

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Dec 5, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/richard-boothby-freud-as-philosopher-metapsychology-after-lacan/>

Adrian Johnston

## **Richard Boothby, Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan**

In 1991, Richard Boothby's first book appeared—*Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud*—and provided English-speaking readers with a sustained analysis of Lacan's engagement with perhaps the most notorious and controversial of Freudian concepts, namely, the infamous death drive (*Todestrieb*). Not only did Boothby manage to successfully elucidate a facet of Lacanian theory that had, up until then, received comparatively little attention, but he also displayed a thorough, nuanced understanding of the ultimate philosophical stakes of the death drive, both in terms of its relation to the history of philosophy as well as its consequences for contemporary theoretical issues. Unfortunately, this gem of Lacanian scholarship was allowed to lapse out of print. Ten years later, Boothby offers the reading public a second volume that also concerns itself with Freud, Lacan, and various currents in philosophy.

*Freud as Philosopher* is, even by the author's own admission, a slightly misleading title, at least upon first glance. Boothby's topic throughout the book is, predominantly, the details of the oeuvre of Jacques Lacan (ironically enough, the figure mentioned in the sub-title is the real focal point of the volume). Of course, the justification for this is that Lacan presents himself as the initiator of a "return to Freud," a sustained effort at recuperating the genuine import of Freud's discovery of the unconscious. In Lacan's eyes, most prevalent strains of Freudianism have nothing to do with the truths contained in Freud's work; rather, Lacan sees Freud as having suffered a systematic distortion and bastardization by those who claim to speak in his name. Furthermore, Boothby's choice of title has its justifications in that an essential feature of the Lacanian revivification of Freudian thought resides in the manner in which Lacan demonstrates the incredibly far-reaching significance that Freud's ideas have for philosophy and, more generally, the history of ideas. Boothby correctly identifies Freud's metapsychology (instead of his more "empirical" labors on case studies from the clinical domain) as the ultimate bedrock on which psychoanalysis as a whole rests. The overarching theoretical framework established *vis-à-vis* the originary positing of such fundamental concepts as, among others, "unconscious," "drive," "repression," and "sublimation" literally opens the vista within which evidence of these very same concepts appears. In other words, Freud is not an inductive scientist, despite his burning desire to fancy himself as such. On the contrary, unlike the experimental procedure associated with the natural sciences, psychoanalysis makes it possible to see "factual evidence" of its theories, not by making the attempt to derive them from an observation field supposedly purged of all prior assumptions and mediating notions, but by first properly establishing its meta-level foundation (so that the evidence for this foundation can be accurately identified and interpreted—the components of such pathological structures as neurotic symptoms in the lives of individuals aren't always obvious to a theoretically untrained eye, and might be missed by a positivist-style attempt to proceed from brute empirical observation to a subsequent set of thus-derived generalizations). The best way to understand the role of Freud's metapsychology is as a two-fold set of basic, "transcendental" concepts: on the one hand, these concepts represent some of the underlying conditions of possibility for the formation and existence of human reality as it's experienced by the psyche; on the other hand, these concepts serve as possibility conditions for the analytic interpretation of this same field of human experiential reality (in short, as possibility conditions shaping both the subject of

psychoanalytic investigation as well as the procedures of the agent-analyst carrying out this investigation). Thus, as transcendental, the foundation of Freudian psychoanalysis cannot be construed as a jumble of factual claims abstracted from a handful of therapeutic case studies. Succinctly put, the *a priori* gesture of positing the metapsychological structures constitutive of subjectivity must precede the *a posteriori* buttressing of this structure through the empirical materials that are capable of being gathered exclusively in the wake of this very gesture. Hence, because of the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of psychoanalysis, Freud is, indeed, much more of a philosopher than either he or many of his readers, both sympathetic and critical, would like to believe. Boothby grasps this well, and makes a strong, articulate case for viewing the Freudian corpus from this perspective.

The central thesis of *Freud as Philosopher* hinges on the tension between words and images: the main argument is that the unconscious, as shaped by the mechanics of repression, is primarily established by the antagonistic dynamic operative between verbal-linguistic processes and the modalities of specular, imagistic (re)presentation. Boothby begins with the Gestalt theme of the distinction between figure and ground (or, put differently, between form and field). Within the visual field, for example, a focus on one part of it requires a blurring of the clarity and distinctness of the rest of the field, transforming the thus-excluded part into a hazy “fringe” or “halo” enveloping the highlighted object of attention (Boothby uses such references as the paintings of Claude Monet and the psychological writings of William James to underscore this motif of the surrounding “dispositional field”). Boothby proceeds to trace the importance of the Gestalt notion of a dialectical oscillation between figure/form and ground/field for the three main representatives of phenomenology: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (the latter two being colleagues of and influences on Lacan).

Basically, as far as psychoanalysis is concerned, Boothby’s program is to press the ideas and metaphors at play in both Gestalt psychology and phenomenology into the service of clarifying the fundamentals of metapsychology. He understands Lacan’s recasting of the Freudian theory of the unconscious as amounting to the supposition of a dispositional field in which a conflict between words (the Lacanian category of the Symbolic) and images (the Lacanian category of the Imaginary) establishes the line of demarcation between the restrictive sphere of the consciously accessible and the inaccessible-yet-influential domain of the unthematized repressed. The Imaginary ego’s intensive investment in particular “images” (for instance, the signified referents of conscious speech directed at the “little other” of intersubjective communication) inevitably results in a structurally determined distortion whereby the broader Symbolic horizon (i.e., the “big Other” as the battery of signifiers) shaping the very contours of the ego’s selective focal points fades out of the same picture that this horizon itself contributes to shaping. Boothby shows how, at least during the period of the 1950s, Lacan organizes his conception of the unconscious around the dual poles of the Imaginary and the Symbolic (as epitomized in, for example, the well-known “Schema L”).

Given this cursory presentation of the rudiments of Boothby’s thesis, a reader familiar with Lacanian theory might be wondering, at just this moment, what place Boothby assigns to Lacan’s third category. That is to say, what about the Real? Is he suggesting that the “return to Freud” can be adequately grasped through reference to merely two out of three of the elements of the, so to speak, Lacanian holy trinity? *Freud as Philosopher* proceeds to address the category of the Real through a novel reinterpretation of what Lacan means by *das Ding* (a term taken up from both Kant and Heidegger, which Lacan first introduces in an explicit fashion during the seventh seminar of 1959-1960). In essence, Boothby makes a case for viewing the term “other” as one of those special tripartite Borromean switch-points found throughout Lacan’s thought (i.e., as a juncture knotting/conjoining all three of Lacan’s categories): the “little other” refers to the specular image generating the kernel of the ego in the mirror stage, as well as the accessible visage of other individuals *qua* alter-egos encountered by this ego; the “big Other” refers to the trans-subjective symbolic order, the overarching socio-linguistic domain molding the subjects produced within it; and, finally, after presenting the Imaginary and the Symbolic forms of “otherness” respectively in this light, Boothby treats the Lacanian *das Ding* as referring to what the ego cannot discern “behind” the accessible Imaginary-Symbolic façade of another’s presence, what remains inscrutable and enigmatic about one’s neighbor or love-object (this being the other as the “Real Thing,” the hidden-yet-proximate [non-]presence of the desires of the Other). This third, Real dimension of alterity is the unknown desire of those confronting the individual, others who never cease to disturb the subject, always forcing the question “What do you want?” to be posed

again and again.

This notion of a third sense of otherness at the level of the Real leads to Boothby developing an elegant explanation of what's involved in a "Lacanian theory of sacrifice." A sacrifice isn't so much a matter of offering an item that one knows is desired by another. When people sacrifice objects to their gods, they don't do so as a straightforward, exchange-style transaction between mortals and deities. Rather, the function of the sacrificed object is to give body to the troubling mystery of what, if anything, these obscure, divine others want from human beings, to domesticate an intolerable background permeated by the threatening proximity of unknown, alien wants. The sacrificial ritual provides the stable Imaginary-Symbolic framework within which an answer to the question of the desires of the (Real) Other is conjured up *ex nihilo*. Humans don't give the gods things that the gods already desire and unambiguously request; instead, they give the gods things so as to create the calming illusion of there being determinate wants in the gods that, reassuringly enough, can be sated by the repeatable act of sacrificing a definite, fixed kind of item through a set, ritualistic practice. Of course, the same process is, for Lacan, at play between the child and its mother: in fact, the Lacanian "phallus" can be concisely defined as, precisely, whatever object the child latches onto as symbolizing its answer to the question of what its (m)other supposedly wants. Without the pacifying, stabilizing intervention of everything situated under the rubric of the "paternal function" (i.e., the phallus, castration, the Name-of-the-Father, and so on), the nascent subject-to-be is in danger of being plunged into psychosis by virtue of never achieving sufficient distance from the stifling, smothering gravity of the maternal "Thing" and its seemingly unquenchable desires-hence, Lacan asserts that one's choice, as an Oedipalized individual, is "*Père ou pire*" ("Father or worse").

As far as this review is concerned, there are two points of criticism worth mentioning. In both cases, the problem has to do with Boothby allowing himself the luxury of giving a stripped-down, streamlined presentation of Lacanian concepts, a presentation that belies the actual complexity and semantic richness of these concepts as they appear within Lacan's texts and seminars. First, Boothby characterizes the distinction between the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic as, respectively, a difference between visual images and the words of a given language. He leads readers to assume that, for instance, the category of the Symbolic is simply Lacan's own idiosyncratic way of referring to any sort of linguistic structure. For Lacan, natural languages are themselves, at certain of their levels, sub-species of the larger framework referred to as the symbolic order; the latter is a much broader notion than the former, and hence they shouldn't be equivocated between without reservation. Boothby admits this at one point, acknowledging that he risks obfuscating the other facets of meaning that certain terms and concepts possess within the teachings of Lacan. And yet, despite this admission on Boothby's part, he continues throughout the book to speak as though the two Lacanian categories of the Symbolic and the Imaginary translated into the difference between words and images (this would be an instance of the psychoanalytic mechanism of "disavowal," of "I know full well, but nonetheless").

The difficulty with Boothby's handling of these notions becomes easily apparent if one recalls that, for Lacan, one can relate to the words of articulated language in an Imaginary fashion, and, inversely, images can function in a fully Symbolic capacity. In the former case, the speaker and/or listener can grasp speech not as a "chain of signifiers" (i.e., as a series of acoustic and graphic materials, each of whose value is determined through its connections and differential relations with other such elements), but, instead, as a sequence of signs (namely, in terms of the consciously intended meaning presumed to control the process of enunciation, the supposed signifieds deliberately aligned with the enunciated signifiers). The latter case (i.e., images participating in the Symbolic register) is writ large across the whole of psychoanalysis, particularly as the imagery of dreams and the role of the body image in symptom formation. The image of a bodily organ, in instances of hysterical disorders or neurotic tics, becomes a heavily invested feature of the libidinal economy by virtue of its significance as defined by its place, as a *Vorstellung*, within the broader psychical matrix of ideational representations.

The same problem occurs in the interpretation of the Real offered here. Boothby writes as though the Real amounts almost exclusively to the foreign alterity of the Other as *das Ding* (although this is a productive angle of interpretation, it fails to do justice to the complete range of senses that this especially slippery third category has in Lacan's work). Rather than being an explanation of the meaning of the Real per se in Lacanian theory, this amounts to an application of this category to a specific topic/theme that, thus far, the

Real hasn't been applied to in any clear and precisely delineated way.

Hence, the fundamental flaw of Boothby's approach is that it runs the risk of presenting the three Lacanian registers of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary as each being tied to a specific kind of content: the Real refers to the enigmatic Other, the Symbolic refers to the words of natural languages, and the Imaginary refers to visual imagery. On the contrary, for Lacan, these three terms designate a formal framework through which the entirety of the "contents" characteristic of the unconscious and subjectivity take shape and generate their effects. However, this means that all types of ideational, mnemonic elements, ranging from auditory traces to visually imprinted memories, participate simultaneously in multiple registers. In Lacanian theory, language has its Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary dimensions (designated as the letter, the signifier, and the sign respectively), each coming to the fore in turn when one views language from different possible positions/perspectives. The same holds for psychically significant images.

Overall, despite some of its simplifications of Lacan, *Freud as Philosopher* is a solid piece of philosophically oriented psychoanalytic theory. Boothby is a skilled writer, someone who provides the reader pleasure both through evocative descriptions of his subject matter and carefully chosen examples as well as through the numerous flashes of insight illuminating some of the dark, neglected corners of the Lacanian textual edifice. This is one of the better English-language engagements with Lacan to have appeared in the past several years. Nobody who claims to have an interest in the unfolding dialogue between psychoanalysis and philosophy could make a valid excuse for not having this volume in their own home library.

*Adrian Johnston*