

Floating and Sinking in Psychoanalysis

Nikos Sideris interviewed
by Alexandra Chronaki

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ALEXANDRA CHRONAKI: Floating and Sinking. In which way do these two notions appear in psychoanalysis? Do they refer to psychopathology or to the process of psychoanalysis as well?

NIKOS SIDERIS: Floating and sinking are subjective experiences corresponding to vestibular sensations, illusions or hallucinations. They may typically occur in conditions of hypnosis, hypnagogic states (when falling asleep), relaxation and yoga exercises, meditation, drug-induced states or psychopathology of organic (febrile, toxic ...) or functional origin.

Typically, they do not occur isolated. Normally, they are part of a broader complex of experiences corresponding to more or less altered states of consciousness.

As far as the psychoanalytic process per se is concerned, it is highly unlikely to encounter such experiences during a session, because of the preponderance of articulated addressed speech and the effective interaction with the psychoanalyst. Nevertheless, such experiences during the process of free association may occur. Obviously, such mental recollections and verbal reports will be treated as an integral part of the analysand's discourse, according to the principles defining the psychoanalytic listening, perception, elaboration and interpretation of discourse.

The occurrence of floating and sinking experiences in hypnosis, hypnagogic and hypnopompic states, through relaxation, yoga or meditation practices, as drug or pathological effects, is a clear indication of the regressive mechanisms at work. In metapsychological terms, the core mechanism of floating and sinking is actually regression to archaic patterns of perception and mental elaboration – practically, regression to primeval modes of fantasy formation and experience, integrating sensory information of any kind available.

A particular pattern of experience, known as the *Isakower phenomenon*, after the Viennese psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who first described it in 1936, reveals the main *point of fixation* and offers substantial and decisive indications about the psychic *chora*; this is where floating and sinking experiences are emanating from or, more precisely, this is where regression process stabilizes the psychical functioning during this kind of experience. In his article *Beitrag zur Pathopsychologie der Einschlafphaenome*, which appeared in English in 1938 as *A contribution to the psychopathology of phenomena associated with falling asleep*, Isakower describes a varied set of phenomena that occur in certain hypnagogic states and can possibly be observed “in a number of patients suffering from widely different types of psychological disorders and also in some normal persons”.¹ Having examined several clinical cases, Isakower observed: “The most striking of all is the blurring of the distinction between quite different regions of the body, e.g. between mouth and skin, and also between what is internal and what is external, the body and the outside world.

We note too the *amorphous* character of the impressions conveyed by the sense-organs. The visual impression is that of something *shadowy* and *indefinite*, generally felt to be ‘round’, which comes closer and closer, swells to a *gigantic* size and threatens to crush the subject. Then, it becomes gradually smaller and shrinks up to nothing [. . .]. The auditory impression is of a humming, rustling, babbling, murmuring, or of an *unintelligible* monotonous speech. The tactile sensation is of something crumpled, *jagged*, sandy or dry, and is experienced in the mouth and at the same time on the skin of the whole body. In any other case, the subject feels enveloped by it or knows that it is close at hand. Sometimes it feels as if there was a soft yielding mass in his mouth, but at the same time he knows that it is outside him”.²

Reference to breast-feeding in the context of a fusion of all relevant experiences, including virtually all sensorial modalities, is obvious. It implies difficulty or absence of interest in evaluating spatial parameters (distance, position, etc.); the epicenter of these phenomena is often the mouth, the whole experience sometimes involving a feeling of *déjà vu* and a position of auto-referential observation by the subject. Besides neurophysiological considerations, Isakower attempts a metapsychological analysis: He refers to a set of mechanisms and experiences having lived at the earliest stages of development, including regression, splitting of ego, confusion of the boundaries between the inside and the outside, relative indifferentiation of perceptions and affects... These remarks led him to the conclusion that “we can observe the *regressive* revival of ego-attitudes which from the *ontogenetic* standpoint are *primitive*”.³

The Isakower phenomenon offers a re-elaborated view of the very ancient sensory history of the child, particularly the child at the breast, if not, eventually, in the *uterus*. This is also the conclusion of Isakower's analysis: “In dreams and in the phenomenon which is the subject of this paper we have the best authenticated instances of the way in which that function may be renounced in order to *conjure up* lost objects and submerged worlds”.⁴

So, the decisive point of regression –in the breast of the all-including and embracing mother- is clearly indicated. Co-occurrence of feelings of floating and/or sinking are spatial sensations highly probable to be experienced in this context of maternal embracing and –more or less effective, subjectively trustful- holding by the mother. Actually, the configuration and adjustment of maternal and infantile positions and movements are decisive to the formation of a holding environment in which empathy and trust can appear, especially in the context of such close corporeal interactions. Indeed, the experience –perceptive, postural, motor, and affective- of being enveloped by the maternal embrace constitutes the historical core, internalized as structure, of the child's body-image. The primordial psychic structure, source of all subsequent emergence of the representational world of the subject, is constituted through this proprioceptive, kinaesthetic and tactile body image – that is to say, through *internalization of fundamental patterns of spatial interaction*.

Therefore, it is possible to delineate the metapsychological mechanism of floating and sinking as follows: in particular conditions, effective perception and control of bodily posture and motion is not sufficiently (eventually, not at all) mediated by a clear sensorium (primarily, vision) and/or programmed, so that the rationally planned activity refers to a sharply defined

environment. It is precisely what happens in hypnosis, hypnagogic states, profound relaxation, yoga or meditation practice ... with the dream being an extreme illustration of the process. In these conditions, regression may lead the whole psychic system to archaic patterns of function. Eventually, through the convergence of neurophysiological alterations, proprioceptive information flooding, intense fantasmatic activity and sensorimotor singularities, the process of regression may reach psychic inscriptions –mainly, internalized spatial experiences and constructions referring not only to the psychic equivalent of primeval experiences of maternal embracing and holding but also to the fusion with archaic versions of an experiential world structured around the all-including maternal body, as lived especially in the setting of sucking, with fantasmatic connotations referring to the intra-uterine life.

AC: In spatial terms we could say that those two notions-sinking and floating- represent two different images of movement, one vertical and one horizontal. In the case of sinking, the movement leads to a depth under the weight of the moving body while, in the case of floating, the movement is horizontal with the moving body remaining at the same level. It's a movement against gravity, an attempt to be released from the weight, perhaps a loss of weight.

What could these representations say about the experiences that you described before?

NS: Floating and sinking are manifestations of the double spatiality determining the experience of spatial existence of the human subject. The main spatial alteration supporting and framing the floating and sinking experiences consists in a double movement: *Detachment from the secondary spatiality and intensification of the primary spatiality.*

Secondary spatiality designates the spatial experience and function of the subject determined by the Euclidean representation of space, more or less socially shared and punctuated, complying with operational metrics and configurations. It represents the dominant mode of conscious spatial existence, individual and collective, in everyday life and in rationally programmed action subsumed to the reality principle.

Primary spatiality designates the spatial experience and function of the subject evolving into a topological, fluid representation of space, fundamentally independent of social conventions, following fantasy staging and dispositions. It represents the dominant mode of unconscious spatial existence in fantasy, dream, altered states of consciousness, but it may also occur in more common conditions such as day dreaming, diving, dancing, making love, running to escape a threat or pursuing somebody with strong emotional involvement... in any condition where powerful affective processes intervene in relation to the pleasure principle – and beyond, to the realm of the Lacanian *jouissance*, i.e. the pre-symbolic subjective world.

The main mechanism of floating and sinking consists, as mentioned above, in functional regression of the psychic system. This regression takes place simultaneously in *spatial* (from the ego to the id), *formal* (from secondary to primary process dominance, from verbal-linguistic to bodily-proprioceptive sense of being), and *temporal-historical* (from the sense of separateness to a sense of continuity, eventually fusion with

the living or physical environment) level. This global regression includes the subjective terms of spatial existence, leading to a sense of non-differentiation / discontinuity of otherness, all relevant experiential facts being integrated in an analogical, continuous whole. Distant perception (mainly visual) gives way to touch and proprioception. Instrumental spatial action is replaced by receptive passivity and openness. And any linear narrative, projecting to the future, gives way to the un-mediated experience of the self-sufficient here-and-now. It moves the subjective experience away from the symbolic construction of realities, to the imaginary realms of fantasy and beyond – to encountering the real: where names or iconic designations are not functional, where the experience of things lies, for a while, before and beyond words and ready images.

In such a regressive, partially un-mediated experiential environment, it is, in principle, possible to function without reference to the laws of gravity, kinematics and physiological postural regulation. That is, to reach a subjective experience resembling that of the baby in the hands of his/her mother: where her body constitutes indistinct part of the baby's postural and motor experience, and her activity cancels the constraints and exigencies of gravity, making the sense of floating and sinking an actual, undeniable, profoundly engraved "piece of true life" –in terms of fantasy and poetry, at least. In psychoanalytic literature, the equivalence *sea=mother* is well established since Ferenczi's "*Thalassa*" – and talking of the sea, inevitably one will invoke experiences, real or imagined, of floating and sinking. Moreover, this kind of experience, where the subject's body is received without resistance or restriction by the whole universe, is part of the well-known Freudian discussion of the *oceanic feeling*.

Floating and sinking represent not only a regression from the verbal, symbolic to the non-verbal, pre-symbolic world structurally present as core of the Unconscious (as Id), but also a direct proof that interlocution is not the primary locus of subjectivity; that the first experience of one's being is that of his/her bodily ego; and that *silent* experience and *silent existence* constitute the most fundamental, profound and ultimate nucleus of subjectivity, as well as the primordial source of vital narcissism and the effective matrix of all poetry – of the poetical sensation of one's world, of the creative dynamics of one's fantasy, articulated or not in the formal language of an art. The defining spatial character of the floating and sinking experiences in relation to its creative potential is, I maintain, of the utmost importance for one of the highest forms of the creative approach of spatiality, namely, architecture.

AC: *Could these experiences be related to spatial conditions? Are there spatial factors that favour the appearance of such sensations?*

NS: In general, when emotional factors predominate or other factors induce detachment from an operational/instrumental perception of the external reality, the ratio

Primary Spatiality (PS) / Secondary Spatiality (SS)

increases, that is to say, it is modified in favour of the PS, either through intensification of its proper share of experience or through restriction of the SS's corresponding share. In these situations, a necessary, although not sufficient, condition

emerges and favours the possibility and probability of experiencing sensations of floating and sinking.

Spatial arrangements, through construction or conditioned bodily functioning, favouring the primary spatiality and/or reducing the part of the secondary spatiality (as common as water-slides or as sophisticated as the floatation tanks...), could lead to the aimed, or side-effect of floating or sinking experiences emergence.

The necessity or expediency of such spatially induced effects, however, should be carefully considered and assessed, especially when profound regression is a possibility. In that –not so obviously playful- perspective, it is preferable to avoid an “open doors accessibility” and practice, instead, on thoughtful case selection, since psychological fragility that undergoes this kind of regression could be further destabilized, with hazardous consequences. Architecture is also an ethical praxis and architectural handling of the double spatiality represents not only an instrumental activity, but also an ethical responsibility.

Notes

¹ Otto Isakower, *A contribution to the psychopathology of phenomena associated with falling asleep*, International Journal of Psychoanalysis 19, (1938)

² Otto Isakower, *A contribution to the psychopathology of phenomena associated with falling asleep*, International Journal of Psychoanalysis 19, (1938), p.333

³ Otto Isakower, *A contribution to the psychopathology of phenomena associated with falling asleep*, International Journal of Psychoanalysis 19, (1938), p.345

⁴ Otto Isakower, *A contribution to the psychopathology of phenomena associated with falling asleep*, International Journal of Psychoanalysis 19, (1938), p.345