

Psychoanalysis and the Philosophical Turn

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In this review essay, I examine Robin S. Brown's (2017) recent book on his critique of contemporary psychoanalytic theory, subjectivity, dualism, and his return to philosophy and religion as viable alternatives the field of psychoanalysis should entertain. I particularly address the role of binaries, dialectics, and his advocacy for a participatory metaphysics based in spiritual, transpersonal, and Jungian principles.

Keywords: Philosophy, participatory metaphysics, transpersonal, Jung

Psychoanalysis is internally divided: Declared a science, hermeneutics, a theory of mind and culture, a clinical treatment, a general method of observation regarding human phenomena, even a *Weltanschauung*, we can neither find agreement nor consensus. Here we may observe a fundamental split in its identity. In its insistence on being viewed as a science, it has embraced naturalism, rationalism, and empiricism, while other proponents champion psychoanalysis as a psychological theory of subjectivity and human dynamics, which in turn inform clinical method and cultural critique. As apologists are busy attempting to lend scientific credibility to the discipline—from empirical research in attachment to neuroscience, traditionalists maintain their narrow focus (and subsequent insularity) by staying devout to their own school's self-entrenchment opposed to rival disillusioned perspectives that threaten them (Govrin, 2016). In this way, group loyalty quells dissent and internal critique by “preaching to the choir,” of which there are many congregations. Yet there are independent thinkers within contemporary times that have stimulated a renewal of intellectual energies by turning to philosophy, a trend that is likely to spark an appreciation for novel concepts typically not addressed by psychoanalysis, albeit ones based on a return to past ideas.

In his book, *Psychoanalysis Beyond the End of Metaphysics*, Robin Brown (2017) revisits the puissance of philosophy as a way of reinvigorating our thinking not only about old debates, but as a creative reopening of some of the most important issues dear to the human condition. Whether we interpret “the end of metaphysics” to refer to the displacement of philosophy by the rise of modern science, the epistemological and linguistic movements of modernity and postmodernity, or the historical recapitulation of fundamental ontology, that is, a return to the presencing and question of Being, there can be no meaningful discussion without accepting the premise of existence and our role in it. “But then what does it mean, ‘the end of metaphysics’? It means the historical moment in which *the essential possibilities* of metaphysics are exhausted” (Heidegger, 1961/1982, p. 148). Brown wants to situate psychoanalysis “beyond” this limit by reconsidering first principles.

What does this amount to for psychoanalysis? Brown covers a lot of ground—from a critique of relationality, constructivism, and pluralism to a defense of individuality, clinical ethics, spirituality, transpersonal psychology, and archetypal theory. He condenses many thinkers in Western philosophy and theology and engages Continental strands of thought, particularly studies in subjectivity, as well as brings them into dialogue with contemporary perspectives in psychoanalysis and postmodernism. The book is a very dense read punctuated by eccentric critique, and those with no knowledge of or exposure to formal philosophy will likely be clueless. Also, one has to be very patient in anticipating and seeing the interconnected threads of so many disparate topics that without a broad exposure to the humanities the reader will likely be lost. But if you are looking for a vast introduction to many celebrated issues in the history of ideas, this book is for you.

While impressive in content and scope, this is both its appeal and its limitation. Although the topics Brown covers are interesting in themselves, the book meanders all over the place, citing different authors from different traditions and disciplines, and at times is tangential, lacking organization and clearly laid-out theses. Instead, you have to wait for them, if they do come at all, or they are presupposed or merely stated without showing how conclusions are supported or derived from premises. And yet in other places, arguments are made too quickly without sufficiently preparing the conceptual ground. This is inevitable when one loosely blends authors and topics. This not only extends to quibbles over interpretations of key philosophers in ancient, scholastic, modern, and German Idealist traditions, it is further compounded when Brown does not engage original texts. A problem always arises when one does not engage original texts and relies instead on secondary literature to inform us how to interpret a text, because we do not see what a theorist actually wrote. As a result, Brown does not stay faithful to any philosophical tradition, but rather borrows from whomever he wants to buttress particular positions he is advocating for. This leaves the distinct impression that he covers far too much ground in too little space without sufficient detail to do justice to all the topics. Although the reader may be dazzled by his erudition, the far range of topics, and diversity of thinkers, it becomes difficult to distill the overall nature of his project. On one hand, it is a book of various minicritiques, while on the other it is a wandering free association on issues close to the author's heart.

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What does stand out as more original is what he refers to as “participatory metaphysics,” a notion I examine shortly.

On Binaries

In his critique of ideas, Brown revives an age-old dispute—the material–immaterial debate in metaphysics. This is intimately related to his overall goal of preserving the existential priorities of selfhood, freedom, and agency on the one hand, and the theological presuppositions of religion, positing a transcendental soul, and more cryptically, God, on the other. He eventually anchors these notions in the work of Carl Jung, but before doing so, he introduces a series of false binaries and classifications between physicality–incorporeality, mind–body, subject–object, self–other, and so forth, while privileging lived experience (interiority) and subjectivity over objectivity, which he equates with naturalism, scientism, positivism, and empiricism. In other words, he wants to pit science against phenomenology rather than seeing how the two are operative within any metaphysical system. One is baited into thinking that if materialism is true, then all there is are physics, biology, and the concrete materiality of culture, while immateriality allows for lived experience, transcendence, soul, spirituality, and ethical participation with divinity, the cosmos, or God, which science cannot accomplish. If “positivism” is true (which is not necessarily a “dirty word,” as it optimistically signifies the positive valences and consequences that scientific advances can afford, such as medicine and technology), then everything devolves into a crass physical reductionism dictated by the propaganda of so-called “objective science.” Although we have good reasons to question such dogmatic assumptions and ideologies (see Mills, 2015), let alone any reductive corollaries, it is not necessary to philosophically negate one category for the other when both are mutually tacit in any discourse on the purported binary to begin with.

Why do we need to negate the physicality of nature or the material–energetic stratification of the universe in order to have selfhood, spirit, freedom, agency, transcendence—whatever that means—in order to privilege the phenomenology of lived experience? We do not. Phenomenology and ontology may be perfectly compatible within an explanatory (participatory) framework that displaces the rigid subject–object divide that the German Idealists did their best to conceptually collapse. Brown favors subjectivity over objectivity, questioning whether we can ever really know the latter; but when we posit an object world, it is always laced with subjectivity. Fair enough. We cannot conceive of or mentally apprehend anything without cognitive mediation. But who really believes there is no such thing as objective reality? If you got hit in the head with a hammer, objective reality announces its presence whether you like it or not. And what do we mean by immateriality? Is there really such a thing, other than the domain of ideas and values, which must transpire within an organic conduit (such as a brainstem) in order to exist and appear? Even dark matter/dark energy—the invisible Higgs field, must manifest in order to be actual. Is the materialism–immaterialism debate not a false dilemma, a deposit of antiquity? Even Descartes (1641/1984) knew that mind and body could not exist independent of each other, and he specifically told us so (see pp. 11, 54–56, 59) despite the unscholarly, freshman textbook rhetoric that characterizes Descartes’ project. And given that our psyches are enmattered, namely, consciousness cannot exist without a body, does it make

any sense to perpetuate this dichotomous way of thinking when it leads into untenable assumptions about the immateriality of the soul (Hume, 1755/1985),¹ often grounded in a naïve supernaturalism? Here we may sense the universal anxiety of our impending death clamoring for an afterlife, immortality, and salvation from a divine providence.

I believe this is precisely what Brown (2017) is after when he says “the claim that consciousness is entirely dependent on the activity of the brain is itself an unproven assumption,” and goes on to draw on Stanislav Grof to support the notion that brain-consciousness necessity is “not a proven scientific fact” (p. 29). Consciousness may not be “entirely dependent” on our brain, but it is most certainly and unequivocally reliant upon our organic foundations to allow for consciousness to emerge in the first place. Although it is a mereological fallacy to reduce the summation of psychic experience to material substrates, what Whitehead (1925) referred to as the fallacy of simple location or misplaced concreteness, we do not need to negate our biological facticity to champion the primacy of consciousness. Relying on Grof for credibility is not exactly helpful given he has gone on record for claiming to be a Medieval monk in a previously lifetime. What Brown is ostensibly offended by, and I agree with him here, is the unreflective, simplistic, unsophisticated, and parsimonious reductive view of the positivist project, which I applaud. But let us not too swiftly jettison our given corporeality as biological thrownness. Here Brown is willing to deny our ontological dependence on our embodiment for his preferred transpersonal view of consciousness, something he reclaims later in Jung as a salve for spirituality. Here we can discern some emotional prejudices in his thinking, for you can have spirituality based on naturalized principles without appealing to divinity or a transpersonal metaphysics.

Subjectivity

One of the strongest sections of Brown’s book is his discussion of subjectivity. He challenges the relational predominance on relationship by revisiting the notion of individuality and the intrapsychic primacy of interiority as lived phenomenal experience. Not only is this ontologically prioritized, he further emphasizes the traditional clinical position of staying focused on the patient’s subjective experience in the consulting room rather than on the reciprocal dyad and, as such, underscores the value of acknowledging difference, alterity, and living more creatively rather than pursuing the myopic goal of symptom relief. Of course, this is arguably nothing new, having already a stronghold in past psychoanalytic ideas, but the message is worth repeating as we are perennially challenged by the question of what constitutes therapeutic action: Staying focused on the uniqueness and peculiarity of the patient in the treatment milieu ensures that no two people are the same, nor can a relationship ever be based on the same universal principles.

Unfortunately, either/or positions are continually reintroduced with Brown’s antimaterialism and tirade against objective ontol-

¹ Also see David Hume’s (1739–1740) *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Book 1, Section V, “Of the Immateriality of the Soul,”), where he concludes that any argument in support of the soul as immaterial substance “is absolutely unintelligible” (p. 298), as is the case for the immortality of the soul (p. 299).

ogy, which appears over again as a theoretical bias for transpersonal and religious approaches to experience. His discussion of one-person versus two-person models further problematize the issue, as it reintroduces a false dichotomy, and further perpetuates a mythology that classical theory is reductionistic and solipsistic when it is not (Mills, 2012). The complex notion of subjectivity and the self is beyond the scope of this review; however, we neither have to accept the premise that the self is a totality, a unity, or is unified, nor that subjectivity trumps objectivity, or that they are really at odds with one another, when process conditions all matters of becoming. I have argued elsewhere that the psyche or mind is conditioned on a presubjective unconscious agentic ground that arises from within its own desirous-sentient-affective-telic matrix as a prereflective unconscious self-consciousness and proceeds developmentally to take its own self as its first object of experience, only to differentiate, modify, and refine its internal organizations through its breach into consciousness, hence forming the dialectical polarities of subject and object (Mills, 2010). Following Hegel, the soul emerges from the materiality of nature, hence its embodiment, and effects its transition into consciousness and into the objective parameters of the physical and social world as subjectivity is subsumed in higher tiers of being (Mills, 2002). Here subjectivity and objectivity are preserved yet sublated (*Aufhebung*), hence elevated, within higher modes in the coming into being of self-consciousness, neither of which need negating.

Participatory Metaphysics

This leads me to engage the main thesis that populates Brown's book, namely, advocacy for a "participatory" metaphysics. What does he mean by this? There are many imported implications by using this term, for do not we all participate in and of the world, not to mention inhabit many psychic worlds? When Brown (2017) introduces participation theory he begins with a false binary between the "Continental tradition," a broad sweep at best, which "disavow[s] the objective standpoint," which is a false generalization presumably made in reaction to the ochlocracy of science. "The participatory perspective proposes that our experience should not be considered reflective of a reified positivist conception of truth, but nor should it be treated as merely phenomenal. Instead, objective nature is thought to be actualized through subjective cognition" (p. 14). But of course it is. What else could it be? We may only apprehend and experience anything through our psychic faculties. Here he is mixing traditional metaphysics with cognition and phenomenal events, which confounds all schools at once, as there are different ways of explaining participation. Despite the distractive reference to "positivism" and "truth," as though anyone can agree upon what these terms ultimately signify, the notion that reality of the external world is actualized through subjectivity and cognition is a thoroughly Idealist proposition. Brown supports this view by further stating that "[i]n a participatory frame of reference . . . the subjective is effectively posited as an active principle animating the domain of objectivity" (p. 14). This is Hegelianism at its finest, where subjectivity is sublated into objective *Geist* yet remains the animating force behind all that is (see Hegel, 1817–1827–1830/1971).

By adopting this position, Brown commits himself, I suggest, to a form of idealism that engenders realism, hence accepting the notion of an objective realm of the universe that exists independent

of human existence, but may only be apprehended and comprehended by subjective minds. The most celebrated Modern thinkers, German Idealists, and philosophers of the Will were preoccupied with the relationship and unity of mind, nature, science, religion, ethics, and aesthetics ultimately culminating in Hegel's system. This led Derrida (1982) to say that "Hegelianism represents the fulfillment of metaphysics, its end and accomplishment" (p. 73). But the notion of participation has a far earlier meaning in the history of theology and ancient metaphysics.

The notion of participation is vogue in Thomism and biblical exegesis. Mathew Levering (2008) plainly tells us that our "understanding of reality" is "an ongoing participation in God's active providence, both metaphysically and Christologically–pneumatologically" (p. 1). Jacob Sherman (2008) also nicely summarized this position:

The metaphysics of participation envisions a radically relational world without sacrificing difference and distance. It seeks to reconcile the integrity of the Many with the allurements and reality of the One. Thomistic philosophy discovers that participatory relationships are analogically present in the veiled-unveiling of all creatures one to another, and of God to all things. (p. 92)

Although St. Thomas Aquinas inherited neo-Platonism, which he amended with the Medieval discovery of Aristotle's texts, Plato is ultimately invoked, which Brown (2017) elucidates:

humans are conceived to participate in the nature of the eternal Forms. Thus the Platonic Forms are posited in distinction from a natural world in which they are at the same time immediately implicated . . . participation in this light is inclusive of the question of Platonic essence, but also goes further to embrace the notion of existence as an ongoing act of creation gifted by God. (p. 15)

Here Brown is very clear that he is relying on Thomist philosophy that ultimately grounds human existence and experience in our ontological dependence on God (see Aquinas, 1256–1272/1947) conditioned on the metaphysical dualism introduced by Plato. Given that ontological dualism has been thoroughly discredited for insisting on material and immaterial distinctions, and that Aristotle (see *Metaphysics*, Aristotle, 1984a, 990b17ff and *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle, 1984b, 178b37ff) had interrogated any tenable arguments for the existence of Idealized Forms long before that as a cogent refutation of separate worlds based on the incompatibility of different essences populating yet intermingling with such worlds, we are left with having to decide whether we can identify with and defend these philosophical systems.

As Brown reveals his commitment to religion and transpersonal psychology, which opens up a space for the spiritual that other positions, he insinuates, presumably foreclose, we now know where he is coming from. But all one has to do is reject the very ontological premises and logical propositions Brown wants us to adopt at face value in order to question the viability of his take on a participatory metaphysics. If one does not believe in God or Eternal Forms, then his position is seriously attenuated, because his philosophy rests on begging the question by asking us to accept the very thing that he has the burden to prove, which is not self-evident by any means or stretch of the imagination, not to mention that spirituality can be founded upon secular principles grounded in naturalized psychology (see Mills, 2017). His adoption of ontological dualism and rejection of essentialism at the

same time, with qualifications, also keeps the subject–object split very much alive.

It is easy to appreciate, and admire, that Brown is a spiritual man and that he is searching for the ultimate answers including a relational principle, synthetic integration, harmonization, and perhaps even unity between the personal, the collective, and the cosmos. And he tells us so when he says that

a participatory outlook seeks to radically reimagine the relationship between subject and object, thus reflecting something of the traditional belief in a correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm as expressed in such disparate traditions as Christianity, Buddhism, Vedanta, Taoism, Platonism, Kabbalah, and Hermeticism. (p. 14)

I will not attempt to summarize how these various religious, theosophic, and mystical traditions are conjoined in common participation, but if they rely on and are grounded in a macroanthropos, then this position inevitably rests on providing a justification for the belief in God. And if God is ultimately separate from the material world, which it supposedly created, then we have a reinstatement of ontological dualism that maintains the bifurcation between the natural and the supernatural, a thesis that even some theologians cannot buy. There are many nuanced distinctions in these competing traditions, some based on a divinity principle, some in theology and mysticism, and others as a life philosophy. Although Brown does not explicitly reveal his warranted theological beliefs, I believe it is fair to infer that he is chasing after God, even if metaphysics becomes a replacement for religion.

How does Brown attempt to resolve the subject–object conundrum? He turns to Jung. I agree with Brown that Jung has been unjustly marginalized by classical psychoanalysis, and that the field would do well to embrace many of his ideas. Having said this, Jung's entire metaphysics rests on the doctrine of archetypes. Given that Jung was entirely inconsistent in his writings on the archetypes, which are theoretically presupposed and conditioned on the belief in God (Mills, 2013, 2014a), not to mention the fact that the Jungian community cannot even agree upon what constitutes an archetype, Brown seeks to convince us otherwise. Here is where his critique stops. Brown's subtitle of his book, *Thinking Towards the Post-Relational*, is not about a *beyond*, rather it is a *return*. Depth psychology becomes the bridge between the unique subjective experiences that transpire within our personal psychologies, including the need for the spiritual, and our individuality that participates of the collective. Whether one buys into a collective unconscious is another matter, one that could be arguably identified with a cosmic process, emanationism, or supervenience from a deity (Mills, 2014b). I will not entertain such speculations here, but Brown (2017) adopts the Jungian notion of a "transpersonal core of unrealized meaning. This archetypal kernel transcends the empirical person, yet is expressed through the structure of the personality—that is, the personal history of the individual offers the substance by means of which spirit shapes consciousness" (p. 78). We are not offered a definition of the transpersonal, transcendence, or spirit, but anything that transcends the empirical person is suggestive of supernaturalism, and hence is seriously dubious at best, if not entirely untenable. Here the reader is asked to accept the Jungian corpus in toto without continuing in Brown's previous pattern of critique. In all fairness to Brown, he appears content with finding a palatable solution to the questions of spirituality, religion, and God. Of course, this begs the question on what constitutes the spiritual, especially if one views religion as pathological and the belief in God as delusional.

On Dialectics

Like many debates in philosophy before him, Brown perpetuates a long tradition of introducing polarities in metaphysical postulates that often imply rigid oppositions, for example, matter–spirit, nature–God, and so forth. For him, participation becomes the synthetic bridge. What is not discussed, however, is the role of dialectics. What becomes of these binaries when we entertain a dialectical method?

Dialectical instantiations emanate from and inform transmogrifications in ontological structure, which further condition how phenomenal appearances are made manifest and actualized by the individual and collective alike, for any reference to identity and difference, self and otherness, joint opposition, and their coparticipation must be mutually implicative and reciprocally determinative. By focusing on duality and bifurcation as rigid antithesis, where one side holds truth over the other, we may tend to miss the dialectical nature of process that conjoins yet establishes difference within ongoing integrative activity that need not be a unified whole, but rather an unfolding plethora of patterned activity that not only allows for complexity and creativity, but generates increased sophistication in its organizational structure through continual, negotiated interaction with one another. This ultimately rests on a relational principle. Because there are so many metaphysical systems where process dialectics may account for participatory explanations, I hope Brown will develop his thesis on a participatory metaphysics by taking into account the nature of process reality as dialectically situated.

In the end, Brown is looking for theoretical synthesis and a transcendent function, which the perspicacious reader will locate in his identification with a spiritual sensibility, one that preserves the notion of unitive thinking without having to commit to a specific metaphysical system. On a related note, he wants psychoanalysis to have its own place for spirituality and the numinous, and gravitates toward religion and nontraditional, hybrid (e.g., theological, transpersonal, Eastern, mystical) metaphysics. Ultimately, we all have to pick which philosophers appeal to our subjective sensibilities even if neither they, nor we, can justify the premises and arguments that draw us to a particular conclusion. That is why nothing is more intellectually enjoyable, or contentious, than discussing metaphysics, as it in an open indeterminate question.

If the field of psychoanalysis is to evolve, it must expand its scope of reference and be willing to engage in critique. Brown succeeds admirably in advancing this goal and brings much needed attention to how philosophy can be a boon for the discipline.

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