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Sigmund Freud's Investigation of Astrology

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ABSTRACT: Following the First World War there was an increase in the use of psychics and clairvoyants as the bereaved attempted to contact their dead relations. Sigmund Freud saw this as a dangerous development and in 1921 set out to study it. As part of this he considered the visit of one of his patients to an astrologer, placing the incident in its historical context, looking at the causes and possible consequences of the occult boom.

Freud's study of one of his patients' visit to an astrologer was written in August 1921 and was included as part of a study of prophetic phenomena, written in the context of recent attacks on him by Jung and Adler. It appears to have been presented to a meeting of his closest followers (Abraham, Eitington, Ferenczi, Rank, Sachs and Ernest Jones) in September 1921, and was published in 1941 as 'Psychoanalyse und Telepathie'.¹

Freud opened his discussion by setting the historical context. In particular he attributed what he identified as a rapidly growing interest in the occult to the political turmoil, economic collapse and social dislocation which followed the First World War. He argued that 'Nor is there much doubt as to the origin of this trend. It is a part expression of the loss of value by which everything has been affected since the catastrophe of the Great War, a part of the tentative approach to the great revolution towards which we are heading and of whose extent we can form no estimate; but no doubt it is also an attempt at compensation, at making up in another, a supermundane, sphere for the attractions which have been lost by life on this earth'.²

Freud also thought that recent scientific discoveries and theories were stimulating public interest in the occult by confusing publicly accepted beliefs on the nature of the universe, or by undermining belief in the objective trustworthiness of science. He cited the discovery of radium and the theory of relativity as two examples.³

In his introduction Freud considered possible connections and co-operation between occultists and psychoanalysts in view of the fact that

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science considered both disreputable; psychoanalysis was widely considered to be mysticism, and he had recently been asked to contribute to three occult journals. He pursued this line of thought, writing that 'It does not follow as a matter of course that an intensified interest in occultism must involve a danger to psycho-analysis. We should, on the contrary, be prepared to find reciprocal sympathy between them. They have both experienced the same contemptuous and arrogant treatment by official science. To this day psycho-analysis is regarded as savouring of mysticism, and its unconscious is looked upon as one of the things between heaven and earth which philosophy refuses to dream of...Alliance and co-operation between analysts and occultists might thus appear both plausible and promising'.⁴

However, he found problems with this approach, arguing that whereas occultists are believers, driven by the need only to find evidence to support their faith, analysts are scientists, committed to a dispassionate appraisal of the facts. Worse still, if evidence were to be found to support any one occult phenomenon, then occultists might use it to proclaim the truth of all occult phenomena. The results, in Freud's opinion, would be disastrous. He predicted that occultists 'will be hailed as liberators from the burden of intellectual bondage, they will be joyfully acclaimed by all the credulity lying ready to hand since the infancy of the human race and the childhood of the individual. There may follow a fearful collapse of critical thought, of determinist standard and of mechanistic science'.⁵

Freud feared that analysis would also suffer, for if occultists were able to provide all the answers then there would be no interest in its laborious procedures. He considered that these risks were so profound that, even though he felt obliged to study the occult, he believed that his discussion of it should be withheld from the wider public. Thus, while he saw the resurgence of interest in the occult as a historical phenomenon, defined by the collapse of Europe in 1918-1919, the very study of this phenomenon might have significant and damaging historical consequences. In words reminiscent of his earlier call on Jung to join him in forming a 'bulwark against...the black tide of occultism', he wrote that even his own enemies, Jung and Adler, were threatened.⁶

However, in spite of Freud's 'unenthusiastic and ambivalent' attitude to the material, he believed that his scientific approach rendered it exempt from 'the uncertainties and doubts to which most of the observations of occultists are prone'.⁷

Freud's discussion of astrology centered on the account of a visit by one of his patients to an astrologer in Munich. The astrologer was not named, but was clearly well-known. Freud wrote that she 'enjoyed a great reputation. The Bavarian princes used to visit her when they had any undertaking in mind. All that she required was to be supplied with a date'.⁸ Freud remarked that he had not inquired whether she also required a year, or indeed a time, the data required for the casting of a full horoscope.

Freud's concern was not with astrology's veracity, but with its mechanism and function. He reported that the astrological incident was one of two 'prophecies made by professional fortune tellers which did *not* come true. In spite of this, these prophecies made an extraordinary impression on the people to whom they were announced, so that their relation to the future cannot be their essential point. Anything that may contribute to their explanation, as well as anything that throws doubt on their evidential force, will be extremely welcome to me'.⁹

The astrologer's exact prophecy was that Freud's patient's brother-in-law would die of crayfish or oyster poisoning in the following July or August. The patient described this forecast as 'wonderful' because the event in question had in fact occurred in the previous August. However, Freud considered a forecast of such precision beyond astrology's technical capacity, arguing that 'you will no doubt agree with me in offering the most obstinate resistance to the possibility that so detailed an event as falling ill of crayfish poisoning could be inferred from the date of the subject's birth by help of any tables of formulae whatever. Do not forget how many people are born on the same day. Is it credible that the similarity of the futures of people born on the same day can be carried down to such details as this? I therefore venture to exclude the astrological calculations entirely from the discussion; I believe the fortune teller might have adopted some other procedure without affecting the outcome of the interrogation'.¹⁰ This does not mean, though, that the astrologer was practicing deliberate deception: 'Accordingly, we can also so it seems to me, leave the fortune teller (or, as we may say straight out, the 'medium') quite out of account as a possible source of deception'.¹¹

Freud's explanation, though, depended not on the normal models of the mechanistic science which he saw as the basis of analysis, but another occult phenomenon: 'And we at once find - and this is the case with the majority of these phenomena - that its explanation on an occult basis is remarkably adequate and covers what has to be explained

completely, except that it is so unsatisfying in itself. It is impossible that the knowledge that this man - born on the day in question - had had an attack of crayfish-poisoning could have been present in the fortune teller's mind; nor can she have arrived at that knowledge from her tables and calculations. It was, however, present in the mind of her questioner. The event becomes completely explicable if we are ready to assume that the knowledge was transferred from him to the supposed prophetess - by some unknown method which excluded the means of communication familiar to us. That is to say, we must draw the inference that there is such a thing as thought-transference. The fortune-teller's astrological activities would in that case have performed the function of diverting her own psychical forces and occupying them in a harmless way, so that she could have become receptive and accessible to the effects upon her of her client's thoughts - so that she could become a true 'medium'.¹²

Thus Freud explained one inexplicable phenomenon, the 'wonderful' astrological forecast, by another, thought-transference. He does not appear to have believed that thought transference provided a preferable explanation of the prophecy to astrology, for both were occult. However, he thought it more likely that thought transference could explain the precision of the forecast better than astrology. In addition, both astrologer and client were involved in bringing the prophecy into existence: the patient actually wished that his brother-in-law would die with such intensity that his memory of the previous incident was picked up by the astrologer. It was his wish that the brother-in-law would die that converted the memory to the prophecy uttered by the astrologer. Thus the astrologer could not have uttered any meaningful statement without the client's presence. Although Freud didn't state this explicitly, this is evidence against the existence of any independent astrological 'effect'.

However, Freud argued that his evidence for thought-transference as an explanation for astrology and other prophetic experiences should not be used to support other occult phenomena but nevertheless opened the door to a substantial scientific breakthrough. He wrote that 'I have nothing to say about all the other miracles that are claimed by occultism. My own life, as I have already openly admitted, has been particularly poor in an occult sense. Perhaps the problem of thought transference may seem very trivial to you in comparison with the great magical world of the occult. But consider what a momentous step beyond what we have hitherto believed would be involved in this hypothesis alone'.¹³

Thus, although Freud saw the increasing interest in the occult, including astrology, as partly a psychological compensation for the material disruption of the First World War, and as a profound threat to science and civilisation, he believed that some occult phenomena might be genuine, and that their explanation could lead, if carefully handled, to an intellectual revolution.

References

1. Sigmund Freud, 'Psychoanalysis and Telepathy', 1921, in James Strachey (trans.) *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII, London, 1955, pp 177-194.
2. *ibid.* p 177.
3. *ibid.* p 178. Freud's sentiments were echoed by Richard Dawkins in 1998: 'Quantum uncertainty and chaos theory have had deplorable effects upon popular culture...Both are regularly exploited by those with a bent for abusing science and shanghaiing its wonder', *Unweaving the Rainbow*, London, 1998, p 188.
4. Freud, 'Telepathy', p 178.
5. *ibid.* p 180.
6. *ibid.* p 117, 19. C.G.Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, London, 1963, p 173. See also Frank McGillion, 'The Influence of Wilhelm Fliess' Cosmology on Sigmund Freud', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 2 no 1, p 36.
7. Freud, 'Telepathy', p 181.
8. *ibid.* p 182.
9. *ibid.* p 181.
10. *ibid.* p 182.
11. *ibid.* p 184.
12. *ibid.* p 184.
13. *ibid.* p 193.