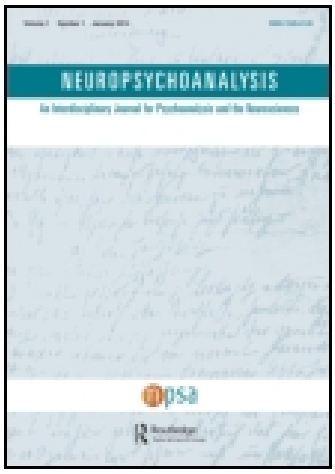

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Commentary on "Freudian Dream Theory, Dream Bizarreness, and the Disguise-Censor Controversy"

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Commentary on "Freudian Dream Theory, Dream Bizarreness, and the Disguise-Censor Controversy"

Doris McIlwain (Sydney)

SUBSTITUTE OBJECTS AND SUBSTITUTE ACTS

Dreams are bizarre—a surrealism of one, involving fractured story-lines and composite beasts that puzzle even their narrator. Other people's dreams confound us as we listen politely to this "hallucinatory, self-involving narrative" (Solms, 1995, p. 46). The narrative we tell, the manifest content, is a tapestry of dreamwork, symbolism, and the "plastic representation" Freud describes, where, dreaming, we find ourselves regressing back at the hallucinatory raw-feel level of sensory experience—we see, hear, smell, and take it all as real (see Solms, 1995). As we know, from a classical psychoanalytic point of view the logic of dreams is not to be sought merely at the level of the manifest content, but in a complex *defensive* mapping between latent wish and hallucinatory manifest array. Defense requires motivational conflict. Before it became clear that dreams were not coterminous with REM sleep (Foulkes, 1962; Solms, 1995), the Hobsonian account made it unlikely that anything motivational could play a part in causing dreams. We are now in a position to say, as Solms and Turnbull (2002) note, "the brain mechanisms of dreams are the same as those for the basic emotions" (p. 201). Reminiscent of Panksepp's (2000) characterization of the basic emotion systems having "minds of their own" (p. 237), drives, for Freud, are somatically anchored sources of policy with regard to aspects of reality relevant to their satisfaction. So on the basis of neuroscientific evidence, the possibility emerges once more that drives, affects, and wishes may be operative in dreaming.

That is not to say, however, that dreams are not compromise formations between what is wished for and what can be tolerated at the level of experience. In dreams, direct expression of drive or affect (orgasm or anxiety) signals for Freud a failure of the dreamwork. Freud thought that dealing with affect was the second most crucial feature of dreams. "*The inhibition of affect . . . must be considered as the second consequence of the censorship of dreams just as dream distortion is its first consequence*" (1900, p. 605, emphasis in original). The dreamwork and symbolism arise through defensive substitutions along an affectively linked chain of associations. Affective inhibition is central to symbol formation—as Jones (1916)[1] has shown (for an exqui-

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[1] "Insofar as a secondary idea B receives its meaning from a primary idea A, with which it has been identified, it functions as what may be called a symbolic equivalent of A. . . . There is an overflow of feeling and interest from A to B, one which gives B much of its meaning so that under appropriate conditions it is possible for B to represent A. According to the view here maintained, the essential element of these conditions is an affective inhibition relating to A" (Jones, 1916, p. 139).

sitely full account, see Petocz, 1999). Thus, despite dreams' wish-fulfilling nature for Freud, they were still sublimated products—the product of censorship born of psychic conflict and repression offering us "substitute objects" and "substitute acts" (Freud, 1913, p. 30).

So it is great to see Boag put center stage the notion of the censor, a notion that on some accounts is replete with the teleology of agency and the language of intentionality. It is a tough call as to how the accounts canvassed by Boag might be "cashed out"[2] in mechanistic terms. Yet this is psychoanalysis at its best: exploring the causal underpinnings of mental events is the heart of a psychoanalytic philosophy of mind to which neuroscientific evidence fruitfully contributes. The question addressed in Boag's paper is how can a phenomenology of defense that seems saturated with free will and deliberation, strategy and choice, logical traps of "knowing in order not to know" and homunculi, be given a thoroughgoing determinist/materialist account consonant with the neuroscientific evidence? The stakes are high.

I shall give a quick summary of what I see as Boag's main points and then go into detail. I then suggest where I think his account might go from here in terms of cashing out the "how" of defensive inhibition.

Freud's metaphor of the censor of dreams is evaluated and demonstrated to be problematic. Boag then puts forward an alternative (Freudian) account of repression based on motivational, interdrive conflict and consonant with the neuroscientific evidence espoused by Solms. Boag says, "Here the mind is pictured as an economy of competing motives attempting to find equilibrium." It might be best to say: motives continuing to operate until the outcome of some consummatory responses turns them off (or down). This entails a more deterministic stance, portraying equilibrium as a de facto endpoint rather than a goal.

The centrality of defense

Those for and against psychoanalysis have queried the centrality to dreams of the disguise/distortion born of repression (Solms & Turnbull, 2002, p. 215) and Hobson (1999). Yet without motivated distortion, dreams would be the royal road to primary process or brain noise rather than to dynamically unconscious processes (as Freud believed them to be). The concept of motivated not-knowing is central to psychoanalysis, as Hobson suggests. Boag calls it a "supposed centrality", yet he shows that Freud has no doubt as to the centrality of censorship, noting that "it deserves to be recognized as the watchman of our mental health" (Freud, 1900, p. 567). Hobson's claim has teeth. If there is "not the faintest modicum of support for the notion of a psychic censor" (Hobson, 1999, p. 157), "then Freudian dream theory as a whole can be rejected" (Boag). I would say, the whole of Freudian theory.

Fortunately, that is not the terrain of evidence in this paper. Boag turns many apparent criticisms to psychoanalytic advantage.

Boag notes that "Freud appears to hold two contrary pictures of mind, one explicable in terms of mechanistic operations, the other in terms of agency and 'persons'." Yet it is unclear to me whether Freud, at a metapsychological level, ever truly wished to characterize these processes in terms of agencies and persons. Freud is quite careful, even in the *Introductory Lectures,* which were aimed at a wider audience, to make clear that in using the term "censor" he is not invoking a homunculus, "a severe little manikin," nor does he wish us to reduce censor to brain center ("do not think of a brain centre", p. 140; quoted by Boag), noting that it is "nothing more than a serviceable term for describing a dynamic relation."[3]

As Boag shows, there has been inconsistency as to what is meant by the censor. He does not cite Freud so much as later commentators. Not everyone interested in psychoanalysis is a "dual-aspect monist" whereby every neuropsychological event is simultaneously a mental event (Solms & Turnbull, 2002, p. 197). So it is left to Boag to assemble not only the picture of what functions a censor or the process of censorship must achieve, but also to adumbrate what philosophical commitments fall out from the various positions taken up within the literature. He assembles from the literature the following picture of the characteristics of the censor.

The censor entails:

- An examining function that cognizes and evaluates other mental processes.
- A censorship that acts with varying intensity, that is separate from the ego, and is not only a cognizing subject, but one that is *deliberate* and *strategic* (emphasis in Boag's original).
- Deliberately changing the appearances of the target into an acceptable form, independent of the ego's reasoning.

[2] Cashing out is a metaphor popular in the contemporary philosophical jargon for offering nonmetaphorical conceptual or neuropsychological underpinnings and bodily mechanisms for a phenomenon or process.

[3] It is significant that Freud here is using the notion of unconscious in terms of an epistemic relation, rather than his more problematic notion of the system unconscious, but that is a problem to which we return shortly.

- A sophisticated *rational* agency "having beliefs and desires and exercising rational capacities" that knows appropriate strategies for censoring and distorting repressed material in such a way as to make the offensive material appear innocuous to the conscious system.

He notes that despite disparate commitments in the literature there is the common assumption made of "at least one cognizing, intentional agency screening mental content before allowing it to become known by the ego".

The attributes required of a censor lead to the following scheme emerging:

- A wish is known by the censor prior to becoming part of the ego. I had some difficulty here in that Boag says "i.e. while it is technically unconscious." My understanding is that being part of the ego and being conscious are not coterminous, as there are unconscious parts of the ego. This is something Boag does note later on, and to which I will return.
- The agency must have its own beliefs about what is or is not permissible.
- If not permissible, it must be able to inhibit or disguise the wish.
- It must have free access to all sections of the mind, never sleep, and be capable of manipulating cognitive content (via limitations and omissions, interpolations and additions).

Voilá!—an undesirable theoretical endpoint—a superior, transcendental omnipotent agency.

Agents, mechanisms, systems, relations

I am with Maze and Henry (1996), who suggest that "we cannot believe in such knowing little men as the censor." It is especially uncongenial to posit omniscient, omnipotent tyrants in the psyche.

Part of the difficulty of such accounts is that they use intentional language for mechanisms that operate at a subpersonal level, whether these are cashed out neuropsychologically or not. The structures of Freud's theory lend themselves to becoming little "persons" in colloquial use. Furthermore, it is difficult to keep clear the relation of Freud's structural account, in terms of ego, id, and superego, to his topographical account regarding conscious or unconscious processes. These do not map clearly with parts of the ego and the superego being unconscious.

In acknowledging the persons–mechanisms difficulty that Boag alleges Freud gets himself into at times with regard to the notion of the censor, Boag does not separate out the difficulties that arise from the systemic vs. relational issues regarding the nature of unconscious processes. Petocz (1999) has argued that we can profitably, theoretically, dispense with the notion of a system unconscious and retain a single epistemic conception of unconscious processes, though, as she acknowledges, that would entail a thorough reworking of the concept of repression. It is this problematic issue that resurfaces in Boag's appropriate critique of Jones, who, like Freud, does not consistently grasp the philosophical and scientific implications of the two conceptions of unconscious. The epistemic, relational view is an "approach to unconscious mentality . . . consistent with the view of mentality (conscious or unconscious) which regards mental processes (knowing, believing, perceiving, remembering, etc.) as *relations* between a cognizing subject and a state of affairs cognized" (Petocz, 1999, p. 162). In this sense, "unconscious" refers to a dynamic relation as opposed to a systemic "place" for thoughts and impulses (McIlwain, 2001). Adopting Petocz's view dispenses with the problem of spatial metaphors: the unconscious as a place for ideas as things.

Jones does invoke "mental compartments" (1949, p. 28) and an agency as well, noting that there is "a selective agency," and Boag rightly asks: if it is not a specific entity, how are we to understand this notion? Rather than risk an empty telos by failing to characterize the censor over and above the "functions it is said to perform," Boag suggests that a possible solution is to seek underpinnings. While it would be advantageous to retain as part of the metapsychology of psychoanalysis those features for which we have corroborating scientific evidence, I am not sure that underpinnings entirely solve the problem here. However, before we address what might be the problem, let us look at the difficulties Boag countenances in cashing out the censorship in dreams. By way of clarifying the metaphorical nature of the censor, which Boag suggests is "without clear indication of what the metaphor exactly refers to", he asks two questions: what are the characteristics of the censor, and how does such a censor originate?

Boag says that such agencies cannot be present at birth, so positing that a particular brain mechanism has its problems. But, of course, for something to have biological underpinnings does not entail innate status. Nor does it entail the unchanging function of a single localized brain center. Many mature functions entail

a distributed circuit implicating different brain locations (see the work of Panksepp and of Blair: Blair, 2001, 2003; Panksepp, 1998, 2000), synaptically potentiated through experience during critical periods, or through learning, identification, attachment (Kandel, 1999; Saltaris, 2002), signature patterns of experiencing emotions, and signature ways of attending to (or away from) world/self/other that certain affects and attachment patterns render differentially more likely (see Lambie & Marcel, 2002).

Furthermore, the same difficulty about brain mechanisms being present from the start but not being from the start sufficient to underpin a *developed* psychological function remains when Boag turns to Freud's alternative account of mental conflict and instinctual drives. It is likely that drives are present at birth, but, as Boag notes, they are highly plastic and modifiable (Freud, 1915), affected by information concerning sources of gratification and frustrations, and highly shaped by affective consequences once behavior is initiated (e.g., shame, disgust, and guilt can act as mental dams that diminish desires: Freud, 1908). This is what Mackay (1996) notes when he suggests that wishes can have negative variants "such as a desire for something *not* to occur, the latter translated into fear and hate of the object" (Boag, emphasis in the original).

It is the modifiability of the drives on the basis of cognitions, emotional sanctions, and the setting of one drive against another that forms a part of Boag's positive account. He must realize that the underpinning would be changing as a result of this. For something to be innate or biologically underpinned does not entail immodifiabilty (McIlwain, in press), because as Boag knows, the relation between drives, objects, and aims means that they are not "blind bodily forces" but psychobiological systems—psychic representatives of somatic forces. They are defined somatically (neural brain structures using sensory and motor mechanisms) but are able to engage in cognition. His positive account of how we may cash out the notions of censorship in terms of mechanisms rather than persons and agents entails, following Maze (1983), a resumption of Freud's early position of maintaining a distinction between the ego instincts (which serve the survival of the individual) and the sexual instincts (which serve the survival of the species, with the byproduct of a certain pleasure for the individual). According to Boag, "repression involves a conflict between motivational systems and not between an impulse and a superior, transcendental censor." The protagonists are qualitatively similar, just differing motivational systems. Boag invokes socialization as an account of how the different systems arise, noting that our social context socializes us to avoid the direct expression of certain drives—namely, those that have been associated with punishment or threaten loss of love while allowing others to dominate. Impulses that are punished become associated with danger. We attempt to flee. Boag says: "As a result of this attempt at flight, the threatening mental content is incapable of becoming known or reflected upon (i.e., incapable of becoming the object of a second mental act)." This account leaves some questions unanswered: why, how? This states an outcome, but does not give insight into the process. He suggests this also prevents acting upon the desire, "a motor fettering of the impulse," but he leaves somewhere out of the picture the important issue of how this deals with the associated affect—affect that we have to know in advance would be triggered.

The core problem of censorship seems to be the issue raised by the notion of "side cathexis" in Freud's project. Colloquially characterized, it is as follows: if the very next neuron to fire is going to be a threatening one, the neural firing should sidetrack onto an adjacent neuron. This is a notion Boag correctly sees as highly problematic. It is the nub of Sartre's critique of Freud: how does one know in order not to know?

Boag's use of Hobson, Stickgold, and Pace-Schott's (1998), comment that certain dream plots "all satisfy the driving emotion, anxiety . . ." (p. R3) is interesting to introduce at this point. Anxiety is seen by psychoanalysis as a byproduct of motivational conflict, as an end-result of repression, and at times as a signal for repression. Anxiety may be a causal factor in the cognitive inhibition produced by defense missing from Boag's account, though implicit in it. Affective inhibition promotes the displacement of interest along associative chains until the drive stands in relation to an imagined state of affairs that comes in sufficiently below the anxiety bar set by morality (of which more later). This is a form of associative defense—a notion that is particularly crucial to any form of censorship. Anxiety and affective inhibition may also be the key perhaps to getting round one of the central difficulties in the concept of "a censor." But how?

Signal anxiety in solving the "knowing in order not to know" problem

Freud calls the signal triggering a motivated lack of awareness "signal anxiety." As Kandel (1999) notes, Pavlov found "that defensive conditioning provides a particularly good experimental model of signal anxiety, a form of learned fear that can be advantageous" (p. 512), that is responding to stimuli that "*signal* the approach" of stimuli that may bring harm.

Anxiety may play a causal role in preventing the sustained mentalization of a knowing relationship of an impulse or wishful urge to a state of affairs in the world. So in other words, it is not that I have to know in advance to prevent myself from knowing something. I do know it briefly, but anxiety disrupts that process, and the knowing does not become conscious—that is, the knowing relation does not become an object of a second act of knowing. Anxiety may also wipe out the momentary awareness that one drive has of the current operation of another drive. As Solms and Turnbull (2002) suggest, emotion can be like a sensory awareness of the internal milieu. Emotion may arise in part as a function of the operation of drives. In repression, the repression itself may be unconscious in two stages: (1) Anxiety disrupts my knowing what I want. (2) Anxiety disrupts my awareness of the process responsible for my not-knowing what I want. Hence Freud's notion that even the operation of repression is itself unconscious (which Boag has characterized as being a censorship that "acts with varying intensity," that is "separate from the ego", and is a "cognizing subject"). So far so good. The causal outcome is of a process being cognitively inhibited and/or not acted upon due to the disruptive role of anxiety on thought, and (say) the amygdaloid freezing effect of fear (to a stimulus or the thought of an action). So Boag goes on to say that, rather than its being an active censor deliberately disguising and distorting dream content, the present account explains it in terms of an inhibition of aims and substitute satisfactions. Direct routes to satisfaction of primary aims of drives are blocked due to punishment; thus they may be "repressed out of anxiety": "demands are compelled to enter on new paths leading to substitutive satisfactions" (Freud, 1940, p. 201). Even more remote expressions of the wish might develop (what is being described is, in a sense, sublimation).

Evaluative moral beliefs: a procedural basis of moral development

Boag puts forward a model of censorship based on interdrive conflict, yes, but it is likely that what brings drives into conflict is morality. It is not entirely a contingent conflict of the sort that one cannot eat and have sex at the same time, at least not with the same virtuosity! As Boag notes: the protagonists are qualitatively similar, just differing motivational systems. But how well does this capture the features of the censoring agency that, according to Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), involve an authority judging what is or is not permissible? Do we need to find a place in the model for the possibility that anxiety arises because of the beliefs the drives have come to hold, evaluative moral beliefs?[4]

In an adult, the thought of certain actions might evoke moral anxiety and not merely fear. This entails the role of evaluative beliefs and attitudes the adult has been socialized to hold. This is no more mysterious than the power of the superego—but that is mysterious enough. Given that the superego has no drives to shore up its clout in opposing the drives, how do the drives come into conflict? In the early development of morality, procedural memory is likely to be enough. Kandel (1999) cites Marianne Goldberg, who suggests that early moral development is advanced by procedural means, that "people do not generally remember in any conscious way, the circumstances under which they assimilated the moral rules that govern their behaviour" (Kandel, 1999, p. 509). So, initially morality is the habit-like acquisition of fear and distress responses to certain cues from the inner or outer environment (in this regard see the work of James Blair, 2001, 2003). This is certainly consonant with Freud's (1915) notion of the vicissitudes of the drives and with the role he accorded to affects as mental dams that prevented certain thoughts (Freud, 1908), prior to the development of the superego. Thus the modification of the manner of expression of drives due to affects may cash out those aspects of the censor seen by some as a precursor of the superego. Declarative memory can come later, and while many of our moral convictions may remain part of what Bollas (1989) terms the "unthought known," they may become more elaborate and decontextualized due to more complex processes like identification.

Self-observation

Perhaps the only thing I cannot quite work into Boag's account is the function of *self*-observation. Recall that Freud said of the superego that "conscience is one of its functions, and that self-observation, which is an essential preliminary to the judging activity of conscience, is another of them" (Freud, 1933, p. 60). My reading makes it apparent that there is some meta-level invoked in censorship, as Freud refers to it as a "self-observing agency . . . from which proceed the repressions of inadmissible wishful impulses." Can a drive be self-observing, or can it merely become able to be aware of the operation of another drive or affect?

[4] See Maze (1971) for a wonderful exploration of the nature of evaluative moral beliefs in his paper "The Concept of Attitude."

Dynamic factors also contribute to the content of dreams

Boag has taken the stance that the question is empirical as to whether repressive inhibition contributes to dream bizarreness, and he goes on to consider what neuroscience has to offer.

Dynamic factors may, as Hobson suggests, be unnecessary for dream distortion. As Freud noted, there were dreams that were merely day residues. However, it is impossible to imagine a dream where dynamic factors were at play that is entirely without distortion. So dynamic factors can be sufficient, without being the full story of what contributes to distortion in any given dream. Boag puts forward a very modest account: "if motivational conflict does shape the dream, in any part, then there is a tentative basis for the Freudian account". He concludes: the evidence is "clearly in the expected direction for a neuropsychodynamic model of dreams."

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