

FREUD AND THE MEMBRANE-CONCEPTS¹

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Abstract:

The project of naturalization of the subject

Body-psychism relations

Freudian fundament: dependent concomitance

Membrane-concepts: affect, instinct and Id

Some years ago, the American press presented as a “scientific discovery” the fact that researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles, had proven that “non-chemical therapies” (in this case, the cognitive or behavioral therapy) provoke alterations similar to the chemical interventions from the cerebral activity point of view.² More recently, the Folha de São Paulo newspaper dated 10/08/2001 published a small survey on Parkinson patients, carried out by researchers from the British Columbia University, in Canada. The findings of this survey suggest that receiving some sort of treatment may cause effects due to the expectancy of the benefit it creates. In the case of these sick Canadians, the belief that they are taking something really effective against their illness would have led to the liberation of dopamine, a chemical messenger from the brain, which is also involved in the control of automatic and involuntary body.

With this discovery, scientists from the British Columbia are willing to undo the current belief amongst them, which says that there would be no type

¹ This text is a modified version of the article published in Revista Percurso, no. 28, 1/2002, by the title *Freud, the body and the psychism*.

² Cf. C. Calligaris. “A ressaca do Prozac e o milagre da fala”, *Folha de São Paulo*, March 17, 1996.

of chemical response related to the “placebo effect” in the human body; any effect verified would be merely a result of self-suggestion. To Jon Stoessl and his group, the said “placebo effect” would lead to brain alterations with similar magnitude to those caused by amphetamines, also known for liberating substantial amounts of dopamine.

Before Stoessl and his group, in 1888, Sigmund Freud had made a similar discovery. Working with hysterical patients, the future inventor of the psychoanalysis realized that the psychic treatments were as effective³ as those that intervened in the patient’s body. As well as what happens in our body causes effects on the way we think, what happens in the way we think produces effects in our body. Any chemical verbal, intervention, etc., is necessarily partly physical and partly psychological⁴. 113 years later, would we be a little closer to the controversial “scientific proof”, whose inexistence served as an argument against the psychoanalytical theory and clinic? Would we have finally found the black box of the human psychism?

This issue is important because it deals with the boundaries of psychoanalysis, epistemological, metapsychological and clinical. But, what is interesting to note in this article is not really the empirical verification, officially scientific of the reciprocity of the relation between the biology of the body and the physical variations. There is no surprise here for a psychoanalyst. The article’s headline, which says that the innocuous substance fights the Parkinson, is what really causes strangeness. Even after proving “scientifically” that imagining an improvement when one is sick may produce neuro-chemical variations of great magnitude, we are intended to continue believing that such variations were “produced” by a substance, the placebo.

It is in fact, a project of naturalizing the psychism that is being implemented since the mid XX century, in accordance with the hegemony claimed by the conception of the human being as a machine that may be projected, constructed and programmed. From this point of view, as the liver secretes the bile, the psychism would be like a brain secretion, as George

³ Specifically in the sense that they produce effects, without considering the quality of the effects produced.

⁴ Cf. S. Freud. “Hysteria” in M. Solms & M. Saling, *A moment of transition*. Londres: Karnac Books, 1990

Canguilhem stated in a famous conference held in December 1980.⁵ In this conference, as Elisabeth Roudinesco also reminded, Canguilhem fought in blocks, not the sciences and its developments, not the modern works on the neurons, the genes or the brain activity, but a type of thinking that, when blending the science of cognition, artificial intelligence, experimentalism, neurobiology, etc., is nothing but a power tool, a biotechnology of the human behavior that weakens the freedom and the power of thinking and acting.

How the psychoanalysis should understand such biological discourses and how it should stand is a current hot debate. Is it the case of seeking compositions with the “biologies”? If so, with which discourses should the psychoanalysis compose with? Why compose? How to do it? Or before, should not it be up to psychoanalysis to analyze such arguments and the modes of subjectivities they produce separately? These questions are only examples of those that have certainly been in our minds lately.

A quick reference to the bibliography about the relations between psychoanalysis and biological discourses (specially the neurosciences, but not only them) shows that there is one important aspect that appears more clearly when we back up: from the neighborhoods of the psychoanalytic field towards the core of the metapsychology. It is a theoretical and clinic question for the psychoanalysis and far from being worn out: the relations, in several levels, between body and psychism. The investigation of this problem specifically related to the psychoanalysis field, particularly in Freud’s work, is interesting because besides presenting some psychoanalysis fundamentals, it also shows the way through which is possible to resist the naturalization of the thought.

The specifically psychoanalytical bibliography privileges the problem of the psychic representation of the body, of how it is, more than affected, built by the symbolic and the imaginary. In other words, on how the body is made of words. This is true as far as psychoanalysis is concerned, though it is just part of the problem. Taking it as a whole would lead to foolish theoretical and clinically serious mistakes as those made by the neurobiology.

⁵ Cf. “Le cerveau et la pensée” in *Colloque Georges Canguilhem. Philosophe,*

The history of my personal background reminds me of parts of the Freudian text usually labeled as “vestiges of biologism”, “leftovers of Freud’s positivistic background”, meaningful and even unimportant. It is very common that such parts are read without being dealt with. It looks as though it is only important to point out the originality of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis in general, for having discovered that the human body is made of, affected and determined by the language or by ideas, to use a strictly Freudian terminology.

Obviously, it is not about disagreeing with what is commonly called the “Freudian discovery”, but about understanding it as a whole complexity. The problem of the body in psychoanalysis does not end with the statement that there is no body without words that make up the body as such. In other words, that just in language that we can talk about this body. In fact, whatever we say, we are in language. But. To conclude that what really matters in the determination of the body and the psychism are only words, the distance is long and very frequently regarded as meaningless.

If we follow Freud’s work from the beginning, text by text, we can see that the body-mind problem surrounds all his production. At a first stage, it appears directly connected to the relations between the brain and thought, and is more explicit. After that, it becomes subterranean, though it is still there, in operation, coming up to surface again, for example, with the circumscription of the concept of instinct, or even before, with the matter of sexuality.

Instead of conclusive answers, we have found several points of articulation, from which we were able to select a few and organize them in two blocks. The first block deals with assumptions more or less implicit in the Freudian thought. They are points of view and theoretical fundaments *a priori*, i.e., that would over determine the image of the psychism built by Freud. The second block, formed by metapsychological concepts, derives from the assumptions. They are what we can call membrane-concepts, or simply *membranes*, inspired by the Freudian idea of *Grenzbegriff* (*Grenz*: limit, frontier; *begriff*: concept).

The terminology *Grenzbegriff* had never been used by anyone before Freud and his translations had to break down the new word. James Strachey suggested the translation for “concept on the frontier”, which could be called in Portuguese as the “conceito situado na fronteira”.⁶ This Portuguese translation is only partly correct because if it stands out the place of the concept in the metapsychology geography as being in the frontier, it does not clearly transmits the meaning that this concept is also the frontier itself. Translators of the Argentinean edition, on the other hand, preferred to make use of the “concepto fronteirizo”, whereas the French translation suggested by Laplanche & Pontalis preferred to use the “limit concept” — a more interesting translation, as it approximates its composition of the word created by Freud, without bias to either side. Indeed, *Grenzbegriff* may be understood as being in the frontier, as a bordering concept. However, this only occurs when this concept is the frontier itself, i.e., as it delimitates certain region and operates exchanges with neighboring regions.

For this reason, if Freud believes there are different regions, we should ask: which frontier is this? Which regions are being delimited? The terminology *Grenzbegriff* was used to define a strength of which source is physical, that demands the constitution of the psychism and is its main spring: “*The instinct is a frontier-concept between the animical and the somatic (...)*”.⁷ From this statement, it is enough to consider the following: Freud considered the “animical” and the “somatic” as two levels of distinct realities; the reality of ideas and the reality of things, or the psychic reality and the objective reality. In a letter to Georg Groddeck on June 5, 1917, Freud replies to an attempt of being convinced of a monist point of view: “*I assume that you are also a philosopher and have the monistic inclination of disdaining all beautiful differences of nature instead of the allurements of the unit. Would we be getting rid of differences?*”.⁸ Freud’s dualism however was only apparent, as these

⁶ Cf. Nota ao “Pulsiones y destinos de pulsión” in *Obras Completas de Sigmund Freud*, Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1996

⁷ S. Freud, “Pulsiones y destinos de pulsión” (1915) in *Obras Completas de Sigmund Freud*, Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1996, pág. 117

⁸ S. Freud, Carta a G. Groddeck de 5/06/1917 in G. Groddeck, *O homem e seu isso*, São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1994, pág. 11

two sequences of reality being distinguished, he insistently sought what linked them, what would be a bridge between these two realities.

For example, at his youth, Freud suggested to “unauthorized” the question about certain phenomena such as the hypnosis presents psychic or physiological processes.⁹ To him, this was a false problem in which he managed to get rid of at a very early stage. Psychic or physiological processes take place concomitantly and dependable of one another; they are not independent processes, but also cannot be reduced one to another by establishing a causal hierarchy.

This is the *first presupposition* I would like to point out. It is the most determining, the real fundament of all the rest. It talks about the idea of dependable concomitance. This idea clearly stands out in some of the classic texts called “pre-psychoanalytical texts”, when the question was about the relations between brain and thought. It was explicitly formulated in Freud’s first book published in 1891, when he was 35 years old.

It is worth reading the text: “*The physiological processes chain in the nervous system is probably not found in a relation of casualty with psychic processes. The physiological processes do not stop when the psychic processes begin. On the contrary, the physiological chain goes on, but from a certain moment, a psychic moment corresponds to one or more of its links. The psychic process is therefore, parallel to the physiological process (“a dependent concomitant”).*”¹⁰

To Freud, the connection between these physiological and psychological processes is not of a mechanical causality: they are parallel processes, concomitant series and reciprocally dependable of one another. Each series is, at the same time, a cause of the other and of itself: what goes on in the corporal and material series affects what goes on in the psychic, incorporeal series, and vice-versa. In other words, each happening in one of the series produces simultaneous effects in this same series and in the other. The psychoanalysis is base on this Freud’s psychophysical parallelism, which is probably his most important assumption. Therefore it gets problematic any

⁹ Cf. S. Freud, Prólogo à tradução de H. Bernheim, “De la suggestion” (1888) in *Obras Completas de Sigmund Freud*, Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1996

¹⁰ *Contribution à la conception des aphasies* (1891), Paris: PUF, 1986, pág. 105

reduction of one series to another, either “biologising” and naturalizing the subject, or “psychologizing” it.

The second presupposition derives from the first and talks about Freud on an *evolutionist* line, expressed in an attempt of inventing an animical, parallel, concomitant, and dependable phylogenetics, and in a reciprocal relation with the biological phylogeny. With it, Freud tried to explain the genesis of current animic forms and their variations from a collective memory point of view. In other words, he meant to understand how the human psychism reached this level of organization, which types can be found and why these and not others? As for Haeckel and Darwin, Freud believed that there should be a connection between the evolution of forms in the embryonary development and in the development of the species and its several linings. Only the forms considered by the psychoanalysis should be animic, rather than the biological ones.

Like any physician graduating in Viena *fin-de-siècle*, Freud learned the evolution theory at university. He also had in his curriculum, a work published in 1877 named *Observations on the conformation of the lobulous organ of the sea lamprey, described as the male germinal gland*, which provided important contribution for the matter. This had been his first work in Brücke laboratory, where he studied nervous physiology from 1876 to 1882. It was based on the histology of the nervous system, but more specifically on the histology of a peculiar form of nervous cells discovered in a species of fish named the *Petromyzon* or, for a non-expert, the sea lamprey. Up to that moment, it was known that the inferior vertebrate animals presented bipolar cells (possessing two processes) in the spinal ganglion, whereas the superior vertebrates animals presented unipolar cells. Young Freud's researches led him to conclude that the *Petromyzon* cells constituted some sort of intermediary cells.

In the 1870's, the natural selection theory was still very controversial. Darwin had placed man in the animal kingdom, daring to explain its origin, survival and differentiated development. The causes operating in the transformations in a natural order of living beings were no longer sent to a divine entity, but expressed the fight between the organism and its environment through time and the catastrophes. The young Freud, who

studied cells of the nervous system, was totally bashed in participating in this new way of conceiving natural history, which was presented by Carl Claus (1835-1899), his teacher of evolutionism. His histological discoveries proved the evolutionary processes, thus filling a gap in the theory of evolution. The intermediary cells of the *Petromyzon* revealed how the evolutionary process originated from the inferior vertebrates to superior vertebrates. Through the demonstration that the nervous system of inferior and superior animals is made up of identical elements, the continuity amongst the species could be established. Freud would adhere to Darwin's ideas and participated in the attempts to demonstrate the paths of evolution.

Derived from the second, the third presupposition is based upon the idea of *etiological equation*, later complemented with the *complementary series*. The idea of an etiological equation suggests that, in the origin of each specific psychism operates a quantitative conjugation of "constitutional" and "accidental" factors, in Freud's own words. Today we could say: the conjugation of genetic and accidental factors. We can see here the relations between body and psychism mixing with the innate/acquired, inherited/accidental problem. Such opposition loses its sense in Freud's work, as he says the individual is what he brings to life and what life brings to him. It is impossible to separate the soul from what produces it, nor the producer from what it makes.

These presuppositions presented above will operate, on implicit basis, in the elaboration of the Freudian metapsychology, where the problem of the relations between body and soul appear in three fundamental concepts. For now, we will only point them out.

Like Gilles Deleuze taught us, a concept is made up of elements that become their inseparable components, though they are distinct and heterogeneous.¹¹ This is what defines its interior consistence, or like the philosopher says, its endo-conscience. Each distinct component presents a partial recovery in its neighboring with others components. For instance, considering the strength that moves the soul, the instinct (*Trieb*), whose

¹¹ Cf. *O que é a filosofia?*, Rio de Janeiro: Editora 34, 1992

components Freud clearly explains, the object (infinitely variable), the source (live body), the pressure (constant intensity) and the target (discharge or satisfaction) are inseparable, despite distinct. The pressure does not exist without the source, although they differentiate as the strength is distinct from the muscle where it acts; and as the satisfaction does not mix with the object (which explains its variability with the infinite), it happens through it, constituted as such.

This inseparability defines the interior consistence of a concept, but it also has an exo-consistence in its relations to other concepts. Those are the neighboring points, the points where they are mixed up, where it is not possible to decide upon which order of happenings they refer to. That is why Deleuze says that the exo-consistency implies the construction of a bridge. Taking the example of the instinct (*Trieb*), this bridge is evident in at least one of its elements, the source (body). That is the reason why Freud is led to locate it in the boundaries of psychoanalysis with other knowledges on the body and in the boundaries of the psychic apparatus with the body. Nevertheless, it is not only the *instinct* that makes this bridge. Although this is the only concept-limit, the metapsychologist assembles at least two others: *affect and Id*.

Although Freud has given us the idea of *Grenzbegriff*, he used it only to refer to the instinct. Therefore, as far as Freudian text is concerned, the terminology would not be applicable to other concepts than instinct, though it is not incorrect doing so. On the other side, the idea of membrane enriches the problem of the boundaries when explaining its porosity and, in the case of living membranes, its continuous differentiation as a membrane of an inner region. Moreover, it can be developed on the idea that the psychism is made up of layers. Such idea is expressed, for example, in the 1920's text *Beyond the Principle of Pleasure*, in which Freud makes use of the metaphor about the crust formed on the upper layer of an undifferentiated bladder, through the contact with the external world. Below this bladder, deeper layers work differently. Or even in the 1900 model, conceived with a telescope, a device formed by the overlapping of lenses. Or even in the emblematic archeological metaphor that illustrates the Freudian conception of the memory.

Either way, what in fact allows a better visualization of affect, Id and instinct as membranes, is its metapsychological and epistemic situation:

1. Metapsychologically, they refer to boundaries of the soul, to the borders of the animic apparatus. The affect is defined as a quantitative variation and partial awareness of such variation. On the other hand, the instinct is the strength, animic and somatic at the same time, i.e. the *Grenzbegriff* in excellence. And finally, the Id represents the animic and spontaneous instance, always current and mixed in its base with the body in and from which it originates.

2. Epistemically, they are concepts located on the edge of the Freudian metapsychology, thus measuring the interlocutions with neighboring knowledge fields, such as the biology and the philosophy. In the former one, Freud always believed that it could complete or pull down his hypothesis and, on the other side, that he made important contributions for it with such concepts. As for Philosophy, Freud would not hesitate in falling back on it in an attempt to get resources to sustain some important formulations, such as the instinct of death, for instance.

On a more schematic basis, we can state that affect, instinct and Id are concepts through which Freud establishes the bridge Deleuze refers. It is a bridge through which exchanges with the order of body reality are made, about which it is not due to the psychoanalysis to theorize, for it would no longer be a psychoanalysis. We could also think of them as interfaces, responsible for the translation and the transport of information between body and soul, both epistemically and metapsychologically.

Both such membranes and the presuppositions pointed out above are just examples (very meaningful and, to a certain extent, synthetic) of what can be found on the body-psychism problem in Sigmund Freud's work. There are other adjacent points, equally important, such as the idea of conversion (strictly linked to the notion of affect), the concept of sexuality (enclosed in the problem of instinct) and the ego's constitution (articulated to the Id).