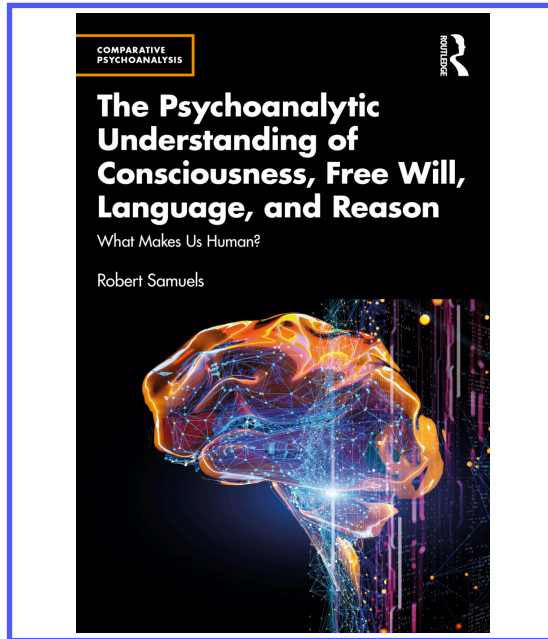




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This book is dedicated to two great humans, Madeleine and Sophia



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Introduction

For thousands of years, thinkers have been trying to define what makes us human. Some of the main questions they have asked is: What is consciousness? Do we have free will? Do animals use language? And what does reason mean?¹ This book argues that philosophers, neuroscientists, and evolutionary psychologists have been unable to answer these questions because they do not understand the psychoanalytic approach to human nature. This lack of comprehension results in false claims and half-truths about what it means to be human, and so I hope this book provides a better sense of our humanity. Moreover, this analysis is not just a purely academic exercise since our ability to protect our climate and pursue human rights is predicated on our clear understanding of what it means to be human.

One might ask why psychoanalysis is given such a privileged place in this vital discussion, and the main reason is that Freud was able to think about these core issues in an open and creative way that avoided traditional definitions of mental functioning. His openness allowed him to document four radical breaks that help define what makes us different from other animals. The first break that he presented was through his theory of consciousness and his realization that thought allows humans to escape from reality as they become immersed in fictional representations of the real world.² In fact, it was by analyzing his own dreams that he first discovered the way we are able to confuse memories and perceptions. He then made the leap to create an equivalence between the dream state, psychosis, animistic cultures, and thought itself.³ For Freud, consciousness cannot be separated from psychosis because as Descartes insists, we never know when we are thinking if we are awake or experiencing a dream.⁴ Not only does this theory of consciousness mean that the mind can transcend matter, but on the level of thought itself, we cannot distinguish between fiction and reality. Thus, one of the things that makes humans unique is our ability to hallucinate a false reality, and therefore we are able to break free from our immersion in the material world.⁵

For philosophers and neuroscientists, one of the key questions is how do we move from the physical materiality of the brain to mental states that go beyond the physical world.⁶ Freud's theory of consciousness answers this

question by showing how our ability to hallucinate and imagine allows us the chance to jump from the material to the psychological. On its most basic level, Freud posits that we spontaneously combine memories with perceptions, and this mixture equates inner thoughts with the perception of external reality.⁷ According to Freud, psychotics, infants, animistic cultures, and dreamers, all experience their thoughts as if they are coming from the outside material world. So if we want to understand what consciousness and perception is, we have to first realize that hallucination is our primary experience of the world.

The second major break that Freud helps to introduce is through his theory of sexuality.⁸ By arguing that human sexuality is not driven by the evolutionary goal of reproduction, Freud helps us to see how humans make a break with nature and biology. Due to the fact that we can replace the objects of our instincts, we are not born pre-wired like other animals. Freud insists that our sexuality is perverse because anything can become sexualized, and people react to sex with both horror and excitement. This theory of sexuality also tells us that since we are not defined by our instincts or biology, we have the possibility of free will. As psychoanalysis insists, our drives are always partial, and so there is a gap in our being that opens the door for human difference and what psychoanalysis calls desire, and since we have free will and desire, we are able to influence our lives in ways that other animals cannot achieve.⁹

Paradoxically, one way to think about human free will is to look at addictions, which show that we can become invested in the pursuit of external objects to such an extent that we can destroy ourselves.¹⁰ As a human drive, an addiction provides an escape not only from biological nature but also from self-interest and social necessity. We are thus free to desire what we want, but our fixation on these arbitrary objects leads us to seek immediate gratification and to avoid all social restrictions. Freud explains these drives through his theory of the pleasure principle, which claims that we are driven to escape tension, conflict, and reality through the immediate access to enjoyment.¹¹ It is therefore misleading to call addictions “diseases” because they are not primarily biological; instead, addictions represent a gap in our instincts, and this gap opens us up to becoming fixated on different objects than other animals.

Besides consciousness and free will, another problem for philosophers and neuroscientists is the question of whether other animals have language.¹² One reason it is so hard for people to answer this question is that they do not understand the contradictory nature of human representation: human language combines being with non-being and the self with the other.¹³ As Hegel argues, I can say “I,” but so can anyone else, and this means that this primary signifier is both universal and singular.¹⁴ In other words, language allows us the ability to escape from the law of non-contradiction as we are able to be both something and its opposite at the same time.¹⁵

Freud first discovered this contradictory nature of human language when he was working with hysterical patients who presented symptoms that did not make biological or logical sense.¹⁶ For instance, a patient would be unable to use her hand, but there was no biological explanation for this disorder; instead, Freud found that the patient was able to convert mental memories into physical signs, but due to the process of repression, the patient had no awareness of this symbolic substitution.¹⁷ In fact, it is the theory of repression that is so hard for many philosophers and neuroscientists to understand because they do not accept that a person can lie to himself or herself.¹⁸ After all, if there is anything we know, it is our own thoughts, but psychoanalysis tells us that we do not know ourselves, and we have the ability to break with biological and mental causality since we can always displace and replace our memories.¹⁹ The psychoanalytic view of memory is dynamic and recursive, which means that we are constantly changing our memories by placing them in a network of other memories, and due to the mental autonomy of human thinking, these memories can be either true or false.²⁰

In his “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” Freud makes another important leap by seeing neurons as a set of symbols connected together in a network of associations.²¹ Memories are then not physical or biological entities; rather, they are signs related to other signs in an emerging system that has no beginning or end or stable presence. Not only does this theory of memory show how we structure our inner experience, but it also reveals how our social relations are also structured through language and symbolic associations.²² While some other primates do have social hierarchies and a primitive form of communication, they do not have symbolic memories and symbolic social systems. It is important to stress that a symbol is something that represents something else, and so it is defined by its contradictory nature.

Just as every word relates to other words, every person is defined by their relation to other people. Identity is therefore based on difference, and people only know themselves by comparing themselves to others.²³ Our social being is then centered on the ability of language to combine opposites and place differences in a network of retained associations. This theory of language is so hard for philosophers and neuroscientists to think because it goes against the law of non-contradiction, and it is founded on the differential nature of symbolic representations.

In addition to this rethinking of free will, consciousness, and language, psychoanalysis also pushes us to ask what is reason? For Freud, a key move was to realize that thought itself allowed people to escape from perceiving reality, and so humans have to learn how to limit their thinking and to accept that not everything can be known. Similar to Kant’s idea that we cannot know the thing-in-itself, but we can understand how we think about reality, Freud developed his theory of the reality principle to explain how we can use reason to approach truth if we first learn how to remove our own

investments in our memories and thoughts.²⁴ Just as Descartes posits that we have to give up all bias and assumptions in order to apply reason in a scientific manner, Freud argues that we need to apply the reality principle by separating our memories from our perceptions of the external world.²⁵ Through a process of dis-investment, we learn how to be disinterested judges of our own experiences. In short, reason is reality testing, which itself requires critical self-analysis and a break with the pleasure principle.

Another aspect of reason is that it must also cut its ties with the subjective dependency on others. For Freud, transference relates to the way that we seek to escape from our own helplessness and freedom by transferring responsibility onto others.²⁶ For Freud, the roots of the transference are derived from the cry of the baby and the response of the care-taker.²⁷ When a baby cries, it is making a demand to the Other for love, recognition, and knowledge, but this demand can never be totally fulfilled.²⁸ Moreover, Freud argues that the demand makes the helpless child dependent on the powerful adult, and therefore all social and linguistic relationships derive their foundation from this initial request for the other to make all suffering and dis-pleasure go away.²⁹

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud posited that at the heart of all religions is a demand (prayer) made to an imaginary Other, and what then allows science to emerge is a giving up of this demand so that one no longer transfers power and responsibility onto others. Freedom and reason are then achieved when we move beyond transference, and we realize that there is no one or nothing that is going to make all of our suffering disappear. In fact, psychoanalysis, as a practice of radical self-honesty, does not eliminate the fundamental conflicts between culture and nature or society and the individual; rather, psychoanalysis is dedicated to freely examining the effects of these unresolvable differences.³⁰ Other approaches cannot accomplish this level of truth because they seek to avoid or resolve the fundamental conflicts shaping human existence.

To further elucidate how psychoanalysis differs from other perspectives, I will begin by looking at the television series *Westworld* to determine why humans are not purely animals or machines. While this show does a good job at asking the question of what makes us human, it ultimately provides the wrong answers because it does not comprehend the psychoanalytic perspective on sexuality, consciousness, language, and reason. However, the program is still helpful since it clarifies some of the stakes involved in determining the difference between humans and machines and the role culture plays in hiding this conflict.

Chapter Three looks at Sam Harris' book *The Moral Landscape* to examine the different ways neuroscience and evolutionary psychology block our ability to understand what makes us human.³¹ In trying to establish a science of morality, Harris ends up producing a repression of psychoanalysis and the establishment of a totalizing form of scientism.³² There are also

profound political implications to this replacement of psychoanalysis with biological determinism.

In Chapter Four, I turn to Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*. We shall see that his reliance on evolutionary psychology and neuro-biology prevents him from seeing how humans are not determined by their instincts.³³ Furthermore, because he fails to recognize the ways human consciousness transcends material reality, he is unable to determine what differentiates humans from animals. This lack of distinction leads him to make the common mistake of comparing human beings to language processing machines. What he then misses is the way that our relationship to others is predicated on an unconscious demand for love, recognition, and knowledge within the structure of transference. Pinker also does not define reason as the separation of memory from perception and what Freud calls the limitations of our own knowledge in the face of an unknowable real.

Chapter Five examines Daniel Dennett's *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* to further explore what people get wrong about the uniqueness of human beings.³⁴ Like Pinker, Dennett turns to evolutionary theory in order to explain how we are shaped by biology, and why we are not very different from other animals. He also combines together computer science and evolutionary psychology to wrongly assert that we are fundamentally information processing machines. By confusing DNA with digital code, Dennett asserts that we are computers pre-programmed through natural selection.

Chapter Six then looks at why so many psychoanalysts tend to misunderstand what makes us human. Through an analysis of Mark Solms' work, I reveal the problem of trying to combine psychoanalysis and neuroscience.³⁵ Since I argue in this book that psychoanalysis offers us the best way to understand what makes us human, it is important to look at the ways people from within the field repress its most radical insights. It will be my argument that there is a common misunderstanding of reason, consciousness, drives, language, transference, and free association, and if we do not clarify these confusions, we will not be able to see how psychoanalysis differs from other approaches in its response to the quest of defining our common humanity.

Chapter Seven examines Jordan Peterson's *12 Rules for Life*, which offers an interesting mix of Jungian philosophy, evolutionary psychology, and Christian theology. Like so many of the writers and theorists discussed in this work, Peterson tends to erase the difference between humans and other animals. This repression of what makes us human is often tied to his return to traditional social hierarchies, prejudices, and stereotypes. For instance, he equates humans to lobsters in order to show how cultural and psychological dominance is based on biological determinism.

The final chapter answers the question of why it is important to know what makes us human. It turns out that the only way we can begin to know ourselves and our world is if we fully comprehend why we are neither

