Colace states, has to be considered, at the moment, like a programmatic mapping on the dreaming-brain mental functioning of children. This may become more solid and be brought to more robust conclusions only when further studies have confirmed and replicated his findings, especially if conducted in sleep laboratories (or in other settings in normal every-day or more "ecological," environments. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that this book is one of the few studies on dreams of preschool children in the literature worldwide, where only two studies conducted in sleep laboratories on preschool children and their dreams reports are present (Foulkes, 1982; Foulkes et al., 1990).

REFERENCES


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The problem with repression is that in order to repress something, we first have to be aware of it. If we are aware of it, it is not repressed. If it is repressed, how can we be aware of it? And repression is not something that can just be done, once and for all, because Freud is clear that what is repressed exerts a pressure to be known; it has to be constantly re-repressed. And yet we are unaware of it. How can this work?

Simon Boag looked at this question for his doctoral thesis, and in this book he gathers up the arguments for and against various responses. Freud himself found it difficult to explain: Sartre and many other eminent authors based some of their objections to psychoanalysis on such paradoxes, and it has troubled philosophers and scientists alike. Boag takes us through the objections and the explanations; the sections that work and the sections that do not. He teases out what remains of the theory when some of the illogicalities have been removed, and he uses neuroscience to create a sensible solution. His explanation is that we can know without knowing that we know, and he draws on current neuroscience research to back this up.

What I enjoy about books like this is the way people have, so many years later, found good neuroscientific backing for ideas that Freud discovered clinically, and which clinicians have been using for many years. As a clinician I have less problem than Freud did with the idea that we can know without knowing that we know: following his insights, I have been using this idea all my professional life. In the counselling room, using the ideas of Melanie Klein, philosophical objections always seem of less relevance than what makes sense to the client. Scientific rigour is not one of the requirements of the normal mind, particularly those parts that are unconscious. People seem perfectly capable of allowing certain ideas into their minds one at a time, cutting off another that conflicts, and five minutes later reversing the process. What Boag, an academic, does is to provide us with the rigor that is needed for those endeavors that require a little more logic, a little more intellectual clarity. He writes well, using nonspecialist language that will make sense to a general reader.

Boag looks at the origins of the theory of repression: issues arising from the metaphor of “homunculi” (the ego, id, and superego; a mental “censor”) in the structural model and the systems Cs, Ucs, Pcs. in the topographic model. The role of “recovered memory” is discussed, and Boag (p. xxvii) takes just one example of a researcher (Rofe, 2008) who, while purporting to “evaluate Freudian repression” dismisses Freud without appearing to have read his work. He looks in some detail at ideas around drives, instinct, and motivation, at what can and cannot hold true. He considers the role of anxiety and fear and concludes with a conflict theory: that we have conflicting desires and beliefs, some of which cause considerable anxiety. He considers how an unrequired impulse (as a child, to kill a small brother, for example) might come into conflict with the need to keep the parents happy. The book is highly readable, and develops over many years, easy to follow and fair.
I was interested to read in Chapter 10 about attempts to explain repression in terms of some neuroscientific findings about the brain, such as ideas about the left-brain and right-brain split, and about the role of the amygdala in detecting threat. Talvitie writes about “conscious detection,” where “one has a sensation of hearing or seeing something,” and “unconscious detection,” which “does not give rise to a sensation, and as such it does not affect one’s behaviour” (Talvitie, 2009, pp. 76-77). Nevertheless, such unconscious detection might “trigger” neural algorithms (information processing modes), which might then influence how we interpret events” (Boag, p. 179). As a lay reader of such ideas, I have often played with thoughts about the way these discoveries fit into the ideas of Freud and Klein, and it is good to see a level of rigor applied to them. I was a little disappointed not to see mention of the concept of “blindsight,” described by Welskranz (1986), which delighted me when it first appeared, precisely because it was an example of “unconscious knowing” in the scientific literature at a time when highly educated friends of mine were settling on the idea that things might be going in their minds that they did not know about.

Boag’s solution to the problem of repression is to locate it in terms of selective inattention and neural inhibition. Conflicts between different desires or impulses cause one to suppress the other. He shows that there is evidence from neuropsychology that there is a separate system within the mind for knowing that we know something. We can know something for long enough to know that we do not want to know it, then, neural inhibition can come into action to prevent us from knowing that we have known.

At this point we are grateful to Kaplan-Solms and Solms (2000), who have provided us with an example of this in Mrs. A, a patient who was suicidal about having lost function as a result of brain damage, but was unable to acknowledge (“to know”) that she had lost function. I have known several stroke survivors who appeared both to know and to not know the extent of their deficits; from an academic point of view, it is good to see this mechanism used as evidence of the complexity of the mind, although I actually find these examples problematic because it is not clear to me (nor to Kaplan-Solms & Solms) whether a psychodynamic or a physiological explanation is the more convincing. My solution as a therapist is to work on the assumption that both may be true—that either may give way at any time, either may be partial rather than complete, and that one may reinforce or maintain the other, rather than replace it. It is even possible that they may be considered different representations of the same thing—the psychodynamic “denial” as a mental expression of a functional incapacity—although this seems less satisfying, as it oversimplifies both. The capacity as a therapist to suspend disbelief, to believe two possibly contradictory things at once (with the useful analogy of the wave vs. particle theory of light) can be helpful with patients, especially those suffering from neurological conditions. In addition, it is clear that what is at issue is extremely painful and threatening knowledge, however it is being kept from consciousness and however much it creates problems for socialization and rehabilitation. However, I can see that this might not entirely satisfy a theoretical psychologist.

Interestingly, Boag has no explanation for the way a repressed idea can be redirected onto another object, except the “mistaken belief” that the two are equivalent, but he agrees that it can and that it retains its force because it cannot be worked through. My own understanding is that, from the beginning, our minds organize perceptions along with the accompanying emotions into unconscious phantasies, which combine knowledge arising from the self and the internal world with observation and experience arising from the external world, and that we use such phantasies in an automatic way to understand the world around us. In this (Kleinian) view, it is obvious that we can transfer ideas about one person to ideas about another. This is the way we understand everything. Our beliefs are always likely to be “mistaken” since they are based on previous imperfect knowledge and perceptions, compromised by misreadings of the world and powerfully influenced by our emotions, wishes, and desires. As we grow, we struggle to correct and to bring closer to reality those phantasies that include troublesome misperceptions, but always with the risk that some truths may feel unbearable. However, I have yet to find a paper that addresses these ideas with scientific rigor, and I did not find it in Boag’s book. Perhaps this is a vain hope, if, as Solms, in “Do Unconscious Fantasies Really Exist?” (Solms, 2003, p. 102) suggests, Klein’s concepts use the language of subjective experience to make sense of the same processes that Freud tried to describe in more objective, abstract, mechanistic ways. Or perhaps I have just missed it.

Boag is an academic, and he addresses many of the intellectual challenges that make Freud’s theory of repression hard to swallow for psychologists. I have often been uncomfortably aware of the contempt in which Freud’s ideas are held by many academic psychologists and by those with only a lay knowledge of Freud and psychoanalysis. Whether Boag’s account is sufficiently convincing to satisfy a skeptic is not entirely clear, but it is good to know that there are people, like him, who believe, quoting Kandel (1999), that “psychoanalysis still represents the most coherent and intellectually satisfying view of the mind” and who are addressing these issues for a nonspecialist reader.

REFERENCES

Erik Goodwyn’s book is a splendid, detailed, thorough, and essential piece of reading. It is full of well-researched data and packed with interesting new angles on some very old and established ideas. The Neurobiology of the Gods is a mixture of passionate enthusiasm mixed with appropriately objective andagnostically scientific reasoning. It covers all the popular—and less well spoken about—aspects of religion, science, and culture. Using reams of well-sourced references and literary examples of humankind’s logically senseless striving for spiritual comprehension, Goodwyn has one beady eye on the why and the other on the how of brain mechanisms throughout—leaving the cosmic third eye of perception to roam the sheer beauty of spirituality’s meaninglessness and the sense of deep meaning it gives to many everyday persons’ lives.

Goodwyn argues that the brain’s large array of innate predispositions for certain mental experiences—including that of our capacity for those that are mystical or spiritual—explain the huge similarities between the world’s religions. Clearly a man who is passionately Jung at heart, Goodwyn describes the similarities of symbols used by humans through the ages. The development of the collective unconscious as a product of evolutionary psychology (EP) brings to the core human psyche our sense of self-ness and belonging. It is a byproduct of millions of years of adaptive evolution; just as the corporal body has evolved in the face of physical environmental stimuli thrust upon it, so too has the brain and mind at large.

Combining traditional psychoanalytic ideas with data from contemporary EP, the author demonstrates just how close the Jungian and Freudian scholars were to today’s reality. There are many shared universals—not just the propensity to worship nonvisible gods. Humans have developed broadly similar societal organizations wherever and whenever they have lived, and their dream imagery is universal and relies on common themes. Drawing on many recent psychological studies and brain imaging, as well as on data from anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, and philosophical arguments, Goodwyn links the phenomenon of shared symbols with what is known about brain activity to bring together our subjective experience of normal perception and our understanding of gods.

Ineffability—the inadequacy of words or even metaphors to describe... or... other words and metaphors—is a constant and necessary challenge to this subject. Goodwyn rises to this and paints a colorful and inspiring picture of the links between mind, neurology, culture, and language. He describes well our “very human hard-wired intentionality device,” Theory of Mind, as the tool by which we differentiate animate (“What does that object want from me?”) from inanimate objects, and he uses this as an illustration of the power of invented symbols, created in our brains (or is that minds and cultures?), in increasingly elaborate forms until we are left staring at the most fabulous god-like creatures—all entirely of our own evolutionary invention. Exciting stuff for anyone who has ever thought about how we got from hungry monkeys swinging in the trees to Bible- or Quran-bashing fanatics carrying placards claiming we know whom God hates and whom he or she loves.

Indeed, monkeys and other animals feature heavily in the book, as it is our innate tendency to anthropomorphize them, imbuing bears, snakes, fish, and birds with human emotions, Theory of Mind of their own, and intentionality that has provided us with such a staggering advantage over our relatively “thoughtless” and unfeeling animal cousins. Children frequently represent themselves as animals in their dreams up until the age of 8 years, and then they attribute Theory of Mind to their multiple animal forms, thereby practicing the ability to test other people’s points of views and learn the rules of complex sociability—a necessary step on the journey toward the development of metacognitions—representing something about what it is to be human, or even prehuman. Birds, snakes, bears, spiders, and lions crop up with predictable spontaneity and consistency throughout cultures throughout time—linked, argues Goodwyn, to the amygdala-driven passions of rage, fear, panic, and care—and practiced through play and shared as images and stories.

Archetypal animals represent emotions in ways simple language or inanimate objects never can or do. And from there it is but a small step to imagine the timeless, eternal perfection of a “super animal,” one that personifies raw emotion across the whole spectrum of possibilities. We thus edge closer to spiritual entities and gods. There is a god for every emotion, says the brain, add to that the stimulating external environment and all the social and communicable possibilities opened up by the sharing of cultural experiences, and we soon have gods coming out of—and going in to—our cars.

Goodwyn argues against those who critically describe the mystical state as a “mere cognitive error.” He sees no