

Psychoanalytic speculations on the subjectivity of time: The prison of the present

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Freud noted that “our perception of time is derived from the method of working of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* (perceptual– connections) and to correspond to a perception on its own part of that method of working” (1920b 1957, p. 28). A few years later he described a small contrivance, a ‘*Mystic Writing-Pad*’ that was a writing tablet from which notes can be erased by an easy movement of the hand, and he considered its similarities with the system *Pcpt. –Cs.* (Freud, 1920a 1957, p.231) Freud wrote:

My theory was that cathectic innervations are sent out and withdrawn in rapid periodic impulses from within into the completely pervious system *Pcpt.-Cs.* So long as that system is cathected in this manner, it receives perceptions (which are accompanied by consciousness) and passes the excitation on to the unconscious mnemonic systems; but as soon as the cathexis is withdrawn, consciousness is extinguished and the functioning of the system comes to a standstill.

According to Freud, the unconscious, like an exploratory agent, sends out feelers through the medium of the system *Pcpt. –Cs.* to the external world to gather a sample of the excitations coming from it, and very quickly withdraws from them. This discontinuous method of functioning of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.*, Freud guesses, “lies at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time” (p. 231). But the question is: What are these feelers of the unconscious? Where is the external world? Is it the external of the unconscious or of the individual? What are these excitations ? And how do they relate to the concept of time?

These are questions that were not fully answered by Freud, but perhaps a serious contemplation of them could help us to arrive at a solution of the riddle of time and space from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. It seems clear that the unconscious is not just an undefined place but is an intelligent system that issues commands, and that the system *Pcpt. –Cs.* acts as its executive agent. Freud merges two topographic and structural views to give a more complete explanation of the concept of time.

Green and Weller (2002, p.119) argue that Freud and his successors failed to theorize the function of the object in its relation to time. Analysts have attended to the subjectivity of time in relation to the dynamics of obsessional neurosis (or anal eroticism, cf., Freud, 1909[1955]; Abraham, 1923 and Jones, 1923), internal biological rhythms (Fenichel, 1945; Gifford, 1960) or in intervals between feedings (Sachs, as quoted by Bergler and Róheim, 1946; Yates, 1935; Meerloo, 1954). Some investigators came to be interested in the relation between the sense of time and the self (c.f., Arlow, 1986; Hartocollis, 1978), object constancy (Hartocollis, 1974; Benjamin, 1961; Jacobson, 1964) and affect (Arlow, 1986, Hartocollis, 1972, 1978).

Interest in the subjective experience of time has grown. Colarusso (1979) pointed out “almost all analysts have been predominantly interested in subjective time sense...[R]ather than conforming to time in nature—objective time—subjective time is determined by the dynamic forces of the psyche and is personal and experiential. According to Loewald (1972) even past, present, and future are static, linear

concepts—“they are aspects of time sense which shape each other and are constantly influenced by intrapsychic forces” (p. 243). Hartocollis (1974) states that two elementary aspects of physical reality are necessary for a consciousness of time: “the consciousness of movement, i.e., the awareness that objects about oneself move or change; and the consciousness of objects as unique, continuous, relatively stable” (p.243). I, in another paper (Pajoohandeh, unpublished) I focus on the relations between the libidinal cathexis of the object, the (internal or external) distance from the object and the time, which considered the first aspect. In this paper I consider the role of object - thought transitional - on the subjective experience of time.

Transitional time objects and transitional time phenomena

According to Winnicott (1953), a transitional object is a soft object or form of an object that the infant finds and uses as a defense against anxiety, particularly depressive anxiety. Winnicott terms the infant’s self-soothing behavior transitional phenomena. Accordingly, transitional objects are neither completely a part of the external world nor are they only mental or emotional phenomena. They are neither a part of the infant’s body nor are they a part of the external world (object), for in fact these objects are placed in an intermediary space: a space in which culture, art and religion are found, a space for illusion, a place between the real world and the internal world: “a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related” (ibid.: 90). Winnicott (1967, 1969) believed that cultural experience and play exist in the potential space between the individual and the environment (object) and that cultural experience appears in the creative life first experienced in play (as transitional phenomena). Winnicott (1953) goes on to talk of the inevitability of motherly failures, which are necessary for the growth of the infant, in good enough mothering. He argued: “The infant's means of dealing with this maternal failure include:

1. The infant's experience, often repeated, that there is a time limit to frustration. At first, naturally, this time limit must be short.
2. Growing sense of process.
3. The beginnings of mental activity.
4. Employment of auto-erotic satisfactions.
5. Remembering, reliving, fantasizing, dreaming; the integrating of past, present, and future.

As Colarusso (1979) puts it, the transitional object acts as an intermediary between the mother and the self. For the child, it is an instrument, a means for the explanation of his experience of time. Colarusso, quoting Settlage, continues, “The existing primitive memories of already past experiences are externalized into this in-between space where they are compared and correlated with the current and more consciously perceived experiences with the mother and the emerging self. The infant plays, as it were, with past and present images of self, object, and object-relatedness, as they are on their way toward stable intrapsychic representation” (1972, p. 76). He later claims that games played with images of the past and present concerning the self and object are experienced through the images the infant has of the mother. This external representation of the mother and the self (transitional object) of the child allows the infant to safely link past and present. Since the transitional object can be controlled by the infant both through mental and motor actions it becomes a device through which he manages both mental images and their external representations. Thus, he can come

to play with them. For the infant the present turns into the past and the past into the present. (p. 248). Hence, the transitional object becomes the element that enables communication between the past and the present.

Freud (1908) saw fantasy in a similar role. He considered the connection between fantasy and time to be of critical importance as connector between present, past and future. Hence, the effect of a stimulus in the present can set into motion wishes (of an infantile nature) tied to a certain experience in the past. In these wishes the memory of the wish will be met and go on to create conditions for the future in which the wish is to be once again satisfied. Freud believed that which is being created now is a daily dream or fantasy that finds traces of its source, the scene in which it was first conceived and traces of memory with itself. Freud sees the *wish* as a string that ties the past, the present, and the future (p. 147-8). Thus, according to Freud the wish that carries fantasy within itself (possibly *desire* in Lacan's view) is the cause of a certain kind of communication between the past, present and future.

Many internal and external objects that do not qualify as transitional objects according to Winnicott (1953) and are not of the nature of fantasy, nonetheless function as communicators across time. Thus, it might be possible to identify different types of objects or phenomena that address the shortcomings of the theory. *Transitional time objects* or *phenomena* are the terms I use. They are internal or external objects that can absorb libido and create the sensation of the passage of time; transitional time phenomena are methods used by the ego to cathect the libido onto these objects.

Some objects and phenomena accelerate the feeling of the passage of time. They cause regression and thus, by creating the illusion of the elimination of the present, they connect past to future. On the other hand, other such objects stir the increase of thought, fantasy, daydreaming and by creating the illusion of the elimination of the past they join the present to the future. The transitional object comes into existence in the space between internal and external reality while the transitional time object comes into existence in the space between the past and the future. That is, in the present. However, there are key differences between Winnicott's concepts and these objects and phenomena. One major difference is that a transitional time object can be any object -soft, hard, internal, and external - that the individual uses to connect past and future. Another difference, as Winnicott (1953) described, is that "in health the transitional object does not 'go inside' nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression" (p.91). Transitional time objects and phenomena, by contrast, can consist of the individual's internal objects. Fantasy, day dreaming, dreams, crying, laughing, sex, smoking and even psychoanalysis are all transitional time phenomena that contain innumerable transitional time objects.

I divide transitional time objects into two categories: the first group is more general and can be termed non-transferential time objects; the second group are transferential time objects. Of course, from a general perspective, all objects that draw the libido into themselves are transferential objects and have a definite relation with the individual's primary objects. However, by non-transferential time objects I mean objects that have transitional power (or the ability to absorb libido) but are not directly tied to any one of the patient's important people. Another distinct aspect of these objects is that they have less transitional power than transferential. They can consist of all items, people, events (internal/external) and behaviors that remind the individual of the past or increase fantasy and daydreaming. So we divide transitional

time objects into high and low. High transitional time objects are objects that have high transitional power; low transitional time objects have low transitional power. Non-transferential time objects can be both retrospective and prospective. Each object absorbs a certain amount of libidinal cathexis to itself and, depending on the amount, it has different potentials for being transitional. For example, any childhood game or habit can act as a non-transferential time phenomenon.

Case Study

Ms. A, a fifty-year-old widow, arrived for her tenth session. For the first time she was able to talk of her sexual fantasies about a man thirteen years her junior. She remembered when she was twenty-five she had fallen in love with a teacher. That teacher resembled her present therapist. However, at the time she was unable to express her emotions to this teacher. After this session she didn't come to therapy for two weeks. Her excuse was that she was traveling. When she did arrive later she admitted that she had been suffering an illness that didn't seem to have a medical source. It started immediately after her last session. Her blood pressure suddenly fell and she had had such strange dizzy spells that each time she had gotten up she felt she was thrown onto her bed.

In the next session, she asked about the clock hanging on the wall between herself and her therapist. She wanted to know if it was new. When the therapist replied that the clock had always been there she was surprised that she had never noticed before. The next session, she immediately asked about the mirror that hung on the back of the door and wanted to know if it had recently been put there. Once she heard that it hadn't she was surprised again. The therapist had recently had his office painted, a fact which Ms. A failed to notice. But she had noticed that something had changed and she had attributed this change to the clock and the mirror. When the therapist interpreted her questions that she flees all those things that remind her of time like the clock and the mirror she laughed and confessed that she never did look in the mirror because her face had grown so old.

Here, the clock and the mirror are non-transferential time objects (non-TTO) for they have no relationship with any of her familiar images. The therapist is a transferential time object (TTO) because he reminds her of her former teacher. Both her transferential and non-transferential objects carried her into the past and she was afraid of contact with either of these objects.

Time change: present, past and future past

In another case, I studied an infant girl named N from birth until she was one year old. At the age of one month she could stare for nearly an one hour at a blue knitted doll that hung about one meter above her head on the wall. At times she would smile at this doll. When anyone entered her room, she would immediately turn her attention to the newcomer to welcome him. During such visits she never turned her attention to the doll. When the visitor left the room, she returned her gaze to her doll. By the age of two months, her tolerance for loneliness had lessened. She was still able to tolerate human absence for about thirty minutes by focusing on her doll but after that she would began to protest until her family members joined her.

At three months of age, she would stare at the television for up to ten minutes, sometimes longer. The amount of time likely depended on the kind of movements and colors the television set was showing. The time she spent with her doll was much less

than this. After that, she needed real human communication which she would first express by crying out to draw others to her. In the following months, this amount of time gradually decreased. Once she was able to move (crawl on her chest, then her knees and finally walk around one year of age) she would immediately begin to search out her mother or other members of her family whenever left alone.

Unsurprisingly, the more important the presence of the other became for N the less time she could tolerate the absence. For example, at one month she had less need of the presence of significant others and was able to occupy herself with her doll but at ten months she could spend very little time by herself. It seemed as if previously she felt the passage of time less but that by now she had become fully aware of it.

We can posit that the formation of the meaning of time in the different stages of development begins first with the present for the infant, who is not yet able to form continuity between past and future for an object/event. She can only understand the presence of an object when it is within her reach. Once object constancy begins and she has gained a number of experiences she comes to understand the past and its continuity which is when the future begins. The reason for the priority of the past over the future is that due to communicative experiences of the self and its objects she can predict the future of this relationship. Thus, first she needs to understand the past in order to understand the future. Colarusso (1979) believes that the presence of the mother speaks of the present, the representation of her in her absence is the past and the prediction of her return makes the future. He says, "With the eventual withdrawal of the transitional object and the achievement of object constancy, there is repression of much of the equation mother equals time. As with weaning and toilet training, the active intervention of the parents in helping the child give up the transitional object supports the ego in the resolution of separation issues, in the internalization of self-object differentiation, and in the repression of the mother-time equation." (p. 249) The following vignette is illustrative:

Maryam is a young twenty-six-year-old woman diagnosed with borderline personality disorder whose psychiatrist referred her to me. In the third year of therapy she spoke of feeling that the events of her life were unreal. She only felt things were real when she was in the present, and that the present was when she always felt extreme anxiety. Thus, she preferred to take refuge in fantasies of the past and future. To her, the past and the future were not real; they no longer existed. Hartocollis (1978) talks of a similar case. His borderline patient also complained that the world did not seem real. Hartocollis says: "Things 15 minutes in the past are just shadows of what they were, and things 15 minutes in the future could barely be comprehended by her, because she could not imagine that they would be real." (p. 159)

One reason for this may be that the patient has not attained object constancy, or had it seriously shaken. Time then consists of unrelated, fragmented pieces that torture the person. Eissler (1952) wrote of such a case: a borderline woman patient who sees time as a series of unrelated events. She has no feeling for the passage of time and recalls her memories as separate units of time that are isolated.

Time splitting by borderline patients

A key defense mechanism in borderline patients is splitting. Hartocollis observes:

If the ability to perceive oneself as adequate or inadequate within a temporal perspective becomes lost, as is characteristic of borderline individuals, one

tends to feel suspended in a pleasant or unpleasant state of mind, which is akin to the putative experience of an infant during the post-symbiotic phase of development, before the establishment of integrated self and object images when the self or the object are perceived as all 'good' or all 'bad' and felt as such. Elation, a feeling of omnipotent self-sufficiency, is the positive side of the experience; dejection, a feeling of helpless anger, boredom, emptiness, loneliness or alienation, is the negative side; and the two Sides alternate in rapid, seemingly unpredictable succession.” (Hartcollis, 1978, p.160}

Splitting allows the individual to feel his entire existence in the here and now in such a manner that all affects belonging to the past or expectations of differing feelings in the future can be negated or denied. As Kernberg (1971) writes, preliminaries of the sense of time develop along with the process of differentiation of self from object representations. Kernberg (1967, p.664) specified two essential tasks for the early ego for the internalization of object relationships: 1- the differentiation of self from object images and 2- the integration of self and object images formed under the influence of libidinal drive derivatives with their corresponding self and object images formed under the influence of aggressive drive derivatives.

As for Maryam, she only saw the present as real. Her past had been split, part of it had been spent with her neglectful parents (the bad past) and another part related to her post-marital life with her loving, supportive spouse when she also found friends who enjoyed fun and sports (her good past). Hence, when her mood was low and memories of her bad past rose to haunt her, she saw the future as dark (bad future) but when she was in an elated mood she saw the future as bright and hopeful (good future). It seems that, for Maryam, the differentiation of self from object images formed incompletely. Indeed, self and object split into good and bad ones and then the bad object images differentiated completely from the self while the good object images remained. The shorter the object's distance from the ego (self) the faster the sense of time passage. Moreover, she was not able to integrate the good and bad object images in a whole object image, and the good and bad self-images into a united self-concept.

Transference and counter-transference

For any therapist there comes a time when upon announcing the end of a session the analysand suddenly looks at her watch in surprise and exclaims, “Finished? Already?” Or another patient keeps on looking at his watch and impatiently asking, ‘how much is left of our time?’ In the previous session this very patient might have been the one who complained about how fast time passed. The reverse might well be true for a therapist. Some patients might not notice the passage of time at all while others might experience it as moving painfully slowly.

When the therapist is unable to be engaged in the past, present and future of his client he gets trapped in the present and time passes slowly and with difficulty. When he is unable to use the present session experience as a transitional time object he feels trapped in the present and feels time as crawling. The therapist should be able to find meaningful connection between what he has heard from the patient in previous sessions, that which is happening in the present session and that which he anticipates. This process has a high transitional power and might serve as an instance of ‘the use of counter-transference for the analysis of transference’.

This plight applies to the patient as well. When the patient is stuck in the present he feels time passes too slowly. When he is able to employ the therapist as a transference time object (TTO) he begins to tie the past and the future together which causes a sense of time rapidly passing. Unpleasant memories and associations slow down time because the individual is incapable of using them as transference time objects to bridge past and future, and this disrupts object constancy. Thus, the person is stuck in the present and, like my borderline patient, he experiences acute anxiety.

Based on this discussion, it is possible to understand why the therapist's silence becomes so difficult for most patients to bear. One element of an answer is because silence keeps the patient stuck in the present and highlights the gap between the past and the future. Silence is a very weak transitional phenomenon that has no transitional time object in it or it has an object that has low transitional power to transfer from the present. This is also true of the patient's silence. For example, at times when I feel time pass slowly with a patient I realize I am either in the past or in the future and am unable to use my patient as a transitional time object to pull myself out of the present. It seems that it is as important for the patient to utilize the therapist as an object as it is for the therapist to utilize the patient as such. If a therapist can't experience his patient as a transitional time object he becomes incapable of aiding that patient. It is critical that we pay attention to the fact that both patient and therapist are transitional time objects for one another.

Discussion

When cathexis occurs time begins and this time is the present. Then why is the present so difficult that the person seeks to exit it through time objects and to flee into the past or the future? As we learned from Freud (1914c) the infant lives in a state of autoeroticism before entering into primary narcissism. Before the reality principle sets in, the infant is not yet confronted with frequent or systematic frustration. What he desires (mother or mother's breast) are at his disposal. As the reality principle sets in, the infant is forced to relinquish or fend off certain desires and drives and thus the past is formed. What was previously of no consequence now becomes anxiety-provoking. The present becomes intolerable. This is the annihilation anxiety, for before this time the infant did not realize any differentiation between himself and the (m)other. Thus, *the present is the time in which there is no repression*, and all that has been repressed returns to consciousness. The ego is not easily able to bear this situation. On the other hand, it means that once repression begins man will no longer return to the present, except in psychosis or, less distressingly, poetic or trance modes. Hartocollis (1978) argues that the more one becomes selfless or the less he is concerned with himself, the less he perceives the passage of time, which makes one feel as if there is no time and the self feels eternal, timeless (p. 157).

One could say we have just two senses of time: past and past in the future (or *future past*), which means the repetition of the past in the future. Thus we have no future and present as a distinct form in the psychic reality. We have no any idea of the future without our perception and memory traces. So, psychically speaking, the future is little more than the projection of our expectations and experiences from the past. And, for the deeply disturbed, the present is just a prison in which they are stuck. When we're talking about the present, we're usually talking about the past because the present cannot be fully verbalized. The past, however, is the only time that is experienced and therefore can come into the word. In the other words, the present is

pre-experiential and the future is unexperiencable. Future past is a form of the past that is not repeated yet and is produced by the repetition compulsion

Hartocollis (1978) aligns with this depiction when he said: “What is present and what is past are but elaborations of the existential question of what is happening or not happening to the self in relation to the world of love objects—objects to which we are cathected, reflecting our internalized objects, people and what they have come to represent in terms of personal memories, values and aspirations...The present is our wishes and their shape; and what the future holds that is meaningful stands for the present shapelessness of our wishes—the wish to reshape or keep shaping our wishes” (p. 157).

The present is a selfless state of mind, experienced perhaps when the self and object images were not been differentiated (Kernberg, 1967, 1973, 1976) or in symbiotic phase as Mahler (1974) specified or when, as Lacan (1966[2006]) says, the object *a* has appeared for a while at birth and then disappeared forever. What is the so-called present is the past seconds, minutes, hours, days, months or even years and centuries. For example, we may call a geological period as the present. Transitional time objects are objects with which the differentiation between self and object is reduced and so the sense of passage of time is decreased. The higher the transitional power the less differentiation, and the less differentiation the less the passage of time is perceived.

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