Abstract. Sartre poses in *Being and Nothingness* a challenge to Freud which repays close attention. Sartre's argument focuses on Freud's concept of the censor, a mechanism or agency responsible for determining which mental contents are admitted to consciousness. Whether or not his argument shows a contradiction or other logical fault in psychoanalytic explanation, it is enough for Sartre to have forced Freud's naturalistic assumptions out into the open and traced their implications, in order for him to have put pressure on Freud. The question which we are left with, concerning what we are to think of psychoanalysis in philosophical respects, reflects our broader difficulty in attuning our naturalistic commitments and our *prima facie* non-naturalistic self-conception.

The philosophical controversies surrounding psychoanalysis with which we are most familiar concern its scientific standing or, as its detractors allege, lack thereof. This provides a fruitful set of terms for evaluating psychoanalysis, however, only to the extent that scientificity is thought to be necessary in order for Freud's ideas to have value, and a quick glance at the mountain of psychoanalytically inspired work in the humanities shows that this is highly doubtful: psychoanalysis holds appeal and is reckoned to have importance, not because it is believed to offer a back door into the essence of the mind, bypassing the usual forms of access, but on the contrary because of the way in which it coheres with all of the other forms of sense making that we employ. If psychoanalysis should be counted a science, it belongs among the human sciences, whose methods are diverse, largely continuous with our folk practice of crediting one another with beliefs and desires, and for the greater part not shared by the natural sciences. To say this is of course not to say that Freud's claims are true, but to indicate their proper measure. This, at any rate, is how Sartre understands Freud – as attempting to render theoretically perspicuous certain puzzling psychological phenomena that we encounter in ourselves and others in which there appears to be a *motivated failure of self-knowledge*. This plane of consideration is ethical as much as explanatory: self-deception, like weakness of will, is inconsistent with sincerity and full integrity, while honesty with oneself and courage in facing up to one's feelings are virtues; self-knowledge matters in ways that are not merely epistemic. Sartre's criticisms are consequently of a different order from those of, say, Karl Popper, and they reveal more of the philosophical significance of Freud's ideas.

1. Sartre's argument

Let us begin by spelling out Sartre's argument in *Being and Nothingness*. The explicit object of his attack is Freud's concept of an agency or mechanism, referred to as the censor, which determines
the relation of mental contents to consciousness, either by refusing unconscious elements admission to consciousness, the system $C_\text{s}$, or by exiling previously conscious elements to the unconscious, $U_{cs}$. Such exclusions – acts of repression, Verdrängung – are adduced to explain the perplexing cognitive failures and seeming irrationality of subjects encountered inside and outside the psychoanalytic consulting room: the analysand's heated and indignant repudiation of the construal of his motives which the evidence clearly supports, a person's inability to recognize her actions as bearing a significance which is plain to all around, and so on. The agency responsible for repression is conceived by Freud as strictly non-identical with the person as a whole, of whom it forms merely a proper part. The metapsychology appears furthermore to be modelled closely on the intersubjective case: communication between the parts of a single person's mind is held to break down in the same way that communication can break down between different people. Hence Sartre's remark, 'psychoanalysis places me in the same relation to myself as the Other is in respect to me' – the analyst is conceived as playing the role of a mediating third party, an Other who restores communication between the part of the analysand from which awareness is withheld ($C_\text{s}$) and the part which contains the withheld item ($U_{cs}$). The principle of individuation of mental parts in Freudian theory – its distinctions of $C_\text{s}$, $U_{cs}$, and intermediating censor mechanism, or in Freud's later theory, of id, ego, and superego – thus owes something to our pre-theoretical conception of the distinction of one mind or person from another.

Now for the problem, as Sartre sees it: In order to do the work that Freud asks of it, the censor is required to know of the threat posed by the unconscious content to the interests of consciousness and to share its aim of self-protection. And in order to execute its task of keeping the anxiety-inducing idea away from $C_\text{s}$, the censor is required to sponsor various doxastic projects – incriminating counter-evidence must be reconstrued, awkward questions must be deflected, etc. – in ways which demand full rights of access to the mind and world of the subject. Psychoanalytic explanation, in so far as it turns on the postulation of the censor or some functional equivalent – and it does so essentially – is therefore non-explanatory: in truth and in effect the censor is the person as a whole, under a particular description. The censor mechanism 'within' me just is me qua bringing it about, determining, that I do not avow my motives, wishfully attribute to myself false qualities, etc.

If the censor is stripped of its rationality, then it deflates to a point where it is explanatorily useless; but if it is attributed the capacity to do what Freud demands of it, then it inflates to person-sized proportions. Hence the contradiction: the psychoanalytic censor is both part and whole, both non-rational mechanism and non-mechanical rational agent.

The original puzzle was to explain how I can lie to myself. Psychoanalysis answers: By virtue of the censor mechanism. But that concept is empty, Sartre contends, for it simply recycles, behind a screen of theoretical terminology, the explanandum in the verbal shape of an explanans.
More broadly we can see, Sartre believes, that the whole strategy of mental partition employed by Freud is ill-conceived: the unity of the person is *sui generis*, undecomposable, conceptually primitive. The para-intersubjective modelling of the mind in psychoanalytic metapsychology is, moreover, not simply confused but a case of complicity: the self-deceived subject puts themselves forwards implicitly as an innocent *victim* of deception, and the psychoanalytic theoretician buys their story, constructing a whole theory of mind in accordance with their self-serving illusion of having merely, passively, *suffered* a psychological misfortune, in the same morally innocuous way that one can be simply unable to recall a telephone number. Freudian theory thereby underwrites the psychological and moral failings of human beings.

It must now be asked, with a view to seeing what defence may be available to Freud, if Sartre has made assumptions with which issue may be taken issue. Sartre cannot be charged with having assumed dogmatically that unconscious mental states are a conceptual or metaphysical impossibility, or that the mind necessarily enjoys inescapable total rational transparency – he does hold both views, but in this context he has granted Freud, for the sake of argument, what is required for formulation of the psychoanalytic hypothesis. Sartre may nonetheless seem to have begged the question in so far as he supposes that the operations of the censor involve the attribution to it of beliefs and desires which bring it into effective identity with the person as a whole. Granted that its psychic agency cannot be genuinely mechanical in the manner of a physical process – since it operates on mental content, which cannot be acted on without being in some way understood – why can it not still be much more rationally limited, more mechanism-like, than a full-blown rational agent? It is after all integral to the programme of homuncular explanation, or faculty theory, as we encounter it in more generally in psychology, that homunculi and faculties are accorded limited powers and ranges of function – the faculty of memory can do no more than store and retrieve memories, the module of word-recognition can only process linguistic representations, etc. It is also highly relevant that ordinary psychology acknowledges a vast range of psychological phenomena which involve intentionality but not rationality, perhaps not even conceptualization: the finger movements of a professional pianist, the subliminal awareness of the increasing weight of an object that makes me tighten my grip, the anticipation of attack that pushes all else out of mind, and so on. These form not only the penumbra of mental life but also, it may be argued, give evidence of a supporting substrate without which rational reflective consciousness would collapse. In short, can Freud not respond to Sartre by invoking the homuncularist strategy of functional analysis, in conjunction with an appeal to the ordinary idea of sub-rational, pre-conceptual intentionality? If so, then the seemingly intersubjective character of Freud's mental divisions is an inessential distraction; though of heuristic value, it is not part of what the theory holds true.
It depends on what we think the facts are in the relevant kinds of case, and on how we understand the total phenomenon of a person's self-deception or motivated self-ignorance. If all that the censor need do is block episodes of consciousness, then the 'rule' governing its behaviour does not imply significant rationality: it can unconsciously deflect ideas with a particular affective quality or associative power in roughly the way that we instinctively avert our gaze from obscene or abhorrent sights. If however the 'mechanisms of defence', as Freud calls them, stretch to complicated doxastic manoeuvres, then Sartre's argument is well grounded. In order to progress on this front it would be necessary therefore to examine actual case histories in some detail.

The second point is the crux of the matter and not contingent on the details. Suppose we accept the psychoanalytic account of what goes on when, say, a patient resists the interpretation of the analyst. Resistance is thus analysed into the interactions of mental parts. And yet it remains the case that we understand the person as a whole in such cases as working against themselves, i.e. as exhibiting a self-relation. That is why psychoanalysis can advertise itself as a form of emancipation, as liberating the subject from her own counter-purposivity. (Compare cases of defective performance where no self-relation is involved – inability to wake up, or to add up a set of numbers. To restore such capacities is, as in physical medicine, to empower but not to liberate.) Now the question is this: Since according to psychoanalysis the self-relation involved in repression and resistance is a function of mental parts, (why) should we not treat self-relations in general as supervening on and made true by the interrelations of mental components? Psychoanalysis seems to make exactly such a claim in, for example, the context of morality: to sacrifice the gratification of an appetite for the sake of duty, just is for certain sorts of relations to obtain between id, ego, and superego. In so far as psychoanalysis does not, in such cases, claim to have shown the non-existence of its explanandum – Freud is not Nietzsche – what it must claim to be offering is a form of realist reduction, that is, an account which reveals the underlying reality of moral self-relations and shows what it is that enables us to determine ourselves in accordance with duty. To the extent that self-relations are held to be conceptually problematic – and the worry that self-consciousness, self-knowledge, and self-determination may be incoherent has a long history\(^5\) – it would seem that there is reason to welcome partitive analysis as freeing reflexivity from paradox. Pursuing this line, psychoanalysis might join forces with cognitive psychology in its endeavour to map the sub-personal modular realm.\(^6\)

Sartre, however, believes that partitive analysis is incompatible with self-relations. His reasons are brought out in a different and perhaps clearer way in his discussion of psychoanalytic symbolism, in Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions.\(^7\) Here he is concerned with a different type of relation between Ucs. and Cs., as it were the next stage in the standard psychoanalytic sequence: Having undergone repression, unconscious ideas and the desires formed around them do not of
course disappear but retain their force, and one of the several possible results of their continued search for fulfilment is symbol-formation: cued by some associative connection, an object accessible to consciousness becomes by substitution the vehicle of expression for the repressed idea; the conscious object, invested with the significance of the unconscious idea, symbolizes the latter, such that the gratification consciously taken in the object at the same time fulfils (or at any rate appeases) the unconscious desire – Cs.'s relation to X satisfies Ucs.'s wish for Y, because X 'means' Y.

Sartre's criticism of this model follows the earlier pattern. In order for Cs.'s relation to X to have positive significance for Ucs.'s desire for Y, it is necessary for the symbolic relation between X and Y to be registered. Now, where is this registration, S's grasp of the 'X = Y' equation, located? It cannot be in Cs., since that would make the unconscious meaning of X an open secret; but if it is in Ucs., then Ucs. is either itself a divided subject of belief, for whom both X = Y and X ≠ Y, or Ucs. is a subject for whom X has a symbolic significance, which is the very explanandum we started with. Again what is supposed to be an explanation at the level of mental parts is shown to involve a sleight of hand: the terms of the causal relations plotted in psychoanalytic explanation are officially sub-personal, but psychoanalytic explanation tacitly invokes a perspective on the mental whole which must be available to the subject herself – not only can we theoreticians see what the configuration of S's mental parts adds up to, but S herself must be able to see this. The upshot of Sartre's argument is then as follows: If psychological reality consists in nothing but the causal interactions postulated by psychoanalysis, then it is false that X 'symbolizes' Y for S – rather their relation is external, in the way that (in Sartre's example) ashes give evidence that a fire was once made on this spot; but if it is true that X means Y for S, then X's-means-Y-for-S ('S's taking X as Y') cannot receive a partitive analysis.\(^8\)

To see what is at stake here we may briefly consider a well-known argument of Kant's from the Third Paralogism of the Critique of Pure Reason. Here Kant entertains the hypothesis that at each instant a numerically different substance might be the subject of my consciousness, each substance passing on its accrued stock of representations to its successor, as one billiard ball transfers its motion to the next.\(^9\) Might this not be, for all we known, the metaphysical reality underlying self-consciousness over time? Kant deals with this possibility by showing that our first-person conception of ourselves as thinkers entitles, in fact it requires, us to set it aside: if the conjecture were true, then the different parts of a judgement (or different steps in an argument) would be thought by different subjects, and so no judgement at all (or reasoning) would take place – there would be no thought 'A is F' (or inference from 'p→q' and 'p' to 'q'), since the thinker-of-A('p→q' and 'p') would be non-identical with the thinker-of-F('q'), and their mere temporal succession, however immediate, would not suffice for the logical connection expressed in the
copula (or the application of *modus ponens*); any more than *your* utterance of 'promise' after *my* utterance of 'I' gives rise to an obligation. But we cannot think – judge – that we do not think; *ergo* etc.

In the Paralogisms, Kant has Cartesians in mind, whereas Sartre's target is a naturalistic psychology, but the form of argument is the same (thus the argument of the Third Paralogism has equal application to naturalistic accounts of the grounds of thought). In the same way that the unity of a thinker cannot be reduced to an aggregate of substances with representations – in more strictly Kantian terms: a thinker cannot cannot *take herself qua thinker* to consist in such – Sartre argues for the inconsistency of self-relations with a merely aggregative psychological manifold: in so far as Dora or the Ratman accept that Freud has shown them something about how they feel towards their fathers, they cannot regard their father-love/-hatred as the *kind* of thing that *could* be modelled in Freud's metapsychology; to do so would be to set it outside the bounds of their self, logically on a par with physiological processes occurring in their bodies (Sartre points out the self-alienation: according to Freud, 'I *am* the ego but *I am not* the id').

Other dimensions of the disagreement of Freud and Sartre confirm that the features of psychoanalytic metapsychology that draw Sartre's fire are indeed closely bound up with Freud's naturalism.

Mental partition makes sense if and only if mental states or contents are the sorts of things that allow themselves to be treated 'topographically', i.e. regarded as capable of having, and changing, locations. Irrespective of whether Freud professes materialism, the only conception of 'ideas' or 'mental contents' that makes sense for the purposes of the metapsychology is *in effect* materialist: whether or not he reduces them to neural events, Freud supposes them to *behave* like material entities, as discrete entities endowed with quantities of energy and externally related through efficient causality. Sartre's short argument against this conception is this: If it is true that 'the mental' consists of discrete items with an exclusively empirical identity – and is therefore not constituted by self-consciousness in the way that the Kantian tradition supposes – then we can form no coherent conception of what it is for a mental 'state' or 'content' to *be conscious*. As Sartre puts it, consciousness becomes something – an evanescent diaphanous quality – contingently attached to mental content like a sticker. But consciousness cannot grasp itself in that form: for me to know *I believe p* is not for me to be aware of a *p-content* as having some special radiance or any other property.

This difference in their conception of the nature of mind is connected to another, deep and obvious, point of disagreement. In line with his commitment to the neural basis of mental phenomena, Freud regards the 'psychic apparatus' as governed by deterministic laws, and so can only admit compatibilist forms of freedom. For Sartre, famously, the human subject is constituted
by freedom of a radical, non-compatibilist sort. Again the issue is connected closely with that of partition: however non-compatibilistic freedom is understood, it cannot coherently be localized at a particular point on a diagram of the mind; rather, self-determination demands an irreducible reflexivity.12

2. Freedom and Nature

Freud stands confidently in the nineteenth-century German tradition of empirical psychology, stemming from Johann Friedrich Herbart and Hermann von Helmholtz. Sartre's assault on psychoanalysis is a restatement of the anti-naturalistic humanistic libertarian standpoint of classical German philosophy. It is no coincidence that the issue which occupies Sartre is expanded on by Hegel in his Philosophy of Mind:

*Empirical psychology* has as its object the *concrete* mind and, after the revival of the sciences, when observation and experience had become the principal foundation for knowledge of concrete reality, such psychology was pursued in the same way. Consequently the metaphysical element was kept outside this empirical science, and so prevented from getting any concrete determination or content, while the empirical science clung to the conventional intellectual metaphysics of forces, various activities, etc., and banished the speculative approach [...] The essential aim of a philosophy of mind can only be to reintroduce the concept again into the knowledge of mind.13

The 'concept' missing from empirical psychology is what is responsible for the mind's real unity. Hegel adds that 'the self-feeling of the mind's *living* unity spontaneously resists the fragmentation of the mind into different *faculties, forces, or, what comes to the same thing, activities, represented as independent of each other*.14 This complaint echoes a criticism levelled by Schelling against an early post-Kantian attempt (of K. L. Reinhold) to ground freedom in an autonomous 'faculty' of free choice:

A completed science shuns all philosophical artifices by which the I itself is taken apart and split into faculties which are not thinkable under any common principle of unity. The completed science does not aim at dead faculties that have no reality and exist only in artificial abstractions. It aims rather at the living unity of the I, which is the same in all manifestations of its activity. In that science all the different faculties and actions that
philosophy has ever named become one faculty only, one action of the one and same identical I.¹⁵

The idealism expounded by thinkers from Kant to Hegel and belatedly re-espoused by Sartre, has presumably had its day, but its thesis of the irreducible reality of the self has not passed into history: we do not and could not give up the conception of persons as ontologically preeminent; without it, the moral and political values of modernity would lack foundation and purpose. And yet at the same time we grant that the mind is a legitimate object of scientific enquiry, and anticipate deriving benefits from the results thereof. Psychoanalysis is a mirror of this double commitment, in a way that Sartre's criticism brings to light: Sartre is able to argue against psychoanalysis on grounds of internal inconsistency – as opposed to merely counter-asserting his own libertarian metaphysics – only because it contains both naturalistic and non-naturalistic elements; it both abandons the personal plane for the sake of sub-personal reality, in the metapsychology, and affirms its integrity, in so far as psychoanalysis in its therapeutic practice addresses the subject in her full self-conscious personhood.

Where does all this leave us, as regards psychoanalysis? The options may be reduced to three.

First, we may aim to free psychoanalysis from its naturalism. The conceptual difficulties highlighted by Sartre do not mean that there is no truth in psychoanalysis, and Sartre himself is fully persuaded that Freud is on the correct path: though Freud is mistaken in thinking that the grounds of human motivation lie in animality, he is absolutely right, Sartre maintains, to believe that depth-psychological interpretation, going beyond the characterizations of common sense psychology, is required in order to make human beings genuinely intelligible. Sartre proposes accordingly an 'existential psychoanalysis' which seeks to determine the original, freely chosen project that defines each individual.¹⁶

Another, more influential attempt to salvage Freud's insights by prising these apart from his naturalistic misconception, again guided by the idealist aim of determining the conditions of human freedom but opposed to the idea that these are located within the individual subject, is found in Jürgen Habermas.¹⁷ The key to a correct representation of psychoanalytic ideas, Habermas argues, lies in the concept of communication, which we have already seen to be central to its concerns but which Habermas understands in a new way: since psychoanalytic thought has its starting point in distortions of meaning in the analytic context and aims at a restoration of transparent public communication, which provides the measure of the enlightenment achieved by the analysand, psychoanalytic metapsychology should be understood as 'the logic of interpretation in the analytic situation of dialogue'.¹⁸ As a depth-hermeneutics committed to emancipation, psychoanalysis
belongs among the human sciences: 'the categorial framework of psychoanalysis is tied to the presuppositions of the interpretation of muted and distorted texts by means of which their authors deceive themselves'.

Second, we might aim to make psychoanalysis rigorously naturalistic. What this amounts to will depend chiefly upon the view taken of how naturalism constrains psychology. On an extreme view, it requires nothing less than identifying neural referents for psychoanalytic concepts. The principal question which the second option raises therefore is whether psychoanalytic theory, in allowing itself to be subsumed within some more general programme of psychological explanation, one which takes its cue from evolutionary theory or brain science rather than the concepts and problems of common sense psychology, will find that its claims stand up to such scrutiny, and continue to be capable of underwriting psychoanalysis as a distinctive therapeutic practice.

Both of the preceding accept the incompatibility of naturalism with our fundamental self-conception. The third option is to attempt their conciliation. In so far as the requisite concepts do not lie ready to hand, novel theoretical construction is called for, and here again we are referred back to classical German philosophy. Though one wing of the post-Kantian development held fast to Kant's dualism of Freedom and Nature, another aimed at its overcoming. Hegel, again:

But the need for comprehension here is stimulated even more by the oppositions, which at once present themselves, between the mind's freedom and the mind's determinism, of the free agency of the soul in contrast to the bodiliness external to it, and again the intimate connection between the two. In experience too the phenomena of animal magnetism in particular have given, in recent times, a visible confirmation of the substantial unity of the soul, and of the power of its ideality. Before these phenomena, the rigid distinctions of the intellect are thrown into disarray; and the necessity of a speculative examination for the dissolution of the contradictions is displayed more directly.

It is highly significant that Hegel, seeking an empirical manifestation of the substantial unity of free mind and bodily mind, should refer to Mesmer's attempt to cure nervous illness by means of hypnosis, for it was with hypnotism as a treatment for hysteria that Freud's psychological researches began. Hegel does not however intend to offer mesmerism as a proof of the relevant underlying identity – on his account, speculative philosophy is needed to dissolve what are, for ordinary human understanding, insuperable contradictions. Suppose we agree with Hegel that unification is the proper theoretical goal, but doubt his speculative method. In what ways might psychoanalysis try to work towards it?
There are some obvious ways in which a start can be made, and which we find explored in post-Freudian thought, especially the Kleinian school and object-relations theory. Here the more crudely biologistic cum mechanistic features of Freudian explanation – drive understood as sheer instinctual pressure, subject to a law of homeostasis – are excised in favour of a conception of unconscious activity as consisting in forms of thinking directed at distinctive objects, compounds of the real and the phantastical located in an inner world.

This is a beginning, but more is needed. In a recent paper, Jonathan Lear offers an account of psychoanalysis which allows us to specify what this is.22 As Lear formulates it, in Aristotelian vocabulary, the aim of psychoanalysis is to put the rational and non-rational parts of the soul in communication with another and, by informing the non-rational with reason, to bring it about that they speak in the same voice: when this is achieved, the subject experiences her self-conscious speech as the unison of plural, concerted voices, and as efficacious. Whether this overcomes Sartre's sticking point depends on whether we can be thought to be capable of forming a new concept, acquiring a new and amplified understanding, of what it is for a mental state to be 'mine'.

References


2 Censorship is introduced in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900–01), but Sartre appears to be working from Freud's broader expositions in the Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (1916–17), Lectures 9 and 19, and perhaps New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (1933), Lecture 29. See Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 24 Vols., trans. under the general editorship of James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953–74): Vol. 4, pp. 141–145; Vol. 15, pp. 139–141; Vol. 16, pp. 292–296; Vol. 22, pp. 15–16. Freud asks that the censor not be pictured as a 'manikin or a spirit' closeted in the brain – 'it is nothing more than a serviceable term for describing a dynamic relation' (Vol. 15, p. 140). But everything turns on the analysis of this 'dynamic relation'.

3 The point is familiar from Daniel Dennett and Jerry Fodor. See Robert Cummins, The Nature of Psychological Explanation (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), Ch. 4.

4 This contention is associated closely with Merleau-Ponty, and the issues raised have been explored recently by John McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus: see Joseph K. Scheer (ed.), Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate (London: Routledge, 2013).
Going back to Plotinus: *Enneads*, V.3.1–7. Prominent contemporary critics of the view that self-relations are fundamental — as maintained in the school of Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank — include Jürgen Habermas and Ernst Tugendhat.


8 It is indicative of the genuinely naturalistic character of Freud's theory, and of Sartre's having located his target correctly, that the same key elements — partition of the mind, and a blurring of the distinction between intentional psychology and biological-functional explanation — reappear in a contemporary attempt to view self-deception in an evolutionary perspective: see Robert Trivers, *Deceit and Self-Deception: Fooling Yourself the Better to Fool Others* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).


12 *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 25 and 439–444.


16 *Being and Nothingness*, Pt. 4, Ch. 2, Sect. 1, pp. 557–575.


19 Ibid, p. 252.

20 See the innovative work of Jim Hopkins:
http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/philosophy/people/staff/associates/emeritus/hopkins/index.asp
