

# Theory of Psychic Attractors

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## Abstract

This text presents, in condensed form and without systematic referencing, the theses developed at length in the following works: *Sciences cognitives et psychanalyse* [Cognitive Science and Psychoanalysis] (1994) and *La complexité de soi* [The Complexity of the Self] (2011).

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## The Epistemic Situation of Psychoanalysis

Contemporary complexity theory allows us to reinterpret the epistemic moments in the development of psychoanalysis. The foundational discovery is that of the unconscious, with its properties linked to primary process and to the determining status of sexuality. In terms of complexity theory, this amounts to the discovery of an internal system (the psyche) of which only local sections can be known, and whose unfolding trajectories alone can be observed. The discovery of the psychic agencies (instances) constitutes the second moment. These agencies are organizations endowed with structural stability. Their relations, conflicts, emergences, developments, and degradations are progressively uncovered and described within the lexicon of psychoanalysis. The third moment concerns the description of the interfaces between this dynamical system (the psyche) and the other systems with which it coexists. Lacan's work can be interpreted as an ingenious construction attempting to describe the interface between the psyche and the symbolic organization of language. It borrows a mixed lexicon combining that of psychoanalysis, that of linguistics, and finally that of topology — the specific lexicon of interfaces. Other interfaces exist: with social organizations, with cultural organizations, and finally with biological organization. Advancing the understanding of these various interfaces is the objective of a

contemporary psychoanalysis. We must therefore advance theoretical reflection in psychoanalysis while managing a double constraint: attempting to deploy a new theoretical imaginary of complexity while at the same time remaining faithful to the fundamentals of Freud's discovery.

## The Generative Perimeter of Psychoanalysis

This double constraint requires us to delimit the minimal generative perimeter of psychoanalysis. We propose the graphic metaphor of a triangle stretched between three poles, corresponding to three classes of foundational facts.

1. The first pole is the existence of the unconscious, the locus of the deployment of primary processes (condensation, displacement, means of figuration, absence of contradiction), observable in the psychopathology of everyday life (slips, parapraxes), in certain pathological formations (neuroses), and in dreams — guardians of sleep and fulfillments of desire subject to repression. We add to this the phylogenetic mnemonic traces. The atemporality of the unconscious, a fundamental quality, implies the transference of infantile relations onto the present — observable in privileged fashion in the analytic cure situation, but present across the whole range of human relations. The essence of this pole is presented in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899).

2. The second pole corresponds to the continuous character of the sexual drive, to the particular status of representations of sexuality in the unconscious, to the existence of infantile sexuality (erogenous zones), and to its distinctive ontogenetic development (primary bisexuality, diphasic onset, independence of genitality). The essence of this pole is presented in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).

3. The third pole is identification. A human being cannot construct themselves alone, without identification with the other; but this identification with the other requires self-love (narcissism). The essence of this pole is found in the paper "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914).

## Theory of Psychic Attractors

By metaphorical analogy with dynamical systems theory, an attractor is defined as a position of relative stability within the complex dynamical set of mental representations, emotions, and, more generally, the whole set of mental states (conscious and unconscious). An attractor draws the evolving trajectories of thoughts, beliefs, feelings, emotions, and fantasies toward a position of stability. An attractor can bifurcate into another type of attractor, split, merge through resonance (similarity), or enter into dynamic conflict with one or several other attractors. Psychic activity, emergent from neuronal interconnectivity, displays properties close to those of a dynamical system comprising attractors in constant interaction. The various mental states result from the complex interactions between these attractors. Under certain conditions, one mental state takes precedence over the others and becomes dominant until a modification of the parameters controlling the system causes it to bifurcate toward another state.

This dynamical system is controlled by the deployment of a regulatory figure, in the sense given to that term by René Thom — namely, a structure integrating various external parameters, some of which are themselves under genomic control. However, the genome controls the bifurcation points between attractors, not the system as a whole. The relationship between innate and acquired, between constitution and life experience, between genetic and environmental factors, is thereby made explicit. The genome defines a set of singular (catastrophic) points delimiting the areas of variation linked to experience.

Describing psychic processes in this way, within the lexicon of complex dynamical systems, allows us to advance in several directions.

- **The first direction** concerns the understanding of the symbolization process. The generation of a new symbol (a new thought, a new object-cathexis) is made possible by the intrinsic generativity properties of a dynamical system.
- **The second direction** concerns the links with cognitive science, through a better understanding of the genesis of abstraction, then of the genesis of intentional objects, and then of the neuronal implementation of representations.
- **The third direction** concerns the links between anthropology and biology. The different positions of this system correspond to embeddings of primary biocognitive phases (assimilation, expulsion, etc.). This system prepares the relationship to the dynamical structures of culture. The developing child, equipped with this generative dynamical system, is thereby led to encounter the cultural rules conveyed by symbolic systems (kinship systems, exchange systems, language, education, prohibitions, rituals, etc.).

## Ontogenetic Development of the System

The establishment of this dynamical system unfolds during the first months of life and corresponds in part to the developmental processes of object relations described in the work of Melanie Klein. This system is acquired over the course of the first year, after which it stabilizes and remains operative throughout life. It possesses a central adaptive function: that of enabling exchanges between external reality and the subject by managing the contradiction between aggression (predation) and love (sexual drive), between autonomy and dependence, and by generating interindividual diversity (variation) in cognitive styles and hence in individual behaviors and their productions.

The model allows a connection to be made with cognitive development. The study of cognitive disturbances in schizophrenia, paranoia, and depression, and in mania (and, comparatively, in lesional or involutional cognitive disorders) reveals a central fact: exit from the oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position ( $PS \leftrightarrow D$ ) is always linked to an operation of cognitive abstraction (a process that remains problematic in psychology — see

Arnheim, Piaget) — namely, precisely, the generation of a virtual hypernymic object (the origin of metaphor).

### **Attractor 1 — The Autistic-Aesthetic Phase**

The autistic-aesthetic phase corresponds to the primary form of closure of the ego. In terms of child development, this attractor dominates the infant's psychic life during the first months. Action upon the external world is inhibited owing to the neurophysiological immaturity of action execution. The qualities of objects in the external world are then perceived by the embryonic self as primary entities disconnected from action, and elicit intense affective states of anxiety or, conversely, aesthetic jubilation, because they are biologically linked to the maternal figure of attachment.

The perception of external objects is linked to the manual-grasping action that can be exerted upon them. To perceive is to anticipate grasping. Yet in the very young, normally developing infant, action is immature. Physical forms are perceived as threatening or, on the contrary, as intensely attractive; the meaning of the object is of no importance. Autistic children manipulate objects and subject them to various treatments in order to generate morphological effects, independently of their usual functional use. Clinically, phenomena of supra-releasers are also sometimes observed: the intensity of a reaction in these children is sometimes a function of the object's metric properties, whereas its selection depends on its topology.

This position has been described in the psychoanalytic literature on childhood autism. There is a confusion, within the unconscious body image, between inside and outside. Autistic children thus display persistent topological confusions. Everything proceeds as though the external world were an immense body and the autistic child's own body were not psychically represented. This position constitutes a generic attractor.

### **Attractor 2 — The Paranoid-Schizoid Position**

This position was described by the English psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. The ego is subject to an elliptical surge toward external reality for the constitution of the external object. This surge guides action and its feedback according to the biological model of the cellular flagellum. Action informs the subject about external reality by modifying it. This function is acquired ontogenetically through learning involving the early mother-infant relations of the first year. These relations engage phantasy objects and are governed by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of anxiety.

The discrepancies between genetically programmed action-preconceptions and the actual execution of actions generate intense affects of displeasure, which are experienced by the ego as toxic and dangerous. They are then expelled through projective identification, by way of motor discharges accompanied by phantasies of destruction. Progressively, the transformation performed by maternal containment upon these behaviors brings the infant relief and gives it

confidence in its capacity to think — that is, to retain internal representations of the continuous drive flux. The transition from this position to the depressive position requires the psychic activity of an external human object.

In Bion's terminology, beta-elements predominate. They correspond to unmentalized physical singularities, treated by perceptual processes as intermediate elements between the physical world and the psychic world. Remarkably, this phenomenon is observable both in child psychotherapy and in adult analyses. It is also scale-invariant, whatever the level at which the phenomenon is observed — from intrapsychic or somato-psychic interactions to the dynamics at work in small groups, and even in large groups. This scale-invariance invites us to read into it a fundamental process of living organization, linked to the necessity of demarcating the entity from its environment, and to connect it to a fractal dimension.

### **Attractor 3 — The Depressive Position**

This position was described by Melanie Klein. It is marked by an internal activity of transformation accompanied by an intensely painful feeling. The object is then perceived under a double aspect: on the one hand, its properties are dislocated and dispersed discontinuously in space; on the other hand, the object is perceived as a whole in reality. The ego then experiences a painful feeling of guilt for having phantasmatically destroyed the object, and seeks to escape this painful feeling. This feeling of guilt arises from the tension between the superego and the ego. The painful feeling also results from the work of internal transformation. The transition to the depressive position corresponds to the necessity of an autoplasmic internal modification, once the full range of alloplastic attempts to transform external reality through the phantasies of the paranoid-schizoid position have failed.

### **Attractor 4 — The Creative-Sublimatory Phase**

Remarkably, the exit from the depressive position is constantly associated with a phenomenon of qualitative leap. This phenomenon is observed either in the developing child, through the generation of a new cognitive dimension that globally reorganizes its development, or in the adult, through the creation of a new perspectival object that globally organizes behavior and action. This phase is marked by the generation of a conscious perspectival object and activates an anticipatory representation of self-realization.

The generation of this perspectival object, which guides the overall intentionality of the subject's activity, is underpinned by the unconscious intentionality to restore the good internal phantasy object destroyed by aggressiveness. Child psychotherapy allows this phenomenon to be observed consistently. This perspectival object is articulated with external symbolic structures. It is a virtual object that can be cathected by various cultural objects, themselves arranged within differential systems. It is this process that is termed "access to the symbolic" in Lacanian and neo-Lacanian theories. This sublimatory position is

essentially dedicated to coupling the individual with symbolic structures, and first of all with that of sexual difference, and hence with castration.

The exit from the depressive position is thus accompanied by an anticipation of self-realization involving an awareness of one's finitude and of one's genealogical filiation. This transition corresponds to the processes of sexualization and of the construction of subjectivity in relation to the structural oppositions of sexual difference and Oedipal relations. On the cognitive level, the activation of this position underlies the development of cognition toward progressive abstraction. Concepts are organized among themselves through property inheritance. This activation presents several facets, including the reversal of topological qualities and of texture and color (fundamental biological characteristics) into secondary qualities of metric objects and concepts.

The persistence of these processes of creation and generic development of abstractions, together with the persistence of an oscillation between paranoid-schizoid moments and depressive moments, suggests the existence of an active system oscillating between attractive positions that regularly sustains this generativity.

## Inter-Positional Oscillation

The two positions, PS and D, constitute an oscillating dynamical system (PS  $\Leftrightarrow$  D). Starting from the continuous and conflictual flux of the life and death drives, it enables the generation of a psychic apparatus organized into agencies. It allows for the co-management of individual space and of external symbolic systems.

The superego is the internalized agency of parental prohibitions, which are themselves vehicles of cultural rules. This internalization, however, is not easy to understand without a satisfactory theory of the passage of an external symbolic object into the interior of an organization such as the ego. The dynamical structure alternating moments of projection and introjection enables this passage. This system is determined by the necessity of coupling between an organism and the external world. Such coupling can only be achieved by putting to work, within the organism, a representative fraction of the external world. This process occurs in all cognitive systems (for example, the immune system).

In the case of the young child's relationship to the world of other human beings, this process requires the creation of a superego whose precursors (partial internal objects) are internalized during the first year. The acquisition phase proceeds through two successive stages, but in steady state, the two positions coexist and mutually virtualize one another. An oscillation occurs between the two positions, from which the subject can only exit by taking different paths.

Some of these paths lead to psychopathological stases, marked by the hypertrophy of defense processes. Another path — situated midway between the two positions — leads to the sublimatory position (the most unstable of the three), which nonetheless allows, at the cognitive level, the creation of a strictly idiosyncratic new dimension. It is thus conceivable that this position serves interindividual diversity at the psychic level, thereby fulfilling, at the level of men-

tal operations, a function analogous to that of the genome's internal variation engine (meiosis), which ensures the biological variation necessary for evolution. Since this oscillation bears upon sexual cathexes in the Freudian sense, one may infer that the autonomy of the sexual drive serves interindividual diversity.

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*Translator's note: This is a scientific English translation of the French original by Benoît Virole, prepared to preserve the technical vocabulary of psychoanalysis (e.g., "position paranoïde-schizoïde," "position dépressive," Kleinian and Bionian terminology) and of dynamical-systems/complexity theory (attractor, bifurcation, structural stability). Untranslated proper titles of Freud's works are rendered by their standard English titles; original publication dates are retained.*