

GROUNDWORK *for a* TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

Spirituality, Relationship, and Participation



ROBIN S. BROWN

“In this timely and insightful volume, Robin Brown offers an invitation to reintroduce spirituality into psychoanalytic theory and treatment. Crossing the artificial divide left by the falling out between Freud and Jung, Brown eruditely argues for the important recognition of the transpersonal aspects of the unconscious that underpin insight-oriented psychotherapies. *Groundwork for a Transpersonal Psychoanalysis* is an important text for all psychotherapists committed to a deeper understanding of the human struggle.”

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contemporary psychoanalysis and analytical psychology. Written in an articulate, well-referenced, and insightful manner, Brown's text has far-reaching implications for relational thinking. His argument is also carefully grounded in clinical examples. The volume is a cutting-edge, thought-provoking 'must' read for psychoanalytic scholars and psychoanalytic practitioners of all theoretical orientations."

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Groundwork for a Transpersonal Psychoanalysis

This book explores how a deeper engagement with the theme of spirituality can challenge and stimulate contemporary psychoanalytic discourse.

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With an outlook at the intersection of intrapsychic and intersubjective perspectives, *Groundwork for a Transpersonal Psychoanalysis* will be a valuable resource to analysts looking to incorporate a more pluralistic approach to clinical work.

Robin S. Brown, PhD, LP, NCPsyA, is a psychoanalyst in private practice and a member of adjunct faculty for the Counseling and Clinical Psychology Department at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is the author of *Psychoanalysis Beyond the End of Metaphysics: Thinking Towards the Post-Relational* and the editor of *Re-Encountering Jung: Analytical Psychology and Contemporary Psychoanalysis*.

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Groundwork for a Transpersonal Psychoanalysis

Spirituality, Relationship, and
Participation

Robin S. Brown

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Preface

My formation as a clinician has reflected an undertaking to synthesize relational ideas with my interest in Jungian and transpersonal thinking. In my first book, *Psychoanalysis Beyond the End of Metaphysics: Thinking Towards the Post-Relational*, I offered an initial outline of what I consider to be a necessary shift in relational psychoanalysis. The focus of my concern was a sense that relational thinking has often tended to insufficiently address its own foundational commitments, and that this failure may subtly promote a reductively secular outlook on treatment. In service of both clinical and theoretical diversity, I argued for the need of a “post-relational” perspective which would entail a reconciliation with analytical psychology and transpersonal theory. Subsequent to the publication of this text, I edited a volume of papers entitled *Re-Encountering Jung: Analytical Psychology and Contemporary Psychoanalysis*. This collection sought to draw lines of communication between Jungian psychology and the psychoanalytic mainstream. Building on this work, the present text situates my approach more categorically in terms of spirituality. An inevitable shortcoming of this endeavor is that I have often been forced to paint with broad brushstrokes. For example, in blithely speaking of “relationalists” or “Jungians” it may very well be objected that these schools are far too diverse as to be addressed in such generic terms. While I have considerable sympathy for such objections, it is unfortunately the case that any interdisciplinary undertaking that aspires to more than mere comparison must risk throwing caution to the wind in order that the reader not be bogged down in endless qualification. Another challenge is reflected in the question of the reader’s assumed exposure to the literature. This book is not intended as an introduction to Jungian or transpersonal theory for a mainstream psychoanalytic audience, nor is it intended as an introduction

to contemporary relational analysis aimed at a Jungian or transpersonal audience. Therefore, the uninitiated reader may at times find themselves needing to refer to the relevant literature. The “groundwork” that the title of the present work so grandly announces is not, in a final analysis, my own. Rather, my intention is to show how a cross-pollination of ideas between the relational, Jungian, and transpersonal fields might challenge received ideas and perhaps stimulate further conversation.

An earlier version of Chapter 2 was published in my book *Re-Encountering Jung: Analytical Psychology and Contemporary Psychoanalysis* (Brown, 2018b). Chapter 3 includes excerpts from an earlier paper “On the Significance of Psychodynamic Discourse for Consciousness Studies,” which was published in *CONSCIOUSNESS: Ideas and Research for the Twenty-First Century* (Brown, 2015). Chapter 4 features a few brief passages that originally appeared in my paper “Evolving Attitudes,” which was published in the *International Journal of Jungian Studies* (Brown, 2014). Chapters 5 and 8 were first published in the *Journal of Analytical Psychology* as “Imaginal Action: Towards a Jungian Conception of Enactment, and an Extraverted Counterpart to Active Imagination” (Brown, 2018a) and “Bridging Worlds: Participatory Thinking in Jungian Context” (Brown, 2017). Both papers have been lightly revised and expanded for republication. Thanks go to Allan Combs, Lucy Huskinson, and William Meredith-Owen for editorial guidance and copyright permissions. In bringing the present text to publication, special thanks go to Melanie Suchet, Kate Hawes, and Marie.

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Part I

Foundations



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The spiritual ground of psychoanalysis

Establishing a basic sense of theoretical orientation, this introductory chapter focuses on conceptualizations of the unconscious in relationship to the notion of a transpersonal psychoanalysis. I argue that a spiritually receptive approach to psychoanalysis entails that “the unconscious” be considered transpersonal and in some degree accessible to conscious experience. To address this theme invites a rapprochement between Jungian psychology and contemporary psychoanalysis. Identifying the insufficiency of efforts to promote spirituality merely by endorsing the creative value of fantasy, I begin to articulate how the fear of paranoia has limited the field’s development.

Seeking to define what makes a therapeutic approach “psychoanalytic” has become a surprisingly complex task. Historically, efforts to circumscribe the field have often been undertaken for political reasons and in order to preserve professional advantage – a tendency that can be traced at least as far back as Freud’s Secret Committee.¹ Wherever the task of defining the field has been undertaken by a self-identified “psychoanalyst,” the results of this inquiry are liable to be reflective of the standards to which the clinician has been made subject over the course of their own professional development. Disputes concerning training and technique have tended to be central, and it is along such lines that one’s entitlement to identify as a practicing psychoanalyst has often been claimed to rest. Emphasis has thus been placed on debating such variables as use of the couch; the frequency with which patients attend treatment; and the pedigree of a clinician’s training analyst, supervisors, and teachers.

With the changing nature of the clinical, intellectual, and economic landscape, however, psychoanalysis has shifted from a profession of prestige to one that has been significantly marginalized. The psychoanalytic community has thus been forced circumstantially to take a more relaxed attitude towards the question of professional membership. As the field has slowly become less preoccupied with defining a limiting stance on what psychoanalysis *ought* to be, it becomes apparent that the task of definition is aided in seeking to establish commonalities rather than defining a basis for exclusion. Antonino Ferro offers a minimally dogmatic definition of the field as follows:

In my view, in order for the term “psychoanalysis” to be used legitimately, three invariants are indispensable: first, the conviction that an unconscious exists (even if it may assume a variety of forms); second, respect for the unvarying elements of the setting; and, third and last, an asymmetry, with the analyst taking full responsibility for what happens in the consulting room.

(Ferro, 2009, p. 210)

Of the three points identified, the latter two are concerned with the technicalities of clinical practice. If we are to inquire, more simply, what makes a particular approach to the mind psychoanalytic, then the one pertinent feature Ferro identifies is *the conviction that an unconscious exists*. It is with this foundational idea of an unconscious mind that any psychoanalytic practice ultimately organizes its claims. Attending to the origins of this idea offers the possibility of a fundamental reconfiguration in our understanding of psychoanalysis, for while the technical prescriptions Ferro eludes to might cogently be traced to the specific nature of Freud’s intellectual contribution, the idea of the unconscious is by no means a Freudian invention. Freud himself states: “The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious; what I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied” (quoted in Trilling, 2008, p. 34). This statement makes clear that Freud’s own claim to importance hangs upon the development of a “scientific method” that furnishes us with the proof of an idea that was already widespread.² The practice of psychoanalysis is itself grounded in a theoretical notion not of Freud’s making.

The philosophical unconscious

In considering how “the unconscious” [*das Unbewusste*] came to emerge as an idea, we might first turn to René Descartes (1596–1650). It is in the work of Descartes that we recognize a shift in Western consciousness that would later be expressed in the emergence of “psychology” as a distinct discipline. Descartes is known for theorizing that the mind is an entity that should be conceptualized in distinction from the physical body. His famous statement *cogito ergo sum* – “I think therefore I am” – identifies selfhood with the conscious mind. Any question of an unconscious would thus appear to destabilize the basis upon which Descartes’s philosophical enterprise rests. Nevertheless, a forerunner to the idea of the unconscious is still discernible in Descartes’s thinking. In order to preserve the self-transparency of the mind, this conception is associated with the domain of matter. As Eshelman (2007) states:

Descartes’s account of unconscious psychic life centers upon the claim that mental transparency does not hold for material causes of our emotional lives. Since the subject has no awareness of these causes, there will be cases where it cannot tell that its thoughts are by secret impressions implanted in the brain (due to a traumatizing experience), but not from current sensory perceptions (someone who resembles the offender).

(p. 299)

For Descartes, the unconscious is conceptualized in terms of an environmental event resulting in a physical trauma registered upon the brain. However, despite Descartes’s willingness to recognize the possibility of the past impacting our perceptions of the present, the main thrust of his philosophy hinges upon establishing the self-transparency of consciousness. This is why it is necessary for Descartes’s outlook that he consign unconscious processes to the material domain of the body. Yet in separating the mind from the body and emphasizing the role of thought in his definition of selfhood, Descartes’s philosophy inadvertently casts doubt upon the soul’s constant activity. This is most evident with respect to the phenomenon of sleep. If the soul is to go on existing, Descartes’s approach requires that we always be thinking. How, then, are we to explain the state of dreamless sleep? Descartes is required to offer a rather convoluted justification:

You say you want to stop and ask whether I think the soul always thinks. But why should it not always think, since it is a thinking substance? It is no surprise that we do not remember the thoughts that the soul had when in the womb or in a deep sleep, since there are many other thoughts that we equally do not remember, although we know we had them when grown up, healthy and wide-awake. So long as the mind is joined to the body, then in order for it to remember thoughts which it had in the past, it is necessary for some traces of them to be imprinted on the brain; it is by turning to these, or applying itself to them, that the mind remembers. So is it really surprising if the brain of an infant, or a man in a deep sleep, is unsuited to receive these traces?
(Descartes, 1984, pp. 246–247)

The questionable nature of this justification led Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) to argue that a neurological understanding of the unconscious is insufficient. Owing to the hardline separation Descartes establishes between mind and matter, the unconscious is associated with the material world while the conscious mind is associated only with thinking. Like Descartes, Leibniz wishes to preserve a notion of the soul's constant activity, but unlike Descartes, he suggests that supporting this notion requires a more nuanced conception of consciousness – one that acknowledges different degrees of intensity, thus establishing a spectrum of mental experience ranging from relatively conscious states to relatively unconscious states. Thus, for Leibniz, not all thought is conscious, and the notion of the unconscious is framed as something mental. The self-transparency of the Cartesian mind can thus be contrasted with the Leibnizian mind's multifaceted complexity.

It was Descartes's philosophy that was to exert a more powerful influence on the development of the Western intellectual tradition. While Descartes's adoption of a skeptical method in order to combat skepticism fell short, his dualist separation of mind from body emphasized a mechanistic conception of the material world that helped clear a path for the development of Western science. Although Descartes's project was explicitly concerned with establishing the thinking subject as the ground upon which to refute skepticism, the more lasting impact of his philosophy came to be reflected in the implication that if there is to be a basis for certainty then it is to be found in a material world that could now be thought of as though existing in distinction from the thinking subject; a

thinking subject that Descartes wished to establish as primary, but which seemed only less certain as a consequence of his emphasis on the *cogito*. It might be argued that Descartes's rationalism only fostered the subsequent rise of empiricism.

David Hume (1711–1776) would come to criticize the *cogito* from an empirical standpoint, arguing that the mind is nothing but a bundle of sense perceptions. The empirical refusal of rationalism had a powerful basis in the politics of the time, for empiricism was considered a revolutionary movement standing for independence of thought and a resistance to religious dogma. The work of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) can be understood as an attempt to establish a balance between the extremes of rationalist dogmatism and empirical skepticism. His concern is to protect the autonomy of reason – he wishes to deny that reason is merely contingent on habits of belief. Kant's critical philosophy seeks to argue for an a priori knowledge upon which our experience of the world can be shown to unavoidably rest. In approaching this undertaking, Kant establishes a different form of dualism from the one endorsed by Descartes. While Descartes's philosophy hinges upon the separation of mind from matter, Kant establishes a distinction between the *phenomenal* world (our experience of things) and the *noumenal* world (the things in themselves).

Although Kant's philosophy sought to protect the autonomy of reason, it did so without adequately addressing the relationship between self and world. In Kant's view, the law of cause and effect only applies as a function of subjective experience. If this is so, however, it becomes impossible to say how objects in the world (*noumena*) could give rise to our experiences (*phenomena*). The German philosophical tradition coming after Kant sought to offer a more comprehensive (and for this reason speculative) philosophy of consciousness. It was out of this endeavor that the philosophical idea of the unconscious proper arose. The term was coined in its German original by Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) who, under the influence of Jakob Böhme's (1575–1624) Christian theosophy, built on Leibniz's *petits perceptions* (perceptions that are not apperceived) and Kant's *dunkele Vorstellungen* (obscure presentations) to formulate an evolving philosophy of the unconscious. For Schelling, reflecting the idea that reason can never gain mastery of its own conditions, an unconscious ground is asserted such as to express the original unity out of which self and other emerge. Spiritualized nature – the world soul – is conceptualized

as the unconscious other in relationship to which self-consciousness comes into existence.

The notion of the unconscious articulated by Schelling was subsequently expanded upon by Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869), and reframed in the work of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) as the Will. In 1869, Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906) published his compendious *Philosophy of the Unconscious* – a work of more than 1,000 pages surveying the various permutations of “the unconscious” to have arisen in the recent history of Germanic philosophy. Such was the popularity of this idea in the mid-nineteenth-century German-speaking world that by the time Freud and Breuer’s ‘Preliminary Communication’ was published some 24 years later, von Hartmann’s book had already made its way through nine editions (Dufresne, 2000).

Broadly speaking, the notion of the philosophical unconscious can be understood as a unificatory principle that reflects a response to the dualisms of both Descartes and Kant. It offers itself as a speculative basis upon which to conceptualize the unity of self-consciousness, the unity of self and world,³ and the unity of mind and body. Reflective of its speculative and inherently murky status, it should be noted that the unificatory function of the philosophical unconscious is enlisted not to annul difference but to *preserve* it. This is worth underscoring, for it suggests the extent to which the idea upon which psychoanalytic practice is founded might serve to support diversity – this has perhaps been clouded by the extent to which our conceptions of what it means to invoke “the unconscious” have been shaped by Freudian dogmatism, and a consequent concern that orienting practice to this idea is liable to result in abuses of clinical authority. As Kugler (2005) writes:

The realization that our clinical grounds are not as absolute as we once thought does not lead to a radical relativism, nor to a nihilism. It leads, instead, to a psychological realism based upon the awareness that all systems of clinical interpretation gain their authority through a grounding in a god-term, a transcendental “ultimate.” But this “ultimate” is no longer so absolute, so ultimate. In therapeutic analysis we must still, on one level, believe in our god-term, and use it as if it were the ultimate explanatory principle. But on a deeper level, we also know it is not. And it is precisely this deeper level of awareness that prevents our psychological theories from becoming secular religions

and differentiates professional debates from religious idolatry. *The ultimate ground of depth psychology is not a known god-term, but the ultimately unknowable, the unconscious itself. And this is the absolute ground which gives authority to all schools of depth psychology.*

(pp. 37–38, italics in original)

In the extent that the reformatory thrust of much recent psychoanalytic thinking has tended to emphasize the need of incorporating a recognition of the sociocultural (see Brown, in press), this movement is perhaps fueled on the limited fashion in which a Freudian reading of the unconscious had previously come to reflect a culture of essentialism. This essentialism is quite inconsistent with the ethos of the idea of the philosophical unconscious as it was originally formulated, and is very much contingent on Freud's belief that he had discovered a "scientific method" by which the unconscious might be studied as an empirical fact.

Spirituality and the psychoanalytic unconscious

Given the idealist and romantic philosophy out of which the idea of the philosophical unconscious came to be given shape, it is a curious state of affairs that Freud – a professed atheist and materialist – would come to offer a "scientific approach" by means of which the unconscious's existence might be confirmed. Furthermore, it is Freud's assertion that he is offering an empirical basis for a philosophical idea that is itself seemingly concerned with the limits of knowledge. If this unknowable ground is to become accessible to experience, then it remains to be asked in what manner. Should the unconscious be understood in the fashion of Descartes, as a quality of matter, then there would seem to be two clear possibilities for discerning this unconscious at work: the first is in terms of neurobiology, and the second is as an *inference* from experience and/or observed behavior. If, however, the unconscious is understood in relationship to a spectrum of different intensities of consciousness (as was suggested by Leibnitz, and later William James),⁴ then the possibility emerges that the unconscious might in some respect be experienced directly.

Psychoanalysis has historically been concerned with demonstrating the existence of the unconscious via clinical observation. The forerunner to this tendency is reflected in the practice of hypnotism, wherein striking effects could be achieved by the hypnotist (and verified by an audience)

without the hypnotized subject's conscious recall. Freud was to forego a reliance on this technique. This contributed to his developing a psychological approach to the mind that circumvented some of the challenges posed to "good science" by the inherent messiness of hypnosis. The practice of hypnosis had given rise to something of an epistemic crisis within the still new field of psychology, for the hypnotic subject's suggestibility had broader implications for the study of the mind (Kline, 1972; Makari, 2008). What were the limits of this phenomenon? Was everyone suggestible? If not, why? If so, how could any approach to the mind not orienting itself to the purportedly material facts of neuroanatomy expect to stabilize its truth claims? The idea of transference enabled a rational way of conceptualizing this phenomenon and limiting its purview. Freud's technique and the subsequent notion of a training analysis would come to offer the basis upon which a clinician's claims to scientific objectivity might henceforth be founded.

The reception to Freud's work is best appreciated with a recognition of the manner in which the intellectual climate was informed by the philosophical idea of the unconscious and the clinical use of hypnosis, yet Freud is careful to distance himself from both. The three domains he initially turns to as the basis from which to demonstrate unconscious processes are the subject of his first three major works: dreams, jokes, and parapraxes. But while Freud seeks to establish his scientific credentials by positioning himself as the disinterested observer of his patients' unconscious minds, in subtle ways Freud's three domains of inquiry nevertheless cause us to notice the ways in which we might directly apprehend the workings of the unconscious in our own lives – not simply as something implied, but as an experience of a mildly altered state of consciousness. The possibility of being able to gain direct experiential access to the unconscious seems also to be suggested in Freud's self-analysis. This intensely subjective undertaking is posited by Freud to offer the basis upon which the central truth about the unconscious came to be realized. Yet in order to protect his authority, Freud would come to assert that his own primary experience could not be repeated by others – that an initiation at the hands of himself or one of his disciples was the only valid means to acquire knowledge of one's own unconscious. The decisive factor in the training analysis was not framed in terms of a direct experience of the unconscious, but as the analysand's capacity to accept the training analyst's interpretation of their free associations.

While Freud clears the table of the speculative – i.e. scientifically problematic – notions of the philosophical unconscious and hypnotic suggestion, in subtle ways his work nevertheless invites a certain measure of introspective validation. In teaching psychoanalysis to skeptically minded graduate students, I have found that the notion of the unconscious is often difficult to grasp until it is situated as a way of understanding one's own experience. Before students are asked to apply psychoanalytic ideas clinically, it is helpful to first have them recall the otherworldly experience of being wakened from a powerful dream. Alternatively, their attention might profitably be turned to the felt experience of meditation, of being in love, of ingesting mind altering substances, of attending a large and energized gathering (such as a music concert, sports event, or political rally), or the experience of being very unwell. These personally verifiable experiences are invariably more compelling as an initial starting point than attempting to demonstrate psychoanalytic ideas on the basis of case material.

Drawing from personal experience has not tended to be a feature of psychoanalytic teachings on the unconscious. Emphasis has usually been placed on the *inference* of an unconscious mind, not on direct experience. Yet it is upon this experiential question that the relevance of psychoanalysis as a spiritually receptive practice ultimately rests. If by “spirituality” we intend relationship to a sense of meaning that is felt to exist beyond ourselves then, psychologically speaking, this implies some question of relationship with the unconscious – assuming that by “unconscious” we intend that which is fundamental to who we are and yet *other* to our everyday sense of ourselves. But if psychoanalysts wish to adopt a non-reductive attitude towards spirituality then we must assume that in some extent the unconscious can itself be considered transpersonal – or, as Jung would have it, *collective*.

With the extent to which psychoanalysis can trace its intellectual roots to Germanic romanticism, it should come as no surprise that Jung was able to find in the tropes of depth psychology a resonance with his own more explicitly spiritual sensibility. Yet the personal split between Freud and Jung was carried forward by their supporters and, even now, more than a hundred years subsequent to the collapse of their relationship, reflects a significant and still inadequately addressed rift in intellectual discourse (see Brown, 2018). If a single theoretical theme were to be identified as the lasting cause of contention between these two schools, then the broadly “spiritual” orientation of Jung's work would perhaps be most obvious.