Theology and the Discovery of the Unconscious: Preliminary Remarks

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The most recent relevant discussion seems to involve, perhaps unavoidably, a theological account of the Unconscious, which lies behind almost all concepts on the adoption of which concepts psychoanalysis depends. In the present paper I will limit myself to studying some important books that show the current status of relevant research, and then I will attempt to offer some more, though still preliminary, theological remarks.

In my book entitled *Psychoanalysis and Orthodox Theology: On Desire, Catholicity, and Eschatology,*[1] I ventured to search for the uncovering of a possible spiritual dimension of psychoanalysis that somehow 'correlates' with fundamental theological notions. For this purpose, I confined myself to what are in my view three of the most important and common concepts, considered bridges between theology and psychoanalysis: First, that of *Desire* as it is described in its subjective functioning according to Lacan, or, in theological terms, of *natural will* (as formulated by St Maximus the Confessor), which has to be rooted in nature as an expression of its internal life , instead of being just a vehicle of the intellect. In this way it can express human desire as the pure yearning for unity, both internal and external, which can hold all things together, an ontological unity that can be properly expressed by the theological notion of *consubstantiality.*[2]

Second, the concept of *Catholicity*, which I called 'Inter-Intra-co-Being', developed as a theological commentary on the psychoanalytic experience of inter-subjectivity, where the pan-unity of all things (co-being) takes place within the

[1] Αθήνα: Αρμός, 2003.

[2] Regarding the concept of consubstantiality, see in my book *Analogical identities: The Creation of the Christian Self. Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era,* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 183: ' The achievement of the of nature is, of course, the work of Christ, who draws together the ontological gaps which segment the relationship of created things between themselves and God, effecting this thereafter in the Church through the mysteries, as "Eucharistic Ontology" of the entry from now of beings into the last things of the Kingdom. As regards the will, from the point of view of the believer, the manner in which this consubstantiality emerges, which Christ Himself activates eucharistically in the Holy Spirit, is a bond of the personal will towards others, as a relationship "bringing all, through the one logos of creation to the one cause of nature" (Maximus the Confessor, *To Thalassius,* PG 90, 724C-725A), i.e. to consubstantiality' .

subject, in his or her psychosomatic existence (intra), but it is constantly verified through the active presence of the real other (inter), who is given voice and existence in the subject, thus initiating a true '*dialogical reciprocity*'[3] in which the final mode of being is realized in a non-passive dialogue between God and man, taking the form of an *ecstatic* synergy out of mutual love between them.

Third, the concept of *Eschatology*, a Biblical concept par excellence, which, applied to psychoanalysis, manifests its anti-metaphysical orientation, expressed in its effort for a hermeneutical re-construction of the subject, a self-re-creating, which overcomes their present neurotic de-construction in a quest for a genuine, true, and full Self. Within such an *Eschatology,* the vision of an existential *Catholicity* is annexed together with the liberating experience of the restoration of the full human existential *Desire*. Psychoanalysis, on another level, together with philosophy and art, is part of this long-term 'building up' of Man—of the immanent *eschaton* in process.

All the above discussion unavoidably involves a theological account of the Unconscious, which lies behind all mentioned concepts on the adoption of which concepts psychoanalysis depends. In the present paper I will limit myself to studying some important books that show the current status of relevant research, and then I will attempt to offer some more, though still preliminary, theological remarks.

The first of these books is Matt Ffytche's *The Foundation of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud, and the Birth of the Modern Psyche.*[4] Ffytche understands his work as a correction and further development of Odo Marquard's and Michel Foucault's works. In his highly original study entitled *Transcendental Idealism, Romantic Philosophy of Nature, Psychoanalysis* (1987, in German), Marquard finally argues that psychoanalysis is simply a modification of the methods of thinking originally adopted by transcendental philosophy and then transformed into a sort of a philosophy of nature: one could say that psychoanalysis is a disenchanted 'Naturphilosophie'; that is why it thinks in the manner of a 'Naturphilosophie'. To support this hypothesis, he provides a list of various conceptual features the two systems of thought hold in common, for instance, the turn from mind to 'nature', the emphasis on recollecting and clarifying the prehistory of the ego, as well as the project of consciously retrieving Unconscious histories. He suggests that their relationship has remained rather unnoticed largely for the reason that Schelling's writings are no longer widely read. Moreover, he thinks that, in this way, psychoanalysis follows transcendental philosophy's falling away from an engagement with political reason.

Michel Foucault, on the other hand, in his work *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*[5] argues that the Unconscious centres on the ways

[3] I have extensively analysed this term in my work entitled *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Dialogical Reciprocity* (Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010).

[4] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[5] London: Tavistock, 1970 or 1980.

in which society, emerging self-consciously as itself the agent of representation, attempts to establish a hypothetical relationship to the deeper or foundational basis of its own practice, whether this basis was viewed in logical, historical, or evolutionary terms. At some points Foucault seems to use the Unconscious as a tool for criticizing the whole project of German idealism, putting forward a conception of subject as a self-constituted and absolutely free consciousness. At other points, his concern is with those aspects of human phenomena that escape the rationalizing drive for the self-consciousness of cogito. In yet other moments, Foucault alludes to the attempt to ground human existence through the intellectual recovery of distant historical origins. All these versions of the Unconscious are united in a single principle that forms a powerful undertow within his account of the twentieth century as a whole. For him, while 'representation' is the central issue for the nineteenth century, the Unconscious is the characteristic of the twentieth century. And, of course, psychoanalysis sets itself the task of making the Unconscious speak through consciousness.

Furthermore, there exists the 'liberal Unconscious'. For Ffytche, (now drawing on Eli Zaretsky's *Secrets of the Soul: a social and cultural history of Psychoanalysis*),[6] the Unconscious, since it forms the foundation for a new science of the individual mind, is not detachable from some nineteenth century attempts to give an account of autonomy, originality, and independence, concerning the individual. Thus, people endorse psychoanalysis to help recast the promise of individual autonomy, which encompasses the freedom to think one's thoughts and to decide for oneself what to do with one's life; in addition, autonomy is not restricted to the sphere of morality but applies as well to creativity, love, and happiness.

The core argument of Zaretsky's book is that the increasing interest in an Unconscious psyche reflects not merely the attempt to produce an adequate account of the phenomena of inner life but also a concern with establishing the possibility of a self-created self, or a self whose logic of development is irreducibly detached from more systematic forms of explanation or from the idea of its manipulation by external authorities or other determining causes. Finally, for Ffytche, the concept of Unconscious emerges, firstly, from these vital debates about freedom and autonomy; secondly, from the search for holism, in an effort to take roots in nature, and, thirdly, from the search for 'thinking independence, spontaneity, particularity, originality, and self-authorship against, or alongside the universal legislation of reason'.[7] All these, according to the author, bring Freud into close association with Schelling. What brings them together, however, is not a Romantic vision of the unity of nature. It is that Freud makes a detour through biological and evolutionary theory in order to fix the ultimate basis of human individuality. The turn to nature and the attempt to reconstruct a logic of separation and conjugation in life's most elementary units is everywhere shadowed by tensions in the modern and liberal theory of individuality

[6] New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.
[7] Ffytche, 27– 8.

and by the anxieties of the contemporary world. However, let us keep this turn to nature in mind as an essential characteristic of the Freudian understanding of psychoanalysis (and, subsequently, of the Unconscious), also taking into account the theological connotations this concept of nature carries with it in Schelling's thought.

The second book is Suzanne Kirschner's *The Religious and Romantic Origins of Psychoanalysis: Individuation and Integration in Post-Freudian Theory.*[8] According to her,

> the contemporary Anglo-American psychoanalytic developmental theories are cast and elaborated in terms of a generative metaphor that has an ancient and culturally distinctive source: the Judeo-Christian mystical narrative of the history of the soul. This narrative pattern has been progressively secularized and interiorized: the entire trajectory now is seen to take place in this world, over the course of an 'ordinary' life. Moreover, it is now told as the story of the development of the individual personality—not of the history of race, or the world. In place of the Plotinian distaste for individuation [...] and individuality, as well as Christian mystics' ambivalence regarding them, psychoanalytic developmental psychology imbues individuation with an unambiguously positive value; it is made an end in itself. As for that other end of development, exemplified in the capacity for intimate relationship, it too has been modified over the course of time and disenchantment. The essentially rationalist and materialist view of the world in which psychoanalytic theory participates dictates that the forms of 'redemption' still permitted us by Psychoanalysis—intimacy, authenticity, the creative process, and, in a more subtle sense, internalization itself—are more modest, more truncated, certainly less enduring and absolute than the traditional religious forms.[9]

Thus, like its forbears, the psychoanalytic narrative remains a narrative of ultimate concern, spelling out the terms of the meaning of life and the sources of suffering.

In the rather positive Christian account of the value of individuality, one may add the Romantic movement, which turned theodicy into a 'biodicy'. As Kirschner claims, the Romantic narrative eschewed 'God' and the 'soul' and, in a complex transposition that has precedent in Boehme's system, substitutes 'mind' for both of these. The ultimate problems of existence were no longer conceived in terms of the soul's estrangement from God but rather in terms of man's estrangement from nature. Man is estranged, so the Romantic narrative goes, both from those 'natural' (uncivilized, instinctual) aspects of himself and, perhaps even more crucially and fundamentally,

[8] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
[9] S. Kirschner, *The Religious and Romantic Origins of Psychoanalysis*, 194.

from 'nature' as the entire world external to himself—the 'object[s]' from which the subject has been severed. Now,

> heaven and hell are in the human breast; this is the place where we find meaning and fulfillment in our lives [...] Thus was accomplished the completion of 'the transference of faith to the inner life [...] The 'ordinary-life' arena of the self and its relationships is the contemporary repository of once-theological concerns about the meaning of life and the nature and sources of fulfillment .[10]

Echoing the Biblical narrative, the *Fall* is no more considered separation from God, and, consequently, salvation does not mean reunion with him but exclusively a betterment of this finite life. Even the idea of progress, so important for the psychoanalytic intervention, is clearly an ex-Biblical idea. Ultimately, so Kirschner asserts:

> psychoanalytic psychology conceives of the human condition and the life-course as fraught with inevitable suffering, frustration, and loss, and furnishes a framework by which at least some of these vicissitudes are given a rationale and are endowed with meaning. A corollary implication is that it is essential to explicate these dimensions of human existence and to understand their role in determining individual and social activities. [11]

In this sense, psychoanalysis embodies another layer of cultural significance, acquired via the 'translation' of the mystical narrative into high Romanticism. This is so because some of the psychoanalytic features, such as the irrational, the affective, and the life and growth of the self, are characteristically Romantic preoccupations. Also Romantic, and perhaps even more fundamental, is the fact that psychoanalytic modes of explanation embody a distinctive way of conceiving of experience, as well as of the human condition and the potentials for its renovation. According to Kirshner, the Romantics insisted that the philosophies of the Enlightenment produced an inadequate, spiritually and morally impoverished means of making sense of the human condition. They looked backwards to Christian mysticism and translated it into secular terms. In this way, the Romantic movement can be fruitfully understood as having introduced into European educated culture a new vocabulary for designating certain domains and modes of experience, meaning, and values. Its critique of the Enlightenment and other modern European social and intellectual trends constituted an insertion of naturalistic, non-theological versions of worldly mystical Christian doctrines into Euro-American intellectual and cultural discourse.

[10] Op.cit., 196.
[11] S. Kirschner, *The Religious and Romantic Origins of Psychoanalysis*, 197.

In any case, Kirschner avers, whether or not specific psychoanalytic theorists considered themselves or could be interpreted as 'crypto-Romantics', these psychoanalytic modes of explanation clearly can be viewed as carriers of this counter-Enlightenment set of connotations. Romantic thinkers and artists perceived a shallowness and a spiritual impoverishment in much of emerging Modernity. In their view, disenchanted visions of nature, self, and history were inadequate (despite such visions' bright teleologies) to offer hope for a moral and existential integration that took full and sophisticated account of the inescapability of suffering and tragedy (an inescapability made all the more poignant and concrete by the Romantics' own experience of the French Revolution). Just as the Romantic spiral was conceived to provide a more efficient spiritual account, so psychoanalytic theories too embody a perpetuation of this tragic-hopeful sense in the midst of later-modern social life. Thus, finally, as Kirschner states, these theories can be seen as efforts to preserve (and as evidence too that such preservation is vital or absolutely required), through transmutation, an inherited spiritual dialectic of severance and integration, suffering and redemption.

I am not quite sure that the above is an adequate explanation of the birth of the Unconscious—since it is impossible not to see in all this development also the persistence of Enlightened rationalism, now transformed into a thirst for ultimate knowledge of the Unconscious, according to Freud's famous suggestion—but it seems nonetheless true that the emergence of the Unconscious is related with both a sense of degradation of human nature in Modernity and an aiming at restoring its integrity and truth. It is also clear enough that without the Christian cultural substratum, which more or less inspired the romantics, this fertile implicit criticism of the Enlightenment that brought about the psychoanalytic discussion of the Unconscious would perhaps not have taken place.

I have left last Michel Henry's emblematic *Généalogie de la Psychanalyse: Le Commençement Perdu,*[12]—a book that forms an invaluable source for the research of the recent Western history of the Unconscious. In this work, Henry understands the Unconscious as a by-product of Descartes' philosophy of consciousness and its final neglect of the concept and the reality of life under his final definition of the soul in his 'Second Meditation'. And it is, according to the author, Schopenhauer who stopped this reign of the metaphysics of representation inaugurated by Descartes 'by declaring that this metaphysics has nothing in it which could refer to the condition of the real being or the true existence'[13] and that being cannot become an object for anyone, including itself, because it must be identified with life. This 'interpretation of being as Life, is the crucial event of the modern culture, the moment when it turns towards its Beginning, and acquires the means to join it again'.[14] Now the 'fun-

[12] Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003 (1985).
[13] M. Henry, *Généalogie de la Psychanalyse*, 8, my translation.
[14] Op.cit., my translation.

damental determinations' of existence come to the fore, such as body, action, and affectivity. Schopenhauer establishes human *primitive corporeity*.

On the other hand, Henry continues:

> the Kantian theory of the interior sense which reduces this, i.e. the absolute subjectivity, into an ec-stasis from time, and thus into a representation, prevents us from giving a phenomenological meaning to immanence, which immanence defines, at the end of the day, the will. The will is placed under the yoke of the Western thought, and it is submitted to its fate, which fate is that this thought is produced in the light of the temporal ec-stasis, and enters the darkness of representation, or the Unconscious. Life is thus lost at the very moment it is given a name, and Freud is already here.[15]

This approach of life reaches its peak of course with Nietzsche and his 'eternal return of the Same'—which is Life. Thus, according to Henry, the Nietzschean will is finally the Unconscious darkness of life that escapes the light of representation; the Unconscious is identified with life, which runs under the representative thought, forming being's secret foundation. In this way, and beyond representation, 'l' inconscient est le nom de la vie'[16]. There exists a reciprocal movement between consciousness and Unconsciousness, and this mutual possession forms an ontological law 'where all the future of being lies'. Thus, the Unconscious part of the representation forms the 'essence of life'.[17]

However, Henry seems unable to see that this new ecstatic will that now wants to express nature gets out of nature immediately again, since it soon becomes a will-to-power that always exceeds nature, understanding being as always 'more than being'. Therefore, it is not so much an affirmation of life as it is rather its final negation, precisely in favour of an unlimited transcendence for the sake of power itself. At any rate, what remains extremely important is Henry's identification of the Unconscious with life, something which of course can be directly attached to the long modern Western intellectual crusade to restore the integrity of human nature, even, at times, against Enlightenment, as this process is described by all the authors discussed above. What is extremely important—and Henry was not perhaps prepared to fully admit it—is that all this thinking about life is rooted in the Christian Theology of Incarnation and Resurrection and is practically inconceivable solely within the context, for example, of ancient Greek philosophy, where nature is not capable of holding within it divine life in its fullness.

After all the above considerations I may proceed to some preliminary remarks concerning my topic:

[15] M. Henry, *Généalogie de la Psychanalyse,* 9, my translation.
[16] Op.cit., 348.
[17] Op.cit., 349– 50.

1. The Unconscious seems to relate with the truth and the fullness of human nature/life. But it is impossible in our Greek-Western Christian world to conceive of this nature/ life *without its theological premises, especially those of freedom and autonomy, holism, catholicity, particularity, originality.* And of course, any sort of absolute affirmation of nature *per se* ends up with various sorts of naturalism. A theological proposal can perhaps be to think of this nature as *'a dialogical nature'*, meaning by this a state of constant dialogue between man and God, a dialogue of ontological significance, concerning the true *mode of existence* of things.[18] Here Orthodox Theology could provide crucial insights into the anthropological and 'spiritual' dimension of psychoanalysis, especially by the mediation of this *dialogical nature* drawn from Eastern Patristic theology. In addition, the exploration of the Unconscious could enrich Christian hermeneutics with conceptual tools for deepening this nature conceived as an *open nature,* as I have already called this elsewhere.[19] But this has to be proved.

2. The Unconscious obviously has to do with the desire/will, and this subsequently means, with *ecstasis*. We need a history of *ecstasis*, in both East and West, in order to discern similarities and differences concerning the possible meaning of the Unconscious. It is true of course that in the West, in general, *ecstasis* is usually conceived in an almost Neo-Platonic way. Does that mean that the Unconscious is *against ecstasis,* or is it an expression of it? However, as I have recently claimed, a sort of forerunner of to the modern notion of the Unconscious can be traced to Maximus the Confessor's formulations of the *natural will.*[20] What does this mean for a possible theological interpretation of the Unconscious?

3. The Unconscious is *apophatic*, as it happens with life itself; it is a radical unknowability, which, however, pretends to possess an absolute knowledge concerning the essence of human nature. (Bion's work is perhaps the best modern articulation of this). But how can we, theologically speaking, analys e this bipolarity of unknowability and knowledge? In order to do this, it is essential that we find a true *analogical* dimension in the Unconscious—a possible analogy between divine fullness and human inwardness. The questions *if* this could be possible and in *what sense* remain open. The Unconscious then has to be connected with what I have recently called the *analogical identity* of man.[21]

[18] In my *Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Dialogical Reciprocity,* above.

[19] See my *Analogical Identities*, 312.

[20] Op. cit., 70.

[21] See my *Analogical Identities,* 264ff.

4. The Unconscious therefore is wise—not only through negating representation but also because it reflects primordial human nature and life, a sort of human *Ursein—a*nd thus it can be related with the image of God in man.
5. In this sense the Unconscious is revealing: it discloses hidden aspects of this image.
6. And precisely because of this, the Unconscious in both, I think, its theological and psychological interpretations is also *eschatological,* in the sense that it pertains, in both cases, to the final fulfillment of human nature.

All these remarks form working hypotheses and fields of research for their author, rather than proved positions. It is, I think, obvious that unless we further study the relation and the difference between not only modern anthropological philosophy and Christian theological anthropology, but also, and perhaps mainly, between ancient philosophical and Patristic concepts of life, nature, person, and *ecstasis*, it is impossible to explore the notion of the Unconscious in its fullness.