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Repressed Contents Reconsidered: Repressed Contents and Dennett's Intentional Stance Approach

Abstract

The conventional view presented in terms of repressed contents brought to consciousness (a 'realistic view' of repressed contents) is seen as untenable because the existence of repressed contents cannot be pinpointed. An instrumentalist view of the nature of repressed contents is sketched, and Dennett's intentional stance approach is applied to the issue of repressed contents. As opposed to realistic view, it is suggested that becoming conscious of repressed contents should be seen as forming new contents of consciousness. However, it is seen as plausible to project unconscious contents into the mind in an instrumentalist manner. An instrumentalist view is suggested to avoid ontological problems concerning repressed contents.

Introduction

Sigmund Freud's concept of repressed memories and desires has become an outstanding part of the self-understanding of Western man. According to Freud's thinking, repressed contents resemble conscious ones: 'all the categories which we employ to describe conscious mental acts, such as ideas, purposes, resolutions and so on, can be applied to them [the latent states of mental life]' (Freud, 1915: 168).

In present-day science, this idea is very contradictory. There can not be such a things as non-conscious desires and ideas in the brain, for brains contain only the types of items described by neuroscience.

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This problem is not limited to non-consciousness: scientists and philosophers have had problems determining just how *conscious* propositional attitudes might exist in our mind/brain. Two fundamental criticisms of folk-psychology are (a) that it has emerged in daily life and is not formulated in a manner appropriate for a scientific theory, and (b) that there appear to be no entities in the brain corresponding to the words ‘belief’ and ‘desire’ (Churchland, 1981/2000; Dennett, 1987). These problems are well-known, and there have been several responses to them. For example, Jerry Fodor (1985) favors the strategy of developing a scientific psychological theory on the basic assumptions of folk-psychology. Paul Churchland’s (1981/2000) opinion is the opposite: in the future folk-psychology will be replaced by theories presented in terms of neurophysiology. Daniel Dennett is somewhere between these two poles: according to him there are no such things as beliefs and desires, but despite this it is accurate to study people with the supposition of existing beliefs and desires.

The strength of folk-psychology is easy to describe: it works. We can use it to deal with the situations of daily life and predict the behavior of other people by considering what they probably believe and desire. Everybody, including the critics of folk-psychology, is bound to use the folk-psychological vocabulary, but folk-psychology can neither be accepted by its critics nor replaced with a better model by them.

Freud’s work is perhaps the most scientific formulation of the folk-psychology of present-day Western man is (which idea is an anachronism, because Freud’s thinking did not have such a status in his lifetime; on the relation between psychoanalysis and folk-psychology, see Brook, 1998). However, criticism of Freud’s idea of repressed mental contents on the grounds that this cannot be reconciled with a materialist conception of the mind seem to be slightly off-target: the question about *unconscious* desires and beliefs is irrelevant as long as we do not have a scientific theory about *conscious* beliefs and desires. There are ontological problems with the supposition of repressed propositional attitudes, but this makes no difference to conscious ones.

In order to avoid these ontological problems, I shall sketch an instrumentalist view of repressed mental contents. This is done through Dennett’s intentional stance approach. Dennett’s approach is far from mainstream philosophy, and it is perhaps more criticized (see for example McCulloch, 1990; Fodor & Lepore, 1993; Rey, 1994; Searle, 1997) than supported. Dennett’s thinking on intentionality can be divided to two themes: 1) there is no such thing as intrinsic intentionality, and 2) it is a reasonable research strategy to project intentionality to different organisms or ‘systems’, although they do not possess intentionality.

The criticism of Dennett’s thinking mentioned above is mainly directed to the first, philosophical question on intentionality. Many of Dennett’s ideas are independent of this specific philosophical thesis, and in this paper I will

concentrate on Dennett's second claim, and apply it to the psychoanalytic idea of repressed contents.

Problems with the realistic view of repressed contents

In order to lay groundwork for an instrumentalistic view of repressed contents, we must first take a closer look to the view to which this is an alternative. A *realistic* view of unconscious mental contents claims that in the brain lie intentional repressed desires and beliefs', which reflect the true nature of the person's aims, and that these repressed contents can cause psychic disorders. Repressed contents are lifted to consciousness in psychoanalytic treatment, and disorders are thereby relieved. So, according to realistic approach, somewhere below consciousness there are entities, which can be lifted or brought to consciousness. The idea that the entities can be made conscious, implies that their mode of existence in the unconscious is similar as it would be in consciousness. Freud's remarks concerning the resemblance between conscious and repressed contents can be thought to support this kind of thinking. On the other hand, Freud often stressed (e.g. Freud, 1915) that unconscious matters can be just *transformed* to consciousness. It seems that in the psychoanalytic literature, repressed contents are referred mainly in a realistic terms (see, however, Smith, 1999).

In the domain of cognitive science, it is difficult to state cogent arguments for the realistic view, as it seems to entail the existence of an intermediate level between consciousness and the brain (Searle, 1992). A realistic account of repressed contents should answer questions such as 'where do repressed contents lie,' 'how can they be observed', and 'what are they like.' In psychoanalytic thinking, too, problems with the realistic view has been demonstrated (see Beres Joseph, 1970; Schimek, 1975; Olds, 1992). The idea of repression is the central characteristic of psychoanalytic thinking, and the realistic view concerning repressed contents is a fundamental obstacle for the integration of cognitive and psychoanalytic views.

Thus, there seems to be good reason for seeking an alternative for the realistic view concerning repressed contents, and intentional stance thinking is a promising candidate. According to this view, it is legitimate to speak of the beliefs and desires of computers and the conventional psychoanalytic terminology concerning repressed desires and beliefs might appear as reasonable in this context as well.

This article is concerned with repressed propositional attitudes. The notion of repressed memories do not involve the same problems as repressed beliefs and desires.

Intentional stance

For Dennett there is, literally speaking, no such a thing as intrinsic intentionality. Dennett does not make the common distinction between original or intrinsic intentionality on the one hand, and derived or ‘as-if’ intentionality on the other. In Dennett’s world a computer has intentionality, it seems to ‘know’ or ‘believe’ things, because an engineer has programmed it. The intentionality of computers is therefore derived from it’s programmer. In terms of Dennett’s intentional stance thinking humans’ cognitive capacities are formed in such a way that they also can be said to be programmed: structures of the brain are responsible for our information processing, and shaped by evolutionary processes (Dennett 1987).

There is no standard view about how propositional attitudes are thought to exist in our brains. However, they are often seen, especially in folk-psychology, as sentence-like entities in the head. Dennett (1987) argues quite carefully against this view. Thus, when we get hungry, there is no module or structure of the brain, which corresponds to the sentence ‘I want beef’. Similarly, there is no sentence-like structure in the brain that ‘when one goes out while it is raining, one will become wet’, the activation of which causes us to take an umbrella.

Wanting a piece of beef and taking an umbrella on a rainy day are surely caused by activities of the brain. However, activities responsible for those acts are not describable in such a way which would resemble the way we use the words ‘belief’ and ‘desire’. Everyday talk about desires and beliefs is strongly affected by habits of speaking, and they reflect less the actual functioning of the brain, and more the way how language is used in one’s community (Dennett 1998; Westbury & Dennett 2000).

Dennett, however, does not reject folk-psychological terms such as ‘belief’ and ‘desire’, but quite the contrary sees using of them as an interpretative strategy. The functioning of certain ‘systems’ can be predicted by projecting beliefs and desires onto them, and in many cases this intentional stance strategy works better than, for example, purely physiological explanation. As according to Dennett there is no such thing as intrinsic intentionality, intentionality can in principle be projected to any systems where it works. According to him (Dennett, 1987), the strategy works not only with humans, but also with other mammals, chess-playing computers, thermostats, and even plants. For example, we can predict the behavior of a computer by thinking in terms of it’s beliefs and fears: ‘the chess-playing computer will not take your knight because it *knows* that there is a line of ensuing play that would lead to losing its rook, and it *does not want* that to happen’ (Dennett, 1987: 22, italics added).

There are three rules for attributing propositional attributes to systems (Dennett 1987, 49):

1. Concerning system's knowledge and beliefs, we have to take into account what the system has 'perceived' through its history (or what has been, for example, programmed into a computer).
2. Desires are determined by what a system ought to have, given it's biological needs. Thus, humans desire survival and procreation, and this way also food, security, sex and so forth.
3. We must suppose that a system behaves rationally given its beliefs and desires.

These rules, indeed, tell us what is 'normal' for a certain kind of system. However, systems do not always behave rationally: for example an animal or a human may die because it refuses to eat. In these cases, we are allowed to attribute 'abnormal' desires to the system through 'special stories' (Dennett, 1987: 49).

There are two reasons for applying the intentional stance strategy. The first reason is practical: explanations basing on the physical properties of systems are too long and complicated. Let us think of the functioning of a computer. It is often said things like 'now you have to tell it that you want to...', or 'it does not know yet which program it should run' etc. If the functioning of a computer were described exclusively in terms of what it *really* contains (electric circuits, changes of charges between 0 and 1), describing a simple act would take hours or days. Talk about 0's and 1's is also not especially informative in relating to how a computer can be used. Thus the appropriate level of explanation contains *abstractions* of what actually is happening inside the computer.

The working of a computer is known exactly because it is a man-made system. When considering natural systems, there is also another good reason for applying the intentional stance strategy: the neurophysiological processes underpinning human and animal behavior are often not known, and intentional stance strategy can serve as a tool for studying them (Dennett, 1987).

The physical, design, and intentional stances

Dennett (1978, 1987) proposes three levels of explanation: the *physical stance* explains phenomena (e.g. behavior of a human, an animal or a computer) by applying the knowledge we have on the laws of the nature, the *design stance* refers to the aims of the system (e.g. computers are made and programmed for certain task), and expiations by means of the *intentional stance* involve attributing desires and beliefs of the system in question.

In order to describe these strategies more closely, let us concentrate on 'deceiving behavior'. This behavior can be found in many birds (see Dennett

1987): A bird behaves as if it were hurt, attracts this way predators attention, and protects it's offspring. From the perspective of the physical stance, this behavior is explained in terms of neurophysiology. The design stance view refers to evolutionary function of such a behavior: ancestors of the bird in question had an aptitude for this behavior. Because of this aptitude, they produced more descendants, and the aptitude became prevalent in the species. The reason for the behavior in question can not be found from the brain of a single bird. Similarly, the function of a computer (or a program of it) can not be found from the hardware of a computer, but it has to be asked for the engineers which have made the computer. Dennett antropomorphizes evolutionary process responsible for the design of organisms by calling it Mother Nature (from which human intentionality is derived).

Intentional stance explanation of the deceiving behavior of birds concerns the bird's beliefs and desires: 'that predator is trying to eat my offspring, but if I act as if I am injured, it may think I am an easier catch, and forget the offspring (and this way my genes will be spread more widely)'. It is clear that a bird does not literally posses these kinds of ideas. The explanation, however, mirrors the reason of the behavior: the behavior has proliferated because it protects offspring, and the ideas projected into the mind of the bird reflect this fact.

Repression re-defined

Having discussed problems with the notion of repressed contents, it has to be stated that no such problems exist with regard to the *phenomenon of repression*. There is no reason to doubt the findings of psychoanalysts that patients often miss certain contents of consciousness (beliefs, desires, memories). To rephrase: what is problematic is not the phenomenon, but *the way Freud explained it* via the supposition of repressed mental contents.

In psychoanalysis one is usually interested in non-rational behavior: a patient suffers for something ('a disorder', for example anorexia nervosa), which is not regarded as normal by her/him and by the others. As mentioned above, according to Dennett's approach in such a case 'special stories' have to be told, and 'abnormal' desires and beliefs are allowed to be projected onto a system. Psychoanalytic case studies can be taken to be examples of such special stories. In psychoanalytic thinking abnormal desires are not often projected onto patients. Analysts usually attribute to their analysands quite normal propositional attitudes, but what is not 'normal', is that these *propositional attitudes are not conscious*. In this way disorders, slips and so on are explained through the supposition of *repressed contents*. I suggest that the supposition of repressed contents should not be viewed in a realistic sense, but in an instrumentalistic way. Adopting the

instrumentalist view to repressed contents creates a need to reformulate our thinking on becoming conscious of repressed contents.

People undergoing psychotherapy often say things like ‘indeed I have been envied my sister since she was borne, but I have not realized it before.’ Their experience is that they have possessed certain ideas without being conscious of them. Psychoanalytic thinking shares this intuition by supposing that those ideas have pre-existed in a non-conscious form. In terms of the instrumentalist view, the experience of having possessed certain beliefs and desires unconsciously has to be treated as experience. What has traditionally been called lifting or bringing something unconscious to consciousness, is simply forming a new content of consciousness.

Let us study the analysand’s experience of having possessed an unconscious content. Thinking of events in one’s life-history can be in a certain sense compared to watching a film. We may experience feelings about the protagonist of a film. After watching the film for awhile, we can also form some impression what ideas (not mentioned in the film) the protagonist might have in mind. Those ideas are projected to the mind of the character (or it can be said that we have identified with her/him). Similarly, when thinking about events in one’s own life-history, one can be thought to identify to the main character (oneself), and to project into this character’s mind the desires/beliefs/feelings he or she ought to possess. An analysand thinks that he or she has had certain non-conscious propositional attitudes, but in terms intentional stance thinking it is a question about projection. An analysand notices retrospectively that it would have been reasonable to have certain beliefs/desires in the situation in question.

In the psychoanalytic situation the analysand has a certain distance from previous events. Because of this, the analysand may be able to know (and even feel) afterwards what he or she ought to have believed/desired/felt in the situation in question. Nothing previously hidden has become conscious, but new contents of consciousness have been formed. It can be asked, how else one could come to the conclusion of having had a non-conscious belief/desire than by this kind of reasoning? How else could non-conscious desires and beliefs could be felt or observed afterwards?

When Dennett’s intentional stance approach is applied to the topic of repressed contents, it can be said that although repressed contents did not preexist their ‘coming into consciousness’, we can say that there should have been certain contents of consciousness. Thus, let us redefine repression as a state in which a person did not have a desire/belief/idea he/she should have had. The desires, beliefs, etc. that one ‘ought to’ possess are those which are realistic given one’s species-specific features, surroundings, life-history, and one’s other beliefs and desires. This ‘ought to’ is based on the three rules proposed by Dennett, which we have to take into account when projecting intentional states into systems:

when we know the biological needs and knowledge of the person, and suppose a person to behave rationally towards them, we can determine what is 'normal' for that person. This 'ought to' is difficult to define exactly. The problems are, however, practical and not of principle. The crucial question is whether accurate contents of consciousness can be defined in a manner of Freud's metapsychology in a naturalistic or objective way, or in culture-dependent way.

The analysand also applies the three rules when projecting nonconscious propositional attitudes in the past event: 'considering the cognitive capacity, knowledge, desires and beliefs I had, I should have had desired/believed x too'. By this it is not meant that the analysand would follow the rules consciously. Instead of that, the conclusion that he or she has had certain non-conscious beliefs and desire is based on the application of the three rules.

Repressed contents and the design level

Evolutionary perspectives on repression has been advanced (Nesse & Lloyd 1992) but there are two reasons why they are not sufficient. Firstly, the contents of consciousness, and thus also the phenomenon of repression, are inseparable from our linguistic abilities. Secondly, the evolutionary process determines species-specific features, but in order to explain individual variance, ontogenesis has to be taken into account. Individual cognitive competencies are realized or evolved during life-history. Because of that, in addition to evolutionary point of view, developmental psychology is needed for design-level theory for psychoanalysis. As Dennett antropomorphizes the evolutionary process as 'Mother Nature', the factors affecting individual development might be called 'Father Culture'.

What would a design stance account of repression be like? In the psychoanalytic tradition two kinds of such explanations can be found. First ones are of the form: 'P was punished by her parents every time she expressed aggressivity. Because of that aggressive desires rise an unconscious fear of punishment, and therefore those desires are repressed.' In other words, a person's mind has 'become designed' along her/his life-history in such a way, that certain ought-to-be contents of consciousness are lacking.

Design done by Mother Nature is irrevocable. When we think of the design emerging during the course of a personal life-history, the situation is different. Indeed, life is a continuing design-process of a person: structures of the mind/ brain are in changing all the time. Psychoanalytic treatment is based on the idea that past experiences (in relation to one's parents, for example) can be processed in the treatment in such a way that their negative effects on information processing vanish.

The second variety of design-level account of repression is Freud's metapsychology (or the alternatives, which are created in order to replace it; see Brenner, 1980) in which repression is explained by referring to the energy which would become uncatheted if a certain idea were conscious. Large quantities of uncatheted energy are said to cause psychic tension and anxiety. In terms of the design stance, this means that the mind/brain is designed (by Mother Nature) to cathet energy and avoid psychic tension. Metapsychological theorizing can not be said to reflect present-day scientific views, and it is a remarkable challenge to create an up-to-date design level theory for psychoanalysis. The crucial question is, how (according to which principles or rules) the contents of consciousness become selected or formed? Also, what is the brain designed to do_A and why do certain ought-to-be contents of consciousness do not become realized?.

When it comes to explaining why certain contents are missing, the traditional psychoanalytic 'special stories' are serviceable for the instrumentalistic view as well: the reasons relate to life-historical matters and the relation between ought- to-be content of consciousness and person's other beliefs and desires. Psychoanalytic case studies explain the missing of ought-to-be contents of consciousness by referring either to the extraordinary nature of certain events (the sexual abuse of a child, for example), or to the person's other beliefs and desires, with which the repressed content is contradictory (an intrapsychic conflict).

The reason for repression (the absence of certain contents from consciousness) is hard to pinpoint or to localize in certain structures of the brain. In discussing the phenomenon of repression we deal with several entangled issues that pertain to the overall functioning of the mind/brain. The missing of contents emerge from the design of the system. According to the instrumentalist view, a repressed content is not a thing, which might become revealed. It refers just to the absence of a conscious mental content, which is due to complex dynamics of the mind/brain.

The instrumentalist view in practice

Having sketched an instrumentalist view of repressed contents, we might want to consider whether we have done anything more than applying a conceptual trick in order to save the good old psychoanalytic terminology. If the realistic view of repressed contents is given up, are there grounds for the talk about repressed desires and beliefs?

The general reasons for adopting the intentional stance were mentioned above: physical stance descriptions are either too complicated, or we just cannot tell the reasons from the physical stance. These reasons hold in the case repressed contents

too: no one can give a complete physical or design level explanation of why a certain person is missing certain (ought-to-be) contents of consciousness. However, intentional stance level discussion about repressed ideas can be of help in creating design and physical stance explanations, as non-conscious propositional attitudes mirror the real reason for the behavior, as in the case with deceiving birds.

In the case of (clinical) psychoanalysis, there are also additional reasons for applying the intentional stance strategy. In our personal efforts towards selfunderstanding, we are bound to folk-psychological terminology, and it is hard to conceive how this could be replaced by, for example, neuroscientific terminology. The expression ‘repressed desire/belief/memory’ is a lively metaphor for an ought- to-be content of consciousness. Belief/desire -psychology is not capable of encompassing causality and the reasons for our behavior in the strict sense of these terms (see Kim, 1998; Grienbaum, 1984). It is, however, the only tool for making sense to our mental life and behavior.

Discussion

Freud’s idea repressed mental contents has been disputed for more than a century. From the point of view taken in the present article, this question, however, seems to be an empty one. We cannot find counterparts to conscious beliefs and desires in the brain, and even less for non-conscious ones. Thus the problem does not lie in Freud’s ideas themselves, but in the gap between scientific approaches and folk-psychological intuitions. This matter appears as a problem when we assume that the unconscious items ‘really exist’. There are many legitimate theoretical concepts, which do not have counterparts in reality. Dennett’s favourite example is the ‘center of gravity’. There is no such ‘thing’ as a center of gravity, but it is thought to exist both by laymen and physicians (Dennett, 1998). Likewise, it is legitimate to speak about repressed desires and beliefs, although they do not exist in a realistic sense of the word. To rephrase Stich (1992), “there may, perhaps, be good reasons not to speak about repressed contents. But the fact that they cannot be found in the mind/brain is not one of them”.

Legitimizing the psychoanalytic statements about repressed contents in principle is, however, different from underwriting the ‘truth’ of psychoanalytic ideas. Legitimizing is also not Dennett’s idea in his intentional stance approach: ‘The tactic of adopting the intentional stance is not a matter of replacing empirical investigations with aprioristic (‘armchair’) investigations, but of using the stance to suggest which brute empirical questions to put to nature.’(Dennett, 1987: 247). The empirical questions in the case of psychoanalysis are numerous: ‘Does not having beliefs/desires that one ought to have give rise to psychological disorders?’,

‘Does reconstructing past events, and later having the beliefs and desires that one should have had change information processing in a meaningful manner?’, ‘What is the indeed the curative aspect in psychoanalytic treatment?’ and so on.

Dennett (1987: 47) calls folk psychology ‘a myth we live in’, and he (Dennett, 1991) treats phenomenal consciousness in terms of a ‘fictional world’. This may sound, although it is not necessarily intended to do so, as though he is giving only minor importance to the matters which are the most meaningful in our everyday life. This kind of talk can be taken to imply that our intuitive ideas about our minds should not be studied by the methods of the brain sciences at all, and instead studied in much the same way that myths and fictions are studied. By this I mean the narrative ‘psyche as a text’ approach, which has been applied in psychoanalysis issues, too (e.g. Derrida, 1967; Spence, 1982; Brooks, 1994). In this framework, our expressions concerning mind are not anchored to what is there in the brain at all. Instead of that, we should study their interrelationships and the wholes that they form (see also Dennett, 1969; Dennett, 1978; Dennett, 1991; Dennett, 1998; Dennett & Humphrey, 1998).

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