PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, AND PSYCHOANALYSIS
A Critical Meeting

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KARNAK
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INTRODUCTION

Vesa Talvitie, Linda A. W. Brakel, and Simon Boag

The perennial interest in psychoanalysis shows no signs of abating, and the longevity of psychoanalytic theory is seen in the varied extensions and elaborations of Freudian thinking in the fields of neuroscience and cognitive theory. The enduring interest in psychoanalysis is, in many respects, understandable: psychoanalytic theory addresses such issues as unconscious mental processes, self-deception, and wish-fulfilment, and makes bold claims in terms of using these concepts to explain both everyday behaviour and clinical phenomena. Nevertheless, while developments in mainstream psychology have repackaged many of Freud’s ideas (demonstrating the vitality of Freud’s thinking), there remains doubt about the veracity of psychoanalytic claims, and questions concerning the place of psychoanalysis vis-à-vis science. Furthermore, developments in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and the cognitive—and neurosciences—since Freud’s time also require consideration with respect to appreciating their implications for contemporary psychoanalysis. Such considerations may have important practical implications, since psychoanalysis is not simply concerned with theory for theory’s sake and instead considers the implications of theory for therapeutic practice. However, assessing psychoanalysis in light of modern-day research is not an easy project, not least because
the complexity of psychoanalytic theory raises complex scientific and philosophical questions concerning the nature of mind and the nature of the scientific enterprise itself. Accordingly, a fresh evaluation of psychoanalysis in the new millennium entails a perspective that is at once scientific and philosophical and represents the junction where philosophy, science and psychoanalysis meet.

This book aims to provide a forum within which discussions of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic research go beyond partitioning philosophy and science, and sees, instead, a rigorous science as being inherently philosophical in nature. But the first obstacle in any discussion here is that the topic of philosophy, science and psychoanalysis branches in many directions. It would be desirable that a book on this topic interests both psychoanalytic audiences and “outsiders” to the field. This is, however, a rather difficult criterion to meet for many reasons. The title *Philosophy, Science, and Psychoanalysis* covers a wide range of topics, and no one person will be fully acquainted with or interested in them all. Some topics are, for want of a better term, “solipsistic”—of primary interest only to a psychoanalytic audience. Counter to that, other topics deal with nuances of philosophical issues, and a clinically oriented reader, for instance, may find both following these issues and appreciating their significance difficult. Additionally, readers will all arrive at the material presented in this volume from their own explicit or implicit philosophies, the assumptions of which may hinder communication and appreciation for the positions presented here.

Nevertheless, it is important not to avoid this kind of challenge. Due to the nature of Sigmund Freud’s work, a wide range of topics including both abstract scientific and philosophical issues are embedded within psychoanalytic thinking. Thus, as long as psychoanalysis contains relevance for people, we must keep on diving into those deep waters of science and philosophy. The situation is somewhat circular: if psychoanalysis withdraws from studying topics such as those treated in this volume, it loses its relevance to the academic community.

**The importance of the history of psychoanalysis**

Due to the enduring respect for the founder’s writings, one cannot make sense of psychoanalysis’ (prevailing) relations to science and philosophy without knowing the zeitgeist of the late nineteenth-century middle Europe where German romanticism still had a notable impact
on people’s thinking. Considering the topic of philosophy, Freud, as a young man, and his contemporaries read such notable figures as Kant and Hegel. Despite appearances to the contrary in his later life, Freud enjoyed reading philosophical writings in his youth, and only later developed a dismissive stance toward the discipline. In fact, Alfred Tauber (2011) describes Freud as a “reluctant philosopher” (see however, Boag, 2011a). When analytic philosophy emerged, Freud was in his fifties and subsequently some would say that Freud and his contemporaries were not terribly interested in such questions as “how should the term ‘mental’ be defined?”—even if he did offer a subtle and effective philosophical argument against his detractors, who claimed that psychological processes and contents must be conscious, by definition (Freud, 1915e). It was not until more than a decade after Freud’s death that philosophers began to talk about (Wittgensteinian) language games. Thus the question concerning the relation between language and the world, and more generally the entire philosophy of language, were not particularly vivid for Freud, even if he believed that language was necessary for consciousness (e.g., Freud, 1900a, 1915e, 1940a[1938]). Additionally, when reading Freud and talking about his ideas we easily bypass the above matters, as we tend to downplay the significant temporal distance between us and Freud. For most readers, Kantian thinking and positivism appear as opposite and incompatible philosophical orientations. However, it seems that Freud had no difficulty in possessing sympathies toward both of them (Tauber, 2011), a trait also reflected in Freud’s acceptance at various points in his writings of contradictory positions generally (for instance, see Petocz’s (2006) discussion of Freud’s discussion of the mind-body relation). Had Freud paid greater attention to philosophical issues then possibly there would be fewer disputes and disagreements concerning Freudian theory today.

On the other hand, with respect to scientific issues, the temporal distance is also salient in the case of Freud’s appreciation of evolutionary theory. When Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, Freud was three-years old. It is easy in retrospect to attribute a contemporary (Darwinian) understanding of evolution to Freud’s thinking, but, as generally known, Freud also retained an adherence to Lamarckian lines of thought until the end of his life (see Jones, 1957, pp. 310–311; let us mention that recently certain Lamarckian-like ideas have been revived in the domain of epigenetics). Moreover, the development of psychoanalysis occurred prior to the introduction of psychopharmaceuticals.
For example, in the domain of psychiatry, first generation antipsychotic drugs were developed in the 1950s and evidence-based medicine emerged at the end of the twentieth century—about half a century after Freud’s death. Such factors provide some context of the world in which psychoanalysis began. On top of this, our notions of philosophy and science, and the ideals concerning them, are developing and changing all of the time, as do conceptions of psychoanalysis. For instance, in France an idiosyncratic mixture of continental philosophy and psychoanalytic ideas emerged, while in Britain, Wilfred Bion created an original conception of psychoanalysis, and in the United States, psychoanalysis took place in the context of empirical psychology and was influenced by the idea of information-processing. Psychoanalytic clinical theory and its method of cure have also experienced a number of branchings. Currently there are numerous psychoanalytical schools, whose interrelations are not always especially warm and accepting of one another.

When looking at the (big) picture painted above, it is clear that one cannot compose a definitive handbook on the relations between psychoanalytic, scientific and philosophical ideas. Nonetheless, there have been some notable attempts beginning at least from the year 1959, when *Psychoanalysis, Scientific Method, and Philosophy*, edited by Sidney Hook, was published. The book is based on the presentations held in the Second Annual Meeting of the New York University Institute of Philosophy. In its preface the editor states that the seminar was probably the first in the United States where “a distinguished group of psychoanalysts has met with a distinguished group of philosophers of science in a free, critical interchange of views on the scientific status of psychoanalysis” (Hook, 1959, p. xiii). Following that, several edited books have been published, including *Philosophical Essays on Freud* (Wollheim & Hopkins, 1982), *The Cambridge Companion to Freud* (Neu, 1991), *Mind, Psychoanalysis and Science* (Clark & Wright, 1998), *Freud 2000* (Elliot, 1998), *The Analytic Freud: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Levine, 2000), *The Freud Encyclopedia: Theory, Therapy, and Culture* (Erwin, 2002) and *Psychoanalysis at the Limit: Epistemology, Mind and the Question of Science* (Mills, 2004). Thus there is a relatively long-standing recognition of the importance of both philosophical and scientific issues within psychoanalysis.

The topics covered within these volumes may be classified in many ways, the simplest being according to the issues included. Also, alongside of each specific topic, the basic approach of an article may be categorised as either intrapsychoanalytic or interdisciplinary. With the former
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The approach, psychoanalysis is treated as a more or less independent discipline possessing its own methodology and object of study. A writer aims to reveal something about a phenomenon by applying psychoanalytic theories or viewpoint. On that basis, a writer may create contributions of an aesthetic, historical, ethical, or educational nature, or of a cultural or philosophical nature without necessarily referring to studies put forward outside psychoanalysis. Alternatively, studies that may be called interdisciplinary are grounded on the assumption that psychoanalysis and certain other disciplines possess considerable shared interests and objectives. On one hand this implies that psychoanalytic viewpoints may enrich, for example, the biologists’ or philosophers’ thinking, and on the other that psychoanalytic hypotheses may be tested and evaluated with the help of the outcomes of (for example) neuroscience or cognitive psychology. Articles falling into this category may be critical toward psychoanalysis, or the author(s) may argue that non-psychoanalytic studies support psychoanalyts’ insights.

The other additional core topic of this book is Adolf Grünbaum’s critique of psychoanalysis. Although far newer than conflicts over the status of unconscious mentation, Professor Grünbaum’s views have already been debated for more than three decades. Perhaps no single contributor’s criticism in the academic world has been as influential and long-standing as that of Grünbaum’s. While many advocates of psychoanalysis are perhaps irritated about Grünbaum’s persistent argumentation, psychoanalysis should be (also) honestly grateful to him: during past decades the discussions around Grünbaum’s criticisms have been among the most notable link between psychoanalysis and the academic world. Thanks to Professor Grünbaum, psychoanalysis is less isolated from the academic world than it would be otherwise. In this volume we find Grünbaum’s latest formulation of his critique; within the same spirit is Edward Erwin’s criticism of psychoanalysis, and there are several reflections on the plausibility and significance of Grünbaum’s and Erwin’s arguments—particularly Linda A. W. Brakel’s reply to Grünbaum and Agnes Petocz’s discussion of the scientific status of psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis will of course face challenges from science and philosophy beyond those treated in this volume. Developments in neuroscience will continue to warrant re-examining the nature of psychoanalytic theories. Also, increasingly, the market place, insurance companies and public administration will all clamour for
evidence-based evaluation of all psychological and psychiatric treatments. The talking-cure method of psychoanalysis cannot and should not bypass this issue. While we do not address these problems directly, we hope that this volume will have laid the groundwork for facing these future challenges.