過程 AND THE MEANING ATTRIBUTED TO PAST EXPERIENCE

In my book, Imagination and the Meaningful Brain (Modell, 2003), I suggested that a metaphoric process analogous to dreaming is operative in the waking state. In that book, I quoted the critic and novelist Cynthia Ozick (1991) who observed that “Metaphor, like the Delphic oracle is a priest of interpretation, but what it interprets is memory.” According to the Nobel Prize laureate, Gerald Edelman (1998), memory carves both the inner and outer world into categories. Further, these categories are recontextualized through experience. What I have observed is that emotional memory is categorized by means of metaphor. In health, these memorial metaphoric categories oscillate between similarities and differences. In the face of trauma, however, this play of similarity and differences between time past and time present is lost and the metaphoric transfer of meaning from past to present is invariant (Modell, 2005, 2009).

In health, metaphoric process facilitates the recontextualization of autobiographical memory. We assume that old memories are constantly reinterpreted in the context of new experience. This is the process that Freud (1896) termed nochträglichkeit, the meaning of old memories are reinterpreted in the light of subsequent experience. (I discussed this process in greater detail in
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Modell, 1990) Metaphoric matchings play a crucial role in this process. Traumatic memories may represent a failure in the transformative power of metaphor. In this example, memory was not recontextualized by means of metaphor. Metaphor was used not to transform memory but to simply transfer memory so that an unyielding similarity is experienced between the past and the present.

My patient reported the following incident. Because his airline went out on strike, my patient was stranded in a distant city and unable to return home. He did everything possible to obtain passage on another airline: He cajoled and pleaded with the functionaries of other airlines, all to no avail. Although my patient was usually not unduly anxious and was, in fact, a highly experienced traveler, in this particular situation he experienced an overwhelming and generalized panic. He felt as if the unyielding airline representatives were like Nazis and that the underground passages of the airline terminal resembled a concentration camp. The helplessness of not being able to return home, combined with the institutional intransigence of the authorities, evoked the following memory, which had been unconscious.

When this man was three years old, he and his parents were residents of central European country and, as Jews, we desperately attempting to escape the Nazis. They did, in fact, obtain airline passage to freedom, but until that point, the outcome was very much in doubt. Although my patient did not recall his affect state at that time, his parents reported that he seemed cheerful and unaffected by their anxiety. His helpless inability to leave a foreign city, combined with the intransigence of the authorities, evoked a specific affect category that remained a potential (unconscious) memory of an unassimilated past experience. In this example, metaphor found similarity between the past and the immediate present. His helpless inability to leave a foreign city, combined with the intransigence of the authorities, served as a metonymic trigger. The metaphoric process can be defined as the transfer of meaning between different domains in this case, the different domains are that of unconscious autobiographical memory and the present moment. This example also illustrates my hypothesis that an unconscious metaphoric process operates in the waking state. It is a process that interprets the meaning of current experience in a manner that is analogous to the way a dream utilizes metaphor.

The similarity between dream process and the unconscious process that occurs while we are awake has received some support from neuroscience. The neurophysiologists, Linas and Pare (1991), have also seen an analogy between the dream state and waking unconscious process. They provide some experimental evidence that points to a similarity of the neural process that supports the unconscious mentation of dreams and an analogous unconscious process that occurs while awake. As a consequence of their experimental observations, they made the following statement: “These observations indicate that mentation during dreaming operates on the same anatomical substrate as does perception during the waking state” (Linas and Pare, 1991). This means that my suggestion that an unconscious metaphoric process, analogous to dreaming, occurs in the waking state is not physiologically implausible.

I shall attempt to further spell out this analogy between dreaming and a waking unconscious process. Neuroscience believes that dreaming is initiated by a self-generated excitatory process within the brain. The anatomical site of this process is correlated with the various stages in the sleep cycle (Linas and Pare, 1991). Let us label this as the deepest level of unconscious dream process; it can be thought of as the physical or the neurochemical dream. Let us further consider that the dream of which we are conscious is the product of a higher level of unconscious
processing as compared to the initiating neurophysiological events. This higher-level unconscious process interprets the excitatory signals, what may be described as the raw neurophysiologic dream. This higher level represents the functioning of the unconscious self. The functioning of the unconscious self encompasses many tasks of the dream that Freud described. These functions would include the classical Freudian dream wish, the defensive functions in accord with internalized moral values of the self, as well as intentional thoughts directed toward future actions in response to specific elements from the previous day’s residue. In contrast to the deeper neurophysiologic level of unconscious processing, which like other physiological processes is shared by all, the functions of the unconscious self are highly individualized.

I recognize that these ideas are speculative and undoubtedly controversial. But I firmly believe that a revised theory of the unconscious, or more properly speaking unconscious processing, is a useful starting point. It is a theory that recognizes the ubiquity of the metaphor process that is active both in dreaming and in the waking state. I suggest that we seek common ground in concepts, rather than in matters of technique. Those analysts who favor one aspect of technique over another will find it impossible to prove their case, for the uniqueness and variety of selves are such that generalizations are nearly impossible. Controversies concerning matters of technique ultimately prove to be irresolvable.

It may be a quixotic hope that some agreement regarding the nature of unconscious process and recognition of the ubiquity of metaphor will enable a dialogue between the various factions of contemporary psychoanalysis. But the alternative, the absence of dialogue, is unacceptable. We should welcome conceptual controversies, for without controversy a discipline lacks vitality. But in order for controversies to be fruitful, there must also be some basic shared assumptions. If the various psychoanalytic factions accept the idea that metaphor is the fundamental cognitive tool of unconscious processing, it is possible that we may then be able to establish other areas of conceptual agreement.

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