Christoph Türcke’s *Philosophy of Dreams* is unique, situating itself between psychoanalysis and philosophy, drawing on both to formulate a philosophical version of psychoanalysis, or equally, a psychoanalytic version of philosophy. As a scholarly treatise *Philosophy of Dreams* is a rare breed, an intellectually demanding book that became a minor bestseller in Germany, a book that successfully marries philosophy, and more narrowly, critical theory, with psychoanalysis. Türcke accomplishes this feat in surprising fashion, not by hijacking psychoanalysis for political purposes, as, for instance, Marcuse had done before him. He treats Freud with the utmost respect and clearly recognizes and emphasizes Freud’s monumental achievement. Yet he takes Freud into places that Freud would not have ventured himself by turning Freudian theory reflexively onto itself, psychoanalyzing psychoanalysis, as it were. He treats Freud’s opus as manifest content and tries to unearth the latent content of the human unconscious. Türcke’s project is ambitious: to create a psychoanalytically informed philosophy and/or a philosophically informed psychoanalysis. In a nod to Dante, he uses Freud as a guide but takes him into places he might have feared to tread.

Freud postulated that uncovering the repressed traces of ontogenetic development in adult patients might lead to a cure for neurotic symptoms. Psychoanalysis was to delve into the repressed unconscious. Türcke is interested in philogenesis. Freud had mentioned *urphantasien* or primary fantasies, first in his account of the Wolf Man case. Influenced by Lamarck, Freud saw these *urphantasien* as transmitted to us philogenetically. In their book *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1973), Laplanche and Pontalis point out that primary fantasies seem to be connected in some way to “primary repression,” a term Freud also started to use at around the same time (1915), although Freud himself never spelled out the relationship of these
two terms. Türcke’s project is to turn the psychoanalytic method towards the psychological development of our species; that is, he attempts to lift the primary repression of our Stone Age heritage and hopes to shed light on the primary unconscious by reconstructing the psychological path from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens*. Türcke’s reconstructions are speculative, but nevertheless, like any philosophical or scientific theory, they can be judged by their adherence to established scientific facts, by their internal logical cohesion, and by their parsimony.

*The Philosophy of Dreams* has a tripartite structure with the deceptively simple section headings “Dream,” “Drive,” and “Word.” Each section introduces a strand of evidence and also takes up prevailing theories in their respective fields, e.g., in “Word” he takes up the field of structuralism in linguistics.

In “Dream” Türcke sets out to show how early hominids slowly, under pressure from their environment, displaced their drive energy, first towards the production of tools and then towards symbol formation. He sees dreams as remnants of an earlier era of psychic and cognitive functioning. In Türcke’s admittedly speculative version of human history, early hominids reacted to their frightening environment in much the same way as veterans of the First World War. Freud noted that the psyche is an apparatus for *Reizabfuhr*, best translated as “tension reduction.” He saw memory as emerging during the attempt to master traumatic stimuli via reliving them retrospectively, and in the process, slowly creating the mental capacity to imagine. For Türcke this is the first instance of *Nachtraeglichkeit* (unfortunately “deferred action” does not capture the full meaning of that word), when a traumatic event is imagined and then represented and remembered. For Türcke this process of traumatic repetition compulsion is at the heart of the philogenesis of mental space. It is the philogenetic equivalent of the famous “Fort-Da” game that Freud’s grandson Heinerle was playing to master his mother’s traumatic absence.

Türcke has very specific forces in mind that shaped the psyche of early hominids. These Stone Age peoples were subject to traumatic experiences by the shocking and awesome forces of nature (storms, earthquakes, predators) and tried to master their helplessness in the face of these forces by taking a “reflexive turn.” In challenging Freud’s own creation myth of the primal horde, Türcke points out that, while fathers might have been stronger and more powerful than the rest of the horde, the fathers were as impotent as their fellows in the face of these forces of nature. According to Türcke, these early peoples used the mechanisms of dream work—condensation, displacement, and reversal—to turn the awe-inspiring
forces of nature into primarily angry, yet potentially protective “gods.” A memory of these awe-inspiring gods is preserved in the biblical story of Abraham, whose God demands ritual sacrifice of his own son, Isaac. Türcke goes one step further and advances the more general claim that cults involving human sacrifice were the first stepping stone in the evolution of culture. In these rituals of human sacrifice, early humans re-enacted what nature visited on them and thus slowly brought nature under control. It is not in the scope of a book review to list the extensive body of evidence Türcke has collected to bolster his speculative claims. Suffice it to say that he relies on the latest findings in anthropology and ethnology, and he also goes back to some of the earliest written records. He interprets the two earliest reported dreams found in the epic of Gilgamesh. He also revisits and reinterprets the story of Cain and Abel, reading it as containing a screen memory of earlier religious practices of human sacrifice.

In the section entitled “Drive,” Türcke initially sifts through various definitions of the word *Trieb*. He then maps the findings of modern neuroscience onto Freud’s descriptions of drive and discovers a remarkable fit with Freud’s conceptualization of drives in *Drives/Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*. Unfortunately, Strachey’s translation does not capture the full meaning of *Triebe und Triebeschicksale*. A better translation of the German word *Schicksal* would be “fate” or “destiny.” For the purpose of understanding Türcke, this difference in translation is not trivial, because Türcke connects drives and their fate with the notion of repetition compulsion. Thus, previous attempts to channel drive energy create their own fate. Freud defined the brain as an organ for *Reizabfuhr* (tension reduction in an attempt to bring tension towards zero); see Freud’s “principle of constancy.” Perceptions of stimuli from external or internal sources disrupt the pleasurable state of constancy and require tension reduction. From a neurological point of view, the charge associated with the stimulus finds its way along neural pathways through the brain. Once a pathway has been used, its synapses become more responsive and it is more likely to be used again, thus creating a physiological substrate for procedural memory. Procedural memory is the neurological substrate one could map onto the concept of vicissitudes. It provides a template for the way drives tend to reuse already familiar patterns for their discharge.

The third section, “Word,” concerns itself with the philogenesis of language. Türcke considers the prehistoric development of language the original talking cure. Early hominids used first vocalizations, and then language, to discharge overwhelming tension in the face of imminent danger. In this view, language was born out of acute traumatic experience and was,
indeed, a talking cure. Biblical sources again show the slow sedimentation of language into the grammatical structures we know today. Türcke challenges the structuralist and post-structuralist versions of a priori grammatical structures. The father of structuralism, Saussure, was interested in the grammatical properties of existing languages and explicitly uninterested in how language(s) and their structures developed. Thus linguistic structures found in highly evolved cultures have been taken to have been present from the outset of human history. Lacan, following Saussure, postulated that the unconscious is structured like a language. Türcke considers this ahistorical approach a turning away from Freud, not a return to Freud, and likens the structuralist approach to the unconscious to a dream interpretation that concerns itself only with the manifest dream contents.

In the epilogue of the book, Türcke turns to very current issues and does so with a surprising twist. He raises pressing concerns about the fate of the human mind under conditions of high-tech culture in a capitalist economy. In his introduction, Türcke sets the stage by taking us back to the year 1895 when two momentous historical events took place. This was the year the secrets of dream interpretation revealed themselves to Sigmund Freud, and also the year the brothers Lumière showed the first moving pictures in front of a public audience. For Türcke these two events are connected as two early instances of what he calls “mental archeology.” Freud’s archeological project was aimed at lifting secondary repression with the help of dream interpretation to “cure” neurotic symptoms. Türcke argues that in the wake of the Lumière brothers’ first moving pictures, modern information technology and movies, in particular, are unwittingly engaged in a more sinister archeology. Here the unwitting target of the mental archeology is the contents of primary repression.

Türcke points to ADD and ADHD as the first syndromes connected to an unwitting mental archeology of modern media technology. In his view, the relentless assault of stimulation threatens the human mind as it has evolved over millennia. The processes that constituted mental space involved condensation and displacement, and then a remembering of stimuli after the fact. The German word nachdenken connotes a thinking-through after the fact. The effect of modern media, on the other hand, is diversion rather than condensation. Attention moves from one image or frame to the next without sufficient time for nachdenken and remembering, that is, for the dream function to do its work. Here the English word condensation does not convey the same meaning-producing function as Freud’s own verdichten. Dichten, in German, means “to produce poetry”: a dichter is a poet, and while we dream we all become ver-dichter.
Türcke’s book is a philosophical tour de force. Along the way the reader is treated to many surprising and exhilarating vistas. Just to give two examples, in the “Dream” section, Türcke discusses the Freudian unconscious in depth and compares it to Jung’s collective unconscious with its archetypes. I have not come upon a critique of Jung’s theory as cogent as the one Türcke advances in this book. In the “Drive” section, he retells Plato’s tale of the origin of the human species as hybrid double, cut in half by Zeus. He then asks what is specifically human about libidinal cathexis, since animals also copulate and experience the pressure of sexual tension. In this instance, Türcke throws his lot in with Plato, who understood that Eros is always already seeking the other half of something previously lost, connoting a reflexive turn that transforms the human drive into erotic desire.

Philosophy of Dreams is the main tableau of a philosophical triptych. Unfortunately, there are no English translations of Türcke’s other two books: Erregte Gesellschaft. Philosophie der Sensation, (2002), and Vom Kainszeichen zum Genetischen Code. Kritische Theorie der Schrift (2005). Having come across Philosophy of Dreams in 2009, I eagerly awaited the translation. Especially in the German original, Türcke’s language closely resembles Freud’s. It is at once evocative, precise, and sparse, and it contains a minimum of scientific jargon. Philosophy of Dreams is a book brimming with interesting and provocative ideas. I hope it will find an anglophone audience and help foster a new dialogue between psychoanalysis and critical theory.

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