

## Conference briefings

### The concept of self in philosophy and psychiatry\*

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There has been an active philosophy seminar in Manchester for several years which has had a regular attendance, despite taking place during the evening, and the members of the seminar recently organised a one day conference in association with the University Department of Psychiatry and the Philosophy Special Interest Group of the College.

The seminar had taken a particular interest in the philosophy of mind. However the topic chosen for the day was the concept of self in philosophy and psychiatry, partly because of excellent books on that subject by Professor Rom Harre and Dr Jonathan Glover which had been read in the seminar. We were therefore delighted that both authors were able to speak. Their contributions were from a philosophical standpoint and were counterpointed by papers by Professor David Taylor and Dr Derek Bolton, both principally clinicians.

Derek Bolton's paper set the scene by contrasting a traditional, Cartesian understanding of the self as the object of introspection with a "post-empiricist" view of the self as the creation of a "theory" to which other people also made a significant contribution. This view was similar to that held by Harre, as emerged later, but based by Bolton firmly on social psychology rather than the philosophical argument of Harre's book *Personal Being* (1983). A particularly intriguing proposal of Bolton's was that the introspectionist account captured a truth about self statements – that they were indeed knowledge statements – but, Bolton argued, the introspectionists were wrong to claim that this was because a person has privileged access to their own mental contents.

David Taylor's paper took the audience into the world and style of reasoning of clinical example: children, girls mainly, whose selves were subordinated to the service of a larger social unit. Self, David Taylor seemed to be reminding us, was a product, possibly of a mechanism or specific cerebral structure – but sometimes the factory was run by a consortium and not just the owner.

Rom Harre presented work which was about to be published on the articulation of the socially

constructed self and the more familiar private self, the "real" self of many clinicians. His deceptively simple model swept away many of the confusions and duplications into which we often lapse. People, he said, take up "positions" with respect to each other but these positions are the subject of constant negotiation even during discourse about other matters. What people would say of themselves, their "story line", is determined by the positions that they establish, but also delimits the availability of new positions.

Jonathan Glover's paper stood slightly apart from the others in considering only one facet of self-hood – the investment of self in systems of belief. Glover argued that beliefs were like primitive maps. Some areas were clearly defined and their revision involved changing a large area of the map. Other areas were vaguer and more easily modified. Belief maps did not all 'join up' – they had "non-Euclidean geometries". Like other interconnected systems a variant of Goedel's theorem applied. Beliefs were either neatly connected up ['plausible'] or were held with conviction, but not both. There always was a trade-off between plausibility and commitment. Glover's conception of a belief map functioned much as Harre's positions did. It both constrained action and was re-defined by it.

Professor Graham Bird began the afternoon by summarising the speakers' contributions and placing them in the tradition of classical, particularly Kantian, philosophy. His approach, of critical exegesis, introduced some tougher philosophical language which dispelled the mirage of clarity that had previously settled over the proceedings.

Emboldened by Graham Bird, the conference attenders plunged into small groups to come up with some really stiff questions to ask the panel of speakers. One of these – "why do we need to talk about selves anyway?" – was an understandable and perhaps not thoughtless reaction to the day's debate. But most of the small groups were especially preoccupied about the universality of the conceptions of self that had been put forward during the day. Would they apply within other traditions – Buddhism, with its emphasis on maya, the illusion of the separateness of the self, for example? Would they even apply to

\*Conference at University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology on 2 June 1990.

some psychiatric conditions in which the mental apparatus is fundamentally damaged, such as autism and schizophrenia? Were they, in some way, too rational?

Debate about these and other points with the speakers had only just begun when the conference had to end. As always, philosophy had raised questions rather than settled them but most of the

audience seemed sufficiently hooked on ratiocination to appear to be well satisfied even so.

### *Further reading*

GLOVER, J. (1988) I: *The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity*. London: Allen Lane.

HARRE, R. (1983) *Personal Being*. Oxford: Blackwells.  
— (in press) *Pronouns and People*.

*Psychiatric Bulletin* (1991), 15, 102

## Speculations!\*

**“If you don’t exaggerate what is the point of talking?”**

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‘Speculations!’ was the Freud Museum’s first international conference and is part of a series of discussions on social, cultural and historical aspects of psychoanalysis known as the Freud Museum Public Programme.

The speakers were largely practising analysts, including several American and European Professors of French, English and Philosophy. The participants were usually either student or professional psychotherapists with a sprinkling of art historians and English literature academics. Thus the stage was set for talks on subjects like ‘Lust’, ‘Love: Between Passion and Civility’, ‘Silence’, ‘Autonomy’ and the politics of Psychoanalysis. These subjects reflected the stated aim of the conference – to explore the impact of psychoanalysis on wider culture. It was claimed that the disciplines which have been shifted from their grounds by psychoanalysis included psychology, sociology, women’s studies, anthropology and literary studies.

Perhaps it was therefore inevitable that the more clinically oriented practitioner would find much of the content verging on the obscure or irrelevant. The talk entitled ‘Anthropos phusei politikon zoon’ (‘Man is by nature a political animal’ – Aristotle), or Patient as Citizen, serves as a good example – with the complexity of its title signalling the un-understandability of its contents. Despite an intricate analysis of the political context of the analytic situation, the speaker James Hillman (Director of Studies at the Jung Institute, Zurich) deftly side-stepped the vexed issue of the inevitably political

\*An international conference on psychoanalysis organised by the Freud Museum and held at the Institut Français on 26, 27 and 28 October 1990.

implications of patient selection for analysis being determined by the ability to pay. At other times of the conference similar impenetrable lines of discussion were sparked off by questions from the floor such as “How do you know that the silence you want to listen to is silence enough?”. In trying to explain why analysts fall asleep during therapy (an event I thought was restricted to Hollywood caricature) one speaker invoked the notion of ‘therapy as symptom’. This kind of discussion lends itself too easily to caricature itself.

It is interesting to note that in the final session of the conference, when a round table discussion ensued, the major preoccupation was the underlying nature of the psychoanalysis. “Which of the many disciplines that psychoanalysis is supposed to have influenced now ‘owns’ psychoanalysis?”, wondered the delegates. One is reminded of Thomas Carlyle’s comment, “Self-contemplation is infallibly the symptom of disease”.

This conference did explore many of the wider cultural implications of psychoanalysis in an entertaining and genuinely informative way, but in so doing it seemed to forget the clinical and scientific roots of psychoanalysis. Freud was a scientist but there were no scientists on the panel of speakers at this conference. Freud himself said, “The poets and philosophers before me have discovered the unconscious: I have discovered the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied”.

It would be a great pity if only 50 years after his death Freud’s deservedly profound impact on wider culture paradoxically led to psychoanalysis being stolen forever from the clinicians and scientists by the poets and philosophers.