

an alienating aversion in analytic association

**talia morag, *emotion,
imagination and the limits of
reason* (routledge, 2016)**

justin clemens

The relationship between psychoanalysis and other forms of thought, including philosophy, has always been fraught at best. As a student, Sigmund Freud himself was deeply interested in philosophy, not least the work of Franz Brentano.¹ Brentano is of course well-known for his revivification of the scholastic concept of intentionality as essential to all mental phenomena, insofar as they are discriminated from physical phenomena: each mental act is *about* something, an object of some kind, even if that object is inexistent; that observational or empirical psychology does not unite the study of consciousness with a first-person view; and that perception is always necessarily a kind of mis-taking too. Among Brentano's famous students were such luminaries as Edmund Husserl, Alexius Meinong, and Rudolf Steiner.

Freud, however, never did a doctorate in academic philosophy: he moved into neurophysiology, and spent some time dissecting eels, shooting and snorting coke, before coming to focus on a psychotherapeutics which, as we know, rapidly led him to a unique appreciation of the powers of common language. While he never lost his enthusiasm for “hard” science—from his neurological *Project for a Scientific Psychology* to the late, slightly wistful remarks about his abiding hopes for placing analysis on a scientific basis—Freud also always acknowledged the necessity of fictional descriptions in the practice of analysis. As he famously writes in *Studies on Hysteria*:

The fact is that local diagnosis and electrical reactions lead nowhere in the study of hysteria, whereas a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of poets enables me, with the use of a few psychological formulas, to obtain at least some kind of insight into the course of that affection.²

Furthermore, as Freud puts it in “An Outline of Psycho-Analysis,” implicitly invoking while fundamentally distorting the spirit of Brentano:

We know two kinds of things about what we call our psyche (or mental life): firstly, its bodily organ and scene of action, the brain (or nervous system) and, on the other hand, our acts of consciousness, which are immediate data and cannot be further explained by any sort of description. Everything that lies between is unknown to us, and the data do not include any direct relation between these two terminal points of our knowledge. If it existed, it would at the most afford an exact localization of the processes of consciousness and would give us no help towards understanding them.³

What we therefore find instead between consciousness and its material substrate is not a locale of process but the de-localizations of the unconscious. Temporally divided yet eternal, singularly effective yet unavailable to observation, and more cunning than any reason recognizable to either philosophy or science, the unconscious poses the greatest possible challenges to knowledge of the self. The closest one can come is through the writings of the poets. Yet, in doing so, this is not to depart science altogether: it is to create a third way, *in holding psychoanalysis between the two*, in a position of the greatest possible tension. Following Jacques Lacan and Alain Badiou—two thinkers quite foreign to Talia Morag’s own proclivities—this fundamental operation of psychoanalysis should be considered a kind of “antiphilosophy”: whereas philosophy begins and sustains itself precisely by injecting science into poetry, psychoanalysis inverts the direction, injecting poetry into science. If psychoanalysis is not a science, it is not not a science, either. Yet psychoanalysis is only possible under the conditions of a science from which it continually re-departs without ever entirely abandoning.

So it’s no wonder then that scientists, philosophers, and ideologues of all kinds still find the key propositions and methods of psychoanalysis impossible to swallow. The pill is too bitter, too poisonous. Hence commences the grand tradition of Freud-bashing still lively today, from the spasmodic reactions of Freud’s own

contemporaries through Karl Popper and Adolf Grünbaum (“Each accused the other’s principles of being so weak that they allowed even psychoanalysis to be called a science, when their own of course did not”), up to the monotonous obsessional rantings of Frederick Crews and beyond.⁴

That said, certain philosophers—even hard-core analytic philosophers—have sometimes found that psychoanalysis has unique challenges to offer philosophy, and might even, perhaps, provide some indications from which philosophy can learn. Morag’s book is a contribution to this marginal if important tradition. Yet I find her attempt—as I suppose any card-carrying ambivalent Freudian should—both highly agreeable and disagreeable at the same time. As her title proposes, both emotion and imagination are crucial aspects of human life, which, in their own ways, open up the problematic of the limits of reason. Here Morag reprises some important basis points regarding psychology:

1. The spontaneity of emotional response: not only do people differ, often wildly, in their emotional responses to the same circumstances, but the same person can differ at different times to what are essentially the same circumstances. Indeed, this variability establishes the possibility of psychology at all: thinking, judging, and emoting may have no necessary prime cause, stability or referent;
2. The relation between reason and emotion is not only variable, even unstable, but emotions and reason expressly often part company in experience, even as their relation does not seem to be simply oppositional;
3. The basic recalcitrance of individual psyches to ‘external’ or ‘objective’ observation and intervention is a fundamental factor of psychology as such.

So: irreducible spontaneity, rational unreliability, and essential resistance to empirical research all present abiding issues for any putative scientific psychology. Here, Morag offers a nice formula for what psychoanalysis can bring to the table: non-scientific empiricism. Not that I agree with this: as aforementioned, I think psychoanalysis is an antiphilosophy; it’s not simply non-scientific but anti-scientific, with the proviso that the “anti-” here designates not a rejection but a paradoxical affiliation. Yet Morag’s formulation remains very suggestive, along the lines of what we might call post-Humean associationism (to which I’ll return shortly). For Morag, it’s important to snap apart the assumed linkages between

reports and what they report on, in order to contradict the only-too-prevalent dogma that, on the one hand, belated accounts of emotions can ultimately be correlated with emotions themselves; on the other, that one can simply put normative pressure on emotional responses by forcing behavioural change at the level of verbal expression.

The common fantasy that emotions are common, stable entities across times and cultures is of course not entirely false, but we need the reminder that such stabilities are rather the outcomes of what we could call “royal command performances,” analysed so incomparably by Homer in his account of Briseis’s weeping for Patrocles in Book XIX of the *Iliad*, or in Freud’s description of the weeping schoolgirls in *Mass Psychology*. Here, the intuition is of the (un-conscious) opportunism of possibilities of expression: for Homer, the utter misery of slaves means that their only opportunity to weep for their own plight comes when they are publicly compelled to mourn the death of their master, and they do it so well, so authentically, *because they are doing it for themselves*.... It is therefore at the very least misleading to start from “common,” “normal,” or “usual” forms as occasions for emotion as if these could simply function as evidence of shared purpose or function.

So I also agree with Morag that the various critiques of psychoanalysis which seem to clamour for its rejection should rather induce us to return to Freud, instead of departing from him—not least to verify whether the critiques are actually aiming at Freudian propositions rather than a received image of them. And if I can sort of agree that “the psychoanalytic explanation for certain behaviours consists in or rather has the potential to consist in an extension of common-sense psychology” (6), I can’t agree that concepts such as “repression” are currently murky or obscure. Our differing convictions in this regard can be directly correlated with our different intellectual-institutional situations: essentially, “analytic” versus “continental” philosophy.

It has always struck me as symptomatic that the emphasis on the “ordinary” and “everyday” in analytic philosophy has often been a justification for recondite stripping-away of the rights of ordinary language, whereas the recondite language of continental philosophy (perhaps, above all, the rebarbative obscurities of G.W.F. Hegel) has often been far more attentive and amenable to the world of daily experience. But then, as Jacques Lacan put it: for a good portion of analytic philosophy, no new space was able to be imagined that wasn’t ego-based; as he

says, inverting Freud's famous assertion to Jung as they sailed into New York, America brought the plague to psychoanalysis.⁵ To attempt an escape from the more constraining and unjustifiable elements of that space but without leaving behind its rigour is part of Morag's project here.

Hence Morag points out that the allegedly scientific individuation of emotion is usually done through verbal reports, or behaviours, or brain activity of the test subjects. Even if these verbal reports are treated as suspicious by the researcher, ordinary language is still at stake; if behaviour is the focus, that behaviour still has to be classified in ordinary language, and salience cannot be entirely denied to the subject without undoing the very basis of the experiment; in the case of brain activity, "previously established correlations with verbal descriptions of emotional states through self-report or observer interpretation" (10) cannot be entirely foreclosed. Such supposed "science" requires, in other words, some rather suspiciously unscientific presumptions in order to get itself off the ground.

In her rejection of the more reductionist tendencies of physicalism and causal fundamentalism, Morag announces her adherence to "Liberal Naturalism": that, given the existence of multiple explanatory contexts, there may be, in David Macarthur's words, "a plurality of complete causal explanations for the same event" (cited 11), not all of which need to be nomological. On this methodological basis, Talia proposes a different kind of conception of the unconscious, one which is quite persuasive in a number of important ways.

Yet Morag's confessed self-restriction to the describable elements of emotions is not without difficulties of its own. After all, what are emotions? Are they to be considered different from moods or feelings or affects? If not, why not? If so, what relations do they bear to each other? Are emotions best modelled on beliefs or judgements, or indeed something else? What if, as Friedrich Nietzsche proposes, that "we only ever find words for what is already dead in our hearts"?⁶ That is: to speak is to speak of vanished, non-existing entities as if they still existed. Or, again, not only is the in-principle describability of emotions a somewhat hopeful enterprise, but common parlance is not necessarily a good or adequate criterion of identity. "But surely another man can't feel like this—,' someone says, striking his breast" Wittgenstein imagines somebody exclaiming, before adding: "Striking one's breast is not an adequate criterion of identity."⁷ Talia knows this, moreover, since, as she puts it, we cannot dispense with the possibility of retrospective "look-alike reasons," which, while conforming at every point to the verisimili-

tude of rationality, are themselves illusory *ex post facto* justifications. An orthodox Freudian might start mumbling here about “secondary revision,” before adverting to the doctrine that the products of the unconscious may well be communications, but they were never intended to be understood.....

So orthodoxy could certainly affirm Morag’s critique of the “dogma of emotions,” or what she also calls the “tracking dogma,” that is, that certain emotions are allegedly age- or context-appropriate, which, as she explicitly points out, is an Aristotelian dogma, that of the *Phronismos*. Still, I agree and disagree yet again: emotions and their descriptions are surely intimately connected in a non-Aristotelian way, even if it is still not very clear to me how Liberal Naturalism might deal with two strictly *contradictory* causal explanations of the same event. In the end, I probably don’t even believe, unlike Morag, that there are some preprogrammed emotions in humans—fear of bears, for example—not least given that human history is full of counter-examples, whether it’s little Alcibiades staring down a bull, or the notorious recurrence of wolf-children from Romulus and Remus to Lyokha. Yet at the same time, I think we should maintain that emotions are always *already* biophysically-materialized. Nietzsche, again: the rabbit’s giant ears are terror incarnate. In this view, every organ would be an organization of ancestral affects, an assemblage, a multiplicity, constantly on the verge of malfunctioning, debouching to, or creating entirely new relationships with other organs—and hence with other emotions, etc.

Yet Morag has a clear commitment to affirming the idiosyncrasy of individual humans. As she puts it: “Science may be able to explain or even predict statistical distributions of emotional reactions across certain classes of people, but it cannot answer the question that is the focus of this book, namely, *what makes this particular individual emote in a certain way in a certain specific situation*” (13). Surely this is true, and Morag’s emphasis on the concatenating contingencies of emotion as creating personal forms of associative pattern-programming is persuasive and productive. Hence her account that “associative patterns are not pre-existing rules that the mind follows, but rather a matter of retroactive and synoptic identification” (269), which entails “we engage in this self-deceptive activity without self-awareness” (270), producing our unique personalities as networks of “alienating aversion” (a great phrase btw).

For Morag, moreover, our personalities can never become altogether conscious. For her, the unconscious is composed of at least two different kinds of unaware-

ness: 1) our distraction from our own emotions; 2) our ignorance of their cause. Psychoanalytical treatment would therefore ideally enable both a recognition of these emotions, a kind of recollection of their causation, and, finally, a kind of affirmation of the truth of causation itself.

For Morag, then, the field of psychoanalysis depends on the integral-yet-divergent relations each subject incarnates between affect, knowledge and action. Behaviouralist and contemporary cognitive modalities often seem to suppose that it is by re-fusing good affects with correct expressions that better action can be achieved, at once psychologically-satisfying and pragmatically-useful. Take the instances where common scientific psychology tries to dose individuals according to what is essentially a commonsense version of the good: MDMA for PTSD, or corrective pleasure-shocks when recollecting unpleasant events, or even the subsisting varieties of aversion therapy. At issue with such “psychologies” is something that I believe neither psychoanalysis nor philosophy should abide: without a recourse to thought or thinking as such (however that thinking is defined), any such alleged “treatment” will find itself violently consolidating inadequate ideas of the body in bodies themselves; moreover, that such treatment will occlude if not compound the obscurity of causation in humans; finally, that individuality as such will be assaulted and, with it, any putative “mental health.”

But it is here that one can start to discern a well-defined genealogy of “modern philosophy” lurking behind Morag’s own proposals, from Spinoza to Kant. For Spinoza, the mind-body distinction is only formal not real, and the mind is always the idea of the body; in being so, one can have more or less adequate ideas concerning the chain of causes in which one is inserted; and it is through thinking the larger contexts in which we are inserted that one can ultimately come to the mind of God itself, aka the thought of the whole. Spinoza is of particular importance here because of his refusal of a distinction between will and understanding: contra Descartes, for whom it is one thing to have an idea and another thing to reject or assent to it, for Spinoza, to have an idea is necessarily to affirm it.

Separating and radicalising this idea of the idea of association, David Hume and his fellow-travellers, such as David Hartley and Dugald Stewart, emphasized the contractions of ideas of cause through the contingent associations of individual habits: Hume thence focuses upon similarity, contiguity and causality, while Stewart emphasizes resemblance, vicinity and contrariety. As Gilles Deleuze points out in *Difference and Repetition*: “the constitution of repetition already implies

three instances: the in-itself which causes it to disappear as it appears, leaving it unthinkable; the for-itself of the passive synthesis; and, grounded upon the latter, the reflected representation of a 'for-us' in the active syntheses. Associationism possesses an irreplaceable subtlety."⁸ If one can agree with this Deleuzian judgement, it must also be said there is a problem with the standard versions of associationism to which Deleuze is responding, which Morag also teeters upon: associationism already presumes the differentiation and unity of what obtrudes in repetition (whether the sequence AB-AB-AB or even simply A-A-A-A), without being able to account for the genesis of the very trait that repeats/is-repeated.

And this is precisely why Kant, both with and against Hume, revivifies a kind of faculty psychology in which something like a transcendental must be presumed in order to enable us to pass from sensation through imagination to understanding and to reason. This is what Kant offers associationism: an account of prior operations by which anything is able to be picked out at all, what must always already have had to have been at work in order for a trait to be individuated, let alone repeatable. Morag's own associationism seems to be located between Humean and Kantian kinds, without being fully able to seize its own dependence upon the latter. Without it, however, she has no account of how repetition can manifest at all, let alone be contracted into patterns of un-awareness; yet, with it, there turn out to be pre-existing operations that organise principles of linkage that contravene the radicality of the associationism she is essaying to promote.

In contrast to such classical philosophical views, certain versions of psychoanalysis insist that affects are never quite correlated with their causes, which are lost; and that knowledge itself is a lure that betrays the truth it purports to desire. Above all, the determining cause for human psychology—and cause has to be taken in a very particular sense here—is sexual difference as such. This difference, which of course has been cashed out according to so many competing descriptions, nonetheless reduces to the following in most orientations of psychoanalysis: a child is produced from two; these two are irreducible and irreplaceable; each child has to construct its relation to this doublet upon which it is dependent or belated with respect to its own position and from its own experience; since its own infant ratiocinations are at once forged on the basis of its singularity of experience, insufficient information, and untutored thinking, and oriented by pleasure; and, since these infant ratiocinations are part of the process of embodiment itself, they come to be wired into the sensorium in such a way that the adult itself is the outcome of this process. In a particular sense, then, the "trauma of being"

cannot ever be representable as such. In classic psychoanalytic treatment, the remembering, repeating and working-through of the trauma demands a protracted process of free association in a relation between analysand and analyst.

In Morag's version, which seems to give the question of sexuality no particular authority in ontogenesis, she remarks:

According to the associative account, the patient's problem in life is not caused by just one well-individuated emotion that the patient is alienated from, but by an imaginatively interconnected bundle of such unconscious emotions (243-44).

Now, for Morag, introspection requires that we pay attention to our inner mental states (images, feelings, ideas); we then need to find words for these states, to express them verbally; finally, it's vital that we report honestly about these states. This is already a triple act of attention-nomination-transmission: quite a process! Moreover, in pursuing it, the very process goes "hand in hand with the gradual breaking of patterns of inattention," that is, resistances (244). Analysis enables a transformation in our forms of inattention to ourselves; concomitantly, that we otherwise act as if we were distracted from ourselves, that is, *we are ourselves* habituated processes of self-distraction. Yet even if it's not just one well-individuated alienating emotion that's at issue, Morag still seems to retain a commitment to a well-individuated emotion somewhere ... as opposed to the possibility of an irremediably inconsistent, incoherent, or indistinct obscurity of fundamental affects...

So what could possibly make us pay attention to ourselves given our constitutive inattention to ourselves? Morag offers some intriguing suggestions, such as the sequence: laughter, art, being-interrupted, and daydreaming (224). Such interruptions may, in one way or another, enable us to pay a new kind of attention to ourselves but, as she notes, the vocalizing of such associations is itself only rarely proposed and thematized as such. Analysis is one of those situations. Otherwise, we continue to find and lose ourselves simultaneously in the drift of inconsistent or apparently unmotivated synonyms.

So the obligations to pay attention to such a drift and to speak of such a drift in ways that are not simply self-misleading or repetitions of such is a fundamental problem for any analysand and analyst (and everyone else besides). While I like

certain features of Morag's account of the analytic situation—for example, that the neutrality of the analyst helps render visible that the analyst is not a cause of emotions in the analysand, but a trigger and an object of sets of projective identifications, that the end of analysis might be best considered on pragmatic grounds, and so on—she still gives us a Freudian unconscious that squats uneasily between a Humean theory of association and a Kantian theory of the imagination. Why do I insist on such historical nominal markers as if they were of any importance here? Because they establish an unconscious that is already a little too *conscious* for psychoanalysis, an unconscious that in the end is a little too *philosophical* for my own convictions, an unconscious that is going to resist you a little—but in the end comes round.

If I have gone on at length about Morag's book, it is because it does what such a book should do: induce a process of thinking that is at once enthusiastic and disenchanting, that is implicated in and then beyond the immediate data of the text in order to return to find itself estranged from the real. This book does not shut down dialogue, but encourages dissension. I can recommend this book highly, then, for anybody interested in contemporary philosophy and psychoanalysis. It is a difficult book; it is closely argued; and it offers propositions that demand attention and response. One thinks a little differently for having read it.

The University of Melbourne

NOTES

1. It is possible, of course, that Brentano's influence has been overdrawn. See Freud's letter to his friend Eduard Silberstein, in which he recounts a visit to the great man: "you might flatter yourself on having a friend thought worthy of the company of so excellent a man, were it not that thousands of others have been invited to his home or to converse with him, which greatly detracts from our distinction....Over the next few semesters, I intend to make a thorough study of his philosophy, and meanwhile reserve judgment and the choice between theism and materialism," S. Freud, "Letter from Sigmund Freud to Eduard Silberstein," March 13, 1875 in *The Letters of Sigmund Freud to Eduard Silberstein 1871-1881*, pp. 99-105. For his part, Siegfried Bernfeld remarks that "It is impossible that Freud at that time, or at any time for that matter, was a follower of Brentano. One even wonders whether he would have cared to understand the finer points of his arguments. This does not exclude the possibility that Freud was impressed by some of Brentano's polemics and statements, that he preserved them in his preconscious and that they influenced his thoughts twenty years later when he, disappointed in the existing psychological theories, ventured into this broad field on his own," "Freud's Scientific Beginnings," *American Imago*, No. 6 (1949), pp. 190-191.
2. S. Freud, "Fräulein Elisabeth von R, Case Histories" from *Studies on Hysteria* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume II (1893-1895)*, pp. 160-161.
3. S. Freud, "An Outline of Psycho-Analysis" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXIII (1937-1939)*, pp. 144-145.
4. D. Corfield, "From Mathematics to Psychology: Lacan's Missed Encounter," in J. Glynos and Y. Stavrakakis (eds), *Lacan and Science* (London: Karnac, 2002), p. 190. See, inter alia, F. Crews, *The Memory Wars: Freud's Legacy in Dispute* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1995).
5. See J. Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. B. Fink with H. Fink and R. Grigg (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 336. Sadly, it turns out, Freud never said this, as Elisabeth Roudinesco reports elsewhere.
6. "[P]erhaps indeed there was nothing more fearful and uncanny in the whole prehistory of man than his mnemotechnics: 'If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory'—this is a main clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring) psychology on earth," F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann with R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 61.
7. "I have seen a person in a discussion on this subject strike himself on the breast and say: 'But surely another person can't have THIS pain!'—the answer to this is that one does not define a criterion of identity by emphatic stressing of the word 'this,'" L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), n. 254, p. 91.
8. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 71.