

# **The Task of a Past – Psychoanalysis (and architecture) as an Ethical Practice**

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## **Introduction to the Past**

In a lecture titled “Architecture and its Pasts” Mark Cousins, an architectural historian and theorist, asked provocatively why young architects need to study the history of architecture. If architecture is about finding solutions to social, technological and cultural problems - why do we care about the Greek orders or the architecture of the Quattrocento? Cousins’ goes on to compare architecture to medicine and law, two other professions that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and wonders if anyone would suggest that the training of doctors should include learning the medical procedures of the middle ages.

Like architecture, the profession of psychoanalysis is also interested in the past; not the historical past of the field (Young-Bruel) but rather the past of its’ patients. Psychoanalysis studies the human mind and relationships by investigating autobiographical past. This analytic process – long, intense, and at times deeply fulfilling - aims (or claims) to help the patient live a better life.

But can we ask about psychoanalysis the same provocative question that Mark Cousins’ asks about architecture - does building a better future depend on studying joyous and traumatic memories of the past? Why are events that happened long ago relevant to our present and future aspirations? Is dwelling on the past more than a self-centered indulgence?

I will suggest that both Mark Cousins, from the field of architecture, and psychoanalyst Hans Loewald view the past in a unique and related way. For them the past is not a point behind us on a linear trajectory from before to after, rather, they see the past as a live part of our present experience which we must accept in order to cure the psyche and construct a meaningful environment.

Loewald developed a theoretical structure that framed his view of sublimation, religion, transference and time. To grasp Loewald's theory, we will first briefly recall Freud's view of sublimation and religion, and trace the chiasmic symmetry between Freud and Loewald's different understandings of these experiences. I will then consider the similarity between Mark Cousins' view of an architectural past and Loewald's view of a psychic past. I will end by touching, all too briefly, on Loewald's most radical claim that the psychoanalytic process of relinking past, present and future, is in itself an ethical process and a moral achievement.

## **Sublimation**

Sublimation, Freud writes, is the conversion of lower instinctual desire into a higher level of art. The sexual energies of the artists are transformed; their aim shifted, from the oedipal, forbidden, objects to higher, "sublime" creations of art, science and culture.

Loewald saw the relationship of infantile wishes to adult creativity in a different way.

The infant, according to Loewald, initially sees the world as an undifferentiated unity, in which there is no separation between subject and object, baby and breast, me and you. As we mature, we learn to differentiate between our self and the outer world and become able to participate in actions that require a relationship to other people and things.

But the original experience of oneness, primary process and unconscious, remains alive in our adult psychic life and continues to play a crucial role in creative, sublimatory, processes. Sublimation is not a transformation of child-like wish into a higher cultural product; rather it is a binding of these different human modes of experience, linking the original unity to a more mature, complex, language based, differentiated reality.

"A last comment on those works of the human imagination - the productions of science, art, philosophy, religious thought and ritual - that are sublimation par excellence... (Those we admire most, hold us spellbound, fill us with awe, partake of magic as they summon and master "secret forces in nature")... May we assume that this magic is connected with the achievement of a reconciliation - with the return, on a higher level of organization, to the early magic of thought, gesture, word, image, emotion, fantasy, as they become united again with what in ordinary nonmagical experience they only reflect, (recollect, represent,) or symbolize? Could sublimation be both a mourning of lost original oneness and a celebration of oneness regained? " (Loewald, 1988 p. 517).

## **Religion**

Freud and Loewald's attitudes to religion parallel their different understandings of sublimation.

Freud saw religion, like sublimation, as an infantile, defensive expressing a wish to be protected by an omnipotent God or father, and illusion which should be overcome. Maturation demands that the primitive believer be elevated to a modern, secular rational man.

As we have seen, Loewald saw sublimation as a healthy binding of infantile narcissism to adult differentiation. Similarly, he understood religious and mystical moments as experiences that tap into alternative levels of reality which pre-date rational and verbal organizations, connecting us back to our original state of unity with the world.

The Oceanic sense of eternity, Loewald writes, is a state in which “the category of time does not apply...in the experience of eternity, time is abolished” (Loewald, 1980, p. 570), and he emphasizes that the reality of time and the experience of eternity are both true: “Neither the felt version nor the verbalized version, it seems to me, should be called an illusion. If we acknowledge the undifferentiating unconscious as a genuine mode of mentation...” (Loewald, 1980, p. 571). He continues to lament that certain forms of religious experiences which are aspects of unconscious mentation are “in much of modern civilization are more deeply repressed than "sexuality" is today.” (Loewald, 1980, p.577).

Professor Jones ends his paper on this topic with a clear quote from Loewald: “The mature individual, being able to reach back into his deep origins and roots of being, finds in himself the oneness from where he stems, and understands this in the freedom as his bond of love with God” (Jones, 2001, p.807)

Religion, seen by Freud as a regressive, primitive, illusion, is understood by Loewald as a vital capacity to oscillate between different modes or reality, a sign of true aliveness and a capacity to contain a wide range of human experiences: “the range and richness of human life is directly proportional to the mutual responsiveness between these various phases and levels.” (Loewald, 1980, p. 569) writes Loewald.

## **Time**

As we have seen, Loewald puts linking in the center of sublimation and religious experiences. Similarly he sees linking as central to the understanding psychic time:

“We encounter time in psychic life primarily as a linking activity in which what we call past, present, and future are woven into a nexus... The nexus itself is not so much one of succession but of interaction. Past, present, and future present themselves in psychic life not primarily as one preceding or following the other, but as modes of time which determine and shape each other, which differentiate out of and articulate a pure now. There is no irreversibility on a linear continuum, as in the common concept of time as succession, but a reciprocal relationship whereby one time mode cannot be experienced or thought without the other and whereby they continually modify each other.” (Loewald, 1971. *The Experience of Time*. p. 143)

The past as Loewald explains, is alive in us now, and our present recasts and recreates that past. I react anxiously when I remember a traumatic moment and this anxiety occurs in my mind and body now. Memories are also not fixed; our present understanding modifies our past.

It is this past, that is alive in the present, which we expose in analysis. The analytic transference is a particular way of remembering, Loewald says, which links the patient's past to the current relationship to the analyst. The analytic task is to understand and re-

link these moments in time, unity and multiplicity, body and language. Time, like sublimation and religion, is always a process of linking.

### **Having a History vs. Having a Past**

We have seen how Loewald understood sublimation, religion and time, as connecting a past of unity to present that includes differentiation.

I can now return to Mark Cousins's lecture and to the distinction he makes between a having a history and having a past. A history of architecture, Cousins suggests, is a succession of chronological events and buildings, resembling the profession's resume of accomplishment.

Much more important, says Cousins, is to have a Past.

A past, 'a non-historical past' as he calls it, does not reside in earlier times. Like Loewald's psychic past it is alive now. To say "I have a past", Cousins tells us, it to say there are problems which are present in me and which need to be addressed.

Architects work on problems which concern society since antiquity. They wonder with previous generations of planners how to create a civic space and study with builders of the past how to transitions from public space into the interiority of a home.

Cousins suggest that the past of architecture is similar to the individual's past as discovered in psychoanalysis. He demonstrates his view of the past by telling a powerful story about his own past as exposed through his analysis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stRrrHnkTqA> (especially minutes 47:50-52:35)

Cousins's past, his parents' divorce and his longing for his father, is alive in him and expressed through his inability or refusal to drive. He is still waiting for his father's return. The abandonment, hope and mourning are all encapsulated in his current being as a non-driving person.

The architectural past, like the past of the individual, registers problems that are alive even when unnoticed. Architecture continues to wrestle with fundamental human and social issues; the grand questions of civic structures and the small problem of a doorway.

Cousins describes the architectural past in a manner that resonates with the psychic past we saw in Loewald. He says:

“The investigation of the architectural past starts not with the origin of architecture, but certainly in the present... and so, to become adept, about the architectural past is not about listening to architectural theory or to architectural design but developing a kind of intuitive recognition that there is something unspoken... indeed different people will identify different pasts... the past no longer has an ontological, veridical, moment of unmasking it all...different schools could develop different accounts of the architectural past...it would be an analysis of the problems which were met with...now.”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stRrrHnkTqA> )

### **Ethics of Psychoanalysis**

Cousins and Loewald both describe a past that links memories of archaic experiences and fundamental human problems to present life and future hopes, overcoming what others may call repression, dissociation or splitting.

But what is perhaps Hans Loewald's most radical claim is that by linking the past and present, the psychoanalytic endeavor becomes a moral achievement.

Loewald writes:

“I believe it is not unscientific to know ourselves also in the sense of exploring the moral implications of our therapeutic goals and of our scientific passions...And I think it is an unwarranted limitation, at this stage of our science, to maintain that self-knowledge, making the unconscious conscious, transforming id into ego, is a purely 'objective' matter of self-observation and self-understanding, and not a moral phenomenon and activity in and of itself.” (Loewald, 1971, p. 63)

My experience resonates with Loewald’s claims that the long, intentional and painful process of psychoanalysis is not only a way to alleviate pain and to awaken creativity, but also a process of becoming a moral person. We become aware of ourselves, our limitations, projection, traumas and strengths through analysis. “In such memorial activity, which weaves past, present, and future into a context of heightened meaning, each of us is on a path to becoming a self.” (Loewald, 1976, p.172).

If I had more time, I would have liked to explore this view of morality as a temporal, internal, evolutionary process. Iris Murdoch, in her essay “The Idea of Perfection” describes morality as a private process of struggle and progress to become a person able to interpret the other “not accurately”, as she writes, “but justly or lovingly.” (Murdoch, 1971, p. 22).

For me, this ongoing inner work is the goal and achievement of psychoanalysis. Making our past a vital living aspect of our present self makes us human and allows us to react with care to our own traumas and to treat kindly the needs of those around us, it allows us to mourn, love and become creative.



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