

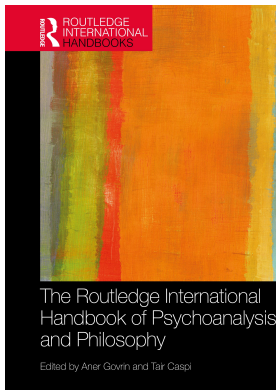
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A-RATIONALITY

The Views of Freud and Wittgenstein Explored

Linda A. W. Brakel

Introduction

Humans prefer to think of themselves (ourselves) as rational. We look for reasons and then find them; but we also create them, rationalizing, sometimes with little evidence. As we will see below in discussing Freud's primary and secondary processes, the primary processes are the more basic, earlier form of mentation. Yet, the primary processes remain ever-present throughout adult human life. However, partly because they are a mode of a-rational rather than rational thinking, adult humans often automatically re-formulate primary process content into secondary process. A brief example most will have experienced involves normal persons and their dream reports. Dreams as they are dreamt frequently have sequences that demonstrate primary process content to the extent that they are not organized causally, not possible in the real world, phantasy driven, and hard to describe. When dreamers awaken and recount dreams, these primary process portions are almost necessarily described in secondary process terms, namely, noting that ordinary coherence is not present in the dream. (See Brakel, 2009, chap. 4 for more on this and related phenomena.)

Scientists and academics of all stripes are people too. When discussing a-rational mentation, particularly its utility in human and non-human animal life, terms suggesting some form of rationality, while omitting a-rationality, are often invoked. So, we have "bounded rationality" (Simon, 1956a); "ecological rationality" (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999; Todd & Gigerenzer, 2000); "rationality1 vs. rationality2" (Evans & Over, 1996); and "biological rationality or b-rationality," defined by Kacelnik (2006, p. 87) as that in which "animals . . . behave as if they had been designed to surpass the fitness of their conspecifics." Kacelnik (p. 87) explains that in this way b-rationality is distinct from economic and/or philosophic/psychologic rationality. These latter have requirements, such as transitivity among choice preferences including consistency across contexts, "violated" routinely by animals exhibiting "b-rationality." One excellent anthology – *Rational Animals, Irrational Humans* (Hurley & Nudds, 2006) – by its very title summarizes and reinforces the notion that if mentation leads to pragmatic or adaptive results; that is, if it works, it must be some form of *rational*, even if it is descriptively a-rational.

In this chapter, I will take a different tack – exploring a-rationality as itself a contentful (representational) form of mentation. A-rationality, instantiated in a set of a-rational cognitive processes, is used sometimes to operate adaptively, sometimes problematically. But either way,

I shall argue that a-rational mentation is properly considered a mode of mentation distinct both from rationality and irrationality. I make this case discussing the views of Freud, then comparing and contrasting these with Wittgenstein's understanding of a-rational/non-rational grounds for rationality – both of these influential thinkers important contributors to our body of knowledge.

Freud and A-Rationality

Description of Primary Versus Secondary Processes

In his landmark book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900), consolidated earlier work¹ and added to it, outlining two different formal modes of mentation he had observed. The earlier, more basic type – prevalent in children, in the dreams and daydreams of normal adults, and in persons with neurotic problems, and/or those under stressful, intense situations – he termed the primary processes. He proposed that primary process-type mentation was unconsciously underlying much of adult human behavior, but that the more familiar secondary processes were operative in the conscious, rational operations of alert and wakeful adults.

The primary processes function prior to considerations of what is True and what is False. Therefore, they are properly considered a-rational rather than irrational in that they *lack*, rather than *violate*, the principles of everyday logic.² Primary processes operate such that opposites are not mutually exclusive, contradictions are tolerated, and evidence-based reality testing is not employed. Further, contextual time, both past and future, are not registered as such. Thus, under the sway of the primary processes one exists in what I've termed the “unexamined present” (Brakel, 2015, p. 131). Moreover, the primary processes employ associative rather than causally based connections. This has implications for categorizations – primary process-based categories are associative in that they are predicated on contiguity in time and space, displacements and condensations of contents, and small, superficial, even part-for-whole attribute similarities. Secondary process categorizations, in contrast, aim for similarities among category members based on more central, essential, rational etiologic features.³

Moreover, the primary processes are faster: closer to drives, instincts, and affects than are the secondary processes; the primary processes are impulse-linked, sometimes almost automatic, and in this way resemble the mentation of non-human animals.⁴ This is quite different from the secondary processes in which tasks are more deliberative and require more psychological/mental work. Furthermore, the secondary processes are ever reality-testing, evaluating evidence, and striving for solutions (mostly) independent of emotions, sometimes even overriding very strong affects.

Finally, and of great importance for Freud, the primary processes – given their associative proclivities toward displacement, contiguity, and condensation of contentful elements – are regularly employed by persons for the purpose of disguising their unacceptable impulses and unfulfillable wishes. It is in this way – as neurotic and psychotic symptoms result from combining original impulses plus their disguises – that primary process a-rationality is used toward irrational and pathological ends. But note, the disguise function also occurs regularly, not irrationally but merely a-rationally, in normal healthy individuals; this in dreams, daydreams, and slips of the tongue. Here is one recent example from a daydream of mine, involving condensation, displacement, part for whole categorization, and associative contiguity. Since I have both a dear friend who studies wolf behavior, and a new acquaintance named Wolfgang, it is not surprising that today after getting an e-mail from my friend, but expecting a reply from my acquaintance, I found myself daydreaming about a pack (gang) of wolves.

Note just above, I indicated that the use of primary processes in order to disguise was of great importance to Freud. But, also note that I provided neither references nor examples. This omission owes to a reason I will own up to now. In the next two subsections of this chapter, I will first take up work that I have done over the last three decades to extend Freud's primary processes as *normal* a-rationality toward cognate fields in philosophy, psychology, and even biology. Then, in the second (and final) subsection on Freud's views on a-rationality, I will address a central Freudian theme that I have heretofore given short shrift. There, without abandoning my attempt to expand Freud's views within the context of the broader academic world, I will also provide examples and a few representative references demonstrating that with regard to the primary processes, psychopathology, no less (perhaps more) than a general theory of the human mind, was on Freud's mind, even if not on mine!

Extending Freud's A-Rational (Not Irrational) Primary Processes to Cognate Fields

Hoping to restore and secure the status of psychoanalysis in the academic world, I have, in multiple ways, attempted to demonstrate the relevance of Freud's account of a-rational primary processes to cognate fields. In this quest I have made much of two central ideas – that the primary processes are prior to considerations of True and False; and that primary process mentation is characterized by its associative nature.

Let me briefly recount the sorts of extensions I have found significant. First, in order to support the claim that there are testable aspects of psychoanalytic theory, we⁵ performed a series of empirical experiments (referenced below in this paragraph) in which the prevalence of primary process a-rational categorization was compared with that of secondary process rational categorization. We indexed primary categorizations with attributional matches – i.e., categorization by simple, small, superficial similarity matches – while more essential, relational elements indexed the secondary process categorizations.⁶ Following the work of cognitive psychologists, Medin, Goldstone, and Gentner (1990), we found that the a-rational type categorizations predominated in exactly the domains predicted by Freud: (1) in the similarity assessments made by young children (Brakel, Shevrin, & Villa, 2002); (2) when the stimuli were outside of consciousness (Brakel, Kleinsorge, Snodgrass, & Shevrin, 2000; Brakel, 2004); (3) when categorizations were performed by participants under stress (Brakel & Shevrin, 2005), and (4) by similarity assessments made by patients with serious psychiatric symptoms (Bazan, Van Draege, DeKrock, Geeradyn, Shevrin, & Brakel, 2013). The very disparate nature of the several domains predicted does, along with the findings, further the credibility of Freud's view.

With these positive findings in hand, the next challenge was to investigate more fully the “prior-ness” of primary process from an evolutionary perspective.⁷ Yes, the primary processes predominate in small children, and in non-conscious assessments, but are the cognitive operations in various non-human animals best characterized as associative, a-rational, primary process-like? If so, this would help establish that such mentation is evolutionarily adaptive.⁸ With bird researchers we did gain positive evidence for attributional type categorization in a study on pigeons (Garlick, Gant, Brakel, & Blaisdell, 2011). And indeed, the phenomenon of imprinting (Lorenz, 1935) is predicated on a single attribute. Next, looking to field research studies across a variety of species,⁹ animal researchers consistently found much behavior that was both a-rational and adaptive. Most notable were frequent “violations” of rational rules – specifically transitivity with consistency across contexts.¹⁰ (For references to 18 of these studies, see Cutler & Brakel, 2014, pp. 792–809.)

Supplementing the animal a-rationality evidence, dual process theorists – most famously Tversky and Kahneman – provided a large body of empirical work supporting the notion of two

types of mentation for humans too. (See Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Tversky, 2004; Kahneman, 2011.) First, System One: a-rational in its operations without much regard for logical, rational norms, this earlier mode is tied to impulses and emotions, delivering associative, automatic responses. Then, the later developing System Two: characterized as rational, deliberative, and obeying rules of logic, one of System Two's roles is to inhibit System One responses. These two modes of mentation map very well onto Freud's primary and secondary responses, respectively.¹¹

With this plethora of non-human animal findings, I felt able to posit that even a biological process as fundamental and widespread as conditioning could operate on the basis of primary process-like associative connections. Specifically, that attributional feature similarity, or contiguity in space or time between the unconditioned stimulus (US) and the conditioned stimulus (CS), could drive conditioned responses. (For details, see Brakel, 2013, chap. 1.) To demonstrate, let me offer a famous example. Pavlov's dogs salivated when presented with food, the unconditioned stimuli (US). When after a number of trials in which food (US) was paired contiguously in time or space with a bell, the conditioned stimuli (CS), Pavlov found that in subsequent trials the dogs salivated even when the bell (the CS) was presented alone!

From here the placebo effect can be similarly understood, in a-rational primary process terms. Following ameliorative responses to active medications (US), placebos delivered contiguously, especially those resembling the active medication in substance or context, constitute the conditioned stimuli (CS). When later, these placebos (CS) are delivered alone, they produce the conditioned placebo response. Positive transferences to healing clinicians also engender placebo effects, and are themselves based on primary process a-rational similarity categorizations (Brakel, 2010, chap 5).

Continuing the extension of Freud's views to cognate academic fields – now to philosophy of biology, and philosophy of mind – I devised a proper function account of the a-rational primary processes. Focusing on several primary process qualities – associative connections, subjective experience in the unexamined present, and actions predicated prior to considerations of Truth or Falsity – I made a case for a-rational mentation being determinatively contentful, but on a basis very different from the usual rational normativity. Clearly, *rational* normativity would not work for the a-rational! Instead, then, the proper function argument I advanced held that a-rationality's very particular non-rationalness promoted evolutionary fitness normativity, which in turn fixed determinate a-rational content. (Further explication will follow later in this chapter, but for a fuller account, see Brakel, 2002, 2009, chap. 5.)

Extending Freud's Primary Processes to Cognate Fields – A-Rationality to Irrationality

Although Freud acknowledges the existence of primary processes in normal waking life – obvious in jokes, and slips of the tongue; and ever-present in unconscious mentation undergirding all thought, thus central for transference-influenced life choices (e.g., picking a mate, finding a career) – by far, for Freud the use of a-rational primary processes in order to disguise is most important. Here are just a few of Freud's many comments to this effect. He says (1900, p. 515) of primary process-laden dream elements: "The modifications to which dreams are submitted . . . are associatively linked to the material which they replace." Then, not only in dreams, but significantly in psychiatric symptoms for which dreams are a model, Freud (1905, p. 171) states:

Among displacements are to be counted . . . in particular the replacement of an important but objectionable element by one that is indifferent and appears innocent . . . something that seems like a very remote allusion to the other one – substitution by a piece of symbolism, or an analogy, or something small.

And in yet another passage he asserts (1900, p. 597):

In hysteria . . . normal thoughts have been . . . transformed into symptoms by means of condensation and . . . by way of superficial associations and in disregard of contradictions . . . [demonstrating] the complete identity between the characteristic features of the dream-work and those of the psychical activity which issues in psychoneurotic symptoms.

To illustrate the a-rational primary processes at work in their disguise-agent role, producing a symptom that is irrational and yet quite understandable, I will present (again)¹² the case of Mrs. M. She arrived at the University of Michigan Psychiatric Emergency Service at age 55, presenting with an acute psychotic episode. This was a recurrence after decades of normal functioning, which included raising several children to adulthood. Just prior to this newest psychotic break, Mrs. M who had been suffering with abdominal pain, received terrible news – a diagnosis of a uterine malignancy with a grave prognosis, notwithstanding the surgery required. This background is essential to understand the contentful meaning of her hallucination/delusion: Mrs. M was forcefully trying to insert a hard plastic “Head and Shoulders” brand shampoo bottle into her vagina and yelling: “The head and shoulders are killing me.” Clearly, her thought processes were idiosyncratic and associative, conflating aspects of normal vaginal childbirth – the decades-old pain, as well as the delivery of the babies’ heads and shoulders – with her current cancer pain and the impending surgery. The conflation disguised the problem, had an obvious wishful element, and demonstrated many primary process features – condensation, reversal (she was inserting, not delivering), displacement, part-for-whole representation (the Head and Shoulders bottle standing for her newborns’ heads and shoulders), and her experience taking place in the unexamined present.

Mrs. M’s case proves instructive in another way; instrumental in relating Freud’s understanding of a-rational primary processes to epistemological issues. First, let’s examine Mrs. M’s recovery from her psychiatric symptoms. This occurred within an hour after absorbing a sufficient dose of an anti-psychotic medication. Rapidly the associative contents that she had delusionally categorized as belonging together – the Head and Shoulders bottle with the emergence of the heads and shoulders of her newborns; the tumor-caused pain with childbirth pain; insertion into the vagina with birth from the vagina; the 1970s with the 1950s – she no longer put together at all. Instead, like her physicians, Mrs. M’s mentation became ordinary, rational, and secondary process. She felt embarrassed about the shampoo bottle and realized that her pain was from the large tumor, not a pregnancy. Further she knew she was a 55-year-old woman, past pregnancy days, and that a difficult, frightening road lay ahead. Mrs. M also knew that she wished the upcoming surgery would be just like the happy occasions of giving birth.

Next, influenced by Mrs. M’s dramatic recovery, my speculative leap: under Freud’s assumption that the a-rational primary processes are developmentally prior to the rational secondary processes, I wondered if for all rational thinkers, an initial a-rational primary process stage of *putting things together, associatively, automatically, and idiosyncratically* necessarily precedes rational secondary process thought. Put in question form: is a-rational, associative thinking ontologically necessary for, and prior to, our normal epistemological functioning? There is some support for this idea from Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant (1781/1787) sought an *a priori* principle, organizing the combination of part-representations and sensory perceptions so as to constitute (most basically) discrete objective objects. While associational law would be a natural candidate, Kant (1781, A121, p. 144) rejected this notion, contending that associations allowed representation to be placed “in any order . . . [which] would not lead to any determinate connection of

them, but only to accidental collocations.” But now, Kant, having dismissed the laws of association needed another organizing principle. He searched for “a relation [of representations etc.] which is *objectively valid*, and so distinguished from a relation of the same representations that would have only subjective validity – as when they are connected by the laws of association” (1787, B142, p. 159). Now of course for Kant, objective validity is not thing-in-itself objective validity, unknowable by human cognizers, but is instead the more modest species-wide, ordinary, consensually agreed upon objective validity of our ordinary world of objects, persons, and so on. Thus, Kant (1787, B142, p. 159) sought something quite like Freud’s regular, secondary-process rationality for his *a priori* principle – one capable of producing a determinate organization of representations in which “they are combined in the object, no matter what the state of the subject might be.” Without going more deeply into Kantian thought, I will simply aver that this reading of B142 suggests that subjects cannot bind things together as they are combined in the object without having had a *contrastive* ground that was an earlier, associative, subjective putting together. Mrs. M’s case then, as she recovered, could be viewed as a striking analog to the necessary ontological priority of a-rational primary processes to any normal, ordinary, secondary process thinking, and thereby to any rational epistemological capacity.¹³

The idea that a-rational holdings are fundamental and prior to any systematic rationality, while quite different from the Freudian account, is central to views presented by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his seminal late work, *On Certainty*. Let us turn to consider Wittgenstein on a-rationality forthwith.

Wittgenstein and A-Rationality

Description of Wittgenstein’s Views on the A-Rational Foundation of Rationality

Wittgenstein (1950/1969) makes clear in *On Certainty* that there can be no doubt that doubt itself, in fact the very capacity to doubt, must follow from assumptions¹⁴ that are held/grasped, automatically, prior to considerations of doubt, truth, falsity – assumptions that are a-rational rather than rational. In perhaps the most famous example he explains (#125, pp. 18–19):

If a blind man were to ask me “Have you got two hands?” I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don’t know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn’t I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*?

He goes on (#163, p. 24): “For whenever we test anything, we are already presupposing something that is not tested.” And then continues (#166, p. 24): “The difficulty is to realize that groundlessness of our believing.” Wittgenstein then adds (#205, p. 28): “If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false.”

How do we know that these very groundings of “believing” are a-rational, and like Freud’s primary processes, prior to considerations of Truth or Falsity? And, how do we know they are nonetheless foundational? Wittgenstein again invokes his “two hands” example. First, he states (#245–#246, p. 33):

I could say: “That I have two hands is an irreversible belief.” That would express the fact that I am not ready to let anything count as a disproof of this proposition. “Here I have arrived at a foundation of all my beliefs.” “This position I will *hold!*”

With this, Wittgenstein has demonstrated that these grounds for belief are, like the primary processes, evidence insensitive and not responsive to reason.

Next, he addresses the foundational nature of these holdings (#247, p. 33): “What would it be like to doubt now whether I have two hands? . . . What would I believe if I didn’t believe that? So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist.” Wittgenstein continues (#248, p. 33): “I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions.” And he elaborates (#250): “My having two hands is . . . as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.” And then Wittgenstein generalizes (#252): “But it isn’t just that *I* believe in this way . . . every reasonable person does.” Finally, he generalizes again, in a different and equally important direction (#253, p. 33): “At the foundation of well-founded-belief lies belief that is not well founded.” Thus (#341, p. 44) “the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.”

Proceeding to discuss other foundational, non-rationally grounded, a-rational universally held “beliefs” (or “hinges,” as he terms them), Wittgenstein asserts (#411, p. 52): “If I say ‘*we assume* that the earth has existed for many years past’ (or something similar)¹⁵ . . . it sounds strange that we should *assume* such a thing. But in the entire system of our language-games it belongs to the foundations.” Later, regarding our language-game itself, Wittgenstein states unequivocally (#558, p. 73): “it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life.” Action too would be at stake, as there are ungrounded a-rational hinges which “form the basis of action, and therefore, naturally of thought” (#411, p. 52). Continuing with the remarkable view that these a-rational hinges are necessary for action and indeed any rational thought at all, Wittgenstein asks the following two questions (#558, p. 73): “Wouldn’t a mistake [about a hinge] topple all judgment with it? More: what could stand if that were to fall?”

Controversies About Wittgenstein’s Views on the A-Rational Foundation of Rationality

Concisely summarizing what is uncontested, Duncan Pritchard notes that hinge commitments are “immune to rational doubt” (2018, p. 88). Moreover, given the centrality of these hinge holdings, Pritchard states Wittgenstein’s radical view that “at the heart of our rational practices are essentially arational commitments” (2012, p. 225). Thus, while their a-rationality, and foundational importance is not at issue¹⁶ there are several competing notions as to whether the hinge holdings are truly: (1) beliefs, (2) propositions, (3) contentful, or (4) epistemic in nature.

Pritchard, for example, over a series of articles (2012, 2018) considers the foundational hinges “commitments” rather than “beliefs.” He finds them contentful, propositional, and non-epistemic, where epistemic pertains to knowledge-producing. Crispin Wright (2004a, 2004b), terming the hinge holdings “entitlements,” puts forth their role as prudential and pragmatic in that they both allow inquiry and avoid cognitive collapse. He regards them as semi-epistemic, with some rational along with non-evidential warrant, so that they are “trusted as true.” Also, for Wright these entitlements are propositional, and contentful, while not being “beliefs.” Annalisa Coliva (2013) has a view, in contrast to all those above, which does question the hinges as foundational. For her, they not only provide the norms of judgment but are themselves also a sort of judgment, which renders them semi-epistemic contentful propositions that are nevertheless are not beliefs.

Daniele Moyal-Sharrock, in her several writings (2004, 2007, 2017) about Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, returns us to the claim that the hinge certainties are foundational. Further, she considers them to be non-propositional, non-epistemic, and not contentful. For Moyal-Sharrock (2007, p. 81), they are not beliefs-proper, in which one holds “beliefs that X,” but instead are

“beliefs-in.” The “beliefs-in” are described as a kind of know-how, one that is consistent with Wittgenstein’s (1950/1969) comments on (1) the animal nature of our a-rational hinge assumptions¹⁷ – “I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified . . . as something animal” (#359, p. 47) – and (2) with his take on know-how. For example, Wittgenstein (#534, p. 71) prefers that a child who masters a language-game be described as being “able to do certain things” over must “know certain things.”

Moyal-Sharrock’s account provides an important link to the next section, where I explore similarities (and differences) between Wittgenstein and Freud on their views on a-rationality. The issues of know-how activity as a type of knowledge, beliefs-proper versus other contentful attitudes, and animal a-rationality will be discussed.

Similarities (and Differences): Freud and Wittgenstein on A-Rationality

Know-How

With Wittgenstein’s comment (#534, p. 71) cited above, he essentially asserts that hinge assumptions, enable one “to do certain things” rather than to “know certain things.” Moreover, he describes (#510–#511, p. 67) his own experience of a hinge certainty in this way: “I don’t think of past or future . . . It is just like directly taking hold of something . . . without having doubts . . . And yet this direct taking-hold corresponds to a *sureness*, not to a knowing.” This amounts to a claim for know-how actions as prior to any rational beliefs, as well as to other types of knowledge. (And, as some have held, this might also point the way to the further claim that knowledge precedes belief and other cognitive attitudes, rather than the other way around.)¹⁸ In any case, these sorts of know-how actions are enacted in the unexamined present, and they are prior to considerations of True or False – indeed, they are a-rational, measured not by Truth or Falsity, but only by whether they work or not. Freud’s primary processes, too, are prior to considerations of Truth and Falsity, and are enacted in the unexamined present.

Non-human Animals

For both Freud and Wittgenstein, animals figure in their theorizing. The know-how connection leads Moyal-Sharrock (2016, p. 104) to characterize attitudes toward the hinge assumptions as “animal certainties,” adding: “Wittgenstein is describing *what it is like* . . . to have an attitude of basic certainty – and the answer is that it is like a way of acting or know-how or reflex action.” She continues: “Here, ‘I have a body’ is the expression of a non-propositional attitude; a way of acting *in the certainty of* having a body, acting embodied.” For Freud, the instincts which fuel the primary processes are essentially animal instincts. He takes this up in several of his mid to later works – “The Resistance to Psycho-Analysis” (1924/1925, p. 218); “The Question of Lay Analysis” (1926, p. 208), “Moses and Monotheism” (1939, p. 100, pp. 132–133); and “An Outline of Psycho-Analysis” (1940, p. 147) – stressing that the barrier between humans and animals is not so great as some of the former would have it.

But at this point, the differences between Freud and Wittgenstein on non-human animals become more salient than any similarity. Whereas for Wittgenstein the “animal certainty” of the a-rational, not-doubted, not doubttable hinge assumptions, is central to the scaffolding of rational systemic thought itself; for Freud the animal-like, instinct-fueled primary processes, while necessary and prior to the secondary processes, need to be inhibited by these secondary processes. Why? Because Freud held that the instinct-led, drive-directed life would follow the

pleasure principle, thereby ignoring reality, with the consequence of subjugating rationality to psychopathology.

Content

On the issue of a-rational attitudes¹⁹ with or without content (i.e., representation), again Freud and Wittgenstein are both similar and different. As discussed briefly above, I have proposed a proper function case²⁰ in which Freudian primary process a-rational attitudes do have content – content that is fixed, not by rational normativity (which would obviously be a non-starter for a-rational attitudes), but instead by evolutionary selective fitness normativity, operative also in the non-human animal world. (See Brakel, 2002, 2009, chap. 5.) A quick example of my proper function argument: toads eat black bugs. If toads swallow black bugs and also black metal pellets reflexively and indiscriminately, a secondary process thinker might conclude that toads have a primary process category for “bug” that is too inclusive – a category a-rationally condensing bugs plus black pellets. But insofar as toads with this inclusive category do not suffer pre-reproductive-age death through metal pellet ingesting, and in fact eat more real bugs, thereby enhancing their selective fitness success over the toads with the more exclusive category, the pellets can be understood as mere misrepresentations of the fixed content “bug.” With this move – finding fitness-based proper function for the a-rational primary process category, fixed determinate a-rational content can be established.

As for Wittgensteinian a-rational content, the picture seems mixed, partly depending on the particular hinge assumption. Those that are truly reflex-like, may be, as some of the philosophers above claim, without fixed content. And these may be the very most global of them. For example, Wittgenstein (#141, p. 21) states: “When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system.” Yet, when Wittgenstein (#125, pp. 18–19), with hinge certainty, answers the blind man that yes, he, Wittgenstein has his two hands – this without checking – there is fixed content represented in the question and its answer.

Evidence Insensitive, Automatic, Associational

For Freud, a-rational mentation is described as thoroughly evidence insensitive. Wittgenstein’s hinge certainties too do not admit of evidence, doubt, or skepticism – they are prior to considerations of True and False. The primary processes are evidence insensitive in that objective reality testing is absent. One can appreciate this in almost any hour of any psychoanalytic practice with any patient. Thus, a patient, a middle-aged professor, claims (and clings to the idea) that he is both unsuccessful and hated by his department – this despite recommendations for a promotion and an invitation to give an important lecture. While this might count as evidence to revise his belief were his attitude to be one of belief-proper, his attitude is not a belief-proper. It is instead what I’ve termed a “neurotic-belief.” (See Brakel, 2001, 2009, chap. 7 for a fuller account.) Experienced and acted upon as beliefs-proper, neurotic-beliefs are different. They are hybrids – primary process phantasies employing psychic reality rather than reality-tested objective reality, yet disguised (to patient as well as analyst) as regular beliefs. Indeed, the professor-patient “explains” that the department chair really preferred another scholar for the talk, one who had just left for a better position. And, as for the promotion, it was done out of charity, and way overdue anyway.

The neurotic-belief is a primary process a-rational attitude in its associative and automatic character and in its evidence insensitivity. However, there are important differences with Wittgenstein’s basic hinge assumptions. Though indeed automatic and beyond and prior to doubt,

hinge holdings are not particularly associative. Further, whereas the Freudian primary process–laden neurotic–beliefs are part of psychopathology, the very opposite is true for the Wittgensteinian hinges – they allow and are necessary for the very system of rational thought we humans rely upon and prize.²¹

Family Resemblance and Evolution

Throughout this chapter, I've held that the a–rationality of Wittgenstein's foundational hinges is not particularly associational, unlike the largely associational primary processes of Freud. While this is the case, there is an important associational (and perhaps a–rational, or at least not fully rational) aspect of Wittgenstein's work that should not be overlooked – the Family Resemblance. Here is how Wittgenstein first put it in his *Blue Book* (1933–1934/1958, p. 17):

We are inclined to think that there must be something in common to all games, say, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term “game” to the various games; whereas games form a *family* the members of which have family likenesses. Some of them have the same nose, others the same eyebrows and others again the same way of walking; and these likenesses overlap.

In this early passage, one can appreciate, Wittgenstein's initial longing for a largely rational (in Freud's terms, secondary process) categorization. He would like to find something essentially linking all games, instead of the non–essential, primary process–like, superficial similarities of a nose here, an eyebrow there.

Elaborating the Family Resemblance idea in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, #66, p. 31), Wittgenstein continues with games: “if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.” He goes on, exclaiming (#66, p. 32) “but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! . . . we can see how similarities crop up and disappear. . . . And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss–crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.” Wittgenstein famously then (#67, p. 32) “characterize[s] these similarities . . . [as] ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss–cross.”

What have we got then with Wittgenstein's Family Resemblance notion? An indication that certain natural categories are formed by individual members sharing different, but overlapping properties (or attributes); some quite superficial, none need shared by all, none necessary, and none essential. Let's see what happens when we play this out with a real and regular family, the Zekes. One can categorize the Zeke family members by associative similarities. But note, though Zeke Brothers A and B and Zeke Cousins G and H can indeed share the triangular family nose, Persons X and Y, unrelated to one another and to the Zekes, can also have this unusually shaped nose. Also, Cousins T and W can seem to have no obvious Zeke family traits and yet Zekes they are. So, we must conclude that successful categorization of Family Zeke by attribute association – an a–rational type process – is a rather iffy affair. Instead, one can more properly categorize the Zeke family, rationally. Family members all do share an essential legal or genetic tie, one directly linked and traceable to some Zeke or other, albeit not to one another and not to some original ur–Zeke progenitor. Thus, as Neil O'Hara (2019, personal communication) has astutely pointed out, a family (like the Zeke family) paradoxically does not conform to a Family Resemblance category.

Yet, there is something more to consider here. Recall that attribute matching (i.e., associative, a-rationally based similarity) often works toward evolutionary fitness success in the non-human-animal world. I discussed some examples of this briefly, earlier in the chapter – imprinting, conditioning, and bird similarity assessments. Now let us generalize and expand this. Take, for instance, flowers of a certain color (red) or shape (oval petals, arrowhead leaves). Birds, bees, and bugs are attracted differentially to flowers with these particular attributes. Why? Because bees, birds, and bugs who have interacted with flowers of a certain specific biological type have experienced enhanced selective fitness; *and* flowers of this certain specific biological type often, *but not always*, appear with that particular color or shape. For humans too, primary process-like a-rational categorizations can be and have been adaptive (evolutionarily) insofar as associative attributional feature similarities very often reflect more essential underlying commonalities. Thus, although young humans can mistakenly classify bats as birds, and whales as fish, most flying creatures that look like birds (or bats) are birds, and most swimming animals that look like fish (or whales) are fish.²²

Fine for associative, a-rational, attribute matching, but we haven't addressed Family Resemblance categories. What about them, then? The flowers of a particular biological type don't make up that sort of Family Resemblance category; neither do the whales or the bats fit that sort of category. For that matter, the conjunctive categories – (1) flowers, whatever their biological type, as long as they are red with oval petals and arrowhead leaves; (2) birds plus bats; (3) fish plus whales – are also not Family Resemblance categories. Yes, games *do* make up a Family Resemblance category, and it is of interest to try to further understand what that means. In an essay on Wittgenstein's Family Resemblance idea, Bambrough (1960/1966, pp. 198–199) attempts to do just that:

The nominalist says that games have nothing in common except that they are called games. The realist says that games must have something in common, and he means by this that they must have something in common other than that they are games. Wittgenstein says they [all] have nothing in common except that they *are* games.

On that basis, let me offer the following proposal. Freud's a-rational primary processes and Wittgenstein's foundational a-rational hinge assumptions constitute a Family Resemblance category. They have overlapping features in common, and equally important, criss-crossing differences. Starting with “what it feels like,” the a-rationality of both is experientially similar – a felt automaticity. Relatedly, both have a link to non-human animals, and as well the evolutionary significance of that link. But despite these important similarities, there is a radical difference. In the Freudian version, humans acting on their primary process animal-like instincts often fall prey to severe individual psychopathology. Whereas in the Wittgensteinian version, persons *without* their animal-grasp on the foundational hinges would be quite insane. As a final criss-crossing, let's note that both Freud's primary processes and Wittgenstein's core hinges are evidence insensitive and prior to considerations of Truth and Falsity, but that this too plays out in a radically different way. Thus, without Wittgenstein's a-rational hinges, no rational systemic thinking could ever get off the ground; whereas operating with Freud's primary processes, alone and unchecked, rationality would be stranded on the runway.

If I have not made the case for the a-rationalities of Freud and Wittgenstein comprising a Family Resemblance category, let me at least close with something beyond contest – this from Yogi Berra, excellent New York Yankee catcher in the 1950s and '60s and practical philosopher/psychoanalyst before and thereafter. When asked if he found similarities between himself and his son, Dale, also a major league baseball player, Yogi replied: “Our similarities are different.” And so, this is the case no less for a-rationality in the works of Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Notes

- 1 See especially Freud (1895, pp. 324–327, 334–340, 357, 362), Freud (1893–1895, pp. 9, 15, 208–209, 214, 225, 239), and Freud (1896, pp. 198–199).
- 2 Ordinary rationality, in contrast, does not tolerate contradictions and is “reasonable” – predicated on reasons and reality testing, it is subject to change if evidence so warrants.
- 3 Transferences, ubiquitous in clinical psychoanalyses, form on the basis of a-rational primary process categorizations. In examining transferences, one can readily appreciate that experiences of “unexamined present” along with inessential associative feature matches serve to promote the transfer of feelings about one person inappropriately onto another.
- 4 See particularly Freud (1925, p. 218, 1926, p. 208), Freud (1939, pp. 97, 100, 132–3), and Freud (1940, p. 147).
- 5 “We” here refers to members of the Hunt Memorial Laboratory for the Study of Unconscious Processes in the Psychiatry Department at the University of Michigan.
- 6 These experiments were much aided by discussions with Douglas Medin and his writings on categorization. In particular, a work by Medin, Goldstone, and Gentner (1990) was instrumental.
- 7 Philosophical priority for a-rationality, both on Freud’s account and that of Wittgenstein, will be taken up later in the chapter.
- 8 Mechanisms would include continued selective reproductive fitness for animals employing a-rational mentation as species branched off a common trunk, or parallel evolution of a-rational mentation in different branches.
- 9 Species studied include honeybees, pigeons, hummingbirds, starlings, gray jays, mice, and capuchin monkeys.
- 10 Note that the researchers did not describe the behavior as “primary process-like” or “a-rational,” but instead “biologically rational.” This exemplifies the tendency described above – tacitly concluding that anything pragmatically effective must be some form of “rational.”
- 11 System One processes include (1) The overcounting of representability and availability. Thus, unusual and intense circumstances are viewed as more likely to occur, and represented with greater frequency than is accurate. (2) Recency and final effects (sometimes called framing) are more prominent. (3) Risk and loss aversion predominate over gain possibilities. (4) Transitivity is not respected. (5) Similarity can be based on inessential attributes. Interestingly, these System One operations can sometimes provide more effective outcomes than can System Two. (For the evolutionary advantage for humans see Gigerenzer & Todd [1999] and Todd & Gigerenzer [2000]).
- 12 For more on Mrs. M’s case, and the Kantian-based speculations that follow, see Brakel (2009, pp. 44–49).
- 13 There is neuroscientific evidence for this view: Gerald Edelman (1987) explains that the world as first experienced is “unlabeled” (p. 7) and without “well arranged categories” (p. 24). As such, for many evolved organisms (including humans) “overall object distinction [is] not necessarily veridical” (p. 257).
- 14 The nature of what I’m calling “assumptions” is the subject of considerable debate. Are these holdings “propositions”? Are they “beliefs”? – Wittgenstein uses both of these terms frequently. He also speaks of “assumptions” (#411, p. 52) and “convictions” (#248, p. 33). These matters will be taken up below, along with another term Wittgenstein scholars use, “commitment” – this, as we discuss the related questions as to whether these holdings are contentful, and epistemic. Note that the term “hinge,” introduced by Wittgenstein, seems acceptable to all, either as an adjective modifying one of the contested terms or as a freestanding noun.
- 15 Another example Wittgenstein offers (#479, p. 63): “Are we to say that the knowledge that there are physical objects comes very early or very late?”
- 16 More correctly, hinge commitments are most often regarded as foundational. For an exception, see the view of Coliva (2013) discussed briefly below.
- 17 It is not entirely clear that for Moyal-Sharrock these “beliefs-in” are without content. In a recent article (2019, p. 4, n. 5) she states: “I don’t see ‘content-involving cognition’ as exclusive to humans.” However, if Moyal-Sharrock regards “beliefs-in” as not “cognitive,” then for her their status as not-contentful would remain.
- 18 For the philosophically radical idea that knowledge precedes belief, see Williamson (2000). See also Brakel (2010, chap. 1) for evidential support from psychoanalysis for the Williamson view.
- 19 I’m using the term “attitudes” as it has a broader compass than “proposition.”
- 20 This proper function argument owes much to the work of Millikan (1993).

- 21 In between the Freudian and Wittgensteinian a-rational attitudes we have Gendler's aliefs (2008a, 2008b). These are belief-like attitudes, associative, automatic, and a-rational, and as such not evidence sensitive. They are developmentally and conceptually antecedent to beliefs-proper, and often tied to affect and action. However, unlike Wittgenstein's hinges, aliefs are in no way vital to ground rationality. And, unlike Freudian neurotic-beliefs, aliefs are not experienced as beliefs-proper, hence do not always lead to harmful neurotic actions. On balance, aliefs sometimes prove problematic, sometimes pragmatically good enough.
- 22 This idea was first imparted to me by Douglas Medin (personal communication) circa 2000.

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