

## Response to Altan Loker's Paper

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We psychotherapists are taught to be very tentative in our formulations of theory lest we cause harm by propounding and applying clinical ideas that fail to mirror some patients' realities. The concomitant danger is that we may shrink from drawing generalizations that, if truly understood, would help all of us in working with our clients. It is exciting to me, therefore, to encounter someone from outside the profession of analysis who has critically examined Jung's theory of compensation by systematically applying it to the study of numbers of dreams. So far as I know, that has not previously been attempted, and so we would have to be grateful to Altan Loker if he had done nothing more than raise important issues in understanding how compensation works through dreams and invite us to test our own intuitive understandings of the theory against the clinical data we face every day.

What he has also done is to ask us to consider (1) how far "compensation" can be taken as a general theory of dreams, (2) how we might refine our use of that theory, and (3) how it can help us understand not only the protective function of dreams but also that of the unconscious generally. It is clear that Loker is impressed with how much consciousness resides in what we usually call the unconscious, a fact which dreams, as a product of cerebration that occurs while we are literally unconscious, i.e. asleep, rather quickly convey to any unbiased observer. As he puts it, "The fact that the unconscious is capable of compensating a lopsidedness in the conscious attitude, or terminating a harmful cognitive-behavioral failure, means that the unconscious is rational enough to do that and is even more rational than consciousness under certain conditions."

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Jung (1921) defines the word “rational” at the end of his landmark study of consciousness, *Psychological Types*, where he says, with deliberate tautology: “The rational is the reasonable, that which accords with reason,” and goes on to admit that reason is “an *attitude* whose principle is to conform thought, feeling, and action to objective values” and that “the rational attitude which permits us to declare objective values as valid at all is not the work of the individual subject, but the product of human history. . . . Most objective values—and reason itself—are firmly established complexes of ideas handed down by the ages” (p. 458). Having established a cultural transmission for what we call “rationality,” Jung assigns two of the four functions of consciousness that he believes can be discriminated on logical and empirical grounds—thinking and feeling—to the task of differentiating the rational in everyday practical reasoning, calling them “rational” functions. At times Loker seems to be using the term “rational” in a way that is not quite Jungian, defining it (following Kuhn) as “serving to realize survival and betterment of one’s life.” I would point out that in seeking the rationality of the unconscious via the theory of compensation, he is focusing on the “thinking” and “feeling” functions *as they operate in dreams*. These rational functions can operate in the unconscious through what has been learned by the human genome in the course of its evolution, through the sensitivity to attachment and survival that is the function of the limbic system, and through analogy to other things the organism has already learned in some situations now applied to a new situation calling for adaptation. Loker’s recognition that in the unconscious these functions can deploy their rationality in all of these ways is at the heart of his contribution. His paper reminds me a bit of Wolfgang Giegerich’s *The Soul’s Logical Life* in its capacity to restore a proper appreciation for the rationality of the unconscious to a psychological audience that has been oversold on the irrationality of the unconscious, and particularly on the idea that the only way the unconscious fosters consciousness is as a reservoir of intuition and sensation, Jung’s “irrational” functions.

The notion that the unconscious exists mainly to enable us to perceive patterns and facts about our lives that our conscious minds have either ignored or not taken into account misses the degree to which the unconscious also discriminates the patterns and facts it focuses upon. By insisting that dreams are more concerned with compensating how we think and feel about these patterns and facts, rather than in simply revealing them to us, Loker’s contribution on compensation is itself compensatory to the way Jung and most contemporary Jungian therapists have approached dreams, and, though I don’t find his clarification of compensation theory to constitute a complete theory of dreams, I find it refresh-

ing. It takes us into the heart of the logical process that must be unpacked if we are to think critically about how we conceive dreams to be conveying consciousness to us, and it forces us to face up to the astonishing degree to which dreams are evaluative, rather than simply perceptive.

Loker is brilliant in arguing that Jung's famous experience of waking up with a crick in his neck from straining in a dream to look up to a patient cannot be interpreted as compensatory to a conscious attitude of devaluing the same patient, because otherwise the process of looking up would not have resulted in so unpleasant a feeling. He is pointing correctly to the way that a dream enables us to *feel* whether an attitude we have taken up sits well with the self or not. Although, to be sure, the crick with which Jung awoke was a physical sensation, caused by a physical gesture that Jung was enacting in his dream, it does not do to interpret the dream only in sensation terms that idealize its concreteness. That idealizing approach to the unconscious, evidently adopted by Jung himself in interpreting this dream, demands that we take the dream as the portrait of a standpoint that Jung really ought to take up, whatever discomfort it might cost him, in order to compensate (in the spirit of paying a karmic debt) for his equally lopsided conscious attitude, which must have been, in physical metaphor, too much "look down" on the patient. Very sensibly, Loker points out that the negative affect—what I would call the felt experience of unpleasantness—that is associated with the effort to make this correction of attitude and look up to his patient is not a sign that the penance that Jung assumes he needs to make is working because it has been sufficiently punishing. Rather, the negative affect is compensatory in quite another sense; the pain with which Jung awakes is a judgment delivered by his body that the effort he has been making, or thinking about making, to revalue his patient, is really too much. Understood in this way, the compensation resides in the *feeling* about the action taken in the dream, not in the action itself. (That feeling, it should be emphasized, is a discomfort that comes just at the moment of waking, so is still an effect of the unconscious, rather than a conscious opinion of the action of the dream.)

The implication here is that there is available to us, at least while we are dreaming, a self that knows what's good for itself, and that how that self feels in the dream about what it is doing is the tip-off as to whether the conscious attitude symbolized by some dream action really suits the self. That Jung's conscious attitude toward his patient, which as symbolized in the dream shows him going out of his way to look up at the patient, manifestly does not suit Jung's self comes through in the crick in the neck that the dreaming self awakes with. As Loker says, "The presentation of the lopsidedness" in this particular conscious attitude "is accompanied by negative affect of intensity appropriate to the harmful-

ness of the lopsidedness." Moreover, the rational cause of the lopsidedness is shown in the action of the dream: Jung is straining himself because he is going out of his way to look up to his patient. Loker's further statement that the "compensation of the lopsidedness is always accompanied by positive affect of intensity appropriate to the effectiveness of the compensation" cannot be verified by this particular dream, unless one considers the latent dream thought, that the patient would not be such a pain in the neck for Jung if he did not expect so much of her—a thought which carries with it the possibility of relief from the countertransference irritation with the patient that very likely stimulated this dream. I think it is simpler to state that the compensation to the conscious attitude lies in the dream affect, whether positive or negative, and that the dream, unlike life, sets up a situation that allows for an unambiguous appraisal of whether one feels good or not about what one is doing. I would agree with the author that such a compensation at the feeling level is always strongest at the end of the dream, often just at the moment of waking, where the thought may come "why am I doing this?" or there may be an affect of intense terror—again delivering a insight or a feeling compensatory to the thinking or feeling that accompanies the waking attitude.

Since so many dreams are negative, caught up in criticizing the one-sidedness and wrong-headedness to which ego-consciousness is prone, I find it relatively rare for the positive alternative, the correct attitude, to be directly represented in a dream. That, in my experience, is not the way compensation usually manifests itself. When the correct, that is, not lopsided, attitude does appear, I have found, in common with Loker, that it appears near the end of a dream and is accompanied by an affirmative affect that as much as says, "This is the solution of your problem, this is what is good for you, this is what you should do." As a clinician, however, I have learned to be a bit wary of the manic defenses that may be unleashed by the euphoria of such a dream thought. Although I don't want to introduce too much suspicion toward the attitude of the unconscious, not every dreamed solution that feels good or believes itself to be good is a wise one, and for that reason I prefer the compensations that are carried by negative affects to those validated by positive affects, since the former are so much less likely to produce an inflation of the ego. I should however admit that there is such a thing as negative inflation, and that this could be regarded as the shadow of using the theory of compensation to correct the conscious attitude. One starts to doubt oneself and others too much, because the unconscious presents one's own attitude, or someone else's, in a negative light.

Where I would want to be more cautious in applying this theory than Loker seems to be is around the assumption that when we have a

dream showing someone we have idealized in a negative light—as was the case for Jung’s young man patient who was overly reliant on his father and then had a dream in which the father was depicted driving drunk—it is compensating us by showing that person’s actual shadow or some negative behavior pattern of theirs that we have failed to see. There is no question that a dream can show us someone else’s shadow, but it is certainly possible to have a dream that someone else is out of control without the dream being founded on a perception of the person emerging from a capacity to perceive reality that is more objective when we are asleep because not so distorted by our waking complexes. The dream Jung reports, for instance, may have been about his patient’s father complex and not about the father’s own way of operating in the world at all. Were that the case, the interpretation would be that the young man’s “father complex” is out of control, inflated to the point of driving the young man’s ego in a decidedly harmful way—an interpretation that does not assume anything about the actual father.

Finally, although compensation is an invaluable consideration when approaching any dream, it does not seem to me to account for all the ways dreams have of making us conscious. Dreams are like works of art, which also emerge, ultimately, from the creative unconscious and have as many styles and strategies as there are literary and artistic forms; these assuredly cannot all be reduced to compensations. As is evident in anyone who has been in analysis for a long time, one’s dreams can underline, refine, and even create a conscious attitude, and they regularly explore that attitude’s many possibilities without necessarily compensating it. Neuroscience lags behind aesthetics in this regard as the best place to look for verification of the possibilities and purposes of dreaming. Compensation is, however, a most creative idea that has emerged from Jungian theory, and this paper, which helps us to unpack the logic and power of the idea and shows us how it can most accurately and fruitfully be applied, is a welcome addition to the literature on dreams.

## References

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