**Freud: From Universal Time to Normative Multi-Temporality**

**Abstract**

This article discusses Freud’s scientific thought regarding the splitting of the human perception of time into multiple temporalities and the phenomena of distortions in the rational perception of time. I explore Freud’s thought mainly through a thorough reading of his writings using the approach of Bruno Latour, an anthropologist of modern science, and other contemporary scholars whose work addresses temporality. I demonstrate the various ways that Freud bridged between forms of constructing scientific knowledge and socio-historic laws in his investigations of phenomena concerning human conduct in time. Freud’s approach illustrates the importance of characterizing time determinants from a multilayered scientific perspective. I show that Freud scientifically drew a collective range of temporality that set social limits on the human operation of time. This range is set by bridging between two levels of reality—the physical features of humans and the cosmos, and the properties of human consciousness that guide human experience. In his critique of the universal regime of time, which is irreversible and unchanging, Freud extended the idea of linear time beyond physical time towards a more complex, heterogeneous, and multilayered notion of temporality. In this essay, I demonstrate how this shift was achieved through interactions between two systems of time that are at play in human reality: natural time and social time. Thus, I present Freud’s contribution to the shift from a unidimensional configuration of time into the multi-temporality of Western culture.

*Keywords:*time representations, natural time and human-social time, scientific rationality and human

experience of time, flow of time and time preservation, passage of time, repetition

compulsion, experienced time, measured time.

**Introduction**

This article discusses Freudian temporality as it concerns the cultural-scientific construction of the human experience. I demonstrate the unique nature of Freud’s contribution to strengthening the pluralistic concept of temporality in Western culture. It seems that Freud based his normative signifier system of time on the interrelationships between scientific rationality (in which time is viewed as an objective physical property in the cosmos to which humans are subject), and sociohistorical ways of constructing knowledge about time (in which time is viewed as modes of transformation and motion in human experience).

First, I review the existing literature on Freud’s perceptions of time. I show that scholarship on ways of representing time in Freud’s work is rooted in the traditional scientific principle that distinguishes between subject and object. Later, I situate the question of cultural signifiers in Freudian temporality within the evolution of ideas about time and temporal order in scientific history. Finally, I examine Freud’s scientific thought regarding the dimension of time, in which the essential duality in human time is preserved, and distortions in time recognition occur when this duality is absent.

The question of time in Freud’s work is explored here from the disciplinary perspective of the human sciences. Scholars have highlighted Freud’s theories regarding subjective human temporality as opposed to physical time, which is structured objectively in nature (Revers, 1975; Cohen, 1962). These scholars discuss Freudian thought regarding time within human existence but disagree regarding the heterogeneity that Freud attributed to human experiences of time. Pearl (2013: 77-103, 181-203) shows that, according to Freud, the neurophysiological layer of the human psyche functions as a linear sequence of points (stimuli), where each stimulus follows another, just as any given moment follows another in the physical world. The nervous system's structure produces the human experience of time—as is, for example, the human experience of color. Time is seen as a property of an object, and the person is seen as an object that is situated among other objects in the physical world. Freud’s concept of time is based on a linear time-axis schema, and he saw neurotic responses as being outside this linear sequence. According to Freud, neuroses are a split in the relationship between the inner world and the linear timeline in which it exists. The individual’s world exists as a conscious sequence of events with gaps in memory, where the contents relating to these gaps are stored in the unconscious (134). The unconscious is part of the structure of the mind that deviates from the physical temporal order and causes disruptions in the perception of time. The therapist should reposition the patient on an amended timeline (136). According to Pearl, Freud explained time as a dimension within human experience that exists due to human biology. Therefore, it serves as a source for representing and knowing the passage of time as it exists in the universe.

Later studies discuss Freud's approach to time representation and mention that while he adopted a linear scientific view, there was also a duality in his perception which stresses the limitation of absolute symbolization of time. Cornejo suggests that Freud's "theory" of psychic temporality (how time is experienced in the mind) has to be considered against the backdrop of conventional, linear time which is Freud's “thesis” about time (Cornejo, 2018: 451). In his article, he presents how Freud's perception of time intertwined with sexuality and involves a more fluid, non-linear concept of time. Ellis shows that Freud proposed that subjectivity doesn't adhere to the same scientific temporal rules. Ellis focuses on how Freud illuminated the individual's lived experience of time consciously and unconsciously and its implications on deviations from chronological time. Still, Ellis expands to consider how time is experienced in the therapeutic setting and patients' everyday lives and addresses the strengths and limitations of Freud's temporal concepts in psychoanalytic practice (Elis, 2024: 10-28).

Although these studies claimed that it is important to consider both aspects of Freud's - linear and psychic time – they emphasized the radical differences between them and focused on the experienced time. This article suggests that Freud's position holds that the connection between physical time and psychological time is important. This correlation is based on the hypothesis that Freud endeavored to bridge time as it is considered and measured by scientific rationality and the human experience of time and enables us to realize his view about social-normative time.

Other scholars who have explored Freud’s perception of time have focused on the factors of consciousness that structure human time, particularly the influence of the unconscious on this construction. Green (2016: 398-407) proposed temporal theory as presenting “refracted time.[[1]](#footnote-1)” He critiqued scholars of Freud and his successors in the psychoanalytic approach for ignoring Freud’s complex, multidimensional concept of time. Green points to psychological factors of organizing time order and disorganizing time order in Freud’s perception of time, which create an image of "refracted time". He claimed that according to Freud, the sense of the passage of time is experienced intuitively throughout a person’s life, and flows from birth to death, creating an awareness of time that is directed from past to future. This experience is a small part of temporality. He argues that the unconscious, which is timeless, produces a pool of time-organizing and disorganizing components: a “dreamwork” that presents events that occurred in different periods of the dreamer’s life, fixation and regression, the phenomenon of afterwardness (deferred action), retrospective recall, repetition compulsion as a characteristic of the function of the death drive, repression, and the “return of the repressed.” Green notes the determinants of biological time, specific history, and the overarching role of the superego as “orienters of time” through the assimilation of parental images. However, he also points out that Freud’s thought contains no references to cultural signifiers of time (Reed, 2016; Green, 2002: 177). Furthermore, Milne pointed to Freud's idea about the possibility of gaps in the uniformity of living consciousness that temporalizes itself and causes also different temporalities (Milne,2019).

Johnston and Noel-Smith both continue the investigation of the timelessness of the unconscious and its denial of time. Johnston (2005: 19, 129) notes that, according to Freud, the unconscious is biased toward the past. Therefore, the “daemonic’ aspect of drive” is itself ignorant of the passage of time, and creates different temporal instances, while also exhibiting some concept of the passage of time in terms of infinite present moments. Noel-Smith (2016) expands on the discussion of Freud’s theories of time and the timelessness of the unconscious and argues that, according to Freud, this knowledge is expressed in the context of myth, the actions of the superego and the drives, and feelings of guilt. She emphasizes that, ultimately, the ego enables knowledge of temporality in reality, as it imposes itself on human perception. The ego can correct temporal distortions caused by the unconscious thanks to its coordination with internalized parental and societal voices. Still, in another study, it is argued that according to Freud the drive, myth, fiction, and trauma influence the representation of material temporality and therefore also the cultural and intergenerational transmission (Pereira and Viana, 2020).

The current study supports the position that Freud's notion about time presents multi-temporality in human behavior but adds to it that time is not refracted infinitely but within normative limits. Moreover, the study reveals that Freud assumed that in consciousness there is another feature that characterizes all organic beings including human beings. In the human world, this feature exists in addition to the perceptual system that represents the passage of time, and the unconscious that represents split time. It navigates human conduct in the direction of time preservation which brings to a construction of time in the human world in a cyclical and historical manner

Absent in these studies is any discussion of Freud’s theories regarding conscious human perceptions of time as expressed in the natural sciences as physical measurements in the cosmos, compared with how time is expressed in the human sciences as a collective norm. This article focuses on cultural signifiers of time and shows that Freud recognized the objective physical reality of the passage of time but believed that this reality is also governed by human psychical structures that create a sociocultural order of time. An examination of how Freud expressed temporality in his writings reveals that he presented a hybrid between the concept of time in the natural sciences as a continuous, ahistorical fixed order in nature and the cosmos, and the expression of time as a psychical element of human nature that is dynamic and stratified within historical processes, according to the “operation (fabrication) of time” (Latour, 1993) in a particular human space. I argue that, within Freudian temporality, there is a link between representations of physical time as a given and measurable object in the cosmos and time that the human subject establishes normatively. Thinking about time without considering this link will create harmful distortions, which will be explored in this essay. Thus, Freud extends the concept of absolute time dominant in Western culture to create a multi-temporality, but with boundaries determined by combining physical time with psychosocial time.

**Freud: a network of time**

The traditional scientific view of time since the seventeenth century considered time as a continuous becoming, a never-ending, irreversible change process. This scientific concept situated transition and change along a linear axis of time, and represented time as a physical property that exists in nature that can be known objectively. The assumption was that time could be divided indefinitely into fixed units, with which social and physical events could be determined (Elias, 1992; Kern, 1983; Price, 2011).

At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a shift in the concept of numerical calculations for measuring changes and motion in space. As a result of technological, scientific, and social developments. The human experience of heterogeneity in time resulted in temporality becoming central and dominant in all areas of life. Theorists emphasized the contradiction between the view of the human sciences on various forms of time, which are based on everyday experiences, and the laws of logic and physics (Elias, 1992: 1-37; Price, 2011). Discrepancies emerged between **experienced time** and **measured time**. This contrast undermined the rigid demand for homogeneity and standardization in the organization of time that had become the established norm in the public sphere.

Thus, patterns of scientific explanation for changes in time are rooted in the ways that humans experience the “passage of time.” These human experiences were included in descriptions of experiences in the physical world, without producing any satisfactory explanations of time, via the division into objective-scientific time and subjective-human time. The changes in people’s everyday experiences of time during this period highlighted the involvement of humans in the “fabrication of time,”. These changes prompted several questions, among them: What should be the criteria for determining an agreed-upon human time? How can a sequence of human actions be determined in a way that permits a definition of normative time limits? This discussion of Freudian thought about temporality allows us to shed light on how Freud addressed these questions.

Analyzing Freud from the perspective of Latour shows that Freud emphasized the tendency of the human consciousness to preserve time, which limits the objectification of perceptions of physical time in the universe. Latour (2005) proposed a fifth dimension for representing phenomena in the universe, in addition to length, width, depth, and time, which he called the “fabrication of time.” According to Latour, human thinking about time cannot be based only on an understanding of time as a physical property of the world, but also as human experiences of transformation and motion. Thus, the passage of time as measured by a clock is synchronized with the human idea of “historicity.” It is not possible to separate the dimensions—perceptions of space-time versus a category of thought—rather they can be considered only through their multiple interrelationships. The arrangement of objects available to an actant exists in various degrees of interrelation, complete or partial, since everything in the social and natural worlds exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships. Although scientific research cannot represent the universe in its entirety, openness to all dimensions of representation allows for an integrative approach toward time, without rigid differentiations between “lived” time and “scientific” time.

I will now move to a discussion of Freud’s perceptions of the construction of time in human space according to two central questions that arose within the scientific thinking of this period:

(1) Is time static or dynamic?

(2) What is the “arrow of time”?

This analysis shows that these questions also were present in Freud’s thinking about normative phenomena as they relate to time.

**“Repetition compulsion”—polarizations in the human manipulation of time**

In this section, I uncover the connection between Freud’s thought on the nature of time, and the question that also occupied physicists, namely whether time is static or dynamic. Freud believed that human reality contains two connected systems of perception about time. The first is the physical-scientific temporal order, which is defined mathematically and disconnected from content and event. The second is relative to the point of view of the observer-researcher. This second system suspends objective knowledge of the flow of time and instead sees it as a cyclical form where time is synchronized repetitively, in a utilitarian way that enables humans to gain control over life and predict the future. Freud posited that everyday “lived” time is an illusion, a product of psychological processes that belong to the realm of consciousness. Therefore, these two systems for approaching time concern first physical-scientific time (which is characterized by an element of transience and is represented measurably) and human-social time (which is characterized by permanent and recurring elements that exist in the organic world and are represented normatively). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920), noted that:

In the last resort, what has left its mark on the development of organisms must be the history of the earth we live in and of its relation to the sun. Every modification which is thus imposed upon the course of the organism’s life is accepted by the conservative organic instincts and stored up for further repetition. Those instincts are therefore bound to give a deceptive appearance of being forces tending towards change and progress, whilst in fact they are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new. Moreover, it is possible to specify this final goal of all organic striving. It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained. On the contrary, it must be an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads (38).

In his historical study on the perception of time, Kern (1983: 36-37) maintained that Freud, like other thinkers in his era, displayed a strong tendency to look to the historical past as a source of social and personal identity in the face of rapid technological, cultural, and social change. Freud’s interest in the past was based on his belief that people could improve their mental health by analyzing their pasts. To this end, Freud argued that recognizing the human tendency to preserve time could produce a more objective approach that could help people contend psychologically with the events of life and everyday reality, noting that “it is the analyst’s task constantly to tear the patient out of his menacing illusion and to show him again and again that what he takes to be new real life is a reflection of the past” (Freud, 1940, p.177). Freud’s approach to time shows that he attached importance to preserving the relationship between cosmic time, which moves along a linear path, and cyclical human time.

Already in 1895, at the outset of Freud’s research for his *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, he theorized that the connection between the two systems of time was made through “contact barriers” (Freud, 1895: 298) (i.e., synapses) in the neuronal system. Freud argued that the neurophysiological system has two classes of neurons: the primary class of neurons is permeable, therefore it receives external stimuli, tends to divest itself of the quantity of energy, and allows the flow of energy to be changed and channeled. This type of neuron functions according to “the principle of inertia [which] finds its expression in the hypothesis of a current passing from the cell’s paths of conduction or processes [dendrites] to the axis-cylinder” (298). These perceptual neurons allow identical conditions for the reception of every new stimulus, since “after each passage of excitation [they] are in the same state as before” (299). The secondary class of neurons is impermeable, demonstrates resistance to conduction of energy, and “after each excitation, [are] in a different state from before and they thus afford the possibility of representing memory” (299). These memory neurons “[call] for the accumulation of Qn [quantity of energy]” (298), preserve within themselves rejected or wished-for mnemic images that are calibrated according to the individual’s experience of satisfaction or lack of satisfaction and serve as a substitute for the actual perception of the object. Thus, their main task is to cope with endogenous stimuli. The “contact barriers” along the neuronal networks are nodes in which the selection and preference of the discharge paths or the endogenous loading pathways in memory are made (299-323). Freud continued to depict how the nervous system forms an equivalent mental function, such as consciousness or ego, which maintains permanent temporal organization. It occurs through “regularly repeated reception of endogenous Qn in certain neurons,” and “facilitating effect, which produce a group of neurons which is constantly cathected” (323). In other words, “a permanent component is distinguished from a changing one” (323). According to Freud, thought processes comprise a struggle between transitory perceptual aspects that establish the passage of time, and permanent aspects that are based on mnemic images, and that feed thought processes (327, 368-375).

With his transition to his “topographical” system—Freud’s description of the structure of the mind that divides it into three levels: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious—Freud (1915b) described the preconscious as a system that mediates between the unconscious and the conscious, whose content is fed by sensory perceptions and unconscious impulses, whose content “may be compared with an aboriginal population in the mind” (Freud, 1915b: 195). This system is tasked with organizing the relationship between the preservation of recurrent cathexes—mnemic traces—that are created by holding energy in instinctual representations— and curating the timeline according to a proper sequence that is determined as linear time (time in line with a physical sequence of time):

It devolves upon the system Pcs. [ preconscious] to make communication possible between the different ideational contents so that they can influence one another, to give them an order in time, and to set up a censorship or several censorships; ‘reality-testing’ too, and the reality-principle, in its province. Conscious memory, moreover, seems to depend wholly on the Pcs (188).

In his “second topography,” which divided the psyche into three agencies: the ego, the superego, and the id, Freud claimed that the ego develops from the nucleus of the preconscious (which is adjacent to the mnemic residues) and only its lower portion merges into the id (Freud, 1923, p. 24). During the maturation process, a differentiation within the ego occurs, which may be called the “ego ideal” or “superego,” and which is “less firmly connected with consciousness” (28). This process entails within it a sequence of substitutions from object-cathexes to identifications, which contribute to “building up what is called its ‘character” (28). Thus, the ego is considered “a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and contains the history of those object-choices” (29). Therefore, it would appear that Freud theorized that the human mind exists on two levels of time: (1) Historical-human time, which is constituted based on “the expression of the most powerful impulses and most important libidinal vicissitudes of the id” (36) in the super-ego, and “residues of the existences of countless egos” (38), which are inherited from previous generations in the id, abandoned object-cathexes and identifications in the super-ego; and (2) physical time, which is constituted by the relation of the ego to the perceptual system, and gives mental processes an order in time and submits them to “reality-testing.”

Freud emphasized that regressions from linear time emerge in the human universe in various forms, such as regression to pregenital organization in pathological situations, while in normal life the super-ego becomes “a memorial of the former weakness and dependence of the ego, and the mature ego remains subject to its domination” (48). In this way, important aspects of the development of an individual’s life and that of the human species are perpetuated. Normality and pathology depend on a degree of repeatability that deviates markedly from the relationship between psychosocial time and cosmic time.

In synchronizing between these two forms of time, disruptions may occur. Freud (1933) analyzed thought processes that occur either without the control of the ego or after its control is disrupted. That is, when psychic activity operates under the deterministic regime of the unconscious, repressed impulses and impressions from the past dictate impressions and the organization of experiences in the present:

There is nothing in the id that corresponds to the idea of time; there is no recognition of the passage of time, and—a thing that is most remarkable and awaits consideration in philosophical thought—no alteration in its mental processes is produced by the passage of time.Wishful impulses which have never passed beyond the id, but impressions, too, which have been sunk into the id by repression, are virtually immortal; after the passage of decades, they behave as though they had just occurred (73).

The timelessness of the unconscious creates disruptions in the essential relationship between the two forms of time that define human rational conduct. These disruptions are expressed through the control of the unconscious world, or the Id, which does not recognize the passage of time and leads to disruptions in normative time, and to neurosis. The perception of linear time is disrupted as a result of mnemic traces that impose a repetitive and fixed order of events in a way that establishes the human experience of time. The concept is based on neural behavior that occurs when a particularly high degree of pain or satisfaction creates a repetitive and stereotypical associative pathway between groups of neurons. This pathway does not change, and perception does not occur according to normal perception.

Further along his theoretical journey, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920) explored how his neurological model for the perception of human time could be a factor in the development of neuroses. Patient histories showed how memories of psychological trauma persist in the present as if there were no separation between past and present. Traumatic past events are replayed, and the passage of time stops. Freud theorized that neuroses occurred concerning time when repetitions in the perception of time were forced by the death drive, which seeks to return matter to its original inorganic state. This impulse results in a fixation on the past and disrupts the continuity of the organization of human phenomena. Human mental processes—fantasies, relationships, feelings, and connections—are not connected to impressions and experiences in the present (20-22). Freud introduced the concept of “repetition compulsion” to describe a phenomenon whereby patients tirelessly repeated “unwanted situations and painful emotions in the transference and revive them with the greatest ingenuity” (20). For example, Freud argued that various activities, such as cleaning or religious rituals, can become compulsions—especially if they are repeated frequently over time (Freud, 1907a: 118; 1912: 87). Here, prolonged mourning can become melancholia since clinging to the object occurs “at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged” (Freud, 1917b: 245). Moreover, Freud offered numerous examples of repetitive actions in human life that occur habitually and that “can almost be taken as characteristics of the person concerned” as opposed to sporadic actions (Freud 1901: 194). All these pathologies depend on how long the rituals and orders have persisted.

It follows from the above that Freud's theory suggests that freezing time without considering that time has passed causes people to experience delusions, and can be considered a deviation from the relationship between human time and cosmic time.

Freud’s perception of time does not concern only individual patients. In his later writings (as I show below), he also discusses phylogenetics, theorizing that the human psychical structure creates a movement of time in which the past combines with the present to enable the conditions for society to exist. The human tendency to preserve time, a trait that characterizes the organic species, is a sociocultural determinant for the collective perception and organization of time. Freud discusses the development of the superego within human consciousness as the authority responsible for the prohibitions and imperatives that govern cultural life. This enables the conditions for time to be preserved in cultural space: “we can only hold fast to the fact that it is rather the rule than the exception for the past to be preserved in mental life” (Freud, 1930: 71).

In his essay *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1912: 1-164) discussed the essential role of the superego in the preservation of time—both personal and collective—through the unconscious feelings of guilt that oppress every person in every generation. He theorized that this emotion is a remnant of the original act of patricide and the fear of incest, and has evolved into a collective morality that enables social existence. The mnemic traces of the experiences of past generations that are embedded in the human consciousness create historical continuity and bridge individual and collective psychology.

In his final article, Freud (1939) once again emphasized the importance of the superego, which he believed was nourished by primitive values for the organization of human and social time:

A fresh complication arises when we become aware of the probability that what may be operative in an individual's psychical life may include not only what he has experienced himself but also things that were innately present in him at his birth, elements with a phylogenetic origin—an *archaic heritage* (97).

However, in this same article, Freud also pointed out the possibility of disruptions in the organization of time within social phenomena such as religious rituals, which he argued occur as compulsive neuroses. In these rituals, time is endlessly fixed and frozen via the operation of mnemic traces, in order to confer tangible reality on these rituals. Freud argues that these fixations exist not only within individuals, but also within the collective psyche, through the transmission of mental processes from generation to generation, and that they influence the historical development of social institutions. They are:

[On] the one hand fixations to the ancient history of the family and survivals of it, and on the other hand revivals of the past and returns, after long intervals, of what has been forgotten (83).

Further, Freud (1907a) had previously argued that the neurotic—and often the religious individual—is subject to an unconscious sense of guilt that has its roots in early psychological processes. Religious or compulsive rituals preserve the ancient event of the temptation to sin, and the expectation of disaster as a punishment. These fixations, like those of the neurotic, result in disruptions in the flow of time. Repetition compulsion, which is controlled by the death drive, involves denying the passage of time and produces an over-large deviation in the relationship between cosmic and psychological time. Freezing the flow of time could result in the omnipotent tyranny of the social organization and have a devastating effect on the independent existence of the subject: “The [development](https://pep-web.org/search/document/ZBK.069.0001d.YP0008047204240?glossary=) of civilization imposes restrictions on it, and justice demands that no one shall escape those restrictions” (Freud, 1930: 94-95).

This suggests that to enable social existence, a balance is also required between the recognition of the passage of time in nature\cosmos and the recognition of the human tendency to preserve time. Temporal imbalances and the freezing of time may create phenomena that are considered neuroses. One can think of mass social phenomena such as religious sects or dictatorial regimes that seek to freeze the passage of time as illustrations of Freud’s perception of neuroses, flaws, and distortions in temporality.

Thus far, I have discussed Freudian thought as it relates to preserving time and setting epistemological limits for temporal heterogeneity that can establish a normative range for organizing human-social time beyond objective, physical time. During Freud’s lifetime, the Newtonian concept of objective time was undermined, and Einstein’s theory of relative time was accepted. According to Einstein’s theory of special relativitytime moves relative to the observer, and objects in motion experience time dilation, meaning that when an object is moving very fast it experiences time more slowly than when it is at rest. This means that the subject and the object in motion within the “universal block” determine time estimates. Thus, the most notable changes in the perception of time were the validation of private (relative) time and the recognition of the possibility of different forms of simultaneity. Freud made efforts to scientifically determine an agreed range for different forms of time. Such a range would bridge between sequences of events on the two levels of reality—the physical reality of the cosmos and humans as objects in the cosmos, and the social attributes (as subjects) that guide human experience. It follows that Freud’s perception of time is that time in its essence flows, but on the subject’s time-axis there is a tendency to preserve time, a phenomenon that is embedded in humans as organic beings, in his words: "an expression of the conservative nature of living substance…in addition to the conservative instincts which impel towards repetition, there may be others which push forward" (Freud, 1920: 36-37). A thorough reading of Freud’s writings shows that he attached importance to the dialectical relationship between these two levels of time: the linear flow of time and the human tendency to preserve time.

Now, I discuss another distortion that occurs as a result of the denial of Latour’s “fifth dimension” of the human operation of time, in light of the human tendency to preserve time. This denial intersects with the second problem in physics that preoccupied scholars in Freud’s era, that is, the direction of the “arrow of time.”

**“Return of the repressed”—polarization in the use of scientific-linear time**

Freud’s study of the human world revealed that scientific time cannot be purely linear, that is, moving in a straight line from past to future. Instead, he presented additional possibilities for timelines that are influenced by the human fabrication of time and that exist in a polytemporal way (Latour, 1993: 74). In Freud’s clinical and social observations, he found combinations of present tenses that incorporated repressed elements from the past that could not be eradicated and elements of the future that arose from the past and the present. Therefore, deviations in the direction of the arrow of time may occur as a result of human adherence to scientific-linear time, which does not recognize human time. A striking example is thinking about clocks as representing physical time in nature without considering their social function in directing and managing the lives of the individual and the collective. From the social perspective, the clock is a homogeneous and shared way of comparing sequences of events, durations, and speeds of the human experience in physical, biological, and social processes (Elias, 1992).

Latour (1993) argued that modern culture tends to understand the passage of time as a continuous and cumulative dimension that moves forward in the direction of an arrow and that realistically cancels the past. This view positioned scientific epistemology as separate and detached from past cultures. Latour suggested seeing time as ephemeral, since each form of time is limited in duration, transitory, and occurs in relation to a particular human space. Anthropological research on modern culture has shown that the passage of time may be interpreted in different ways: “as a cycle or as decadence, as a fall or as instability, as a return or as a continuous presence” (68). Modern culture strives for coherence and imposes strict discipline on entities that belong to different categories of time and have different ontological statuses. Scientific time denies the balance between destruction and preservation, as well as between accumulation and revolutions and crises. The arrow of time is unequivocally perceived as a continuous flow that takes place gradually, step by step, therefore the denied past becomes a “return of the repressed” or an archaism (68). Latour’s thought can help us shed light on Freud’s theoretical position in which social-human and physical measurements of time are each granted partial scientific validity. Such a reading of Freud allows us to see that he believed that a single point of time embodies the past and the present equally and that it has consequences for the future (the physical method also consolidates knowledge according to traditional principles).

From the outset of his research into dreaming, Freud (1900) demonstrated that the content of dreams includes different layers of time that make up human experience. These times are not chronologically ordered from infancy and childhood, but early and late are used interchangeably. Likewise, in his research on the pathogenic factors of neurotic symptoms, Freud discovered that impressions from sexual experiences in childhood leave mnemic traces that are repressed but disguised and influence a person’s conscious behavior:

A humiliation that was experienced thirty years ago acts exactly like a fresh one throughout the thirty years, as soon as it has obtained access to the [unconscious](https://pep-web.org/search/document/ZBK.069.0001u.YP0013420666620?glossary=) sources of emotion. As soon as the memory of it is touched, it springs into life again and shows itself cathected with [excitation](https://pep-web.org/search/document/ZBK.069.0001e.YP0012482820020?glossary=) which finds a motor [discharge](https://pep-web.org/search/document/ZBK.069.0001d.YP0019870290110?glossary=) in an attack. This is precisely the point at which [psychotherapy](https://pep-web.org/search/document/ZBK.069.0001p.YN0015102990380?glossary=) has to intervene (577).

Freud theorized that mnemic traces and specific traits of consciousness do not permit the individual to gain a fresh and correct perspective of novel events, and thus the foundations of perception are prevented from fulfilling their role. Thus, it is not possible to distinguish temporal relationships in an organized way. Rather, they are subject to past experiences. Freud noted that dreams that are experienced in the present “are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been molded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past” (620). The individual projects into the future desires that were created in the past, and past events resurface in the present as threats or disruptions. This implies that the polarization of perceptions of time dimension in nature as being universal and linear masks the fact that this definition is based on human definition. Human time is decoupled from scientific-linear time, which does not contain any deviations or paradoxes:

Strictly speaking, there is no need for the hypothesis that the psychical systems are actually arranged in a *spatial* order. It would be sufficient if a fixed order were established by the fact that in a given psychical process the [excitation](https://pep-web.org/search/document/ZBK.069.0001e.YP0012482820020?glossary=) passes through the systems in a particular *temporal* sequence (536).

Since there is a close relationship between human time and scientific knowledge of physical time, knowledge of time is anchored solely in the limitations of the subject. That is, within the human psychical apparatus is embedded a disposition that diverts the individual away from the linear flow of time and back to the past and reproduces past experiences in the present. Such reconstruction is achieved through motor discharge, or dreamwork, symptoms, and art manifestation. Freud (1900: 577; 1939, 95-96), described the “return of the repressed” as a process in which latent content is repressed into a reservoir and preserved outside of time. The content does not change over time but resurfaces as distortions. These distortions can be recognized as belonging to the past, through formations that are created in the same associative ways as the repression itself, such as substitutive formation, symptoms, condensation, and reaction formation. The repressed past is a source of pathology, of flaws in rational thought and memory, and of confusion about time. Freud (1901; 1907a, 1915: 154) also argued that elements of an individual’s past that surface in the present after long periods are remnants of ancient human behaviors and conduct. The return of the repressed includes images of appearances from different periods, so that mnemic traces which signal the original-repressed event are changed and distorted by later occurrences. Therefore, the passage of time differentiates the details of the ancient, historical event from the contemporary event, (such as repressed childhood memories that are repeated in the transference relationship towards the therapist). This phenomenon intensifies the epistemological illusion of the direction of the forward-moving arrow of time in human existence, even though moving forward in real-time is moving backward in psychical time—time travel to the past.

According to Freud, the main distortion in how humans experience time is influenced by ancient impulsive desires that persist unchanged from our phylogenetic or ontogenetic past. Some impulses remain preserved in the human psyche, while others continue to develop and evolve into more mature manifestations. Thus, for example, in his paper *Delusion and Dream in Jensen’s Gradiva* (1907b: 1-96), Freud shows, through his discussion of the story of Norbert Hanold, the protagonist of a novel by Danish poet and writer Wilhelm Jansen, how a scientist’s research work is influenced by his repressed desires. The novel describes the obsessive dreams and delusions of Hanold, an archeologist, regarding a bas-relief of a woman he names Gradiva and his difficulties in disentangling his fantasies from reality. Freud explains Hanold’s neuroses as the result of the reawakening of his repressed sexual desires. Their distorted appearance is due to a subconscious defense mechanism. Hanold’s immersion in his archeological work is a defense against his repressed childhood passions:

[F]or of course Hanold's concern with science was only the instrument which the repression employed. A doctor would have to dig deeper here, but perhaps without hitting upon the reason in this case (48).

Through the conscious discoveries of the scientist in the here and now repressed past urges surface, and so we must be aware of the relativity of time measurements. Failing to do so may cause scientific thought to adhere to a one-dimensional concept of time, where it is seen as a linear flow, and thus confer validity only on the present moment. To do so would be to deny human time. For example, events such as natural disasters and epidemics may be perceived as a “return of the repressed” against a background of scientific progress that has allowed us to discern the laws of nature and given us the power to control nature. It seems that, according to Freud, scientific ideas that remain solely encapsulated in rational paradigms may lose their power to offer objective investigations of reality.

Distortions and flaws in temporal perception are based on the degree of dominance and intensity of childhood memories that cause a person to live in the past, and the degree of differentiation or connection that the person can make between past and present events. In his research on the pathogenic factors of neuroses, Freud (1900: 575-577) theorized that impressions from sexual experiences in childhood leave mnemic traces and that these are repressed but disguised and influence a person’s conscious behavior. Later, Freud (1909: 158-219) explained compulsion neuroses, for example, as stemming from memories of intense eroticism that the patient experienced as a child. Childhood neuroses, experienced as a result of conflicts and repressions that occur even when a person is less than six years old, leave traces. These are then revealed or reconstructed through compulsive fears that surface later in life.

Freud’s preoccupation with the organization of the arrow of time led him to theorize about two key phenomena—afterwardness (deferred action) and regression. In his reports of his work with patients, Freud wrote that neurotics are limited in their discernment of the direction of the flow of time because they are preoccupied with unforgettable past trauma. In *The Case of Paranoia*, Freud (1915c) theorized that a key event that causes neurosis is the child’s observation, in fantasy or reality, of what he called “primal phantasy”—sexual intercourse between his parents:

Among the store of unconscious phantasies of all neurotics, and probably of all human beings, there is one which is seldom absent, and which can be disclosed by analysis: this is the phantasy of watching sexual intercourse between the parents (269).

When a patient recalls his parents’ sexual intercourse during psychoanalysis, this is an imaginary return to his act of procreation. Often, this traumatic event is never integrated into a meaningful relationship at an early stage of the person’s development. Therefore, the appearance of new situations and experiences that echo the same trauma through mnemic traces and repressed impressions stimulates the person to experience the event afresh and process it retrospectively. This concept of afterwardness was often used by Freud about the psychical dimension of time, which occurs through an investigation and understanding of impressions gained from childhood experiences, the meaning of which only surfaces in retrospect, that is, when the person looks back. In this, Freud highlights the human tendency to distort perceptions of the sequence and directionality of time (Laplanche, 1998). Freud (1918) argued that, through psychoanalysis, it is possible to prove that a patient had experienced a withdrawal from life and that he was clinging to the past. The patient’s contemporary self places him in a situation that has already passed, and only through self-observation and correct interpretation can he succeed in grasping what happened within him at that previous time, through an act of conscious thought.

Regression is another important Freudian concept that relates to the directionality of time. Freud first discussed his idea of regression in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). The term refers to the return of the subject to an earlier psychological stage of development based on the assumption that the psychical mechanism contains ordered systems that operate sequentially in a linear forward or backward direction. In the awake state, progress is made from perception to mobility. In sleep, thoughts shift back to the perceptual. Later, when he developed his theories of childhood psychosexual development, Freud postulated the retreat of the libido into a primitive sexual state as a cause of neurosis and as a defense mechanism that allows the patient to withdraw from an unsatisfactory reality. If so, the arrow of time drawn by Freud in his theoretical and clinical work traveled in different directions. In his autobiographical study, Freud (1925) expressed the interpretive principle concerning time in psychoanalysis:

It is left to the patient in all essentials to determine the course of the analysis and the arrangement of the material; any systematic handling of particular symptoms or complexes thus becomes impossible. In complete contrast to what happened with hypnotism and with the urging method, interrelated material makes its appearance at different times and different points in the treatment (Freud, 1925, p. 41).

Freud (1937, p. 266), argued that psychoanalysis enables us to ease the burden that has been placed on human memory, and paves the way for the patient to become more aware of the objective order of time. According to Freud, (1925: 41-42), psychoanalysis leads to a chain of early childhood impressions, which reveal the continued existence of the past in the patient’s memory. A controlled return to the events of the past can reinforce the connection between the retrograde direction of time and the linear flow of time. Freud assigned psychotherapy the task of returning the patient to a linear and normal timeline. However, above all, it seems he intended to evoke a reflective function about the human tendency to partial objectivity concerning time and to clarify its meaning. It is possible to move away from the time illusory trap to create only a partially objective order of the course of events. The conclusion that emerges is that Freud believed in the importance of synchronization between physical and human time since desynchronization between the two could result in neuroses. Clinging on the idea of the directionality of the passage of time as a permanent structure in the human universe is useful for the proper organization of human life, but ignores the human tendency to preserve time and the human fabrication of time. Failing to recognize the power of past events to affect human existence results in the surfacing of unconscious glimpses of past events in the present.

In parallel to the multi-temporality of ontogenetic existence, in which past events penetrate the linear forward flow of time, Freud also presented this within the phylogenetic existence. In *Totem and Taboo* (1912), Freud devised a historical-anthropological model that roots current social structures—political and religious—in the ancient event of undermining the primal father as a result of libidinal and aggressive desires. Politics and religion are pathways formed from this primal event, which served as a prototype for submitting to a single authority, and at the same time creating a desire to break free from and kill this authority (Freud, 1912: 1-18, 140-161).

Later, in his work *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud (1939) noted that:

From that time, I have never doubted that religious phenomena are only to be understood on the pattern of the individual neurotic symptoms familiar to us—as the return of long since forgotten, important events in the primeval history of the human family—and that they have to thank precisely this origin for their compulsive character and that, accordingly, they are effective on human beings by force of the historical truth of their content (57)

Social rules and conventions are shaped by the prohibitions and taboos that serve as primary forms of authority. These taboos preserve society and effectively impose limits on human instincts to enable humans to exist—which is the fundamental function of any social structure. Freud argued that religious rules and rituals are proof that elements of the primitive human past can resurface after long periods of latency and that they have the power and ability to have sweeping effects on masses of people. The return of the forgotten historical past reminds us of the ancient heritage of humans that is identified with the natural/animal state:

If any explanation at all is to be found of this instinctive life of animals, it can only be that they bring the experiences of their species with them into their new existence—that is, that they have preserved memories of what was experienced by their ancestors. The position of the human-animal would not at bottom be different (99).

Reflecting on this heritage and identifying its expression in the present as the traces of a material truth evokes the memory of the first form of social organization and the beginnings of morality and law. This memory could lead us to an awareness of historical truth:

And we assume the right to correct a certain [distortion](https://pep-web.org/search/document/ZBK.069.0001d.YP0018797238250?glossary=) to which this truth has been subjected on its return. That is to say, we do not believe that there is a single great god today, but that in primeval times there was a single person who was bound to appear huge at that time and who afterwards returned in men’s memory elevated to divinity (128).

Freud argued that it was the responsibility of the individual and the collective to become aware of their historical-human origins, including of the first human as the primal father, and the feelings of guilt for his patricide. Doing this would bring about the return of repressed latent content, and distinguish humans from animals: “the psychical precipitates of the primeval period become inherited property, which, in each fresh generation, called not for acquisition but only for awakening” (131). Reincarnations of past events in the present and future are necessary for human existence in general, and social existence in particular. Disruptions can occur without recognizing the continuous existence of the intergenerational past in human memory. A social group can also be damaged by past, forgotten traumatic sexual and violent experiences. After a period of latency, these collective experiences return and resurface, and can cause flaws in rational thinking about time:

The return of the repressed took place slowly and certainly not spontaneously but under the influence of all the changes in conditions of life which fill the history of human civilization (132).

Thus, Freud’s study of the history of Judaism in his *Moses and Monotheism* served as an analogy for world-historical processes, in which incomprehensible revelations surface in the present as evidence of forgotten past experiences. The Jews collectively repressed the memory of the murder of the primal father—the Moses of ancient Egypt—and only with the rise of Christianity did it resurface, albeit in a well-disguised form.

In conclusion, in Freudian thought the social markers of human time are governed by unconscious desires and instincts, biological mechanisms that tend to preserve time, and subjective and phylogenetic ancient historical events. This composition of time organizers distorts the arrow of time as it exists in the human world, creating a network of diverse time components that make it impossible to determine proper conduct in time. The main point of Freud’s work was to consolidate objective and permanent knowledge about the organization of time and point out anomalies in human thinking about time. Despite his efforts to define an agreed range for different forms of time, Freud’s theory has made an important contribution to the development of the concept of multi-temporality in Western culture.

**Multi-temporality in the context of duality between cosmic and human time**

In this paper, I have traced Freud’s contributions to expanding the representation of human experience in time, from scientific-physical time through the heterogeneous time of Western culture. The investigation of Freudian perceptions of time has relied mainly on Latour’s scientific anthropological approach, and on the approaches of several other thinkers who have combined the physical with the cultural-historical in considerations of time and temporality. Freud used scientific principles embodied in interdisciplinary research to explore the limits of human conduct in time. In so doing, Freud situated time as a research object at the center between the natural and human sciences. Here he emphasized the importance of the relationship between representations of time according to the laws of nature (without anthropomorphic elements), and representations of time based on forms of human experience in time.

Freud’s work on time includes the organization of individual/social experiences in different and new forms of time and the human fabrication of time. Epistemologically, Freud overemphasized human-lived time over linear-scientific time and created representations of time that are partially objective. Freud’s psychoanalytical studies of the private and collective historical past reveal patterns of time that exist alongside the sequential flow of moments. Freud argued that flaws in rational thought concerning time depend on the degree of individual or collective fixation on the past, and the tendency to repeat past events in the present.

The argument I present here assumes that Freud believed that the properties of the passage of time and the preservation of time are imposed on the subject and that they structure her experience in time. One question that has not been addressed here is how individual and collective time is constructed as a collective norm to satisfy human needs, values, and preferred meanings in social relationships. Useful next-step research could analyze Freudian temporality comparatively with the ideas of those of his contemporaries who explored the influence of social structures on the construction of representations of time and on time as a symbol of social relationships. Such a comparative study could help produce a more nuanced view of the various factors that shape time in a particular human space. Further, such a study could also help shed additional light onto the multi-temporality that coexists in Western human society alongside physical-scientific perceptions of time.

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1. This is one possible translation of *Le Temps Eclaté*, the French title of Green’s *Time in Psychoanalysis* from which the previous quotations are taken. The French title is sometimes also translated as *Exploded Time* or *Fragmented Time*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)