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# There's Nothing Suspicious about Freud

## Summary:

Trends in the philosophical reception of Freud's work often tend to characterize his method of interpretation, in one way or another, as a hermeneutics of suspicion. According to such characterizations, psychoanalysis becomes a project of deciphering the hidden, unconscious meaning beyond, behind, or beneath our conscious thoughts and actions. As such, interpretation amounts to translating the truth of the unconscious to consciousness, thereby expanding the field of consciousness itself. However, throughout his career, Jean Laplanche continuously combatted such hermeneutic understandings of psychoanalysis both within and without the psychoanalytic clinic. The stakes of his struggle against hermeneutics were high; at stake were both the fundamental and revolutionary method of interpretation essential to the practice of psychoanalysis and the status of the unconscious in it. For Laplanche, the fundamental method guiding psychoanalysis should be understood as an anti-hermeneutic method of interpretation, which works in the service of de-translating the analysand's free associations to allow the unconscious to speak.

## There's Nothing Suspicious about Freud: Laplanche's Anti-Hermeneutic Method of Psychoanalytic Interpretation [1]

It would, without a doubt, be an understatement to say that for some time scholars and lay people alike have been suspicious of Freud's psychoanalytic method of interpretation. This has been due, in large part, to the popular opinion that Freud himself was always suspicious of us. For, as the story goes, behind all of our conscious utterances, thoughts, and actions Freud was able to find some unconscious meaning or motivation that remained hidden from us. After all, was it not Freud who tirelessly interpreted nonsensical dreams, innocuous slips of the tongue, and neurotic symptoms as revealing our secret wishes, desires, and fantasies—all of which invariably turned out to be sexual in nature? For example, we know from Freud's own article on negation that if you told him the woman in your dream was *definitely not* your mother, Freud would certainly use such an opportunity to explain that that was exactly who it was and, moreover, reveal your unconscious Oedipal desire for her. Moreover, if you recounted a seemingly innocuous dream about a fire and a jewelry box just as Dora did, Freud would claim that it was an unconscious desire for your father to protect your virginity. And if you came to Freud with symptoms of a hysterical cough, it was, of course, for him the sign of a repressed oral sexuality. How could we not, then, be at least a little suspicious of someone whose method of interpretation seemingly amounted to an almost formulaic attempt to turn everything that we did, said, or thought into some sexual meaning of which we ourselves were not even aware?

This popular conception of Freud's method of interpretation was given its most explicit theoretical articulation in Paul Ricoeur's famous declaration that Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation constitutes a hermeneutics of *suspicion*. By this, as we will see, Ricoeur understood Freud's project as one of

demystification, that is, of deciphering the hidden meaning behind consciousness, thereby giving theoretical credence to the popular belief that Freudian psychoanalysis was only out to find the sexual meaning hidden behind every aspect of our lives. However, through a reading of Jean Laplanche's polemical 1968 essay, "Interpréter [avec] Freud" and his tireless efforts to combat hermeneutic understandings of Freud's method, we will show that Freud's rigorous psychoanalytic method of interpretation was neither a hermeneutics, nor was it suspicious. By attempting to approach Freud's work without suspicion, we seek to open up a different way of understanding the psychoanalytic method of interpretation, one that begins to free it from the specter of suspicion that has come to haunt our understanding of Freud's work and the place of the unconscious in it.

### **The Hermeneutics of Suspicion in Ricoeur's *Essai sur Freud***

Paul Ricoeur, as was fashionable in his day, sought to group Freud together with Marx and Nietzsche as the triumvirate of nineteenth century thinkers that completely changed the way that we understand the world and our place in it. Specifically, in his 1965 *De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud*, Ricoeur famously seeks to elevate these thinkers to the three "masters of suspicion," counting them among the key precursors to his own hermeneutic practice (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 40). Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, according to Ricoeur, together constitute a "school of suspicion," which is united, despite whatever differences, in their respective projects of "demystification" (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 40). Essential to each of their projects of demystification is a shared suspicion that consciousness is itself "false," meaning that consciousness does not appear to itself as it is in itself (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 41). As such, in one way or another, and for one reason or another, there is some other truth about consciousness concealed from itself, which must be discovered.

Ricoeur initially seeks to elaborate the novelty of these three masters by comparing their attitude of suspicion to that of Cartesian skepticism. If Descartes was to arrive at the indubitable truth that thinking implied existence through his extreme skepticism, which forced him to cast doubt over anything and everything that existed, then these masters of suspicion cast doubt on the very consciousness that for Descartes necessarily implied existence. Sure, thinking might after all imply existence; but if we follow Ricoeur's line of argumentation, we must wonder whether we can be certain that what we are thinking is truly reflective of what we are *really* thinking? Although according to this line of thought, the masters of suspicion seem to be more extreme than even Descartes' radical skepticism, the suspicion that guides them opens up a new horizon, allowing them to discover a "more authentic speech, a new reign of Truth" (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 41). As such, suspicion does not lead the masters of suspicion to doubt the very existence of truth altogether, but rather allows us to go beyond our (false) consciousness to a more authentic truth hidden beyond, behind, or beneath it. According to Ricoeur, to reach this more authentic truth beyond, behind, or beneath consciousness, the masters of suspicion had to invent a new "art of interpretation" (Ricoeur, 1965, pp. 41–42).

By turning the search for truth into an art of interpretation, Ricoeur sees these masters of suspicion as turning the project of understanding itself into a hermeneutic one (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 41). Understanding, in this way, becomes a task of finding meaning; but this task no longer concerns itself with the antiquated hermeneutic project of "spelling out the consciousness of meaning," but rather it aims to "decipher its expressions [*déchiffrer les expressions*]," that is, to decipher the expressions of consciousness (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 42). In other words, the task is to decode what is said by (false) consciousness in order to go beyond it and understand what it is *really saying*—in terms of the latent, hidden meaning contained within the expressions themselves.

Just by virtue of their attempt to decipher the expressions of (false) consciousness, according to Ricoeur, the masters of suspicion posited a wholly novel way of understanding the relation between what was manifest and what was latent. For Ricoeur, this relation was founded on the exact same relation that (false) consciousness itself creates between the "appearance and reality of things" (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 42). If consciousness itself is false, that is, not merely what it takes itself to be, then it does not present things to

itself as they really are. The work to be done, then, is to decipher what has been ciphered in the production, or coming to be, of this (false) consciousness. In other words, we must get beyond, behind, or beneath the “illusions of consciousness” to get back to the authentic meaning that has, through various forces, been hidden from (false) consciousness itself. This allows the masters of suspicion to expand the field of consciousness by making conscious what was once (for lack of a better phrase) unconscious to false consciousness (Ricoeur, 1965, pp. 42–43).

In short, the hermeneutics of suspicion owed to these three masters is a project of demystification, revealing through the art of interpretation the hidden meaning that is concealed by the illusions of (false) consciousness and of which this (false) consciousness is not aware. In terms of Freud in particular, to whom we are confining our present discussion, this implies that the psychoanalyst treats the analysand’s conscious speech as masking some deeper unconscious meaning, which must be deciphered by the analyst’s method of interpretation. In so doing, the analyst seeks, according to Ricoeur, to make what was unconscious conscious and, thereby, expand the analysand’s field of consciousness, which supposedly leads to a process of healing (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 43).

Now we can readily see how this hermeneutics of suspicion, this so-called new art of interpretation that Ricoeur attributes to Freud, plays itself out in the popular opinion of Freud’s method. Freud, it is said, is suspicious of the idea that our conscious speech means what it says. As such, Freud will seek to go beyond these illusions of conscious speech in order to find the (almost invariably sexual) truth behind it. You think that’s a cigar in your dream? Well, I’ve got news for you....

### **Foucault’s Hermeneutics of Suspicion of Freud’s *Scientia Sexualis***

While Ricoeur certainly sought to valorize Freud for his so-called hermeneutics of suspicion, it is curious that his contemporary, Michel Foucault, wielded this same suspicious attitude against Freud in order to cast suspicion on Freud’s project itself. In a text that has become widely known for its supposedly ruthless critique of psychoanalysis and its methods,[2] *Histoire de la sexualité I*, Foucault articulated an understanding of Freud’s method of interpretation that echoes what we have just developed here under the name of a hermeneutics of suspicion. However, as we will see, Foucault will do so not to valorize Freud’s psychoanalytic practice, but rather in order to discredit the novelty of it and to raise serious concerns over the allegedly dubious political ambitions motivating it.

Already as early as 1964, in a text entitled “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” Foucault began to characterize Freud’s project as one of hermeneutics, and the consequences of this characterization appear to be much more ambivalent than those that Ricoeur would publish a year later. Foucault, like Ricoeur, will salute Freud’s advancement of hermeneutics when he groups him together with Marx and Nietzsche as the three thinkers who “put us back in the presence of a new possibility for interpretations,” founding “afresh the possibility of a hermeneutics” (Foucault, 1994, p. 566) Yet, at the same time, Foucault’s sandwiching of Freud between his two hermeneutic bedfellows seems to be an attempt to mitigate the revolutionary effects of Freud’s discovery of the unconscious and the psychoanalytic method itself. By turning psychoanalysis into just another hermeneutics, Foucault attempts to undercut its novelty.[3] Furthermore, by the end of “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx”, Foucault seeks to trap psychoanalysis in a never-ending game of giving interpretations of interpretations from which Freud (and we) can never escape.[4] Thus, whereas Ricoeur saw in the hermeneutics of suspicion a new reign of unconscious Truth revealed to consciousness, Foucault sees an endless chain of interpretations of interpretations of interpretations, which never arrives at the unconscious itself.

But if Foucault’s ambivalence in “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” holds out hope for finding some sort of novelty in Freud’s psychoanalytic method, by the time his *Histoire de la sexualité I* is published in 1976 Foucault has become entirely suspicious of Freud’s method of interpretation. For the Foucault of *Histoire de la*

*sexualité I*, the manifest content, as it were, of Freud's texts (that is, what Freud said or wrote) is completely ignored in favor of discovering what Foucault believes to be the hidden motivations behind Freud's work.[5]

In Part 3 of *Histoire de la sexualité I*, entitled "Scientia Sexualis," Foucault argues that far from being a novel way of producing truth, the origins of psychoanalysis can be traced back to Catholic confessional practices, which for centuries was the paradigmatic model for producing truth about sexuality in the West. Foucault is eager to point out all the various parallels between Catholic confessional practices and psychoanalysis: for example, just as the sinner confesses their sins to a religious authority, which discloses some truth about the sinner; the psychoanalytic patient must, or is even forced to, confess the secrets of their sexuality to the analyst, revealing some truth about the patient. As such, Freudian psychoanalysis did not mark some "new rationality," but instead was part of a much larger development of the "interplay of truth and sex" (Foucault, 1976, p. 76). If there is anything at all novel about psychoanalysis, according to Foucault, it is that it represents the pinnacle of the historical development that sought to turn the production of the truth about sex through confessional practices into a science.

This "sciencification" (for lack of a better term) of the discourses concerning sexuality took place, according to Foucault, in five characteristic ways; the first four of which will concern us presently.

- First, there had to be a "clinical codification" to make the patient speak. Foucault claims that psychoanalysts had to elaborate a set of rules and create a space, which mirrored other confessional practices, in which patients were provoked to speak and speak, specifically, about their sexualities (Foucault, 1976, p. 87).
- Second, a "general and diffuse causality" of sexuality was postulated, meaning that sexuality was now regarded as "polymorphous" (Foucault, 1976, pp. 87–88). By conceiving sexuality as polymorphous, practitioners of this *scientia sexualis* could detect sexuality everywhere. As such, the field of signs that supposedly expressed and marked sexuality was expanded almost infinitely. Practically everything the patient said or did was to be construed as a confession and interpretable as a sign of sexuality.
- Third, a "principle of latency intrinsic to sexuality" was established (Foucault, 1976, pp. 88–89). Not only was sexuality something that was polymorphous and everywhere detectable, but it also became something latent. In other words, sexuality became something that we kept hidden from others and, more importantly, from ourselves. As such, our sexuality was only discoverable by those who were able to interpret our confessions and, as a result, interpret our unconscious wishes, desires, and fantasies. Our sexuality is there; it is all around us, but it does not appear to us because it only appears as such to the practitioners of the *scientia sexualis*.
- Fourth, and most importantly for our purposes, Foucault claims that a "method of interpretation" had to be developed in order to consolidate the power relation between the one confessing and the one listening to the confession, who was able, in turn, to understand the truth hidden in the confession (Foucault, 1976, pp. 89–90). Because sexuality was so diffuse, but still hidden from the subject supposed to confess, a method had to be created in order to decipher the secret meaning and truth behind the confession. In this way, according to Foucault, the analyst became the "master of truth," the one who knows how to properly interpret the signs of sexuality, and his function was a decidedly "hermeneutic function". (Foucault, 1976, p. 89)

Although to a much different end, Foucault also seeks to turn Freud into a hermeneut of suspicion because sexuality itself has become "an object of great suspicion" (Foucault, 1976, p. 93). Through the sciencification of confessional practices in the psychoanalytic clinic, the patient's speech can no longer be taken at face value precisely because the analyst is the only one who can properly interpret the signs of sexuality that remain hidden from the patient. As such, Foucault portrays the analyst as a figure who harbors an extreme suspicion about what the patient, always searching for some concealed sexual meaning in anything and everything that the patient says or does.

Of course, for Foucault the truth produced about sexuality through these confessional practices is never neutral; it is always bound up in the same power structures that produce it (Foucault, 1976, pp. 82–83). As

such, Foucault aligns these confessional practices, including psychoanalysis, with dubious political projects such as public health initiatives that seek to “eliminate those with defects, degenerates, and bastardized populations” and has “justified the racisms of the state” (Foucault, 1976, p. 73)[6] Thus, Foucault is able to find behind the psychoanalytic method of interpretation *qua* pinnacle of the *scientia sexualis*, a hidden motivation that is tied to practices with problematic aims and even violent political programs.

But if Foucault finds a secret motivation hidden behind Freud’s method of psychoanalytic interpretation, it is because he approaches Freud with the very same hermeneutics of suspicion that he attributes to Freud’s work. It is only by virtue of approaching Freud’s work with great suspicion that Foucault finds himself in a position to go beyond Freud’s word to the supposed secret truth hidden behind the method. Throughout the entirety of the text, Foucault refuses to take Freud at his word; nor does he even seem to care what Freud himself has to say about his psychoanalytic practice or the method that founds it (as Freud is not directly quoted a single time in the entirety of his *Histoire de la sexualité I*).[7] By remaining so suspicious of Freud and his project, Foucault is ultimately only able to see suspicion in it. However, a different understanding of Freud’s method of interpretation promises to open itself up if we do not approach it with such suspicion.

### **The Work of Interpretation in Freud’s Method**

Throughout his career, Jean Laplanche constantly and vehemently insisted that the psychoanalytic method of interpretation was not a hermeneutics.[8] In order to avoid and combat such disastrous mischaracterizations of Freud’s psychoanalytic method of interpretation, Laplanche was adamant that psychoanalysis was always in direct opposition and conflict with hermeneutic practices of all stripes. In fact, late in his career, he would go so far as to declare that psychoanalysis is an “anti-hermeneutics” (Laplanche, 1999). This was certainly meant to be a provocative and polemical claim. After all, how could psychoanalysis—a practice whose key methodological cornerstone is the *interpretation* of dreams—even dare to call itself an anti-hermeneutics?

Yet, for Laplanche, it is precisely the very method itself of psychoanalytic interpretation that, in its form and its function, works counter to all hermeneutics. In every single one of his polemical encounters with hermeneutics, Laplanche is at pains to emphasize that the fundamental fault line separating psychoanalysis from hermeneutics is their respective *methods* of interpretation (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 23; 1992b, p. 412; 1999, p. 244). What is at stake, then, in Laplanche’s constant preoccupation with confronting hermeneutics is a much larger struggle to defend the originality and radicality of Freud’s method of interpretation—a method, he argues, that all hermeneutics, however wittingly or unwittingly, suppresses.

In an earlier article published in 1968, entitled “*Interpréter [avec] Freud*” (or, “Interpreting Freud with Freud” as it has been translated into English), Laplanche sets out to sketch the basic methodological considerations guiding and animating his own return to Freud. With the publication of this article, the question of method—of *how* precisely to return to Freud, that is, of *how* to interpret Freud—becomes the privileged point of departure for his engagement with Freud’s work. In this article, Laplanche seeks not only to elaborate Freud’s ingenious method of psychoanalytic interpretation—underscoring its singularity and originality—but also begins to articulate the specificity of his own approach to Freud’s work. These two projects are, and will continue to be, for Laplanche, inextricably and necessarily woven together: to return to Freud—to interpret Freud [*with Freud*—demands a method of interpreting Freud’s work that is in accord with the latter’s own method of interpretation.

In this fiercely polemical ‘68 manifesto, Laplanche seeks to carve out his own position against any and every non-Freudian mode of interpretation, which he subsumes under the heading of ‘hermeneutics’ (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 22). For Laplanche, the term ‘hermeneutics’ comes to represent any interpretive process of construction, of synthesis, or of *translation*. By taking some given, some manifest element (whether it be a sign, a gesture, a work, spoken word, etc.) as the bearer of meaning, hermeneutics treats this given, according to Laplanche, as a text to be read, translated and, in this way, replaced by another more authentic

text (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 22). As such, hermeneutics finds itself in the business of finding meaning, of *giving interpretations*. In other words, by providing interpretations of the given, hermeneutics seeks to decipher the latent meaning behind it and translate it for our conscious understanding.

In “*Interpréter [avec] Freud*,” Laplanche has two primary hermeneutic targets in his crosshairs. On the one hand, outside the psychoanalytic clinic, he takes aim at the philosophical tradition of hermeneutics that seeks to turn Freudian psychoanalysis into just another hermeneutics amongst many. According to Laplanche, these philosophical appropriations of Freudian psychoanalysis only serve to translate it into the “contingent alterity” of an external discourse, thereby suppressing its most groundbreaking and revolutionary insights (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 31). Specifically, Laplanche takes an explicit swipe at Ricoeur’s *De l’interprétation* (and we can now see how the later Foucault takes things even further in his *Histoire de la sexualité I*). By transplanting Freud’s work into the philosophical realm, philosophers like Ricoeur and Foucault completely misunderstand the specificity that makes Freudian psychoanalysis what it is and the unique object around which it articulates itself. On the other hand, within the psychoanalytic clinic itself, Laplanche takes aim at certain Freudianisms that treat psychoanalytic interpretation like an “open book reading” of neurotic symptoms (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 23). Such open book readings give credence to the popular opinion about psychoanalysis according to which everything an analysand says and does fully discloses some unconscious meaning to the analyst, which can be subjected to the most savage of wild analyses. In other words, the “open book reading” unfoundedly and unmethodically allows the analyst to interpret the supposed hidden meaning behind any and all of the patient’s utterances and actions.

However, it is important to note that already in his own lifetime Freud found himself struggling against what Laplanche will later call “hermeneutic” approaches within psychoanalysis. Understanding Freud’s own polemics will help us further understand the specificity of the psychoanalytic method of interpretation at stake for Laplanche. When, for example, returning to the question of the interpretation of dreams in his *Introductory Lectures*, he cautions his audience:

I suspect that at bottom you consider that the ideal method of dream-interpretation is by filling in the meaning of symbols and that you would like to discard the technique of obtaining associations to the dream; and I am anxious to disabuse you of this damaging mistake. (Freud, 1916a, p. 186; 1916b, p. 190)

For many, Freud’s method of interpreting dreams amounts to what he calls here this so-called “ideal method of dream interpretation,” according to which the analyst takes the content of the dream as symbols bearing a certain, pre-given meaning. In this way, the analyst, suspicious of the manifest content of the dream, treats the often absurd and confusing elements of it as a text that can be read, fully comprehended, and then translated back to the patient in their everyday conscious language. In other words, the truth contained in the illusions of the manifest dream can be deciphered and translated into a more authentic text for consciousness. This hermeneutically inspired way of interpreting dreams amounts to a “damaging mistake” for Freud because it does not do justice to the patient, the analytic process, or the dream itself.

But how do we do justice to the dream and the method that interprets it? In order to do so, we must first understand the nature of the dream and the method by which Freud endeavors to interpret it.

For Freud, dreams are the result of a curious psychical process called the dream-work, which is responsible for transforming any thoughts that threaten to disturb sleep into the manifest content that constitutes the dreamer’s experience of dreaming. Through processes of condensation, displacement, and the mysterious regressive movement of thoughts into hallucinatory images, the dream-work seeks to *translate* these otherwise disturbing thoughts into the seemingly nonsensical and absurd, but nonetheless more benign, form of a dream:

The dream-work puts these thoughts into another form, and it is a strange fact that in making this translation [*Übersetzung*] (this rendering [*Übertragung*] into another script or language) these

methods of merging or combining are brought into use. (Freud, 1916a, p. 172; 1916b, p. 176)

It is, in fact, the dream-work that is responsible for translation by taking disturbing thoughts, transforming them, and making them agreeable to the dreamer. Thus, what eventually becomes the latent dream thoughts—those once disturbing thoughts that are now translated into the manifest content—only become so (that is, only become latent) secondarily in the dream-work's curious process of translation. In other words, a latent dream thought only *becomes latent*—and as such *unconscious* for the dreamer who “does not know that he knows it and for that reason thinks he does not know it (Freud, 1916a, p. 101; 1916b, p. 105)”—once the dream-work has succeeded in obfuscating the now-latent thought in its peculiar work of translation.

However, the problem—the problem which demands the psychoanalytic, as opposed to a hermeneutic, method of interpretation—is that the translation performed by the dream-work is a never a simple, straightforward one. It does not disclose itself to an open book reading. This is because all the dream-work has at its disposal are the mechanisms of condensation and displacement, so it never produces a one-to-one, word-for-word, symbol-for-symbol translation of the latent thoughts into the manifest content:

Thus the dream-work carries out a very unusual kind of transcription [*Transkription*] of the dream-thoughts: it is not a word-for-word or sign-for-sign translation [*U?bersetzung*]... it is something different and far more complicated. (Freud, 1916a, p. 173; 1916b, p. 177)

Instead of creating a simple translation, the dream-work creates a mess of complex, complicated, and overdetermined manifest elements that cover over the now unconscious latent dream thoughts. The dream looks less like an open book and more like, as Freud famously states, a composite photograph in which “separate elements that have been condensed together” and is “as a rule a blurred and vague image” (Freud, 1916a, p. 173; 1916b, p. 176).

Thus, according to Freud, psychoanalysis does not seek to find the hidden meaning *of the manifest content* by “filling in the meaning of symbols” or some other operation (Freud, 1916a, p. 114; 1916b, p. 118). Although this “ideal method of dream-interpretation” has firmly taken root in popular consciousness as what psychoanalytic interpretation amounts to (as if what Freud ultimately left us with was a “Translating Dream Symbolism for Dummies” handbook), Freud constantly combatted such caricatures. To repudiate these hermeneutic caricatures of psychoanalysis, Freud adamantly stressed the *work* and the *type of work* that goes into the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams:

And let me remind you once again that the work which transforms the latent dream into the manifest one is called the *dream-work*. The work [*Arbeit*] which proceeds in the contrary direction, which endeavors to arrive at the latent dream from the manifest one, is our *work of interpretation* [*Deutungsarbeit*]. This work of interpretation seeks to undo [*aufheben*] the dream-work. (Freud, 1916a, p. 170; 1916b, p. 174)

What psychoanalytic interpretation seeks to do is, indeed, work contrary to the translation of the dream-work. The analyst works with the dreamer through the manifest content of their dream in order to undo the translation provided by the dream-work and arrive at the latent, now unconscious, thoughts.

For Laplanche, what Freud ultimately discovered in his unique way of interpreting dreams, his *Traumdeutung*, was a method—a rigorous and systematic way—of *undoing*, not deciphering, the manifest content of a dream in order to arrive at the latent unconscious thoughts. According to Laplanche, the work of dream interpretation becomes the guiding principle of the psychoanalytic method itself, which operates according to two fundamental methodological demands that make up a “methodological whole” (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 25). The first of these methodological demands is the famous rule of *free association* on the part of the analysand, according to which the analysand is supposed to put into speech whatever comes to mind. Of course, the ‘freedom’ of the free association is a curious sort of freedom. While the analysand is ‘free’ to say whatever comes to mind, this comes with the difficult mandate to say *whatever* comes to mind—no matter

how seemingly trivial, absurd, or deplorable and in spite of any resistances (Freud, 1916a, p. 115; 1916b, p. 119).

As for the other side of this methodological whole, the analyst must *listen* to this free association without losing hold of it. Freud characterized this second methodological demand as the rule of *free-floating attention* on the part of the analyst. However, in “Interpréter [avec] Freud,” Laplanche takes up this rule and recasts it in a slightly different light, relabeling it instead the “rule of equal floating attention” (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 25). Seeking to combat certain hermeneutic trends within psychoanalysis (which abuse free floating attention as the justification for freely cherry-picking anything one likes out of the analysand’s free association as if it were all unconscious material ready to be translated into conscious thought[9]), Laplanche shifts the emphasis away from *freedom to equality*. In this way, the analyst must treat everything the analysand says equally, insofar as no aspect of the analysand’s free association is to be privileged, or sought out, in advance as bearing special unconscious meaning. The analyst resists listening for certain utterances rather than others and refuses to anticipate or dictate where the free association will lead.

Taken as a methodological whole, then, which amounts to the *work* done by *both* the analyst *and* the analysand *together*, the psychoanalytic method becomes an immanent and non-teleological process. Neither side knows in advance where the free association will lead, but both remain committed to following it wherever it goes. In this way, the entire process is animated by the fact that neither the analysand nor the analyst *know*, only presupposing that there is something there *to know*.

### **Analysis, Pointing to the Unconscious**

According to Laplanche, the psychoanalytic method can be construed as something like a “hyperbolic” and “deviant” form of Cartesian analysis (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 25). Like Cartesian analysis, psychoanalysis is, above all, a process of decomposition, a process of “dismantling” the object of inquiry (here, the manifest text *qua* chain of free association) into “discrete elements” (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 26; 2014, p. 52).[10] Laplanche returns to this point when—in revisiting the relation between psychoanalysis and hermeneutics in his 1994 article, “*L’interprétation entre déterminisme et hermeneutique*”—he writes that “...it is necessary for me to insist only on this: that psychoanalysis—along the chains of free association—*analyzes*, i.e. it decomposes, leads back to discrete elements (Laplanche, 1992b, p. 412).” There we have it, psychoanalysis analyzes; it is an analysis, from the ancient Greek ????????—in the sense that it breaks apart, decomposes, and dismantles the chain of free association.

But what does this process of analyzing the free association lead us to?

According to Laplanche, the process of analysis works to point us to the unconscious. Throughout his work, Laplanche is at pains to remind us that the term Freud used to capture his unique method of psychoanalytic interpretation was the German term *Deutung*. *Deutung*, according to Laplanche, is much more realist and less hermeneutic than the French word *interprétation* (and by extension the English cognate, interpretation):

*Deutung* is more realist... For Freud, to interpret is to go from a manifest text to the latent text on which it is founded; it is to traverse backwards along the paths that have led to the production of the phenomenon. (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 23)

*Deutung*, then, is the movement, the work, *der Deutungsarbeit*, that moves from the manifest text to the latent text. It traverses in reverse, through a radical process of dismantling, closely following the paths backwards from the manifest text of the analysand’s free association to the unconscious:

To interpret is to hang on, without letting go, to the tail of the discourse, satisfied to see no further than the next step, but animated by the sole certainty that the traces of the game-hunter will end up by outlining, through the coming together of their innumerable interlacings, the *signifying knots* that



punctuate a certain unconscious sequence. (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 26)

Psychoanalytic interpretation does not seek to provide a translation of hidden unconscious thoughts to the analysand. It seeks, instead, to rigorously follow the chain of associations without forcing them in one direction or the other. Then, through dismantling the manifest text *qua* free association, psychoanalytic interpretation begins to *point* to places at which the patient's discourse begins to tie itself up into signifying knots that punctuate unconscious sequences. And it is precisely in these knots, where the unconscious speaks.

What Freud's method of interpretation is meant to do, then, is to listen carefully and point out these moments when the unconscious speaks. After all, as Laplanche himself points out, the German verb *deuten*, from which *Deutung* comes, means something like "to point" or "to point out":

The German term *deuten*, *Deutung* is here much more demonstrative, and much less "hermeneutic" than our French word "*interprétation*": *deuten auf* is to indicate with your finger or your eyes, "to point" borrowing this term from Lacanese. (Laplanche, 1992b, p. 412)

Through a process of immanently following and dismantling the free associations, psychoanalytic interpretation *points* to the unconscious. Thus, if Freud does, indeed, find sexuality everywhere, as the popular opinion holds, it is not because he posits it as the hidden meaning behind all of our thoughts, utterances, and actions. Rather, it is because we are talking about it all the time, whether we realize it or not, and Freud is just pointing it out to us.

As we have seen, the hermeneut of suspicion seeks to journey beyond, behind, or beneath some supposedly false consciousness in order to find the hidden meaning underlying it and translate it back to consciousness. However, in so doing, the hermeneut only succeeds in shutting the unconscious up by speaking for it and providing their own hermeneutic translation of the manifest text. On the other hand, the psychoanalyst (who is guided by the two rules of the psychoanalytic method) seeks to follow the associative chains in the patient's speech in order to find the points at which the unconscious speaks for itself. According to Laplanche, then, this makes psychoanalysis a project with a realist bent, which is always predicated on the realism of the object around which it articulates itself—namely, the unconscious (Laplanche & Leclaire, 1981). As such, the meaning of the unconscious does not need to be deciphered from the patient's conscious speech because it is already there, speaking for itself.

If interpretation in the hermeneutic tradition amounts, as Laplanche claims, to a constructive process of giving interpretations, or of *translating*, Freud's *Deutung* is the complete opposite. According to Laplanche, hermeneutics works—like the dream-work itself—on the side of repression (Laplanche, 1999, p. 250), sedimenting translations over the unconscious, burying it, suppressing it, and shutting it up (Laplanche, 1999, p. 252). Psychoanalysis properly speaking, on the other hand, proceeds in the opposite direction. It is a process of undoing, of analyzing, of dismantling these translations in order to arrive at the unconscious. In other words, it is a process of *de-translation* in the service of letting the unconscious speak.

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## Notes:

[1] Note about citations: All texts are cited in the original language and the translations are my own, except for James Strachey's translations of Freud. In those cases, I cite Strachey's translation first and the German original second.

[2] See, for example, Yeng (2008) and Allen (2018).

[3] In "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," Foucault in a surprising act of confession seems to divulge the dream behind his repeated attempts to declare Freud a hermeneut. Indeed, Foucault begins this 1964 talk by revealing a dream of his: "In reality, behind these themes," Foucault confesses, "there is a dream that it could one day be possible to make a sort of general Corpus, an Encyclopedia of all the known techniques of interpretation from the Greek grammarians up to the present day" (Foucault, 1994, p. 564). By situating Freud's method of interpretation as just one entry in this Encyclopedia-with-a-capital-E of all the known techniques of interpretation in the Western world, Foucault seeks to dissolve any revolutionary impetus of psychoanalysis into a much larger historical, or historicist, context. Nineteenth century hermeneutics, however influential, and however epoch defining, is just one system of interpretation among many, of which the entry on Freud would constitute a single, paltry subsection.

[4] According to Foucault, Freud's method of interpretation was never able to arrive at a "trauma," a hard kernel of interpretation, an originary signified, a point at which interpretation would bottom out" (Foucault, 1994, p. 571). As a result, all the psychoanalyst is able to arrive at through interpretation, according to Foucault, are the patient's fantasies, which are themselves already interpretations (Foucault, 1994, p. 571). In the end, psychoanalysis *qua* hermeneutics becomes an infinite play of giving interpretations of the patient's interpretations, which are already themselves interpretations. Since there is nothing to interpret but interpretations, hermeneutics throws us, as interpreters ourselves, into a perpetual game of mirrors, in which we are forced to return to Nietzsche (and Freud and Marx) in order to give our own interpretations with the same techniques of interpretation they put forward. As interpreters ourselves, we are forever trapped in Foucault's fun house of hermeneutics, where every hallway leads us again back to the triumvirate of nineteenth century hermeneutics in a perpetual game of mirrors (Foucault, 1994, p. 571). Foucault confuses the potentially interminable character of the analysis with a game of mirrors that never reaches the unconscious.

[5] It must be said that Foucault does not cite or quote Freud at any point in the *Histoire de la sexualité*, where Freud is mentioned by name only 12 times. As such, many commentators have pointed out that the Freud who Foucault seeks to critique in the History of Sexuality is very much a caricature of Freudian psychoanalysis (Ali, 2019, pp. 18–19; Copjec, 2010, p. 69). Mladen Dolar puts it most harshly when he writes: “If *History of Sexuality* is an attempt at a genealogy of psychoanalysis, then this is a genealogy singularly devoid of any statements, énoncés. He blatantly imputed so many views to this opponent that neither Freud nor Lacan would ever dream of espousing” (Dolar, 2019, pp. 44–45). While not without its merit, Foucault ends up with a book that critiques something like the popular opinion of psychoanalysis, and not psychoanalysis itself.

[6] Though, again, Foucault seems to have an ambivalent relation to psychoanalysis. In the last Chapter, Foucault expressly states that in theory and practice psychoanalysis was opposed to fascism precisely because Freud grounded his psychoanalytic practice in the law so as to oppose it to the “surge of racism” that was contemporary with it (Foucault, 1976, p. 198). But then he goes on to call this understanding of psychoanalysis and its supposed subversive effects a “historical retro-version” (Foucault, 1976, p. 198).

[7] See the footnote above.

[8] Laplanche’s polemics against hermeneutics within psychoanalysis itself date at least as far back as a 1959 paper coauthored with Serge Leclaire, “L’inconscient: une étude psychanalytique.” Although in 1959 Laplanche does not explicitly employ the term ‘hermeneutics,’ it is certainly there under the heading of what he calls the “attitude of simultaneous translation.” So-called psychoanalysts who subscribe to this attitude of simultaneous translation treat everything the analysand says and does as a “pure material”—i.e., as an isolated, self-sufficient text unto itself bearing some hidden unconscious meaning (Laplanche & Leclaire, 1981, p. 269). In this way, the unconscious is considered to be everywhere, always lurking behind every single utterance; and all the analyst needs to do is read this manifest text, decipher its unconscious meaning, and then translate it into a more authentic text. For these so-called analysts, the key to translating the latent unconscious meaning of the manifest text has already been provided by Freud, or Klein, or Jung, or even Marx or Heidegger—whatever one’s favorite flavor of “unconscious language” may be (Laplanche & Leclaire, 1981, pp. 269–270). These supposed keys to translation give the impression that the analyst knows in advance how to translate the unconscious meaning of the analysand’s manifest text, such that they can give their own interpretation of it without any further psychoanalytic work—forgetting that it is precisely this work, the work of the method, that founds psychoanalytic interpretation.

[9] See (Laplanche & Leclaire, 1981, p. 270).

[10] This term, “discrete elements,” seems, at first glance, potentially misleading. Laplanche himself takes account of this potential deception, when in “*Interpréter [avec] Freud*,” he cautions that: “the term ‘element’ itself must not deceive us: in a dream there are no *partes extra partes* subject to simple delimitation; these elements are not signifying atoms [*atomes signifiantes*] or even ‘distinctive’ atoms in the sense used by linguistics theory *vis à vis* articulated discourse (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 25).” For Laplanche, while the Cartesian neatly and cleanly divides the object into its “natural and simple parts,” situating them side-by-side such that they can be examined one-by-one and conveniently synthesized back into the whole, the elements

of the free association, whatever they may be, are much different. These elements admit of no such simple delimitation, and they cannot be reduced to distinctive, signifying atoms of meaning. Due to the object of inquiry and the analyst's commitment to equal floating attention, there can be no "natural and simple parts" in psychoanalytic interpretation. However, this does not imply an infinite divisibility and analyzability, as, for example, John Fletcher and Nicholas Ray have suggested (Fletcher & Ray, 2014, p. 21). Rather, what Laplanche is primarily concerned with in the above passage is the idea that there is no "simple delimitation" of the elements decided in advance. According to Laplanche, the lines of decomposition along which the text is to be broken down are not in any way determined or drawn up by analyst beforehand: "What Freud called *displacement of psychical intensity* or a *transvaluation of all psychical values* in dreams is nothing other than the theoretical justification of the rule that the fragmentation of the signifying unity [*morcellement de l'unité signifiante*] along all imaginable lines of division, along apparently less natural borders that might exist (Laplanche, 1992a, p. 25)."

## **Bio:**

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