

# ORGANIZATIONS IN DEPTH



YIANNIS GABRIEL

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## *The Psychoanalysis of Organizations*

YIANNIS GABRIEL

*with*

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# PREFACE

This book is the result of a deeply held conviction that psychoanalysis can make a great contribution to the study of organizational phenomena. The book stands at the intersection of two academic traditions which have grown relatively independently of each other. Organization theory has examined the behaviour of people in the large public spaces of organizations, while psychoanalysis has explored the intimate and private spaces of their personal lives. In recent years, however, as public and private lives have become increasingly difficult to disentangle, the two traditions have been moving closer together. Organization theory has turned to the study of non-rational phenomena in organizations: emotions, symbolism, aesthetics, sexuality, rhetoric. Psychoanalysis, for its part, has been rediscovering some of the wider horizons of its early years, stretching beyond the consultation room to address cultural, political and social phenomena. At the same time, our view of organizations has also undergone a change. To be sure, we still view them as dominant features of the macrocosm, the social and political landscape we inhabit. But we also recognize them as an inevitable presence in the microcosm, our intimate, personal lives. They are part of us, at least from that very first day at school when we leave our parental embrace to become one of many, a face among unknowns, a name on a register.

The time now seems right to examine systematically the insights that psychoanalysis can offer to the study of organizations. The psychoanalytic study of organizations is not a new area, even if many of its contributions have gone unnoticed by mainstream organization theory. Past contributions range from the pioneering work of the Tavistock Institute to the leadership scholarship of Levinson and Zaleznik; from the studies of organizational pathologies by Kets de Vries and Hirschhorn to the exploration of narcissistic phenomena by Schwartz and Sievers; from the studies of group processes by Bion to the enquiries into bureaucracy of Baum and Diamond. This book brings together the insights offered by this scholarship and presents them to a wider audience, one which is not necessarily familiar with psychoanalytic ideas and may initially react to them with apprehension. I hope to show that psychoanalytic insights can complement and deepen current theorizing on organizations undertaken from other perspectives.

The book is addressed to a multiple readership: to novice and expert alike, to those with and those without systematic knowledge of psychoanalytic theories and concepts, to those with primarily theoretical and to those with primarily practical interests. The book is also addressed to those organizational scholars who are interested in the psychoanalytic approach but are unwilling to read the voluminous original bibliography. The book's structure and content reflect the diversity of its audience. Practitioners will find a number of practical cases and illustrative materials displayed in boxes; readers new to psychoanalysis will find a presentation of its core



theories in the early chapters of the book and synoptic treatments of key terms in the Glossary; organizational scholars will find in-depth treatments of the psychoanalytic contributions to the study of organizational phenomena, such as groups, leadership and culture, in the later chapters of the book. Doctoral students will find a chapter on research strategies and tactics (Chapter 11). Each chapter is self-contained and does not rely on a reading of the preceding chapters.

Many scholars have made valuable contributions to this book. Several have contributed case studies, essays and illustrations which are included as boxed materials in the text. Larry Hirschhorn, Marion McCollom Hampton, Howard Schwartz and Glenn Swogger participated in lengthy and stimulating discussions in the early planning of the book and have authored or co-authored chapters of this book. The International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations, both in its annual symposium and its lively and constructive Internet discussion list, has been a great source of inspiration and a valuable sounding board for some of the ideas presented here. Numerous colleagues have provided me with suggestions, feedback and criticism during the writing of the book. My thanks to all of them, and in particular to Seth Allcorn, Howell Baum, Ana Magnolia Bezerra Mendes, Adrian Carr, Michael Diamond, Steve Fineman, Larry Gould, Leo Gruenfeld, Rose Mersky, Burkard Sievers and Andrew Sturdy. I also wish to thank my students at the University of Bath: their lasting interest in the subject and their remarkable ability to use psychoanalytic insights to understand their own experiences of organizations have been sources of inspiration for this book. One piece included in this book, by Ben Askew-Renaut, began as an essay submitted for one of my courses. Several more could have been included had space permitted. My thanks, too, to Rosemary Nixon and all the people at Sage, who as always have shown the highest levels of competence in bringing this book to the public.

# INTRODUCTION: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ORGANIZATION

*with Howard S. Schwartz*

At first glance, psychoanalysis and organization do not go well together. When we think of psychoanalysis we think of individuals, their worries and problems. We think of irrationality, of instability, of mental illness. But organizations are not individuals, obviously. And while most of us would be ready to admit that irrational and even crazy things occasionally go on within organizations, it is hard to say that this is what organizations are about. On the contrary, organizations usually appear to be quite ordinary, stable, even mundane; the way in which they go about their business seems to make perfectly good sense. What can psychoanalysis possibly tell us about organizations? Can it tell us only about unusual, pathological individuals or exceptional events within organizations? Or only about the occasional organization characterized by so much irrationality that it may be said to have gone crazy? In this book, we shall argue that the psychoanalytic conception of organizations goes far beyond the examination of the pathological and the unusual. Psychoanalysis can provide a deep understanding of many features of organizations, even those that appear perfectly straightforward and ordinary. It does this by examining not so much the behaviour of individuals in organizations, but rather the *meaning* of their behaviour and the deeper *motives* for their actions.

When we address ourselves to the meaning of events and the motives of actions, we find that the mundane disappears, and that even apparently ordinary events arise for reasons that are not evident. The distinctions between the rational and the irrational may become a bit blurred. Actions which appear on the surface to make perfectly good sense can turn out to serve ends which have little to do with organizational efficiency and rationality. Such actions may in the end turn out to be better understood by reference to motives which some organizational members may not openly acknowledge or may prefer not to understand. The idea of stability fares no better, for we find that underneath the appearance of stability and order, an appearance often cultivated with great care by organizational leaders, lie tension, conflict and flux, always threatening to change the order of things.

The idea that what goes on at the surface of an organization is not all that there is, and that understanding organizations often means comprehending matters that lie beneath the surface, matters that some organizational participants may prefer not to know about, is not an idea that is likely to gain easy acceptance; nor should it. It is one for which a strong case must be made in terms of the gain in understanding that it achieves. This is the case made in this book. This book does not seek to disparage

traditional concepts and theories of organizational studies. Instead, it seeks to qualify, extend and complement some of the insights of mainstream organizational theory by coupling it with a psychological tradition which does justice to the full complexities, ambiguities and conflicts of human beings. The time for a closer rapprochement between organizational theory and the psychoanalytic tradition seems right. In recent years, some of mainstream organizational theory has moved to explore irrational, symbolic and emotional forces in accounting for the behaviours of individuals and groups in organizations. This has brought it closer to the themes which have always preoccupied psychoanalysis. At the same time, increasing numbers of psychoanalytic scholars, consultants and clinicians have turned their attention to the world of organizations, its discontents and dysfunctions.

### **MR COOK'S NASA**

Some scholars may object to the idea that there are hidden depths in organizations. Instead, they may prefer to focus on what is actually said, on what can be observed and established beyond all doubt. We believe that such an approach forecloses many interesting lines of enquiry. The example that follows offers an illustration of something underneath the surface of organizations, a depth whose exploration can enable us to make better sense of phenomena at the surface.

Following the Challenger space shuttle disaster, the United States government created a commission, headed by former Secretary of State William P. Rogers, to investigate the causes. At first, the commission was in the dark about the causes of the disaster and tended to view it as a freak accident, something entirely at odds with the image of technological sophistication, competence and responsibility presented by NASA at the time. So, when a NASA budget analyst named Richard C. Cook came before them with a story that was at variance with this image of NASA, they tended to be dismissive.

Cook's job had been to keep track of the development of the space shuttle's solid rocket boosters (SRBs), the element whose failure was ultimately found to have caused the explosion, and to assess the budgetary impacts of any problems that occurred. In a memorandum written on 23 July 1985, six months before the disaster, Cook warned that flight safety was being compromised by erosion of the boosters' O-ring seals, and that failure of these parts could be catastrophic. Following the explosion, he wrote another memo referring to the earlier one, which someone leaked to the Rogers Commission. He was then called to testify on 12 February 1986. In his testimony, Cook claimed that his information was solely based on what engineers on the SRB project had told him, something that turned out to be entirely accurate. Yet, when NASA officials were invited to comment on his charges, they categorically refuted them:

ROGERS: Ah, it's fair to say that after or at about the same time Mr Cook's memorandum was written in July, 85, that you and your team were, had been and were at that time conducting a lot of investigations, doing a lot of work about the O-rings.

[DAVID] WINTERHALTER [acting director of NASA's shuttle propulsion division]: That's correct, sir.

ROGERS: But in the final analysis, the qualified people, the engineers and others who were assigned responsibility of their decisions have to make the decisions.

WINTERHALTER: That's true. And I pride, I prided myself on our division to be particularly

good team workers. We gave our differences, we work 'em out . . . At no time . . . during that period did any of my people come to me, give any indication that they felt there was any, any safety of flight problems in their area.

Q: Was it the view of your division, the propulsion group, that the seal design, as it was installed and operating in the shuttle system was ah, safe and adequate?

WINTERHALTER: It was.

(*The New York Times*, 13 February 1986: B11)

The *Times* reported further that a 'parade' of NASA officials testified that Mr Cook's concerns were out of proportion and that the issue of seal erosion had been dealt with carefully by NASA engineering experts and managers. They said, quite erroneously as it turned out,<sup>1</sup> that seal problems had diminished in 1985. While they did not deny Cook's claim that the seals had eroded, they did claim that more competent professionals than he had concluded they were safe.<sup>2</sup>

The next day, the *Times* gave Cook a chance to respond. What is important to note, at this point, is not only that Cook's version of events was at odds with that of the officials, but also that his general image of NASA was substantially different.

In his first major interview since publication of his internal memorandum . . . Richard C. Cook, said that propulsion engineers at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration 'whispered' in his ear since he arrived last July that the seals were unsafe and even 'held their breath' when earlier shuttles were launched . . .

Mr Cook said he based his warning memorandum last July on conversations with engineers in the agency's propulsion division who were concerned about erosion of the rocket's safety seals. 'They began to tell me that some of these were being eaten away,' he said, 'and rather innocently I asked what does that mean?'

'They said to me, almost in a whisper in my ear, that the thing could blow up,' he continued. 'I was shocked.' In his July memorandum, Mr Cook explained, 'I was simply paraphrasing what this engineering group was telling me. I was not making it up that flight safety was being compromised and the results could be catastrophic. I didn't put it in my memorandum, but one of them said to me, 'When this thing goes up, we hold our breath.' (*The New York Times*, 14 February 1986: B4)

Compare this image of NASA with that held by one of its senior officials:

Today, L. Michael Weeks, deputy associate Administrator for space flight, the space agency's second-ranking shuttle official, said that the climate at the agency actually encouraged individuals two or three levels below him to speak their minds on safety concerns. He said that working-level engineers 'don't hesitate to tell Mike Weeks anything' and 'quite often will argue right on the spot at a significant meeting with me or Jesse,' a reference to Jesse W. Moore, the top shuttle official. (*The New York Times*, 14 February 1986: B4)

Now the picture of NASA presented by Cook was evidently far from the idea of NASA that was in the minds of its officials. Cook's NASA was a place in which engineers agonized over the flaws in their equipment and feared for the lives of astronauts, but did not feel that they could voice their concerns. The NASA of its management, on the other hand, was a place in which communication between ranks was open and free, in which concerns about safety were addressed directly and competently, and in which, on that basis, safety very simply was not a matter that needed to be worried about. It does not appear that NASA officials were lying or being disingenuous. Rather, they appeared to maintain their representations with perfect conviction.

Nor was it simply that certain elements of organizational functioning were not within their purview, for in fact they had a very elaborate idea of how those elements functioned; it is just that their idea was contrary to the reality as experienced by Mr Cook and the engineers who had talked to him. Seen from the perspective of the senior officials, the Challenger disaster was a one-off, unpredictable abnormality. Seen from the perspective of Mr Cook and his informants, it is surprising that the accident did not happen earlier. In fact, the accident was the natural culmination of a situation in which people were afraid to speak their minds.

[Cook] said such concerns [as those about the O-rings] got submerged because 'the whole culture of the place' calls for a 'can-do attitude that NASA can do what ever it tries to do, can solve any problem that comes up . . . Cook said that, in meetings called by the shuttle program managers, a middle-level engineer with safety concerns is 'just a little guy.'

'You aren't going to find an engineer with 20 years' experience and a livelihood to protect stand up and say, 'Excuse me, but we might have an explosion on the next shuttle flight because the O-rings might break.' It's just not going to happen.'

'If some did get up, he would quickly be branded a nay-sayer,' Mr Cook said. (*The New York Times*, 14 February 1986: B4)

Along the same lines, NASA veteran John Naugle, commenting on the way NASA changed during the Nixon administration:

Up until that era there, I never worried about saying what I felt. I always felt my bosses, while they might not agree with me, they might slap me down, they might quarrel with me, but they were not going to throw me out just because I brought them bad news. And somewhere between the time [Nixon appointee] Fletcher came on board and the time he left, I no longer felt that way. (Trento, 1987: 121)

What we have here is a sharp contrast between two images of NASA, each of which leads to very different conclusions about the causes of the disaster, as well as its meaning. One, held by management, is an image of an organization that is open to communication, in which everyone can say openly what they think. This image is positive and desirable. It makes perfectly good sense in terms of our beliefs about the way in which organizations should function and perhaps in terms of what we perceive to be NASA's earlier successes. The other image, which emerges from Cook's account, supported by the testimonies of many engineers, is one of an organization dominated by enforced silence and conformity, which muffles its employees and is impervious to criticism. This image is disturbing and may be at variance with what some insiders and some outsiders like to believe. In the former image, the employees emerge as independent professionals, doing a job which contributes to the organization's formidable technical achievements. In the latter image, the employees are individuals merely earning a living, frightened to do anything that may jeopardize their livelihoods.

This raises several questions. Which one of the two images is 'right' and which one is 'wrong'? Which corresponds to the real organization? How can two images at such variance co-exist within the same organization? How can different people working together maintain such different perceptions? Furthermore, is it possible that the same individual may hold both images at the same time? ('Somewhere between the time Fletcher came on board and the time he left'.) What are the implications for the organization of the fact that such inconsistent images were held simultaneously?

The Challenger disaster has been the subject of several books and articles which enable us to address some of these questions (McConnell, 1987; Trento, 1987; McCurdy, 1993; Vaughan, 1996; Allcorn and Diamond, 1997; Adams and Balfour, 1998). While their authors differ in the many points of interpretation and explanation, they generally agree that the agency's senior officials failed to recognize numerous warning signals, both in terms of technical failures and in terms of the ways in which technical failures were identified and discussed. They seemed to be blind to the failures themselves, and they were blind to the fact that the agency was preventing its staff from expressing legitimate concerns. Their blindness was not the result of ignorance, stupidity or *naïveté*. Rather, it is as if they kept themselves from knowing, as if it were too painful for them to acknowledge that an organization they loved and cared for was fallible or that it was experienced by some of its members as tyrannical and oppressive.

This is where psychoanalysis can make a contribution. Non-psychoanalytic approaches may content themselves by arguing that, to defend their interests, individuals lie, distort and disregard inconvenient facts. A psychoanalytic approach, on the other hand, envisages a possibility where individuals deceive themselves, without actually lying or being disingenuous. Our perceptions and ideas about the social reality of which we are part are not neutral. They are shaped by feelings, such as pride, anxiety and pain, as well as by earlier experiences in our lives which, unknown to us, have left deep marks on our mental personality. If we sometimes deceive ourselves, it is because reality is too painful or too complex and our desires too precious to forsake. Seen from this perspective, the blindness of the NASA officials to technical flaws with catastrophic potential, as well as to their organization's unwillingness to tolerate 'bad news', was not accidental – it was the product of *repression*, a process whereby dangerous or unpleasant ideas are prevented from reaching consciousness and restricted to an unconscious part of the mind. Managers worried about potential disasters may disregard signs of danger and discard warnings as defeatist talk of nay-sayers; in this way, troubling parts of reality are avoided by being replaced with desirable but unrealistic fictions. This process may be reinforced if managers are surrounded by others who are likewise inclined to re-shape their view of reality according to their desires, or if current worries trigger off memories of earlier painful events in their personal histories which threaten to overwhelm them.

### **PSYCHOANALYSIS, DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY AND THE UNCONSCIOUS**

The concept of the *unconscious* lies at the very centre of psychoanalysis, the field of psychology established by Sigmund Freud. In spite of many changes and developments which psychoanalysis has undergone since its early beginnings, the unconscious has remained at the heart of its arguments. It is also the defining characteristic of that branch of psychology referred to before Freud as 'depth psychology' which includes other, non-Freudian traditions. Although Freud did not invent the concept of the unconscious, he sought to make its study the object of serious, empirically testable investigations. Psychoanalysis, he argued, 'as a specialist science, a branch of psychology – a depth-psychology or psychology of the unconscious – is quite unfit to construct a Weltanschauung of its own: it must accept the scientific one' (Freud, 1933: 193).

Unlike some other depth psychologists, Freud's emphasis on the scientific method never faltered. Yet, in postulating that a part of our mental lives is unconscious, he challenged some of the assumptions of his time, arguing that the psychology of consciousness is unable to explain a wide variety of mental phenomena, such as dreams, neurotic symptoms and hypnotic states. It was initially to account for such phenomena that he postulated the idea that some mental processes and some ideas and desires exist outside our consciousness, in the unconscious part of our mind. Freud rejected the view of the unconscious as a spiritual or mystical entity, viewing it as something normal, ordered and subject to normal scientific scrutiny. He rejected intuition, divination and revelation as sources of knowledge of the unconscious, proposing instead a system of analytic interpretations and constructions for accessing and exploring the unconscious. Freud's concept must not be confused with the common misconception of the unconscious (or the 'subconscious' as it is sometimes referred to) as a messy jumble of ideas and impulses arising out of the depths of the human soul. Nor does Freud's unconscious bear much resemblance to the virgin and unpolluted personality core (the 'noble savage' in all of us) which has become the trademark of some humanistic schools of psychology. Instead, the unconscious is, in the first place, the state of ideas and desires which have undergone repression. Repression and unconscious are linked in Freudian theory like Siamese twins. 'We obtain the proof of the unconscious from the theory of repression. The repressed is the prototype of the unconscious for us' (Freud, 1923: 362).

Unconscious ideas and desires do not behave like conscious ones. They cannot be accessed through introspection (i.e. by asking questions of oneself and looking inward); they cannot be corrected or changed by appeal to logic or material evidence; they do not lead to action geared to achieving desired results. Above all, unconscious ideas and desires cannot be discussed freely because powerful psychic forces keep them repressed. We all spend much mental energy defending ourselves against disturbing or embarrassing ideas and desires, by keeping them unconscious. In this way, much as the NASA officials did, we censor our thoughts, our desires and even our feelings. If political censors seek to eliminate ideas and images which threaten the regime, mental censors seek to suppress those ideas and desires which they envisage as threatening our psychological well-being or even survival. *The idea that repression is a form of mental defence against threatening psychic phenomena lies at the heart of Freudian psychology and much of depth psychology* (key idea 1).

## INTERPRETATION

If the unconscious is by definition inaccessible to consciousness, how can we be sure of its existence, how can we ever hope to know its contents? To answer these questions, Freud relied on his view that unconscious material (ideas, desires, thoughts and feelings) is the result of a process of repression in the service of psychological defence. But he also used a key corollary of this idea, which he initially formulated through his study of neurotic symptoms (such as a compulsive cough or an irrational fear of horses) and dreams. *Repressed ideas do not disappear without trace from a person's life, but they seek expression in various subterfuges* (key idea 2). During sleep, for instance, when the censors are less vigilant, repressed ideas may be expressed through dreams. In waking life, a repressed feeling may be manifested by changing into its opposite or by being *displaced* on to a different object. Interpretation is a process

whereby we can access unconscious material through its conscious manifestations. It is a powerful but also a dangerous process, capable of yielding extraordinary insights into human motivation; but it is also a dangerous process which, when abused, can lead to false and potentially destructive conclusions. It is a process that cannot be reduced to a number of simple steps, but requires practice and experience. It is a process whose outcomes are virtually always provisional, open to refinement, correction and re-evaluation. Throughout this book, we shall offer numerous examples of interpretations. We shall interpret individual actions and ideas, some organizational stories and symbols and some wider cultural practices and institutions. None of these interpretations will be definitive and all must be accepted as conditional.

Interpretation is used not just in psychoanalysis, but in many fields when small signs are taken as the basis for inferences. The art critic Giovanni Morelli, for example, established a way of authenticating works of art based on the way in which different artists dealt with small details; for instance, the painting of ears or hands. Instead of seeking to identify a painting as the work of Raphael or Titian by looking at the general composition, Morelli was successful at deducing authorship through the interpretation of tiny details. Likewise, detective work as practised by Sherlock Holmes and his less famous imitators relies on interpreting small clues and trying to construct a general picture from the meaning of tiny details. The similarity of psychoanalysis to detective work has often been pointed out (Ricoeur, 1970; Ginzburg, 1980; Shepherd, 1985). But Freud was even keener on the parallel between psychoanalysis and archaeology, a discipline which held an acute fascination for him. Like an archaeologist, Freud imagined himself as someone who extrapolates latent structures from manifest ones by undoing the work of time. Yet, what Freud also realized, as some archaeologists also do, was that the material he was starting with – the dream, the neurotic symptom, the returning memory – had not just deteriorated with the passage of time, but had been deliberately tampered with in order to frustrate and mislead the attempts at interpretation.

In interpreting dreams, Freud postulated the existence of a mental censor, an ingenious mental agent which not only erases what it finds objectionable but, through omissions, changes in emphasis, careful substitutions and other subtle tactics, distorts the text's meaning. This made the work of interpretation both harder and easier; it made it harder because in the minds of patients, dreamers and people in general, psychoanalysis was facing an enemy determined to confuse and mislead, an enemy which operates in the mind of the dreamer as well as that of the interpreter. At the same time, however, it made it easier, once the purposes of this cunning adversary, its character and its methods of operation became known to the interpreter. Thus, Freud was led to make a 'bold hypothesis', namely that *dreams represent fulfilments of unconscious desires and that they are censored to the extent that they may contradict the contents of consciousness* (key idea 3).

### **AN EXAMPLE OF PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETATION: THE 'UNCLE JOSEF DREAM'**

Given the importance of the process of interpretation in depth psychology, we shall present a detailed example of an interpretation of a dream, as discussed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the book that introduced a systematic method for interpreting



dreams in 1900. Later, Freud and others used a similar method for interpreting neurotic symptoms, slips of the tongue, fantasies and day-dreams, works of art, jokes, rituals, myths, stories and other items of folklore and culture.

The dream discussed below is one that Freud had in the spring of 1897, shortly after he was nominated for an appointment as professor extraordinary at the University of Vienna. The news surprised him and delighted him, as it marked the esteem in which he was held by those who had recommended him. He had no hopes, however, of being appointed, since earlier nominees, including his friends R and N, had failed to be appointed due to 'denominational considerations', i.e. the fact that they were Jewish.

Freud had the following dream on the night following a meeting with R. 'I. . . . My friend R was my uncle. – I had a great feeling of affection for him. II. I saw before me his face, somewhat changed. It was as though it had been drawn out lengthways. A yellow beard that surrounded it stood out especially clearly' (1900: 218). On recollecting the dream next day, Freud 'laughed aloud and said: "The dream's nonsense!"' But the dream refused to go away, and Freud began to suspect that his dismissal of the dream was itself significant, i.e. a sign that he was putting up an internal *resistance* against interpreting it for fear that it might reveal something painful or embarrassing. He therefore set about its interpretation.

The text above is referred to as the dream's 'manifest content'. It is relatively compressed, containing a thought combined with a feeling, followed by an image. In interpreting the dream, Freud starts with the overlap between his friend R and his uncle. This is an example of *condensation*, a dream process whereby two or more ideas (for example, the faces of two people) merge into one. But why should this happen? We learn from Freud that his Uncle Josef had, some thirty years earlier, been punished by law for a financial transaction that he had carried out in his eagerness to make money. Freud's father (Josef's brother) had been very upset about it, and his hair had turned white in a few days. He had tried to excuse his brother by saying that he was not a bad man, only a simpleton. The condensation of the two people seemed to transfer the quality of being a simpleton from Josef on to R, a person who was neither a simpleton nor guilty of any major offence.

Why, then, was Freud unconsciously seeking to view R as a simpleton? At this point, Freud remembered another conversation with a different friend of his, N, who, like R and Freud himself, had been nominated for the professorship. This is an example of *free association*, a process fundamental to psychoanalytic technique, whereby seemingly unrelated thoughts are allowed to reach consciousness and given voice. Frequently, the relations between these thoughts lead to some unconscious associations. In this case, Freud recollected a conversation with N in the street. N had offered his congratulations to Freud on his nomination, but Freud refused to accept them, saying 'You are the last person to make that kind of joke; you know what such a recommendation is worth from your own experience.' N then proceeded to tell Freud that in his own case an unsubstantiated scandal may have been held against his appointment, whereas no such factor could be used against Freud. This led Freud to his first interpretative conclusion:

My uncle Josef represented my two colleagues who had not been appointed to professorships – the one as a simpleton and the other as a criminal. I now saw why they were represented in this light. If the appointment of my friends R and N had been postponed for 'denominational' reasons, my own appointment was also open to doubt; if, however, I could

attribute the rejection of my two friends to other reasons, which did not apply to me, my hopes would remain untouched. This was the procedure adopted by my dream: it made one of them, R, into a simpleton and the other, N, into a criminal, whereas I was neither the one nor the other; thus we no longer had anything in common; I could rejoice at my appointment to a professorship, and I could avoid drawing the distressing conclusion that R's report of what the high official had said to him must apply equally to me. (1900: 220–1)

A small and seemingly insignificant dream was thus interpreted as a fulfilment of wish, Freud's wish to be appointed to a professorship. In fact, it is the interpretation of the dream that brings this wish to the surface. It will be noted that Freud had initially disowned such a wish, along with other similar ones, in a slightly disingenuous manner: 'So far as I knew, I was not an ambitious man; I was following my profession with gratifying success even without the advantages afforded by a title' (1900: 217). What the dream and its interpretation did was to disabuse him of this self-deception, i.e. that he did not care for titles and honours. Not only did he care for them but, in order to achieve them, he was in his dream willing to dismiss one of his friends as a simpleton and the other as a crook.

But the interpretation of the dream is not yet complete. There are too many loose ends, which must be accounted for. The 'great feeling of affection' present in the dream seemed odd. Freud had never felt great warmth towards his uncle and his feelings towards R were far more tempered than those experienced in the dream. Moreover, the warm feeling was inconsistent with his dream's attempt to cast R in the part of a simpleton. Freud came to the view that the feeling was meant to foreclose the task of interpretation or at least to hamper it by introducing a distortion.

If my dream was distorted in this respect from its latent content – and distorted into its opposite – then the affection that was manifest in the dream served the purpose of this distortion. In other words, *distortion* was shown in this case to be deliberate and to be a means of *dissimulation*. My dream thoughts had contained a slander against R; and, in order that I might not notice this, what appeared in the dream was the opposite, a feeling of affection for him. (1900: 222–3)

Freud goes on to generalize and argue that, as in the case of political censorship, censorship and distortions in dreams 'are given their shape in individual human beings by the operation of two psychical forces (or we may describe them as currents or systems); and that one of these forces constructs the wish which is expressed in the dream, while the other exercises a censorship upon this dream-wish and, by the use of that censorship, forcibly brings about a distortion in the expression of the wish' (1900: 225). The task of interpretation is to undo the effects of the censor, reaching at the latent dream thoughts which find their disguised expressions in the manifest dream content.

There are still loose ends in the dream. There is, for example, the beard – yellow, surrounding the face and 'standing out'. Freud made a somewhat half-hearted attempt to account for the yellow beard as a sign of the passing of youth, though clearly the interpretation of this part of the dream is left incomplete, perhaps because Freud felt that he had already got what he wanted out of this dream (the illustration of the wish-fulfilling character of the dream and of the opposed mental forces which determine its form) or because he did not wish to share this part of the interpretation with the reader. Some commentators have suggested that the dream also reveals a disguised wish not to be Jewish or, at least, to have the power to eliminate Jewish

rivals – an interpretation which finds some support in three other dreams reported in the same book (Schorske, 1961: 187). In any event, the interpretation of a dream is almost always incomplete, although in the majority of cases of successful interpretation, new lines of interpretation tend to reinforce earlier ones.

In summary, then, the interpretation of the Uncle Josef dream illustrates:

- 1 The link between the manifest content of the dream and the unconscious wish or desire which it expresses.
- 2 The way that the manifest content of a dream is a compromise formation between the unconscious desire seeking expression and censoring forces.
- 3 The processes of condensation and displacement which are known as primary processes and characterize the changes undergone by unconscious ideas as they reach consciousness.

### **THE BIG PICTURE AND THE INTIMATE DETAIL**

The intimate, personal details of dreams and the vast panorama of thousands of people working to put rockets into space seem to belong to different worlds. Dreams appear to spring from the irrational recesses of each individual's unconscious, whereas an organization such as NASA appears to be the epitome of technical rationality, science and order. And, yet, is it not the case that behind the massive resources mobilized by NASA lie the dreams of millions of people? How many children have not dreamt of becoming astronauts, of going to the moon or beyond? And how many adults did not share Kennedy's dream of putting a man on the moon and bringing him back safely by the end of the decade? How many did not shed tears as they lined the roads to give the early astronauts the welcome reserved for conquering emperors in antiquity? It would seem that, however rational and ordered organizations appear to be, they are often carriers of strong emotional forces, unconscious desires and hopes, similar to those expressed in dreams.

Notice again how some of the details of the Uncle Josef dream are drawn from the broader picture of social life, organizations and culture: the ambition of professional recognition, the presence of professional rivalry, discrimination on the basis of religious denomination, the oppressive clout of academic hierarchies and honours; these are all features in the dream which are found in a large measure with contemporary organizations. The clash between proud ambition and fear of failure lies squarely at the heart of both Freud's dream and of the NASA officials' treatment of the warnings of the alarmed engineers. In both instances powerful censoring forces stopped unpalatable or painful ideas from being voiced.

The two worlds, then, the public arena of technical and cultural achievements and the private world of dreams, are not as far apart as they seem at first. In both, we encounter human desires finding different expressions. It is true that in organizations some desires are expressed through action or failure to act, whereas in dreams the expression is through manifest content. Yet, in both areas interpretation can uncover hidden meanings and desires. Psychoanalytic interpretations are built on the premiss that things often stand for more than they appear. As Paul Ricoeur, one of the most persuasive commentators on psychoanalysis, has argued, 'to interpret is to understand a double meaning' (1970: 8). Conscious phenomena are thus often found to be compromise formations between unconscious wishes that are too troublesome

to gain access to consciousness and the forces of repression that aim to censor them. Interpretation is for Ricoeur the 'systematic exercise of suspicion' (1970: 32), forever looking for meanings behind meanings and for clues as signs of a wider picture. In this way, interpretation can move quickly from tiny detail to sweeping inference in a way akin to the primitive huntsman who can detect the existence of prey from tiny disturbances in the ground. Like the primitive huntsman, the psychoanalytic interpreter may disregard vast areas of undisturbed terrain and focus on the seemingly trifling irregularities and oddities; his or her skill resides in his or her ability to make sense of these trifles, to reveal their meaning as part of the broader picture (Ginzburg, 1980).

How can we distinguish between valid and spurious interpretations? What corroborations may be offered to strengthen specific interpretations? Since the work of Barthes and postmodernist theorists, we have learned to look for double meanings not only in dreams, neurotic symptoms and fantasies but in virtually any cultural artefact, from blue jeans to spaceships and from businessmen's grey suits to AIDS. Are all interpretations equally valid? We do not believe so. Interpretation is an art owing as much to tacit skills and know-how as to scientific method. Specific interpretations may not be proved or disproved by conventional criteria, like those used in the natural or mathematical sciences. Yet this does not make every interpretation equally meaningful or valid. An interpretation may be original, clever, perceptive, incomplete, misleading or even plain wrong. In Chapter 11, a number of techniques for corroborating interpretations will be suggested.

## CONCLUSION

In this introductory chapter we have tried to show that the distance between the concerns of psychoanalysis and the types of phenomena prevalent in organizations is not so great. We have suggested that people's actions, thoughts and emotions in organizations are expressions of wishes and desires similar to those in the rest of their lives. The meaning of these actions, thoughts and emotions is not always clear because powerful psychic as well as social censors are muffling and distorting them. In these circumstances, interpretations like the ones pioneered by Freud in his discussions of dreams and neurotic symptoms can help reveal the hidden meanings of organizational phenomena. In the chapters that follow we shall see how such interpretations can initiate insightful explorations of organizational phenomena, such as leadership, group behaviour, symbolism and culture. We shall also introduce a number of key psychoanalytic ideas, concepts and theories which will further enhance these explorations.

## NOTES

- 1 In fact, of nine flights in 1985, O-ring erosion occurred in seven, with blow-by occurring in six. This compared with four instances of erosion and three of blow-by for the six flights of 1984, when the problem began developing on a regular basis (Report of the Rogers Commission, 1986: 130–1).
- 2 It may be useful to cite here what the Rogers Commission wrote about NASA management's use of the term 'safety margin'. 'From the beginning, [contractor Morton-] Thiokol had suspected the putty was a contributing factor in O-ring erosion . . . In April 1983, Thiokol

reported on tests conducted to study the behavior of the joint putty. One conclusion of the report was that the STS-2 erosion was probably caused by blow holes in the putty, which allowed a jet of hot gas to focus on the primary O-ring. Thiokol discovered the focused jet ate away or "impinged" on portions of the O-ring. Thiokol calculated that the maximum possible impingement erosion was .090 inch, and that lab test proved that an O-ring would seal at 3,000 psi when erosion of .095 was simulated. This "safety margin" was the basis for approving Shuttle flights while accepting the possibility of O-ring erosion' (Report, 1986: 133). It is also important to note that, as investigation revealed, NASA's problems were by no means limited to the solid rocket boosters, but affected every aspect of their activity. They had hardware problems in other areas, and had lost technical, financial and operational control over what they were doing (Schwartz, 1990). The Rogers Commission, who observed that 'an assessment of the system's overall performance is best made by studying the process at the end of the production chain: crew training', cited this from astronaut Henry Hartsfield: 'Had we not had the accident, we were going to be up against a wall; STS 61-H . . . would have had to average 31 hours in the simulator to accomplish their required training, and STS 61-K would have to average 33 hours [note normal time was 77 hours]. That is ridiculous. For the first time, somebody was going to have to stand up and say we have got to slip the launch because we are not going to have the crew trained' (1986: 170). There can be little doubt that NASA's problems were systemic.

# 1 CORE PSYCHOANALYTIC IDEAS AND THEORIES

In the Introduction, we emphasized the importance of interpretation in unravelling the deeper meanings of organizational events. In later chapters we shall explore different psychoanalytic interpretations of organizational phenomena, including myths, fantasies and jokes. A large and important part of the psychoanalytic task is interpretative. Interpretation, however, is not an end in itself in depth psychology; rather, it is a technique leading towards an understanding of deeper psychic, organizational and cultural realities.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud provided the prototype for most types of psychoanalytic interpretations; in this work, he moved from interpretations of individual dreams to a study of the transformations of ideas and desires in the unconscious and the nature of unconscious processes. The interpretation of dreams was for Freud not an exercise in literary criticism, but the 'royal road' to the unconscious, the privileged but not exclusive path to the secrets of the human psyche. The final chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* is not a synthesis of all the interpretations which have been offered earlier, but a presentation of the theoretical yield of his interpretations, a *metapsychology*. This is a complex of concepts, principles, theories and models of the mind, the philosophical underpinning of a psychology of the unconscious, which, like metaphysics, lies once removed from empirical reality. This chapter presents most of the important elements of this metapsychology, including the emergence of the different agencies of the mind through each individual's early childhood experiences, the functions and dynamics of these mental agencies. Readers who are familiar with the core ideas of depth psychology will wish to skip this chapter. Those, however, with only a sketchy understanding of these ideas will find in this chapter a systematic presentation of concepts and theories sometimes used in a casual and imprecise way, which denies them their vitality and explanatory power.

## **METAPSYCHOLOGY: THE THREE POINTS OF VIEW**

Freud's metapsychological investigations continued throughout his life; they are organized around three general 'points of view' or three distinct levels of analysis. These three points of view are seldom incompatible; at times they support each other and at times they proceed independently of each other, making use of different assumptions and imageries. The object of metapsychology is to provide complementary accounts from all three points of view.

The *topographic point of view* is essentially *descriptive*, a kind of mental map displaying different areas of the mind. The fundamental qualities and properties of ideas and processes in different areas are different. This point of view lacks a causal imagery: it does not seek to explain why an idea crosses a boundary; why, for example, a conscious idea becomes repressed in the unconscious; or why an unconscious one re-surfaces in consciousness at some particular point of an individual's life. It does, however, yield valuable information about the itinerary of different ideas as they travel into different mental locations being processed by different mental agencies, as well as their properties at different stages in their journeys.

The *economic point of view* deals in the currency of *energies*. Ideas and desires become charged with energy which is, essentially, in limited supply. Different events may be accompanied by the discharge or binding of energy, its investment ('cathexis') into different objects or ideas, its transformation or sublimation into different aims or its dissipation in different mental activities. The economic point of view becomes very important in explaining outcomes of mental conflicts or mental events in which different factors are pitched against each other, or in accounting for sudden surges of overpowering emotions or desires.

The *dynamic point of view* examines how and when different wishes and desires manifest themselves, how they are acted upon or are defended against. It focuses on mental *conflict*, its origins, which may lie in clashing desires or in the demands made by external reality, and its resolutions, which may lead to fresh conflicts, symptoms and inhibitions. This is the point of view which directly deals with different currents within the individual psyche and examines how and when unconscious material surfaces into consciousness.

Freud argued that 'when we have succeeded in describing a psychical process in its dynamic, topographical and economic aspects, we shall speak of it as a *metapsychological* presentation' (1915b: 184). This way of looking at mental processes from three different points of view may puzzle some; it is not, however, so unusual. It is a procedure that empirical scientists employ regularly in accounting for natural or historical phenomena. The discovery of a new set of historical artefacts, such as human remains, weapons or cooking implements, would lead to different examinations and hypotheses, drawing from the resources of different disciplines, including biology, chemistry, archaeology, geology, palaeontology and so on. Different scientists may bring their knowledge to bear in analysing such findings. Only when the hypotheses provided by different disciplines point in the same direction can we say that we have an understanding of the nature and meaning of the findings, their origins and their functions. In a similar way, a psychological process, such as the repression of a particular idea, may be approached from different points of view, each furnishing its own explanatory insights, each testing, qualifying or modifying the insights of the others.

### **A TORN SELF: THE DYNAMICS OF INNER CONFLICT**

Undoubtedly, the dynamic point of view is the driving one in most psychoanalytic investigations, becoming over the past hundred years increasingly dominant. It is the one that builds most directly on to interpretation, and yields some of the most interesting insights, by addressing *conflict* – a fundamental feature of the psychoanalytic conception of the individual, culture and society. As Rieff has argued, Freud

conceives of the self not as an abstract entity, uniting experience and cognition, but as the subject of a struggle between two objective forces – unregenerate instincts and overbearing culture. Between these two forces there may be compromise but no resolution. Since the individual can neither extirpate his instincts nor wholly reject the demands of society, his character expresses the way in which he organizes and appeases the conflict between the two. (Rieff, 1959: 29)

The unity of the self in the face of such conflicts is problematic. Individuals may at times experience themselves as wholesome, unified and centred; in reality, however, such unity is the result of psychological *work* in the presence of forces which seek to break the self apart, to decentre it. Freud's image of the self as something achieved rather than as something given has had a profound influence on twentieth-century culture, becoming one of the core features of postmodern theorizing. The individual psyche, the psychical apparatus as Freud often referred to it, is composed of different mental agencies, each one of which draws the individual in different directions. Between these mental agencies, there can be compromise, accommodation or strife, but no permanent harmony.

### **The id, the instincts and the pleasure principle**

The oldest and least accessible mental agency is referred to as the *id*. The id is substantially unconscious, containing

everything that is inherited, that is present at birth, that is laid down in the constitution – above all, therefore, the instincts, which originate from the somatic organization and which find a first psychical expression here in the id in forms unknown to us. This oldest portion of the psychical apparatus remains the most important throughout life; moreover, the investigations of psychoanalysis started with it. (1940: 376)

The id, then, is this large area of the psyche which is inaccessible to consciousness, untainted by culture or civilization, with no sense of time and no sense of reason, whose influence on our mental lives can only be studied indirectly, through its manifestations in conscious activity. The id, that 'cauldron full of seething excitations' (1933: 106), is the source of internal stimuli, which, unlike external ones, may not be avoided by running away from them, through flight. 'It is filled with energy reaching from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle' (1933: 106).

The concept of *instinct* or *drive* whose province is the id is one of the richest, but also one of the most problematic in depth psychology. It has been rejected or disregarded by many depth psychologists, who view it as a remnant of nineteenth-century biological thinking. Freud, for his part, was adamant that it is an indispensable concept for explaining stimuli originating from within. Much of his psychology was dedicated to an exploration of one major instinct, *sexuality*. Throughout his life, however, he argued for an instinctual dualism. In his early writings, he argued for a dualism of sexuality and self-preservation; later, he modified this view, arguing that self-preservation is itself a modification of the sexual instinct. He finally proposed a dualism of life instincts, which include sexuality, and death instincts, which include destructiveness and a tendency towards inertia and ultimately death.



While he viewed these instinctual forces as characteristic of all organic life, instincts in human beings have some totally unique properties. They are almost infinitely complex, malleable and changing, developing throughout an individual's life and manifesting themselves in a hugely diverse array of wishes and desires. Sexuality, for instance, develops from a simple force in early life into an increasingly complex force, which may be manifested in sexual desires, social bonding and solidarity, artistic creativity, scientific enquiry or spiritual longings. What is constant behind such different manifestations is *libido*, the life energy which drives them, an energy which becomes easily deflected, re-oriented or modified. Libido is the force that converts a mere idea into a vital urge, something that demands satisfaction or at least action. A satisfied desire is, at least temporarily, drained of its energy, reverting to its status as an idea. In this sense, Freud identified the *pleasure principle* as the principle of mental functioning which dominates desires in the id, a principle under which pleasure is the result of a fulfilled desire, a desire which, when left unfulfilled generates an unpleasant excitation. The importance of the pleasure principle in mental functioning cannot be exaggerated. No amount of civilization, morality or constraint can alter this. 'In the theory of psychoanalysis we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle' (1920: 275). The pleasure, according to this view, is no abstract ethical principle of how to achieve a good and happy life, but rather a lived experience associated with the fulfilment of our most basic strivings:

The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed. The irresistibility of perverse instincts, and perhaps the attraction in general of forbidden things finds an economic explanation here. (1930: 267)

Yet, the programme of the pleasure principle is 'at loggerheads with the whole world, with the microcosm as much as the macrocosm. There is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all regulations of the universe run counter to it' (1930: 263).

### **The ego, the reality principle and the mechanisms of defence**

The life of an organism ruled exclusively by the pleasure principle would undoubtedly be colourful; it would also be extremely short. From a very early age, each one of us learns that some pleasures are out of bounds, forbidden or unattainable. The pursuit of such pleasures is bound to produce disappointment or damage, physical or psychological. Hence it is postponed, modified or relinquished, in exchange for what is attainable. This is described as the *reality principle*, the principle of mental functioning served by the *ego*, the second major mental agency.

Under the influence of the real external world around us, one portion of the id has undergone a special development. From what was originally a cortical layer, equipped with the organs for receiving stimuli and with arrangements for acting as a protective shield against stimuli, a special organization has arisen which henceforward acts as an intermediary between the id and the external world. To this region of the mind we have given the name of *ego*. (1940: 376)

The ego performs a number of vital functions for an individual. It is responsible for receiving stimuli both from inside and outside and for establishing whether things are

real or imaginary through *reality testing*. It interjects *thought* between the experience of a need and its fulfilment, frequently postponing or qualifying the gratification of instinctual impulses. It is responsible for *motility* and *action*; above all, the ego is the seat of *consciousness* and controls the movement of ideas from the preconscious to consciousness. It is also the mental agency responsible for keeping the individual together.

What distinguishes the ego from the id quite especially is a tendency for synthesis in its contents, to a combination and unification in its mental processes which are totally lacking . . . To adopt a popular mode of speaking, we might say that the ego stands for reason and good sense while the id stands for the untamed passions. (1933: 108)

The ego, then, is the mental agency specifically responsible for the sense of unity and integrity, which we each experience as 'self'. This is something that is accomplished at considerable cost and constant vigilance. How does the ego seek to maintain the integrity of the self in the face of inner and outer threats? In the first place, as we saw in the Introduction, it does so through the *defence mechanisms*, i.e. by initiating a set of psychological processes aimed at averting the danger. The process of repression, as a form of psychological defence against pain, embarrassment or disappointment, has already been examined in some detail. Freud came to regard repression as being triggered by a 'signal of anxiety', a very unpleasant feeling accompanying the recognition of a danger, inner or outer. Repression, however, is not the only type of defence available to the ego. Other defensive mechanisms, to use the term proposed by Anna Freud (1936), include the following:

- 1 *Regression*: the wholesale replacement of a set of instinctual impulses and desires by one which characterized an earlier stage of development; for example, reversion to childhood or adolescent configurations.
- 2 *Reaction-formation*: the obliteration of powerful impulses (especially hostile ones) through a transformation into their opposites; for example, an angry person manifests exaggerated care, a hateful person exaggerated love.
- 3 *Projection*: the attribution of one's own desires (especially destructive ones) to another person.
- 4 *Introjection or identification*: whereby one identifies with another person either as an object of admiration or as an object of persecution.
- 5 *Denial*: the refusal to acknowledge external reality or stimuli, however threatening.
- 6 *Isolation*: whereby an idea or memory is acknowledged in consciousness, but the accompanying emotion is rejected; alternatively, an idea or a memory, however painful, may be acknowledged but only if it is dissociated from other related ideas.

Subsequent theorists have added other defensive mechanisms against anxiety, some of which are deployed at an individual level, while others may be deployed in groups or larger social collectivities. Some of these will be examined in future chapters, but we should note now the following two:

- 1 *Splitting*: an object or indeed the ego is split into two, each part possessing qualities at odds with those of the other; for example, one is totally good and one is totally bad.
- 2 *Rationalization*: plausible or rational reasons are provided for explaining one's actions or feelings, but which in reality conceal the real reasons.

All of these mechanisms may involve the repression of particular ideas or desires, the dissociation between an instinct and the object to which it is attached, or the dissociation between two closely related ideas or desires which are kept apart. They may, sometimes, lead to behaviour which is recognized as 'pathological', involving a weakening of reality testing and thinking processes. One process which may also function as a defence mechanism is called *sublimation*, and this is of great importance for the study of group and organizational phenomena. Sublimation operates not by altering the relation between instinct and object, but by radically modifying the energy of the instinct itself, in a way analogous to the chemical process whereby a solid is directly transformed into a gas. Sublimation, an idea which Freud inherited from Nietzsche, involves the desexualization of libido and its transformation into a creative, bonding or spiritual energy, re-oriented towards non-sexual aims, such as artistic, scientific or spiritual pursuits. The transformation of libido from a pleasure-seeking force into a force towards cultural, economic and political achievement makes sublimation a vital process in the service of civilization.

To the contributions of the energy won in such a way for the functions of our mental life we probably owe the highest cultural consequences. A repression taking place at an early period excludes the sublimation of the repressed impulse; after the removal of the repression the way to sublimation is again free. (1910: 54)

The discussion of the mechanisms of defence underlines the fact that the ego, in some of its manifestations, is itself unconscious. The mechanisms of defence are not conscious strategies of coping with stress or difficulties (as is sometimes assumed) but *unconscious processes*, which can only be established through painstaking interpretative work. This is what forced Freud to reconsider the nature of the ego in his later work. Contrary to his earlier views that psychic conflict is between unconscious impulses and the conscious forces of repression, in his later work Freud came to appreciate that defensive processes initiated by the ego are themselves unconscious. The analysis of the ego's defence mechanisms forms the central focus of a tradition in depth psychology known as *ego psychology*, which has flourished in the United States since the 1930s. In some versions of this tradition, the ego emerges essentially as an agent of adaptation, employing the defence mechanisms to ensure the survival and well-being of the individual: 'The term "mechanism" is unfortunate here; they are purposeful strategies, consciously or unconsciously designed to make life easier and more manageable, not mechanical routines with causes but no purposes' (Jahoda, 1977: 66). In this context, 'purposeful' must be understood as fulfilling an important psychological function, rather than as 'consciously purposeful'. Yet such functionalist readings of the ego do not do full justice to the complexities of the concept in psychoanalytic theory. In particular, they disregard a major feature of the ego, the fact that 'from a dynamic point of view it is weak, it has borrowed its energies from the id' (1933: 109). In a famous simile, Freud argued that

the ego's relation to the id might be compared with that of a rider to his horse. The horse supplies the locomotive energy, while the rider has the privilege of deciding on the goal and of guiding the powerful animal's movement. But only too often there arises between the ego and the id the not precisely ideal situation of the rider being obliged to guide the horse along the path by which it itself wants to go. (1933: 109)

## Narcissism and the ego-ideal

The concept which crucially shifted the psychoanalytic ego from its position as agent of adaptation is *narcissism*. The theory of narcissism is one of the most original and far-reaching concepts in depth psychology, which has made enormous contributions to the analysis of organizations as well as contemporary culture in general. The term 'narcissism' is drawn from the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus, the young man who fell in love with his own image in a lake's calm water, not realizing that the image was his own. The importance of the concept of narcissism for the study of the ego lies in the fact that it casts the ego not in its usual role as agent deploying defensive strategies, but as an *object*, an object of instinctual impulses. If libido may be directed outwards, towards the objects of the world, the theory of narcissism proposes that it may also be re-directed inwards by adopting the ego as its object.

The idea of narcissism was introduced in an important essay published by Freud in 1914. Reflecting on certain pathological conditions in which an individual withdraws all interest from the external objects, Freud proposed that these conditions are the result of an individual adopting him or herself as a love-object. Object libido is in this way converted into ego libido. But, as in other areas of psychoanalytic enquiry, pathology is not qualitatively different from normality, but rather marks an exaggerated preponderance of certain tendencies at the expense of others. A healthy individual is one who combines sturdy self-esteem with an ability to channel his or her interest, attention and love to objects of the natural and social world.

[W]e may even venture to touch on the question of what makes it necessary at all for our mental life to pass beyond the limits of narcissism and to attach the libido to objects. The answer which would follow from our line of thought would once more be that this necessity arises when the cathexis of the ego with libido exceeds a certain amount. A strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love. (1914a: 78)

This extract highlights the importance of the economic factor in determining pathology as against mental health. Some of the libido must be *cathected*, i.e. channelled on to and invested in the ego, in order for the ego to function properly; if, however, an individual's libido is exclusively oriented towards the ego, then the individual will suffer from a kind of self-obsession, accompanied by an inability to form meaningful relations with the world around him or her and exaggerated feelings of self-importance. In fact, in choosing objects on which to focus their sexual and emotional interest, individuals may adopt one of two characteristic stances, the *narcissistic* and the *anaclitic*. In the former, individuals choose objects 'like themselves', while in the latter the object embodies certain attractive qualities associated with a person who once looked after them or protected them. Through narcissistic object choices, individuals strengthen their own feelings of self-esteem, provided that the object of their interest reciprocates the love and admiration. Anaclitic object choices, on the other hand, may leave the ego weakened; in extreme cases of falling in love, an individual may feel totally drained of self-interest or esteem as he or she exalts his or her lover to an idealized, sublime state.

How does the ego make itself an object of narcissistic admiration and love? The answer to this question rests on the concept of the *ego-ideal*, an amalgam of attractive qualities which are abstracted from admired persons, notably the parents as

perceived in early life, cultural and personal heroes and other individuals or ideas that inspire respect. Against this ego-ideal, the ego continuously measures itself, and to the extent that it can draw itself close to the ideal, the ego can attract libido on to itself. Narcissism then restores some of the self-love which was enjoyed in early childhood by the ego before a distinction between the inner and the outer worlds was made. It must be noted that the ego-ideal is itself an unconscious representation; most people would deny that they idealize a particular individual or hero-worship another. Such admissions may expose them to ridicule or embarrassment. Instead, the ego-ideal may very well absorb disparate and at times contradictory qualities from different role models, provided that these are kept below consciousness.

From its earliest postulation, the importance of the ego-ideal for group and organizational psychology was evident to Freud:

The ego ideal opens up an important avenue for the understanding of group psychology. In addition to its individual side, this ideal has a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, a class or a nation. It binds not only a person's narcissistic libido, but also a considerable amount of his homosexual libido, which is in this way turned back into the ego. (1914a: 96)

Individuals may thus derive narcissistic fulfilment from the cultural, economic, military and even sporting achievements of their nation or group; as members of the group, they too can feel that they have played a part in the achievement, their ego drawing close to the cultural super-ego.

To recapitulate, then, the ego in psychoanalysis stands for the reality principle, the demands of natural and social reality, and seeks to curb the impulses from the id in the name of psychological unity and synthesis which is one of its major pre-occupations. It commands the thinking, reflecting and testing faculties and initiates various defensive processes in response to anxiety which signals a threat, from inside or from outside. The ego, however, is weak and must use energies which it draws to itself from the id through the process of narcissism. To do so, it seeks to make itself lovable and attractive by emulating the ego-ideal which is composed of all the perfections with which the parents and other admired persons were once invested. Yet, in drawing libido to itself, the ego risks losing its ability to invest it in meaningful objects and forming relations with the world outside. Besides, the task of emulating the ego-ideal and making itself attractive and lovable is by no means unproblematic.

### **The super-ego, conscience and guilt**

Just how problematic it is for the ego to adopt the attributes of the ego-ideal and attract libido on to itself is highlighted by the third major mental agency, the *super-ego*. The super-ego, in another of Freud's famous metaphors, is the ego's third harsh master, the other two being the id and external reality. The super-ego can be seen as part of the ego which becomes differentiated from the ego in childhood, just as the ego becomes differentiated from the id. But if the ego becomes separate from the id under the realization of the opposition between an outer and an inner world, the super-ego becomes separated following one of the major psychic episodes of childhood centring around what is referred to as the Oedipus complex. The super-ego embodies the authority of the child's father as a representative of broader moral and

social laws, strictures and prohibitions. It is the super-ego which ensures that the moral demands of our society are not experienced as external but as part of ourselves. The chief qualities of the super-ego are vigilance, rigidity and harshness; it continuously monitors the ego, enforcing the social regulations through conscience and feelings of guilt. It also constantly measures the ego against the ideal and punishes cruelly any perceived shortfalls.

Where does the super-ego derive these properties from, whose social usefulness is quite evident but which make the ego's task even more problematic? We shall presently examine how the super-ego inherits many of the harsh, critical qualities with which the father was associated by the child during the Oedipal phase. From an economic point of view, however, the super-ego represents a re-orientation of aggressive impulses against the ego in the interest of morality.

From the point of view of instinctual control of morality, it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be. It is remarkable that the more a man controls his aggressiveness towards the exterior the more severe – that is aggressive – he becomes in his ego ideal. The ordinary view sees the situation the other way round: the standard set up by the ego ideal seems to be the motive for the suppression of aggressiveness. The fact remains, however, as we have stated it: the more a man controls his aggressiveness, the more intense becomes his ideal's inclination to aggressiveness against his ego. (1923: 395–6)

It will be noticed that in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), the work in which Freud first proposed the idea of the super-ego, it is used interchangeably with the ego-ideal. In the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933), however, the ego-ideal is treated as one of three core functions of the super-ego, the other two being self-observation and conscience. Subsequent writers have sought to draw these two concepts, the ego-ideal and the super-ego, further apart. Nunberg (1955), Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985) and several theorists interested in organizations, including Schwartz (1990), have argued that while the super-ego is associated with the qualities of dreaded figures, the ego-ideal is fundamentally formed on the model of loved objects, most especially the mother, of the very first life experiences. To appreciate these differences, it is now important to move from a relatively static presentation of the metapsychology to an examination of the development of the mental personality through some of life's early experiences.

## THE STAGES OF SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

One of Freud's most original and controversial theories is and has remained his theory of infantile sexuality. His book *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905b) caused a considerable scandal at the time of its publication. In it, he revolutionized the conception of sexuality by disengaging it from overtly sexual acts involving the genital apparatus, and re-orienting it towards a broad range of activities, sensations and experiences entailing pleasure and involving many different parts of the body.

The detaching of sexuality from the genitals has the advantage of allowing us to bring the sexual activities of children and of perverts into the same scope as those of normal adults. The sexual activities of children have hitherto been entirely neglected and though those of perverts have been recognized it has been with moral indignation and without understanding. (1925a: 222)

Freud's conception of the development of sexuality involves a series of transitions through several stages, beginning with the child's earliest experiences. Each stage revolves around a particular bodily area which becomes the focus of pleasure-yielding sensations but also of disappointments and frustrations. The closure of each stage signals the arrival of the next, yet each stage bequeaths the individual a certain legacy which will remain with him or her for the rest of life. This includes a new range of meanings and distinctions, such as inner/outer, good/bad, me/not me; a new range of mental agencies or institutions, such as the ego and the super-ego; and a new range of repressed longings and desires which will surface later on in life, under diverse guises. It is largely through these subsequent manifestations that much of our understanding of the early transformations of sexuality are studied.

### **Primary narcissism and the oral stage**

The infant's early experience is one without boundaries: there is no boundary between the child and the world; instead, the child experiences the mother's love for it directly and without mediation. And the mother is, at least in the beginning, the whole world to the infant; and the infant is, at least at the beginning, the central focus of her attention. The infant thus experiences itself as being continuous with the world, which itself appears to be made out of love. This early experience of being continuous with a loving world is shrouded in mystery, almost obliterated by the major trials that life places in the child's path. Yet, if we reflect on it, we may discover that in it lies the kernel of some religious experiences in later life, when the religious believer loses him or herself in a religious community, experiencing an 'oceanic' feeling of love, peace and complete fusion. In our nostalgic frames of mind, when we have the idea that once life was perfect, as in the Garden of Eden, or in our organizations before the despised present regime gained power, we are tapping into this substratum of our experience (Gabriel, 1993). This experience of fusion was described by Freud as *primary narcissism*, when self-love precedes the realization that there is a recalcitrant reality which does not automatically yield to our wishes.

The first realization that this blissful state of affairs is not going to last occurs when the mother's breast fails to be present when it is wanted. This, at once, establishes the mouth as the centre of pleasurable sensations but also as the centre of separation. It establishes the first core opposition in the child's universe of meanings, that between the ego and the object. The experience of separation defines us as specifically different from the rest of the world, and is marked by the first feelings of *anxiety*. Pleasure, on the other hand, is associated with the incorporation of the object, which is the dominant relational mode of this phase of sexual development. Later in life, the mouth and incorporation may re-surface as the focus of sexual pleasure. During the oral stage, and especially as the child starts teething, it begins to bite the breast. Melanie Klein, following Karl Abraham, placed much importance on what she viewed as the first display of infantile sadism, the first manifestation of destructive impulses:

The destructive instinct projected outwards is first experienced as oral aggression. I believe that oral-sadistic impulses towards the mother's breast are active from the beginning of life, though with the onset of teething the cannibalistic impulses increase in strength – a factor stressed by Abraham.

In states of frustration and anxiety the oral-sadistic and cannibalistic desires are reinforced, and then the infant feels that he has taken the nipple and the breast *in bits*. (Klein, 1946/1986: 180)

Klein attributes greater importance to the oral phase for the future development of the child than Freud did. The child, immersed in its narcissistic sense of self-importance, is unable as yet to understand the significance of the withdrawing breast or its own feelings of anxiety. It attributes the cause of the anxiety to powerful forces outside itself, which are arrayed against it. It attempts to defend against them with the idea of a return to the state of fusion in which there was no separation between it and the world, and hence no anxiety. Putting the whole matter in terms of the infant's relations with the mother, the infant *splits* its relations with the breast into two parts: one is a good breast, belonging to a perfect mother who loves it absolutely; the other is a bad breast, belonging to a malevolent, withholding, dangerous mother. In this way, the infant establishes the root of a view of the world which divides it into elements that are all good, filled with love, with which it may perfectly fuse, and elements that are all bad, filled with hate, seeking to destroy it (see Klein, 1946/1986, 1956/1986; Segal, 1964, 1979).

This conflict between perfect goodness and irredeemable badness can be seen as the second core opposition which comes to dominate our mental functioning. It is characteristic of what Klein calls the *paranoid-schizoid position*, a mode of *object relations* (i.e. relationships between ourselves and the important objects of our universe) during the first four or five months of life (Klein, 1946/1986). Our tendency to see the features of our world, including our organizations, our groups, our leaders, our co-workers and so on, as either all good or all bad is a consequence of this position. But the paranoid-schizoid position is superseded, before the first year of life is over, by what Klein calls the *depressive position*, built on the realization that the object of love and the object of hate is one and the same, the mother. This becomes part of a broader realization that others, and ourselves, are not either all bad or all good, but both (Klein, 1940/1986). The world is full of complexities, relations are transient and contingent, love is not something we are absolutely entitled to, but something that may be earned. Thus primary narcissism gives way to *mutualistic relations* with others.

Klein's contribution to an understanding of the oral phase, based on her work on children's play, has had profound implications for psychoanalytic theory. It has highlighted the complexity of the child's relationship with its world, the discovery of the world of objects, the experience of emotional *ambivalence* (i.e. simultaneous strong positive and strong negative feelings about the same object) and the early manifestations of aggressiveness. It initiated a psychoanalytic tradition known as *object relations theory*, which shifted the focus of understanding of early childhood development and subsequent mental functioning away from the world of instincts, sexuality and pleasure, towards the modes of relating to others. This tradition, which has prospered in the United Kingdom, has made notable contributions to the study of group and organizational phenomena, including those of Bion, Jaques and Menzies Lyth, some of which will be explored in later chapters of this book. In many of these contributions, the child's early emotional relationships, especially the distant memory of the perfect fusion with the mother and the desire to recover it, will continue to act as a powerful force whenever feelings of anxiety are experienced. Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985) has argued that memory of the child's perfect fusion with



the mother is preserved in the ego-ideal, which seeks to restore the ego as the centre of a loving world, an idea which has proved of great value for the study of leadership and other organizational processes, as shown in the work of Schwartz (1990).

### **The anal-sadistic stage**

Freud's interest, unlike that of the object relations theorists, remained firmly focused on the oral phase as a phase of *sexual* development, characterized by incorporation, its unique mode of deriving pleasure. In his very last work, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud wrote: 'The baby's obstinate persistence in sucking gives evidence at an early stage of a need for satisfaction which, though it originates from and is instigated by the taking of nourishment, nevertheless strives to obtain pleasure independently of nourishment and for that reason may and should be termed *sexual*' (1940: 385).

Between the ages of two and four the child enters a new phase of sexual development, which is characterized by the anus as the centre of pleasurable sensations; this coincides with the strengthening of the child's muscular apparatus and its increasing control over the sphincter functions. The sexual nature of the excretory function may come as a surprise to those who regard it, like feeding, as a straightforward physiological function. For Freud, however, defecation, like eating before it, opens a new range of pleasurable sensations, associated with controlling the processes of evacuating and retaining. It is during this stage that the opposition of *activity* and *passivity* comes to the fore, as the child's wishes to control its bowel movements bring it into opposition with the parents' attempts to toilet-train it.

During the anal stage, the faeces assume an extraordinary symbolic importance as objects of sexual interest and value. They are, in the first instance, a part of the child that is detachable, and, in the second place, something that is of concern and value to the parents. The parents' apparent delight when the child succeeds in taming its excretions, producing faeces in the chamber pot, leads to a symbolic equation in the child's unconscious mind, one that will persist long after it has accepted the view that faeces are something quite disgusting and useless, the equation faeces = gift = money. Deferring to the parents' wishes is viewed by the child as an act of generosity on its part; alternatively, the child may deny its parents satisfaction, displaying an obstinacy which may re-surface in later life, as one of a triad of character traits which frequently occur together, orderliness, parsimoniousness and obstinacy, the traits of the so-called 'anal personality'. The anal phase, even more than the oral phase, displays a pronounced *sadistic* quality. This originates in the child's refusal to please the parents – a refusal which comes to be associated with the denial of another person's pleasure or even more intensely with the inflicting of pain on another person. Karl Abraham distinguished between two sadistic qualities in the anal stage, one succeeding the other. The earlier one is linked to the destruction of the object through evacuation, the later one to possessive collection and controlling of objects and a simultaneous frustration of the other's wishes (Abraham, 1973: 422ff). Both of these qualities may re-surface in later life in sadistic personalities.

As with the oral stage, the anal stage is usually concluded with the child accepting the frustrations and disappointments of external reality, surrendering some of the pleasures of early life and repressing most of its impulses. At the same time, the child emerges from the anal stage with a vastly increased symbolic universe, one that includes objects invested with a wealth of different meanings and nuances and a wide

variety of emotional experiences. It has become aware of the enormity and recalcitrance of the external world that surrounds and confronts it, but at the same time has started to discover the limited but effective control that it can exercise over others if not yet over its own life.

### THE PHALLIC STAGE AND THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

The child has not yet discovered the difference between she and he (hence we have referred to 'it' through the neutral pronoun thus far). This polarity between feminine and masculine will come to dominate the third stage of libidinal development, the phallic stage. The arrival of this stage is signalled by the child's discovery of yet another area of bodily pleasure, the penis for the boy, the clitoris for the girl. The child's attitude towards this new discovery is coloured by its prior experiences with breast and faeces; from the start, the phallus is experienced as a detachable object, an object that may be lost. Two events mark the development of the phallic phase: the parents' admonishments against juvenile masturbation (at times accompanied by threats or innuendoes) and the discovery of the anatomical differences between the sexes. From this point on, the mental and sexual development of boys and girls will follow different paths. This is how Freud describes in a single sentence the great Oedipal adventure which lies in the path of every boy:

The boy enters the Oedipus phase; he begins to manipulate his penis and simultaneously has phantasies of carrying out some sort of activity with it in relation to his mother, till owing to the effect of a threat of castration and the sight of the absence of a penis in females, he experiences the greatest trauma of his life and this introduces the period of latency with all its consequences. (1940: 386)

The Oedipus period or episode represents the climax of early childhood development, obliterating sexual feelings with a mass of repressions from which they will only re-surface, radically altered, in adolescence. The myth of Oedipus, hero of two great tragedies by Sophocles, provided Freud with the key to unlocking the complex mental dynamics of this fated episode in a person's life, an episode whose outcomes play a major part in subsequent mental life.

Oedipus was a child abandoned in his infancy on a mountain by his parents, Laius and Jocasta, the king and queen of Thebes, who had been alarmed by an oracle which claimed that the child would grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. The child's life was spared, however, by the shepherd who had been assigned to abandon him; instead, he handed him to another shepherd serving the king and queen of Corinth. They were childless and adopted the boy, naming him Oedipus, 'sore-footed', after the dreadful sores in his ankles, which had been pierced to allow for a rope to be put through them. The boy grew up not knowing his true origins, until he too heard of the prophecy, whereupon he left his foster parents to escape the dreadful fate, thinking that the prophecy related to them. During his travels he quarrelled with a rich man riding a chariot, who set his slaves upon him. In the fight that followed he killed the man and all but one of the slaves, little realizing that the first half of the prophecy had already been fulfilled.

Oedipus's wanderings took him to Thebes, a city ravaged by the Sphinx, a wild beast which tormented its inhabitants by setting a famous riddle: 'What is the animal

which walks on four legs in the morning, on two at mid-day and on three in the evening?' Oedipus answered the riddle with the 'power of his intellect alone' and rid the city of its tormentor. The answer to the riddle was, of course, 'man', who walks on all fours in infancy, later on two legs and finally adds a third in old age in the shape of a walking stick. Little did Oedipus realize that he, the solver of riddles, was ignorant of the biggest riddle, that of his own roots and destiny. The people of Thebes rewarded Oedipus by crowning him king of their city; after all, had their king not recently been set upon by robbers and killed? The dead king's widow, Jocasta, was then offered to King Oedipus as his wife, thus completing the prophecy. Oedipus lived for many years with Jocasta, having four children with her. But his past caught up with him when he was at the peak of his powers in ripe middle age. It was then that sickness and hunger struck his city, a sure sign of a terrible insult to a god, the presence of miasma in the city. Oedipus set about to find the person responsible for the insult, not knowing that hunter and prey were one. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, he is the last person to realize the truth about his actions, his origins and the terrifying forces that had driven his life. In despair, he blinds himself and leaves the city, the most wretched and reviled of men.

Freud was taken with this myth long before he turned it into the centrepiece of his psychology. Jones, his friend and biographer, tells of an incident on his fiftieth birthday when he was presented with a medallion, which bore the inscription from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* 'He who divined the meaning of famous riddles and was a man most mighty.' On seeing the inscription, Freud became pale and agitated; he explained to those present that as a young student at Vienna University, he would stroll around the Great Hall, examining the busts of famous professors. 'He then had a phantasy, not merely seeing his own bust there in the future, which would not have been anything remarkable in an ambitious young student, but of it actually being inscribed with the *identical words* he now saw on the medallion' (Jones, 1955: II. 15). Undoubtedly, then, Oedipus was a mythical character with whom Freud had already identified; yet, it was in a letter to his friend Fliess written on 15 October 1897, a few days before the first anniversary of his own father's death (and six months after the 'Uncle Josef' dream examined in the Introduction), that Freud came upon what he viewed as his greatest discovery. The reason why the story of Oedipus has held such a powerful emotional grip over people across the ages, he ventured, is that it awakens memories of wishes which once dominated our mental lives but were subsequently repressed and obliterated from memory.

Being entirely honest with oneself is a good exercise. Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of childhood, even if it does not always occur so early as in children who have become hysterics . . . In this case, the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, becomes intelligible, and one can understand why later fate dramas were such failures. Our feelings rise against the arbitrary, individual fate . . . but the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfilment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state. (Freud, 1954: 227)

Like Oedipus, we are blind to our past, and only the fact that he acted out in deed what we all experienced as phantasy sets us apart. But why would one want to kill