



Introduction: Should Freud be Taken Seriously as a Philosopher of Mind?

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Sigmund Freud is famous above all for insisting that mental states can be unconscious. This momentous claim represented a significant change of course for psychology from the Cartesian view, dominant in Freud’s time, that held that the mental equals consciousness.

But what exactly is Freud’s argument for the view that it is possible for mental states—specifically ideas (*Vorstellungen*), such as thoughts, images, and other cognitive representations—to be unconscious? This topic has received renewed attention from philosophers since John Searle’s (1992) influential critique of the Freudian notion of the unconscious. Despite some excellent philosophical scholarship in this area, especially John Livingstone Smith’s (1999a) book-length treatment of Freud’s “philosophy of the unconscious” and many conceptually sophisticated entries in Edward Erwin’s (2001) Freud encyclopedia and in Morris Eagle’s (2018a, 2018b) two volumes on core concepts in psychoanalysis, as well as a slew of other illuminating books from philosophers and intellectual historians that address or touch on Freud’s philosophy of mind and its historic role (e.g., Boag, Brakel, & Talvitie, 2015; Churchland, 2013; Kitcher, 1992; Lear, 2015; Levy, 1996; Makari, 2008, 2015), I don’t think we yet have a fully adequate answer to

this question. I attempt to provide such an answer in this book by reconstructing Freud's philosophical argument for the existence of unconscious mental states.

I argue that scattered throughout Freud's writings there is a systematic and—even when judged by current philosophical standards—rather sophisticated and subtle philosophical argument about the nature of the mental. This argument, I claim, has direct lines of contact with philosophy of mind today and its struggle to reconcile an intentionalist theory of the mental with the mystery of consciousness. The reconstructed argument, I believe, reveals Freud as a prescient and important philosopher of mind who made a seminal and underappreciated contribution when judged by the concerns that dominate philosophy of mind in the analytic tradition today.

Freud is under siege these days by critics, mostly for reasons having to do with his clinical and psychological theorizing and the questionable evidential base for some of his claims. This book does not address or try to save Freud from the resulting "Freud wars." Rather, I sharply distinguish Freud's clinical theorizing from the strictly philosophical argument that I claim he presented for the nature of the mental (in Chapter 3, I show that Freud himself recognized such a distinction), and I focus exclusively on the philosophy of mind argument. This undertaking is bound to arouse skepticism among those who have dismissed Freud as a pseudoscientist in his clinical theorizing. I aim to show that no such accusation can be lodged against his philosophical thinking; he is not a pseudo-philosopher but a bold and perceptive instance of the genuine article.

I focus on Freud's major conceptual and theoretical strategic moves, following a path of ascent to the anti-Cartesian summit that has not been mapped before but became increasingly elaborated in Freud's later years as he reflected on the centrality and complexity of his philosophical argument. The novel parts of the reconstructed argument—such as an essentialist definition of "mental," Freud's new twist on psychophysical parallelism, the embrace of Franz Brentano's (1874/1995) account of the mental as intentionality while abandoning Brentano's equation of intentionality with consciousness, and the adoption with another crucial twist of Brentano's perceptual model of consciousness—constitute the most consequential and least-understood aspects of Freud's assault on Cartesianism. Whether directly from Freud or as part of the intellectual background, I suggest that Freud's philosophical argument contributed to reshaping psychology and philosophy of mind into what they are today. Given the prominence of Freud's writings, I locate the argument

within the history of psychology and philosophy of mind without claiming or attempting to document actual lines of influence.

Although the problem of the nature and existence of unconscious mental states may not be as hard as the “hard problem” (Chalmers, 1995) of the nature of consciousness, it has proven quite challenging. Despite decades of heated discussion, no consensus yet exists among philosophers of mind as to what constitutes a genuine mental content that is realized in the brain, but not in consciousness. My analysis of Freud’s argument is the first step toward presenting a new solution to the “not as hard but still quite difficult” problem of unconscious mental states.

Freud’s argument requires reconstruction because, although its essential premises are clearly in Freud’s text, they exist in the form of scattered remarks rather than one unified logical presentation. There are also many enthymemic gaps in the argument that must be filled. Consistent with the surprisingly sophisticated nature of the argument itself, I formulate it within the context and apparatus of contemporary analytic philosophy. I try to be as charitable and sympathetic as possible in interpreting Freud, refining the structure of his argument where logic or more recent philosophical insights demand it and where an elaboration stays within the spirit of Freud’s approach. My prime concern here is conceptual insight into the nature of the argument, not strict historical accuracy regarding explicit statements. However, I believe that my reconstruction is supported by the textual evidence and stays well within the limits imposed by Freud’s presentation.

For some readers, the reconstruction contained in this book may seem superfluous. Freud’s argument for the existence of unconscious mental states is well known, they would object: In observing consciousness, one finds that it lacks rational or associative continuity and that there are “gaps” in the sequence of conscious mental states (e.g., unconscious problem-solving, post-hypnotic suggestion) that can only be explained by unconscious mental states. Freud often presented the “continuity argument”—that the sequence of conscious states lacks rational or associative continuity—as if it is his central argument for unconscious mental states, and others—for example, Smith (1999a)—take it to be Freud’s central argument. It certainly has a role to play and is part of the larger Freudian strategy that I excavate. However, I argue that the continuity argument has to rely on a prior philosophical argument about the essence of the mental if it is to be effective. Otherwise, such an argument about missing links between conscious states begs the long-disputed philosophical question of how to properly interpret such examples

(see Chapter 8). In the course of the analysis, I explain why I don't think the continuity argument can stand alone or be the starting point of a compelling argument that arrives at Freud's conclusion. I will also address this issue in greater detail in a further volume in this series.

The argument over the existence of unconscious mental states has an empirical component, but it was first and foremost a philosophical debate in Freud's time. Freud was, of course, not a philosopher in terms of his life's major work. Yet, common statements over the decades that "Freud was not a philosopher" (Quinton, 1972, p. 72; Gyemant, 2017, p. 491), and even the characterization of Freud as a "reluctant philosopher" (Tauber, 2010), are misleading. I believe this verdict on Freud is due to inadequate attention to the nuances of Freud's text.

Freud was in a small portion of his work a philosopher, and he was anything but reluctant to challenge philosophical views and defend philosophical claims. He returned to the same philosophical points again and again, sharpening his arguments over time. Commentators tend to confuse Freud's contempt for both the standard Cartesian views that dominated philosophy of mind at his time (which he dismissively refers to globally as "philosophy" or the views of "the philosophers") and the mysticism of the Germanic metaphysical tradition that preceded him for a general hatred of philosophy. What we now know of his university years (detailed in Chapter 6) reveals instead a deep affinity for and enduring engagement with philosophy. Indeed, we know from Freud's letters that his philosophy teacher, Franz Brentano, instilled in Freud some of his extreme negative attitudes toward earlier philosophers even as he inspired Freud's love of philosophy. Following Brentano, Freud's disdain for philosophy was a would-be philosopher's disdain for an admired subject being poorly pursued. The documentation of Freud's supposed negative attitude toward philosophers and philosophy has been presented so many times that I do not go through it again; it is not relevant to my task of reconstructing Freud's philosophical argument. Those interested can see Smith (1999a), who agrees with me on this point but nonetheless dutifully summarizes the claims and the quotes, and there are many other sources (e.g., Tauber, 2010).

In my view, the philosopher of science Clark Glymour (1991) gets closer to the truth when he states:

Freud's writings contain a philosophy of mind, and indeed a philosophy of mind that addresses many of the issues about the mental that nowadays

concern philosophers and ought to concern psychologists. Freud's thinking about the issues in the philosophy of mind is better than much of what goes on in contemporary philosophy, and it is sometimes as good as the best. ... Even when Freud had the wrong answer to a question, or refused to give an answer, he knew what the question was and what was at stake in it. And when he was deeply wrong it was often for reasons that still make parts of cognitive psychology wrong. (p. 46)

My reconstruction of Freud's philosophical argument for the existence of unconscious mental states places Freud's argument within both Freud's own historical context and the context of contemporary philosophical debate. In arguing for the existence of unconscious mental states, Freud explicitly challenged the then-dominant tradition that I will refer to here as the "Cartesian" view of the mind or as the "consciousness criterion," namely the doctrine that the mind consists of consciousness and thus mental states are conscious states. (Note that here and throughout this book I tend to use "Cartesian" to refer specifically to the doctrine that confronted and was challenged by Freud, that mental states are conscious states, and not to any of the rest of the doctrines about mind associated with Descartes, such as substance dualism.) I believe that it is by anchoring an analysis within the context of Freud's challenge to Cartesianism that the reconstruction of Freud's argument can best proceed and is most illuminating.

The reconstruction of Freud's argument for unconscious mentation potentially has a broader significance. I believe that the Freudian argument that emerges from this reconstruction in important respects approximates "the" argument for unconscious mental states. That is, from Freud's day through to our own cognitive science, the kind of argument that Freud attempted to mount is in certain respects the central type of argument that addresses the issue of unconscious mental states in a way that engages the objections raised by Cartesians (Wakefield, 1992). Despite the ubiquity of belief in unconscious mental states these days, the features of such an argument that make it *prima facie* persuasive as to the existence of unconscious mental states are not well understood, in my view. Reconstructing Freud's argument reveals some of those features. One supposes that, if one wanted to formulate a parallel argument for cognitive science that engaged the objections and alternative perspective of today's Cartesians, something along the lines of Freud's argument must underlie the postulation of unconscious mental states there as well.

Regarding Freud's relationship to cognitive science, there is of course nothing new in seeing Freud's work as an early precursor of today's cognitive theorizing. Many writers have commented to this effect. For example, Glymour (1991) says that "A big part of contemporary cognitive science is pretty much what you would expect if Sigmund Freud had had a computer" (p. 144), Kitcher (1992) describes Freud as "the first interdisciplinary cognitive scientist" (p. 5), and Smith (1999b) says "Sigmund Freud was clearly an unacknowledged pioneer of cognitive science" (p. 421–422). However, these writers have various substantive aspects of Freud's theory in mind that go beyond the strictly philosophical justification for rejecting Cartesianism and placing unconscious representational contents at the heart of the science of the mind. It is specifically and exclusively with regard to the latter foundational philosophical element that the reconstruction of Freud's argument presented here forges a surprisingly powerful link between Freud's theorizing and contemporary cognitive science.

Glymour's statement above notwithstanding, approaching Freud as a serious philosopher of mind deviates from the standard view of Freud among philosophers. With a few exceptions, Freud is generally not taken seriously by philosophers as someone who contributed significantly to the philosophy of mind. Freud's arguments are considered of interest for raising issues in philosophical psychology such as the nature of irrationality and self-deception, or as relevant to certain issues in social and moral philosophy, but are not generally seen as grappling interestingly or in a contemporary spirit with central topics in philosophy of mind. Certainly, Freud is not generally considered to have advanced the core agenda of philosophy of mind itself. Freud's argument for unconscious mental states is often seen as following a traditional formula of citing phenomena that might be argued to involve unconscious mentation, ranging from memory and gaps in associations to hypnosis and problem-solving as well as psychopathological examples such as conversion hysterical symptoms (e.g., "glove anesthesia"), and leaping to the conclusion that there are unconscious mental states. I largely leave the discussion of such specific empirical examples for a later volume and focus here on demonstrating that Freud has a core philosophical contribution that forms the prism through which he views such empirical examples and that explains the otherwise dubious leap from the examples to the profound ontological conclusion that there are unconscious mental states.

An innovation in my reconstruction of Freud's argument is to place the argument explicitly within an essentialist conceptual framework

for understanding natural kind terms of the sort proposed by Putnam (1975) and Kripke (1980), but using the “internalist” approach suggested by Searle (1983) rather than Putnam and Kripke’s own “externalist” approach (see Chapter 5). I thus interpret Freud as mounting an essentialist argument (in the contemporary philosophical sense) about the nature of the mental. This approach yields the perhaps surprising result that the anti-Cartesian argument must start with an analysis of consciousness if the Cartesian position is to be successfully disputed; opponents of Cartesianism, if they are to properly engage Cartesianism, can run but they cannot hide from consciousness. Brentano, although a Cartesian who rejected unconscious mental states, provided an analysis of consciousness in terms of intentionality (the directedness of states of consciousness at objects, so that beliefs, desires, and emotions are about various things in the world), and this analysis paved the way for his student Freud to formulate an argument for unconscious mental states. Freud, I argue, borrowed Brentano’s understanding of consciousness as intentionality and ran with it as an account of the mental independent of consciousness. In Chapters 8–10, I reconstruct Freud’s argument and show how by starting with Brentano’s analysis of consciousness as intentionality one can mount an interesting argument that gets one to the existence of unconscious mental states.

One might think of Freud’s argument, empirical examples aside, as a combination of two components: the conceptual and the theoretical arguments. The conceptual component is necessary in order for Freud to rebut the semantic objection, which was the most common objection to his postulation of unconscious mental states in the context of the Cartesian tradition. Freud lived at a time when the standard theory of the mental was Cartesian, so to many it seemed that “mental” meant consciousness, period. The semantic objection is thus that unconscious mental states cannot exist because consciousness is part of the traditional meaning of the word “mental,” so Freud is merely playing with words and being incoherent rather than putting forward a substantive thesis or reporting a scientific discovery when he asserts that unconscious mental states exist. In response to the semantic objection, Freud must argue for the conceptual coherence of his claim. I document the historical importance of the semantic objection in Chapter 4 and present Freud’s response in Chapter 5. Freud’s answer is that he is not disputing the meaning of “mental” but rather making a scientific claim about the theoretical essence of the mental. Essentialism systematically exploited can evade the semantic objection, and I offer evidence that something like this very contemporary

approach to concepts is exactly what Freud had in mind. In the course of my analysis, I offer what I call a “black-box-essentialist” account of the meaning of “mental” that starts with conscious states as initial exemplars of the mental but allows for the logical possibility that some nonconscious states might satisfy the definition and thus be mental, depending on the precise mental-relevant essence of the set of conscious states.

If on the basis of the essentialist analysis of “mental” it is granted that the claim that there can be unconscious mental states is conceptually coherent and not mere semantic trickery, then the theoretical question is, what is Freud’s alternative account of the essence of the mental that is different from the consciousness criterion? I lay out the evidence in Chapters 6 and 7—and further in Chapter 10—for a specifically representationalist interpretation of Freud’s own account of the mental, while acknowledging that Freud explicitly leaves aside the challenge that has absorbed the attention of much of the field of philosophy of mind for the last half of the twentieth century of specifying what property confers intentional content on a brain state. Thus, although I reconstruct Freud’s claims about the representationality of the mental, I do not attempt to address the thorny question, never addressed by Freud but surely the most interesting question of all, of exactly how a brain state without consciousness can possess content. The issue of whether and how brain states can be representational, an issue as yet unresolved by philosophers of mind, is clearly posed by Freud, but not resolved by him, and addressing it requires an extended exploration of its own that is left for the future. This study is limited to the reconstruction of what Freud did have to say about the problem of unconscious mental states and clarifying the nature of the problem that he left us to ponder.

The theoretical objection, then, is that even if conceptually possible, unconscious mental states are theoretically impossible because consciousness is the theoretical essence of the mental. In Chapter 7, I argue that, in answer to the theoretical objection, Freud holds that the mental has a theoretical essence that is independent of consciousness, namely brain representationality that can be unconscious. I analyze Freud’s view specifically as a response to the Cartesian tradition that he inherited and to the views of Brentano, identifying which elements of the tradition Freud retained and which he rejected.

A successful reconstruction of Freud’s philosophical argument for unconscious mental states should yield a better appreciation of Freud’s contribution to the history of philosophy of mind. By doing so, I believe that such a reconstruction can contribute to the resolution of three

historical-philosophical puzzles. Two of the puzzles, detailed in Chapter 2, are parallel historical puzzles for the disciplines of psychology and philosophy of mind: (1) By what argument was psychology transformed from a science of consciousness in the late nineteenth century into a science of what I will call “brain representationality” in our own cognitive-scientific era? (2) By what argument did philosophy of mind shift from a focus on the mind–body problem in the late nineteenth century in which “mind” meant consciousness, to a focus on the problem of intrinsic intentionality independent of consciousness—that is, nonconscious brain representationality—in our own era?

A third puzzle, mostly left implicit in the analysis here and to be further addressed in a later volume, concerns Freud’s originality. Given all the talk of unconscious mental states by philosophers starting with Leibniz, what exactly was Freud’s original contribution to the argument over unconscious mental states? Entire books continue to be written arguing that Freud said little or nothing of moment that was original (e.g., Sand, 2013). However, one cannot understand whether anything Freud said was interestingly original until one has a precise account of what he and his predecessors actually argued. The fact that many writers discussed “unconscious mental states” is insufficient to settle the issue because, as we shall see, different writers meant very different things by the same phrase and the originality could be hidden in the details of what was meant. Looking for a distinctive Freudian contribution in his philosophy of mind argument rather than in his clinical theory is unorthodox, but I believe this is where something of importance is waiting to be found.

In the remainder of this introduction, I offer some caveats to clarify the scope and limits of my analysis. I then present a few terminological conventions.

CAVEATS

First, my aim here is to understand Freud’s philosophical argument by optimally and charitably reconstructing the argument that I believe is implicit in scattered comments in his work, and to reconstruct his argument from a rigorous contemporary philosophical perspective. This task is helped along because Freud turns out to have been remarkably sophisticated in a contemporary way about the nature of the philosophical argument that was needed.

Second, my aims in this book are strictly philosophical. I do not claim that my analysis has much in the way of practical implications for

psychoanalytic therapy. However, the way in which one conceptualizes the unconscious may of course alter how one understands what goes on in the clinical hour when one interprets unconscious material. I believe that philosophical debates over the nature of unconscious mental states do have such implications for how psychoanalysts and their patients understand “making the unconscious conscious” and will perhaps spell that out elsewhere.

Third, although this work has a historical dimension in that it locates Freud within his immediate philosophical context and explains how he shifted the center of gravity of philosophy of mind relative to the Cartesian/intentionalist doctrines of Brentano, that historical material is used to clarify the nature of Freud’s position rather than being a scholarly target in its own right. The primary goal throughout is the most plausible and compelling logical reconstruction of Freud’s argument for his position on unconscious mental states, not the elaboration of the historical relationships that led to Freud’s insights.

Correspondingly, although I explore logical relations between Freud’s views and the views of later thinkers, I make no specific claims about lines or degrees of literal historical influence from Freud’s theory to what came after Freud. Where such influence did exist, it may have been more historically implicit than explicit. However, supporting claims about historical influence in any detail would involve a type of historical scholarship I cannot undertake here. My analysis focuses on the logical reconstruction of arguments and their implications and their place in the logic of the development of psychology and philosophy of mind, not the history of the pathways of their influence.

Fourth, regarding the evaluation of Freud’s argument, I will sometimes charitably explain Freud’s likely rationale for a claim or defend the *prima facie* plausibility of Freud’s assertions or assumptions, which is an integral part of reconstructing an optimally explanatory argument. However, I cannot attempt here to evaluate whether Freud was ultimately right or wrong in the conclusions he reaches via the argument I charitably reconstruct. Consequently, I do not in this book attempt to resolve the question of the existence of unconscious mental states or the nature of the essence of the mental. These overarching philosophical tasks require a very different sort of approach and will be undertaken in subsequent work.

Fifth, I set aside all other issues concerning Freudian theory, such as his theories of sexuality and psychopathology, and consider only Freud’s arguments for the existence of unconscious mental states and the nature

of the mental independently of his clinical theory. I thus diverge from other philosophers who insist that Freud's argument for unconscious mental states is directly dependent on his claimed discoveries of the "dynamic unconscious" and repression. In Chapter 3, I explain why this division of my topic from Freud's theory of repression makes sense from Freud's own perspective.

Sixth, the argument between Freud and Cartesians is an argument between representationalists about the nature of mental states and about whether mental states can be unconscious. My analysis is restricted to these competing theories of the mind that share the representationalist premise but differ over the medium—conscious phenomenology or brain tissue—within which mental representationality must be realized. I thus ignore views that deny that mental states are representational, such as logical behaviorism (Hempel, 1949), Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological critique of Freud, the anti-cognitivist positions of Wittgenstein (1953/1968) and Heidegger (1927/1962), and purportedly anti-representationist variants of "connectionist" models of mental processing (if that is the right way to interpret such models; see, e.g., Fodor & Pylyshyn [1988]). Such positions deny the existence of unconscious mental representations because they deny that mental states are representations, not because they object to mental states being unconscious. Their rejection of representationalism is for reasons that are not relevant to Freud's and the modern cognitive scientist's arguments against Cartesianism and thus are put aside here.

TERMINOLOGICAL AND TEXTUAL CONVENTIONS

Throughout this book, many of the writers I quote, including Freud, tend to use italics liberally for emphasis. Rather than stating each time that italics appear that they are in the original text or that they are added by me, I adopt the convention that any italics appearing in quoted passages are in the original, unless otherwise stated. Additionally, I allow myself to eliminate reference citations from quoted passages without the addition of ellipses.

As noted above, the terms "Cartesian" and "Cartesianism" are generally used here to refer only to the traditional doctrine that concerned Freud, namely the equating of the mental and consciousness. Except where it is clear from context, I am not referring to Cartesianism as a whole, with its many doctrines such as substance dualism.

With apologies to my philosophy readers, I note that I will *not* be using a convention common in philosophy to refer to concepts using double quotes (e.g., the concept “mental”) while referring to terms using single quotes (e.g., the word ‘mental’). Although these conventions are standard in philosophy, they are unfamiliar to psychologists and other readers. So, I will use the standard double quotes throughout and the context will indicate whether I am referring to a word or a concept. Because the word stands for the concept, consideration of the nature of the concept and the meaning of the word will usually come to the same thing. As an occasional variant, as is standardly done in psychology, I will italicize to refer to a term (e.g., the word *mental*).

Finally, it is standard in psychology to discuss past thinkers in the past tense, as in “Freud argued that unconscious mental states exist.” In contrast, philosophers see themselves as engaged in actively arguing with the thinkers of the past, and so they often write in the present tense, as in “Freud argues that unconscious mental states exist.” My style varies, but I tend to choose the latter convention as more in keeping with my style of approaching Freud’s arguments as live challenges to contemporary thinking and with my attempt to engage in an open-ended “conversation” with Freud via his texts.

A terminological awkwardness is that there is a potential ambiguity in labeling something “physical” to distinguish it from the mental because for those who believe that the mental are identical to some subset of physical states, something physical still might be mental. Instead of repeating phrases like “physical and not mental,” for terminological convenience I specify here that, unless context demands otherwise, by “physical” I generally mean exclusively physical, that is, physical and not also mental. However, in contexts in which I am considering whether mental states are (also) physical states, it will be obvious that I am allowing both.

“Unconscious” has often been used to refer to anything not conscious. However, that includes things like biochemical processes that have nothing to do with mental states. I use “unconscious” here more restrictedly to refer only to *mental* states that are not conscious. When context does not demand otherwise, I use “nonconscious” for anything outside of conscious awareness, whether mental or not. “Nonconscious” thus includes digestive processes as well as unconscious desires. Bodily processes of which one is not aware are nonconscious, but not unconscious, whereas mental states of which one is not aware are both unconscious and nonconscious. As will become clear, I use “unconscious”

strictly in what Freud called the “descriptive” or “qualitative” sense, simply indicating that a mental content is not in consciousness. Except in Chapter 3, I rarely have occasion to refer to the dynamic unconscious, which Freud often confusedly referred to simply as “the unconscious”.

Some quoted passages are relevant at several different points in the book. Given the importance of quoted passages as “data” in an interpretive study like this, rather than referring the reader back to earlier chapters, I sometimes repeat a quote or part of a quote when its repetition is useful, with apologies to the reader who might be put off by such repetition.

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