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Kant and Freud on the Mind

Abstract

It may seem surprising to compare the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant, with Sigmund Freud, the founder of a discipline which explores the darkest, most irrational aspects of our minds. But as a matter of historical fact, Freud is the direct heir of a nineteenth century school of naturalistic philosophy of mind which called itself “physiological Kantianism.” This makes it less surprising that the structures of mental life we find in what Freud called his “metapsychology” should be, in important respects, comparable to those we find in Kant’s transcendental philosophy.

The goal of these lectures is not to repeat arguments I have developed elsewhere concerning the structural similarities between Kant’s and Freud’s respective views of the mind. Rather, the goal is to put those arguments to the test by focusing on specific questions such as the following. What is the role and import of unity and disunity in our mental life, according to Kant’s and Freud’s respective views of the mind? To what extent and in what sense does Kant acknowledge the existence of mental representations and mental activities of which we are not conscious? To what extent is Freud justified in claiming radical novelty for his concept of “the unconscious”? What are the consequences of Kant’s and Freud’s respective accounts of the mind for our normative and moral attitudes?

Throughout the lectures, I point out connections between Kant’s and Freud’s concepts and arguments, on one hand; and related concepts and arguments in contemporary philosophy of mind, on the other hand. I argue that the line of legacy from Kant’s anti-naturalism to Freud’s naturalism offers valuable lessons concerning a central concern in contemporary philosophy: the place of mind in a natural world.

Lecture One

Conflicting Logics of the Mind.

Abstract:

In previous work, I have claimed that Sigmund Freud’s and Immanuel Kant’s respective views of the structures of human mental life in cognition and in morality present striking similarities. The goal of this lecture is to respond to objections to my admittedly surprising claims.

The central objection under consideration concerns the contrast between, on the one hand, Kant’s view of what he calls the “unity of consciousness,” which he takes to be fundamental to our mental life; and, on the other, Freud’s conception of what he takes to be the insuperably conflicted nature of our mental life. Another objection is that Freud’s investigation of the mind is psychological and clinical, whereas Kant’s is epistemological and (in Kant’s own terms, to be explained) “transcendental.” I acknowledge the force of the objections and I offer responses to them. I conclude this lecture by noting that one important condition for properly adjudicating the

differences between Freud's view of the mind and Kant's is to clarify their respective views of "conscious" vs. "unconscious" representations. This will be the topic of the next two lectures.

Suggested Readings for Lecture 1:

Freud, Sigmund. *The Ego and the Id*, Sections 1 & 2. In *The Standard Edition of the Psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, vol.19, p.12–27.

Longuenesse, Béatrice. *I, Me, Mine. Back to Kant and Back Again*, Chapter 7.

Lear, Jonathan. "A Freudian Naturalization of Kantian Philosophy," sections 1, 2, 3, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. XVIII<sup>no</sup> 3, May 2019, p.748– 55.

Longuenesse, Béatrice : "Response to Jonathan Lear," *Op.cit.*, sections 4.1 & 4.2, pp.774–78.

Lecture Two

Kant on Consciousness and its Limits.

Abstract

I argue that we can find in Kant a distinction that is close to Ned Block's distinction between "phenomenal" and "access" consciousness, namely, between there being something it's like for the subject of a mental state to be in that state (phenomenal consciousness), on the one hand; and the state's content being available for judging, reasoning, and guiding action (access consciousness), on the other. I argue that heeding that distinction allows us to understand the very different ways in which cognitive states (for Kant: sensations, intuitions or concepts) can be, for Kant, "with" or "without" consciousness.

Having clarified those distinctions, I argue that for Kant, more fundamental than state consciousness is what we would call "creature consciousness": consciousness, by the subject of a state, of being, itself, in that state. However, Kant surprisingly claims that this type of consciousness can itself be something of which we are *not* conscious. I explain how this apparent contradiction may be resolved in light of the distinctions introduced earlier in connection with mental states: the distinction between "phenomenal" and "access" consciousness.

The upshot is that Kant offers rich and subtle insights into the conscious and unconscious aspects of our mental life. Freud was wrong, then, to claim that he was the first to recognize that what is mental is not necessarily conscious. And yet, Freud was right to take his own discovery of what he called "the unconscious" to be radically novel. This is the argument of the next lecture.

Suggested readings for Lecture 2

Kant:

- *Critique of Pure Reason*, the "Stufenleiter", A320/B376–A320/B377. On the activity of imagination as one of which we are "seldom even conscious": A78/B103. On empirical consciousness and apperception: A117n.
- *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, §§ 5 & 6, AA 7, 135–40.
- *The Jäsche Logic*, in *Lectures on Logic*, p.567–69. AA9: 62–65.

(All English texts are from the Guyer/Wood *Cambridge Edition of the Complete Works of Immanuel Kant*, available online)

Block: "On a confusion about a function of consciousness." In *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (1995), 18: 227–87.

### Lecture 3

#### Freud's Concept of the Unconscious.

##### Abstract

Freud was far from the first to defend the view that many of our mental states and mental activities are not conscious. This is a view Freud shares with quite a few early modern and modern philosophers, including Kant.

Nevertheless, Freud is right to claim that his concept of “the unconscious” is radically new. The goal of this Lecture 3 is to clarify what makes it novel. It is also to answer the question: If Freud’s concept of what, in our mental life, is unconscious, puts him at a distance from Kant’s, how is acknowledging this distance compatible with claiming that Freud’s and Kant’s respective views of the structure of mental life are similar?

What Freud means by “consciousness,” as a property of mental states, is what we call phenomenal consciousness: the qualitative presence, for the subject of a mental state, of that mental state and its content. A representation that is *not* conscious is, in the broadest sense, a representation that lacks this phenomenal character. But Freud’s originality lies in his investigation of a narrower subset of representations that lack the quality of being conscious, namely, those that lack that quality because, according to Freud, they are repressed. I investigate Freud’s concept of repression and argue that it must be understood in light of its relation to three fundamental aspects of mental life: memory, biological/psychological drives (for instance, hunger, aggression or lust), and affective states (pleasure or pain). I argue that what is fundamental in Freud’s concept of “the unconscious” is not so much whether representational states have or lack the quality of phenomenal consciousness. Rather it is how, unbeknownst to us, drives and affects interfere with the rational organization of our memories and their function in cognition and volition.

That interference is especially salient when, after considering (in lecture 1), the parallel between Freud’s “ego” and Kant’s unity of apperception, we consider another important aspect of the parallel between Kant’s and Freud’s respective views of the mind: Kant’s “categorical imperative” of morality, on the one hand; and Freud’s “super-ego,” on the other. Or what Bernard Williams called the “morality system.” This is the topic for the next lecture.

##### Suggested Reading

Freud, “The Unconscious.” The Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund

Freud, vol.14, p.166–204.

Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through.” *Ibid.*, vol.12,145–56.

### Lecture 4

#### The “Morality System”.

##### Abstract

In Lecture 1, I argued that the mental structure Freud called “ego” finds an ancestor in the mental structure Kant called the “empirical unity of apperception.” I left out of consideration an important structure of our mental life: that “part” or aspect of the ego Freud calls the “superego,” which he explicitly relates to Kant’s “categorical imperative” of morality. In this fourth Lecture, I continue the work begun in Lecture 1 and consider the connections between those two notions (Freud’s “superego” and Kant’s “categorical imperative”).

In addition, I introduce a notion which is connected, in Freud's account, to that of "super-ego" but plays a distinctive role in Freud's genealogy of our moral attitudes: the concept of the "ego-ideal." I examine the role of ideals in Freud's view of morality as compared to Kant's. We encounter here a new dimension of what I have called Freud's "naturalization" of the structures of mental life he found in Kant.

I argue that Bernard Williams's diagnosis of what he called the "morality system" is close to Freud's diagnosis in both its positive and its negative aspects. I argue that both Williams's and Freud's diagnoses are eerily relevant for today's moral quandaries.

In conclusion, I argue that Freud's references to Kant throughout his mature work should be taken seriously. They should be taken seriously as a resource for understanding Freud's thinking. But they should also be taken seriously by anyone sympathetic to Kant's transcendental approach to the mind but unpersuaded by Kant's appeal to a purely intelligible world as the metaphysical ground for the structures of mental life he argues are necessary conditions for theoretical cognition, on the one hand; and moral responsibility, on the other. If we look for a naturalistic metaphysics of the mind as an alternative to the supernaturalistic metaphysics Kant offers as a ground for our a priori normative capacities, we could do worse than to take Freud's metapsychology as a starting point of inquiry.

Suggested Readings.

Freud. *The Ego and the Id*. Sections 4, 5, 6.

Longuenesse. *I, Me, Mine*, Chapter 8.

Longuenesse. *The First Person in Cognition and Morality*. Chapter 2.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Chapter 10: "Morality, the Peculiar Institution." Fontana 1985, p.174–96.

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