PSYCHOANALYSIS AND PHILOSOPHY OF MIND
Unconscious Mentality in the Twenty-first Century

Edited by
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CONTENTS

ABOUT THE EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS vii

INTRODUCTION
Psychoanalysis and philosophy of mind ix
Simon Boag, Vesa Talvitie, & Linda A. W. Brakel

CHAPTER ONE
Wish-fulfilment revisited 1
Tamas Pataki

CHAPTER TWO
The significance of consilience: psychoanalysis, attachment, neuroscience, and evolution 47
Jim Hopkins

CHAPTER THREE
Freud’s aesthetics: artists, art and psychoanalysis 137
Michael Levine
CHAPTER FOUR
Beyond the philosophy of the (unconscious) mind:
the Freudian cornerstone as scientific theory, a cult,
and a way of talking 163
Vesa Talvitie

CHAPTER FIVE
Unconscious knowing: psychoanalytic evidence in support
of a radical epistemic view 193
Linda A. W. Brakel

CHAPTER SIX
In defence of unconscious mentality 239
Simon Boag

REFERENCES 267

INDEX 293
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Psychoanalysis and philosophy of mind

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

Freud’s philosophy of mind is at once one of his most contentious and enduring contributions to our understanding of human functioning. Psychoanalytic theory makes bold claims about the significance of unconscious mental processes and the wish-fulfilling activity of the mind, citing their importance for understanding the nature of dreams and explaining both normal and pathological behaviour alike. If true, then psychoanalytic explanation makes a substantial impact to our understanding of human behaviour; it informs us that what people do often belies their true motives—and that these motives themselves may not even be known to the person who holds them. However, since Freud’s initial work, both modern psychology and philosophy have had much to say about the merits of psychoanalysis, especially with respect to the possibility of unconscious mentality. Freudian thinking has been heavily criticised by both those outside of psychoanalysis and those within. Of the latter, the tension between clinicians and theoretician/scientists has been pronounced: Freud’s metapsychology has fallen out of favour with many for not reflecting the clinical situation, and the development of object-relations accounts has called into question the fundamental motives that Freud proposed. Whether psychoanalysis is a scientific or hermeneutic exercise has also been debated.
The state of affairs is reflected in the current discussions of plurality in psychoanalysis—or psychoanalyses, as some would say (e.g., Wallerstein, 1995). Changes in mainstream psychology have also led to adaptations within psychoanalytic theory. For instance, psychoanalysis has been re-conceptualised in terms of cognitive theory and information-processing (Erdelyi, 1974, 1985), and the developments in affective neuroscience have underscored the development of neuropsychoanalysis (Panksepp, 1998, 1999). The increasing interest in neuropsychoanalysis is itself a new direction that is not welcomed by all (Blass & Carmeli, 2007) and its conceptual underpinnings are critically questioned (Talvitie, 2009, this volume). One also wonders what Freud would make of some of the developments in psychoanalysis, including the mentalisation movement as advanced by Fonagy and colleagues (e.g., Fonagy, 1999; Fonagy & Target, 2000); therein defence and unconscious processes recede into the background and instead a failure to develop a theory of mind finds prominence.

Given the current state of psychoanalysis, one may then wonder whether there is any merit in revisiting the fundamentals of Freudian theory again. After all, some may think, surely advances in science generally and psychology specifically have overtaken Freud’s anachronistic, early twentieth-century thinking. There are, however, several reasons for re-examining the fundamentals of the psychoanalytic conception of mind. For a start, while some of the specifics of Freudian theory have found little currency in contemporary discussions, it is the fundamental factors in Freudian thinking—unconscious mentality, wish-fulfilment, and defence—that nevertheless generally enjoy prominence across the various psychoanalytic perspectives. Furthermore, any new psychoanalytic perspective tends to define itself by specific differences with classical Freudian theory. However, even more fundamentally, Freud in many respects left more questions than answers. His theory was never completed and his aversion to philosophy possibly prevented him paying critical attention to fundamental issues that can only be addressed philosophically, such as the relation between mind and body, or mind and consciousness. What is required then is a critical re-examination of Freudian concepts via a joint scientific and philosophical appraisal of psychoanalytic theory.

The new developments in psychology, philosophy and psychoanalysis raise new challenges and questions concerning Freud’s theory
INTRODUCTION

of mind. This book centres upon the major concepts in psychoanalysis, including the notion of unconscious mental processes and wish-fulfilment and their relationship to dreams, fantasy, repression, religion, art, and morality. These are central concepts because they provide the theoretical building blocks that allow a move beyond describing psychological and behavioural phenomena in order to explain them in terms of complex psychodynamic processes. However, these concepts are not all considered equally coherent. Taken as such, this volume can be considered a companion volume to our other edited work (Philosophy, Science and Psychoanalysis—Boag, Brakel, & Talvitie, 2015). In both volumes we provide a fresh, critical appraisal and reflection on Freudian concepts, and address how the current evidence and scientific thinking bears upon Freud’s original ideas.

There are two major themes contained within this volume. The first theme addresses the topic of explanation in psychoanalysis. Freud’s theory is seen by many as situated within, and extending, the ordinary folk-psychological “desire plus belief model” (Boag, 2012; Brakel, 2009; Cavell, 1993; Gardner, 1993; Hopkins, 1988, this volume; Mackay, 1996, 1999; Pataki, 1999, 2000; this volume; Petocz, 1999; Wollheim, 1991, 1993). On this view, intentional action arises from a motivational state or “desire” component, guided by an instrumental cognitive or “belief” component. Here, when explaining person P’s doing A, it is understood that: (i) P desires B; and (ii) P believes that doing A leads to B. The “belief” component includes knowledge, memory and phantasy and specifies the known possible means of satisfaction (or of avoiding frustration). One could say here that explanation could thereby never be reduced to neural events alone, even if neural events are nevertheless implicated in believing and desiring. Accordingly, the relation of neuropsychoanalysis to psychoanalytic explanation requires very careful consideration—and Talvitie (this volume) proposes that this has yet to occur. However, there are also opportunities for enhancing psychoanalytic explanations in terms of current research, neuroscientific or otherwise, even if philosophical issues still require much further consideration.

Tamas Pataki opens this section by addressing the fundamental psychoanalytic thesis of wish-fulfilment and its relevance to unconscious intentionality. He argues for the fundamental role of Freudian wish-fulfilment for both interpretation and explanation of symptoms, the analysis of dreams, and the understanding of art, religion, and even
prejudice. Jim Hopkins then examines psychoanalysis in the context of modern neuroscience and evolutionary theory, as well as refreshing psychoanalysis in terms of insights from attachment research. He examines the explanatory context of Freudian theory, demonstrating similarities between the types of explanations both Freud and Darwin employ, and how Freud’s explanation then deepens our understanding of human existence. Hopkins’ contemporary stance, moreover, draws upon current research from a variety of fields, including neuroscience and sleep research. Next, Michael Levine develops a psychoanalytic discussion about understanding art and the mind of the artist. He addresses views about art and the artist in terms of key long-standing questions concerning the ethics of art and their relation to art’s aesthetic.

The second major theme addresses the current debate concerning the nature of unconscious processes. Vesa Talvitie critically assesses whether the cornerstone of psychoanalysis—the unconscious and the possibility of repressed ideas located in the unconscious part of the mind—can be coherently sustained, drawing attention to the sociological factors impinging on scientific discourse generally and psychoanalysis specifically. Linda A. W. Brakel then examines the psychoanalytic topic of primary process mentation, providing both theoretical and empirical evidence for unconscious processes. Finally, Simon Boag raises philosophical arguments in defence of unconscious mental processes, through a fresh examination of Brentano’s argument against unconscious mentality.

This debate presented here is an extension of Freud’s view on the unconscious, under critical discussion during Freud’s lifetime (for example, see Münsterberg, 1909, pp. 125–157). This topic still draws attention to the conflict between empirical findings that suggest the possibility of unconscious mentation, and philosophical perspectives claiming that the very notion of an unconscious mental process is untenable. As the philosopher Ernest Nagel states: “And as for the notions of unconscious psychic processes processing causal efficacies—of unconscious, causally operative motives and wishes that are not somatic dispositions and activities—I will not venture to say that such locutions are inherently nonsense, since a great many people claim to make good sense of them. But in all candour I must admit that such locutions are just nonsense to me” (Nagel, 1959, p. 47). Indeed, in the same volume in which Nagel’s comments appear, the psychoanalyst Heinz Hartmann admits that Freud himself gave reason for such criticism: “As to the
psychology of unconscious processes, I think it can be said that Freud in developing that part of analysis was much less interested in the ultimate ‘nature’ or ‘essence’ of such processes—whatever that means—than in finding a suitable conceptual framework for the phenomena he had discovered” (Hartmann, 1959, p. 7).

In the pre-analytic philosophy era, Freud’s restricted exploration regarding the ontology of mental processes and unconscious mentation was perhaps both understandable and prevalent. However, ever since Freud’s time there has been considerable pressure from two directions to rigorously account for the mental unconscious and to minimally describe what it actually refers. One direction is the fast developing field of neuroscience, which has challenged the division of labour between psychology and brain science. Multicolour brain-scan images and high-tech methods, in general, attract people, and there is a danger that the weight of neuroscience-driven viewpoints will become far overemphasised. Thus there is a growing need to determine the nature and essence of mind and its relation to neuroscience (see, for example, Bem & Looren de Jong, 2006; Bennett & Hacker, 2003; Boag, 2012; Talvitie, & Ihanus, (2011a, 2011b), especially with respect to the mind-body problem (see Brakel, 2013 for extended discussion of this issue)).

The other (related) direction pressing for explanation of unconscious mentation involves the philosophy of mind. Here, too, technological innovations have played a considerable role. The development of computers, for instance, has given rise to the computer-metaphor for understanding brain-mind processes (i.e., the analogy between the brain and computer’s hardware, and mind and computer’s software). The computer analogy provided a fresh viewpoint to the age-old Cartesian mind-body problem, and inspired philosophers to engage in lively discussions concerning epistemology. Thought-experiments like the “Chinese Room Argument” (Searle, 2002), “Twin earth” (Putnam, 1975), and “Mary the super color scientist” (Jackson, 1982) have figured in these debates. Clearly, especially as the questions concerning the essence of mind and mental phenomena have become extremely topical in other domains, psychoanalysis cannot be a credible academic discipline if it (still) ignores the challenge of providing a coherent account of unconscious mentality. Our volume is an attempt to do just that.