

**Matthew C. Altman and Cynthia D. Coe**

*The Fractured Self in Freud and German Philosophy.*

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Freudianism has triumphed. Indeed, Freud's basic message has become so entrenched that we can disregard the particulars of psychoanalytic theory and still incorporate its basic lesson. Simply, the suspicion that our very identities remain cloaked by the mysteries of unconscious desire and undeclared motivations has percolated throughout culture. In this sense, the 'fractured self' is the breakdown of Cartesian certainty and the acknowledgement that a deep suspicion appropriately guides the agenda for understanding ourselves. The development of this position hardly begins with Freud, for he only extended a long philosophical tradition, which began with the earliest revolt against modernism, but he is most closely linked to its present standing.

In *The Fractured Self*, Altman and Coe have juxtaposed Freud with his key 19th-century German predecessors, whose views in some cases lay the groundwork for Freud's own positions and in other instances provide important contrasts. Ranging from Kant to the German idealists and then marching through the pantheon to Schopenhauer, Marx, and Nietzsche, Altman and Coe present a kaleidoscopic view of this rich era through a Freudian lens to offer an account of the philosophical foundation upon which Freud's grand narrative is erected.

The authors have adopted a dual approach to their subject. Most generally, the 'fractured self' is not only a theme used to tie together the various issues Freudianism raises about subjectivity, but the image also reflects the complex array of topics that might be collected under the notion of selfhood, broadly understood: existential freedom, historical consciousness, self-knowing and self-identification, agency (configured socially and morally), and other matters so critical to contemporary discussions in cultural studies, psychology, philosophy, and sociology. Indeed, the authors have cast their net widely, as well they might. Freud's shadow falls far beyond the couch when one couples the ruptured boundaries of normativity to the insecurity in answering, "Who am I?" Indeed, the self has been effectively fractured, and to understand the residual remains requires philosophically informed historical perspectives, which show the underlying challenge Freud embraced and its continued relevance for contemporary thought.

The more specific reading is organized by topics, which refracts Freudianism in particular ways and thus illuminates Freud's implicit philosophical positions and then extends those views to engage the more general philosophical discourse. So after some wide-ranging comments to situate Freud within his philosophical tradition, individual chapters deal with the central concern of a philosophical predecessor to provide a particular construct that is compared and contrasted with Freud's own theory and practice. This format thus offers a commentary on the issue addressed by Freud both to shed light on the grounding of psychoanalytic theory and to provide critical insight into the earlier philosopher, albeit from a Freudian perspective

(A closely related work, *Thinking the Unconscious. Nineteenth-century German Thought*, edited by Angus Nicholls and Martin Liebscher [Cambridge 2010], is organized around the

conceptions of the unconscious more specifically, but by necessity consideration is given also to the relationship of consciousness and human freedom arising from the conception of ‘nature’ in the guise of the character of the unconscious. In addition to those considered in *The Fractured Self*, chapters devoted to Goethe, Carus, von Hartmann, and Fechner broaden the survey while focusing the discussion on the unconscious. With this thematic emphasis, we see more clearly the relevance of Freud’s project in terms of the naturalistic turn dominating philosophy of mind today, which has yet to resolve satisfactorily the perplexing issues raised by German idealists. Contemporary philosophical attempts to reduce intentionality and meaning to causal explanations has led to reflections on the limits of natural science, which have wide-ranging implications and highlight the historical depth of this matter.)

The historical and philosophical importance of the mind-nature relationship seems self-evident and for Freud, it is *the* compelling starting point. Upon that platform, he presented a theory that would allow for reasoned analysis of the unruly unconscious – an enigmatic, decidedly a-rational cauldron of forces and drives. That portrayal required derivative understandings of free will and determinism, the character of the moral, and the unsteady balance of cultural strictures pitted against individual desire. Appropriately, Altman and Coe begin with Kant’s model of the mind to draw parallels and distinctions with Freud’s formulation of the psyche. While Freud often cited Kant and flirted with the notion that the unconscious might be considered a noumenon, Freud had no commitment to transcendental philosophy. Indeed, he took pains to assert that his epistemology followed the scientific empiricism that had guided his early laboratory research. That posture required a form of positivism for the “new science” that would ape the epistemological ideals of the era. However, not to be charged with philosophical consistency, Freud both modeled the mind as a product of linear sensory ascensions *and* accepted the basic Kantian tenet that knowledge (the reality we might *know*) results from the mediation of the mind. Inextricably limited by human resources, reality is an interpretation, which Freud radically extended: fantasy and unconscious desire configure the world in such a way that a negotiation between ego functions and unconscious drives together compose the ‘real.’ As the authors correctly observe, for Freud, “we live not in the world but in our conception of the world” (49).

In that radical turn, psychic desire and fantasy typically conflict with the external social reality and as a consequence, the mind becomes not only the arbiter of objectivity (that with which we all might agree is the case), but also contributes its own idiosyncratic inclinations to compose a reality that requires controls and, in the psychoanalytic setting, analysis. In other words, Kant may have established a basis for objectivity by positing some universal mental functional conditions and requirements, but Freud turns the tables and makes subjectivity a coupled problem, because of the peculiarities of individual psychic experience and personality that would distort some universal processing mechanisms.

Altman and Coe choose to emphasize the differences separating Freud and Kant, which certainly are manifest enough, but their treatment does not offer the full dimension of the philosophy of mind that holds them together. The fundamental characteristic of their shared “cognitivist” program is a reasoning, intellectual system built upon a causal theory of perception: objects are perceived as sensory data, which then follow a trajectory that ends in a mental percept that corresponds to that object. Just as Kant ‘re-presented’ the world through the

representational power of the mind, so too would Freud assign representations (in the form of 'ideas') to the unconscious drives. Discerning the meaning of those ideas putatively permitted the analysis of repressed memories and thus a means to relieve the anxiety resulting from that repression.

To discern the drive's attachment to *ideas*, Freud required a language and interpretive schema of symbols in which those ideas were given meaning within a narrative of psychic trauma. Thus dream images assumed their psychoanalytic meaning as derived from both a larger symbolic universe (derived from psychoanalytic explanatory mechanisms) and the emotional constellation in which the dream is interpreted (the transference context). These 'ideas' become the *métier* of psycho-*analysis*, that is, such representations serve as purveyors of the drives' associated ideas, which, when deciphered, point to an intra-psychic 'other.' (Note that the *idea* is repressed, not the drive per se, whose expression through desire continues its own quest in defiance of repressive effects.) Accordingly, the psychoanalytic unconscious is a product of the representational mind, one with a particular philosophical orientation: As the 'other' of the conscious mind, and most evidently as decoded by psychoanalytic interpretation, the unconscious mirrors the semantic structure of consciousness, which, according to much of late-20th-century philosophy, suffers from the dichotomous subject-object structure imposed by the Cartesian metaphysics of selfhood. And here we come to the weakness of Freud's theory: With what authority might the ego achieve its scrutinizing perspective on itself? In other words, how might the self as both subject and object *represent* itself to itself?

Freud's theory clearly presents a portrait of the psyche that suffers from the philosophical heritage he inherited. Employing psychoanalysis as their own instrument, his philosophical critics argued that (1) 'the ego' is an artifice; (2) a representational model of the mind (the exercise of such an agent) falsifies experience, especially that of inner states (i.e., self-consciousness); and thus (3) thinking based on a subject-object dichotomy misshapes our understanding of thought. In short, the commitment to a psychology organizing psychic life dependent on such a representing subject fails to account for mental life, at least according to Freud's most adamant disputants. Thus psychoanalysis was drawn into the more general philosophical controversies about meaning, reference, and representation. (Following that theme, I have surveyed the philosophical critiques of Adorno, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein in *The Requiem of the Ego. Freud and the Origins of Postmodernism* [Stanford University Press 2013].)

Freud embraced the problematic status of the 'fractured self' without fully understanding how that underlying philosophy would undermine his own project. Simply put, he accepted the authority of a rational ego to hold a scientific perspective, which applied its interpretive capacity to *all* mental states in order to make the unconscious discernible in the same terms used to describe conscious states. And while embracing that analytic position, he fully recognized that the ego was not master of its own house. The contradiction could not be sustained and left psychoanalysis vulnerable to attack. Indeed, lacking an external, universal point of view, how could Freud claim objectivity to decipher the larger meanings of inner mental states? His inferences were not *facts*. The psychoanalytic narratives might offer intriguing hermeneutics, but not scientific evidence.

Freud's own misgivings about the rationalizations of interpretation and the ever-receding limits of self-understanding thus joined a tide that would radically alter notions of personal identity in the post-Freudian period. With autonomy compromised, freedom restricted, reason imperiled, Freud himself provided a depiction of the psyche in which the ego's ambivalent standing proved a vulnerable site for attack. Ironically, perhaps, given Freud's abiding hope in reason and Enlightenment ideals, psychoanalysis provided the hammer and anvil to fully fracture the self whose moral standing he so valiantly attempted to save.

Having warned us against the conceit of certainty, Freud led us into skepticism about our very identity. And here we come to the intriguing play of counterfactual history: if Freud had better understood the philosophical developments of his own era, he would have recognized the unsteady foundations of his theory's construction and ventured less boldly beyond the limits of his epistemology. But if he had recognized the 19th-century origins of the fractured self and predicted its 20th-century deconstructed future, we would not be the beneficiaries of his insights, which so influenced the reconfiguration of personal identity. The psychoanalytic-inspired awareness of the densities of subjectivity and the complex valences of moral agency may have arisen from philosophical naiveté and a most tenuous methodology, yet the full harvest of Freud's legacy remains on philosophy's agenda.

**Alfred I. Tauber**  
Boston University