

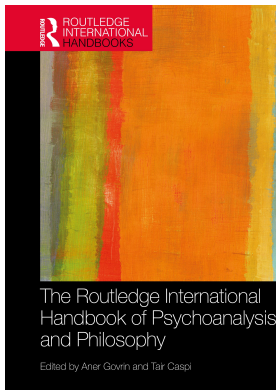
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### **Psychoanalysis, Self-Deception, and the Problem of Teleology**

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# PSYCHOANALYSIS, SELF-DECEPTION, AND THE PROBLEM OF TELEOLOGY

*Simon Boag*

## **Self-Deception and the Problem of the Dynamic Unconscious**

The possibility of deceiving oneself provides an ongoing puzzle for both psychology and philosophy. Self-deception is construed variously but is typically modelled upon *interpersonal* deception (Baghramian & Nicholson, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2013). With interpersonal deception, a person intentionally deceives another into believing that *p* while actually believing that not-*p* is the case. So applied to self-deception, the self-deceiver at once believes that *p* is false whilst deceiving himself or herself into believing that *p* is true. Two problems are associated with such self-deception: the so-called *static* and *dynamic* paradoxes (Mele, 1987). The static paradox entails the seeming impossibility of holding contradictory beliefs simultaneously (i.e., believing both *p* and not-*p*), whereas the dynamic paradox involves *intentionally* deceiving oneself, which is taken to be *prima facie* self-defeating.

Repression, the so-called “corner-stone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests” (Freud, 1914, p. 16), is also comparable to self-deception. Simply put, “*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious*” (Freud, 1915a, p. 147), and Freud, at times, compares repression to other- and self-deception:

I must draw an analogy between the criminal and the hysteric. In both we are concerned with a secret, with something hidden. . . . In the case of the criminal it is a secret which he knows and hides from you, whereas in the case of the hysteric it is a secret which he himself does not know either, which is hidden even from himself.

*(Freud, 1906, p. 108)*

With repression, not only do we commonly deceive ourselves, but such opacity is maintained by competing forces instigated by strong emotions and even unrelenting desires (Boag, 2012, 2017).

Explaining repression, however, involves addressing particular theoretical difficulties (Boag, 2012, 2017; Maze & Henry, 1996). Freud (1915a) notes that repression is not an event that simply occurs once but is instead an ongoing activity whereby an individual actively ignores the content of his or her own mind (Boag, 2012; Maze & Henry, 1996). As Freud writes:

The process of repression is not to be regarded as an event which takes place *once*, the results of which are permanent, as when some living thing has been killed and from

that time onward is dead; repression demands a persistent expenditure of force, and if this were to cease the success of the repression would be jeopardized, so that a fresh act of repression would be necessary. We may suppose that the repressed exercises a continuous pressure in the direction of the conscious, so that this pressure must be balanced by an unceasing counter-pressure.

(Freud, 1915, p. 151)

The situation is further complicated, however, since the repressed target further acquires substitute aims in the form of phantasies (Freud, 1907),<sup>1</sup> which then attempt to force their way into both waking consciousness and dreams, requiring further acts of repression. Repression subsequently involves a two-stage operation whereby the objectionable impulse is initially prevented from entering consciousness ('primal repression'),<sup>2</sup> and thereafter the substitutive phantasies are targeted by 'repression proper' (*eigentliche Verdrängung*) or 'after-pressure' (*Nachdrängen*; Freud, 1915).<sup>3</sup>

As Maze and Henry (1996) point out, since the 'ego' is said to be both the repressing agency and the 'victim' of repression, then the ego must somehow continuously guard against intrusions of the repressed. Consequently, repression appears to be an impossible task since it appears to require the repressing subject (the ego) re-knowing the target in order not to know it. This paradoxical state of affairs is exemplified by the clinical phenomenon of resistance, an offshoot of repression. Resistance occurs when

the desire to reveal one's unconscious feelings and thoughts to oneself and one's therapist is countered by an equally strong desire to keep those feelings and thoughts out of awareness and away from the therapist's attention. Thus every client struggles to reveal and to conceal, to express and repress.

(Auld, et al., 2005, p. 111)

As such, with resistance, the person undergoing therapy both consciously attempts to discover what is unconscious, while simultaneously unconsciously resisting this. Such resistance is believed to be both a selective and discriminative process, actively opposing some, though not other, mental contents from becoming conscious (see Boag, 2012).

Such theoretical difficulties are not limited to repression and resistance and extend to other defensive processes. For example, Kernberg (1987) proposes that the defense of projective identification entails projecting "intolerable intrapsychic experiences" onto another person, not as a single act but as "a continuing effort to defend against the intolerable experience" (p. 796). The theoretical challenge here then is explaining how this ongoing response to the defended-against target occurs so as to externalise and manage the distress, while also explaining how the distressing event is defended against without being further recognised. Although a person might be able to turn their attention away from a distressing event once, an account is nevertheless required for explaining how the defense is maintained when evidence of the distressing target re-asserts itself or remains apparent.

Phenomena such as repression and resistance capture the essence and complexity of psychodynamic processes, and so explaining how these occur is an important challenge for psychoanalytic theory. The aim of the present chapter is to address the contributions of the philosophy of self-deception for understanding repression and defensive processes. To achieve this, the chapter first addresses the static and dynamic paradoxes of self-deception to both clarify where the actual problems lie and to identify problematic strategies for explaining the harder cases of self-deception. Strongly partitive accounts of the mind and the role of intentions and teleology

in repression and self-deception are then discussed. The chapter then identifies problems with approaches proposing that self-deception and repression are both functional and have evolutionary adaptive benefits. The problem of teleology in functional accounts of repression is then discussed in the context of ‘betrayal blindness’ found within betrayal trauma theory. After demonstrating that teleology prevents such approaches from providing coherent theories of repression and self-deception, a realist-relational view of mentality is developed for addressing how repression and betrayal blindness can be maintained when evidence of the distressing target re-asserts itself or remains apparent. An alternative non-teleological account of betrayal blindness based on affects as efficient causes and Freud’s account of the ‘blindness of the seeing eye’ is then put forward.

### Clarifying the Paradoxes of Self-Deception

There are two paradoxes typically associated with self-deception: the static and dynamic paradoxes. The static paradox – where a person *S* both believes *p* and not-*p* simultaneously – is typically taken to be the more difficult of the two paradoxes to address (Van Leeuwen, 2013). For some, holding contradictory beliefs “is thought to be an impossible state of mind” (Hohol & Urbańczyk, 2013, p. 221), while Baghramian and Nicholson (2013) write that this apparent logical contradiction “remains intuitively jarring if not absurd” (p. 1018). However, the problem of believing both *p* and not-*p* assumes rationality and transparency of mind and so is not as problematic as some might believe:<sup>4</sup> there is only an apparent paradox if the person is concurrently aware of holding contradictory beliefs. Put differently, if one considers the apparently infinite number of beliefs than any one person holds, and which, for the most part are rarely, if ever, reflected upon or brought to conscious attention, then there are infinitely numerous opportunities for holding contradictory beliefs. In some respects, this simply reflects a characteristic of Freud’s system *Ucs.*, whereby incompatible beliefs can exist side by side without contradiction, and conscious recognition of such a contradiction is necessary for resolution (see Boag, 2015).

The dynamic paradox, on the other hand, pivots on the role of intentions, whereby *S* believes that *p* is the case but intends to falsely believe that not-*p*. The perceived problem here hinges upon the self-defeating nature of intentionally performing acts of self-deception. As Van Leeuwen (2013) writes,

In order for *A* to deceive *A*, *A* must intend to cause false belief in *A* . . . but intentions are usually accessible to those who have them, so *A* would be aware that she intends to cause a false belief in herself; but being aware of this intention, it would be impossible for her to be fooled by it. So how is self-deception possible?

(p. 2)

Again, however, there is an assumption of transparency, and so a psychodynamically oriented response might simply question the implicit Cartesian position here whereby the mind’s acts are said to be transparent to itself. After all, it is not *a priori* obvious that it must be the case that any intention is automatically known. Nevertheless, intentionally deceiving oneself appears to be self-defeating if one is aware that one knows *p* but intends to believe not-*p*: “For if one were intentionally to decide to deceive oneself, to deny what one knows to be true, that would presuppose that one does already know what one knows to be true” (Neu, 1988, p. 81). Successful self-deception would then require preventing awareness of one’s intention to self-deceive, threatening a regress of repressive-like acts to prevent awareness of each self-deceiving intention.

### Strategies for Addressing the Paradoxes

One strategy for circumventing the static paradox involves partitioning the mind, either weakly or strongly (see Baghramian & Nicholson, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2013). Weak partitioning separates conflicting beliefs by postulating “boundaries between parts of the mind . . . between any (obviously) conflicting beliefs” (Davidson, 1985, p. 147), such that a single person believes both  $p$  and not- $p$  in different parts of the mind. Davidson (1998) recognises, however, that this approach is descriptive rather than explanatory, neither addressing how such splitting occurs in the first place nor how the splitting is maintained (cf. Heil, 1989).<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, if a single agent were to somehow initiate this division, along the lines of a “self-inflicted lobotomy” (Davidson, 1998, p. 8), then some account is required for explaining how this could intelligibly occur.

‘Strongly’ partitive accounts, on the other hand, propose that the mind is inhabited by a multiplicity of knowing subjects (Boag, 2005), and some view strong partitioning as a *sine qua non* of psychodynamic thinking (e.g., Lockie, 2003). Generally speaking, rather than attempting to understand how a single agent can simultaneously believe that  $p$  and believe that not- $p$ , the contradictory beliefs are said to be held by different knowing subjects. Such strongly partitive approaches have a long history in psychoanalytic thinking, as is evident in Freud’s censor of dreams (see Boag, 2012 for discussion). With such accounts, a censor stands between the unconscious content and the ego, allowing certain content to become conscious while repressing and distorting other content.

Strong partitioning has been criticised on logical grounds (e.g., Van Leeuwen, 2013) but on the position here, postulating multiple knowers provides no greater grounds for theoretical concern than compared to postulating a single knower (see Boag, 2005 for objections and responses). There are, nevertheless, several problems with postulating a censor for explaining repression and self-deception. As Sartre (1956) observes in his discussion of self-deception as ‘bad faith’ (*mauvaise foi*), any such censor must be an independent agency, discerning what shall and shall not become conscious.<sup>6</sup> Consider here, for instance, Lockie’s (2003) claim that such censoring agents “have (partially successful) means of selectively concealing, revealing, and deceiving the other parts” (p. 128). If this is the case, then Gardner (1993) correctly concludes that the censoring agency “must have a greater capacity than any other part of the mind for (i) representing the contents of other mental parts, and (ii) controlling mental events” (p. 48). In other words, the censor must be a transcendental agency, superior to the conscious system, and capable of manipulating and distorting mental content to deceive the conscious system. At the same time, the only evidence for such a censor is the apparent censoring itself, and so any such agency appears to be an instance of reification and circular explanation whereby the supposed self-deceiving activity is reified into an agency performing that very same activity (Boag, 2012, 2017).

### Intentions, the Censor, and Teleology

The role of the censor above draws attention to another problem relevant to explaining self-deception and repression. As outlined above, the censor appears to act intentionally, discriminating what may or may not pass into conscious awareness, *in order to* prevent the ego from coming to know the repressed. Lockie (2003), for instance, writes that the censor acts “to prevent the one part of the mind from fully realizing the desires of the other part of the mind. It *defends* the conscience from confronting these desires” (p. 130). Such accounts entail an apparent teleology whereby, broadly speaking, a *telos* (‘end’ or ‘purpose’) acts as a final cause constituting an explanation or partial explanation. Rather than repression being instigated by causal antecedents such

as conflict and distress, the censor acts (or repressive processes occur) in order to prevent distress from occurring in the first place by keeping the conscious system ignorant.

Teleological approaches to repression are not limited to accounts proposing censors and notable examples of apparent teleology are found within the literature relating repression to ‘evolutionary functions’ (e.g., Slavin, 1985, 1990; Nesse, 1990, 2019). Here repression occurs to serve a purpose, rather than due to antecedent conditions such as anxiety: “[Repression occurs] because it allows people to deceive themselves about their true motives, and thus better deceive others as they unconsciously pursue these covert selfish motives” (Nesse, 1990, p. 273; cf. Slavin, 1990, p. 321). Thus, Nesse (2019) suggests that repression serves multiple purposes, including avoiding distress in the first place and fulfilling various desires and evolutionary goals:

I suspect that keeping some desires out of consciousness is a major function of repression. We can only get a fraction of what we want. Gaps between what we have and what we want generate envy, anxiety, anger, and dissatisfaction. Keeping unsatisfiable desires out of consciousness not only avoids mental suffering, it also allows us to focus on projects that are possible, instead of ruminating about those that are not. More important, it allows us not only to appear to be, but also to be more moral than would be otherwise possible. Thanks to social selection, being good increases fitness. Repression makes it easier to appear good and to be good.

(Nesse, 2019, p. 194)

Although whether or not such evolutionary accounts of repression explicitly subscribe to teleology remains to be seen, teleology is nevertheless at times unambiguously embraced as seen in Zepf’s (2001) teleological reading of Freud: “Freud considers the engine of mental life to be not an efficient but a final cause” (p. 469). For Zepf, then, repression is not instigated by anxiety and distress, but instead occurs in order to avoid unpleasure, and so “the basis of the repression is seen to be not causal but a matter of intentionality” (p. 468). Consequently, if there are logical problems with teleological explanations, then such accounts cannot coherently explain how repression occurs.

### The Problem With Teleological Accounts

There are many problems associated with teleology, including issues of vitalism, self-determinism, goal-directedness, and anthropomorphism (see Mayr, 1974). For instance, at face value, teleological explanations rest upon the premise that an end-state (an effect) is somehow causally efficacious (*S* does *A* in order to bring about *B*, where *B* is some future state of affairs). Obviously, it cannot literally be the case that future events – events that have not as yet occurred and may never occur – can act as the causes of events occurring presently (Mackay, 1996). In this respect, Mackay (1996) notes, “[t]eleological explanations breach the conditions for explanations; they treat the causes of current actions as goals, states which have not yet come about and indeed may never come about” (p. 10).

At the same time, humans do appear to act in a goal-directed manner, and so any explanation of human activity needs to satisfactorily address this. On the position here, any such explanation must be consistent with a deterministic account entailing mechanism and causal antecedents (i.e., efficient causality). The topic of causal explanation itself is of course complex (see Mackie, 1974), and the position advanced here proposes that rather than simply a cause-effect chain, causality is best understood as a dynamic network involving causes and effects occurring within a *causal field* (“a background against which the causing goes on” – Mackie, 1974, p. 63). On

this view, all events arise out of causal antecedents and go on to cause other events, and in this respect, causality is a necessary condition for anything to exist. However, such an approach does not deny a role for human consciousness (e.g., forethought, planning) since such mental activities can operate as causal antecedents underlying apparent goal-directed activity (Maze, 1983; Michell, 1988). As such, the apparent teleology associated with ‘reasons’ can be accommodated within a natural science framework embracing efficient causality.

One perspective that addresses apparent goal-directedness in a manner consistent with efficient causality is a teleonomic approach (from Pittendrigh, 1958 in Thompson, 1987; Mayr, 1974). Teleonomic explanations are strictly causal and mechanistic: apparent goal-directed behaviour is initiated by mechanisms (or what Mayr [1974] broadly calls ‘programs’) such that any ‘teleonomic’ system, “living or mechanical, . . . is so constructed that, when activated in its environment of adaptedness, it achieves a predictable outcome” (Bowlby, 1969, p. 139). Taking into account feedback processes, one can attribute apparent goal-directedness to both living systems and machines (such as a guided missile), and thus making apparent goal-directedness consistent with a deterministic psychology (Bowlby, 1969). As argued elsewhere, Freud’s general metapsychology explains apparent goal-directed human activity in such a teleonomic manner (Boag, 2017).

Mechanistic explanations themselves provide intelligibility for understanding how certain antecedent conditions give rise to certain effects (Maze, 1983).<sup>7</sup> One problem with teleological accounts of repression and self-deception, however, is that they are devoid of any coherent mechanism because they either propose effects as causes or require an unworkable account involving an intention to repress. Consider, for instance, Zepf’s (2001) claim that “the basis of the repression is seen to be not causal but a matter of intentionality” (p. 468). If repression occurs in order to avoid unpleasure rather than being triggered by distress, as Zepf believes, then the person must somehow be able to predict that some occurrence  $x$  is likely to result in unpleasure, to thereby instigate repression. However, being able to predict that some occurrence  $x$  will incur unpleasure appears to be antithetical to the outcome of repression. That is, if we need to know  $p$  in order to intentionally repress  $p$ , then we have again the problem of knowing in order not to know, or we require some type of censoring agency to act on behalf of the ego. As such, the problem with teleological accounts of repression and self-deception is that, if anything, the *telos* is an effect to be explained and provides no coherent mechanism for how repression could occur: repression occurs either intentionally and so is either self-defeating or requires a problematic censor.

### **Betrayal Trauma and Teleological Accounts of Betrayal Blindness**

Problems with explaining repression and self-deception teleologically are apparent in the explanation of betrayal blindness found in betrayal trauma theory (BTT). BTT proposes a form of self-deception occurring in the context of trauma (Birrel & Freyd, 2006; Freyd, et al., 2007; Freyd, 1994, 1996). Two factors conspire in facilitating this self-deception: young children are particularly vulnerable and dependent upon their caregivers for meeting both physical and emotional needs, while, at the same time, humans have evolved sensitivity to detecting instances of interpersonal betrayal via a ‘cheater detector’ mechanism (based on Cosmides, 1989). One such instance of betrayal involves a caregiver’s physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Ordinarily, detecting betrayal results in psychic pain, which in turn prompts avoidance of the perpetrator of betrayal. However, given that children are dependent upon their caregivers, detecting betrayal would be counterproductive to the child’s survival. This conflict is resolved via ‘knowledge isolation’ or (betrayal blindness) whereby knowledge of the betrayal trauma is shut down,



which prevents the psychic pain from occurring that would otherwise instigate the avoidance behaviour:

If a child processed the betrayal in the normal way, he or she would be motivated to stop interacting with the betrayer. Instead, he or she essentially needs to ignore the betrayal. If the betrayer is a primary caregiver, it is especially essential that the child does not stop behaving in such a way that will inspire attachment. For the child to withdraw from a caregiver on which he or she is dependent would further threaten the child's life, both physically and mentally. Thus the trauma of child abuse by its very nature requires that information about the abuse be blocked from mental mechanisms that control attachment and attachment behaviour.

*(Freyd, 1994, p. 312)*

As with self-deception, knowledge isolation involves keeping knowledge of betrayal “hidden from awareness” (DePrince, et al., 2012, p. 195) and so is comparable to repression or dissociation (Freyd, 1996, 1999; Freyd, et al., 2007).<sup>8</sup>

### **The Function of Betrayal Blindness**

The link with childhood vulnerability and attachment means betrayal blindness serves a function: “Betrayal blindness may be the only mechanism by which children may seek out and accept emotional closeness from the same individual that is abusing them” (Freyd, et al., 2007, p. 298).<sup>9</sup> However, in contradistinction to accounts that explain repression in terms of distress, BTT explains betrayal blindness instead in terms of the ‘social utility’ of blocking out information that may interfere with attachment processes. As Freyd (1994) writes, “[b]etrayal trauma differs from the prevailing conception of traumatic adaptation in its emphasis on the social utility of forgetting abuse by caregivers, as opposed to the more standard emphases on trauma as overwhelming or unbearably painful” (p. 321).<sup>10</sup> As such, betrayal blindness is explained with respect to the purported effect: “children separate abuse experiences from memory and consciousness to maintain the attachment relationships with caregivers that they need to survive” (Goldsmith, et al., 2004, p. 454). So, rather than distressing affects acting as efficient causes that then instigate betrayal blindness, the motivation for betrayal blindness is viewed in terms of avoiding social conflict. The upshot then is that betrayal blindness is stated teleologically: “The theory argues that victims, perpetrators, and witnesses may display betrayal blindness in order to preserve relationships, institutions, and social systems upon which they depend” (Freyd, et al., 2007, p. 297). Consequently, explaining how betrayal blindness occurs requires an account of how someone can both detect betrayal and yet be able to intentionally keep this knowledge from awareness.

### **The Why and the How of Betrayal Blindness**

BTT attempts to address the question of *why* traumatising events involving betrayal are more likely to be forgotten compared to non-betrayal traumatising events. As Freyd, et al. (2007) write, “Betrayal trauma theory . . . is, at its core, an attempt to account for why victims of abuse may appear to remain largely unaware of their abuse” (p. 297). However, addressing ‘why’ such abuse may be forgotten is not the same as stipulating *how* such forgetting could actually occur, especially in the face of chronic mistreatment. To address this, BTT embraces here the work by Anderson and colleagues to explain knowledge isolation in terms of active inhibition



(Anderson, 2001; Anderson & Green, 2001). Active inhibition involves suppression of a target and (at least initial) rehearsal of an alternative representation. Laboratory research indicates that suppressing memories under these circumstances makes the target memory less accessible to later recall. Applied to betrayal trauma, the abused child learns “to retrieve alternative diversionary thoughts in response to a reminder”, which leads to subsequent betrayal blindness (Anderson & Huddlestone, 2012, p. 67). Freyd et al. summarise:

Active inhibition induces forgetting when a representation (Representation A) is associated with two or more other representations (B and C) and links to one of those representations (B) is rehearsed more frequently than the other (C). Under those conditions, Anderson and others have observed reduced recall for C. That is, the act of rehearsing A–B seems to actively inhibit C. Anderson (2001) has proposed that a parallel learning context exists for children in the untenable position of rehearsing very different associations regarding caretakers – e.g., parent–abuse (A–C) and parent–care (A–B). To the extent that many socio-cultural forces encourage practising the association parent–care and/or the child victim is motivated to rehearse the parent–care association, active inhibitory processes may decrease recall for parent–abuse information. Active inhibition provides a parsimonious explanation for how children exposed to repeated abuse could forget the event.

*(Freyd, et al., 2007, p. 306)*

Consequently, when the child is being reminded of the betrayal (e.g., the parent–abuse association), the child rehearses (or reinterprets) a non–abuse parent association, which leads to memory of the abuse no longer being available for recall. This allows the abused child to suppress knowledge of the abuse despite constant reminders of it: “victims of abuse who are faced with inescapable reminders to an unwanted memory are forced into a situation of retraining their memory’s response to the reminder, by selectively retrieving alternative thoughts and memories about the abuser” (Anderson & Huddlestone, 2012, p. 67). The suppression is further reinforced given that there are also typically greater opportunities to retrieve non–traumatic knowledge over the life span compared to traumatic ones.

In due course, however, the retrieval suppression can occur independently of thought–substitution. Anderson and Green (2001) write:

Our results imply that a process exists that impairs the retention of memories when they are deliberately kept out of consciousness. When people encounter a stimulus that is known to cue an unwanted memory, this process can be recruited to prevent awareness of the memory. The regulation of consciousness is accomplished by an inhibitory control mechanism that suppresses the unwanted memory itself . . . and not merely by the momentary filling of working memory with diversionary thoughts.

*(p. 368)*

These authors liken this to a defensive or suppression mechanism postulated by Freud, leading to memories becoming relatively inaccessible: “if retrieving diversionary thoughts becomes habitual, inhibition may be sustained without any intention of avoiding the unwanted memory” (Anderson & Green, 2001, p. 368). Of course, however, if ‘habit’ simply means acting routinely and without apparent effort, then we require some kind of mechanism for knowing how this precisely occurs.

### Can Selective Inhibitory Mechanisms Explain Betrayal Blindness?

Active inhibition and retrieval suppression seem, at first glance, particularly well-suited to explaining how long-term abuse and concomitant reminders are forgotten. The longer the abuse occurs, the increased likelihood then that it will be forgotten through repeated suppression: “Retrieval suppression seems more likely to contribute in cases where a person is forced to confront unwelcome reminders over a long time, and is motivated to control awareness” (Anderson & Huddleston, 2012, p. 110). Moreover, postulating a basic motivation to forget unpleasurable events is also not implausible (Anderson & Huddleston, 2012; Erdelyi, 2006). One question here, however, concerns what is meant by ‘motivation’. Both BTT and Anderson and colleagues ascribe motivation to the teleological function that it serves, whereby the motive appears to be to avoid awareness of the abuse in order not to threaten the attachment relationship. For example, Anderson (2001) writes that “[i]n the case of betrayal trauma, traumatic memories intrude and must be suppressed to sustain behaviors and thoughts consistent with the goal of maintaining the current attachment relationships with the caregiver” (p. 204). In other words, the motivation behind betrayal blindness is stated in teleological and goal-directed terms.

By implication, then, these teleological motives appear to require the child anticipating the outcomes of detecting the betrayal and being able to segregate abuse from non-abuse information. Anderson and Huddleston (2012), say as much when they refer to the “motivated selective retrieval of non-abuse information” (p. 56), while Anderson (2001) writes that “[t]he ability to separate out abuse from non-abuse knowledge may thus allow the preservation of a necessary image or model of the parent” (p. 204). Thus, some explanation then is required for how a child *selectively* discriminates abuse from non-abuse despite constant reminders of it. As Anderson and Huddleston (2012) write: “victims of abuse who are faced with inescapable reminders to an unwanted memory are forced into a situation of retraining their memory’s response to the reminder, by selectively retrieving alternative thoughts and memories about the abuser” (p. 67). In other words, explaining how betrayal blindness operates appears to necessitate some type of cognitive screening involved in selective retrieval of non-traumatic information. Consequently, betrayal blindness requires both anticipating the consequences of acknowledging betrayal and segregating knowledge in order to avoid acknowledging the betrayal.

As presented above, the child would need to detect the betrayal but also anticipate that recognising the betrayal would instigate withdrawing from the betraying caregiver and constitute a threat to survival. The child then also needs to be able to selectively retrieve non-traumatic knowledge while inhibiting knowledge of the trauma. If this is the case, then BTT’s explanatory strategy entails either the problem of knowing in order not to know or deferring to a problematic censor that selectively retrieves non-traumatic knowledge in order to prevent traumatic memories from impeding attachment behaviours.

### Is It Possible to Re-interpret Betrayal Blindness Non-teleologically?

The empirical findings associated with BTT indicate that the theory is contributing something valuable, and so one question then is whether the theory can be divested of teleology and made consistent with a natural science account entailing efficient causes. As will be demonstrated, it is possible to explain betrayal blindness in a mechanistic fashion, although there are some considerations to first address. To begin with, betrayal blindness and active inhibition must operate at the psychological level given that detecting betrayal requires a *judgement*, which cannot preclude both awareness and evaluation of target material (although this need not be conscious itself). In fact, ‘betrayal’, itself, is a complex social relationship between the betraying person

(or institution, etc.) and the person (or group, etc.) betrayed. To say that *X* feels betrayed by *Y*, then, is to suggest that *X* expects *A* from *Y*, and yet *Y* does *B* (something harmful that opposes *A*). Moreover, to judge that one is being betrayed presumably involves a judgement that the betraying person's actions are intentional rather than accidental: *X* must judge that *Y* performs this opposing act deliberately, even if that may have not been actually so. As such, this judgement cannot be outsourced to some type of neural mechanism or cheater detection mechanism, even if, of course, neural mechanisms necessarily underlie betrayal blindness. Furthermore, any account must address how betrayal can be both somehow psychologically apprehended and yet not available for recall without either being self-defeating or requiring recourse to a censor. Last, according to BTT, knowledge of the abuse may remain isolated but is nevertheless potentially recoverable, especially once the situation of dependency ends. In such circumstances, strong feelings such as anger and rage might occur once the betrayal is acknowledged (Freyd, et al., 2007, p. 305). Any account of betrayal blindness thus must explain how knowledge is prevented while the threat based on dependency remains, but then be made available once the threat based on dependency recedes.

To begin with, if betrayal blindness occurs, it is not in order to do anything, but is instead presumably instigated by relevant causal antecedents. An obvious candidate here for triggering betrayal blindness would be affective states such as overwhelming distress. However, as discussed earlier, BTT appears to rule out betrayal blindness being instigated by distressing affects (Freyd, 1994). Nevertheless, distressing affects are at times implicated within the discussion. For example, Freyd, et al. (2007) describes a hypothetical example of a nephew sexually abused by a favourite uncle: the negative memories of the abuse compete with other positive memories, such as being taken to a ball game. In such circumstances, “[r]ecollection for the second event [the ballgame] is much more likely to be reinforced, whereas the abuse is likely to be accompanied by factors that inhibit recall, such as threats, denial, or pressure not to disclose” (pp. 454–455). As this quote indicates, the actual situation is far more complex than simply non-affective, intrapersonal active inhibition. For instance, ‘threats’ presumably exert their force via fear, and so this is not then motivation in the sense of serving a social function but rather fear of consequences of acknowledging the abuse. Thus, affective states such as fear are likely to be relevant to explaining betrayal blindness.

### **An Alternative Account of Self-Deception Betrayal Trauma**

The aim of the present section is to propose a non-teleological account for explaining the self-deception and knowledge isolation in BTT in terms of distressing affects and defense. The aim here is simply to show, however, that it is logically possible to account for betrayal blindness in terms of efficient causes, rather than proving any specific theory correct. As noted earlier, one of the challenges with explaining betrayal blindness is addressing how the betrayal is not recognised in cases of chronic abuse. More specifically, we need to account for the more difficult cases whereby a cognitively intact person believes not-*p* despite all evidence to the contrary (Lockie, 2003). As Baghrmian and Nicholson (2013) write, “[a] key feature of a self-deceptive belief is that is held ‘in the teeth’ of available evidence, where it does not seem plausible to blame the agent for intellectual sloppiness or other significant cognitive failures” (p. 1019). How does a person repeatedly confronted with betrayal then avoid recognising this as betrayal when all the evidence supports such a conclusion?

The approach here involves understanding betrayal blindness in terms of affective motivational states: distress and fear of anticipated consequences causes the child to anxiously deny the betrayal. The motivation here, though, is not in terms of an intention to produce

self-deception: instead betrayal blindness, like repression, is comparable to a “flight reflex in the presence of painful stimuli” (Freud, 1901, p. 147). However, to avoid the difficulties associated with ‘knowing in order not to know’ and the problematic censor requires clarifying a theory of mind, and the position adopted here can be described as a relational-realist view of psychological processes (Boag, 2015, 2017). Brentano’s Intentionality is a particularly useful starting point for discussing psychological processes since it is accepted by many as the defining criterion of mentality (e.g., Searle, 2004; Solms, 2013). Brentano (1874), believes that mental acts can be distinguished from physical processes by virtue of their Intentionality or their having a “direction toward an object” (p. 88), sometimes referred to as the *ofness* or *aboutness* of mental acts. One realist implication here is that cognition, then, is a particular *relation* between a cognising subject and an independent object term (Maze, 1983; Michell, 1988). Cognition here broadly refers to acts of *knowing*, such as believing, thinking, remembering, wishing, and desiring, whether they be veridical or non-veridical: “psychological processes are . . . typified by a kind of relation not to be found in merely physical interactions, and that is the relation of *knowing about* or *referring to*” (Maze, 1983, p. 83; cf. Maze & Henry, 1996, p. 1089). As a relation, any instance of knowing (where *S* knows *p*), involves (1) a *subject S* that knows something and (2) the something known (*p*). *S*’s knowing *p* is entailed by neither (1) nor (2) alone, and any account of cognition thus requires stipulating the subject term (the knower) and object term (the known) involved in the cognitive relation.

Although intentionality is helpful for understanding mentality, an apparent stumbling block arises with conceptualising ‘unconscious mentality’.<sup>11</sup> Intentionality, by definition, appears to necessitate ‘consciousness’ (or awareness) of some state of affairs. Consequently, an unconscious mental process is sometimes taken to be a contradiction in terms since it entails a conscious process somehow existing without consciousness (Searle, 2004; Talvitie, 2009). The problem is only apparent, however, since there is an important but barely recognised distinction between ‘knowing *x*’ and ‘knowing that you know *x*’. Having a belief, for instance, is a different state of affairs to knowing that you have a belief. On the relational-realist view, any mental act of knowing is not itself automatically known and requires a second mental act of reflection upon the first. A person *S* might believe *x* without knowing that *x* is believed (call this knowing relation *SRp*) and for *S* to come to know that *x* is believed (i.e., to become conscious of the belief) requires a *second mental act* such that *s/he knows that s/he knows SRp* (Maze, 1983; Michell, 1988; see also Boag, 2012, 2015, 2017). On the relational-realist view, then, an *unconscious mental act* is one whereby a person knows some state of affairs without at the same time knowing that that same state of affairs is known. Subsequently, we can make sense of what Freud means when he writes that “there are mental things in a man which he knows without knowing that he knows” (Freud, 1916–17, p. 101).<sup>12</sup> A person, for instance, could fear abandonment without knowing that abandonment is feared.

This distinction between ‘knowing’ and ‘knowing that one knows’ is not new and is found in various guises including Freud’s descriptively preconscious and conscious process distinction, or the metapsychological cathexis and hyper-cathexis distinction (see Boag, 2017). More recently, the distinction is evident in the relationship between cognition and metacognition (‘thinking about thinking’), ‘primary’ consciousness and a ‘secondary reflective’ consciousness (Brakel, 2013), and ‘simple awareness’ and ‘reflexive awareness’ (Solms & Turnbull, 2002). The point being made here is not to introduce new terminology, but rather simply to note the generally accepted distinction between a mental act of knowing something, and the logically independent mental act of knowing that knowing.

Accepting this distinction, Freud’s ‘descriptive unconscious’ can be conceptualised in terms of presently unreflected upon mental acts, and whether these unconscious mental acts can be

reflected upon or not distinguishes the dynamic unconscious from preconscious mental activity (Boag, 2012, 2017).<sup>13</sup> Adopting the realist-relational view of mentality thus allows conceptualising the dynamic unconscious not in terms of banishing the defended-against target into “the unconscious” (see Boag, 2015), but instead preventing secondary mental acts of reflection. Eagle (2000) proposes precisely this when he writes that “[t]he essence of repression lies in its interference with one’s ability to reflect on one’s mental state” (p. 173). A person may, for instance, hold certain desires or beliefs but be incapable of reflecting upon these due to intensely distressing affects (Boag, 2012). More specifically, then, repression could be explicable via unconsciously knowing the distressing event, but *without knowing (or acknowledging) that the distressing event is known* (Boag, 2012, 2015). Such interference may prevent reflection upon the whole target of repression, or upon various components, whereby the type of target may be miscategorised, or the object of the mental act may be misclassified, and so on (see Krickel, 2018; see also Suppes & Warren (1975) on varieties of defensive transformations).

The distinction between ‘knowing’ and ‘knowing that one knows’ is apparent in the example of Frank Fitzpatrick’s recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse (cited by Freyd, 1999). Fitzpatrick had earlier forgotten and then later recalled abuse at the hands of Reverend James R. Porter. Freyd, citing a *New York Times* report (July 1992), writes:

Mr. Fitzpatrick’s retrieval of the repressed memories began, he said, when “I was feeling a great mental pain . . .” Mr. Fitzpatrick . . . slowly realized that the mental pain was due to a “betrayal of some kind,” and remembered the sound of heavy breathing. “Then I realized I had been sexually abused by someone I loved,” said Mr. Fitzpatrick.  
(in Freyd, 1999, p. 5)

On this account, we see that (1) Mr. Fitzpatrick first experienced a “great mental pain”, without knowing the event that was the source of the pain; (2) before then connecting the mental pain with betrayal, before finally realising that (3) the “great mental pain” arose in response to being abused by someone he loved. If this account is temporally accurate, we have then a situation where at least on one occasion, Mr. Fitzpatrick appears to have known that he had been abused, which apparently instigated the mental pain, without knowing that he knew it. Put differently, Mr. Fitzpatrick unknowingly knew that he had been abused, before the betrayal blindness was finally lifted.

Such unconscious knowing may sound paradoxical, although ample evidence can be found in studies of subliminal perception and cases of both blindsight and anosognosia (Boag, 2020). In the context of defense, Freud refers to this apparent paradox as the ‘blindness of the seeing eye’. As discussed elsewhere, this concept first appears in the *Studies on Hysteria* (Breuer & Freud, 1895), where Freud describes the wilful blindness displayed by Miss Lucy R. involving the apparent paradox of both knowing and not knowing some state of affairs simultaneously:

I have never managed to give a better description than this of the strange state of mind in which one knows and does not know a thing at the same time. It is clearly impossible to understand it unless one has been in such a state oneself.  
(Freud in Breuer & Freud, 1895, p. 117n)

Freud views this self-deception as a defensive act:

I myself have had a very remarkable experience of this sort, which is still clearly before me. If I try to recollect what went on in my mind at that time I can get

hold of very little. What happened was that I saw something which did not fit in at all with my expectation; yet I did not allow what I saw to disturb my fixed plan in the least, though the perception should have put a stop to it, I was unconscious of any contradiction in this; nor was I aware of my feelings of repulsion, which must nevertheless undoubtedly have been responsible for the perception producing no psychological effect. I was afflicted by that blindness of the seeing eye which is so astonishing in the attitude of mothers to their daughters, husbands to their wives and rulers to their favourites.

*(Freud in Breuer & Freud, 1895, p. 117n)*

Applying such unconscious knowing to betrayal blindness provides a means of conceptualising how someone could simultaneously know and not know betrayal: the betrayal is known but cannot be reflected upon and so cannot be acknowledged. The distress of abuse instigates an anxious denial which prevents the child from acknowledging the act as betrayal. The child thereafter thus knows the betrayal without knowing that the betrayal is known. As such, a child enduring chronic abuse could then repeatedly know that she or he is being abused but be incapable of reflecting upon or acknowledging that fact. Thus, it is logically possible to maintain relative ignorance in the face of evidence that would otherwise reveal itself as betrayal. As dependency recedes, the threat evaluation and consequent anxiety could then be tempered by modifying re-evaluations of the situation allowing the betrayal to be acknowledged. Such a state of affairs is presumably underpinned by specific neural activity (Boag, 2012), and further associated with various sensorimotor consequences including not acting upon recognition of the betrayal (see Bazan, 2012 for extensive theoretical discussion on this point). This position addresses the problem of knowing in order not to know because it is possible for one and the same person to know the betrayal but be prevented from reflecting upon this.

## **Conclusion**

As this chapter demonstrates, it is possible to account for repression and more difficult cases of self-deception, such as betrayal blindness, in terms of efficient causes such as distress and a realist-relational view of mind. For betrayal blindness to occur in the face of chronic abuse, the betrayal can be known without a censoring agency there to protect the conscious system from the knowledge of the abuse. Instead, both repression and betrayal blindness could be motivated by a person anxiously denying that the offending target is known, which, mediated by neural inhibition, prevents both acknowledging the target and from acting upon it. As such, accounts of repression and self-deception can be consistent within a natural science framework and comprehensible in terms of natural defensive responses to painful stimuli, which situates these processes firmly within an evolutionary context. A child does not deny betrayal trauma for survival *per se*, although that may (or may not) be a consequence. Instead, humans have been shaped by evolutionary selective forces in such a way so that extreme distress prevents acknowledging certain situations, one consequence of which may have included survival. While the account above is speculative, avoiding teleological explanations and embracing efficient causality and mechanisms provides a logically coherent platform for understanding repression and self-deception. Acknowledging this has radical implications for psychological theory and addressing the complexities of the human mind.



## Notes

- 1 “[Phantasies] are substitutes for and derivatives of repressed memories which a resistance will not allow to enter consciousness unaltered, but which can purchase the possibility of becoming conscious by taking account, by means of changes and distortions, of the resistance’s censorship. When this compromise has been accomplished, the memories have turned into phantasies, which can easily be misunderstood by the conscious personality – that is, understood so as to fit in with the dominant psychological current” (Freud, 1907a, p. 58).
- 2 “We have reason to assume that there is a *primal repression*, a first phase of repression, which consists in the psychological (ideational) representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious” (Freud, 1915d, p. 148). As argued elsewhere, however, there are theoretical difficulties with explaining such repression if the target is never in fact known (see Boag, 2012; Maze & Henry, 1996).
- 3 “The second stage of repression, *repression proper*, affects mental derivatives of the repressed representative, or such trains of thought as, originating elsewhere, have come into associative connection with it. On account of this association, these ideas experience the same fate as what was primarily repressed. Repression proper, therefore, is actually an after-pressure” (Freud, 1915a, p. 148).
- 4 Heil (1989) writes: “If anything is obvious . . . it is that rationality is hardly universal: *all of us fail to be rational some of the time, and some of us fail more often than is good for us*” (p. 574).
- 5 Davidson acknowledges that this is a “highly abstract account . . . [and] never intended as a psychologically revealing explanation of the nature or aetiology of self-deception” (Davidson, 1998, pp. 8–9), and the model’s “modest purpose was to remove, or at least mitigate, the features that at first make self-deception seem inconceivable” (Davidson, 1998, p. 9), namely how contradictory beliefs persist in one and the same subject so that one causes (without rationalising) the other.
- 6 Sartre’s own analysis is problematic, however, because he believes that knowing involves ‘knowing that knowing’, and so the censoring agency must, he reasons, be cognisant of its own activity, and therefore be in ‘bad faith’ itself. However, his Cartesian perspective creates an *a priori* theoretical conflict *vis-à-vis* the psychoanalytic assertion of the existence of unconscious mental processes, and as many have pointed out (Lockie, 2003; Neu, 1988), the fact that the censoring agency may know its own activities does not succeed in undermining Freud’s account since it is the conscious system that is being protected and not the censor.
- 7 A mechanism can be distributed across various contexts and settings, however, and need not be confined within any particular entity. The mechanism of ‘natural selection,’ for example, explains the continuity and discontinuity of species in terms of the interaction between properties and activities of biological organisms and environmental conditions across generations.
- 8 DePrince, et al. (2012) write that there are at least two forms of knowledge isolation: ‘forgetting’ or ‘unawareness’, which “describes situations in which abuse-related information is inaccessible to conscious recall” (p. 195). With such forgetting there is no recall of the event and essentially an absence of information. On the other hand, a person might also ‘misremember’ the abuse by reconstructing events as more positive or less negative than they actually were.
- 9 Betrayal trauma is not restricted to childhood abuse, however, and can be found occurring in adults in situations of deception (Freyd, 1999).
- 10 Similarly, Freyd (1994) writes that “[t]he trauma of child abuse thus requires that information about the abuse be blocked from mental mechanisms that control attachment and attachment behavior. One does not need to posit any particular avoidance of psychic pain per se here; instead, what is of functional significance is the control of social behaviour” (p. 318).
- 11 It is also true that Brentano (1874) denied the existence of unconscious mental acts based on the assertion that mental acts were necessarily conscious. Brentano’s position can be shown to be problematic (see Boag, 2015 for further discussion).
- 12 In all fairness to the various interpretations of what Freud means by the term ‘unconscious’, the viewpoint presented here is but one of many, and one can typically find support for one or another view based on Freud’s inconsistent writing on the topic.
- 13 The discussion above requires a further word of clarification, however. None of this should be taken to mean that knowing is an all-or-nothing phenomena, since one can talk of levels or degrees of knowing (see Erdelyi, 2006). There are also, of course, nuances with respect to what is precisely the object of reflection (including sensory and emotional dimensions, for instance), as well as factors such as critical and uncritical assessment and so on (see Axelrod, 2012).

There is also a critical distinction between directly and indirectly knowing one’s own mental acts. As Freud recognises, “[t]o have heard something and to have experienced something are in their



psychological nature two quite different things, even though the content of both is the same” (Freud, 1915b, p. 176). That is, a person may be aware of holding a particular belief, say, via an analyst’s interpretation, without being directly aware of the actual belief, or even while actively believing the opposite (see Finkelstein, 1999; see also Boag, 2010). In the former case, the person can be said to know the belief indirectly via the analyst’s interpretation, in contrast to directly reflecting upon the belief.

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