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A Finite Infinity. Freud on the Timelessness of the Unconscious

INTRODUCTION: MAP AND TERRAIN

In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud identifies the unconscious as “the true psychical reality” and argues that “in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world”.¹ Kant had famously argued that external perception cannot be understood in terms of an *exhaustive, unbiased, and veridical reception* of reality as it exists *in itself*, but instead as a field that is always already colored, augmented, and thus also potentially distorted by experiential faculties and differentiating categories of the perceiver.² Freud’s main contribution was to expand this idea into the region of self-awareness: “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 psycho-analysis warns us not to equate conscious perceptions with the unconscious mental processes which are their object. Like the physical, the psychical is not necessarily in reality what it appears to us to be”.³ Applying this groundbreaking insight first to dreaming and then to various other experiential phenomena, Freud argues that even if the psyche can only be represented in the guise of concrete objects and relations, these

apparent contents must be taken precisely as *re*-presentations – “metaphors” or “translations” – that must not be conflated with the original, “true psychic reality”, which is destined to remain unconscious as such.

In this regard, we are constantly in danger of taking things too “literally” or “concretely”. When making sense of the unconscious – be it in research, in clinical practice, or in self-analysis – our everyday grasp of *space* and *time* tends to blend into our ideas about the unconscious. When it comes to the former, consider Freud’s pictorial illustrations of the psychological apparatus. Comprised of distinct compartments for “Id”, “Ego”, and “Superego”, or to the systems “Cs.”, “Pre-Cs.”, and “Unc.”, the picture is a *spatial metaphor*, a *map* of sorts – it is an easily remembered abstraction and as such it comes with an obvious pedagogical value. Yet, as Freud puts it, there is always the danger of taking such “abstractions too rigidly”.⁴ As soon as, led by such abstractions, the unconscious is treated as an “area”, “compartment”, or “storage” within the psychic apparatus, quasi-spatial features are smuggled into one’s thinking. By “concretizing” or “reifying” what is meant as a *spatial metaphor*,⁵ and hence omitting Freud’s reminder that “psychical reality is a particular form of existence not to be confused with material reality”,⁶ one would be confusing the map with the terrain – a point recently emphasized by Ogden’s statement that “there is no such thing as the unconscious”.⁷

This article focuses on related questions of *time*. While emphasizing the distinction between the unconscious and its conscious representation, Freud famously underlines that “the unconscious is altogether timeless”.⁸ For sure, when consciously represented, or reflected upon, our psychic life is assigned a *linear temporal guise*. But instead of using this to justify claims about the temporality of the unconscious, Freud argues on the contrary that the unconscious as such is *lacks a temporal order*, is *not affected by time* in any way, and is *not articulable in terms of time*.⁹ These claims awaken a good amount of questions. If the unconscious is not ordered temporally, what justifies the psychoanalytic focus on the *development* of the individual? If it is not affected by time, what consequences does this have for the psychotherapeutic practice that Freud was creating? How does the claim about unaffectedness fit with the view that the unconscious is not all there from the beginning, but instead largely formed in and through acts of repression over the course of time? Moreover, if the unconscious is altogether atemporal, how can it have an influence on what happens in the course of time?

While such questions serve to underline the central importance of the topic, my aim here is more modest. I will take a closer look at the three characterizations that Freud's gives for the timelessness of the unconscious. Towards the end, I will combine the gained insights to Freud's claim that "in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of their immortality".¹⁰ By so doing, my aim is to take one step into the direction that Freud gestured toward while noting, toward the end of his career, that the psychoanalytic problems of time and timelessness are mysteries that "await consideration in philosophical thought".¹¹

VARIETIES OF TIMELESSNESS

In *The Unconscious*, Freud refers to timelessness by listing three features: "The processes of the system Ucs. are timeless; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all. Reference to time is bound up, once again, with the work of the system Cs."¹² The same threefold distinction is found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* five years later: "unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless'. This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in any way and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them. These are negative characteristics which can only be clearly understood if a comparison is made with conscious mental processes".¹³ As I will show, these three characterizations of timelessness – (A) lack of temporal order, (B) unaffectedness by time, and (C) inapplicability of the category of time – convey partly different claims, also provoking questions of their mutual compatibility.

A. LACK OF TEMPORAL ORGANIZATION

By noting that the unconscious lacks a linear temporal order, Freud means two things. On the one hand, this refers to the lack of mutual temporal order between unconscious contents – say, repressed wishes, to keep with the Freudian examples. For sure, repressed wishes are not something we are born with; rather, as unconscious constituents within us, they must have emerged in the course of time. And so, schematically put, there has been a point of time where a particular wish, impulse, or cathexis has become repressed, and a time where some other mental content has become repressed, and we can of course say that *these two acts of repression have succeeded each other in time*. Yet, once repressed, the different contents (say, two repressed wishes) altogether come to lack mutual relations of "earlier" and "later". Both equally

affect me from within, without manifesting mutual linear relations. Accordingly, instead of being organized in terms of temporal layers or sequences with mutual hierarchies and relations of foundation, the unconscious is characterized by *temporal undifferentiation* between its constituents. On the other hand, besides lacking a mutual temporal orientation, two repressed wishes *lack a temporal relation with the present moment*.¹⁴ In other words, what the unconscious is missing is not just an internal linear *order*, but also a temporal orientation vis-à-vis the “now”. Instead of being experienced as past or as present, the unconscious seems to be “omnipresent”: it colors my current experiences but it is not lodged in the present moment any more than it is lodged in any other moment. Moreover, given the mutual temporal undifferentiation of the repressed contents, the unconscious is *all there in each moment* – a point vividly echoed in the “condensed” and hence “overdetermined” nature of dreams.

Relatedly, Freud argues that the unconscious involves neither negation nor absence:¹⁵ the “laws of logic [e.g., the law of contradiction] have no sway in the unconscious [...]; impulses with contrary aims exist side by side in the unconscious without any call being made for an adjustment between them”.¹⁶ These claims have significant consequences to how the omnipresence of the unconscious is to be understood. Namely, to grasp something as *past* is to grasp it as *not-now* or as *no-longer*. And so, insofar as the sense of negation is missing, what is unconscious cannot be conceived as past. Lacking a reference to what is *not-present*, *no-longer*, or *not-now*, all that ever has been repressed is constantly effective – and, in this sense, omnipresent. And indeed, as Freud famously illustrates, the neurotic is “obliged to repeat the repressed material *as a contemporary experience* instead of [...] remembering it as something belonging to the past”.¹⁷ In the light of what has been said above, expressions like, “our past keeps haunting us”, are misleading when it comes to unconscious contents. For the point is precisely that what is repressed is not really gone or left behind.

Here I deliberately avoid saying that the unconscious is felt as something present. For is it not the case that also when saying that a repressed wish is *not past but present*, we would be equally building on contrast and negation? The dilemma here is the following: insofar as the sense of *what is currently present* makes sense only when contrasted with *what is currently not-present*, the inappropriateness of negation entails that what remains unconscious cannot really be grasped *as present* either. For sure, if the present is understood without the mentioned

contrast – and hence without temporal boundaries! – we could say that the unconscious manifests itself “in the present”. I will come back to this later, but to avoid this potential source of confusion, I suggest that the lack of temporal orientation should be cashed out, not in terms of presence, but in terms of omnipresence. That is to say, the unconscious permeates each of our experiences like an atmosphere – an atmosphere that is, temporally speaking, everywhere and yet nowhere.

B. LACK OF TEMPORAL CHANGE

The lack of linear order and temporal orientation is the first sense in which Freud characterizes the timelessness of the unconscious. The second sense relates to the allegedly *unchanging* nature of the unconscious. As we already saw Freud putting it, repressed mental contents are “not altered by the passage of time” and “time does not change them in any way”.¹⁸ In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud notes: “In the case of repressed memory-traces it can be demonstrated that they undergo no alteration even in the course of the longest period of time”.¹⁹ Still in the *Lectures*, thirty years after, Freud repeats that, in the unconscious, “there is no recognition of the passage of time, and [...] no alteration in its mental processes is produced by the passage of time”.²⁰ For sure, in the light of what has already been said, we must be careful not to confuse this with the idea of unconscious contents *retaining their identity in time* – such linear conceptualizations must be kept at bay. The point is rather that, in their omnipresence, our repressed wishful impulses, memory-traces, and libidinal desires exist in a *supratemporal* fashion, without being altered (or remaining unaltered) over time.

While Freud seems to have held this view throughout,²¹ this is not to say that he was not struggling with it. For sure, the repressed impulses and wishes are not all there from the start of our development; on the contrary, they are piled up or sedimented in the course of time – even if, as said, they might not henceforth reveal any mutual temporal ordering. As Freud puts it:

“in spite of all the later development that occurs in the adult, none of the infantile mental formations perish. All the wishes, instinctual impulses, modes of reaction and attitudes of childhood are still demonstrably present in maturity and in appropriate circumstances can emerge once more. They are

not destroyed but merely overlaid—to use the spatial mode of description which psycho-analytic psychology has been obliged to adopt. Thus it is part of the nature of the mental past that, unlike the historic past, it is not absorbed by its derivatives; it persists (whether actually or only potentially) alongside what has proceeded from it. The proof of this assertion lies in the fact that the dreams of normal people revive their childhood characters every night and reduce their whole mental life to an infantile level”.²²

That is to say, along with new acts of repression, new repressed material becomes interwoven into the fabric of the unconscious, as it were. In the sense of expanding and becoming increasingly complicated, therefore, the unconscious is indeed altered over time. Yet, while accepting this, Freud at the same time insists that each repressed content, now a node in the fabric, remain unaltered by time.²³ That is to say, *the fabric is transformed, yet without changing any of the nodes.*

Relatedly, we are constantly rewriting our personal past. To make use of an analogy, consider listening to a melody. Obviously, the new notes retrospectively modify your grasp of the preceding notes. Looking back, the earlier notes now appear as having led to such-and-such notes, but such awareness was obviously not at your disposal at the time you first heard those notes. The past experience is thus revised in a deferred manner from our current viewpoint. However, in terms of this analogy, Freud seems to be suggesting that our retrospective realization that the past notes were to lead to such-and-such sounds does not *wipe out* our retained impression or mnemonic trace of the note as it was experienced without yet knowing where it will be leading. Curiously, Freud seems to assume *both* that our earlier impression is altered in retrospect *and* that we nonetheless also bear a mnemonic trace of the original impression while ignorant of where it will lead. Following his own ideas to their logical conclusion, Freud considers the sedimentation of the unconscious in terms of certain *doubling*:

“The most important as well as the strangest characteristic of psychical fixation is that all impressions are preserved, *not only* in the same form in which they were first received, *but also* in all the forms which they have adopted in their further developments. [...] Theoretically every earlier state of the mnemonic content could thus be restored to memory again, even if its el-

ements have long ago exchanged all their original connections for more recent ones”.²⁴

Likewise, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, Freud notes that while he had assumed that “the repressed instinctual impulses themselves [...] remained unaltered in the unconscious for an indefinite length of time”, upon closer inspection he has begun to “suspect that it is not self-evident, perhaps not even usual, that those impulses should remain unaltered and unalterable in this way”.²⁵ However, on the same page, Freud underlines that he is not thereby abandoning but complementing his earlier view: “the old, repressed wishes must still be present in the unconscious since we still find their derivatives, the symptoms, in operation”: while “the old wish” may have “transferred the whole of its cathectic energy” to its derivatives, Freud specifies, “it is itself still in existence too”, and it is always possible that it is “re-animated by regression, anachronistic though it may now be”.²⁶

To build a further analogy that possibly clarifies things somewhat, consider the case of a propositional belief. Let us say that I am thinking about whether to go for a walk but looking outside I realize that it is raining. I close the curtains, turn on the TV, and immerse myself into watching a movie. After the movie ends, someone asks me for a walk. While delighted by the request, I find myself reluctant and soon realize that this is partly owing to the fact that it is raining – or, more precisely, my assumption that it is raining. I open the curtains and realize that it is no longer raining and accept the invitation. My belief that it is raining, which had its inception earlier when I glanced outside, has *persisted unaltered* while watching the movie. However, upon closer scrutiny, it might be that here, too, we have to make a double statement. For sure, my earlier belief that it is raining was cancelled, undone, or overruled when I opened the curtains and glanced outside, but it is not without relevance that I then not only realize that it *does not* rain but precisely that it is *no longer* raining. Namely, my new grasp of the state of affairs (“it is *no longer* raining”) has *both cancelled and retained* the original belief (“it is raining”).²⁷ This duality renders the latter as something *past*.

While this, of course, is a cognitive example, and as such quite far from the psychoanalytic unconscious, there might be a formal similarity, an analogy, to be built here. Just as my belief that it rains remains *uncancelled, unchallenged, and unchanged* before being actively

revised, perhaps we could also think that a repressed wish, impulse, or tendency remains unaltered as long as it is hidden by “mere repression” instead of being subjected to a “real removal of an old wishful impulse”.²⁸ Just as the cancellation of the belief still implicitly refers to what is thus cancelled, perhaps in a somewhat similar sense our infantile wishes may still figure in our mind, *both* in their original *and* sedimented forms, and do so even despite our most profound efforts of working through. They keep on forming a part of who we are. After all, I *did* believe that it rains – and this fact will never be altered by the fact that I changed my mind about it. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “What we have lived exists and remains for us, perpetually; the old man remains in contact with his childhood. Each present that happens drives into time like a wedge and lays a claim to eternity. Eternity is not a separate order beyond time, it is the atmosphere of time”.²⁹

C. ATEMPORALITY AND IMMORTALITY

Thus far we have discussed two senses in which Freud refers to the “timelessness” of the unconscious: (A) the unconscious lacks a linear organization and, (B) while sedimented or “overlaid”, its remains unaltered by the course of time. For sure, these insights largely ground the psychoanalytic theory as well as the clinical practices based on it. By contrast, the third notion “timelessness” appears to be more challenging. Namely, Freud suggest that the category of time “cannot be applied to” the unconscious:³⁰ there is nothing in it “that corresponds to the idea of time”,³¹ it carries “no reference to time at all”,³² and “the element of time plays no role whatsoever” in it.³³ For sure, Freud hardly means that the unconscious has *nothing to do* with our temporal life – this claim would basically cancel most of the theoretical and clinical insights of psychoanalysis, from repression to transference. Nonetheless, this third characterizations suggests something more than the two previous ones. The unconscious is not only missing a temporal *order and orientation* (i.e. it is not only omnitemporal) and not only is it *unaltered* by time (i.e. it is not only supratemporal). Rather, by saying that the concept of time cannot be applied to the unconscious, Freud is saying that speaking of temporality in reference to the unconscious would be a *category mistake* – much like speaking of “volume” in reference to two-dimensional geometrical objects. So far so good. However, curiously, the claim of conceptual inapplicability entails that it would be just as senseless to speak in the negative and say that there is *no* time in the unconscious. In terms of the geometry analogy, it would

be erroneous to say that the two-dimensional geometrical plane *lacks a volume* or that its *volume is nil* – for the category of “volume” pertains to three-dimensional space and it is hence applicable neither in the positive nor in the negative sense: it is *out of the question*. Viewed from this angle, Freud’s suggestion therefore seems to be that, when it comes to the unconscious, not just *time* but also *timelessness* is out of the question. Let us take a closer look at this.

As already said, it is only when receiving a conscious representation that our mental life receives a linear guise. As Freud puts it in 1911, “the idea of time is connected with the work of the system Pcpt-Cs”.³⁴ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud elaborates the idea more closely by saying that our “idea of time seems to be wholly derived from the method of working of the system Pcpt-Cs and to correspond to a perception on its own part of that method of working” (Freud 1920, 28). Importantly, Freud makes *two* claims here. On the one hand, sensory perception constantly ties us to the *present moment* – a point frequently emphasized by Freud –³⁵ but this claim alone hardly explains how we come to experience something beyond the narrow now-moment: say, temporally extended objects (like music and change) and the passing of time. This is why Freud adds, on the other hand, that our sense of time corresponds, not to our sensory impressions, but to an “endopsychic perception” of our sense impressions.³⁶ Bonaparte tells that, “based of a psychology of attention”, Freud had communicated her the idea that it is our “inner perceptual activity” that “makes a continuity” out of our sensory impressions.³⁷ As Noel-Smith puts it, “Freud seems to be suggesting that the discontinuous beat marking the receipt of samples taken from the external world is given conceptual continuity through the perceptive process of the monitoring agency”.³⁸ In short, it seems that according to Freud, this “endopsychic perception” is the unconscious origin of our sense of time. And indeed, as the *source or foundation* of our sense of time, this ultimate unconscious cannot be characterized as temporal – for otherwise we would argumentatively end up in an infinite regress, because we would have to assume a further endopsychic perception monitoring the first endopsychic perception, and so on.

To clarify this complex issue, we need to turn from psychoanalytical metapsychology to psychoanalytical phenomenology, and remind ourselves of Freud’s note that *all* psychic activity is unconscious at the outset. To examine the fundamental unconscious, then, we need not restrict ourselves to what has been repressed. Let me illustrate

the atemporality of the unconscious as the source of time with an example. Consider being immersed in music-listening. For sure, while being lost in the song, as it were, what you are listening is the *melodic and rhythmic unfolding*, not the constituents of this this unfolding. That is to say, your experience of the music is not present to you in a linear manner, as an ordered sequence of sounds. Rather, for the time being, you are experientially dwelling *all over the music*, enjoying its undifferentiated or fused temporalization.³⁹ As soon as you start attending your listening experience, and thus engage in self-reflection or introspection, your immersion is interrupted. As a consequence of this, your ongoing experience is dissected into a linear sequence of auditory sensations following each other in time. Yet, such linear self-representation does not capture the manner in which your listening experience was lived through before starting to reflect upon it. For sure, while immersed, the *stream* of auditory impressions was unconsciously “monitored” or “endopsychically perceived”, which is to say that your experience of music was not given *as* timeless either. The point is rather that the categories of “time” or “timeless” are *not applicable* to your immersive experience. Indeed, looking back, you can say that, *at any given moment of time*, you were tacitly reaching toward notes to come and retaining notes just passed, but such linear categories (i.e., “before”, “now”, and “after”) only enter the picture when your immersion is lifted: *après coup*. That is to say, instead of finding yourself “now” in this part of the song, and “now” in that part, *at each moment* you were enjoying the “temporalization” of the song, the musical unfolding, and dwelling *all over it*, as it were. To articulate this fundamental temporalization in linear terms would lead to the mentioned category mistake. Yet, neither can we characterize temporalization as something timeless. Indeed, we can measure the *length* we spent in the immersed state – just as we can measure the *length* of time spent in a dreaming state – but experiential temporalization and linear time are *incommensurable*, and reducing one to the other would hence make no sense.

Moreover, given the mentioned “inapplicability”, one can neither say that, instead of linear time, the unconscious is characterized *simultaneity*. As we have seen, the past notes have their influence on the notes currently perceived (just as repressed contents color our current perceptions), but just as the past notes (or repressed contents) do not appear *as past*, they neither appear *as present*. This is related to feelings of timelessness and Freud’s note that the unconscious is essentially

oblivious of its own finitude. As I see it, both claims are owing to the fact that unconscious temporalization, the source of time, is lacking a sense of linear boundaries. To cash this out, let me continue with the music example. For sure, while we *know* that the music we listen to will eventually come to an end, our immersed experiences may be characterized by (more or less emphatic) *feelings of timelessness*.⁴⁰ Importantly, what is at issue here is not a *belief that* the music one is listening will go on forever. Rather, the question of linear parameters remains undecided: *inapplicable*. To paraphrase Rolland's famous letter to Freud, the eternal (that we occasionally get a glimpse of) might "very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits".⁴¹ That is to say, rather than involving a judgement about endlessness, the concept of "end" is, along with linear time, out of the question. In discussing the psychoanalytic concept of time, Loewald and Hartocollis talk about "instants of eternity" and feelings of "eternity with the moment".⁴² They emphasize that while such moments emerge *in* time, they are not *of* time,⁴³ but a constant (in our terms: omnipresent) "counterpart to time".⁴⁴ Rather than a feeling of *endless linear time*, such moments (which might, objectively speaking, last only a short while) facilitate temporary escape from the "tyranny of linear time",⁴⁵ "overshadowing" the latter.⁴⁶ Yet, we may add, while such timelessness may be grasped in terms of an escape *from linear time*, or in terms of *overshadowing it*, we should not forget that our self-temporalizing psyche, or experiential life, gains a linear articulation only when represented and reflected upon. And while such temporal self-representation is indeed usually quite firmly habituated, this does not change the fact that our unconscious being *cannot* fundamentally delineate itself in this manner. What is present in experiences of music, is just one example of a more general issue.

This insight finally leads us to Freud's note that the unconscious is ignorant of its *finitude*. As I see it, this is an outcome of Freud's claim about the mentioned "inapplicability" of the category of time. Indeed, while justifying this claim, Freud occasionally refers to the incapacity of the child or the primitive human being to grasp its own mortality⁴⁷ – thus leaning toward the second characterization according to which our past mental beliefs survive unaltered in the hollows of the unconscious mind. Yet, this would only justify the claim that primitive beliefs about our immortality are retained in the unconscious, thus only *complicating* our acceptance of our finitude, whereas I think there is a more robust argument to be made: we *cannot*, for principle reasons,

fundamentally accept our finitude. In the words of Edmund Husserl, the birth or death of the “constituting subjectivity” – i.e., “absolute self-temporalization” – is incomprehensible (*unvorstellbar*).⁴⁸ For as the example of music-listening revealed, while immersed in listening, the song appears to flow or unfold without linear boundaries. As said, there is no belief about the absence of such boundaries either. Rather, such linear matters are fundamentally undecided, inapplicable. Enjoying the musical unfolding, we cannot help reaching toward, and thus projecting ourselves into, what is still to come. And so, when speaking of our unconscious conviction about immortality, I suggest that Freud is not merely referring to *unconscious beliefs or wishes* about immortality. His work indicates a more robust interpretation: given our endopsychic perception, we *cannot help* projecting ourselves in the future. As Freud puts it:

“it is indeed impossible to imagine one’s own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psychoanalytic school could venture on the assumption that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or to put the same thing another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality”.⁴⁹

Naturally, there is nothing mystical in this, for what is argued for is not our factual immortality but the impossibility of fundamentally accepting our mortality.

To sum up, when it comes to the unconscious, linear articulation is *not applicable*. As said, this concerns both positive and negative forms of the latter. The seeming paradox that we cannot say that the unconscious is timeless either was explained by saying that the unconscious, as the original stance of any psychic content, can be viewed in terms of temporalization. What we consciously re-present – say, the musical piece or our auditory process of listening to it – is to be taken as a particular *outcome* of temporalization. Before this, the experience has already been acted out; *re-presentation* must be taken quite literally. As the source of experiential time – and hence as the source of linear objects (e.g., music) and continuous experiences (e.g., listening) – temporalization itself cannot be articulated in linear terms. For sure, this should not lead us thinking that it stands *outside* time, as if the unconscious was a distinct compartment or storage that we spoke in

the introduction. The point is rather that the unconscious can be understood in terms of the *source* of experiential time. As should be clear by now, this does not mean that the unconscious is a kind of timeless experience, a point out of time, as it were. Rather, as we emphasized, the notion of time as well as the notion of timelessness is inapplicable to it.

CONCLUSION

I have here elaborated three ways in which Freud discusses the timelessness of the unconscious. I have analyzed the sense in which Freud's notion of the unconscious (A) *lacks a temporal order and orientation*, (B) *is unalterable by time*, and (C) *is atemporal* in the sense of *serving as the source of time*. As goes without saying, this brief article is to be viewed as an opening to a vast and intricate topic. Indeed, various issues were left unexamined, several paths remained unfollowed, and many concepts would deserve a closer scrutiny. Nonetheless, I hope to have shown here that the timelessness of the unconscious is not a uniform claim, but more like a bundle of various claims. What combines all these notions, however, is the warning of confounding the map with the terrain. For sure, when reflected upon, or consciously re-presented, psychic contents can be thematized in linear terms. However, we must not forget that this is a *re*-presentation, an *outcome* of an intricate mental act, which cannot be used as a direct proof when assessing the nature of the unconscious. In the words of Freud already quoted in the beginning, our "conscious perceptions" should not be "equated with the unconscious mental processes which are their object".⁵⁰

Among the paths not yet traversed is the question about the compatibility of these three characterizations. While a detailed exposition would exceed the confines of the present article, let me conclude with a few words related to this interesting question.

Of the three characterizations, the two first ones seem easily compatible. For if the unconscious lacks an internal temporal ordering and linear orientation, one may well assume that it is not altered by time either. Differently put, the claim for "supratemporality" is easily compatible with the claim about "omnitemporality". In these two notions, the structure of the unconscious is assessed in terms of what is *missing* from it. In this sense, the two notions can be described as negative metapsychological characterizations: they approach the topic from the viewpoint of the whole psychic apparatus and build of a contrast with our conscious temporal experiences. Such an approach does

not treat the unconscious in its own terms, as it were. For if Freud is right in claiming that the unconscious knows no *negation* or *absence*, it cannot know itself in terms of a *lack* of time. This brings us to the third notion of “timelessness”. In comparison to the two first notions, I find the third notion more loyal to the unconscious (as it reveals itself in and through endopsychic perception). As said, this notion underlines the inapplicability of the category of time. I ended up suggesting that it can be understood in reference what Freud notes about the origin or emergence of all psychic processes. Combining this with the concept of “temporalization” and “source of experiential time”, I argued that the unconscious cannot articulate itself in temporal terms. After all, linear terms can only refer to the *outcome* of temporalization, whereas here we are discussing temporalization itself. For sure, as I ended up emphasizing, this is not to say that the unconscious, as such a creative source, is something eternal, infinite, or outside time. The point is rather that, as the source of experiential time, the unconscious cannot be present to itself in finite terms. For sure, this does not mean that it *is* infinite. If such terms are used, we could perhaps say that the unconscious can be grasped in terms of a finite infinity.

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- 1 Freud 1900: 613
 - 2 E.g., Kant 1998 [1781], A30
 - 3 Freud 1915a: 171
 - 4 Freud 1926: 97
 - 5 See Enckell 2002
 - 6 Freud 1900: 619
 - 7 Ogden 2024: 279
 - 8 Freud 1901: 274
 - 9 Freud 1915a: 187; Freud 1920: 28
 - 10 Freud 1915b: 289; Freud 1919: 242
 - 11 Freud 1933: 74
 - 12 Freud 1915a: 187
 - 13 Freud 1920: 28.
 - 14 Freud 1915a: 187
 - 15 Freud 1915a: 186; Freud 1933: 73
 - 16 Freud 1940: 48
 - 17 Freud 1920: 18 (my emphasis)

- 18 Freud 1915a: 187; Freud 1920: 28
 19 Freud 1901: 274
 20 Freud 1933: 74
 21 Noel-Smith 2016: 142
 22 Freud 1913: 184
 23 Freud 1933: 74
 24 Freud 1901: 274 (my emphasis)
 25 Freud 1926: 142
 26 Ibid.
 27 To use a Hegelian turn of phrase, the thesis has been been *aufgehoben*: negated and yet it is retained. Or, to put it in Winnicottian idiom, the thesis has «survived its destruction» (Taipale *forthcoming A*).
 28 See Freud 1926: 142
 29 Merleau-Ponty 2002: 457
 30 Freud 1920: 28
 31 Freud 1933: 74
 32 Freud 1915a: 187
 33 Freud 1911, quoted in Nunberg and Federn 1974: 308
 34 Freud 1911, quoted in Jones 1957: 496
 35 E.g., Freud 1915a: 187; Freud 1925: 231
 36 See Freud 1909: 164, 232
 37 Bonaparte 1940: 467 fn.18
 38 Noel-Smith 2016: 178-179
 39 See Bergson 2013: 100-101; Husserl 1966: 129
 40 See Taipale *Forthcoming B*
 41 Quoted in Ackerman 2017: 10; see also Fischer 1976
 42 Hartocollis 1974: 244; Loewald 1978: 68
 43 Loewald 1978: 65
 44 Ibid.: 68
 45 See Bonaparte 1940: 261
 46 Loewald 1978: 67
 47 E.g., Freud 1915a: 296
 48 E.g., Husserl 2006: 97: 438; Husserl 1973: 670; Husserl 1993: 335; Taipale 2014: 111ff
 49 Freud 1915b: 289; see also Merleau-Ponty 2002: 250
 50 Freud 1915a: 171

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