

# Anticipation, the Subject and the Partial Object A Psychoanalytic Approach

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## Abstract

Within the Freudian frame of reference, the emergence of a psychical level or the coming into being of the subject implies the initial loss of a primal object. From then onwards, the human sexual relation appears as determined or structured by this initial loss in that any finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it (Freud, 1925*h*). Evidence for this can abundantly be found in the love life of the human being. What then are the specific conditions for the refinding of the object? It will be argued that this implies (i) the qualification of the object as partial; (ii) a circular causality that involves at least the levels of memory (memory trace of the partial object), the drive and the other. In that sense, the subject unconsciously anticipates the finding or refinding of the object.

**Keywords:** Anticipated coincidence, dynamic anticipatory system, partial object, psychoanalysis, human sexuality.

## 1 Introduction

According to Van de Vijver (1998: 36) a “genuine dynamic view of anticipatory systems”, in a very general way has to do with “a certain type of dynamic behaviour between systems and environments, in which the goal(s), even if it is recognizable *aposteriori* and *globally*, is never fully driving the behaviour *apriori* and *locally*.”<sup>1</sup> Up to that point, it is difficult for the reader to imagine what kind of systems the author is thinking of, except for the fact that they are qualified as being anticipatory. But then the text refers to some of Samuel Beckett’s characters as to “the most exquisite anticipatory

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Rosen’s definition (1985: 339): “An anticipatory system is a system containing a predictive model of itself and/or of its environment, which allows it to change state at an instant in accord with the model’s predictions pertaining to a later instant.”

systems" in their never ending attempts to *fail* or, more precisely, to *fail better* (ibid.: 36).

This reference certainly sounds like an invitation to think of the human being as an anticipatory system. More precisely, as anticipation has something to do with memory, with representation, with motivation, with goal-directedness, with systems that must be driven in a specific way in that all they can accomplish is a better failure, it is tempting to find out whether this view of anticipation is compatible with Freud's dynamic model of the mind.

This is tempting for several reasons. Firstly, because from the very beginning of his theory, the notions of memory and representation, of motivation and goal-directedness are cornerstones of his model. Secondly, because the dynamic view of anticipation, as quoted earlier, nowhere privileges conscious anticipation above unconscious anticipation. Thirdly, because this view explicitly implies the importance of the *present*, i.e. of the interactive processes of the system with its environment or with other anticipatory systems. With respect to this aspect and in contrast to a widespread prejudice concerning psychoanalytic theory and practice, it can be argued that in Freud's model of the functioning of the mind the *present* is at least as important as the *past*. And fourthly, because Freud developed his model of the mind in reference to his clinical experience in the field of psychopathology. There he learned that the present inadequacies or failures of his patients had to be conceived of as actualisations of past failures and that the therapy itself could only help to provide future and better failures. No one then should be surprised that in Freud's model of the mind failure is the rule, and not an accident that could have been avoided.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 The *Finding* of an Object Comes down to a *Refinding* of it

According to Freud (1950) the mental apparatus of a newborn infant is excited externally as well as internally. As a consequence of the rising of quantity within the mental apparatus the infant experiences unpleasure and it will try to reduce tension by means of motor discharge, which it will then experience as pleasure. When we take the internal need for food as an example we can say that as a consequence of the rising of the quantity  $Q\eta$  in the system  $\psi$ , the newborn infant will discharge that quantity in the motor act of screaming by which it expresses its hungry feeling.

Of course, screaming as such does not really change the condition of the baby. Internal quantity keeps rising and in order to get rid of the unpleasurable surplus of quantity, an external intervention from another person is needed. This means that the surplus of quantity will be discharged adequately only when the mother feeds her baby in what Freud calls the primary experience of satisfaction.

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<sup>2</sup> This latter aspect of Freud's model, together with its being firmly rooted in biology, can account for its later reception, e.g. in the United States, as far too deterministic, and hence, as too pessimistic, a qualification that clearly underestimates its dynamic aspect.

Important in this conception is, firstly, that Freud situates the very onset or emergence of a psychical or mental system in the interaction between a biological level and a social level – represented here by the mother.<sup>3</sup> Here we can try to differentiate between the specific way in which this interaction occurs in human beings and in the animal world. For although it is obvious that in many animal species the social dimension is important for the development and well being of the individual, the specificity of the human child's helplessness and of its mother's language system surely must have their consequences.<sup>4</sup> I therefore suggest to situate the emergence of the psychical system more precisely as the result of the interaction between a premature biological system on the one hand and a socio-linguistic system on the other hand.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the emergence of the psychical level as such implies a change of identity in that an organism or biological system is transformed into a psychical system which, however deeply rooted in or constrained by biological constitution, will obtain a relative autonomy in its functioning (Van de Vijver, 1999). Support for this view can be found in the very manner in which Freud developed his theory: starting with his 'Project' in which he clearly imbedded his theoretical model within the constraints of biology, neuroanatomy and neurophysiology, he elaborated his theory in the language of psychology – his so-called metapsychology –, i.e. in a language that could more easily describe the processes and mechanisms he tried to explain.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the outcome of Freud's way of proceeding, his metapsychology remains firmly rooted in biology, that is, in the biological structure of the human organism as well as in the biological principles that regulate it. The very principle that governs his model of the mind comes down to a biological postulate. In his 'Project' (Freud, 1950a: 312) he writes: "Since we have certain knowledge of a trend in physical life towards avoiding unpleasure, we are tempted to identify that trend with the primary trend towards inertia." Some twenty years later, in his paper on 'Instincts and their vicissitudes', Freud makes it clear that this postulate makes use of the concept of 'purpose' – "Tendenz" or even "Zweckmässigkeit" – and runs as follows: "the nervous system is an apparatus which has the function of getting rid of the stimuli that reach it, or of reducing them to the lowest possible level; or which, if it were feasible, would maintain itself in an altogether unstimulated condition." (Freud, 1915c: 120). Through this postulate the nervous system is then assigned the task of "mastering stimuli", which is twofold: external stimuli "impose only the single task of withdrawing from them" and is "accomplished by muscular movements" while internal stimuli – "Triebe" – "make far higher demands on the nervous system and cause it to undertake involved and interconnected activities by which the external world is so changed as to afford

<sup>3</sup> See Van Bunder (2001).

<sup>4</sup> It is clear that this interaction cannot be thought of adequately in terms of biological instincts. There may be a biological need or urge on the side of the infant but the intervention of the mother certainly is not determined by her mothering instinct. It is here that Lacan puts forward his notion of the desire of the mother as it is signified to the infant.

<sup>5</sup> See also Knockaert (2001).

<sup>6</sup> This is more or less the view adopted by Pribram and Gill (1976).

satisfaction to the internal source of stimulation" (ibid.: 120). In other words, biological structure and regulating principles define the human organism as a system 1. the aim of which is to obtain satisfaction; 2. that is fundamentally directed or oriented towards the environment with which it interacts.

Some remarks are to be made here with respect to the aim of the system as well as with respect to the changes due to the interaction with the environment.

When Freud (ibid.: 122) defines the aim of the drive in a biological and even teleological way as being "in every instance satisfaction, which can only be obtained by removing the state of stimulation at the source of the drive"<sup>7</sup>, he then continues in saying that "although the ultimate aim of each drive remains unchangeable, there may yet be different paths leading to the same ultimate aim; so that a drive may be found to have various nearer or intermediate aims, which are combined or interchanged with one another." And it really becomes rather complicated when he further writes that experience, that is his clinical experience, permits him also to speak of drives "which are 'inhibited in their aim', in case of processes which are allowed to make some advance towards satisfaction of the drive but are then inhibited or deflected." (ibid.: 122). Here Freud is of course referring to a far more advanced or experienced system in which the drive can no longer be defined in a purely biological way and must be considered as "a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body." (ibid.: 121-122) For Lacan (1973: 150) for instance, there can be no doubt that the drive cannot be understood in a pure biological way. The very fact of its characteristic as a *constant force* forbids its assimilation with biological functions, which always have a certain rhythm. Lacan does not even accept the idea that satisfaction is really the aim of the drive. As an argument he refers to Freud's problematic conceptualisation of the process of *sublimation*<sup>8</sup>, which implies the satisfaction of the drive as well as the inhibition in its aim (ibid.: 151). Thus it can be argued that thinking of the adult human being as an advanced anticipatory system at least suggests the idea of a change in identity of the original regulating principle, and not only of the biological system as such.

As for the latter, it is easy to see that originally, its being directed to the environment is quite global or indefinite and due to its pure biological constitution. However, with the primary experience of satisfaction, things become less indefinite or more constrained due to the characteristic of memory, i.e. the capacity of the nervous apparatus "for being permanently altered by single occurrences" (Freud, 1950a: 299). For, after being breastfed the infant will retain a memory of this experience in the association or facilitation between the mnemonic images of the breast and of the reflexive motor activity of sucking. In Freud's terms, the experience of satisfaction – as does the

<sup>7</sup> Following Lacan in his criticism of the English translation of "Trieb" as "instinct", we prefer to render it as "drive".

<sup>8</sup> According to Freud (1915c: 126), the drive may undergo four vicissitudes: 1. reversal into its opposite; 2. turning round upon the subject's own self; 3. repression and 4. sublimation.

primary experience of pain – will leave behind a motive of “a compulsive kind” in that every subsequent wishful state will result “in a positive attraction towards the object wished-for, or, more precisely, towards its mnemonic image” (ibid.: 322) In other words, the system remains directed to the environment, be it in a much more definite or particular way. Any future functioning of the system will be determined by the interplay between *biological constitution* on the one hand and the *residue* of that experience on the other hand, the latter being the mnemonic image of an object which the system will seek to match with the environment.

In any case will the result of the primary experience of satisfaction come down to the *isolation* in the environment of an object – the breast – to the mnemonic image of which the infant, on account of its long enduring and unique helplessness, will remain attached – if not forever, then at least for a pretty long time. Important here is 1. the fact that this particular object, considered as being isolated from a global environment, appears from the very beginning as what Freud much later will qualify as *partial*; 2. the fact that after the primary experience of satisfaction any *finding* of an object comes down to a *refinding* of it.

### 3 Anticipated Coincidence

This qualification of the object of human desire – as being partial and as something never to be found – can be inferred from our experience of the dynamics of human sexuality. But perhaps the best rendering of the Freudian idea of the refinding of the partial object as an *anticipated coincidence* can be read in his marvellous essay on *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood* (1910c). In that essay Freud tries to understand some aspects of the great painter and scientist, especially the appearance in a whole series of paintings of the typical leonardesque smile. For more than ninety years now, Freud’s interpretation of that smile and his reconstruction of the life story of Leonardo have received a lot of criticism from historians of art as well as psychoanalysts. To some extent this critique, which I will not elaborate on here, is justified and has to do, amongst other aspects, with methodology and limitations of so-called applied psychoanalysis.<sup>9</sup> It remains that in that essay we are confronted with a genuine piece of theory with regard to the object, a theory that for the most part was inferred from clinical practice.

According to Freud no one else than precisely Leonardo da Vinci could have painted the world-famous portrait of Mona Lisa, this being especially true for her mysterious smiling lips. His explanation of this fact comes down to the following: one day and already in his fifties, Leonardo by pure chance encountered the beautiful Gioconda in whose face some traits reminded him of his mother, i.e. the smile of la Gioconda reactivated the memory of the way his mother used to look at him when he was a little boy. From then onwards, and captured, or better, *recaptured* by that smile, Leonardo succeeded in presenting it in his well known paintings of Mona Lisa, Saint Anna and

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Collins (1997), Eissler (1961), Maidani Gerard (1994).

many other works. For Leonardo, being a homosexual whom moreover was strongly inhibited in his sexuality, this characteristic of his paintings cannot be explained by his falling in love with la Gioconda. Following Freud's train of thought, we can say that Leonardo fell in love with the smile or the gaze as a partial object. In the terms of the *Project* (Freud, 1895: 327) we can say more properly that in Leonardo's mind, at the moment of his meeting with la Gioconda, a "wishful cathexis" of the mnemonic image of his mother "is present and along with it a perception which does not tally with it wholly but only in part" – that part being the smile of la Gioconda.

#### 4 Conclusion

A widespread prejudice concerning psychoanalytic theory reflects the viewpoint that all the vicissitudes of man's life are determined in early childhood and that accordingly, all a psychoanalyst cares about is the *past*. This is of course only half of the truth. From what I have said so far it may be obvious – as it was for Freud – that *present* interactions are at least equally important. These interactions – e.g. Leonardo's encounter with la Gioconda or our falling in love with someone –, of course cannot be considered as due to mere chance. However they might appear to us, analysis time and again reveals them as manifestations of what I would call *present unconsciously anticipated coincidences*. This means that any such interaction of a human system with its environment is determined in a circular and interconnected way: 1. by the drive as an active and constant force in the present which repetitively isolates a partial object from the environment; 2. by chance conditions; 3. by a genuine anticipatory characteristic of the human mind, i.e. its readiness, its always being engaged in actively "completing the similarity" of past and present "into an identity" (Freud, 1895: 328). For, were it not for this latter characteristic, one could never explain the very common phenomenon of a boy falling in love with the girl next door.

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