

Introduction

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Excerpt
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The Question

This book began when I was invited to contribute a paper on Freud to a seminar series on nineteenth-century literature. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in the latter part of 1899 and post-dated to 1900, both fit the requested timeframe and offered me the opportunity to expand my thinking on Freud's general theory. Having centered my recent efforts on his later metapsychological texts, I looked forward to gaining further leverage on the theory by examining its first purely psychological exposition.

Though it was *The Interpretation of Dreams* that launched my interest in Freud's writings, I had not read it closely in many years and not, in any case, since I had completed detailed analyses of Freud's later theoretical works (Sugarman, 2016) and some of his empirical investigations of ordinary waking mental life (e.g., Sugarman, 2010). Through those efforts, I had found in Freud's theory an elegant, methodical system, built from first principles, which Freud modified throughout his career to include increasing nuance and sweep. I had found in his empirical studies a tautness and efficiency reminiscent of argumentation in linguistics, yet propelled by the aim of extracting the psychological pulse of the experience in question.

I thus found myself unprepared for the reluctant discovery that his avowed premier work did not measure up to the rest. Weaknesses appear in his account of dreams that do not surface in his other efforts.

Freud, throughout his career, considered *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and in particular his thesis that dreams fulfill wishes, his landmark contribution (e.g., Freud, 1933). All else in the volume follows from that thesis, and he ever regarded both thesis and book as

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the scaffolding of his subsequent work. Yet, I found that Freud sets an anchor in the text drawn from his previous examination of the psychoneuroses, rather than create a new prototype for his future endeavors. The shortcomings that arise in his account of dreams do not appear in either that or his later work.

This book is about *The Interpretation of Dreams*, about what it does and does not achieve and, in view of its achieving less than Freud intended it to do, where that leaves his larger project.

THE TEXT AND ITS PUZZLE

The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) both painstakingly builds the case for a revolutionary theory of dreams and lays the foundation for Freud's general theory of the mind, the latter an undertaking he believed necessary to account for dreams.

He identified as the real breakthrough of the treatise his discovery that dreams fulfill wishes (1950, letter #137), a wish-fulfillment embodying a condition of relief, whether expressly desired or otherwise welcome. He found, when analyzing his own dreams and when guiding his patients to analyze theirs, that he could identify a payoff of some kind – a wish-fulfillment in his terms – among a dream's constituents, regardless of their ostensible appearance. The identified payoff, in turn, lent coherence to both the dream's imagery and the lines of thought the imagery had prompted. Recognition of the payoff, along with the process of analyzing dreams in general, opened a world of ideation outside people's immediate awareness that was to prove vital in the mitigation of mental illness.

The Interpretation of Dreams presents a puzzle, though. Do – or, more to Freud's point, must – dreams provide a mental tonic, regardless of how obscure, in order to materialize? He extrapolates to that position from dreamers' waking analyses of their dreams. Yet, regardless of how illuminating and even salutary those analyses might prove, they do not establish on their own that the dreams formed *so as* to bring about either the salutary upshot or any other outcome they produce. Theoretically, dreams could arise in a more

arbitrary fashion and yet lend themselves to productive and auspicious analyses, given that both dreams and their analyses come from the same mind.

Others have long remarked that lack of necessary symmetry between dream analyses undertaken after a dream has occurred and the process that created it (e.g., Foulkes, 1964). They arrive at different views of the consequences, some regarding Freud's apparent leap as relatively harmless to his account (e.g., Lear, 2005; Michael, 2007), and others, as its undoing (e.g., Glymour, 1983; Grünbaum, 1992). The variation mirrors that regarding the implications for Freud's account of the neural circuitry now thought to underlie dreaming: some writers find Freud's account still plausible (e.g., Solms and Turnbull, 2007), while others believe it undermined (e.g., Domhoff, 2019; Hobson, 1988).

It is difficult to gauge the solidity of Freud's conclusions without a close reading of his account, which unfolds over 600-plus pages – to see whether it, or any other consideration, closes the apparent gap in the argument. Neither the account's adherents nor its detractors provide that examination. They either speak in generalities or address isolated facets of Freud's construction.

The cortical regions now known to activate during dreaming, which include both lower and higher areas (e.g., Domhoff, 2019; Solms and Turnbull, 2007), likewise, neither confirm nor rule out Freud's vision. Though the altered neural function that supports dreaming might appear to favor a more rudimentary depiction of dreaming than his, dreaming, in his eyes and despite the complexity of his portrayal, remains a primitive psychological process.

The integrity of *The Interpretation of Dreams* begs for thorough investigation given the centrality to it of the claim that dreams fulfill wishes and of the treatise to Freud's larger project.

DREAMS AS WISH-FULFILLMENTS

We hear little of Freud's wish-fulfillment thesis today. Contemporary psychoanalysis, where it engages dreams, looks for their underlying narrative, be it wishes, fears, or other currency (e.g., Budd, 2004).

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Some perceive Freud himself as having moved, in his later writings, away from ascribing wishes a dominant role in dreaming (e.g., Budd, 2004; McLeod, 1992).

Wishes, however, occupy the center of both his dream theory and the connection of that theory to his larger program. Without a motivating wish, he tells us in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a dream would not occur; there would be no need for it. That view becomes the fulcrum of his Dora case history (1905a), which followed shortly after the dreams book, and remains intact thereafter, despite other developments in his understanding of dreaming.¹ All else in *The Interpretation of Dreams* follows from the claim that dreams form from wishes, for instance Freud's propositions that dreams contain distortion and arise through mechanisms like condensation and displacement. It makes sense to speak of processes like those, which alter something, only if a dream's real content differs from its outward form, as it would do if all dreams fulfill wishes and some do not look like they do.

Contemporary psychoanalysis, consistent with its lack of interest in Freud's wish-fulfillment theory of dreams, also has little use for his occupation in general with the question of how dreams form. Dream analyses naturally generate both old and new connections, the new created for the first time in the analysis. The analytic process utilizes all the material that comes forth, regardless of its source, to arrive at as full a picture as possible of the currents of a person's mental life (e.g., Lear, 2005, p. 112). On the other side, it is the story of dreams' genesis that critics mindful of the lacuna in Freud's argument – in the extrapolation from the results of dream analysis to dreams' formation – find undermined (e.g., Grünbaum, 1992).

Freud (1900, Ch. VII.A), meanwhile, acknowledged and exploited the same potential confluence of old and new associations

¹ See, for example, Freud (1923), p. 111, on his differentiation of dreams originating "from above" and those originating "from below" and p. 113 on the continued centrality of wish-fulfillment to his vision of dreaming even after he concluded that some dreams breach that function.

capitalized on in dream analysis, while at the same time holding fast to his genesis theory. What is more, he constructs the same genesis narrative he imposes on dreams, rooted in the prospect of wish-fulfillment, in his investigations of mental happenings other than dreams. Those efforts succeed, as I will show.

FREUD'S LARGER PROJECT

With respect to the centrality of *The Interpretation of Dreams* to Freud's larger project, the idea that dreams might give us the reprieve Freud describes – fulfill wishes – aligns with his axiom that our mental processes observe a pleasure principle. Mental life trends away from what causes us pain and toward what brings relief or pleasure; the former, inhibiting, version of the principle dates to Freud's earlier, and soon abandoned, "Project for a scientific psychology" (1895), and the full version, to *The Interpretation of Dreams*.² The pleasure principle, so defined, describes the motivational architecture we naturally ascribe to human behavior. It is the "why" entailed in our asking why someone did something. It drives any psychotherapy, like psychoanalysis, that tries to relieve sufferers of their symptoms by ferreting out the work the symptoms accomplish: the pressure they relieve, the pain from which they divert us.

Thus, the discovery of wish-fulfillment in dreams served, for Freud, as both an impetus for and a demonstration of the bedrock of his general theory, an awkward double role he expressly concedes (1900, p. 511). His later formulations of the theory, in particular the still more elemental construction he superimposed on the pleasure principle in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), leave the pleasure principle intact as the motor of our mental lives; he now allows that extreme limiting conditions can impede it.³

The general theory, as Freud presented it after *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is both powerful and persuasive (Sugarman, 2016).

² The later version is elaborated further in Freud, 1911 and 1924.

³ See Chapter 7 of this volume.

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Significant shortcomings in the dreams treatise, on which Freud imagined himself to have built all that followed it, would create a curious, if not a precarious, circumstance for his larger program, one that adds to the interest of scrutinizing the tract.

PLAN OF THIS BOOK

Accordingly, in Part I of this book, I examine Freud's argument as it unfolds in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, tracking his development of his method of dream interpretation and of his thesis that dreams fulfill wishes. I follow as he tests the thesis, first by showing additional instances of evident wish-fulfillment and then by examining a widening array of dreams that appear to contravene the thesis. I next watch as he, convinced of the thesis's durability, explains by what means dreams, regardless of their surface appearance, still fulfill wishes. I then reconstruct those portions of his final, theoretical chapter from which he believes the wish-fulfilling nature of dreams follows.

Finding inadequate grounds for Freud's account, based on a preliminary appraisal, I then examine, in Part II, whether the problem extends to his work in general – which, were it to do so, might suggest a form of endemic overstatement – or whether it pertains specifically to his handling of dreams. I consider first his narratives of cases of psychoneurosis he treated both before and after he wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the earlier treatments his inspiration and model for his investigation of dreams. I next explore other analyses of Freud's that intersect the account of dreams in different ways, those analyses thus offering alternative templates against which to compare the account of dreams.

In considering the last – analyses beyond those of dreams and psychoneuroses – I examine first Freud's explanations of other phenomena of ordinary mental life and then representatives of his expressly speculative writing. Additional phenomena of ordinary mental life – like momentary glitches such as slips of the tongue, joking, or our capacity to get lost in a book – consist, like dreams, of

specific, transient phenomena that must be analyzed of themselves. Freud's avowedly speculative pieces, which he himself describes as just-so stories meant to evoke a psychological and not necessarily material truth, allow us to evaluate *The Interpretation of Dreams* as one of that category: as a just-so story meant to animate our psychology.

In closing, I consider whether, or for which purposes, the weaknesses evident in the account of dreams matter and their consequences for Freud's overall program.

The goal of the book, therefore, is, not to explain dreams, but to track Freud's reasoning in determining the psychology necessary to account for them. It is to reflect on, given the results of that effort, how to think about Freud's theory and the mind that sleeps, dreams, and negotiates waking life.