



David Rosenthal

David Rosenthal is the author of numerous articles in philosophy of mind, many on consciousness including several that address Freud's writing. He has also worked in philosophy of language and ancient and early modern philosophy. His recent book, *Consciousness and Mind* brings together some of his most significant papers on consciousness, which put forth and develop his well-known higher-order-thought theory of consciousness. The book also advances his homomorphism theory of mental qualities and addresses such topics as the unity of consciousness, the connection between consciousness and speech, and the role of self-interpretation in consciousness.

Rosenthal is currently working on a book that examines whether there is any significant function that results from thoughts, perceptions, and other mental states' occurring consciously, as against their simply occurring without being conscious. The book also explains why perceptions and thoughts do very often occur consciously. This explanation makes no appeal to added functionality that may result from those states' being conscious, and so proceeds independently of any evolutionary selection pressures.

24. Freud and Unconscious

Y. A.: Would you see any kinship of Freud with the forerunners of philosophy of irrational like Goethe, Blake, Schopenhauer etc.? I mean do they have influence over Freud?

D. R.: Freud was exceptionally literate and read widely among these figures. But I myself doubt that they had any very direct influence on Freud's thinking. It's well-known that Freud attended Franz Brentano's lectures on psychology, and I think it's very likely that those lectures were a significant influence on Freud's thinking.

It is true, however, that the seemingly irrational aspects of human psychology were much in the air in the late 19th century, and that doubtless did affect Freud's thinking in as general way.

But I believe that the ostensibly irrational aspects of the unconscious mind that Freud discussed were made intelligible by his theorizing chiefly by Freud's uncovering the ways in which those unconscious mental processes are actually rational. So I believe that the irrationalist tenor of the authors you cite doubtless had influence more on Freud's tendency to describe the unconscious processes he studied as being irrational than in his substantive understanding of how those processes actually operate.

Y. A.: He is scientifically approaching 'irrational' forces in mind, isn't it?

D. R.: Freud did hold that human psychology involves the seemingly irrational desires of the "id." But it's reasonable to see those desires as being irrational only by the measure of the superego and ego. The superego presents the demands of authority and civilized social life; the instinctual demands of

the id, by not taking those things into account, seem irrational.

In another respect, Freud's thinking about unconscious mental processes is solidly based on ascribing rationality to unconscious as well as to conscious processes. Slips of the tongue, neurotic symptoms, and dreams are all interpreted in terms of rationality, i.e., in terms of what unconscious beliefs and desires we need to ascribe for those things to be rational.

The irrational that Freud considers is, I believe, only relative to social demands. Freud's theoretical departure from received views was not to embrace the irrational as such, but to recognize that human psychology involves various distinct, though interacting psychological systems.

Y. A.: What is the status of perception and consciousness in Freudian theory of unconscious?

D. R.: Freud held that the qualitative aspect of mental functioning cannot occur without being conscious, though we sometimes misinterpret its significance. Perceiving has both conceptual content and qualitative character; so Freud would have denied that perceiving, in its qualitative aspect, can occur without being conscious.

But Freud would have insisted that the conceptual component of perceiving can be unconscious, and that perceiving can in consequence be subject to a range of misinterpretations.

Y. A.: Whether unconscious is nature-in-us or culture-in-us? Did not it exist in us in the prehistoric era? Where does Jung resemble/differ from Freud to the nature of unconscious?

D. R.: There are two distinct issues here. One is whether unconscious mental functioning would have occurred independently of culture. Freud held that thoughts, desires,

and other so-called intentional states occur in the first instance without being conscious. So the nonconscious occurrence of these states is independent of culture.

Things are different when one turns to the repression of such states that results in the special psychodynamic interactions that Freud took himself to have discovered. Freud held that language results in a kind of distancing of ourselves from nature. Without language, he thought, humans would not have come to develop, in addition to the id, a superego. And, since the ego develops from the interaction of id and superego, language is needed also for the development of the ego. The repression Freud discusses itself results in turn from conflicts among these three mental agencies. So the kind of unconscious mental functioning that's due to repression would not, on Freud's view, occur without language, and hence not without a measure of culture.

Jung has a view of the so-called collective unconscious--the functioning of social groups in ways analogous with the mental functioning of individuals that results from conflicts between their conscious and unconscious mental processes. It's difficult to know how much of Jung's thinking here is metaphorical; I'm inclined to think that it was to a very great extent.

Y. A.: Let me talk about Oedipus complex. Would you have projected your mother's figure in your wife? What is wrong with Freud in concept of human relationship? Is he parochialist? I incline to love my mother more than father because her body is weak than my father; because my father exploits her with certain prerogative endowed him by patriarchy (somebody may love for other reasons), not or less because her Lawrencean body sexually attracts me. Wouldn't you see so?

D. R.: One can approach this clusters of issues independently of Freud's theorizing, and find his conclusions

perplexing or even offensive. I believe that that is the wrong way to see his views. As with any theorist, one must take his conclusions in the context of the theoretical reasoning that leads to them, and not as detached from that reasoning. My answer will be in that spirit.

There is a closeness of infants and toddlers with parental figures, which involves quasi-erotic feelings—feelings that can involve arousal of the sexual organs. This closeness is, according to both Freud and most thinkers, very important in early human emotional development, as indeed in the early development of many other mammals.

Consider, then, the closeness that occurs between mother and very young son. If that is threatened by the young son's fears, prompted by a father's jealousy or envy of the close mother-son bond, the son is likely to have some impairment in close relations with other women. That's neither strange nor difficult to understand.

It is worth mentioning, moreover, that this has nothing to do with other respects in which patriarchy or other social norms may also influence one's relationships with one's mother and father and, later on in adulthood, with women and men whose personalities evoke in various ways the kinds of emotionally charged interactions one had with one's parents.

In addition, it's no particular news from Freud that one can discern resemblances of personality between the women men are attracted to and those men's mothers, and between the men women are attracted to and those women's fathers. This commonplace can be seen, e.g., in the novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Y. A.: What are the sources of instinct?

D. R.: I suppose you're asking about instincts as Freud understood them, in the context of his theory of instincts in

psychological functioning. Freud took those instincts to be part of our biological heritage, and that seems to be a reasonable assumption. Sex drives, e.g., are doubtless part of our genetically determined biological makeup, as does the aggressive behavior that seems to figure in the destructive death instinct. These urges are found in some form in most mammals, as well as many nonmammalian species.

Y. A.: The aim of all life is death. How does life wish to return to the inorganic state of a life?

Freud posited a death wish or destructive instinct in developing his theory of native instincts. The desire to return to an inorganic state is best understood as metaphorical for destruction—in the relevant case, self-destruction. The death instinct plays a role in Freud's theory of instincts in understanding masochism, for example. A destructive instinct can, if not balanced by the productive, life instinct, lead to the reshaping of sexual impulses in a masochistic way.

Y. A.: What is dream for Freud? Is Freud giving the status of truth to the dream?

D. R.: Dreams, on Freud's view, are expressions of repressed thoughts and desires—thoughts and desires that, because of painful associations, fears, or social and parental pressures, we keep from being conscious. Still, these thoughts and desires need to receive some expression, just as ordinary conscious thoughts and desires do. So dreams function, in Freud's words, as the royal road to the unconscious; as expressions of unconscious mental processes, dreams allow us to infer the nature of the processes.

A thought or desire's being conscious results in its being acknowledged and, hence incorporated into one's mental functioning, and that by itself constitutes a kind of

expression of those of our thoughts and desires which are conscious.

Dreams can therefore be seen as a way to understand what thoughts and desires occur in a person without being consciously acknowledged. Working back from dreams, one can determine what unconscious thoughts and desires a person has, much as one can determine thoughts and desires from ordinary behavior.

Y. A.: What does Freud say about the origin of culture? How does he associate the development of civilization with the development of libidinal?

D. R.: Freud thinks that libidinous energies must be channeled into the social and productive processes that give rise to and sustain civilization, in a process he calls sublimation. Again, I think there's nothing all that deep or surprising in this. Athletes sometimes channel sexual energy into their athletic endeavors; it's a commonplace that one has only so much energy, and that if one doesn't find a sexual release one will look for alternative ways to express and expend energy. When sexual relations are ordered in a way that does not allow for ready release of sexual energy, one is likely to release in other, socially relevant ways.

Y. A.: What are discontents of civilization? How are they originated? How are we paying the price to be a civilized being?

D. R.: The discontents of civilization that Freud speaks of have to do with an analogue he sees in civilized social groups of the conflict in individuals between the desires of the I'd (the pleasure principle) and the countermanding social demands of the superego to restrain those desires (the reality principle). A simplified version of these discontents consists simply in the way civilization restrains individual

desires, but Freud's theory is more nuanced and complex. According to Freud, there's no way to avoid that conflict at the level of social organization.

This analogy of Freud's between individual psychodynamics and social organization is reminiscent of Plato's extrapolating from a similar tripartite view of the soul to an analogous tripartite view of the polis, or state.

Y. A.: Many of philosophers locate space and time as two forms in human mind. How the structure of space and time finds corollary to the structure of unconscious?

D. R.: Kant held that time is the inner form of sensing and space the outer form, ideas that were very influential on the young Einstein. I don't think, however, that these views of Kant have been very widely adopted by philosophers past Kant's immediate successors. What's plausible about Kant's idea about time is that we understand time in terms of a succession of experiences of distinct events. But the experiences of events need not be conscious experiences. And there is some evidence that humans fix the occurrence of events not by way of conscious sensations, but by way of an earlier, nonconscious sensation.

Moreover, it's clear that spatial relations can be discerned nonconsciously, i.e., by way of sensations and perceptions that fail to reach consciousness.

Y. A.: How did Freudian psychology become a potential force of modernity?

D. R.: Freud's views of human psychodynamic functioning provide a framework built on folk-psychological concepts and a commonsense understanding of human psychological functioning that promises to expand our understanding of rational thought and desire beyond the folk-psychological

arena—both into hitherto undiscussed areas of human functioning, such as sexuality and neurosis, and into our understanding of politics and social organization.

In contrast to Marx, the other great influence of the last 150 years in human thinking about human life, Freud based his thinking on individual psychodynamics. Marxian thinking starts with economic and other group dynamics, and seems to many to give second place to individual psychological functioning. Freud therefore filled a felt need to understand both individual psychology social organization without giving short shrift to the individual. This was crucial in Freud's coming to be, in W. H. Auden's useful phrase, "a climate of opinion."

It's often thought that the importance of Freud's thinking was to make room for the study and acceptance of nonconscious mentality. I think it's more accurate to say that he developed a way to understand nonconscious mental functioning on the model of conscious mental functioning, thereby making it readily intelligible.

Y. A.: What is the significance of Freud in twentieth century cognitive science?

D. R.: Freud's theorizing about unconscious mental functioning is a useful reminder in the context of current cognitive science that there is much that occurs mentally but not consciously. Cognitive science has constantly posited cognitive processes and states that are not conscious, much as Freud posited in connection with the psychodynamic processes that yield both normal emotional development and neurotic symptoms. So Freud's work constitutes a model for such unconscious posits.

Still, the significance of Freud's work for cognitive science is somewhat limited. This is in part because the mental

phenomena being explained are so different. But there is another reason for that limited significance. The important unconscious posits that figure in Freud's theorizing are due to the mechanism of repression. By contrast, the unconscious mental phenomena that cognitive science posits simply occur without being conscious, independent of any special mechanism, such as repression.

Y. A.: Thank you for your kind participation in our interview project!

D. R.: Thank you!

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Dedicated to Marjorie Perloff whose ideas have influenced my own notion of art and aesthetics.

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