

Affective Matter: The Unconscious between Brain and Mind

Vinicio Busacchi

(Faculty of Humanities / University of Cagliari - via Is Mirrionis 1, 09123 Cagliari, Italy)

Abstract

The problem of affect and affectivity plays a significant role in psychoanalysis, both at a theoretical and therapeutic level. In Freud's first interpretation of hysterical symptoms affect is considered as a certain amount of energy, and this already mirrors its aporetic intertwining with the 'reality' of the unconscious. For Paul Ricoeur, Freud's psychoanalysis has a double, irreducible theoretical-procedural register, *energetistic* and *hermeneutical*; and his research into the unconscious reality reveals the significance and consequences of this double/dualistic approach. A combination of Husserl's phenomenological and Ricoeur's hermeneutical approaches helps us to find a "third, mediative way", in which the unconscious can be reinterpreted as a "affective matter", that is a mid-way reality placed *between* corporality and non-corporality, body and mind, natural causality and experiential/existential meaning. The notion of "affective matter" seems to indicate a sort of median, hybrid dimension of the unconscious as a "sphere of the unreflective" and as a "sphere of the instinctual" which is, a formula for rejecting Freud's *realism* of the unconscious without denying the instinctual and transformative *reality* underlying the life of consciousness. The problem to be solved is how the idea of transformation can be applied to the domain of identity transformation. I tackle transformation starting from its general reference to the process of the *symbolic appropriation* of reality.

Introduction

The problem of affect and affectivity plays a significant role in psychoanalysis, both at a theoretical and therapeutic level. In Freud's first interpretation of hysterical symptoms affect is considered as a certain amount of energy, and this already mirrors its aporetic intertwining with the 'reality' of the unconscious¹. On the one side, it is true that, in his Metapsychology, Freud identifies the charge of affect with instinct and explains that only ideational representation, not the affection, is found at the unconscious level. This means that affectivity is something concerning the preconscious and conscious psychic life. However, on the other side, the existence of a 'representative' dimension within the unconscious opens the way of a dual or bifacial re-reading of it, beyond the biological-organic constitution which Freud assigned to the *Unbewusste*. (As is known, Freud does not take a clear-cut position in this regard: his project of a unilaterally neuro-biological definition of the unconscious decays with the abandonment of his youthful project of a psychology for neurologists [1895]. Yet it remains true that throughout his work he thinks of the psyche in terms of a psychobiological reality [see, for ex., Sulloway 1983]. This finds confirmation in Freud's final model of mental apparatus, where unconscious [i.e. the *Es*] does not refer only to the *quality* of a certain mental state nor does it have only the meaning of a *system*, nor is it valid only in a *dynamic* sense for the "struggle of forces" between contrary contents: the *Es* is a reality; it is the "reservoir" both for instinctual drives and desires and for [dynamically] repressed contents [see Sandler, Holder et. al. 1997]).

For Paul Ricoeur, Freud's psychoanalysis has a double, irreducible theoretical-procedural register, *energetistic* and *hermeneutical* (Ricoeur 1970); and his research about the unconscious

¹ As Laplanche and Pontalis explain, the notion of affect is recognised as having a central role in Breuer and Freud's essay on hysteria (*Studien über Hysterie* 1895), where the origin of hysteric symptom is identified with a blocked affection, that is an affective excitation connected to a meaningful event, which did not find an adequate discharge (see Laplanche, Pontalis 1967: t. 1, v. affect).

reality reveals the significance and the consequences of this double/dualistic approach. A combination of Husserl's phenomenological and Ricoeur's hermeneutical approaches helps us to find a "third, mediative way", in which the unconscious can be reinterpreted as an "affective matter", that is a mid-way reality placed *between* corporality and non-corporality, body and mind, natural causality and experiential/existential meaning.

This path does not pave the way for a new phenomenological-existential approach to the unconscious but rather to a multidisciplinary approach to the complexity of the unconscious as a *reality* operating both on a psychic level and on a neuro-biological level, and both on an intrapsychic level and on a relational, intersubjective level. This multidisciplinary approach can represent the most concrete and exact response to the complexity of the human being's psycho-organic life, characterised by complex and varied processes. As Wilma Bucci points out among others, human beings possess multiple forms of information processing (Bucci 2009: 29). These forms are not perfectly integrated as they configure "different states" and "different systems" variously implicated both in the assumption and processing of sensory and bodily information as in the processing and expression of inner, psychic and sensory-motor contents.

An approach to the unconscious

A theoretical approach of a phenomenological-hermeneutic type can reject both psychologistic and neuroscientist reductionism. There is a concrete possibility of conceiving the unconscious in its complexity through a plural approach to its reality. This is possible starting from the contemporary developments of research in the neuroscientific field. As Vittorio Gallese observes, "psychoanalysis has always identified the body as the main source for feeding psychic representations. Some recent developments in cognitive neuroscience research have [...] highlighted the importance of the body in action and of the sensory-motor systems in the constitution of the representation of reality" (Gallese 2009: 198; en. tr. V.B.).

The most recent neuroscientific research restores significance to Freud's youthful project of a *Entwurf einer Psychologie für den Neurologen*, that is the idea of a formation of the unconscious at the level of memory. In particular, research in the field of infant research and around the idea of implicit memory confirms the "structuring force" of psychic experiences which (1) are "affectively charged" and (2) mainly take place in the period of psychic development. This research also confirms the correctness of Freud's youthful intuition, according to which nothing recorded in the mind is destroyed, rather it remains as a memory trace, at the level of what today is called unconscious memory (see Moccia 2009: 115 f). This deep level of brain and memory functioning also includes the development and structuring of mutual affective modulation skills of primary bonds. As Solano points out, "the idea is in the psychoanalytical tradition (Winnicott, Bion, Tustin, Gaddini) that the ability to contain, modulate, think and process affects is closely connected to the experiences of understanding, sharing and mirroring affective states by primary objects in the early stages of life. [...] The child comes to contain and regulate his negative affects through the internalisation of this transformative function of the mother" (Solano 2009: 115,116; en. tr. V.B.). This process of internalisation can certainly be placed in parallel with the idea of habit according to the meaning identified by Bateson (Bateson 1967). This meaning opens the way to an understanding of the unconscious that is also valid under a systemic approach (see Casadio 2018) and, therefore, cannot be reduced to the psychological or psycho-biological meaning alone.

Of course, the notion of "trace" remains highly metaphorical. Among the various scholars, Ricoeur has focused on the topic, showing in particular the coexistence of a material dimension and a factual/experiential dimension in the semantics of the trace (see Ricoeur 2004). The notion of trace, in fact, applies both to *mnesic trace* and to *historical trace*, i.e. both as a

biochemical mark and as an experiential mark [= sign of an experience, remembrance]. This distinction goes back to the difference between Aristotle and Plato in understanding memory as a *remembrance* rather than an *impression* ('impression' like from a seal on wax). Ricoeur connects this discourse to the problem of personal identity, which, far from being able to be defined in purely substantial or purely psychological terms, sees the link as close (1) between the *natural* level of identity and the historical-experiential level of the *person*, and (2) between the subjective plane and the relational plane (see Busacchi, Martini 2020). It is no coincidence that Ricoeur has intertwined his theory of the "capable human being" (*homme capable*) with a reinterpretation of psychic life according to Freud's psychoanalysis through a key that accentuates the dimension of the relationship and of recognition (Ricoeur 2005). He does so first of all by deepening Heinz Kohut's research (Kohut 1984) on *consciousness*, *ego* and *self*, and the attention he dedicates to the relationship with the psychic and to the structuring capacity of the intersubjective relationship (see Ricoeur 1986).

Toward a new Metapsychology?

The notion of trace remains as metaphorical but asserts itself in its effective capacity to reflect something intrinsically dual, something that cannot be conceptually determined in a unilateral way (under penalty of a reductionist positioning). On this dual dimension, which cannot be reduced to the biological or the psychic alone, the understanding of the unconscious in its essentiality is maintained. This is how the possibility of a new, *psychobiological* synthesis approach to the unconscious opens up. This is what, for example, the American psychoanalyst Wilma Bucci proposes. Bucci's work is an attempt to profile a renewed Metapsychology *through* contributions from cognitive science and neurobiology. Bucci develops an *integrated* model based on a conception of psychic functioning centred on the category of multiplicity, with reference to a new psychobiological order to which the sphere of the so-called *sub-symbolic* pertains (Bucci 2009). The symbolic is further articulated into verbal symbolic, i.e. the productions concerning the sphere of speech and language, and non-verbal symbolic, in which imaginative activity finds expression at the level of sensoriality (mainly visual). This is the field of elaboration and re-elaboration, representation and manipulation of meaning according to the different expressive-representational modalities of sensorial-psychic life. The sub-symbolic system, connected to the previous one, already manifests a function of processing and re-processing of information (Bucci 2009: 30). What is of interest in psychoanalysis for Bucci is the centrality of sub-symbolic elaboration in the processing of emotional information and in emotional communication (Bucci 2009: 31). It is an aspect (by quoting Daniel Stern) that she develops with reference to infant research, and which again brings us back to the relational dimension and to the "dialectic" between verbal/non-verbal and the affect. The phenomenon of "affective attunement" described by Stern is essentially a type of continuous and analogical emotional communication (*ibidem*), i.e. according to the modality of sub-symbolic representation/expression. Bucci underlines the distinction between sub-symbolic elaboration processes and between primary process: unlike the primary process studied in psychoanalysis, sub-symbolic processes are not chaotic, they are not oriented toward the satisfaction of desire and they are not segregated from reality. Sub-symbolic processing can take place both inside and outside awareness (*ibidem*). However, it is clear that her model goes beyond the level of psychodynamic discourse. The symbolic and sub-symbolic life are connected to and rooted in sensorimotor life. This means that the (pre-)representational cannot be explained only in terms of the consciousness-unconsciousness dynamic and that the very conception of psychic reality needs to be reconsidered. In accordance with Bucci's perspective, a theoretical itinerary based on the phenomenological-hermeneutical approach leads its heuristic effort into a new understanding of psychic reality in the new terms of "affective

matter”. It is precisely the idea of affective matter that proves to be strategic and fertile for an approach capable of reflecting the complexity of psychic life.

Affective matter

Ricoeur’s youthful research on the *voluntary* and the *involuntary* is strategic in highlighting that there must be a link of continuity and non-duality between the dimension of intentionality and will and between the dimension of the unconscious understood in phenomenological terms as a sphere of pre-intentionality, that is as a sphere characterised by a «matière principalement affective» (Ricoeur 1966). This idea comes from Edmund Husserl who combines Freud’s unconscious with the Greek notion of *hyle*, a material “affectively charged”, i.e. the sphere/dimension of the vectorial and the pre-intentional (*Ideen II*, 1952 [post.]).

The notion of “affective matter” seems to indicate a sort of median, hybrid dimension of the unconscious as a “sphere of the unreflective” and as a “sphere of the instinctual”; that is, a formula for rejecting Freud’s *radical realism* of the unconscious without denying the instinctual and transformative *reality* underlying the life of consciousness. This idea is also suggested by the reference to the Greek term. It is known that both in Plato and Aristotle the concept of “matter” oscillates between the idea of a given reality, or of matter-*subject*, and the idea of receptivity, or of matter-*power*.

The problem to be solved is how the idea of transformation can be applied to the domain of identity transformation. So far, I tackle transformation starting from its general reference to the process of the *symbolic appropriation* of reality (= the painter who paints a landscape). Then I address, following Bion, its application to the psychoanalytic process. I then arrive, referring to Ricoeur, at the idea of an *affectivité puissante* that presses on the boundary between soma and psyche and is constituted, like Freud’s *Raprepräsentanz*, as a link between the unreflective and the intentional. Finally, moving to the level of neuropsychology, I explore the transformative function exercised by the cerebral cortex on perceptions and the unconscious to bring them to consciousness.

This interpretation fits into the general design of a theoretical-speculative articulation between the mental/inner world governed by the law of motivation and sense and the psycho-physical world governed by the causal law and by the biological mechanism. The unconscious is understood as connected both to psycho-(pre)intentional aspects and to psycho-physical aspects, so that with the “pre-intentional” both the drive and the sphere of instinctual desires are reinterpreted. Such an interpretative line also modifies the understanding of the notion of representation, which is no longer explainable only in terms of configuration and hermeneutics. The representation emerges as a sort of conveying process both of *affectivity* and *sense* as (following Bucci) of sub-symbolic elements, that is sensory-cognitive-motor.

On the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*

For authors such as Ricoeur, the nexus of ideational representation constitutes the theoretical crux of the problem of the ontological (and epistemological) foundation of Freud’s psychoanalysis. Ricoeur conceives the concept of *Repräsentanz* as an expression of the “coincidence” between the dimension of meaning and the (organic-biological) dimension of force. It is this coincidence that explains the finality or “destiny” of the drive in the psychic representation. Drive and instinctive desire arrange/orientate themselves toward the “representational expression”. It is, evidently, a passage that is a *transformational process*. As Ricoeur explains,

Freud’s originality consists in shifting the point of coincidence of meaning and force back to the unconscious itself. He presupposes this coincidence as making possible all the “transformations” and “translations” of the unconscious into the conscious. In spite of the barrier that separates the systems, they must be assumed to have a common structure whereby the conscious and the

unconscious are equally psychical. That common structure is precisely the function of *Repräsentanz* (Freud 1970: 135).

It is true that Ricoeur thinks that the functioning of the *Repräsentanz* is possible by virtue of a substantial uniformity between the conscious structure and the unconscious structure. The concept of *Repräsentanz* would indicate the “place” where the instinct designates itself: it is understood as something “psychic” that represents the “instinct” as energy; more precisely, the bridge-concept is that of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* – translated by Ricoeur with *présentation représentative*. With this, Freud would show that he has reintegrated the unconscious into the sphere of meaning. However this line of reasoning – which produces a certain persuasive effect in Ricoeur’s essay – fails on the key node of deepening the meaning and use of the concept of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* in a context, that of Freud’s Metapsychology, which closely links psychology and biologism. Limiting oneself to translating as “representative presentation” (or “ideational representation”) and giving it a sense of substantial linguistic-symbolic character and intrinsic significance, without trying to “meet” Freud’s theoretical-scientific point of view raises some doubts about the operation field. This happens even because the concept of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* shares a certain familiarity with the notion of *psychische Repräsentanz*, “psychic representation”, and *Triebrepräsentanz*, “representation of the drive”. The effort made by Laplanche and Pontalis in the *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* appears more valuable. In it they propose an understanding of the “ideational representation” as a delegating-delegated relationship, i.e. as a dialectical-relational nexus where a certain “thrust” causes, determines and expresses something representational. For Laplanche and Pontalis, the relationship between somatic and psychic is neither conceived on the model of parallelism nor on that of a causality; it must be understood on the basis of the comparison with the relationship existing between a delegate and his principal (see Laplanche, Pontalis 1967: v. *représentation psychique*). The two authors put forward the hypothesis that the difference which can be seen between them is only verbal: in the first case the psychic representation would be called ideational representation, in the second case it would be called drive.

With this last statement, Laplanche and Pontalis convey a certain interpretative commitment, careful not to lose the substance of the energetic discourse and the reference to the dimension of the drive and the body. Yet the question of psychic representation can be reinterpreted within a framework that takes into account both the discourse of the non-duality of the mental and the body (in the sense of their mutual connection) as well as the complexity of the systems characterising the functioning of the human organism and psyche. Ricoeur’s thesis according to which the functioning of *Repräsentanz* is possible only on the postulate of a structural uniformity between unconscious and conscious appears weak. On the contrary, it has been highlighted from many sides how Freud himself spoke of a constitution in qualitatively different layers of the apparatus (Sandler, Holder et al. 1997). In addition, Freud’s vision also has to be rethought both by leveraging the rereading that offers a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach (= unconscious as affective matter) and by taking into account studies such as that of Bucci. These studies reveal that the complexity of the functioning of the human organism derives from an intersection, superimposition and connection of states and systems such that it is not possible to think of the symbolic as a *purely* linguistic-representational instance, of the representational as a proper dimension of only mental life, to the affective as something predetermined and not culturally (re-)moldable, etc.

In conclusion

Proceeding from this reinterpretation of the unconscious that takes into account the complexity and non-duality of the organic-psychic life, the possibility emerges of understanding the relationship between unconscious and the conscious as mutually influenced according to a

transformational process. Between the contents of the biological sphere and the contents of the psychic sphere, between the cerebral reality and the psychic reality, between the natural dimension and the dimension of meaning, there is not only a relationship of profound connection and coordination but a profound procedural “dialectic” on the mediation of the affective and the representational. If this is the case, neurobiological functioning is just as central to the entire psychic life as psychic life is central to neurobiological functioning. It is in particular the deepening of the reality of reinforced concrete and of the entity of psychic representations that paves the way for a non-dualistic and corresponding-transformational model in the understanding of human psychic life and the relationship between the mental and the psychical.

References

- Bateson Gregory, 1967. *Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art*. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantines Books 1972.
- Bucci, Wilma, 2009. Lo spettro dei processi dissociativi. Implicazioni per la relazione terapeutica. In G. Moccia, L. Solano, *Psicoanalisi e neuroscienza. Risonanze interdisciplinari*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 29-53.
- Busacchi, V., Martini, G. 2020. *L'identità in questione*. Milano: Jaca Book.
- Laplanche, Jean, Pontalis, Jean-Bertrand, 1967. *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Casadio, Luca, 2018. L'inconscio sistemico. In *Connessioni*, n. 4, dicembre; <http://connessioni.cmtf.it/linconscio-sistemico/> (last accessed: 2/2/2023).
- Gallese, V. 2009. Simulazione incarnata, intersoggettività e linguaggio. In G. Moccia, L. Solano, *Psicoanalisi e neuroscienza*, cit., 174-206.
- Kohut, H., *How does Analysis Cure?*, ed. by A. Goldberg and P. Stepansky, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984.
- Ogden, T. H. 1994. *Subjects of Analysis*. London: Karnac Books.
- Ogden, T. H. 1997. Some Thoughts on the Use of Language in Psychoanalysis. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 7(1): 1–21.
- Ricoeur, P. 1966. *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Trans. E. V. Kohák. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Trans. by D. Savage. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1986. The Self in Psychoanalysis and in Phenomenological Philosophy, *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, n. 3, pp. 437-458; now in Ricoeur, P., *On Psychoanalysis*, trans. by D. Pellauer, Cambridge: Polity Press 2012, pp. 73-93.
- Ricoeur, P. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricœur, P., 2005. *The Course of Recognition*, trans. by D. Pellauer, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- Sandler, Joseph, Holder, Alex, Dare, Christopher, Dreher, Anna Ursula (1997). *Freud's Models of the mind*. Madison (CT): International, Universities Press.
- Solano, Luigi (2009). Teorie psicoanalitiche del funzionamento mentale inconscio e teoria del codice multiplo, in G. Moccia, L. Solano, *Psicoanalisi e neuroscienza*, cit.: 113-124.
- Sulloway, Frank (1983). *Freud, Biologist of the Mind*. New York: Basic Books.