

Cathexis

Authored by
mohammad looti

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In psychoanalysis, cathexis is defined as the process of investment of mental or emotional energy in a person, object, or idea. The Greek term cathexis (κᾰθηξις) was chosen by James Strachey to render the German term Besetzung in his translation of Sigmund Freud's complete works. For Freud, cathexis is defined as an investment of libido. Freud often described the functioning of psychosexual energies in mechanical terms, influenced perhaps by the dominance of the steam engine at the end of the 19th century.

Freud often represented frustration in libidinal desires as a blockage of energies that have, or would eventually build up and require release in alternative ways. This release could occur, for example, by way of regression and the "re-cathecting" of former positions, that is, fixation at the oral phase or anal phase and the enjoyment of former sexual objects ("object-cathexes"), including autoeroticism.

When the ego blocks such efforts to discharge one's cathexis by way of regression, that is, when the ego wishes to repress such desires, Freud uses the term "anti-cathexis" or counter-charge. Like a steam engine, the libido's cathexis then builds up until it finds alternative outlets, which can lead to sublimation or to the formation of sometimes disabling symptoms.