

Philosophy, psychoanalysis and the a-rational mind. By LINDA A. W. BRAKEL. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. viii + 197. Price £32.95)

In her work, Linda Brakel seeks ‘to demonstrate that psychoanalysis as a general theory of mind rests upon a core set of [sound] fundamental assumptions... [which] place psychoanalysis within the framework of ordinary, normal scientific investigation’ (vii). That the most fundamental assumptions of psychoanalysis are metapsychological rather than clinical, i.e. concern psychoanalysis as a general theory of mind rather than a therapeutic practice, has been disputed, as Brakel notes. Nevertheless, the five assumptions she identifies have good claim to play the role she assigns. They are:

1. Psychic continuity: that a subject’s psychological events can all be understood as psychologically meaningful;
2. Psychic determinism: that a subject’s psychological events all have, as at least one of their causes, a psychological cause, and so can be explained, in part, on a psychological basis;
3. The existence of psychologically meaningful unconscious states and processes (Freud’s idea of a ‘dynamic’ unconscious, as opposed to a sub-personal cognitive unconscious operating with heuristics and algorithms)
4. The use of free association as a methodological tool for discovering a subject’s meaningful unconscious states and activities
5. The existence of two distinct forms of mental processing, a-rational, associative ‘primary’ process, and rational ‘secondary’ process

The third assumption is necessitated by the first two, since conscious mental states and events, taken on their own, do not display continuity and determinism. Free association – the expression or description of conscious mental states as they occur in the clinical setting, censoring nothing – displays this apparent violation of continuity and determinism par excellence, but also provides the psychological content needed to ‘fill in the gaps’. That there exists, alongside our familiar rational processes of thought, a different a-rational form of thought is demonstrated by this data, on the basis of the other assumptions.

In *Philosophy, psychoanalysis and the a-rational mind*, Brakel focuses her discussion on the nature of primary process, and its relation to a range of philosophical views. While the discussion, and Brakel’s project, is both original and much-needed in the philosophy of psychoanalysis, in the end, I found the book disappointing. The arguments and connections are repeatedly indicative rather than deeply and cogently unified into a coherent whole. For instance, her rebuttal in Ch. 2 of John Searle’s objection to unconscious mental states (*The Rediscovery of the Mind*, Ch. 7) does no more than protest at his definition of the mental in terms of consciousness and raise a few awkward questions. A more thorough and satisfactory argument had already been presented by David Livingstone Smith in 2004 (‘Freud and Searle on the Ontology of the Unconscious’ in J. Mills (ed.) *Psychoanalysis at the Limit*, pp. 73-90). In Ch. 3, Brakel discusses the place of a-rational thought in Kant’s account of synthesis, and argues that Kant believed that a-rational association between representations, yielding merely ‘subjective’ judgments, occurs prior to the rational unification of representations by the categories into judgments regarding objects. While interesting, I was left wanting more, as Brakel does not move beyond noting that the rationality that characterizes the category-based operations of the understanding (which she claims is equivalent to secondary process thought) is absent in Kant’s pre-categorical associationism as in primary process. Ch. 9 is particularly frustrating in its lack of depth. In just five pages, Brakel undertakes to dispose of the influential interpretations of psychoanalysis given by Sebastian Gardner, Jonathan Lear and Marcia Cavell. There are misreadings here, too. For instance, she argues that because Gardner holds that phantasies are ‘pre-propositional’ in content (*Irrationality*

and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis, Ch. 5-6), he ‘must turn’ (170) to Kleinian psychoanalysis, and then takes this as an objection to his view. But, first, many variants in psychoanalytic theory, esp. object-relations theory, are comfortably combined with a commitment to ‘pre-propositional’ content, so Gardner’s privileging of Klein must be explained otherwise; and there are philosophical arguments quite independent of psychoanalytic considerations for thinking there can be non-propositional content (e.g. ‘I love you’ has no translation into attitudes that take full propositions, as Searle noted back in 1983 (*Intentionality*, Ch. 1, §V)).

At the heart of Brakel’s project, she says, is the provision of a ‘proper function’ account, à la Millikan, of primary process: ‘primary processes, when functioning properly, enhance the selective fitness success of those using primary process mentation’ (12). Brakel is seeking to meet an acute need in the philosophy of psychoanalysis in providing a theory of mental content. Many philosophers hold that for a mental state to have content, it must be part of a holistically rational system of propositional attitudes. The assumption of rationality is necessary to determine (both constitute and fix) content. However, primary process is a-rational. It is without tense (insensitive to the passage of time), is unconcerned with the relation between representation and reality, tolerates contradictions, and is not unified in a continuous point of view or self (61-2). What kind of mental content could this be?

Millikan argues for the determination of content in terms of proper function. Very roughly, the proper function of some mechanism, process or organ is the function it performs such that its operation under Normal conditions in the past contributed to the selective fitness of the organism. The Normal conditions for phantasy, suggests Brakel, are that p is phantasized now only in those cases in which p does not now obtain, but that p will obtain later, and the phantasy that p affords some useful practice for the subject at the time at which p comes to obtain. This is seen in animals’ play; the phantasy – of fighting, mating, preying, fleeing – that accompanies play has its content fixed through its proper function.

This is an intriguing suggestion, but I cannot see how it works as a defence of primary process. Brakel asserts that the play-phantasy has the four characteristics of primary process, but this does not seem to be so. If phantasy is sensitive to the Normal conditions that p does not now obtain, then it is truth-sensitive. This sensitivity is exemplified in animals’ play, as in our conscious imagination generally, where there is a controlling belief that what is played at is not ‘real’ but ‘pretend’. As Brakel herself notes later (116-7), without this belief in place, the behaviour would not be playful, but in earnest. And so, despite her later note, Brakel appears to have confused primary process, which fails to distinguish reality from imagination (as in dreaming), with conscious imagination which is typically experienced as imagination, not hallucination. Furthermore, the proper function of phantasy on Brakel’s account gives a very different, and far more restrictive, conception of the typical content of primary process from classical Freudian wish-fulfilment, which commonly (e.g. in neurotic symptoms) does not provide practice for the real world. It could be that primary process in human beings now typically operates under abNormal conditions, but this is neither suggested nor discussed. (A different way to try to meet the rationalist’s challenge is to expand on the work done in philosophy of imagination and perception. Imagistic content does not readily meet Davidsonian strictures, and there is a body of work attempting to make sense of this.)

I have focused on Brakel’s proper function account of primary process as she identifies it as the heart of her project. But it would be very one-sided not to mention the very interesting, detailed, and more successful discussions of the nature of ‘neurotic beliefs’ and of desire in Ch. 7 and 8. The chapters are rich in ideas that will repay careful consideration, and her argument here vindicates her intention to show that psychoanalytic concepts and clinical theories can benefit

from philosophical rigour, while philosophy of mind can be enriched by engaging with psychoanalytic observations.

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