

# PSYCHOANALYSIS AS A HYBRID OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

DE BLOCK'S PAPER, "Freud as an Evolutionary Psychiatrist," discusses Freud's writings—including a recently discovered paper on the evolution of psychopathology—to establish the Freudian "philosophy of man" that human beings are "ill to the core" (i.e., that mental illness is an inevitable byproduct of human psychological processes). This perspective is then used as a basis for proposing a way in which psychoanalysis can be integrated with contemporary evolutionary psychology. However, this undertaking raises fundamental questions about psychoanalysis itself, which are addressed in this commentary. First, to what extent is a systematic theoretical unity imposed on, rather than discovered in, Freud's writings? Also, has De Block succeeded in grounding the Freudian philosophy of man in evolutionary theory, and how is this ambition affected by general questions about the scientific status and evidence for psychoanalytic conceptions? Further, if there is only limited experimental evidence for psychoanalytic concepts, how are claims to knowledge justified in psychoanalytic discourse, and how does this relate to

the forms of epistemic justification found in religion and science? Finally, is psychoanalysis closer to religious or scientific discourse, and if it combines features of both, what kind of activity is it?

## THE EXPOSITION OF THE FREUDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL PROJECT

The key claim of De Block's paper is that any evolutionary psychology faithful to Freud's account of human nature must be constrained by a fundamental premise: the psychological organization of human beings is such that "there is a quantitative, but not a structural, difference between psychiatric patients and so-called healthy or normal individuals" (2005, 323). From De Block's perspective, this reflects the Freudian perspective that the normal operation of psychological processes inevitably results in some degree of mental distress: "every repression produces symptoms, every defense mechanism produces more suffering than is strictly necessary" (2005, 321). As a result, "when Freud writes that there is only a gradual difference between neurotics and normals, he does not mean the normals are non-neurotic, but only that they suffer less under their neurosis" (2005, 318). This Freudian perspective is variously summarized throughout the paper; for example, "we think there is only one underlying motive of Freud's research, which

could also function as a cornerstone of a 'Freudian' philosophy. This underlying motive is the intuition that there is no substantial difference between the so-called normal human being and the mentally insane" (2005, 315).

De Block's exposition of the Freudian account of human nature also emphasizes the doctrine of psychosexuality: "the Freudian philosophy of man presumes primarily that every human being has to react in some way of another to sexual problems" (2005, 317). One of the problems confronting any expositor of Freud is the fact that his voluminous writings show considerable development in his thought. This heterogeneity raises the question of the extent to which the coherence of Freudian theory as a systematic whole is imposed by expositors, rather than lying in the corpus itself. De Block's approach to this heterogeneity is to extract different kinds of relations between sexuality and psychopathology from Freud's writings (e.g., neurosis and the Oedipal instincts, psychosis and narcissism), and then to argue that they explain Freud's interest in less obviously sexual aspects of mind, behavior, and society. As De Block comments after his exegesis of different connections between sexuality and psychopathology:

but probably, he [Freud] only meant that in neurosis, people wrestle first and foremost with love, in perversion with sex and violence, and in psychosis with identity and issues related to identity, such as death and "the meaning of life." At least, such an interpretation can explain why Freud—in some of his works—recognized the importance of problems like aggression, love, and death for the human psyche and human psychopathology . . . ; he nevertheless refused to modify the primacy of sexuality in psychopathology. (2005, X)

Whether all of Freud's explanations of psychological phenomena involve sexuality is debatable. Thus, the emphasis on psychosexuality was somewhat qualified in his later writings by recognition of the psychic effects of the fear of death, such that, for example, religious beliefs and practices defend against a fear of death (*The Future of an Illusion*, 1927). In this later view, humans are still "ill to the core," but their psychological responses are not solely constrained by the sex drive and its regulation.

In addition to the motivating force of the fear of death, Freud also posited other nonsexual motivating forces. As Zangwill put it,

in Freud's later thinking, those unconscious activities of the id were no longer conceived as concerned exclusively with instinctual gratification and as operating wholly in accord with the pleasure principle. He came increasingly to appreciate the importance of certain repetitive and self-destructive elements in the pattern of human destiny that, literally, lay "beyond" the pleasure principle. . . . These constitute the Freudian "death-wish", the deeply unconscious impulse to seek . . . the extinction of individual existence (Zangwill 1987).

The point here is not so much to dispute details of De Block's exposition of Freud's psychology, but to observe that it represents an attempt to abstract a coherent, systematic theory from a wide-ranging body of writings that developed over more than forty years. In the course of his exegesis, De Block discusses a recently discovered paper of Freud (1983), "A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neuroses" (p. 8ff.), which deals with the evolutionary origins of psychopathology. After summarizing the arguments, and accepting that they are not only speculative but reflect the influence of the discredited theories of Lamarck and Haeckel, De Block nevertheless proposes that they are relevant to founding an evolutionary psychiatry consistent with a Freudian philosophy of man. The fundamental point, in De Block's view, is the notion that "Freud . . . considers the different psychopathologies as unavoidable for *Homo sapiens*. This means that Freud's theory leaves no room for a specific etiology of psychopathology: human nature 'causes' psychopathology" (2005, 322).

Hence, in De Block's view, the doctrine of psychosexuality, and the notion that we are ill to the core, are the key components of the Freudian philosophy of man. On this basis, he argues that previous attempts to integrate psychoanalytic and evolutionary theory are not truly Freudian, in that they "abstain from transforming the psychiatric question, 'Why do we get sick?' into the Freudian question 'Why do we inevitably get sick?'" (2005, 321). For example, Bowlby's Dar-

winian psychoanalysis is disqualified as a suitable foundation for Freudian philosophy because of Bowlby's "strong conviction that secure mother-child relationships and a healthy development are possible. . . . Freud, on the other hand, saw the relationship between mother and child as an impossible relationship . . . in which both were each other's victim as well as the victim of their own instincts" (2005, 321).

De Block argues that a genuine Freudian philosophy fits with a model of evolutionary psychiatry in which "some disorders (e.g., phobias) were adaptive strategies in the 'environment of evolutionary adaptedness,' but are highly problematic in our new environment" (2005, 322). This "genome lag" model, in De Block's view, is evident in the argument of "A Phylogenetic Phantasy" that adaptations to the Ice Age were maladaptive in nineteenth and twentieth century Vienna. The model, De Block argues, concurs with Freud's perspective that "the major psychopathologies were necessary side effects of adaptive traits, such as puberty and intensive parental care. And as long as the advantages of these traits outweigh the disadvantages of the psychopathologies, humans remain ill to the core" (2005, 322).

Having outlined these arguments, De Block—somewhat surprisingly—makes a very reserved estimate of the potential relevance of the Freudian philosophy to evolutionary psychiatry. For example, he comments, "this 'Freudo-Darwinian' explanatory model can certainly not be applied to the majority of psychopathologies," although no explanation is given for this view. He also observes that "it would be dangerous to illustrate this Freudo-Darwinian model, because there are no actual examples of such research" (2005, 323). He does, however, outline a potential topic of research: "the growing realization of death during adolescence, which is in itself a side effect of an adaptive cognitive mechanism, might cause serious neurotic problems in each of us. After all, our mortality is a problem that we cannot solve, but we might be inclined to try several strategies, such as hiding, freezing, or inflation of the self (narcissism), that have proven adaptive with regard to other, more or less related problems" (2005, 323).

De Block's paper presents us, then, with a contrast between a confident exposition of a Freudian philosophy of a man, and the more modest conclusion that "we only want to point out that (neo-)Darwinism does not automatically exclude the possibility of an evolutionary foundation of this Freudian project" (2005, 323). What, then, are we to make of the Freudian philosophy of man and its relevance to evolutionary (or any other) psychology?

#### THE SCIENTIFIC VALIDITY OF THE FREUDIAN "PHILOSOPHICAL PROJECT"

If Freud's intellectual legacy is to be updated and adapted to the changing methods, interests, and evidence base of the human sciences, then we must be convinced of the validity of the conceptions of human nature that he proposed. This justifies us in asking: are psychoanalytic concepts true and/or heuristically useful psychological concepts? In particular, is it true that humans are "ill to the core"? And, further, does De Block's paper give us any basis for answering these questions?

There are numerous points at which De Block poses what ostensibly seem to be scientific questions—in other words, questions that purport to be about the nature of the human mind. For example, "In [Freud's] opinion, all constitutive elements of psychopathology can be found in 'healthy' individuals. But what are these 'pathogenic' elements, and to what degree can they be found in every member of the human population" (2005, 316)? Or, "one of the most fundamental questions is why human beings are so extremely vulnerable to psychopathology" (2005, 318).

De Block answers these questions not by an appeal to contemporary psychological research, but by a careful exegesis of Freud's writings. How, then, should the concepts and propositions of Freud's writings be regarded? De Block himself does not seem to be entirely consistent in his own attitude toward whether Freud's theories should be treated as scientific facts or propositions, or in some other light. For example, "Freud's 'discoveries' cover a wide range, from infantile sexuality and the unconscious, to re-

pression and the psychic processes of condensation and displacement” (2005, 315). By placing *discoveries* in quotation marks, De Block calls their status as either established facts, or at least hypotheses, into question. But if they are not scientific discoveries, what are they?

A more explicit ambiguity about the factual status of psychoanalytic notions appears in the sentence, “there is some variation in the pathogenic problems because of the *fact—or psychoanalytic proposition*—that sexuality is very heterogeneous” (2005, 316; italics added). By contrast, at other points, De Block writes of “psychoanalytic findings” (2005, 318), which seems to imply that something has been found or discovered (established by way of fact). Similarly, at times De Block’s presentation of psychoanalytic theory switches from an expository to a factual mode—in other words, a way of writing that seems to imply that it should be taken as true. For example, “there *seems to be*, for example, a close connection between obsessional neurosis and isolation and paranoia and projection. *One may even suspect* that the defense mechanism is far more decisive for the specific form of psychopathology than the infantile instinct against which the defense mechanism reacts. This is revealed for instance by the fact that Freud attributes a central role to the homosexual instinct in very different pathologies” (2005, 317; italics added). Elsewhere, De Block also comments on the validity of specific psychoanalytic propositions, but the bases for his judgments are not clear—for example, in his comment that Laplanche’s “generalized seduction theory” has “undeniable merits” (2005, 318), without stating what they are, or the criteria on which this opinion is based.

De Block’s paper reveals, then, a persistent ambiguity about the factual or scientific status of psychoanalytic theory itself. In addition, the paper gives no basis for deciding whether or not the psychoanalytic concepts he describes in his exposition of Freud are valid, useful, or true. This presents a problem for the topic he suggests for a Freud–Darwinian evolutionary psychiatry. The example of the adolescent contemplating death begins by referring to what sound like prefron-

tally based cognitive abilities, but in the next sentence the psychoanalytic concept of “inflation of the self (narcissism)” is invoked. But in anticipating a more substantive use of psychoanalytic terms, De Block comes up against the issue of how these concepts can be integrated into psychological research. As Crew comments on the concept of repression,

before he was finished, Freud had conceived of repression as both a conscious and an unconscious process acting upon feelings, thoughts, ideas, and fantasies as well as memories. Such profligacy left repression without any operational meaning; the “repressed” was simply any material that Freud, who was given to ascribing his own punning associations to his patients’ minds, chose to identify as having been dismissed from awareness. (Crews 2004, 4)

Against this, De Block might cite the example of Bowlby, whose work on attachment is widely accepted as empirical psychological research, but which reflects the influence of psychoanalytic concepts. It does not follow, however, that concepts such as inflation or repression can be successfully operationalized in empirical research, or that if they are, they will closely resemble the concepts that Freud developed, or justify the explanatory uses to which he put them.

The example of Bowlby reminds us that his work was “disqualified” as truly Freudian, because it violated the assumption that human beings are “ill to the core.” What, then, of the claim that the Freudian philosophy of man can be grounded in evolutionary psychiatry?

De Block’s argument for a Freud–Darwinian approach to evolutionary psychiatry invokes the genome lag hypothesis, that “some disorders (e.g., phobias) were adaptive strategies in the ‘environment of evolutionary adaptedness,’ but are highly problematic in our new environment” (2005, 322). In the case of phobias, for example, the proposal is that

in the ancestral environment fear of public places and fear of being far from home might well have been adaptive responses “that guard against the many dangers encountered outside the home range of any territorial species” . . . In a modern urban environment, however, people who become extremely anxious when they are away from home or when they are in public

places will find it all but impossible to lead a normal life. (Murphy and Stich 2000, 84, quoting Marks and Nesse 1994)

This example, however, only serves to illustrate how genome lag hypotheses do not need to invoke specific psychoanalytic concepts (such as projection, repression, Oedipus complex). However, De Block argues that although existing genome lag arguments are not specifically Freudian, they do establish a basis for developing a Freudo–Darwinian evolutionary psychiatry. But this claim is problematic. First, the genome lag model has itself been criticized—for example, on the grounds that human ancestral environments are likely to have been so diverse that there were many “environments of evolutionary adaptedness,” resulting in trait variations in diverse populations that may affect current propensity for illness (e.g., selection for *preference* for prolonged separation from home if subsistence strategies required it) (McGuire and Troisi 1998, 41). Equally, “advocates of the genome-lag hypothesis have yet to explain why so many traits presumably selected before and during the [environments of evolutionary adaptedness] remain so well adapted in the present, for example, reproduction, developing novel strategies, and so on’ (ibid, p. 41). Further, speciation may still be continuing, in which case gene–environment interactions that currently eventuate in illness may change (ibid).

This last point indicates a more fundamental criticism of De Block’s use of the genome lag model as a way of relating the Freudian philosophical project to evolutionary psychiatry. De Block argues that Freud “held that some psychopathologies (neuroses, psychoses, and perversions) were necessary side effects of adaptive traits, and as such inevitable for each of us” (2005, 322). However, the genome lag model does not imply that humans are necessarily ill to the core, because the genes that dispose to disorder in contemporary environments were once adaptive. This illustrates not the inevitability, but the environmental contingency, of illness. Genetic variation within a population will also affect the “pathogenicity” of any given environment. Further, the genome lag model entails that circumstances that resemble the environments of evolutionary adapt-

edness (e.g., a hunter–gatherer lifestyle and social organization) might render the genes adaptive for contemporary humans. If this is so, then psychopathology is not inevitable, and we are not ill to the core.

On these grounds, I suggest that De Block has not succeeded in establishing that evolutionary psychiatry can be substantively informed by psychoanalytic concepts, or that the genome lag model provides a basis for an evolutionary psychiatry that exemplifies the Freudian philosophy of man. Nevertheless, specific discussion of the interface between evolutionary psychiatry and Freudian theory comes only at the end of the paper. What is most striking about the paper is the effort expended in a detailed exegesis of Freud’s writings to identify a Freudian philosophy of man. In this respect, it is not typical of evolutionary psychiatric, or indeed any empirical psychological, discourse. But neither is it an exercise in the history of ideas; De Block is not merely developing an argument about the essence of Freud’s writings, but also attempting to demonstrate their current and prospective relevance to evolutionary psychiatry. So what kind of discourse does De Block’s paper exemplify? What kind of discursive activity does it represent?

## TWO WAYS OF JUSTIFYING BELIEFS

In a discussion of how adherents of religious and other belief systems find warrants for claims to knowledge, John Bowker (2005) draws on the distinction between two kinds of epistemic justification: coherence and correspondence theories. Coherence theories “argue that the only warrant or justification that we can hope for in the case of any particular proposition is that it is coherent with the whole body of beliefs and propositions in the system to which it belongs” (p. 126). By contrast, a correspondence theory “holds that propositions are justified when they correspond to what they purport to be about” (p. 125). The natural sciences rely on both strategies to justify particular claims—for example, a hypothesis about the evolutionary origins of flight is tested for coherence with “the whole network of propositions that make up the theory of evolution, . . . and the larger system of beliefs and propositions

that make up the coherent story of biology” (p. 126). Nevertheless, evolutionary theory, like any other system of beliefs that makes claims to knowledge, also has procedures for indicating how its claims about the distant past “check in” to what its statements purport to be about—for example, by examining the fossil record. These procedures illustrate a correspondence theory of justification (p. 131).

Bowker observes that religions cannot, in general, produce for observation what their key beliefs purport to be about (such as God or Brahman). As a result, “many of the propositions of religion are checked for acceptability by the extent to which they do or do not cohere with the system in which they are embedded” (2005, 127). The quest for coherence results in such typical features of religions as systematic theologies, confessions, catechisms, and creeds, the propriety of which are checked by “the extent to which they are coherent with the system as a whole, in which coherence with the (claimed) revelation is paramount” (2005, 127). Religious systems, and subsystems, can achieve very high levels of internal coherence. But although “the strength of coherence theories of epistemic justification is that they allow the telling of many stories,” “their weakness is that they offer *on their own* no criteria outside themselves for distinguishing between them in terms of fact or fiction” (Bowker 2005, 130). To create the possibility of distinguishing fact from fiction, any belief system must find ways of moving from a closed circle of coherence (however internally consistent), to one that is sufficiently open to “check in” (test or explore) what its claims purport to be about. The consequences of this can, of course, be dramatic, as the histories of sciences, and religions, and their complex relationships, demonstrate.

The argument that psychoanalysis is more like a religion than a science has been made before (e.g., Gellner 1985). Here I suggest that the epistemic status of psychoanalysis is closer to religion than science. Like religions, psychoanalysis is unable to “produce for observation what its key beliefs purport to be about”—or, at least, Freud’s numerous intuitive proposals about unobservable psychological processes have not been

widely supported by experimental research. Even the existence of such a key process as repression is not proven (e.g., Crew 2004). Further, the fact that De Block engages in such sustained exegesis of foundational texts is more typical of religious than scientific discourse. His attempt to extract core tenets from these writings, and then use them to determine who and what truly belongs to the system (not Bowlby), is again typical of discursive practices within religious systems. Yet it is also clear that De Block does not wish psychoanalysis to remain a closed circle of coherence, accepted by its followers but otherwise disconnected from other, more widely accepted systems of belief. This would explain, for example, the critique of Laplanche, who “does not seem to realize that the corroboration and foundation of the Freudian philosophical project on nothing but psychoanalytic findings is impracticable” (2005, 318). In contrast to Laplanche, De Block’s strategy is to ground the Freudian philosophy in evolutionary psychiatry, even though (as I have argued) there is reason to doubt his success in this.

#### PSYCHOANALYSIS AS A HYBRID OF RELIGIOUS AND SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE

There is another, quite fundamental, respect in which psychoanalysis resembles religion more than science. Consider, for example, the proposal that human beings are ill to the core. To assert this raises the question of how literally we should take the metaphors and analogies we use to conceive of psychology and human distress. If we accept a psychoanalytic conception of the human person, does it follow that all human beings so constituted are ill to the core? What if they don’t feel ill? What if no one notices that they are ill, but by contrast thinks that they are contented or fulfilled? What if much of their life is spent in such a state of contented fulfillment? What if they occasionally experience aversive psychological states, but not so much that they cannot manage their internal states, or cope with the demands of life? We might accept that dynamic mechanisms are operating, but without—in some cases—producing the kind of distress, dis-ease, or loss of function that prototypically evokes the

concept of “illness” in its application to bodily phenomena, and is extended by analogy to psychological phenomena. If we describe an individual who has achieved a successful adaptation to the conflicts between internal and external reality as “ill,” we are invoking a highly attenuated notion of the concept of “illness.” In this case, the term has been so emptied of referential content as to have become more of a slogan than a description. It functions as an item in a generalizing discourse about human nature—human beings are ill by virtue of psychic constitution, at a deep, hidden level, irrespective of their experience and behavior at the surface. So, to be “ill” in this Freudian sense is not necessarily a bad thing, because it is entirely consistent with being happy and contented. But what term do we now use to characterize what was previously conveyed by mental “illness”, given that the patterns of distress and/or dysfunction previously denoted by the term *illness* are still there in human populations, demanding recognition?

There is a family resemblance between this kind of fundamental claim about the nature of human being and theological, religious, and philosophical positions—for example, the doctrine of original sin; the Buddha’s claim that existence is suffering (*dukkha*); and stoical or existentialist conceptions of human nature. Consider the discourse surrounding *dukkha* in Theravada Buddhism, for example. Three types of *dukkha* are distinguished: (1) *dukkha* as ordinary suffering, encompassing all forms of mental and physical distress; (2) *dukkha* as produced by change; and (3) *dukkha* as conditioned states (Rahula 1985, 19). A consequence of “*dukkha* as produced by change” is that all kinds of happiness, satisfaction, or pleasure (*sukkhā*) are, in fact, instances of *dukkha*. As Collins explains,

this sort of suffering can be registered phenomenologically as “ordinary suffering” through distress at the cessation of pleasant feeling; but more generally, it is not so much an actual state of distress as a proper seriousness in the face of impermanence and death: “When it is seen that that which is impermanent is unsatisfactory, there can be no occurrence of blissful feeling.” It was this reflection, arrived at in meditative solitude, that “indeed this world is in distress: one is

born, grows old, dies and is reborn. No-one knows the escape from this suffering, this growing old and dying,” which led the previous Buddha Vipassi to leave his life of ease as a prince and seek release. (1990, 191)

Similarly, “*dukkha* as conditioned states” rests on the analysis of human beings as constituted by an impermanent flux of elements, leading to a sense of our own contingency and finiteness. Collins comments, “. . . the suffering of impermanence (for the most part), and the unsatisfactoriness of conditioning (wholly), are not descriptive but prescriptive, not depictions of lived experience but evaluations of it from a transcendentalist perspective” (1998, 211). Elsewhere, Collins writes, “to see life as ‘suffering’ represents not an empirically derived judgment on life, but a goal-oriented soteriological project. It is an attitude . . . in which any individual experience, however fortunate . . . , is submerged in a wider reflection on the impermanence and conditionality of samsaric existence as a whole” (1990, 192).

The Freudian philosophy of man, based on the notion that human beings are ill to the core, is similarly evaluative, prescriptive, transcendentalist (in its invocation of a hidden order of reality), and soteriological (although the rescue of human beings psychoanalysis envisages is more like a form of stoical forbearance in the face of a pitiless world and a flawed human nature, in contrast to the more exalted ends of life imagined in religions). In articulating what Collins terms a “wider reflection on . . . existence as a whole,” psychoanalytic discourse is closer to religious discourse, in contrast to the miscellany of provisional facts and theories typical of ordinary empirical psychology and psychiatry.

Unlike religions, however, psychoanalysis presents itself as a naturalistic psychological science and a therapy. There is, therefore, a reasonable expectation that it can be subject to the same standards of proof as other psychological theories and therapies (for discussion of types and methods of epistemic justification in religions, see Bowker 2005). This creates a tension between psychoanalysis as a reflective, high-level discourse about human beings (exemplified by

De Block's exegesis of Freud, and his distillation of a Freudian philosophy of man), and psychoanalysis as an empirically grounded science (exemplified in De Block's arguments about the genome lag hypothesis). These two aspects of psychoanalysis do not sit easily with one another. For example, the epistemic status of De Block's Freudian philosophy of man is ambiguous. Is it a conception that captures the essence of humanity, a fundamental reality about ourselves with which we have to deal? Or is it a scientific hypothesis about only some features of psychological functioning, doubtfully consistent with only one of several models from evolutionary psychiatry, and exposed to the risk that research will fail to establish any evidence for it? De Block acknowledges the flaws of Freud's evolutionary model, and that "the Darwinian theories of Nesse, Bowlby and others, might be correct, despite their problematic consequences for Freud's philosophical project" (2005, 323). Acknowledging the possible consequences for psychoanalysis of opening itself to empirical investigation raises fundamental questions: in the absence of an extensive evidence base for psychoanalytic conceptions, what motivates commitment to them in the first place? And, further, are there any features of psychoanalysis that would justify its perpetuation as a secular discourse on self and salvation if no experimental warrants for its conceptions can be found? In other words, De Block's paper, in attempting to ground psychoanalysis in more widely accepted and authoritative approaches to the study of human psychology, only serves to underline the question of what kind of discourse and practice it really is.

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