

# **The Psychodynamic Self: a true integration of Mind and Body**

**Jane Anderson  
208527048**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social  
Science in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.**

**2010**

**Supervisor: Prof Simon Beck**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project represents the investigation of a question which has always been close to my heart. I am especially grateful to my supervisor, Simon Beck, for encouraging me, guiding me, and keeping my enthusiasm focused in the right direction.

Thanks to all those who gave up time to discuss various aspects of the project with me – your help has been invaluable.

In particular, I would like to acknowledge Roelf van Niekerk: he was the one who first inspired me with a passion for Freud.

The financial assistance of the NRF towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

## DECLARATION

I, Jane Anderson, declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

Signed:

Date:

## ABSTRACT

Philosophers have long been interested in ‘the self’ from a theoretical point of view, rather than in the everyday sense suggested by Sherrington. From Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Foucault; from the biologists to the psychologists, and the politicians to the social constructionists; clearly, *selfhood* has been recognized, emphasized and investigated. But what is not so clear is what this important and ubiquitous ‘self’ really *is*.

Those who have been involved in contemporary discussions about ‘personal identity’ usually fall into one of two broad categories: those who think that being a person is a question of having a certain kind of continuing consciousness; and those who think it is a question of being a certain kind of living creature. In this thesis, I will investigate the considerations for and against both the psychological criterion and the biological criterion of ‘personal identity’. However, neither of these criteria proves to be satisfactory, since they both encounter some serious problems which they seem to have little chance of overcoming. The shortcomings of these ‘identity criteria’ will lead me to look more closely at the logical concept of ‘identity’ – the identity of things in general, as opposed to the identity of persons, specifically. As this investigation progresses, the conclusion that this concept ‘identity’ is quite inappropriate for application to persons begins to look more and more inescapable. This being the case: having given up the ‘personal identity’ idiom, I will be faced with the problem of how to salvage some of our common-sense intuitions about what it means to be a person – to have a *self*. In this problem, I will allow myself to be guided by Sigmund Freud: a writer to whose expertise, and incredible insight, I can only hope to do adequate justice.

Freud remained adamant, throughout his career, that the explanations for most psychological phenomena were firmly rooted in biology. When he was writing (the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), Freud and his contemporaries lacked the knowledge and technologies that would have enabled them to spell out the exact mechanisms by which the psychological phenomena he proposed might be realized. But we no longer lack these technologies. Contemporary neuroscience, although it is not sufficiently advanced to investigate *all* the Freudian concepts relevant to this discussion of selfhood, has made some great steps towards confirming and elaborating on Freud’s insights. We are not psychological selves. We are not biological selves. We are selves that are both psychological and biological.

We are, in fact, Freudian selves.

# CONTENTS

<b>Chapter One – Introduction</b>	1
<b>Chapter Two – The Psychological Criterion</b>	
<b>2.1 The original ‘memory criterion’</b>	2
2.1.1 <i>Locke’s four-fold contribution (Flew)</i>	2
2.1.2 <i>Locke’s thinking intelligent being</i>	3
2.1.3 <i>Problems</i>	5
2.1.4 <i>Solutions</i>	6
<b>2.2 Modern Formulations</b>	8
2.2.1 <i>Locke on ‘consciousness’ vs ‘memory’</i>	8
2.2.2 <i>Psychological Continuity</i>	9
2.2.3 <i>Problems</i>	10
<b>2.3 Why the psychological criterion is unsatisfactory</b>	12
<b>Chapter Three – The Biological Criterion</b>	
<b>3.1 Animalism</b>	14
3.1.1 <i>What animalism says (and what it does not say)</i>	14
3.1.2 <i>Being an Animal</i>	15
3.1.3 <i>Alternatives</i>	17
3.1.4 <i>Another Argument for Animalism</i>	18
3.1.5 <i>Hard Choices</i>	20
<b>3.2 Why the biological criterion is unsatisfactory</b>	21
<b>Chapter Four – Identity and Identity Criteria</b>	
<b>4.1 Constitution</b>	22
4.1.1 <i>Constitution according to Garrett</i>	23
4.1.2 <i>Constitution, Animalism and Lockeanism</i>	25
<b>4.2 Identity Suited to the Idea</b>	
4.2.1 <i>Identity of Substance; Identity of living creatures</i>	26
4.2.2 <i>Personal Identity</i>	27
4.2.3 <i>The Forensic Term</i>	27
4.2.4 <i>The Problem with Identity</i>	29

## Chapter Five – The Psychodynamic Self

### 5.1 The legacy of Sigmund Freud 31

#### Part One – Biology

### 5.2 Motivation 33

5.2.1 *The Pleasure Principle* 33

5.2.2 *The Nature of Instincts – The Compulsion to Repeat* 35

5.2.3 *The Death Instincts* 36

5.2.4 *The Life Instincts* 38

#### Part Two – Psychology

### 5.3 The structure of consciousness 40

5.3.1 *Consciousness, Unconsciousness, and Preconsciousness (and Repression)* 40

5.3.2 *Free Association* 41

### 5.4 Structures of the Mind 42

5.4.1 *The Ego* 42

5.4.2 *The Id* 43

5.4.3 *The Super-ego* 44

#### Part Three – The Union of Biology and Psychology: The Dynamic Unconscious

### 5.5 The Dream Work 47

5.5.1 *The Nature of Sleep, and the Function of Dreams* 47

5.5.2 *Children's Dreams* 49

5.5.3 *Dream Distortion* 50

### 5.6 Psychodynamic metaphysics 52

5.6.1 *An Evolutionary Role for the Dynamic Unconscious* 53

5.6.2 *A Functionalist Approach* 54

5.6.3 *Freud's Agnosticism* 55

## Chapter Six – The Integrated Self

### 6.1 The Dream Work and the Neurosciences 57

6.1.1 *The Dreaming Brain* 58

6.1.2 *The dreaming brain and The Dream Work* 59

### 6.2 The Self and Its Brain 61

6.2.1 *Commissurotomy: the Mind Divided* 61

6.2.2 *A Modified View of the Nature of Consciousness* 63

6.2.3 *Consciousness and the Self* 65

## Conclusion 68

## ONE – INTRODUCTION

Each waking day is a stage dominated for good or ill, in comedy, farce or tragedy by a *dramatis persona*, the ‘self’, and so it will be until the curtain drops.

C.S. Sherrington, 1947<sup>1</sup>.

It is not only the man on the street who is struck by this *dramatis persona*. Philosophers have long been interested in ‘the self’ from a theoretical point of view, rather than in the everyday sense suggested by Sherrington. From Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Foucault; from the biologists to the psychologists, and the politicians to the social constructionists; clearly, *selfhood* has been recognized, emphasized and investigated. But what is not so clear is what this important and ubiquitous ‘self’ really *is*.

Those who have been involved in contemporary discussions about ‘personal identity’ usually fall into one of two broad categories: those who think that being a person is a question of having a certain kind of continuing consciousness; and those who think it is a question of being a certain kind of living creature. In this thesis, I will investigate the considerations for and against both the psychological criterion and the biological criterion of ‘personal identity’. However, neither of these criteria proves to be satisfactory, since they both encounter some serious problems which they seem to have little chance of overcoming. The shortcomings of these ‘identity criteria’ will lead me to look more closely at the logical concept of ‘identity’ – the identity of things in general, as opposed to the identity of persons, specifically. As this investigation progresses, the conclusion that this concept ‘identity’ is quite inappropriate for application to persons begins to look more and more inescapable. This being the case: having given up the ‘personal identity’ idiom, I will be faced with the problem of how to salvage some of our common-sense intuitions about what it means to be a person – to have a *self*. In this problem, I will allow myself to be guided by Sigmund Freud: a writer to whose expertise, and incredible insight, I can only hope to do adequate justice.

Freud remained adamant, throughout his career, that the explanations for most psychological phenomena were firmly rooted in biology. When he was writing (the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), Freud and his contemporaries lacked the knowledge and technologies that would have enabled them to spell out the exact mechanisms by which the psychological phenomena he proposed might be realized. But we no longer lack these technologies. Contemporary neuroscience, although it is not sufficiently advanced to investigate *all* the Freudian concepts relevant to this discussion of selfhood, has made some great steps towards confirming and elaborating on Freud’s insights. We are not psychological selves. We are not biological selves. We are selves that are both psychological and biological.

We are, in fact, Freudian selves.

---

<sup>1</sup> In Popper & Eccles, 1977 (in the Dedication).

## TWO – THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITERION

This chapter is concerned with the ‘psychological continuity’ view of personal identity: the idea that being the same person is a question of having continuous access to thoughts, feelings, memories, etc, ‘from the inside’. I am the same person today as I was yesterday just in case I *feel* like the same person; what *makes* me the same person is just this interior sameness that I experience.

Psychological continuity includes, but is not limited to, continuity of memory; sameness of ambitions, values, and various aspects of psychology and character are also part of this ‘identity criterion’. This view of personal identity in terms of psychological continuity does seem to capture an important intuition we have about what it means to be the same person; but in one respect, it is sadly inadequate. It completely fails to recognize the importance of our bodies.

### 2.1 The original ‘memory criterion’

Locke is usually taken as the paradigm proponent of the ‘memory criterion’ of personal identity. On this view, one is the same person now as at some time in the past if and only if one is able to access past experiences and actions directly in one’s memory. Famously, Locke claimed that the term ‘person’ stands for “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places ... in this alone consists personal identity, i.e., the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person”.<sup>2</sup> If an individual *thinks* she is the same person as some previous individual, then, on Locke’s terms, she *is* this individual.

#### 2.1.1 *Locke’s Four-Fold Contribution*

Flew succinctly summarizes the significance of Locke’s ideas to the personal identity debate. Locke’s first contribution was that he recognised the importance of the question. In the *Essay*, he claims that “[i]n this personal identity is founded all the right and justice of reward and punishment” (E.H.U., Vol. I, p. 459),<sup>6</sup> not only of the sort that man sees fit to visit upon his fellows, but also the divine reward and punishment that shall be meted out at the final day of judgment. He was interested less in how to spell out what it is that makes someone the same person, in metaphysical terms, and more in what it is about being a person that makes a person a

---

<sup>2</sup> Locke, in Perry, 1975, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Flew, 1951, p. 53.

moral agent; an agent who is responsible for her actions. This will be important when Locke talks about the logic of the concept of personal identity (chapter four) – because he says that it is a *forensic* concept.

Secondly, Locke recognised the way in which the ‘puzzle cases’ familiar in personal identity debates inform any proposed solutions to the problem. Such cases have taken on a central role in personal identity discussions. Locke says: suppose a man, believing in reincarnation, was convinced that his ‘soul’ had once been Socrates’ soul. It would be very strange to say that this man *was* Socrates, in spite of his having no consciousness of any of Socrates’ actions or thoughts<sup>7</sup> – we will find, when we think about thought experiments used by contemporary writers to back up their views, that they follow this general pattern laid down by Locke.

Thirdly, Locke insisted that ‘same’ was ambiguous; that in the expression ‘the same man’, for example, the word had a distinct meaning from its meaning in ‘the same person’ (that, in fact, there would be as many different kinds of ‘identity’ as there were discrete categories of things of which the ‘identity’ could be investigated). This insight, as we will see (in chapter 4) is crucial to Locke’s claim that being the ‘same person’ is not the same thing as being the ‘same man’.

Lastly, Locke proposed a [definite] solution to this personal identity problem whose importance he had recognized:

That with which the consciousness of this present thinking thing can join itself, makes the same person, and is one self with it, and with nothing else; and so attributes to itself and owns all the actions of that thing, as its own, as far as that consciousness reaches, and no further; as everyone who reflects will perceive.

Locke, 1964, in Flew, 1951, p. 55.

### 2.1.2 *Locke’s thinking intelligent being:*

Although, expressed in this way, the claim seems both perfectly clear and perfectly straightforward, closer investigation shows that the case is not without problems. Locke says

But that which seems to make the difficulty is this, that this consciousness being interrupted always by forgetfulness, there being no moment of our lives wherein we have the whole train of all our past actions before our eyes in one view, but even the best memories losing the sight of one part whilst they are viewing another; and we sometimes, and that the greatest part of our lives, not reflecting on our past selves, being intent on our present thoughts, and in sound sleep having no thoughts at all, or at least none with that consciousness which remarks

---

<sup>7</sup> Locke (Section 14), in Perry, 1975, p. 44.

our waking thoughts; I say, in all these cases, our consciousness being interrupted, and we losing the sight of our past selves, doubts are raised whether we are the same thinking thing, i.e., the same substance or no.

Locke, 1694, in Perry, 1975, p. 40.

This has been a point on which some critics have laid much emphasis: how can being the same person be a question of continuity of consciousness, when consciousness is in fact *not* continuous – when it is regularly interrupted, as during sleep? But in one sense, the worry hardly seems worthy of serious consideration: the ‘continuity’ Locke is referring to is not continuity in the sense of the uninterrupted progression through time of conscious awareness – it is in the sense of the many aspects of awareness that survive *in spite of* such temporal gaps in consciousness. The sleeper goes to bed with his mind full of beliefs, desires, and projects – and awakens the next morning with most of these still intact, ready to take up his life where he left off.

But there is a sense in which the problem of sleep is more serious for Locke’s account – the sense in which it disrupts the relationship between conscious awareness (the thinking thing) and the ‘thinking substance’ that underpins it. Locke thought that his thinking thing was made possible by the existence of some kind of ‘immaterial’ substance, which he thought of as different from, but analogous to, material substances. The problem of sleep, in this context, is this: even if conscious awareness itself can continue in spite of periods of unconsciousness, couldn’t these periods of unconsciousness allow a different (immaterial) thinking substance to take over the constitution of a (/the same) thinking thing/person? – or couldn’t the same thinking substance at some point become a different person? Locke does not presume to have a final answer. Rather, he explains how different views about how thinking can come about in the first place entail corresponding views on the relation of thinking thing to substance.

He suggests that anyone who believes thinking is an unmysterious aspect of ‘animal constitution’ would accept that personal identity *could* be preserved in the change of immaterial substances – just as the identity of animals is preserved in the change of material particles united to their bodies. That such identity *can* be preserved in spite of material changes he thinks is evident: “[c]ut off a [limb], and thereby separate it from that consciousness [which the animal/person] had of its heat, cold, and other affections, and it is then no longer a part of that which is himself, any more than the remotest part of matter”<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, people (Cartesian dualists) who “place thinking in an immaterial substance only” take the view that the same immaterial substance is needed for the continuation of the same person. Locke thinks that, since even Cartesians would usually accept that the identity of animals is preserved in spite of the change of the material (parts of the) body, the burden of proof would be on these individuals to show why personal identity could not be preserved even if the immaterial substance (that thinks) were changed.

---

<sup>8</sup> Locke, in Perry, 1975, p 41.

And here, claims Locke, the Cartesians are in trouble. Unless they admit that some kind of ‘immaterial substance’ unites the various components of the animal’s physical body, it is unclear what principle they could suggest on which these components could belong to the same animal. But the idea that it is an immaterial substance which unites the material particles of the body of an animal is something “the Cartesians ... will not admit, for fear of making brutes thinking things too”<sup>9</sup>. Any Cartesian who wants to maintain that personal identity cannot be preserved in spite of change in immaterial substance/thinking thing would have to be able to show why this case of changing immaterial substance (which does not allow the ‘person’ to be preserved) is unlike the case of changing material substance (which allows the animal whose physical body is changing to retain its identity) – and Locke evidently thinks that this cannot be done.

In sum: on Locke’s criterion, sameness of consciousness is both necessary and sufficient for personal identity. “[I]f Socrates and the present mayor of Queensborough agree, they are the same person: if the same Socrates waking and sleeping do not partake of the same consciousness, Socrates waking and sleeping is not the same person.”<sup>10</sup> This ‘sameness of consciousness’ which he has in mind is jeopardized neither by periods of unconsciousness/sleep nor by the possibility that the ‘immaterial substance’ which underpins it might change.

### 2.1.3 Problems

The first main charge that the critics lay at Locke’s door is the charge of circularity (Bishop Butler is often named as the originator of the circularity objection). Obviously, “[i]t is absurd to say that ‘he is the same person’ *means* ‘he can remember that he is the same person,’” although “[t]he absurdity is usually slightly masked since expressions such as ‘I remember doing, feeling, seeing something’ do not contain explicit reference to the fact that what is remembered is that the speaker is the same person as did, felt, or saw whatever it was.”<sup>11</sup>

The second major criticism is that Locke’s ‘memory theory’ is said to be simultaneously too broad, and too narrow: “for in many cases where we would want to apply the expression ‘same person’, his definition would not allow us to do so; whereas in some other cases where we should certainly regard it as inappropriate, Locke would have to claim that it was correctly applicable.”

The memory criterion is taken as ‘too narrow’ because, on this criterion, ordinary forgetting is ruled out. If a person cannot remember her own previous actions, she is no longer the same person as the one who acted. Reid, for example, says:

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Locke (Section 19), in Perry, 1975, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Flew, 1951, p. 55.

Suppose a brave officer to have been flogged when a boy at school for robbing an orchard, to have taken a standard from the enemy in his first campaign, and to have been made a general in advanced life; suppose, also, which must be admitted to be possible, that, when he took the standard, he was conscious of his having been flogged at school, and that, when made a general, he was conscious of his taking the standard, but had absolutely lost consciousness of his flogging.

Thomas Reid, “Of Mr Locke’s account of our personal identity”, 1785. In Simon Beck, *Philosophy and Ethics*, UKZN (Lecture notes): Personal Identity (2008).

Since the general has no memory of his childhood flogging, the memory criterion would not allow us to say that the general and the boy were the same person – which is nonsensical. The account of personhood we decide is correct *must* enable us to explain the ordinary way in which children grow up, and in which people form new memories and lose old ones; this is precisely what we need an account of personal identity *for*.

The memory criterion is taken as ‘too broad’, because, on this criterion, if a person has a ‘memory’ of doing something, this is sufficient proof that the person who is remembering the action is the same as the person who performed the action. But this is also nonsensical. Just a little investigation at the local police station or newspaper should suffice to show that when appeals are made to members of the public who might have information regarding a crime, any number of people come forward, claiming to ‘remember’ witnessing what they could not possibly have witnessed. If somebody in fact did *not* do a thing, then – regardless of whether or not the person claims to remember doing it – we definitely wouldn’t want to say that she was the same person as the one who did whatever it was.

#### 2.1.4 Solutions

The ‘circularity’ problem is a problem for Locke if he says that someone is the same person just in case she can remember that she is the same person; but actually, this is not what he says. Locke is very careful to keep his discussion of ‘spirit’ (/immaterial substance) separate from his discussion of ‘person’ (/thinking thing), and this is what keeps him out of the circularity trap:

No one could guarantee by definition that a spirit's thinking it did something ensured that, if any spirit did it, it was the same spirit as the one that did it. But Locke can guarantee by definition that if a spirit thinks it did something then if any spirit did it, it is the same *person* as the one that did it. And this is what he does.

Noonan, 1978, p. 347-348.

Basically, this is the same kind of solution as the one I discussed with regard to the problem of sleep (2.1.2). For all anybody knows, a different spirit (/immaterial substance) *could* creep in through the sleeper's ear, and displace the spirit that was there before; but Locke is not concerned with what it is that enables the person to think she is the same person as the person who did some prior action. He is not making a (circular) claim: he is giving a definition. If there is some kind of thing that thinks (maybe a 'spirit'), and this thing thinks it did some action, then this thing that thinks is the same *person* as the thing (/spirit) that really did do the action.

Similarly the 'too narrow' problem is only a problem for somebody who has not appreciated the distinction Locke draws between 'thinking thing'/'person' and thinking substance. What Locke can't say is that if one has forgotten an action or experience, then one can't (physically) be the same (immaterial) substance (/spirit) that was present at the former time; but he can and does say that, on his terms, and by definition, one cannot be the same 'person'.

As far as regards its being too broad, Flew claims that Locke himself tacitly acknowledged the failure of his own criterion. He says that Locke admits the possibility of a person 'remembering' doing something which she in fact did not do, and that he appeals to God's goodness to prevent such cases from actually occurring ("as far as the happiness or misery of any of his sensible creatures is concerned [God] will not, by a fatal error of theirs, transfer from one to another that consciousness which draws reward or punishment with it" (I, p. 454)). If this is indeed what Locke is conceding, the concession would spell disaster for any analysis of personal identity in terms of memory, "[f]or [Locke] is admitting, what is quite fatal to his own analysis of personal identity, that it is not self-contradictory to say that someone 'remembers' doing something and yet never did do it."<sup>12</sup>

But I think it is reasonable to take this 'admission' of Locke's not as an admission of the shortcomings of his theory, but as a mark of his respect for actual evidence, as opposed to theoretical reasoning. Locke acknowledges that it is *possible* for someone to 'remember' something she did not in fact experience; but asserts that, in most cases, empirical evidence will be sufficient to show when such 'memories' are fictitious. Hughes says that the Lockean "need not think it impossible in all cases, if the internal evidence of the memory warrants it, to believe that the human pattern of memory has been continued from one body to another or from an embodied to a disembodied substance"<sup>13</sup> – which is, of course, far from saying that such evidence *has* been or even *could ever be* produced.

Viewed in this light, Locke's claims can be read with much more sympathy than they often are. Critics usually claim that Locke is appealing to the goodness of God to ensure that somebody

---

<sup>12</sup> Flew, 1951, p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Hughes, 1975, p. 173.

should not ‘remember’ somebody else’s actions; but, on my reading, he is actually acknowledging that ensuring this is problematic – that “why one intellectual substance may not have represented to it, as done by itself, what it never did ... will be difficult to conclude from the nature of things”<sup>14</sup>. He is saying that, although we do not understand *why* people do not usually remember other people’s actions, we observe that this is the case; he is saying that it *is* possible for a person to ‘remember’ somebody else’s actions; and, observing that this happens only very infrequently, he is suggesting that it could just be a mark of God’s goodness that this is so. At any rate, leaving the reasons for our predominant lack of false memories in God’s hands is the best way that he – not possessing a clear understanding of the ways of ‘thinking substances’ – is at the moment able to account for this. If Locke had come across any twenty-first century philosophers with a knowledge of neuroscience, and they had provided good physiological evidence to show why false memories occur only very occasionally, I would expect him to have been quite happy to accept that an appeal to God’s goodness was no longer necessary. If some spirit thought it remembered doing something it did not do, it would not be the same spirit – but it *would* be the same person.

## 2.2 Modern Formulations

Today, a pure memory criterion (which is what – in my opinion, unfairly – Locke is usually taken to have been endorsing) enjoys little support, and this is to some extent due to the three main criticisms of his account that I have been discussing. But I don’t believe that any of these three criticisms seriously threaten Locke’s account of persons; because, whether or not it would be possible to defend an account of personal identity *purely* in terms of memory, I think it is wrong to read Locke as proposing such an account.

### 2.2.1 Locke on ‘consciousness’ versus ‘memory’

In some places (e.g. *Identity and Diversity*, section 13) Locke does speak of ‘consciousness’ in a way that seems to make it synonymous with memory: “a present representation of a past action”; but he also seems to use it in a different sense: the sense of “the present registration by the mind of its present activity”<sup>15</sup> – as when the thinking thing recognizes itself as itself, the same thinking thing, at different times and places. In this second sense, it might be significant that he always talks about *consciousness* (as opposed to memory) – for example, “[t]hat with which *the consciousness*

---

<sup>14</sup> Locke (Section 13), in Perry, 1975, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, 1975, p. 171.

of this present thinking thing can join itself”<sup>16</sup>. And in the same breath as claiming that being a person is a question of being “a thinking intelligent being”, Locke adds that it considers itself as itself, “only by that *consciousness* which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it”<sup>17</sup>. I think it is implausible, to say the least, to take ‘consciousness which is inseparable from thinking’ to be the same as ‘memory’.

Unless he was guilty of using the same term to denote two different concepts, a plausible interpretation of this usage is that Locke takes ‘a present representation of a past action’ (i.e. memory) as simply *one aspect of* ‘consciousness’.

### 2.2.2 *Psychological Continuity*

But whether or not this really is what Locke was proposing, the ‘memory criterion’ does form the basis of ‘Psychological Continuity’ accounts of personal identity – and it is this account which has been endorsed by most personal identity writers from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century on<sup>18</sup>. On the psychological continuity view, “a person at the present time is the same as some person in the past if the present person *has enough memories of the past to allow for a conception of herself as a continuing subject*”. By thus moderating the ‘strong’ criterion of absolute memory, these theorists accommodate the fact that no person remembers every single experience of her life by appealing instead to “overlapping chains” of memory<sup>19</sup>.

Additionally, they assert that psychological connections other than memory (for example, persisting beliefs/desires/values, and connections between intentions and actions) also form part of the ‘psychological continuity’ they are referring to. Olson says that, according to psychological continuity theorists, what makes some future individual *me* is the fact that that individual “in some sense inherits its mental features – beliefs, memories, preferences, the capacity for rational thought, that sort of thing” from me; I am the past individual whose mental features I have thus inherited.<sup>20</sup>

Atkins takes Shoemaker’s views in this regard as representative of psychological continuity views in general.

Shoemaker points out that not everything about personal identity hangs on memory continuity, and the account so far needs to be broadened to encompass causal continuity in personality traits: one’s interests, tastes, dispositions, and so forth. A person has continuity in identity when that person has continuity in memory and personality, in other words, psychological continuity.

---

<sup>16</sup> Locke (Section 17), in Perry, 1975, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> Locke (Section 9), in Perry, 1975, p. 39 (my emphasis).

<sup>18</sup> Olson, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Schechtman, 2005, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Olson, 2008.

Schechtman even goes so far as to say that ‘psychological continuity’ has two distinct elements: the continuation of a single stream of consciousness (in terms of e.g. ‘memory connections’), and the continuation of ‘psychological’ features, such as personality traits<sup>21</sup>. This distinction becomes crucial in cases where memory (of experiences, past events etc.) is lost, but personality (e.g. “character traits, commitments, mannerisms, and patterns of attachment”<sup>22</sup>) is retained; or where ‘personality’ undergoes radical changes, although ‘memory’ remains largely intact. Different parts of the brain have been found to be needed for general, ‘how-to’ (or ‘procedural’) memory, for specific (‘episodic’) memory of actual events, and for various aspects of personality or affective characteristics; and this supports Schechtman’s suggestion that ‘psychological continuity’ should be understood as a much broader relation than purely the continuity of a stream of consciousness.

Something which is thus of the utmost importance about this ‘broader’ (psychological continuity) account – and something which Locke completely failed to consider – is that it allows *unconscious* psychological features to play a part in constituting personal identity. It is not only forgotten memories, or cognitive capacities, that are permitted to feature as part of the continuity of someone’s consciousness, but also thoughts and memories that *were never* conscious – and the kinds of ‘preferences’, or patterns of responding, that are so deeply rooted in someone’s psychological make-up that the person could probably never become conscious of them.

This will be a central theme in Freud’s account of personhood (chapter five).

### 2.2.3 Problems

The psychological continuity theorists think that they have improved on the ‘memory’ theory (which they – erroneously? – ascribed to Locke) by broadening it to include other kinds of continuity; but if I am right in my reading of Locke (in 2.2.1), this ‘broadened’ criterion is no departure from his own understanding of ‘consciousness’ (as opposed to ‘memory’). In fact, the psychological continuity theorists are in a *worse* position than (they believe) Locke is in – they have no ‘thinking thing’ (person)/‘thinking substance’ (spirit) distinction to get them out of trouble when they start encountering difficulties of ‘circularity’, ‘excessive weakness’ and ‘excessive strength’. This broader ‘psychological continuity’ criterion is in exactly the same logical position as a memory criterion would be with regard to circularity worries: if it is a problem for the memory criterion that it defines ‘being the same person’ as ‘being able to remember that one is the same person’, then of course it must, equally, be a problem for the psychological continuity criterion that it defines ‘being

---

<sup>21</sup> Schechtman, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Schechtman, 2004, p. 91.

the same person' as 'having psychological links with those persons with whom one is the same person'.

The psychological continuity criterion is just as vulnerable to the 'too weak' objection as is the memory criterion. Replacing 'memory' with 'overlapping chains of direct memory' will obviously not address the difficulties posed by forgotten incidents and false memories. On the face of it, there does not seem to be much difference between a memory which has simply been lost, and a chain of memories which has been broken at a certain point; and it seems just as plausible that someone could have a certain number of false memory connections as false memories *simpliciter*.

One way to get around the problem of people having false memories (i.e. the 'too weak' problem) would be to stipulate that their memories must have their proper cause (i.e. the impression the individual has of remembering an event must result from the individual's *in fact* having experienced it). If the psychological continuity theorist takes this course, the cases where an individual is incorrectly identified as 'the same' as another whose experiences she (falsely) seems to remember are ruled out. But how is 'proper cause' to be cashed out? Surely, the only means of determining whether an individual's 'memory' of an event is or is not veridical is to appeal to some kind of physical, causal pathway between the event and the individual's perceptual and/or memory processes?

But this is precisely what the psychological continuity theorist cannot admit: that identity might be a question of physical continuity rather than memory or other psychological connections. The psychological continuity theorist is *defined as* the theorist who believes that personal identity is a question of psychological continuity, rather than any other kind continuity (including physical). Whether or not this theorist accepts some kind of account of how psychological phenomena are based on physical ones, what she cannot do is call for a physical basis for the psychological phenomena she is interested in. If she did so, she would no longer be a psychological continuity theorist. She would be a physical continuity theorist.

This psychological continuity is also just as vulnerable as is the memory criterion to escape the 'too strong' objection. Applying this modified psychological continuity criterion dictates that long-ago experiences (and even whole portions of the individual's life) lost forever from her conscious mind, must still be counted as *her* experiences. And in many cases, this just goes against common sense. Although Reid's objection was lodged against the analysis of personal identity in terms of memory only, it seems just as valid against the psychological continuity account. Even if the elderly general is psychologically continuous with the young boy who stole the apples, stealing somebody's apples is no longer, in all likelihood, a thing that would even cross his mind. It seems a bit silly to say that he is 'the same person' as the young boy, to the extent that he still deserves the consequences of his thieving, even in his old age, just as much as he did as a ten-year-old.

### 2.3 Why the psychological continuity criterion is unsatisfactory

The problems of circularity, and of excessive weakness and/or strength, as well as the problem about degrees of continuity, are problems of logical form. An additional (logical) embarrassment for the psychological continuity theorist is that – since ‘psychological continuity’ is a relation that permits degrees (where there is ‘strong connectedness’ between somebody’s present consciousness and recent experiences, and ‘weak connectedness’ between present consciousness and long-ago incidents, or incidents that made only weak impressions on the consciousness) – we are faced with the problem of where, on the continuity continuum, to draw lines. Can we conclude that an individual today is the same as the individual of two days ago if, today, she is connected to the ‘self’ of yesterday by a single memory and, yesterday, she was connected by a single memory to the ‘self’ of the day before? Or is it necessary that the individual of today and two days ago are connected more strongly, say by at least two or more memories of yesterday? What if two or more individuals have the same number of memory connections over a period of time? *And what could possibly save any potential answer to this question from being totally arbitrary?*

However, whether or not these problems rule out the possibility of formulating a logically coherent account of ‘personal identity’ in terms of psychological continuity, they don’t do much to dispel our intuitive sense that psychological continuity is an important part of who we are. It just seems wrong to say that, purely because it is both too weak and too strong; or because it is circular; psychological continuity can’t be what we mean when we think of ‘personal identity’. It seems, on the contrary, that this is exactly what we do mean. At this point, it is not obvious *why* it is wrong to dismiss the psychological continuity account on these (logical) grounds, but it should become clearer later (in chapter four) how and why our intuitions in this case are right on target.

But in any case, there is another problem, not with the (logical) form, but with the (substantial) content of the psychological continuity criterion. Flew objects that any definition of ‘person’ in terms only of psychological and/or personality features fails to capture just what we mean when we use this term in everyday speech. We are quite happy to acknowledge that different ‘people’ can have quite different psychological and/or physical characteristics – *“but what they cannot be is disembodied or in the shape of elephants”*<sup>23</sup>! Persons have to have a certain form; Flew says that, necessarily, persons have to have a *human* form. Some (including Locke?) might say that persons (or thinking things) could be manifested in any form, as long they continued to think; but Flew is not one of these.

Locke's definition would make it a contingent truth about people that some or all of them are either embodied in or are of human form. But in the ordinary use of

---

<sup>23</sup> Flew, 1951, p. 59.

the word "people," ... we do not meet the fleshy houses in which they are living or the containers in which they are kept. Nor is it logically possible for cougars (or parrots!) to be people. It is in short a necessary truth that people are of human shapes and sizes; and, not a contingent fact that some or all people "inhabit" human bodies and are of human and not animal form.

Flew, 1951, p. 59.

The 'psychological continuity' criterion is, for Flew, every bit as unsatisfactory as the memory criterion; this is not because of the logical difficulties faced by both criteria, but because they are (both) equally blind to the logical necessity to 'personal identity' of human embodiment.

## THREE – THE BIOLOGICAL CRITERION

Chapter three is about the ‘biological criterion’ of personal identity; failing to recognize the importance of our bodies is precisely what this biological account is not guilty of. Eric Olson is one of the most distinguished contemporary defenders of a view which accords supreme significance to the ‘human form’ that persons necessarily take. He defends ‘Animalism’ – the view that being the same person is a question of being the same animal – and he rejects completely the idea that psychology has anything to do with personal identity. So long as I continue to be an animal, which continues to be alive, I should, on Olson’s terms, be considered the same person. However, to just the same extent that proponents of the psychological continuity view fail to recognize the significance of our embodiment, those who support the biological view neglect the important psychological aspects of being a person.

### 3.1 Animalism

Whereas the psychological continuity view says that what makes a person a person is having continued access to internal, psychological awareness, the biological view says that what makes a person a person is being a continuing, living animal. Olson’s claim is that “no sort of psychological continuity is either necessary or sufficient for a human animal to persist through time”<sup>24</sup>.

*Animalism* (or the ‘biological continuity’ account of personal identity), according to him, is by far the most satisfactory theory to account for the identity of persons.

#### 3.1.1 *What animalism says (and what it does not say)*

In spelling out exactly what Animalism entails, Olson is concerned to dismiss three misconceptions commonly held about this view. Many people share the intuition central to the arguments of modern psychological continuity theorists: personal identity and human/animal identity could, conceptually at least, be teased apart. But this is not part of the Animalist’s doctrine: Olson describes as ‘constitucionalist’ any view on which ‘person’ and ‘animal’ do not have exactly the same reference, even though the view might still say that persons *are* animals. He says “I doubt whether there is any interesting sense in which you can be something other than yourself [i.e. in which ‘you’ could *be* ‘an animal’]” – which is what you would have to be able to articulate if you wanted to say that persons ‘are’ animals in a sense which doesn’t entail ‘identical with’ (this is the

---

<sup>24</sup> Olson, 1997a, p. 124.

Constitutionalist's project). "In any case," says Olson, "the 'constitutionalists' do not say that we are animals in the straightforward sense in which I mean it. They are not animalists."<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, animalism is not the same as materialism. Since a belief in animalism entails a belief in materialism, but not vice versa, one could be a materialist without being an animalist. Finally, animalism says neither that all persons are animals, nor (even) that all human persons are. A human animal might fall short of being a person, and a person might be something other than a human animal.

What animalism does say is that all actual (human) persons are animals. Although it looks a bit as though this is no more than a statement of the very obvious, it is important, because there are numerous philosophers who deny that (human) persons are animals in any sense at all<sup>26</sup> (see below, 3.1.3). Secondly, although animalism is sometimes taken to entail that human persons (you and I) are *essentially* or *most fundamentally* animals, the doctrine is actually neutral in this regard. Saying that we are identical with human animals leaves open the question whether or not we are so fundamentally – it depends whether you think every human animal is a human animal fundamentally, or only in some contingent way.

Finally, it initially appears that there could be a contradiction in saying that an entity is 'essentially an animal', yet at the same time somehow 'more than just' an animal (in the sense that we might want to say that being a *person* was distinct from, and more than, simply being a certain kind of *animal*). But Olson is quick to reassure us: "we say that Descartes was more than just a philosopher: he was also a mathematician, a Frenchman, a Roman Catholic, and many other things. That is of course compatible with his being a philosopher." Likewise, there should be no problem in allowing that a human person could have properties or aspects (in virtue of being a person) that are not entailed by her membership of the kind 'human animal'. But this is completely compatible with the animalist's doctrine: persons are animals.

### 3.1.2 *Being an Animal*

But what does it *mean* to be an animal? Olson suggests that three important features separate animals from non-animals: metabolism, teleology, and organized complexity. Living organisms need to exchange (metabolize) matter and energy with their surroundings almost constantly. Animals need food, from which they can get energy, just as plants do. Both animals and plants absorb food, use energy from the food to maintain the structures that enable them to be 'alive', and excrete waste. But organisms, unlike plants, are not completely governed by environmental forces:

---

<sup>25</sup> Olson, 2003, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Olson, 2003, p. 3.

they are structured in such a way that they can, at least to some extent, become aware of what is going on in their surroundings, and adapt to it. For example, when warm-blooded animals start feeling uncomfortably cold, their metabolisms speed up, and blood flow is directed toward the interior of the body, rather than the extremities. Even such a simple organism as a bacterium can produce different enzymes in order to synthesize (for food) different chemicals it finds in its environment. Doing things for reasons, rather than doing things reflexively, is what Olson means when he says that organisms are capable of ‘teleological’ behaviour.

More complex organisms can ‘choose’ courses of action flexibly and *consciously*, depending on circumstances. And this ability relies on what Olson calls ‘organized complexity’.

Imagine building a scale model of an ordinary bacterium, using beads to represent atoms. If a thousand workers each stuck two beads together every five seconds, eight hours a day, five days a week, they would complete the project (which would fill a cathedral) in about thirty-five years – and that is assuming that water molecules, which make up 70 percent of the whole, come preassembled from the factory.

Olson, 1997, p. 128.

The ‘organized complexity’ of the living organism is not purely a question of the number of distinct parts which make it up: the precise way in which those distinct parts are put together is also important. This is why most organisms have DNA: DNA molecules contain a genetic code that spells out the characteristic way in which each of the organism’s individual cells is to behave. This is how successive generations of organisms so reliably turn out to have the same three features, which take much the same form, in spite of the overwhelming unlikelihood that their many components would end up organized in the same way as a matter of chance; and it is an essential part of being an animal.

But what exactly is it that *makes* an animal (or ‘organism’) exhibit these features? *Why* do animals, and not non-animals, have metabolism, teleology and organized complexity? It is far from clear how we would answer this question: trying to explain what it is to be an animal (/organism) is approximately the same task as trying to explain the nature of life itself – which is a task that is notoriously difficult. However, the practice of transplanting organs and tissue provides a clue: being an animal is clearly not a question of comprising exactly the same matter, otherwise we would not be able to say that Mrs Smith had been fortunate enough to receive a healthy kidney from a donor to take the place of her own diseased kidney. We would have to say that Mrs Smith had ceased to exist – or perhaps that she had ‘become’ Mrs Jones, whose kidney she had received. But this is not the case. We do not say that Mrs Smith has ceased to exist: we say that she has received a kidney transplant.

The same may be true of lungs, skin – even hearts (such vital organs for keeping organisms alive) – but would it be true for *all* organs? No, says Olson, it would not. Although we would be prepared to accept that a person (or other animal) could lose a limb, or certain organs, what we would not accept is that an animal could lose its head, and still be the same animal. Olson suggests that “[p]art of what makes something a living organism ... is its capacity to coordinate and regulate its metabolic and other vital functions”<sup>27</sup>. Kidneys, lungs, and skin (even, in special circumstance, hearts) are not what give rise to this regulatory capacity, which is why they can be removed without jeopardizing the identity of the organism. But

[b]iology tells us that the result of cutting away a man’s head is not a headless living organism, but a mere heap of flesh, a headless corpse ... That heap is composed, for the time being, of living cells; but those cells are unable to coordinate their activities in the way that the parts of a living organism coordinate theirs. ... All of an organism’s life-sustaining functions cease immediately when you remove [or destroy] its head. ... To believe otherwise is to think that just any connected aggregate of living tissue is an organism, including a kidney awaiting transplant, or a human pyramid at the circus.

Olson, 1997a, p. 132.

Just as a kidney awaiting transplant is not an organism, or a severed arm is not an organism, a body without its head is not an organism. What makes an organism an organism is “its capacity to direct those vital functions that keep it biologically alive”<sup>28</sup>. And this capacity, Olson tells us, is one for which the brainstem is chiefly responsible. It is not an organ which gives rise to a persisting thinking thing – of the kind Locke described – but an organ which allow something to continue being an animal.

### 3.1.3 *Alternatives*

There is one obvious reason to favour the account of ourselves as human animals: if we were not such animals, it is far from easy to see what else we might be. Many views in the personal identity debate clearly rule out our being animals – but few can be said to provide us with any very plausible alternative (for example, Locke’s account of persons as ‘thinking things’ is so vague when it comes to ontology that we are not even told whether we are material or non-material beings<sup>34</sup>). Three fairly important metaphysical positions are clearly incompatible with animalism, namely Idealism, Functionalism and Nihilism – but these positions have some definite problems.

Idealism would have it that persons are literally composed of a series of thoughts. How unconcernedly the idealists seem to overlook the inconvenient fact that certain (animals’) bodies are

---

<sup>27</sup> Olson, 1997a, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> Olson, 1997a, p. 135.

<sup>34</sup> Olson, 2003, p. 5.

apparently linked quite strongly to certain thinking things! Functionalist views also seem to overlook the reality of the animal entities that instantiate their functional specifications of what it is to be a person. Finally, nihilism (“the paradoxical view that we don’t really exist at all”) by definition does not help us understand what we are like: the whole point of nihilism is the defence of the claim that there is nothing that we are. Even if we somehow managed to swallow such a counterintuitive claim, it is certain that Nihilism would be no use for settling questions of practical importance, to ourselves, and other (similarly non-existent!) persons, as we got on with our day-to-day (non-existent) lives.

Are these problems serious enough to render the three alternative doctrines unbelievable? It is definitely a possibility. If the three positions prove to be untenable, does that mean there are no believable alternatives to Animalism? It might be going a bit far to answer this question with a definite No – but, at least, highlighting the problems such alternatives would have to get around does make it easier to see the appeal of Olson’s view.

#### 3.1.4 *Another Argument for Animalism*

The psychological continuity school of personal identity theorists often uses thought-experiments to elicit our intuition that personal identity is preserved only in psychological continuity; Olson, however, is sceptical about this. What he says is that “[i]f anything, the way we regard actual cases suggests a conviction that our identity does not consist in mental continuity, or at any rate that mental continuity is unnecessary for us to persist”<sup>36</sup> The first of these actual cases that Olson discusses is the case of foetuses.

On the psychological view, no ordinary adult human person can ever say ‘*I* was once a foetus’ – since no foetus, during an early developmental stage, has any features that could reasonably be called ‘psychological’, and which could thus be ‘continuous’ with subsequent psychological states (“no person is psychologically continuous with a fetus, for a fetus, at least early in its career, has no mental features at all”<sup>37</sup>). Debate about the moral rights of foetuses has featured large in recent controversies about whether and in what circumstances abortion should be permitted, and the controversy has a lot to do with whether or not we think foetuses are persons. What we believe to be our moral duty towards persons is naturally not at all the same thing as what we believe to be our duty towards non-persons.

Most people believe that they were once foetuses: we believe that *we* started life as almost undetectable bundles of cells in our mummy’s tummies. But since it has now been established beyond doubt that no adult human is ever psychologically continuous with herself as she was before

---

<sup>36</sup> Olson, 2003, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Olson, 1997b, p. 95.

a certain developmental stage, those who want to hold on to the view that being ‘the same person’ is a question of psychological continuity must be prepared to accept that those ultrasound images of the bundle of cells developing in their mothers’ wombs in no way represent *them*, the same *persons* as those fetuses. But there *was* a foetus. That much is certain, regardless of whether or not I can say *I* was that foetus. So if, contrary to all appearances, that foetus did not become me, what did happen to it? It looks as if one of only two things is possible: either the foetus ceased to exist entirely, and was replaced by me; or the foetus persisted somehow, without ever coming to be a person (perhaps it merely came to share its matter with a person?).

Perhaps there is a way of formulating the psychological continuity view so that it is not subject to the foetus problem – perhaps by adding the proviso that it is permissible to say that I existed in the past (when I was a foetus) without possessing any psychological features; but that, since I am (already) a person, I will be able to exist at some future time only if I continue to exhibit the capacities in virtue of which I am now a person (this is the strategy that e.g. Peter Unger uses). But even if it were possible to come up with such an account, it would, by definition, account for our ‘identity’ in different terms at different points in our developmental careers. In Olson’s words, such an account would be “irreducibly disjunctive”<sup>38</sup> – not at all the kind of account one would normally think of as compatible with any relationship so fundamentally unitary as *identity*.

I would propose a far simpler and less problematic solution to the ‘fetus problem’. You and I are always living organisms. Although we are not always people, we are always organisms, and we have our criterion of identity by virtue of being living organisms and not by virtue of being people.

Olson, 1997a, p. 106.

On the biological view, ‘the fetus problem’ does not arise.

The fetus or infant simply comes to be a person, just as it may later come to be a musician or a philosopher. And as a person it continues to survive as long as its biological life continues, just as it did when it was a fetus. A person may cease to be a person and still exist by losing her mental capacities, just as a musician may cease to be a musician and still exist by losing her musical abilities or habits.

Thus Olson concludes a second argument for his point: “[t]he only sound solution to the ‘fetus problem’ is the Biological View”<sup>39</sup>. We are who we are, not in virtue of our psychological awareness of our present selves and past experiences, but in virtue of our ongoing animal lives.

---

<sup>38</sup> Olson, 1997b, p. 105.

<sup>39</sup> Olson, 1997b, p. 108.

### 3.1.5 *Hard Choices*

In view of the strength of his claim about persons being animals, Olson speculates why it might be that so many people, academics and lay persons alike, continue to believe that “some sort of mental continuity [does] suffice for us to persist”. One reason, he suggests, is that they simply have not asked the right questions. “They have thought about what it takes for us to persist through time, but not about what we are.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, a person’s being psychologically continuous with a previous person is very good *evidence* for the person’s being (identical with) that former individual. In fact, in our actual world (a world in which science fiction thought-experiments of the kind beloved of many contemporary personal identity writers are not [yet] possible), psychological continuity constitutes *conclusive* evidence of such personal persistence<sup>41</sup>.

Another reason that it is easy to favour a psychological continuity account when it comes to the ‘identity’ of persons is that we want to tie certain “relations of practical concern”<sup>42</sup> to psychological continuity; and our intuition that these relations must be founded in identity itself is so strong that we tell ourselves psychological continuity must be the correct ‘criterion of identity’. Many people find it almost impossible to believe that these important moral capacities could be grounded in something so primitive as being an animal.

[M]ost of us find mental continuity more interesting and important than brute physical continuity. When we hear a story, we don’t much care which person at the end of the tale is the same animal as a given person at the beginning. We care far more who is psychologically continuous with that person. If mental and animal continuity often came apart, we might think differently. But they don’t.

Olson, 2003, p. 13.

---

<sup>40</sup> Olson, 2003, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Olson, 1997a, p. 70.

### 3.2 Why the biological criterion is unsatisfactory

The main thing that makes us reluctant to agree with Olson is not the fact that his account of persons as animals is not persuasive: it is. What makes us reluctant to agree about being animals is the enormous appeal of the (Lockean/psychological continuity) account of persons as thinking things. Although it looks a bit as if animalism could still be compatible with the conventional ‘psychological continuity’ account of persons – that the psychological continuity which is necessary for personhood might hold within beings that are animals – this is what Olson very decisively denies. Whether or not we are psychologically continuous with ourselves over time is *irrelevant*: the only thing that counts when it comes to ‘personal identity’ is being an animal.

In other words: even if we find Olson’s arguments for animalism convincing, there is still The Lockean Insight. The huge appeal of Locke’s account of persons (as thinking, intelligent beings) was that it captured our intuition that it is our awareness – or more specifically, our *self*-awareness – that sets us apart from all other kinds of biological organisms. It is by virtue of our ability to think, to be intelligent, and to consider ourselves as ourselves, that we can be held responsible (or so we believe) for how we behave and what we do.

But it seems that, on Olson’s biological criterion, this uniquely human capacity turns out to be irrelevant. Whether or not animals are just like trees or cabbages, we have an almost irresistible desire to be justified in saying that there really is a difference between ourselves and not only trees and cabbages but also chimpanzees and dogs. On a biological understanding, it is almost impossible even to *identify* such a difference, let alone defend it. If we are what we are by virtue of exactly the same thing which defines the nature of all other living creatures, our thinking and our intelligence suddenly seems to count for nothing.

Just as (Flew claimed) the psychological criterion failed because it did not take human embodiment properly into account, the biological criterion looks set to fail by reason of insufficiently accounting for the importance of the thinking, intelligent, Lockean person.

## FOUR – IDENTITY AND IDENTITY CRITERIA

Chapter four is about *identity*.

The psychological criterion of personal identity fails because it cannot accommodate the way in which our bodies contribute to who we are; the biological criterion of personal identity fails because it cannot accommodate the first-person (psychological) perspective from which we experience our own lives (as thinking intelligent beings). Each of these two accounts really does seem to capture something important about what we mean when we talk about persons, but, as long as we continue to talk about ‘personal *identity*’, there is no way to incorporate both sets of insights. The determinate logical form of the identity relation rules this out.

Although some have suggested that ‘constitution’ could be a satisfactory logical relationship between things like (psychological) persons and (biological) animals, closer inspection shows that constitution is not a logically coherent relation; and it is thus unable to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of persons and animals. Locke claimed that ‘identity’ is not a single relation, which is invariant across cases, but a different relation in every different case, depending on what it is of which the identity is in question. But to the extent that we would reject such a contingent kind of ‘identity’ relation, we should accept that what Locke means when he talks about ‘identity’ is not what we mean.

We should decide that the psychological/memory criterion ascribed to Locke and the biological criterion proposed by Olson are equally inappropriate as criteria of personal *identity*, since things which are *continuous with* each other (for example, the psychological/biological ‘stages’ of a person/organism) are, by definition, not *identical with* each other. Identity is not a relation that holds between distinct but continuous biological organisms, or psychological states: it is a relation that holds *only between a thing and itself*.

The chapter concludes that, when we speak about personal *identity*, we speak in error.

### 4.1 Constitution

So the biological criterion, apparently, failed because it did not take The Lockean Insight (that persons are thinking intelligent beings) into account. But to say that ‘the Lockean insight’ consists exclusively in the recognition of how significant self-consciousness and memory are is to say a misleading thing. For Locke explicitly talked about ‘biological continuity’: he said that being *the same person* was a question of being the same thinking thing, but he also said that being *the same*

*living creature* was a question of participating in the same continued life (see section 2.1.2, above). Clearly, on his terms, these are two quite independent questions. And, since Olson has already been at pains to point out that ‘Animalism’ does not entail any particular belief about whether a person is *essentially* a human animal (as opposed to being a human animal contingently), there seems to be no reason for thinking *that Locke couldn’t have been an Animalist!* Olson denied that Animalism makes any claim about whether or not we are *essentially* animals, but now he seems to be flying in the face of his own claim by denying that we human animals could have our identity (essentially) in virtue of being thinking things. The Lockean is not denying that we are animals: merely claiming that we are essentially thinking things, or persons; that we are animals, but inessentially.

On Locke’s account, being an animal may not be what *makes* somebody a person – being a person, for Locke, is a question of being the same ‘thinking thing’ – but being a person, nevertheless, could involve being an animal. Insofar as, for Locke, *person* is distinct from *man* (and, presumably, for Olson, although all persons are animals, only some animals are persons?) – what we need to understand is how ‘person’ (thinking thing) and ‘living creature’ (human animal) are related.

#### 4.1.1 *Constitution according to Garrett*

During a critique of the biological continuity account, Garrett produces “a familiar example which, by analogy, tells against Animalism” – but which I will use, more specifically, to shed light on the person/animal relationship. Consider, Garrett invites us, the relationship between a statue and the lump of bronze of which it is composed. In Garrett’s opinion, “[i]t seems uncontroversial that Statue and Bronze are distinct, even though made of the very same matter.”<sup>52</sup>

[W]e do not [say] “I’m obviously not looking at two beautiful things; so the statue and the lump [of bronze] must be identical after all.” We don’t respond like that because we know ... that the statue and the lump are distinct. That belief we will not give up.

Garrett, in Petrus, 2003, p. 45.

Following this line of reasoning, Garrett decides that “in general, coinciding does not imply identity<sup>53</sup>”. Even if ‘the statue’ and ‘the lump of bronze’ seem to be in the same place at the same time, this does not mean that they are not two distinct things. If this is right, perhaps ‘I’ and ‘my animal’ could be related in the same sort of way that Statue is related to Bronze. If there is this sense in which two distinct things could somehow ‘coincide’, without being identical, it may be just

---

<sup>52</sup> Garrett, in Petrus, 2003, p. 44.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

this sense in which ‘I’ and ‘my animal’ seem to be simultaneously the same, in some ways, and not the same, in others. But *is* there such a sense?

Those who take the constitution view are happy to bite the bullet and say that the bronze and the statue are distinct objects which happen to exist at the same time and in the same place. Constitution is distinguished from identity in that constitution, but not identity, is an ‘asymmetric’ relation (if *a* is identical to *b*, then *b* must also be identical to *a*; but if *a* ‘constitutes’ *b*, then *b* does not constitute *a*). The bronze *constitutes* the statue, which is why they are able to occupy the same space-time position, but the bronze is not *identical with* the statue, which is why it is permissible for them to have different non-categorical properties. Although they are both made out of bronze, and both have properties such as being a ‘bronze’ colour, comprising densely packed mineral particles etc., they are not one thing. The bronze existed before the statue began to exist, and may continue to exist after the statue is destroyed; the bronze constitutes the statue, but the statue does not constitute the bronze. In some sense, the statue depends on the bronze for its existence, but at the same time, it is not identical with it.

But although it has the virtue of simplicity, this solution is far from problem-free. For instance, it is part of our understanding of material objects that no two objects can be in the same place at the same time (the ‘impenetrability objection’). “‘Just try to walk through a wall,’ quips the sceptic. ‘Two things can’t be in the same place at the same time!’”<sup>54</sup> If the statue and the bronze both exist, and are both material things, it is difficult to believe that they could occupy the same spot on the space-time continuum unless the relation between them is identity.

According to the constitution view, although the bronze and the statue share the same matter, it is acceptable to maintain that the bronze and statue have different non-categorical properties (e.g. they came into existence at different times; they belong to different kinds, and have different persistence conditions) – so a further problem arises in explaining how this fact can be accounted for. If the statue and the bronze have all the same categorical properties, and yet they differ with regard to their non-categorical properties, it must be possible to explain what these differences are grounded in – in spite of the fact that the differences are clearly not grounded in any [material] aspect of either object (the ‘grounding objection’). It is difficult to see what *could* possibly ground such differences, and no-one has managed to get around this problem very satisfactorily.

If it had proved satisfactory, the constitution view would have been one possible way of explaining how ‘I’ am related to ‘my animal’, if the relation is not identity. But it did not prove satisfactory. Both the grounding objection and the impenetrability objection seem to me sufficient to rule out the possibility of spelling out a ‘constitution’ relation in any satisfactory way. But I –

---

<sup>54</sup> Wasserman, 2009.

with a little guidance from Locke – am going to show why the problem of constitution is a false problem.

#### 4.1.2 *Constitution, Animalism, and Lockeanism*

Garrett thinks that the constitution problem is an insurmountable problem for Animalism, but he does note that, if one were willing to accept that statues were not material entities, the constitution problem could be made to go away altogether – as long as one believed that the statue could not exist without the lump's existing. Perhaps one would say that the statue, while it was not *the same* as the bit of bronze, somehow *depended* on the bit of bronze for its existence. Perhaps this would be something like saying that 'the person' (/Locke's 'thinking thing' etc.) was not a material entity – but that it could not exist without the existence of some kind of living creature. In this case, the problem of relating persons to their animals would not arise: saying that persons 'depended on' their animals would be no more problematic than saying that the existence of a statue required the existence of some or other bit of bronze (or copper, or clay, porcelain, or anything else). So long as we said that persons – while not being *identical with* their constitutive animals – could exist only given the existence of their constitutive animals, it looks as if we might be able to hold onto both our biological and psychological intuitions: we could be psychological beings who depended on the existence of biological beings.

Garrett claims that this position is unavailable to the Lockean – “who thinks that I can exist even if A does not”<sup>55</sup>. However, if my reading of Locke (in 2.1.2) is correct (i.e. that Locke is agnostic about the relation between '[thinking] substance' and 'thinking thing'), there is nothing to stop the Lockean taking just such a position as Garrett here claims is unavailable to him. In fact, on my reading, this is precisely the position Locke does take. He is uninterested in finding out what it is that relates persons to human organisms: all he wants to point out is that they are not the same thing. At no point does he insist 'I can exist even if A [i.e. 'my animal'] does not' – nor does he say anything, so far as I can see, to suggest that he thinks I can *not* exist in the absence of the existence of my animal. All he says is that the concept 'person' does not entail any ontological commitments about what kind of physical form a (human) thinking thing needs to take – just as the concept 'statue' does not necessarily entail 'lump of bronze'.

So, as long as The Lockean Position is more like what I have described than what Garrett has described, there is no mystery about how 'person' and 'human being' can relate to each other. There is no question of an identity relation between them, since they are descriptions of quite different things. The person in some sense *depends* on the human animal, but is obviously not *identical with* the human animal: it is logically and empirically a different thing. There is also no

---

<sup>55</sup> Garrett, in Petrus, 2003, p. 45, footnote 5.

question of a constitution relation between them, since this relation is not coherent: it fails to get around the grounding objection and the impenetrability objection. But if the person and the animal are related neither by identity nor by constitution, in what sense *are* they related? So long as we hang onto our intuitive sense of how important psychological continuity is, and so long as we do not take Garrett's argument against the biological continuity account to have succeeded (and thus retain the belief that our lives are the lives of animals), we are no closer to being able to reconcile our biological and psychological intuitions.

We still need a way of accounting for the relationship between the (thinking) person and its animal – and to do this, we should not be surprised to find that we need to look more closely at Locke.

## 4.2 Identity Suited to the Idea

Locke begins his discussion of personal identity with some comments on identity in general. His basic argument runs as follows: “(i) one thing cannot have two beginnings of existence nor (ii) two things one beginning: it being impossible for (iii) two things of the same kind to be or exist in the same instant in the very same place, or (iv) one and the same thing in different places. That, therefore, that had one beginning of existence is the same thing; and that which had a different beginning in time and place from that is not the same but diverse”<sup>56</sup>. Locke takes (i) to follow logically from (iv), and (ii) from (iii).

Although they are perhaps not insurmountable, there are certainly some problems with this argument. But this general idea of identity (of the identity of all kinds of things) was not especially interesting to Locke. For he believed that ‘identity’ was a different relation when applied to different kinds of entity: “identity is an ambiguous term, its precise meaning depending upon that to which it is applied.”<sup>57</sup> If this point had been clearly understood from the outset, said Locke, much of the confusion and debate around ‘personal identity’ might have been avoided.

### 4.2.1 *Identity of Substance; Identity of Living Creatures*

It is not, therefore, unity of substance that comprehends all sorts of identity or will determine it in every case; but to conceive or judge of it aright, we must consider what idea it is applied to stand for; it being one thing to be the same substance, another the same man [which I am using interchangeably with ‘human being/animal’], and a third the same person, if person, man and

---

<sup>56</sup> *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Ch. xxvii, I, in Noonan, 1978.

<sup>57</sup> Allison, 1966, p. 43.

substance are three names standing for three different ideas; for such as is the idea belonging to that name, such must be the identity.

Essay II, xxvii, 7, In Noonan, 1978.

For “parcels of matter” (what we might call ‘objects’), Locke is adamant that identity is a question of strict, numerical sameness of physical substance. If even a single atom is removed from a mass or body, he claims, it is no longer *the same* mass or body.<sup>58</sup> But for living creatures (including human beings), ‘identity’ cannot be such a question; living creatures manifestly *are not* comprised of the same particles during their lifetimes. An acorn grows into an oak tree; a soldier loses a leg; an infant becomes a healthy child, an athletic adult, and, eventually, a shrunken old man. And thus, Locke stresses, we should account for the ‘identity’ of living creatures in terms of “a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body”.<sup>59</sup> The identity of such creatures, evidently, is one of those cases for which identity of *substance* is not required.

#### 4.2.2 *Personal Identity*

Considering the context in which a theory was developed can often provide useful clues as to how the theory should be interpreted; and Allison contends that “[i]t was nothing other than his fundamental opposition to the dominant philosophy of Descartes” that prompted Locke to formulate the theory of memory as the criterion of personal identity. Descartes never addressed the problem of personal identity *per se* – the question did not really arise, since, in his view, the ‘thinking substance’ in each individual was fundamentally (and self-evidently) indivisible. Locke, in contrast, was sceptical about metaphysical knowledge in general, and could not accept that the human mind was “furnished with any clear and distinct ideas of substance,” let alone intuitive knowledge of its own nature<sup>62</sup>. However, in attempting to find a solution to the problems he identified in Descartes’ account, Locke was largely motivated by the ethical significance of the issue: reward and punishment seeming so clearly to be founded in identity. And it was precisely because, if personal identity were not separated from identity of substance, there would be “no clear means of determining the limits of moral responsibility,” that this person-substance distinction was so important in Locke’s philosophy.

#### 4.2.3 *The forensic term*

Having suggested that *personal* identity was not a question of identity of substance (see section 2.1.2), Locke goes on to make his radical claim: the term *person* “is a forensic term, appropriating

---

<sup>58</sup> Locke (Section 3), in Perry, 1975, p. 35.

<sup>59</sup> *Essay II*, xxvii, 6, in Noonan, 1978, p. 344.

<sup>62</sup> Allison, 1966 [p. 42.].

actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law”<sup>63</sup>. According to Allison, to read Locke simply as advocating a memory account of personal identity is to miss the significance of this insight. When he says that a person is a thinking intelligent being, and that it is this in which its ‘identity’ consists, Locke is not talking about the ‘identity criterion’ for persons, in the sense of logical/numerical identity. In fact, *Locke is not making an ontological claim at all!*

"[P]erson" is an abstract idea. As such, it is not in itself an entity of any sort, standing alongside of the man and the substance, but is simply one aspect of the concrete man, i.e. that aspect in virtue of which he is morally responsible, considered apart for ethical purposes. Moreover, such a conception is perfectly consistent with Locke's doctrine of abstraction, which is in essence: the considering as separate, ideas which are united in their "real existence." This separation is the process whereby we abstract, and it is also the process whereby Locke is able to distinguish the idea of person from the idea of man understood as a psychosomatic organism.

Allison, 1966, p. 47.

On this reading of Locke, calling something a ‘person’ has no ontological implications whatsoever. The term ‘person’ refers to *any* kind of entity that can be held responsible for certain kinds of actions, or rewarded, or punished, for them – and Locke is agnostic about how they may or may not get to have these capacities. Theoretically, extra-terrestrial life-forms, robots, or giant squid *could* be persons; in our world, it is just a contingent fact that all persons (or at least the ones we recognise) appear to be human animals. But it does not follow that all human animals are persons. The question whether or not some ‘human being’ qualifies as a ‘person’ should be taken analogously to, for instance, the question of whether a defendant was in his right mind at the time of his crime, or is presently in a fit state to stand trial.

It follows that when, in the course of our day-to-day lives, we say that being ‘the same person’ is a question of personal ‘identity’, we use this description *very loosely speaking* (if not just plain *incorrectly speaking*). When we believe we recognise an acquaintance by her face or her voice, what we recognise as being ‘the same’ in the present as at some time in the past is NOT ‘the person’ but ‘the human organism’, which has its identity in virtue of its participation in the same continued life (which, Olson would say, it achieves by having the same continued brainstem). Psychological continuity may be what makes one the same person over time, but it is not a *criterion* – or even an account – of personal *identity* (at least, not in the sense in which we usually understand ‘numerically identical’).

Psychological continuity can only constitute personal identity, for Locke, because he is prepared to accept that ‘identity’ can refer to different kinds of relation, in different contexts; if we

---

<sup>63</sup> Locke (Section 26), in Perry, 1975, p. 50.

want to maintain that identity is a logical relation that is invariant, regardless of context, we would have to recognize that what Locke means by personal ‘identity’ is not what we mean. To the extent that we want to claim *identity* is always, necessarily, the same relation (no matter what kind of thing it is whose identity is in question), then to that same extent we would have to say that the (forensic) question of being the same person was *not* a question of identity.

For someone who understands this ‘forensic’ sense of ‘identity’, there is no problem of constitution – of how the ‘human organism’ and the ‘person’ can occupy a single space-time position – since ‘person’ is not a forensic thing, rather than a material object. Just as ‘statue’ is an abstract specification of a certain aspect of some material bronze (/clay/etc.), ‘person’ is a combination of certain prescriptions and proscriptions regarding how it is permissible for some organism or other entity to be configured, and the capacities or characteristics it needs to have.

#### 4.2.4 *The Problem with Identity*

By now we have a surfeit of reasons for abandoning the search for criteria of personal identity (over time). Locke has unashamedly used ‘identity’ to mean at least three different things (which is no longer something most of us would tolerate): strict sameness of substance, down to the last elementary particles; sameness of ‘life’, not entailing sameness of substance; and ‘forensic’ sameness of consciousness, entailing neither sameness of particles nor sameness of life. Olson has talked about the ‘identity’ of living creatures in terms of what it takes to be alive (and I have suggested how Locke was really an animalist, making the same point about *man* as Olson is making about *animal*) – and what it takes to be alive is not a question about identity. And if, as Locke claims, personal ‘identity’ is a forensic question, then this question cannot be a question about numerical identity of the kind which we ascribe to material objects. There appeared to be some chance that this question which is not a question of identity could be a question of ‘constitution’ – but constitution proved to be logically flawed.

I think we should be persuaded by these considerations. Insofar as we do not want to follow Locke’s lead in allowing ‘identity’ to have different meanings in different contexts, we need to stop talking about personal ‘identity’. But in abandoning the personal identity question, I mean to lose sight neither of the sensible assumption that our lives are in essence the lives of animals, nor of our intuitive understanding of persons as thinking, intelligent beings, having reason and reflection, and familiar to us all. There is a real question to be answered about what it is that makes us who we are. Locke says: “[*p*]erson, as I take it, is the name for [*the*] self. Wherever a man finds what he calls himself, there, I think, another may say is the same person”<sup>64</sup> – and I think this is right.

---

<sup>64</sup> Locke, in Atkins, 2005, p. 32 – I italicized ‘self’.

The problem with trying to talk about personal *identity* was that identity is (already) a well-defined logical concept; and, so long as we thought we were talking about personal identity, we had to try and make our talk about persons conform to these logical parameters. *Identity*, by definition, needs to be a relationship that is transitive, and does not vary in its logical form depending on what kind of thing it is whose identity is in question (which is why we cannot accept Locke's discussion of persons as a discussion of 'identity'). But if we reformulate the question of personal identity in terms of *the self*, there should be no such constraints. Since 'selves' are not defined in terms of logical relations like transitivity, there is nothing to stop us saying that being a self *is* a question of one or more kinds of continuity. If it is selves we are talking about, we are no longer obliged to choose between the psychological and biological aspects of persons; we are free to describe how both psychological and biological attributes are vital determinants of who we are.

Accordingly: having given up the investigation of 'personal identity', I am ready to turn my attention to an investigation of the self.

And anyone who wants to talk about the self needs to talk about Sigmund Freud.

## FIVE – THE PSYCHODYNAMIC SELF

Although (personal) ‘identity’ cannot be a question of both psychological continuity and biological continuity – or indeed any other continuity/ies, or anything else other than identity – ‘selfhood’ *can* be. In fact, a kind of ‘self’ which is defined simultaneously in terms of both psychology and biology is exactly what Freud proposed. Chapter five sets out Freud’s account of the psychodynamic self, with particular emphasis on how psychological and biological continuity are not only both important elements of selfhood – but how, effectively, they are different aspects of *the same* element of selfhood.

Although almost everybody thinks they know something about Freud, laypersons’ ‘knowledge’ of Freudian principles very often fall far short of a true understanding of his insights. The cornerstone of Freud’s account of selfhood is the Dynamic Unconscious – the (dynamically) unconscious part of the self far outweighs the conscious part of the self, just as the submerged portion of an iceberg is far greater than the tiny tip which protrudes above the surface. And the unconscious part of the self is just that part which is ‘biological’; it is the part which is central to being an animal. But whereas the biological account (of personal ‘identity’) disregarded the psychological aspect of selfhood – the Lockean thinking thing – Freud explains how this psychological aspect is the *product of* biological forces. The dynamic unconscious comprises the instinctual, biological aspects of the self that are most inaccessible to conscious awareness; but, far from being less significant to selfhood, for being less conscious, these aspects are exactly what determine how the Freudian subject becomes a self.

Freud said that ‘the pleasure principle’ is the basic motivator for all behaviour; and the pleasure principle is a hardwired biological truth. The instincts, which serve the pleasure principle, and thus also have central importance for *all* organisms (including human beings) are biological drives. But these instincts give rise to the id, the ego, and the superego – which are irreducibly *psychological* structures of the mind. And the (biological) instincts and pleasure principle, and the (psychological) id, ego, and superego all contribute to determining the content of our dreams: the interpretation of dreams is ‘the royal road’ to the dynamic unconscious which is at the heart of the psychodynamic self.

### 5.1 The legacy of Sigmund Freud

In order to appreciate fully Freud’s ‘intellectual union’ of psychology and biology, it is instructive to look at his early intellectual career. When Freud enrolled at the university of Vienna, in 1873, he planned to study law – but the allure of a medical career proved to much for him to resist. He registered as a medical student, intending “to embark not on a conventional career as a

physician, but on philosophical-scientific investigations that might solve some of the great riddles that fascinated him.”<sup>66</sup> During the next ten or twelve years, he published influential scientific papers, on subjects ranging from the neuroanatomy of *Ammocoetes* (a primitive form of fish) to a new chemical method for preparing nerve tissues for microscopic examination; and it was only with reluctance, and on the advice of one of his teachers, that Freud grudgingly acknowledged “the inevitable financial difficulties” attendant on a career in biological research, and set up his clinical practice<sup>67</sup>.

The case of ‘Anna O’ (she was a patient of Freud’s friend and mentor Josef Breuer) is widely recognized as the catalyst which set the practice of Freudian psychoanalysis in motion. In 1880, when she was 21 years old, Anna O. began to suffer a range of symptoms – paralysis in her right arm and leg, nausea, difficulty swallowing – that had her doctors baffled. Moreover, she frequently exhibited an altered state of consciousness during which she behaved quite unlike her usual self – and of which she subsequently had no memory. But no-one could find a physical cause for any of Anna O’s symptoms.

Noticing that she often repeated certain words or phrases under her breath during her ‘absent’ periods, Breuer placed her under hypnosis, repeated these words to her, and questioned her about their significance. In this way, he discovered that during her altered states of consciousness Anna O. was reliving the ordeal of her father’s illness, her own illness which subsequently prevented her from continuing to care for him, and his death. As she recalled more and more incidents from this traumatic period in her life, and related them to Breuer, her own symptoms gradually faded, until they disappeared altogether. “The medical cure [of Anna O] was nothing short of stupendous, given the almost unheard of time and patience Breuer spent in treating this one patient.”<sup>68</sup>

Later, in his own clinical practice, Freud began to use ‘the talking cure’, as Anna O. described Breuer’s method, with his patients. It was his finding that memories, partially or completely lost from conscious recall, could play an important role in causing psychological and physical symptoms that led him to develop a model of the structure of consciousness that has been hugely influential in psychotherapeutic practice ever since. But even in the midst of his success and growing stardom in his practice, Freud, in conversation with a friend, said that he hoped “to return to my old pursuit and do a little anatomy; after all, that is the only satisfying thing”<sup>69</sup>.

---

<sup>66</sup> Gay, 1989, p. x.

<sup>67</sup> Sulloway, 1979, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> Sulloway, 1979, p. 56.

<sup>69</sup> Freud, in Sulloway, 1979, p. 16.

## Part One – Biology

### 5.2 Motivation

Many of Freud's followers, dissatisfied with certain aspects of his doctrine, broke away from him, and established their own idiosyncratic forms of psychotherapeutic practice. But such was Freud's influence among them, and so great were his original insights, that these different forms of psychodynamics never varied too significantly from Freud's original theory. The doctrine which incorporates the elements of this original theory is known as 'psychodynamic theory': it sets out the *dynamics* of psychological life; of what leads people to feel as they do, and what causes people to act. This original psychodynamic theory is the one in which psychology and biology are so united; and the main elements of which are set out below.

#### 5.2.1 *The Pleasure Principle*

"*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1919-20] may be regarded as introducing the final phase of Freud's views" about 'metapsychology'; and in it one begins to "see signs of the new picture of the anatomical structure of the mind which was to dominate all Freud's later writings."<sup>70</sup> 'The pleasure principle' is the (apparently uncontroversial) assumption that organisms are driven to do things only if their actions bring them some 'benefit', in the broadest sense: some kind of pleasure or other satisfaction must result from the action, otherwise the organism would have no reason to perform it. Freud saw the pleasure principle as the ultimate motivation for all behaviour; and his understanding of the principle reveals his strong commitment to accounting for psychological phenomena in largely biological terms.

For Freud, the benefit or satisfaction humans derive from their actions always takes the same form: the stabilizing (lowering) of an unpleasurable state of 'intrapsychic tension'. This benefit or satisfaction is not something we consciously choose: it is the principle *in terms of which* we see certain actions as more choice-worthy than others. When someone chooses one course of action, rather than another, this is not *because* the course of action in question is the one which, the person believes, will result in the highest pleasure – it is *conclusive evidence* that this is what she believes. She believes, in short, that this course of action will cause her to be in a stable state of intrapsychic tension: neither too much 'pleasure' (/other satisfaction), nor too little.

As a first step towards accounting for this tendency to seek a state of balance between pleasure and unpleasure, Freud directs us to imagine "a living organism in its most simplified possible form

---

<sup>70</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 5, Editor's note.

as an undifferentiated vesicle of substance that is susceptible to stimulation”<sup>71</sup>. In such an organism, he suggests, the surface of the undifferentiated vesicle turned toward the external world would be the sole medium through which stimuli could be received. According to accepted evolutionary theory, one would expect that, to the extent that receiving accurate information about the environment has survival value, the outer layer of Freud’s elementary vesicle should come to exhibit the most favourable possible conditions for the reception of this information.

Reception of stimuli would be important to enable the vesicle to determine “the direction and nature” of the external forces acting upon it; but it would not be necessary for the vesicle to handle the full impact of these forces. It would be sufficient for it to take in only a small quantity of a stimulus as a sample. In fact, not only would it be *unnecessary* for the vesicle to undergo the full force of external stimuli, it would be positively *undesirable*. Therefore, the vesicle’s outer layer would not only function as an ideal receptor of stimuli, but would also act as a protective shield between the primitive vesicle of organic matter and the potential dangers posed by *too much* stimulation. Freud claims that “[p]rotection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of stimuli*”<sup>72</sup>.

The primitive living organism acquires a protective shield, in the following way:

its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. In consequence, the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity

Freud, 1920, p. 27.

Very likely, this account is not very plausible, from an empirical point of view. But even if there is nothing in nature that closely resembles Freud’s vesicle, that does not necessarily mean that the account is unenlightening with regard to humans. For Freud was almost certainly never trying to make an empirical claim about what organisms actually are like: rather, he was making a theoretical claim about what capacities organisms would logically need to have. We were directed to ‘imagine’ a living organism in its most simplified form – not to ‘call to mind’ an organism with which we were familiar. For Freud, ‘living vesicle’ is a vague, general term (used in much the same way we might use ‘elementary particle’) that entails no particular ontological commitments. The question Freud was asking was something like: ‘If there was this basic living thing, what would be its basic needs?’ – and the answer to this would be ‘*Every* living thing needs to have a way of detecting what is going on in its environment, and a way of protecting itself from external dangers’. Even if the living thing in question does not literally have something we could call a ‘protective

---

<sup>71</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 25.

<sup>72</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 27.

shield' on the outer surface of its body, it must have some means of carrying out two important functions: *reception of stimuli*, and *protection against stimuli*.

But the case of the complex organisms is different from the case of the primitive vesicle. Complex organisms, in addition to dealing with stimulation from the external world, must be prepared to receive stimulation originating from within the organism itself – stimuli originating in the components of the organism's own nervous system. Since the 'internal' processes (and resulting 'stimulations') of the organism's nervous system are what enable the organism to be alive in the first place, there can, by definition be no protective shield against them. An organism that was completely 'shielded' from *itself* would be a dead organism. But because no protective shield could be effective against 'internal' stimulations, "the excitations in the deeper layers [of the complex organism] extend into the system directly and in undiminished amount, in so far as certain of their characteristics give rise to feelings in the pleasure-unpleasure series". These internal stimulations (i.e. pleasure/unpleasure) "predominate over all external stimuli"<sup>73</sup>.

For humans, there are some cases – those we might call 'traumatic' experiences – in which the stimuli are simply too strong for any kind of 'protective shield' to resist; when this happens, there is no longer any possibility of keeping the excessive amounts of stimulus away from the 'deeper layers' (of human organisms), safeguarding these 'layers' becomes a question of mastering the quantities of invading stimulus, "and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can be disposed of"<sup>74</sup>. In such cases, "the pleasure principle is for the moment put out of action"<sup>75</sup>; but, for Freud, these 'traumatic' situations are the exception that proves the rule. The pleasure principle remains the basic force that drives behaviour.

### 5.2.2 *The Nature of Instincts – The Compulsion to Repeat*

Having noted that internal stimulations were potentially much more threatening to the primitive vesicle, and harder for it to bear, Freud goes on to claim that, in less primitive organisms, "the most abundant sources of this internal excitation are what are described as the organism's 'instincts' – the representatives of all the forces originating in the interior of the body and transmitted to the mental apparatus"<sup>76</sup>. Freud does not provide any real argument for this claim, but in any case, it is not crucial that we agree that the instincts are 'the most abundant' source of 'internal excitation'. All we need to do is accept that instinctual forces can *at least sometimes* motivate behaviour (i.e. provide sources of pleasure and/or unpleasure) *to at least some extent*. And it would be close to impossible to motivate this denial – it would amount to a denial of the

---

<sup>73</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 29.

<sup>74</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 30.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 34.

Darwinian idea of evolution by natural selection, which has been demonstrated more or less beyond the possibility of doubt by, for example, the fossil record and the observed adaptation of species to their habitats.

When we need to investigate the nature of the instincts, we are fortunate to have a good source of information close at hand. Small children, explains Freud, are too young to act in accordance with anything much except their instincts, since they have not yet gained the ability to reason. These children, he noted, often exhibit a ‘compulsion to repeat’. They “never tire of asking an adult to repeat a game that he has shown them or played with them, until he is too exhausted to go on. And if a child has been told a nice story, he will insist on hearing it over and over again rather than a new one; and he will remorselessly stipulate that the repetition shall be an identical one and will correct any alterations of which the narrator may be guilty – though they may actually have been made in the hope of gaining fresh approval.”<sup>77</sup> This compulsion to repeat seems in a high degree instinctual – since it is most pronounced in those whose faculties of reason are least developed. Certainly, Freud believed that this was the case – and it seems reasonable.

### 5.2.3 *The Death Instincts*

Sulloway says that “Freud’s notion of a death instinct, by virtue of its consistently misunderstood status in psychoanalytic theory, exemplifies just how fully his intellectual union of psychology with biology has gone unappreciated in psychoanalysis. For his theory of the death instinct has a perfectly rational logic in his own psychobiological terms.”<sup>78</sup> Freud’s contention is that if the compulsion to repeat is indeed a basic instinctive drive, the term ‘instinct’ must be taken *in all cases* to refer to an inherent biological urge, present in living organisms since their very earliest and simplest manifestation, “to restore an earlier state of things”<sup>79</sup>. This is what he calls ‘the conservative nature of instincts’: they seek to perpetuate states of the organism which have been favourable for it in the past.

In logic, the final goal of such a ‘conservative’ instinct (i.e. restoring prior states of being) seems to Freud inescapable:

It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained. On the contrary, it must be an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that every living thing dies for *internal* reasons –

---

<sup>77</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 35.

<sup>78</sup> Sulloway, 1979, p. 395.

<sup>79</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 37.

becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that *‘the aim of all life is death’*

Freud, 1920, p. 38.

So long as we accept that inorganic matter existed before life first came about, the original ‘old’ state, to which the conservative instincts must be trying to lead the organism, must be the state of being inorganic – the state of being dead.

It does not seem, on the face of it, the least bit plausible to say that organisms have an *instinct* to die, in the same sense we say they have an instinct to avoid danger/pass on their genes etc. – *but Freud himself does not use the word ‘instinct’!* The German word (*Trieb*) he does use is usually translated as ‘instinct’ in this context, but it can also be translated as ‘drive’. The fact that it seldom is can probably be put down to (i) the difficulty of *ever* capturing not only the meaning, but also the sense, and connotations, of a word in one language, while using another; and (ii) some idea of making a radical new theory, such as the theory of the instincts, more palatable to people in twentieth century Europe. On my reading, the prevalent translation of *Trieb* as ‘instinct’ is crucial to understanding why so many psychoanalytic thinkers have failed to appreciate Freud’s insight.

If, rather than ‘death instinct’ we instead talk about the ‘death drive’, saying that all organisms have a ‘drive’ towards death could be taken as the sensible observation that all living creatures are mortal: left to their own devices, they eventually cease to be living creatures, and become once again inorganic bits of matter. For persons, who have a good understanding of their own mortality, this is particularly significant: human organisms are not only unable to escape death, but unable to escape *the knowledge of their inability* to escape it. From the moment one is born, in fact, there is at least a sense in which everything one does is nothing more than a preparation for death. “We have no longer,” he claims, “to reckon with the organism’s puzzling determination ... to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.”<sup>81</sup>

In light of this view of the centrality of the death drive, the ‘instincts’ of self-preservation/of ‘passing on one’s genes’ etc. which we normally attribute to all living things become almost insignificant. At best, it seems, these instincts must be merely components of the death instinct: their function must be “to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself.” This is Freud’s view.

---

<sup>81</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 39.

#### 5.2.4 *The Life Instincts*

In the early years of the twentieth century, biological researchers began experimenting on unicellular organisms in order to investigate “the alleged immortality of living substance”<sup>83</sup>. Although this research often appeared to produce conflicting results, Freud suggests that, “from the aggregate of these experiments,” two important conclusions can be drawn that have far-reaching implications. Firstly, he notes that “[i]f two animalculae, at the moment before they show signs of senescence, are able to coalesce with each other, that is to ‘conjugate’ (soon after which they once more separate), they are saved from becoming old and become ‘rejuvenated’. Conjugation is no doubt the forerunner of the sexual reproduction of the higher animals”<sup>84</sup>.

Secondly, the biological research to which Freud was referring can be taken to “prove conclusively” that:

it was only the products of its *own* metabolism which had fatal results for the particular kind of animalcule. For the same animalculae which inevitably perished if they were crowded together in their own nutrient fluid flourished in a solution which was over-saturated with the waste products of a distantly related species. An infusorian, therefore, if it is left to itself, dies a natural death owing to its incomplete voidance of the products of its own metabolism.

Freud, 1920, p. 48.

These two conclusions provided Freud with the framework in which to develop his account of the life instincts. They are the instincts which stand in opposition to the death instincts, as these carry the organism inexorably towards its own demise. “They are conservative in the same sense as the other [i.e. ‘death-’] instincts in that they bring back earlier states of living substance; but they are conservative to a higher degree in that they are peculiarly resistant to external influences; and they are conservative too in another sense in that they preserve life itself for a comparatively long period.”<sup>85</sup>

The insights which had been obtained by evolutionary biology, even more than a century ago, when Freud was writing, allowed him to say with certainty that “the distinction between the sexes did not exist when life began”<sup>86</sup>. However, the fact that the sexes have not always been differentiated is no reason to think that ancestral sexual instincts have not always existed, since the very first life on earth. In fact, there is good reason to think they must have done: for if the death instinct was produced when life first arose out of inorganic matter, and if this instinct did not

---

<sup>83</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 47.

<sup>84</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 48.

<sup>85</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 40.

<sup>86</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 41.

instantly lead all organisms back to their original inorganic state, there must from the first have been some opposing force which enabled life to persist.

[B]oth instincts would be conservative in the strictest sense of the word, since both would be endeavouring to re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life. The appearance of life would thus be regarded as the cause of the continuance of life and also as the cause of the striving towards death; and *life itself* would be a conflict and compromise between these two trends.

Freud, 1923, p. 55, my italics.

There seems no good reason to reject the idea of ‘life instincts’ driving organisms to ward off harm, and pass on their genes; and even if we reject the idea that there is an actual *instinct* leading organisms inexorably towards their own deaths, we can at least be sure that there is a *biological process* that is doing this – it is the normal process of aging. It seems more than plausible to say, with Freud, that life is, from start to finish, an uneasy compromise between trying to pass on one’s genes and trying to fight off the inexorable *biological slide* towards senility and death. The biological urges that are inseparable from any living thing shape and constrain the way in which (human) persons experience a sense of selfhood. Just as the organism is torn between the instinct for preserving its life and the inevitability of death, so the self, as it is experienced psychologically, is fundamentally conflicted; its fight for ‘survival’, futile (this will become clearer in 5.4, during my discussion of ‘Structures of the Mind’).

## Part Two – Psychology

### 5.3 The structure of consciousness

Freud's account of the centrality of the instincts seems to suggest that the Freudian self differs hardly at all from the biological self. But whereas, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud's ideas clearly show the influence of his expertise in anatomy and neurology, *The Ego and the Id* draws heavily on his work in psycho-analysis. This is where we start to see something resembling the psychological self which was opposed to the biological self in our previous (failed) discussion of 'personal identity'. However, whereas Locke's conception of the psychological self explicitly excluded aspects of psychology which were outside of consciousness, Freud tells us that "[t]he division of mental life into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premise on which psycho-analysis is based." The important implication of this premise is that "psycho-analysis cannot accept the view that consciousness is the essence of mental life, but is obliged to regard consciousness as one property of mental life, which may co-exist along with its other properties or may be absent"<sup>87</sup>.

This is Anna O's legacy. For Freud claims that only those who have studied the psychological significance of dreams, and have witnessed at first hand how unconscious mental content is revealed during hypnosis (or psychotherapy), can fully appreciate the significance of unconscious processes. "To most people who have had a philosophical education the idea of anything mental which is not also conscious is so inconceivable that it seems to them absurd and refutable simply by logic."<sup>88</sup>

#### 5.3.1 *Consciousness, Unconsciousness, and Preconsciousness (and Repression)*

On Freud's account, the term 'Conscious' is "purely a descriptive one", denoting the peculiarly "direct and certain"<sup>89</sup> nature of some experiences or mental states. Only as one intentionally focuses attention on a perception is it truly conscious in this sense. But under certain conditions, ideas that have already ceased to be conscious can become conscious again. Any mental content that is not the focus of active mental attention but that can easily be recalled to consciousness at any time Freud describes as 'latent' or 'Preconscious'. However, psychoanalysis shows that some thoughts can exert a powerful force over the conscious mind even if they never become conscious themselves (just as Anna O.'s feelings of helplessness and guilt about her inability to save her father

---

<sup>87</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 9.

<sup>88</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 10.

<sup>89</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 10.

contributed to her psychological and physical state, in spite of her being completely unaware that this was the case).

Freud asserts that unconscious ideas of this second type *cannot* become conscious (as latent/preconscious ones do) because “a certain force”<sup>90</sup> within the ‘mental apparatus’ works to keep these ideas repressed. This kind of content comprises the true ‘Unconscious’ mind; and this was what Freud meant when he described how, in ‘traumatic’ experiences, the ‘mental apparatus’ has to ‘master’, ‘bind’ and ‘dispose of’ powerful (mental) stimuli (see section 5.2.1). The force of Repression prevents certain stimuli from causing intolerably high levels of displeasure; it does so by relegating them to the Dynamic Unconscious. For all it cannot be accessed by the conscious part of the mind, this dynamically unconscious part is very significant. In fact, for Freud, the dynamic unconscious is not only *a* very important part of the mind, but *the most* important part of it. The Freudian conception of consciousness is often visualized diagrammatically as an iceberg, with the Unconscious, submerged beneath the water, comprising the largest portion; the Preconscious, just below the water’s surface, significantly smaller; and finally Consciousness, just the tiny tip of the iceberg fully exposed.

### 5.3.2 *Free Association*

But even what is ‘repressed’ – ideas that are Unconscious in the ‘dynamic’ sense – can usually be retrieved (/be made first preconscious, and then conscious) through the practice of psychoanalysis. Initially, owing to, among other things, Freud’s admiration of Charcot, the main means employed to access unconscious content was hypnosis. When they were hypnotized, Freud’s patients demonstrated a sharply increased ability to make associations between ideas, and thus each one was able “to find the path – inaccessible to his conscious reflection – which led from the symptom to the thoughts and memories connected with it”<sup>91</sup>.

When hypnosis fell out of favour, and was largely discarded from the clinician’s arsenal of techniques, Freud said that the case looked hopeless: hypnosis was one of the best ways of accessing dynamically unconscious content, and clinicians relied heavily on this practice. But then he remembered something one of his colleagues had said with regard to sleepwalkers: although they denied any recall of what they had been doing while sleepwalking, the clinician was often able to elicit these memories by forceful insistence that the memories were *not* lost, and that the patient *would* be able to recall them. Freud describes this ‘free association’ method, through which the psycho-analyst seeks to bring repressed content out of the dynamic unconscious, and make it pre-conscious:

---

<sup>90</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 11.

<sup>91</sup> Two Encyclopaedia Articles; ‘(A) Psycho-Analysis’; Standard Works, p. 235.

[W]e require the patient to put himself into a condition of calm self-observation, without trying to think of anything, and then to communicate everything which he becomes inwardly aware of, feelings, thoughts, remembrances, in the order in which they arise in his mind.

Freud, 1922, p. 242.

Psychodynamic theory posits ‘psychic and biological determinism’: no thought or impression enters the mind for no reason, and tracing it back, via its associations, will in every case eventually lead to content with (usually unconscious) psychological significance; in many cases, (unconscious) content is psychologically significant precisely because it is the product of the struggle between the biological imperatives presented by the life instincts, the death instincts, and the pleasure principle. This is why free association works. Because of this determinism, every impression that is produced by the dynamic unconscious during free association is seen, by the psychoanalyst, as being significantly non-random: a specific image, rather than any other, comes into the patient’s mind for a specific reason; a reason which often has its roots in the patient’s biology.

## 5.4 Structures of the Mind

Although recognition of the significance of the dynamic unconscious is crucial to the psychodynamic understanding of the mind, in Freud’s clinical practice, he found that the categories Conscious, Unconscious and Pre-Conscious proved “inadequate and, for practical purposes, insufficient”<sup>92</sup> for the comprehensive understanding of psychological phenomena that he was looking for.

### 5.4.1 *The Ego*

To remedy this shortcoming, he introduced the structural/functional/organizational term *ego* to refer to “a coherent organization of mental processes ... [the] institution in the mind which regulates all its own constituent processes, and which goes to sleep at night, though even then it continues to exercise a censorship upon dreams”<sup>94</sup>. It looks like the kind of conscious mind that the philosophically-educated typically think of (see 5.3) – but Freud’s work in psychoanalysis shows that this is not the case:

---

<sup>92</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 15.

<sup>94</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 16.

[W]e find that during analysis, when we put certain tasks before the patient, he gets into difficulties; his associations fail when they ought to be getting near to the repressed. We then tell him that he is dominated by a resistance; but he is quite unaware of the fact, and, even if he guesses from his feelings of discomfort that a resistance is now at work in him, he does not know what it is nor how to describe it. Since, however, there can be no question but that this resistance emanates from his ego and belongs to it, we find ourselves in an unforeseen situation. We have come upon something in the ego itself which is also unconscious, which behaves exactly like the repressed, that is, which produces powerful effects without itself becoming conscious and which requires special work before it can be made conscious.

Freud, 1923, pp. 16-17.

The ego is not, therefore, purely a conscious mind. It contains within itself its own dynamic unconscious. But, this unconscious element notwithstanding, the ego does represent reason and sanity. Its work consists in disciplining the dynamic unconscious (proper), and reconciling what the unconscious self desires with what the senses perceive in the external world; we say that the ego operates in accordance with the reality-principle. The ego's work is not easy: the dynamic unconscious (like the submerged part of the iceberg) is enormous and powerful, and the ego is not always successful in controlling it. The ego is like a rider "who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse"<sup>95</sup>: it is obliged to find effective ways of controlling the almost overpowering urges of the dynamic unconscious (/the repressed). And, just as a rider, "if he is not to be parted from his horse, is [sometimes] obliged to guide it where it wants to go", the ego sometimes has to decide on a course of action that is not too strongly opposed to the powerful impulses at work in the dynamic unconscious.

#### 5.4.2 *The Id*

There is a certain intuitive appeal to this view of the essence of the individual as something unreasoning, impulsive, and overwhelmingly powerful – as something on a 'deeper' level than the level of ordinary, everyday awareness of the practical aspects of being-in-the-world. Freud's suggestion is that

we shall gain a great deal by following the suggestion of a writer who [points out that] the conduct through life of what we call our ego is essentially passive, and that, as he expresses it, we are 'lived' by unknown and uncontrollable forces ... I propose to take it into account by calling the entity ... which behaves as though it were Ucs ['Unconscious'], the name of *Id*.

Freud, 1923, pp. 27-8.

---

<sup>95</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 30.

The id operates purely in accordance with the pleasure-principle: the only motivating drives which it recognizes are the drives prompting it to obtain pleasure, and avoid unpleasure. It is governed by instincts, and it is deeply unconscious. The ego, which approximates the conscious self (in spite of having some unconscious elements), is positively insignificant, by comparison to the id, in terms both of its 'size' and its 'power'. "We shall look upon the mind of an individual as an unknown and unconscious id, upon whose surface rests the ego"<sup>96</sup>. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that the ego itself is really just a specially modified part of the id: "that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world acting through the [perceptual system]"<sup>97</sup>.

It comes as no surprise to find that this unconscious id is responsible for instinctual activity. Indeed, if we find that that part of our selves that is the most instinctual is also the most deeply unconscious, it is no more than we would expect. But here Freud again directs our attention to the evidence of psychoanalysis. Our common sense assumption is that our minds can carry out "intricate intellectual operations"<sup>98</sup> without being conscious of doing so (this is the ability we presume when we make when we suggest 'sleeping on' a problem); moreover, Freud discovered, very many of his patients had an unconscious tendency towards self-criticism and guilt. For these two reasons, Freud suggested that "not only what is lowest but also what is highest in the ego [which is, remember, really just a modified part of the Id] can be unconscious"<sup>99</sup>.

### 5.4.3 *The Super-ego*

'What is highest in the ego', for Freud, is 'the super-ego'. Although psycho-analysis, in Freud's day, was "reproached time after time with ignoring the higher, moral, spiritual side of human nature," this reproach seems, as Freud complained, to be unjust. For, although psycho-analysis emphasizes the instinctual and unconscious side of personhood, man's 'higher nature' is precisely what the super-ego represents. Freud used the term 'ego-ideal', because the ego-ideal (or super-ego) contains a pattern of the 'ideal' way for the child to be; and he said that behind the origin of this ego-ideal "lies hidden the first and most important identification of all, the identification with the father [although he notes that, since young children do not appear to differentiate between the sexes, it might be better to say 'with the parents'] which takes place in the prehistory of every person"<sup>100</sup>.

The super-ego is a modified part of the ego; or, since the ego is only a modified part of the id, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the super-ego is (also) a special part of the id. It is the

---

<sup>96</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 28.

<sup>97</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 29.

<sup>98</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 32.

<sup>99</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 33.

<sup>100</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 39.

part that deals with morality. Perhaps it would even be fair to say that the super-ego represents a person's *conscience*, at least to the same extent that it is fair to say the ego represents (conscious) *self* – we have seen that the ego is not without unconscious elements, and perhaps the super-ego might likewise be not without some elements to which we would not want to give the name 'conscience'. But it is easy to see why 'conscience' is a reasonably apt description for the super-ego: the super-ego can be thought of as an imprint left by the earliest impulses of a child's id, and particularly how the child was taught, by its father and mother, to exercise control over those impulses. The relation of the super-ego to the ego "is not exhausted by the precept: 'You *ought to be* such and such (like your father [or 'parents', see previous])'; it also comprises the prohibition: 'You *must not be* such and such (like your father [or parents]); that is, you may not do all that he does; many things are his [their] prerogative'."<sup>101</sup>

But the authority of the parents is not the only factor which contributes to the formation of the super-ego. This super-ego can be seen as having "two complementary origins to it: one in childhood and one in the history of the race"<sup>102</sup>. Children internalize the authority of their parents, and their prohibitive decrees – the 'Thou shalt nots' – but at the same time, Freud suggested, there could be a way in which the super-ego is derived phylogenetically. If the ego can be said to represent the external world, and deal in perceptions, then the super-ego deals with 'internal' perceptions: its world is the world of the id. And, since the id represents the deepest, most instinctual, least conscious promptings of the biological instincts of our species, the super-ego too is intricately enmeshed in our phylogenetic heritage.

Reflection at once shows us that no external vicissitudes can be experienced or undergone by the id, except by way of the ego, which is the representative of the external world to the id. ... The experiences of the ego seem at first to be lost for inheritance, but, when they have been repeated often enough and with sufficient strength in many individuals in successive generations, they transform themselves, so to say, into experiences of the id, the impressions of which are preserved by heredity. Thus in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harboured residues of the existences of countless egos, and, when the ego forms its super-ego out of the id, it may perhaps only be reviving shapes of former egos and be bringing them to resurrection.

Sulloway, 1979, p. 375.

The super-ego tells the ego what it may and may not be like, and how it should and should not handle the impulses of the id – just as parents impose discipline on their children. Of course, part of what makes the Freudian self so fragmented and so riven with conflict is that, although there is a sense in which the id, ego and superego are separate structures, they are, at the same time, part of a single self. The self is at once the voice of authority, the spirit of rebellion, and the compromise between the two. It is the id, the ego and the superego.

---

<sup>101</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 44-45.

<sup>102</sup> Sulloway, 1979, p. 374.

This 'psychological' aspect of the psychodynamic self could be taken as the Freudian analogue of the Lockean thinking thing. But, whereas Locke was agnostic about the physical/material basis for his thinking thing, Freud was adamant that the psychodynamic thinking thing could only come about given the existence of a suitable biological organism.

## **Part Three – The union of Biology and Psychology: the Dynamic Unconscious**

### **5.5 The Dream Work**

In a psychodynamic framework, we have by now seen several considerations in favour of the idea that many important mental phenomena are *not* conscious. In the first place, the pleasure principle is the main motivator for actions – and the main sources of pleasure and unpleasure, ‘internal stimuli’ (especially the instincts), arise almost exclusively outside conscious awareness. In the second place, *repressed* (dynamically unconscious) mental content is at least as integral – and usually more so – to determining how we experience things as is ordinary, conscious mental content. Free association, which is one of two or three central techniques in psycho-analysis, only works because of the fact that repressed content is invariably involved in the etiology of the psychological problems. Finally: although the mind is divided into three functional structures (the Id, Ego and Super-ego), this division is to some extent artificial. If we really want to get down to basics, we can recognize that in a sense there is *only* the id – the id, which is deeply, necessarily unconscious. This is the essence of the psychodynamic self. To the extent that Locke said ‘I am a thing that thinks (about itself)’, and Olson said ‘I am a (human) animal’, Freud could just about be taken as saying ‘I am a thing that is dynamically unconscious’.

Sulloway says that “*The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900] has generally been considered Freud’s single most important work, nothing short of magnificent in its psychological achievement”, and Freud himself claimed that “[i]nsight such as this falls to one’s lot but once in a lifetime”<sup>103</sup>. Freud had long kept a record of his own dreams, and wondered about their significance, but he first began to investigate dreaming in earnest when several of his patients spontaneously reported their dreams to him during psychoanalysis. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud proclaimed that dream-interpretation was “the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind”<sup>104</sup>; and, as we come to understand more about Freud’s view of the self, it is not difficult to see how a view of dreams as significant fits snugly into the framework of a theory emphasizing the centrality of the dynamic unconscious.

#### *5.5.1 The Nature of Sleep, and the Function of Dreams*

In order better to understand the significance of dreams, says Freud, it is necessary to start by considering their fundamental nature. And since one thing that all dreams have in common is that they occur during sleep, what better place to start this consideration than sleep itself? The correct understanding of sleep

---

<sup>103</sup> Freud’s Preface to the third English edition of his collected works, in Sulloway, 1979, p. 320.

<sup>104</sup> In Sulloway, 1979, p. 320.

is a physiological or biological problem concerning which much is still in dispute. We can come to no decisive answer, but I think we may attempt to define one psychological characteristic of sleep. Sleep is a condition in which I refuse to have anything to do with the outer world and have withdrawn my interest from it. I go to sleep by retreating from the outside world and warding off the stimuli proceeding from it. ... Thus the biological object of sleep seems to be recuperation, its psychological characteristic the suspension of interest in the outer world.

Freud, 1922, p. 71.

If this is the correct view, it appears that dreams must always come as an unwelcome interruption. And our commonsense understanding seems to confirm this: we usually do believe that deep and dreamless sleep is 'better' than sleep which is disturbed by an excess of dreaming. So if dreamless sleep performs its function more effectively than dream-laden sleep, Freud concludes that dreams, in themselves, cannot have a beneficial function: they must arise from external stimuli that are acting on the mind during sleep. The 'protective shield' of the mental apparatus is not always able to shield its inner core from stimulations that arise from 'traumatic' situations; likewise, the protective mechanisms of the sleeping mind are, under certain conditions, simply unable to exclude certain external stimuli from its awareness, in spite of its need for recuperation.

That this is the case in a certain sub-class of dreams (which Freud terms 'stimulus dreams') seems obvious. Freud describes experiments that show the effects of somatic (biological) stimuli on the contents of sleepers' dreams: pinch a sleeper's neck gently, and it will not come as a surprise to find that he reports dreaming of the application of a blister to his neck by a doctor in his childhood; let a drop of water fall on his forehead, and it will be the most natural thing in the world to find that his dream was of walking in Italy, and perspiring freely in the hot sun<sup>105</sup>. Without the mediation of their dreams, these sleepers would likely have woken as they perceived these physical stimuli – but the unconscious mind, by incorporating the stimuli into the sleepers' dreams, is often able to maintain sleep even in the face of such disturbances. Dreaming protects the sleeping self from that which threatens to awaken it.

Unlike a dream about, for example, a real experience of walking in Italy, some dreams are highly imaginative, fantastical and entirely unrelated to identifiable aspects of day-to-day life; but, even in realistic dreams, "[t]he character of mental processes during sleep is quite different from that of waking processes" (or as Fechner put it, "the stage whereon the drama of the dream ... is played out is other than that of the life of waking ideas"<sup>106</sup>). Freud proposed that the 'strangeness' of dreams – almost a 'hallucinatory' aspect, he said – was the second thing that all dreams have in common.

---

<sup>105</sup> (A close paraphrase of) Freud, 1922, p. 75.

<sup>106</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 73.

### 5.5.2 Children's Dreams

In order to find out more about the nature and function of dreams, Freud directs our attention to some of the clearest and simplest dreams which share his two universal characteristics: “The dreams we are looking for are met within children: short, clear, coherent, and easy to understand, they are free from ambiguity and yet are unmistakably dreams”. From his observations of these dreams, Freud was able to obtain “trustworthy information about the essential nature of dreams”<sup>107</sup>. (Freud made eight distinct observations about dreams’ essential nature, following his study of children’s dreams – but I have collapsed a few of the points which I thought were much the same):

First, these childhood dreams are readily understood without recourse to any kind of interpretation, since they are unmistakably “the mind’s reaction in sleep to the experience of the previous day”<sup>108</sup>. For example, a child who is disappointed when her first sailing trip comes to an end might dream that she was continuing the trip all through the night; a child who unwilling presents to a friend a birthday gift that she herself wanted might dream of possessing the desired object; or a child who could not reach some destination she saw in the distance might reach it during her dream.

But children’s dreams not only contain traces of the experiences of the previous day: they contain traces of a very particular kind. “The child’s dream is a reaction to an experience of the previous day, which has left behind a regret, a longing, or an unsatisfied wish. *In the dream we have the direct, undisguised fulfilment [sic] of this wish.*”<sup>110</sup> This strikes a chord with the earlier observation that somatic stimuli give rise to ‘stimulus-dreams’: we now find that these are not the only stimuli to give rise to dreams – for ‘mental’ stimuli (i.e. wishes) do so in much the same way.

And the dreams do not merely *express* wishes, they *represent the wishes as being fulfilled*. Freud claims that, after his ‘extensive investigation’, he can be certain this is true *in every case*. Although the dreamer may dream of a straightforward event or experience (like the child who dreamt of sailing on the lake), there is always a reason to account for why *this* event, rather than any other, sets off the dream process. So even in the most literal and straightforward of dreams, there is a difference between the ‘manifest’ content and the ‘latent’ content. The manifest content is what happens in the dream (sailing on the lake), and the latent content is the wish that is imaginatively fulfilled by what happens (*continuing* to sail on the lake, even when it was time to go home).

Although Freud does not at this point attempt to explain *how* dreams function as “guardians and protectors of sleep”, he reiterates his earlier point: although dreaming sleep may not appear to be very restful, without the intervention of our dreams, we should not have slept at all, “and we owe

---

<sup>107</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 105.

<sup>108</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 106.

<sup>110</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 107.

it to the dream that we slept as well as we did”<sup>111</sup>. Dreams are the result of a compromise between sleeping, and thus being able to recoup our resources; and achieving the gratification of our wishes.

### 5.5.3 *Dream Distortion*

In ‘stimulus-dreams’, as we already observed (see section 5.5.1), there is usually no difficulty in identifying the ‘stimulus’ which threatens to disturb sleep, but which is prevented from doing so by its incorporation into the dream. However, even where a sleep-disturbing stimulus is detectable in the content of a dream, it is often the case that this ‘stimulus’ appears in a form much different to its actual form: “[t]he dream does not merely reproduce the stimulus, but elaborates it, plays upon it, fits it into a context, or replaces it by something else”<sup>112</sup>.

Unlike the children’s dreams Freud was investigating, the dreams of adults are often very far from being clear or straightforward. Sometimes – even perhaps *usually* – the wishes that motivate adults’ dreams are so disguised or distorted that the ‘manifest’ content of a dream (what the dream is apparently about) is in no way related to the ‘latent’ content (the wish which motivates the dream, and which is in some way imaginatively fulfilled by it). This is why such dreams require interpretation by psychoanalysts before their true significance can be revealed.

To shed light on the mechanisms of dream-distortion, Freud recounts a dream described to him by “an elderly woman, highly cultivated and held in great esteem”:

She went to the First Military Hospital and said to the sentinel at the gate that she must speak to the physician-in-chief ... as she wished to offer herself for service in the hospital. In saying this, she emphasized the word service in such a way that the sergeant at once perceived that she was speaking of “love service” [in war time – this was a familiar phrase at the time, with specific connotations]. ... [I]nstead of finding the chief physician, she came to a large gloomy room, where a number of officers and army doctors were standing or sitting around a long table. She turned to a staff doctor and told him her proposal; he soon understood her meaning. The words she said in her dream were: “I and countless other women and girls of Vienna are ready for the soldiers, officers or men, to ... .” This ended in a murmur. She saw, however, by the half-embarrassed, half-malicious expressions of the officers that all of them grasped her meaning. The lady continued: “I know our decision sounds odd, but we are in bitter earnest. The soldier on the battlefield is not asked whether he wishes to die or not.” There followed a minute of painful silence; then the staff doctor put his arm round her waist and said: “Madam, supposing it really came to this, that ... (murmur.)” She withdrew herself from his arm, thinking: “They are all alike,” and replied: “Good heavens, I am an old woman and perhaps it won’t happen to me. And one condition must be observed: age must be taken into account, so that an old woman and a young lad may not ... (murmur); that would be horrible.”

Freud, 1922, p. 115.

---

<sup>111</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 107-8.

<sup>112</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 78.

In most respects, this dream represents wish-fulfilment in a straight-forward way: it serves to gratify “the erotic desires of the subject”<sup>113</sup>. But what is very interesting about this dream from the point of view of the psychoanalyst is the *murmuring*. From the context in which the murmuring occurred, there can be little doubt about what the import of each of these murmurs must have been – underlying this dream lies, in Freud’s words, “a shamelessly libidinal phantasy”<sup>114</sup> on the part of the dreamer. The manifest dream, however, does not reveal this: “Just where the context demands this confession, there is in the manifest dream an indistinct murmur”<sup>115</sup> (Freud hopes we will realize “how obvious” it is that it is the shocking nature of these sections of the dream which have led to their being suppressed, and not permitted to enter consciousness).

In fact, the parts of the dream that are unacceptable to the dreamer’s consciousness have been *censored*, in much the same way that the authorities at a political paper might censor potentially libellous sections in the articles. But whereas a newspaper censor simply erases offending passages, the dream censorship achieves its goal by omission, modification and regrouping of material belonging to the dream’s latent content. And in the same way that a political reporter, anticipating which portions the censor might object to, might make his point very obliquely, the dream-censorship may cause the underlying wishes (which are the true motivation for the dream) to become distorted and disguised to such an extent that, although the dream still in some sense gratifies the dream-wish, this wish is prevented from being recognized.

This talk of dream censorship should be ringing some bells in our minds – because we have already come across a kind of a censoring influence that prevented certain thoughts from penetrating consciousness. In the case of Anna O, the distressing thoughts and images concerning her father’s illness and death contributed to her physical and mental symptoms – but this took place completely outside of her conscious awareness. They were *repressed*; or, perhaps, ‘censored’. And in his clinical work, Freud found that patients were unable to continue a chain of free associations when the ideas being evoked began approaching too closely subjects which had been repressed (read ‘censored’) by the ego. During dreaming, “[t]he tendencies which exercise the censorship are those which are acknowledged by the waking judgement of the dreamer and with which he feels himself to be at one”<sup>119</sup>, and the tendencies against which the censorship is exercised are any tendencies the dreamer may consider offensive or objectionable.

Freud’s early (somewhat simplistic) view of dreaming was primarily an ‘economic’ one. Dreaming was understood purely as a way for the sleeping mind to discharge energy residues stored up in memories of “unresolved daytime conflicts” (this is what happens in the children’s dreams

---

<sup>113</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 80.

<sup>114</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 116.

<sup>115</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 116.

<sup>119</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 119.

discussed, 5.5.2 above). But with his ‘discovery’ of the id, this view shifted, and instead he proposed that “we dream because the infantile id clamors for nightly self-expression”<sup>120</sup>. This point needs emphasizing: dreams are the ‘royal road’ to understanding the unconscious – in the form of the id. Dream-distortion is due to the censorship exercised (pre-consciously, by the ego) over any desires of the id which are offensive enough to disturb our withdrawal from consciousness during sleep.<sup>121</sup>

So the ego (/self) protected some of Freud’s patients from understanding the true significance of their free associations by isolating these associations from consciousness (i.e. by Repressing them, and causing them to remain [dynamically] Unconscious). It protected sleep by (pre-consciously, which is to say: *not* consciously; un-consciously) disguising certain wishes that were unacceptable to the sleeper, before gratifying them imaginatively. The dynamic unconscious is rooted in biology, but this (biological) dynamic unconscious is also psychological: it is the source of dreams, which are motivated, psychological phenomena. It is what performs the vital function of consciousness-protector; biology protects psychology – but, what is more, the psychological (experience of) self grows up out of the dynamic unconscious; and psychology *is* biology. Dreams are motivated phenomena: the biological processes which give rise to dreaming occur as a result of dreamers’ (psychological) wishes.

## 5.6 Psychodynamic Metaphysics

Although Freud was a biologist in training, and although he emphasized biological forces in his accounts of various aspects of human behaviour, he was remarkably restrained in holding back on speculation about how the phenomena he talked about (the instincts/the divisions of consciousness/the preconscious ‘censor’ etc.) might be realized on a physical level. He makes his position quite clear when he contrasts his own views with those of Weismann (published between about 1882 and 1892), a writer who dealt extensively with “the duration of life and the death of organisms”<sup>122</sup>. Whereas Weisman considers living things ‘morphologically’, psychoanalysts, says Freud, are “dealing not with the living substance but with the forces operating in it”.

### 5.6.1 *An Evolutionary Role for the Dynamic Unconscious*

---

<sup>120</sup> Sulloway, 1979, p. 329.

<sup>121</sup> (A close paraphrase of) Freud, 1922, p. 123.

<sup>122</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 45.

Even for someone who did not believe in Darwinian evolution by natural selection, a way of accounting for the dynamic unconscious in evolutionary terms would be highly desirable, since the idea of Darwinian evolution was so important in Freud's theories (about the pleasure principle/the instincts etc.). In Darwinian terms, it seems quite straight-forward to suggest that the human mind (or maybe 'Locke's thinking thing', or even 'the psychodynamic self') is the product of evolution:

What is usually described as the unity of the self, or the unity of conscious experience, is most likely a partial consequence of ... the evolution of organisms with inbuilt instincts for the survival of the individual organism. It seems that consciousness, and even reason, have evolved very largely owing to their survival value for the individual organism.

Popper & Eccles, 1977, p. 114.

But in the face of the evolutionary success of all the species which, we assume, lack consciousness on a par with human consciousness, how is one to support the claim that consciousness of the self-aware type is important for evolutionary success? And more importantly, if consciousness – of the self-conscious type, the type we have – really is an evolutionary advantage, then how is one to explain the evolutionary success of a breed of creatures whose selves are dominated by the dynamic unconscious? One reason for the success of non(-self)-conscious species might be that what advantage they lose with regard to cognitive flexibility, intelligence, problem-solving abilities etc., they gain, with regard to the enormous amount of resources which they do not need to devote to cognition,

Westen<sup>123</sup> explains that, on a cognitive level, most human behaviour is driven by such a complex set of goals and motives that it would simply be too much to expect working memory to keep track of all these factors consciously all the time. If they were all always consciously represented, available working memory would have to be almost exclusively devoted to this function, so that goal-directed behaviour would be severely compromised. Within a Freudian framework, unconscious processing serves not only this cognitive function (i.e. keeping working memory free enough to accommodate intentional motives), but also an important psychological one. The capacity of the dynamic unconscious for isolating potentially harmful psychological content from the ego, or self, is absolutely crucial. Since the psychodynamic self embodies the struggle between the (biological) drives of the id, and the measures imposed by the ego to keep these drives under control, *repression* (the ego's means of excluding content from conscious awareness) is likewise a crucial aspect of this selfhood. The dynamic unconscious is there to keep consciousness safe; the ego itself helps protect itself, by relegating harmful content to the unconscious, by means of repression, and dream-distortion. For the Freudian, consciousness (and, to an even greater extent, *self-consciousness*) could and should be taken, not only as an evolutionary advantage, but an

---

<sup>123</sup> 1998.

evolutionary advantage of such great importance that all the resources of the ‘mental apparatus’ are mobilized to protect it.

It might be all very well for Locke to decide that he was a thinking intelligent being, able to consider himself as himself; it may even be all very well for us to agree that this is a very plausible view – but if Freud is right (and by now we should be starting to realize that Freud is almost *always* right), Locke’s thinking intelligent being is only possible in the first place given the existence of an unthinking, non-intelligent, dynamic unconscious to protect it from itself.

### 5.6.2 *A Functionalist Approach*

In other words, the understanding Freud reaches of ‘the mental apparatus’ is not any kind of metaphysical/ontological understanding – it is almost what we today might call a functionalist account. The ‘mental apparatus’ – whatever that may comprise – exerts certain kinds of forces (although we know not how it does so, or what kinds of forces they may be) on human organisms, which can respond to these forces in one of a limited number of ways.

Clearly, within a Freudian framework, being a (human) person is largely a biological question: ‘the self’, as it is experienced psychologically, arises out of the biological drives inherent in human organisms. But, whereas the biological criterion was criticized for its failure to take cognisance of our unique ability to consider ourselves as ourselves (the same thinking things), this is exactly what the psychodynamic account *does not* fail to do. It explains how the conflicting (biological) life instincts and death instincts contribute to making us the (fundamentally conflicted) selves we experience phenomenally. It explains how biological drives lead to the psychological problem of guilt: how the ego is faced with the impossible task of satisfying both the instinctive (biological) urges of the id and the moralizing (psychological) judgments passed down upon it by the super-ego. And it explains how biological aspects of selfhood are not the only ones that can be inaccessible to consciousness: how conscious *and* unconscious psychological attributes are necessary parts of selves; how unconscious wishes that are not acceptable to the pre-conscious censor can find expression during dreams. In effect, the Freudian concept of self is not only broader than a pure ‘memory account’, as is the psychological continuity view; on a psychodynamic view, selfhood comprises memory, ordinary psychological continuity (including e.g. traits/attitudes/projects and plans etc.), *unconscious* psychological continuity (or continuity of the dynamic unconscious) – *and* biological continuity.

Personal Identity writers come up with various criticisms of the psychological and biological criteria of identity – and many critics conclude that either or both of these criteria are unsatisfactory – but we can imagine that what Freud would have said would be more like ‘neither the

psychological nor the biological criterion *on its own* is satisfactory. Neither criterion on its own is satisfactory, for the criteria are, effectively, two aspects of a single criterion. The rich, nuanced awareness of personhood which is developed within the psychodynamic self is effectively an aspect of biology. And since psychological continuity can exist only *as an aspect of* biological continuity, these continuities, together, should be taken as both necessary and sufficient to support Locke's uniquely human 'thinking thing' – for Freud, the forensic 'person', necessarily, *is* the living creature.

### 5.6.3 *Freud's Agnosticism*

Although Freud's work was inspired as well as informed by his biological expertise, he said that metapsychology (i.e. the discipline comprehending his theories about the driving forces behind human psychology) was necessarily an 'indefinite' science because "we know nothing of the nature of the excitatory process that takes place in the elements of the psychical systems, and ... we do not feel justified in framing any hypothesis on the subject. We are consequently operating all the time with a large unknown factor, which we are obliged to carry over into every new formula."<sup>125</sup> From our vantage point of 21<sup>st</sup> century technical expertise and knowledge, the only thing we can find to surprise us is how very astute Freud's speculations were, given his complete ignorance of the principles we now consider fundamental in neuroscience. What he said was

We need not feel greatly disturbed by judging our speculation upon the life and death instincts [etc.] by the fact that so many bewildering and obscure processes occur in it – such as one instinct being driven out by another ... This is merely due to our being obliged to operate with the scientific terms ... The deficiencies in our description would probably vanish if we were already in a position to replace the psychological terms by physiological or chemical ones.

Freud, 1920, p. 60.

While he clearly has some strong beliefs about how psychological phenomena are underpinned by biology, Freud recognizes the limits of his own knowledge, and he is what we might call 'agnostic' about a range of questions. He is agnostic about "the nature of the excitatory process that takes place in the elements of the psychical systems"<sup>126</sup> (and thus about how the pleasure principle is instantiated) – but his agnosticism reaches much further: he is also agnostic about how life first arose from inorganic matter (thus giving rise to the death instinct). He is agnostic about how living organisms first became consciousness (and how the ego was formed), and what exactly it is that separates conscious organisms from merely sentient ones – or *self*-conscious organisms from either (i.e. how the super-ego achieved its powerful hold over us). He is agnostic about how a

---

<sup>125</sup> Freud, 1920, p. 30.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

preconscious impression gets to be a conscious one (or “[w]hat the idea was in the interval”<sup>127</sup> between being unconscious and conscious), and he is agnostic about how the conscious, unconscious, and preconscious divisions of the mind are manifested at a physiological level. He says that there is some part of the mental apparatus that performs the preconscious ‘censorship’ responsible for distorting dreams – but he is agnostic about how this censorship takes place.

In fact, Freud is every bit as agnostic about what kind of biological structures are needed to support his ‘mental apparatus’ and ‘instinctual forces’ as (I am claiming) Locke is about what kind of thinking substance is needed to support his thinking thing. What Freud provides is a conceptual picture of the human mental apparatus, biological imperatives, instinctual motivations, and psychological experience which has stood the test of time and which is as insightful as it is revolutionary – but what he does not provide is a satisfying metaphysics detailing how psychodynamic concepts are instantiated on a physiological level. Freud has a theoretical account explaining that ‘personal identity’ is a question of how the individual’s biological nature engenders her psyche, but no account of the actual mechanisms by which this influence might take place.

This hypothesis about the processes that give rise to the psychodynamic self, which Freud does not provide, is the last piece of our puzzle. We have appreciated the importance for selfhood of Locke’s (forensic) thinking thing; we have appreciated the importance of being an animal; Freud has provided a fascinating theoretical framework within which biology and psychology can be united – but we need a fuller understanding of exactly *how* this union comes about.

We need to understand how the human brain supports the Freudian self – the instinctive, unconscious, Idian self; and we need to understand how this self relates to the Lockean selfhood we possess in virtue of our thinking, our intelligence, and our ability for reflexive self-awareness. We need to understand how we get to be not only things that think, in a vague, Cartesian sense, but things that think *about themselves*; and we need to understand how these thinking things that we are necessarily incorporate both psychological and biological continuity.

And to do this, we need to investigate the biology of the mind – we need to look to neuroscience.

---

<sup>127</sup> Freud, 1923, p. 10.

## SIX – THE INTEGRATED SELF

Freud, although he explained that biology played a role in giving rise to psychology, was not able to suggest exactly how this would take place, in physiological terms. Chapter six is about neuroscience, and how it corroborates the Freudian picture of selves that are both psychological and biological. To date, it has not been possible to confirm, or even investigate, *all* of Freud's main claims from a neuroscience point of view; but what is known about the dreaming brain conforms very closely to the account of dreams that Freud gave (this is significant because Freud saw the interpretation of dreams as 'the royal road' to understanding the dynamic unconscious, which is the core of the psychodynamic self). Moreover, evidence from commissurotomy (the surgical section of the fibres connecting the left and right hemispheres of the brain) strongly supports Freud's theory about how the conscious parts of the mind are inferior to, and in some sense dependent on, the instinctual, unconscious aspects – although it is possible to think of the self as consisting of the id, ego, and superego, there is a sense in which there is, really, only the id.

### 6.1 The Dream Work and the Neurosciences

It was only after Freud's death that dreams (the interpretation of which, remember, is 'the royal road' to the unconscious) began to be studied from the perspective of neuroscience. What neuroscience revealed was that, with the onset of sleep, the levels of cerebral activity and patterns of neuronal activation start to change. Although electroencephalograph (EEG) imaging during normal wakeful states shows a random arrangement of 'spikes' of high brain activity, the spikes are nevertheless grouped around some mean value. In sleep, this average value does not hold: Eccles goes so far as to say that 'chaos' is taking over. Some neurons fire fast; others fire slowly; sometimes they fire in bursts. "Sleep doesn't mean cessation of activity, but something much more like disordered activity."<sup>129</sup>

This disordered activity is characteristic of what we now know as REM sleep. Although this is a very sound kind of sleep, people going through REM cycles display increased brain activity and bursts of Rapid Eye Movement; heart-rate and respiration shoot up, the genitals become engorged, and bodily movement ceases. REM sleep "consists, in short, in a paradoxical physiological condition in which one is simultaneously highly aroused and yet fast asleep"<sup>130</sup>.

---

<sup>129</sup> Popper & Eccles, 1977, p. 371.

<sup>130</sup> Solms, 2005, p. 1.

### 6.1.1 *The Dreaming Brain*

Not surprisingly, the immediate response to the ‘discovery’ of REM sleep was to wonder whether it was the physiological state corresponding to the psychological state of dreaming. By the mid-1970s, the evidence from several experimental studies appeared to indicate that this was indeed the case. But this view of dreaming as “merely an epiphenomenon of REM sleep”<sup>131</sup> rested almost entirely on the observation that people aroused during REM sleep very often reported that they had been dreaming, whereas people aroused during non-REM sleep almost never did so – in fact, when investigators slightly modified the way they phrased their questions, this association began to break down. Using their modified phrasing, researchers found that, although reports of dreaming remained higher in people awakened during REM sleep (as opposed to NREM), the difference in frequency was not nearly so high as it had appeared. In 1988, Hobson reported that “at least 5-10% of non-REM dream reports were ‘indistinguishable by any criterion from those obtained from post-REM awakenings’”<sup>132</sup>.

The hypothesis that REM sleep and dreaming sleep are distinct, and subserved by different neural structures, can easily be experimentally tested. In rats, or other lower mammals, various neural structures can be surgically removed, whereupon experimenters can check whether or not REM sleep has been eliminated: and we find that, in these animals, destruction of parts of the pons, in the brainstem – and of no other areas – leads to the cessation of REM sleep (although obviously we can’t tell what happens to their dreams, if they do dream). Of course, it would not be acceptable from an ethical point of view to experiment in this way on humans, but researchers can still observe what happens when these structures in the human brain are damaged by disease or injury. This is how we know that, in humans, damage to the pons also leads to loss of REM sleep – but almost never to a reported loss of dreaming. In other cases, where brain areas other than the pons are damaged, REM sleep is preserved, while dreaming was lost – the ideal double dissociation test.

The first area of the brain found to be essential to dreaming is deep in the white matter of the frontal lobes, just above the eyes; this area contains a pathway which conducts the neurotransmitter dopamine from the middle section of the brain to the frontal areas responsible for ‘higher’ mental and cognitive processes. The implication of this pathway in dreaming is supported by the fact that patients who take medications (e.g. ‘L-dopa’) which stimulate this pathway usually report very frequent and very vivid dreaming; and excessive dreaming can be stopped by administering drugs which block the transmission of dopamine in this pathway. “In short, dreaming can be switched

---

<sup>131</sup> Solms, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>132</sup> In Solms, 2005, p. 2.

`on' and `off' by a neurochemical pathway which has nothing to do with the REM oscillator in the pons.”<sup>133</sup>

The second area of the brain essential to dreaming is a portion of cortex at the occipito-temporo-parietal junction (just behind and above the ears). This region is responsible for “the highest levels of processing of perceptual information”<sup>135</sup> – especially for using perceptual information for abstract thinking, and for storing it in memory. Dreaming stops completely when this area is damaged. In contrast, damage to the perceptual systems at the ‘lower’ levels only affects certain aspects of the imagery occurring in the dream; and this suggests that the contribution of the occipito-temporo-parietal area comes first, and is followed by activation of specific perceptual systems. Whereas, during wakefulness, sensory systems feed perceptual information to the occipito-temporo-parietal area, during dreams, it is the occipito-temporo-parietal area that feeds its abstract cognitions to the perceptual systems.

### 6.1.2 *The dreaming brain and The Dream Work*

Solms says that “what ... these different mechanisms capable of triggering dreams have in common is the fact that they create a state of arousal during sleep”<sup>136</sup>. Freud said that dreams are a response to something that threatens to disturb sleep, and this neurological evidence seems to confirm it. Freud was also fairly specific about what sort of something this was. In children’s dreams, the something was “a reaction to an experience of the previous day which has left behind a regret, a longing, or an unsatisfied wish”<sup>137</sup>; but, even where the experiences of the previous day did not contribute to the dream, dreams were, Freud said, in all cases, *motivated* phenomena. In every case, some kind of wish, desire or secret longing can be found behind the manifest dream content.

The astonishing thing is that the main function of the dopamine pathway (i.e. the first of the two areas of the brain essential for dreaming) has to do with the kind of goal-seeking behaviours that reflect an organism’s “appetitive interactions with the world”<sup>138</sup> – which is exactly the kind of thing Freud had in mind. For ‘appetitive interaction with the world’, read ‘wish’, and what you have is “we can make sure that what produces the dream must *always* be a *wish*”<sup>139</sup>.

In short, the current neuroscientific evidence gives us every reason to take seriously the radical hypothesis - first set out in this book 100 years ago - to the effect that dreams are motivated phenomena, driven by our wishes. Although it is true that the (cholinergic) mechanism which generates the REM state is ‘motivationally neutral’, this cannot be said of the (dopaminergic) mechanism

---

<sup>133</sup> Solms, 2005, p. 5.

<sup>135</sup> Solms, 2005, p. 7.

<sup>136</sup> Solms, 2005, p. 6.

<sup>137</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 107.

<sup>138</sup> Panksepp, 1985, p. 273, in Solms, 2005, p. 5.

<sup>139</sup> Freud, 1922, p. 108 – I emphasized ‘always’, but ‘wish’ was already emphasized.

which generates the dream state. In fact, the latter mechanism is the appetitive ... 'command system' of the brain (Panksepp, 1985, 1998).

Solms, 2005, p. 5.

The reversed direction of traffic between perceptual systems and the occipito-temporo-parietal junction in the brain (the second area essential to dreaming) is also exactly what Freud predicted. Waking perception is not affected by damage to this 'higher perceptual processing' area, but "is obliterated entirely by damage at the lowest levels of the system". Dreaming, in contrast, stops completely when this area is damaged; but not when specific perceptual systems are damaged. In other words, says Solms, "dreaming reverses the normal sequence of perceptual events."<sup>140</sup> Whereas, during consciousness, abstract images are created from perceptions, in dreams, imaginary 'perceptions' are created from abstract mental imagery. And what did Freud say? He said that dreams are motivated phenomena in which the manifest content – in the form of perceptual images – is generated as the result of ('abstract') psychological processes.

Finally: whereas a single area (responsible for 'higher functioning', and known as 'the dorsolateral frontal convexity') is the most active region during all waking activity, this area is completely inactive during dreaming. So, although dreams can contain almost exactly the same experiences as are contained in consciousness, these probably would have a quite different subjective, experiential character – since they are achieved by different neurological mechanisms. Freud said that the second universal characteristic of dreams was their 'hallucinatory' quality (Fechner's 'other stage'), and this neurological evidence explains how it is that they come to have this quality.

Solms summarizes the current neuroscientific view of the dreaming brain as follows:

[T]he process of dreaming is initiated by an arousal stimulus. If this stimulus is sufficiently intense or persistent to activate the motivational mechanisms of the brain (or if it attracts the interest of these mechanisms for some other reason), the dream process proper begins. The functioning of the motivational systems of the brain is normally channelled toward goal-directed action, but access to the motor systems is blocked during sleep. The purposive action which would be the normal outcome of motivated interest is thereby rendered impossible during sleep. As a result (and quite possibly in order to protect sleep) the process of activation assumes a regressive course. This appears to involve a two-stage process. First, the higher parts of the perceptual systems (which serve memory and abstract thinking) are activated; then the lower parts (which serve concrete imagery) are activated. As a result of this regressive process, the dreamer does not actually engage in motivated activity during sleep, but rather imagines himself to be doing so. Due to inactivation during sleep of the reflective systems in the frontal part of the limbic brain, the imagined scene is uncritically accepted, and the dreamer mistakes it for a real perception.

---

<sup>140</sup> Solms, 2005, p. 7.

This picture is more than just *compatible* with the theory about dreaming that Freud advanced: it is *so very* compatible that Solms says “I personally think we would be well advised to use Freud’s model as a guide for the next phase of our neuroscientific investigations.”<sup>141</sup>

## 6.2 The Self and Its Brain

Popper tells us that “[t]he liaison between the self and its brain is conjectured to be extremely close. But there are a number of very important facts to be remembered which speak against too close and too mechanical a relationship”<sup>142</sup>. The first fact mentioned by Popper concerns the logic of identity: as long as we continue to embrace Naturalism, only physical phenomena have causal efficacy. This means that, even if we wanted to say that the self is identical with the brain (in the sense that it is ‘an aspect of’ the brain), we would have to acknowledge that it was *the brain-aspect* of the brain that had the causal power, not *the self-aspect* of the brain. And if the self has no causal role to play, it would be epiphenomenal – it might as well not exist. But I have already decided that ‘personal *identity*’ is not what we are talking about when we talk about selves. As long as we say that a ‘self’ is not a physical thing (which we should do, since we are talking about a ‘forensic’ concept, rather than a material one), we don’t need to worry about whether or not it can have (physical) causal power,

The other fact which militates against a very close and mechanical relationship between the mind (or self) and the brain – according to Popper – comes from neuroscience.

### 6.2.1 Commissurotomy: *the Mind Divided*

Commissurotomy – the surgical section of the fibres connecting the left and right hemispheres of the brain – has occasionally been performed as a last resort for individuals suffering from intractable epilepsy; these patients provide a unique opportunity to observe how perception and cognition are affected when the hemispheres are unable to communicate. Sperry says that, when the brain has been divided by commissurotomy, “the mind also is correspondingly divided”. Although each of the (disconnected) hemispheres continues to function at a high level, “most

---

<sup>141</sup> Solms, 2005, p. 9.

<sup>142</sup> Popper & Eccles, 1977, p. 118.

conscious experience generated within one hemisphere becomes inaccessible to the conscious awareness of the other”<sup>145</sup>.

The left hemisphere of the brain is responsible for the perception of stimuli that affect the right side of the body; the right hemisphere, for the perception of stimuli that affect the left. In visual perception, the left hemisphere deals with stimuli in the right-hand half of the visual field, and the right hemisphere, stimuli in the left-hand half. As a result of commissurotomy (because the hemispheres are unable to communicate), “visual perception of objects in each hemisphere becomes restricted to half the normal field of view, cut off sharply at the vertical midline and center of gaze”<sup>146</sup>. But usually the most striking effect of the surgery can be seen in tasks requiring language function: commissurotomy completely isolates the brain’s main language centres – which are located in the left hemisphere in approximately 95% of the population<sup>147</sup> – from the perceptions and other functions of the non-linguistic right hemisphere.

A remarkable demonstration of this division of the mind following commissurotomy was provided by Levy et al.<sup>148</sup> ‘Chimeric figures’ were formed by splitting pictures (for example, of faces) and then recombining the separated halves of different pictures. One of these mismatched faces was then flashed on a screen for a brief moment, and subjects were asked to choose which of four faces they had just seen. If they were asked to state verbally which face they had seen, participants reliably chose the face of which a component was shown in the visual area controlled by the (left) verbal hemisphere; if they were asked to view the original four pictures, and point out which one matched the target, they chose the face of which a half was shown in the visual space linked to the (right) visual hemisphere. In both cases, subjects were completely unaware that the face they had seen was actually made up of two halves taken from two different faces. There is, it seems, little doubt that the region of the brain involved in verbal processing (in the left hemisphere), and the region of the brain involved in visual processing (in the right hemisphere, for a stimulus presented to the left) are each conscious, in their different ways, of the external stimuli – but neither hemisphere is conscious of what is going on in the other.

This test can be slightly modified to test auditory perception; and it has similar results. These results, very naturally, led some investigators to conclude that conscious experience depends on linguistic capacity. Although certain perceptual tasks can be carried out by the non-linguistic hemisphere, these tasks are not ‘consciously’ performed. Eccles, for example, took the evidence from commissurotomy to show that “[i]n all cases ... conscious experience results from a neural

---

<sup>145</sup> Sperry, 1984, p. 661.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> Sperry, 1984, p. 662.

<sup>148</sup> 1972, in Popper & Eccles, 1977.

communication to the dominant hemisphere. ... There is no evidence that it arises in the minor hemisphere.”<sup>149</sup>

But although initially it was assumed that the ‘mute’ right hemisphere was both ‘blind’ to printed words and ‘deaf’ to spoken words, it has now been established that it is actually capable of quite a high standard of performance on reading and comprehension of both written and spoken words. In some tasks, usually spatial/non-verbal ones, the non-dominant hemisphere even outperforms the other (Sperry lists reading faces, fitting forms into molds, discrimination and recall of nondescript tactual and visual forms, and other similar tasks<sup>150</sup>). The non-dominant, non-verbal hemisphere is undoubtedly capable of quite advanced mental function, and it seems premature, at best, to deny that this hemisphere is ‘conscious’. It not only outperforms the dominant hemisphere in “novel tasks involving logical reasoning”, but also “generates typical facial expressions of satisfaction at tasks well done or of annoyance at its own errors or at those made by its uninformed partner hemisphere”. It can learn from experience, and recall test items even weeks after they have been presented.<sup>151</sup>

When commissurotomy patients are tested on their cognisance of “vague and diffuse conscious experience”<sup>152</sup>, the normal strict lateralization rule partially breaks down. For example, while one commissurotomy patient could not verbalize the location of her pain (her left hand was being stimulated, i.e. her right brain, i.e. the non-linguistic hemisphere), she still had some idea that she was hurting somewhere; while a subject could not identify a picture of a female nude presented visually to the minor hemisphere, she still blushed. It seems that emotional reactions are less strictly lateralized (i.e. restricted to a single hemisphere) than are sensory perceptions.

Taking these facts into account, some personal identity writers decided that “it is no longer correct to think of ‘person’ as being correlated one-to-one with a body”; that the left and right hemispheres are each almost as good as persons themselves. Some even went so far as to suggest that the ‘consciousness’ of the left and right hemispheres were *equivalent* – that, in effect, each ‘person’ comprised two consciousnesses. (This is where Parfit fits into the picture with his infamous story about Lefty and Righty – two independent halves of a brain that could potentially be transplanted into different bodies, and thus give rise to two discrete ‘persons’.)

### 6.2.2 *A Modified View of the Nature of Consciousness*

But De Witt thinks that it is just as incorrect to take the two hemispheres as equivalent as it is to take the non-dominant hemisphere as mute. What we need, he says, is an intermediate position.

---

<sup>149</sup> Eccles, 1977, p. 321.

<sup>150</sup> Sperry, 1984, p. 666.

<sup>151</sup> Sperry, 1984, p. 666.

<sup>152</sup> Popper & Eccles, 1977, p. 321.

His contention is that those who think the minor hemisphere is inferior in all respects have erred “in refusing to acknowledge how impressive the minor hemisphere's cognitive powers really are”; and that those who take the hemispheres as equivalent have erred “in failing to recognise that the possession of language makes for a profound disparity between the two cerebral hemispheres.”<sup>153</sup>

De Witt first explains that it is important to distinguish the related but distinct notions of ‘consciousness’, ‘mind’ and ‘self’. ‘Consciousness’ is what differentiates simple organisms (earthworms, for example) from living but unconscious life forms (like plants). In these simple organisms, most behaviours are reflexive/tropistic – but in order to have a reflex to a stimulus in the first place, the organism must experience some minimum kind of ‘consciousness’ of the stimulus. ‘Mind’ differentiates these simple organisms from most of the organisms we have think of when we say ‘animals’. These more complex organisms appear to have genuine behavioural freedom (in that they are able to reflect, consider, and make choices, as opposed to reacting reflexively) – but our best guess says that they have no concept *of self*.

Organisms with a consciousness of self (which is to say, human organisms) constitute the third tier of De Witt’s hierarchy. We humans are not only able to appreciate the way in which each of us is a distinct/autonomous individual, but also the way in which some actions are ‘our’ actions, and some thoughts ‘our’ thoughts. This is what sets us apart. De Witt suggests that this is a capacity that emerges only in the presence of a capacity for language – and this is a capacity which the non-dominant hemisphere lacks.

Both minor and major hemispheres are conscious in that they both, no doubt, have the basic phenomenal awareness of perceptions, sensations, etc. And they both have *minds* (under my definitions) in that they exhibit elaborated, organised systems of response hierarchies, i.e., intentional behaviour. But in addition I would conjecture that only the major hemisphere has *a self*; only the language utilising brain is capable of the abstract cognising necessary in order to be aware of itself as a unique being.

De Witt, 1975, p. 44, my italics.

I read ‘self’ in this kind of context as having much the same sense as ‘person’ – but as De Witt notes, whether or not one is prepared to concede that the non-linguistic hemisphere should be counted as a ‘person’ (or ‘self’) turns out to be a question of little importance. He says

I really care very little whether we are all of us really two 'persons'. I do however intend to insist that the two hemispheres are on radically unequal ground; that the major hemisphere is richer in an important sense than its minor relative. And if we decide that we are all of us really two persons then I shall merely say, 'Fine! But let us just remember that one of us is a much more important person than the other!'

---

<sup>153</sup> De Witt, 1975, p. 42.

But even if we accept that a degree of linguistic competence is needed to enable the kind of ‘consciousness of self’ we are looking for (the kind of thing we meant when we used to talk about ‘personal identity’), is it really fair to say that the self, or person, is completely contained within the linguistic hemisphere? As noted, commissurotomy disrupts the unity of the sensory/perceptual experience generated by the hemispheres – but in two important ways, consciousness remains undivided. Firstly, the usual lateralization does not apply to systems mediating ‘centralized states’ like hunger, fatigue, pain, temperature etc. (see above, 6.3.1: subjects perceived generalized discomfort when the left hand was painfully stimulated, although they could not verbalize its location). Secondly, consciousness of self/social awareness seems to be generated in one hemisphere only, but quickly spreads to both hemispheres (subjects blushed while viewing nude pictures presented to the ‘blind’ minor hemisphere – other similar tests had similar results).

### 6.2.3 *Consciousness and the Self*

As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was evidence to suggest that impairment of consciousness was related to brainstem lesions; in the 1940s, experiments on non-human mammals uncovered an association between activity of the brainstem’s reticular formation and the electrical activity characteristic of attentional states; more recent studies have identified specific areas in the brainstem (“extending from about the level of the midpons to the level of the upper midbrain”<sup>154</sup>) – especially those areas comprising the ascending reticular system – which are essential to consciousness. These systems are responsible for what Parvizi & Damasio call ‘life regulation’: the basic functions of keeping people alive (/the functions that allow something to be an animal), and for enabling any form of consciousness at all, rather than for processing specific cognitive information. And, in addition to being responsible for life regulation, they are also the systems responsible for the kind of ‘consciousness of self’ that remains mostly undivided in commissurotomy patients.

Sperry suggested that a useful way to understand the structure of consciousness is to think of a Y-shaped system, “divided in its upper, more structured levels but undivided below”<sup>155</sup>. Higher mental functioning is carried out by various structures of the cerebral hemispheres; the more basic aspects of consciousness belong to the ascending reticular systems of the brainstem (the areas near where the brain joins onto the spinal cord)<sup>156</sup>. While the more structured ‘upper’ levels of perception and executive function are almost completely divided, along left-right lines, by

---

<sup>154</sup> Parvizi & Damasio, 2000, p. 142.

<sup>155</sup> Sperry, 1984, p. 670.

<sup>156</sup> Crick & Koch, 2003, e.g. 119.

commissurotomy, more basic capacities – like the capacity for unified consciousness, or ‘selfhood’ – are not. If this is right, the ability or inability of the linguistic and/or non-linguistic hemispheres to *become cognisant* of the self – although it is obviously a very important part of the issue – should be taken as a separate question from the question of where ‘the self’ actually *originates*.

Parvizi and Damasio claim that one of the two basic aspects of the phenomenon of ‘consciousness’ is how the brain enables a ‘proto-self’ (the other aspect is how the brain creates mental representations of objects in the environment, but this has no great relevance in a discussion of selves). The ‘proto-self’ is “a coherent collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the organism in its many dimensions”<sup>160</sup>. This ‘proto-self’ is not the kind of ‘autobiographical self’ enjoyed by persons, but a much more basic, pre-conscious precursor of such a self. And the proto-self is the element of consciousness which can be accounted for in terms of brainstem structures. The authors contend that “the multiple dimensions which describe the overall current state of the organism are mapped in several groups of brainstem nuclei” – and that this dynamic map of the organism state provides a context in which the brainstem nuclei can influence the functioning of the cerebral cortex and its ‘higher mental functions’. In fact, they claim, “[w]e see the remapping of the changing organism state in relation to a causative object as the basis for the experience of knowing, the very core of the process of consciousness and self”<sup>161</sup>.

On the Parvizi-&-Damasio view, the proto-self is *not* a cognitive phenomenon, located in the cerebral hemispheres: it is the irreducible product of conscious existence. It comes into being insofar as, and to just the same extent that, the human organism is alive. Their view draws a sharp distinction between (‘higher’) cognitive or perceptual capacities, which are divided quite clearly along left-right lines; and the basic awareness of self or unity of consciousness, which is part of ‘life regulation’, originates in the brainstem, and is independent of the cerebral hemispheres. It might be simplistic to say that the self is created by brainstem structures, while *awareness* of this self is a ‘higher’ capacity belonging to the major hemisphere, but the claim nevertheless seems to contain more than a grain of truth.

The brainstem as responsible for life? Consciousness of self as a question of being alive (of being an animal)? We have come across such a view already: on the Parvizi-&-Damasio view, it looks suspiciously as if being a self might become possible precisely in virtue of one’s *being an animal*. Even if the proto-self is not the beginning and end of everything we humans want to think of as who we are, it is certainly what enables our proper, Lockean, self-aware Selves to come into being. Being an animal, it seems, is what allows one to be a thinking thing. Freud said that the psychological experience of selfhood was inextricably rooted in being a biological organism,

---

<sup>160</sup> Parvizi & Damasio, 2000, p. 138.

<sup>161</sup> Parvizi & Damasio, 2000, p. 152.

although he had no ideas about how this could be – but if what we were looking for was an account of how the unconscious, Idian, Freudian self relates to both the human animal and the thinking thing, might this not be exactly what Parvizi & Damasio have provided?

In the brain-stem, we have found the proto-self: a self which is primitive; deeply unconscious – not part of formal cognition – yet upon which all the higher cognitive and perceptual capacities are based.

We have discovered, in fact, the neurobiology of the Freudian Id.

## CONCLUSION

So where does all this leave us? I think one thing is certain: if we had not already become dissatisfied with the false dichotomy of psychological continuity versus biological continuity, we should have become so by now. Locke said that personhood was a question of continuity of consciousness – but a forensic, conceptual question, rather than a substantial one. Olson and Locke both, on my reading, recognize the sense in which persons (or, at least, human beings) are animals – but Freud is the one who explains how continuity of consciousness depends on, and arises out of, continuity of biological life. He has taught us how saying that the self is fundamentally a biological phenomenon need in no way diminish our commitment to Locke's thinking intelligent being. Neuroscience has vindicated Freud with regard to at least one of the ways in which, he says, the unconscious mind is at least as important to the selfhood question as is the conscious. Dreaming – Freud's royal road to the unconscious – is found to take place in much the same way, and for much the same reasons, as Freud suggested.

Freud's idea of the self was an idea of something primitive, instinctual, and largely unconscious. In psychodynamics, we see the concept of self lose many of its conscious and/or cognitive implications. This self is not something that is divided in commissurotomy, because it is much more primitive than the 'higher' cognitive and perceptual capacities arising in the cerebral hemispheres. Freud tells us how the infantile id far outweighs either the ego or the super-ego in terms both of its strength, and of the resources which are devoted to the satisfaction of its needs; and Parvizi & Damasio have suggested a way of accounting for this.

If we say that the ascending reticular systems of the hindbrain are responsible for enabling the 'proto-self', and if we take 'proto-self' as a primitive, unconscious, non-cognitive, biological phenomenon, then what we have is 'The ego and the super-ego are like the tip of the iceberg, resting on the vast, submerged, unconscious id'.

## REFERENCES:

1. Allison, H. E. (1966). Locke's Theory of Personal Identity: A Re-Examination. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 27(1), 41-58.
2. Atkins, K. (Ed.) (2005). *Self and Subjectivity*. Cornwall: MPG Books Ltd.
3. De Witt, L. W. (1975). Consciousness, Mind, and Self: The Implications of the Split-Brain Studies. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 26(1), 41-47.
4. Flew, A. (1951). Locke and the Problem of Personal Identity. *Philosophy*, 26(96), 53-68.
5. Freud, S. (1920). Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (1955). Translated by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.
6. Freud, S. (1922). *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Authorized English Translation by Joan Riviere. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. and the International Psycho-Analytic Institute.  
  
[Strachey cites in his bibliography *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, revised ed., London, 1929 (*A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, New York, 1935).]
7. Freud, S. (1923). *The Ego and the Id* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.) (1947). Authorized translation Joan Riviere. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.
8. Garrett, B. (2003). Some Thoughts on Animalism. In K. Petrus (ed.), *On Human Persons*. Frankfurt/London: Ontos-Verlag.
9. Gay, P. (1989). Introduction to Civilization and its discontents. In James Strachey (Ed.). *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Standard Edition (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). W.W. Norton. URL = [http://www.dahsm.medschool.ucsf.edu/history/DiseasePDF/10\\_Gay.pdf](http://www.dahsm.medschool.ucsf.edu/history/DiseasePDF/10_Gay.pdf).
10. Hughes, M. W. (1975). Personal Identity: A Defence of Locke. *Philosophy*, 50(192), 169-187.
11. Locke, J. (1694). Of Identity and Diversity. In John Perry (Ed.), *Personal Identity* (pp. 33-52). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.
12. Noonan, H. (2009). Identity. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/identity/>.
13. Olson, E. T. (1997a). *The Human Animal*. New York: Oxford University Press.
14. Olson, E.T. (1997b). Was I ever a Fetus? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 57(1), 95-110.
15. Olson, E. T. (2003). An Argument for Animalism. Published in R. Martin and J Barresi (Eds.), *Personal Identity*. Blackwell: 818-834.

16. Olson, E.T. (2010). Personal Identity. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>>.
17. Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: OUP.
18. Parvizi, J. & Damasio, A. (2001). Consciousness and The Brainstem. *Cognition*, 79, 135-159.
19. Popper, K. R. & Eccles, J. C. (1977). *The Self and Its Brain*. Springer International: Berlin/New York/London.
20. Schechtman, M. (2005). Personal Identity and the Past. *Philosophy, psychiatry and psychology*, 12(1), pp. 9-22.
21. Schechtman, M. (2004). Personality and Persistence: The Many Faces of Personal Survival. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 41(2), 87-105.
22. Solms, M. (2005). The Interpretation of Dreams and the Neurosciences. *Lindauer Psychotherapiewochen*. Plenarvortrag im Rahmen der 55, 1-13. URL = <<http://www.lptw.de/archiv/vortrag/2005/solms.pdf>>.
23. Sperry, R. (1984). Consciousness, Personal Identity and the Divided Brain. *Neuropsychologia*, 22(6), 661-673.
24. Sulloway, F. J. (1979). *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend*. Bungay, Suffolk: The Chaucer Press.
25. Wasserman, R. (2009). Material Constitution. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/material-constitution/>>.
26. Westen, D. (1998). The Scientific Legacy of Sigmund Freud: Toward a Psychodynamically Informed Psychological Science. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(3), 333-371.