

## The Ego's Attention and the Therapist's Attention to Reality in Freud At the Threshold of Ethics

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### Abstract

This article aims to show that the practice of attention can create an openness to the truth, from where ethics arises. It does so by exploring the role attention plays, according to Ricoeur, in Freud's thought. Ricoeur shows how in the first stage of Freud's thinking – that of the Project of a Scientific Psychology – attention is one of the instances in which a purely mechanical quantitative explanation can be questioned. Further on, with the introduction of narcissism, Ricoeur shows that attention, insofar as it opens a space for the “wounding truth,” opposes narcissism. Finally, the article explains how in the therapeutic setting an attentional *epoché* allows the therapist to be “the reality principle in flesh and in act,” so that the ego can gain control. According to Ricoeur, this non-judgmental gaze opens a space of truthfulness for the patient's self-knowledge which, although not being the totality of ethics, constitutes its threshold.

*Keywords:* Attention, Reality Principle, Narcissism, Truth.

### Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est de montrer que la pratique de l'attention peut créer une ouverture à la vérité à partir de laquelle peut surgir l'éthique. Il le fait en explorant le rôle que joue l'attention dans la pensée de Freud, selon Ricoeur. Ce dernier montre comment dans la première étape de la pensée de Freud – celle du Projet de psychologie scientifique – l'attention est l'un des cas dans lesquels une explication purement mécanique et quantitative peut être remise en cause. Plus loin, avec l'introduction de la question du narcissisme, Ricoeur montre que l'attention, dans la mesure où elle ouvre un espace à la vérité blessante, s'oppose au narcissisme. Enfin, l'article explique comment, dans le cadre thérapeutique, une *epoché* attentionnelle, permet au thérapeute d'être “le principe de réalité en chair et en acte”, afin que l'ego puisse gagner en maîtrise. Selon Ricoeur, ce regard non critique ouvre un espace de vérité pour la connaissance de soi du patient qui, sans être la totalité de l'éthique, en constitue le seuil.

*Mots-clés:* Attention, principe de réalité, narcissisme, vérité.

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# The Ego's Attention and the Therapist's Attention to Reality in Freud. At the Threshold of Ethics

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This paper sheds light on the role of attention in Freud's thought regarding both the reality principle and the economic task of the ego. This is done following the hint that Ricœur gives in *Freud and Philosophy*. First, I briefly contextualize the problem. Then, I show where attention is addressed by Ricœur. Lastly, I expand on the idea that the therapist's attention to reality could point to an ethics "threshold." This assertion relies on the comparison between the therapist's attentional disposition and the economic task of the ego made by Freud and stressed by Ricœur.

## The Context of Attention

Attention became relevant as an issue to be studied at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries, particularly in the field of empirical psychology. The phenomenon of attention calls into question the mechanistic theory based on stimulus-response as well as the claim that exact measurement of psychic phenomena are possible. According to some authors, the problem of attention would be among the reasons that led Freud to abandon his "Project of a Scientific Psychology."<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, attention has an eminently practical character, which allows it to become a technique that can be exercised. During the period in question, it acquired an important role in the formation of a specific kind of self: the scientific self, seeker of truth in terms of scientific objectivity.<sup>2</sup> This characteristic of being a technique entails assuming specific interior and exterior attitudes or dispositions, which play an important role in psychoanalytic practice. This becomes manifest in Freud's "Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis (1912)."

Historically, attention has been studied from different perspectives. Mainly, it has been addressed from the point of view of perception, reflection, and action. I would like to propose a new angle of reflection that puts the focus on the fact that attention is closely linked to the way human beings relate to reality. This is made explicit in the different experiences that are available to us, depending on our attentional disposition.

Ricœur showed interest in the problem of attention very early in his work, as is revealed by the conference he gave on this topic in 1939 and the centrality that he gives to this matter in his *Philosophy of Will*. Ricœur was well aware of the many different approaches to the discussion regarding attention in the psychological, phenomenological, and philosophical fields. According to him, attention could shed light on the problems of freedom and of truth.<sup>3</sup> It is, therefore, an interesting anthropological hermeneutical key.

## Attention in Freud and Philosophy

We find in Ricœur's *Freud and Philosophy* three main references to attention in Freud. The first one can be found at the beginning of the first part of Book II. In it, Ricœur presents the epistemological problem in Freudianism. Two other references to attention are present in the first chapter of part III of this same book, where he focuses on the relationship between the reality principle and the economic task of the ego.

### The Uneasy Place of Attention in a Quantitative Interpretation

This first reference appears in the context of explaining the functioning of the psyche in terms of energy. Ricœur points to it as one of the instances where a purely mechanical quantitative explanation could be called into question. This challenge becomes all the more evident when the attentional response is related to the indications of "thought-reality."<sup>4</sup>

Ricœur recalls the scientific environment in which Freud's "Project of a Scientific Psychology" was born and presents the main postulates of this "quasi physics of the psychical apparatus" as well as its "quantitative transcription of the economic phenomena." Freud wanted to extend the hypothesis of constancy in areas such as desire, pleasure, education to reality, and the observant and judging thought. Such an approach "transforms it to the breaking point" because he was dealing with a "content that exceeds the frame." Ricœur seeks to untangle two developments: the generalization of the constancy principle and the finding that it is transcended by its own applications.<sup>5</sup> He will do that by showing the way in which Freud, progressively, attributes to the system functions that are less and less ascribable to measurable energies. That is the case of attention.

Ricœur points out the fact that when Freud introduces the function of "judgement"<sup>6</sup> in the third part of the "Project," even if he is confident of giving a quantitative interpretation of it, "it is clear that 'the cathexis of  $\psi$  neurons' (*Origin*, 396) is simply a translation of psychology into a conventional technical language." He continues by stating that "The same may be said of 'attention' conceived as the interest aroused in  $\psi$  by the indication of reality. The explanation Freud proposes is already an economic one: the interest consists in the fact that the ego has learned to hypercathect perception (*Origin*, 419)."<sup>7</sup> This learning, facilitated by attention, allows the ego to cathect precisely the right perceptions of its environment; in the measure that the ego is able to distinguish cathexes of real perceptions from cathexes of wishes, the reality principle could be established.

Referring to Freud's explanation of attention Ricœur asks: "does this remain a mechanical and quantitative explanation?"<sup>8</sup> What is only a question in the case of attention to "perceived reality," we may say becomes a clear challenge in the case of attention to "thought-reality." Ricœur reminds us that Freud considers two degrees of reality. The first one is on the biological and perceptual level. The second degree is on the intellectual and scientific level. He highlights the fact that, for Freud, verbal images have a positive function, contemporaneous with attention and understanding, becoming indicators of thought-reality. Freud says: "the characteristic thing about the process of cognitive thought is that the attention is from the start directed to the indications of the discharge of thought – that is, to indications of speech."<sup>9</sup> The thought process, exemplified by a scientist concentrated on an idea, implies a "high cathexis with a small flow of current."<sup>10</sup> But, according to Ricœur, this marks a first breaking point, since "from now on there is no longer any

anatomical bases; moreover the shortcoming of thought, unlike the confusion between hallucination and perceptions, do not give rise to biological sanctions of unpleasure."<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Ricœur had previously shown that "the whole system rests on the simple postulate equivalence between unpleasure and the rise in the level of tension on the one hand, and between pleasure and the lowering of the level on the other."<sup>12</sup> We notice that the phenomenon of attention is one of the phenomenological *loci* that resists quantification. It is interesting to remember that in Ricœur's conference of 1939, attention was a structure of the subjectivity that challenged naturalism and mechanic explanations. We discover the same fact-finding here.

I will now point out two additional references of attention present in the part III of Book II, specifically when he presents the connections between the reality principle and the economic task of the ego.

### Attention and Narcissism

The introduction of narcissism in Freud's theory is, according to Ricœur, one of the factors that leads to a transformation of the notion of reality. Narcissism, together with the switch to the second topography, "find expression in a progressive dramatization of the opposition between reality principle and pleasure principle,"<sup>13</sup> with reality standing over against the ego. The pleasure principle is easy, as it is easy to let oneself drift into daydreaming and fantasy while the path to reality is long, hard, and entails renunciation.<sup>14</sup>

He describes certain interdependency between the economic task of the ego and the reality principle. In this context, we find our second reference to attention.

Ricœur says: "Narcissism directly concerns the relation to reality, inasmuch as self-attention is inattention to the other."<sup>15</sup> There is an economy of narcissism marked by the egoistic return to a libidinal substrate, whose counterpart is "a lack of self-detachment in our consideration to the world."<sup>16</sup> We can construct a conceptual chain: narcissism–self-attention–egoism–lack of self-detachment–inattention to the other. Ricœur recalls an analysis made by Freud in a short paper entitled "A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis,"<sup>17</sup> where he makes clear how narcissism interposes itself between reality and ourselves. According to Freud, narcissism will oppose the discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin, and psychoanalysis because it resists being taken out of the center. Ricœur says: "truth is always wounding to our narcissism."<sup>18</sup> And in a footnote he translates this discourse in a "dialectic" language saying that "the false Cogito is what interposes itself between us and reality; it blocks our relationship with the world, it prevents us from letting reality be as it is." He continues: "If there is, as I believe, a fundamental Cogito, it is necessary to abandon the position of this screen-cogito, of this resistance-cogito, in order to reach the Cogito that founds in proportion as it lets be."<sup>19</sup>

We have then a "position" that needs to be abandoned, a "resistance" that has to fall. Attention will be the movement of detachment and acceptance in this relationship between reality and us. Attention entails a new relational position of the ego that opens space to the "wounding truth," letting reality be as it is.

The relation established: narcissism – attention – truth is enlightening. It manifests an aspect which the young Ricœur pointed out when he treated "attention" early on in his work. In the conference previously quoted he dedicates a section to analyze how attention sheds light on

the question of truth and reminds us of a well-known fact: "Truth only appears to attentive minds."<sup>20</sup>

### Attention and Ethics

The last reference of attention to be analyzed is linked to a new meaning of the reality principle, that which Ricœur calls the "prudence" principle. It is a principle opposed to the false idealism of the superego with its destructive demands and to "all the exaggerations of the sublime and to the bad faith of the good conscience."<sup>21</sup> In *the Ego and the Id* Freud compares the economic task of the ego and the role played by the analyst. Freud says: "In point of fact [the ego] behaves like the physician during an analytic treatment: it offers itself, *with the attention it pays to the real world*, as a libidinal object to the id, and aims at attaching the id's libido to itself."<sup>22</sup> Ricœur states the fact that the psychoanalyst represents what he calls "the reality principle in flesh and in act," but he does so under one condition: *attention to the real world*. As we will develop below, it demands from the therapist to exercise a specific kind of attention and to overcome his own resistances through a therapeutic process. In other words, that he passes through a purification process in order to "see" and let "reality" appear as it is.

Ricœur places Freud in the company of Marx and Nietzsche pointing out that they have in common the "decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as 'false' consciousness."<sup>23</sup> In addition, we read in *The Conflict of Interpretation* that "psychoanalysis is an indirect revolution. It will change our customs only by changing the quality of our outlook and the tenor of man's way of speaking about himself."<sup>24</sup> So we may wonder if the psychoanalyst's regard is truly purified and if Freud's pre-suppositions allow reality to appear as it is. That said, my argument is not to call into question psychoanalysis but to show the openness to truth which is necessarily present in the practice of attention.

The therapist fulfills his economic task to the extent that "he refrains from judgement and ethical prescription."<sup>25</sup> Apparently, this seems to entail an absence of ethics, but if we place this non-judgmental regard in the opposition between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, it becomes, according to Ricœur, deeply meaningful. He says:

The superego attacks man for being a creature of pleasure, but it demands too much of man and conceals its excesses only by offering the ego the narcissistic satisfaction of being able to think itself better than the others, the regards of the analyst on the contrary, is a regard that has been educated to reality and turned back upon the inner world. Thus the *epochē* or suspension of value judgments becomes the basic step towards self-knowledge; it is a step that enables the reality principle to gain control of the process of becoming conscious.<sup>26</sup>

This neutral regard, or the specific way with which the therapist pays attention to the patient, opens up a "clearing of truthfulness." Ricœur has said before that "truth is always wounding to our narcissism."<sup>27</sup> This truthfulness, says Ricœur, "is not the whole of ethics but at least it is at the threshold."<sup>28</sup>

Ricœur has pointed to the fact that the analyst is well aware that the person is always in an ethical situation and with his *regard* he gives space for knowledge.<sup>29</sup> This is particularly meaningful if we consider that without knowledge there is no possibility of ethical judgement. Therefore,

attention is a fundamental instrument to create the necessary therapeutic space for self-knowledge, opening up space for truth. Attention is not *truth* but allows it to be manifested. This manifestation, enabled by the attentional *epochē*, has a positive function allowing the reality principle to gain control.

In order for the therapist to be able to fulfill this function of being the reality principle to the patient, he must first be "educated to reality" through an intentional practice of attention. In the introduction, I mentioned the practical character of attention, which allows it to become a technique that can be exercised. We should now analyse further this aspect.

Ricœur affirms that one of the biggest discoveries of psychoanalysis is "treating the intersubjective relation as *technique*."<sup>30</sup> The practice of psychoanalysis is an arduous technique that entails specific dispositions and procedures from the analyst and from the patient. We can find an early redaction of these guidelines in Freud's 1912 paper "Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psychoanalysis."<sup>31</sup>

The analyst is advised to exercise an evenly suspended attention while the patient must pursue free association. Ricœur stresses that we have "total listening" on the one hand and "total communication" on the other. In order to achieve this total listening, it is necessary that the analyst undergo a process of purification, so that his own resistances are overcome. On the other side, the patient's sincerity is a condition *sine qua non* for the therapeutic process. It is in this scenario that we have two kinds of attentional practice, one mirroring the other and a claim for truth in both of them.<sup>32</sup>

The evenly suspended attention<sup>33</sup> is a practice that aims to deliver the analyst from the danger of falsifying the findings. Freud says:

as soon as anyone deliberately concentrates his attention to a certain degree, he begins to select from the material before him; one point will be fixed in his mind with particular clearness and some other will be correspondingly disregarded, and in making this selection he will be following his expectations or inclinations. This, however, is precisely what must not be done. In making the selection, if he follows his expectations he is in danger of never finding anything but what he already knows; and if he follows his inclinations he will certainly falsify what he may perceive.<sup>34</sup>

The free association implies that when the patient communicates, he withholds the conscious influences of selective attention so that he may manifest "everything that occurs to him without criticism or selection." Recalling the fact that the fundamental rule for the patient is "saying everything, whatever the cost," Ricœur points out that "this surrender to whatever comes to mind implies a change in the patient's conscious attitude towards his illness and hence a different sort of attention and courage than what is exercised in direct thinking."<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

We have passed through three reformulations of the reality principle that have accompanied the description of the role played by attention. Attention in the context of his "Project" helps the ego distinguish cathexes of real perceptions from cathexes of wishes. The reality

principle stands against the demands of the ego after the introduction of the narcissism. And, after the *Id* and the *ego* it stands against a false idealism of the superego.

The first reference of attention has brought to light the fact that description fights to surpass the quantifiable model and the other two references to attention have made possible a relational reading of the phenomenon of attention as a specific way of being in relationship with “reality,” and that is, the way in which the ego pays attention involves a specific disposition that may open space to truth.

We have seen that the way of paying attention, from a practical point of view, could become a technique. The mental disposition proposed by Freud to therapists, the “evenly suspended attention,” and to patients as “free association,” are attitudes with a claim to truth.

Finally, we have seen that the attentional attitude of the therapist, called to fulfill the function of the reality principle for the patient, can open for the patient a space of truthfulness which, despite not being the totality of ethics, is its threshold.

So what does attention do? It creates a space where ethics can arise.

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1999), 23.
- <sup>2</sup> See: Lorraine Danston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York, Zone Books, 2007), 234-46.
- <sup>3</sup> See Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, translated by Erazim V. Kohák (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1966), 154.
- <sup>4</sup> See: Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, translated by Denis Savage (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1970), 81-82.
- <sup>5</sup> See: Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 73.
- <sup>6</sup> “[...] conceived as the recognition of the identity between a wishful cathexis and a perceptual indication of reality; this real recognition of a wished-for object is the first stage in achieving an estimation of reality, a belief,” Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 81.
- <sup>7</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 81.
- <sup>8</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 81.
- <sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” in *The Origin of Psycho-Analysis*, edited by Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud and Ernest Kris, translated by Eric Mosbacher and James Strachey (New York, Basic Books Publishers, 1954), 347-445.
- <sup>10</sup> Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” 426.
- <sup>11</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 82.
- <sup>12</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 76.
- <sup>13</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 262.
- <sup>14</sup> We can see this increasing polarization between both principles in Sigmund Freud, “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning (1911),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 12, 1911-1913, edited and translated by James Strachey (London, Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1958).
- <sup>15</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 277.
- <sup>16</sup> See: Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 277; We may remember that the setting up of the reality principle was demanded by the need of others in order to attain satisfaction, these introduces the “whole circuit of reality,” *Ibid.*, 265.
- <sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, “A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis (1917),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 17, 1917-1919, edited and translated by James Strachey (London, Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955).
- <sup>18</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 278.

- <sup>19</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 278.
- <sup>20</sup> “La vérité n’apparaît qu’aux esprits attentifs” Paul Ricœur, “L’attention” in *Anthropologie philosophique. Écrits et conférences 3* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2013), 74. Own translation.
- <sup>21</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 279.
- <sup>22</sup> The italics are added by Ricœur. Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 279; Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id (1923),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 19, 1923-1925, edited and translated by James Strachey, (London, Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961), 56.
- <sup>23</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.
- <sup>24</sup> Paul Ricœur, “Psychoanalysis and the Movement of Contemporary Culture,” translated by Willis Domingo, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, edited by Don Ihde (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1974), 155.
- <sup>25</sup> See: Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 297.
- <sup>26</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 280.
- <sup>27</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 278.
- <sup>28</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 280.
- <sup>29</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 280.
- <sup>30</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 406.
- <sup>31</sup> Freud, “Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis (1912),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 12.
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 409.
- <sup>33</sup> “[...] consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same ‘evenly suspended attention’ [...] in the face of all that one hears,” Freud, “Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis (1912),” 111.
- <sup>34</sup> Freud, “Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis (1912),” 112.
- <sup>35</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 412.