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# Realism, Self-Deception and the Logical Paradox of Repression

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**Simon Boag**

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

**ABSTRACT.** Historically, repression has been considered a cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory. However, explaining how the ego maintains repression without knowing the repressed appears to create a logical paradox of knowing in order not to know. Maze and Henry's realist analysis of the problem provides an important new direction for framing possible solutions. However, their proposed explanation in terms of 'affective blocking' is found to be limited with respect to explaining important features of repression, such as the clinical phenomenon of resistance. Alternatively, the present thesis proposes that a solution can be provided in terms of strong partitioning and neural inhibition. The resolution of the paradox hinges upon the recognition that repression inhibits knowledge of knowing the repressed. Implications of this position for understanding self-deception are discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** inhibition, logical paradox, psychoanalysis, realism, repression, resistance, self-deception, strong partitioning, unconscious mental processes

Repression has been considered a central concept in psychoanalytic theory from Freud's time to the present day (Freud, 1914/1957f, p. 16; 1925/1959f, p. 30; Slavin & Grief, 1995, p. 140). Generally understood in terms of motivated cognitive distortion, where particular targets are rendered unknowable, repression is either seen as the basis of all psychological defences (Gillett, 1988; Kinston & Cohen, 1988; Slavin & Grief, 1995) or afforded the status of the most basic of defences (Gillett, 1990; Juni, 1997; Kernberg, 1994; Morley, 2000; Ritvo & Solnit, 1995; Willick, 1995). Furthermore, the theory of repression is described as 'the key explanatory theory of psychoanalysis' (J. Cohen, 1985, p. 165) and is believed to form 'the basis for any general theory of psychopathology' (J. Cohen & Kinston, 1983, p. 420). In recent times Erdelyi (1996, 2001, 2006) has reignited interest in the theory of repression,

proposing a 'unified' theory that situates repression squarely within contemporary cognitive psychology, and the notion of 'defensive process' itself is gaining greater currency within mainstream thinking (e.g. Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998; Cramer, 1998, 2000; Sandstrom & Cramer, 2003). For instance, Brewin and Andrews (2000), write that 'it is now widely accepted that efficient mental functioning depends on flexible excitatory and inhibitory mechanisms that select relevant material and exclude unwanted material from entering consciousness' (p. 615). Concurrently, studies of the neural correlates of repression are emerging (e.g. Shevrin, Ghannam, & Libet, 2002), and the contribution of repression within the neuroscientific-dream debate has also received recent attention (Boag, 2006a, 2006b).

However, despite the growing acceptance of unconscious mental processes (Westen, 1999), and even the claim that 'repression' is central to understanding these (Singer, 1990), the concept of repression remains the subject of controversy, particularly given its association with what, at times, appear to be dubious claims concerning 'recovered memories' (see Weiskrantz, 1997). Whilst the connection of repression with 'recovered memories' is somewhat oversimplified (see Boag, 2006c), the controversy does raise the question concerning the coherency of the theory of repression itself, and the point has been made that accounts of repression 'have focused on *why* the inhibition occurs rather than *how* ideas are prevented from becoming episodes of self-reflective awareness' (Horowitz, 1988, p. 7). Here Maze and Henry (1996a, 1996b) draw attention to the problem that repression raises, *knowing in order not to know*, a problem made famous by Sartre (1956) and recognized subsequently by others (e.g. Madison, 1961; Mirvish, 1990; Neu, 1988). However, whilst various solutions and strategies have evolved to address this paradox, Maze and Henry's framing of the problem, and their discussion of possible solutions, is a significant step forward since they provide what can be broadly termed a *realist* analysis, proposing that consciousness or unconsciousness are not *qualities* of mental processes, but rather certain *relations* between a cognizing subject and objects or events (including mental events) cognized (Maze, 1983, 1991; Maze & Henry, 1996a, 1996b). This position, derived from the work of Scottish-born John Anderson, has been discussed in detail elsewhere (see Anderson, 1927/1962a, 1930/1962b; Baker, 1986; Maze, 1983; McMullen, 1996; Michell, 1988). However, recently, Boag (2005, 2006b), Petocz (1999, 2006), Mackay (2006) and McIlwain (2006) have all noted the importance of this realist position for understanding Freudian repression, since the position clarifies both the mind/brain relationship (see Petocz, 2006) and the meaning of 'conscious' and 'unconscious' processes within accounts of repression. Here, for a situation *p* to be conscious is simply for *p* to be *currently known* (such that *S* currently knows *p*), and if *p* is unconscious means simply for *p* not to be currently known; consciousness and unconsciousness are not to be confused with substantives (e.g. 'the unconscious'), since to be 'currently known' (or 'not currently known') is not a quality but a relation entered into. An

important implication here is that in the act of knowing itself (i.e. when  $S$  knows [or wishes, etc.] that  $p$ ), that relation ( $SRp$ ) is itself unconscious and does not become conscious unless it becomes the object of a *second mental act* such that  $S$  knows  $SRp$ . For instance, at a specific time, subject  $S$  becomes aware that  $p$ , and then, at a later time, is prompted to pay attention to the fact that they had become aware that  $p$  (i.e.  $S$  knows that  $S$  knows  $p$ ; cf. Maze & Henry, 1996a). That 'awareness of  $p$ ' is itself now conscious ('currently known'), whereas previously it had been an unconscious mental act, a position recognized by Freud (1900/1953) when he writes that 'we see the process of a thing becoming conscious as a specific psychical act, distinct from and independent of the process of the formation of a presentation or idea' (p. 144). Furthermore, an unconscious process may never become the object of attention, and so may remain unconscious:  $S$  may wish that  $p$  and never be conscious of that wish, if the appropriate causal antecedents fail to occur. Freud (1915–17/1963) is consequently justified in saying that all 'mental processes are in themselves unconscious' (p. 143), and may or may not go on to become conscious: 'Everything conscious has an unconscious preliminary stage: whereas what is unconscious may remain at that stage and nevertheless claim to be regarded as having the full value of a psychical process' (Freud, 1900/1953, pp. 612–613). As will be demonstrated, this has important implications for understanding how repression could operate.

The particular problem with repression, as Maze and Henry (1996a) point out, arises since typically 'wishes' are made unconscious because they provoke anxiety, which requires a subject (the ego) knowing them in the first instance (Freud, 1925/1959f, pp. 29–30; 1926/1959g, p. 135; 1933/1964a, p. 89). If this were the end of the matter, then no problem would arise, but instead, fuelled by somatic sources, the repressed persists (Freud, 1907/1959c, p. 124; 1915/1957h, p. 151; 1926/1959g, p. 157), acquiring substitute aims that may also require repressing. The ego then must continuously guard against intrusions of the repressed. Consequently, repression appears to be an impossible task since it appears to require the repressing subject (the ego) re-knowing the target in order not to know it. The issue is further complicated by the fact that repression and resistance are at times described in terms of operating *to avoid* knowledge of the repressed. For instance, Slap and Saykin (1984) write: 'The ego, having repressed the pathological schema, continues to avoid, in so far as it can, any recognition of its content' (p. 122). However, this raises the question as to how the repressed could be avoided if after repression the repressed is no longer known. To avoid recognizing the repressed suggests an activity already knowing the situations to avoid. Furthermore, it is not simply a matter of avoiding some situation external to the subject since what is avoided in repression is an aspect of the subject's own psyche, and because any individual has numerous desires, only some of which are forbidden, successful repression appears to require 'screening' mental content for suitability before such content becomes known by the ego.

Whilst there have been a number of strategies addressing this, such attempts have encountered several problems. For instance, some authors (e.g. Anspaugh, 1995; Gillett, 1987; Johnson, 1998), following Freud (e.g. 1900/1953, p. 567, 1915–17/1963, p. 295), postulate a censor screening content before consciousness. However, Maze and Henry (1996a) demonstrate that this merely postpones the problem, since the censor would still need to be informed by the ego as to what is and is not forbidden (see also Boag, 2006a; Petocz, 2006). Another prevalent approach explains the maintenance of repression by appeal to the notion of qualitatively different processes: the repressed is unknowable since it is in a form incompatible with conscious knowing (e.g. Bucci, 1997; Gardner, 1993; Martindale, 1975; Matte-Blanco, 1975), a view often claiming that the repressed is non-verbal, whilst consciousness requires language (e.g. Frank, 1969; Frank & Muslin, 1967; Jones, 1993). However, as Petocz (1999) demonstrates, since the characteristics said to be peculiar to one process can always be found in the other, there is no case for positing a dualism between qualitatively distinct processes, and even if this problem was surmountable, such accounts cannot explain how repression operates as a *selective* process, targeting only specific content, since such accounts explain simply a general lack of awareness for a whole class of mental process (e.g. all mental life before the onset of language). Additionally, as Maze and Henry (1996b) further note, if this were the case, then repressions could never be lifted, since the dualism postulated by these accounts would be unbridgeable.

Alternatively, Sullivan's (1956) influential model of *selective inattention*, where threats are filtered out through 'controlling awareness of the events that impinge upon us' (p. 38), is similarly problematic. Such filtering requires a *judgement*, which cannot preclude both awareness and evaluation of target material, and this requires that *all* incoming material be screened to determine whether it is or is not a threat. As Maze (1983) notes: 'We may anticipate certain information as relevant, but we still have to perceive the remainder in order to see that it is irrelevant' (p. 75). Also accounts of 'perceptual defence', where incoming information is 'screened' for threats in order to prevent knowledge of them (e.g. Eriksen, 1951), face similar problems, for, as Erdelyi (1974) notes, 'if perceptual defence is really perceptual, how can the perceiver selectively defend himself against a particular stimulus unless he *first perceives* the stimulus against which he should defend himself?' (p. 3; cf. S. Cohen, 2001; Erdelyi, 1988). That is, to screen against the repressed appears to require knowing the repressed. It could be that *S* knows *x*, and turns away from it, but with *x* constantly re-presented, *x* must be re-known to be subsequently turned away from. Thus, the individual would be continuously plagued by the repressed desires unless some blocking mechanism prevented these from becoming known (Maze & Henry, 1996a).

The recent development of *information-processing* accounts of repression (e.g. Bonanno, 1990; Eagle, 2000; Erdelyi, 1990; Horowitz, 1988) suffer similar difficulties. For instance, Bonanno (1990) writes that 'the initial perception

of any object first involves unconscious processes of registration and interpretation. ... The mechanism of selective inattention ... may operate at this point by prohibiting affect-laden contents from ever reaching conscious awareness' (p. 462). However, whilst, on the realist account, the relationship of knowing the target may be unconscious, 'affect-laden' content still requires a subject evaluating the target as a threat, and this cannot be relegated to unconscious information processing without stipulating a subject term (acting as a censor) independent of the conscious knower. Again, the problem is accounting for repression if the repressed actively persists, and thus '[t]he question remains, how can the knowing entity continually deny the existence of something while continually maintaining a watch against it?' (Maze & Henry, 1996a, p. 1094).

### Repression and Self-deception

The difficulties faced by the concept of repression are not isolated to psychoanalytic theory, but occur with respect to 'self-deception' generally, of which repression is commonly conceived of as a variety (e.g. S. Cohen, 2001; Fingarette, 1969; Johnson, 1998; Lockie, 2003; Nesse, 1990; Neu, 1988; Slavin, 1985, 1990; Slavin & Grief, 1995). Johnson (1998), for example, writes that 'repression' is 'a kind of self-deception in which people hide painful information about themselves from themselves' (p. 300). Freud (1906/1959b) similarly writes:

... I must draw an analogy between the criminal and the hysteric. In both we are concerned with a secret, with something hidden. ... In the case of the criminal it is a secret which he knows and hides from you, whereas in the case of the hysteric it is a secret which he himself does not know either, which is hidden even from himself. (p. 108)

Viewed in this manner, Johnson (1998) notes that this raises the difficult question concerning 'how does a self hide knowledge of itself from itself?' (p. 305). Although accounts of self-deception are diverse (see Mele, 1987), they are typically analysed in terms of the paradox of beliefs, such that *S* believes that *p* but *S* deceives him- or herself that not-*p*. If modelled on *interpersonal* deception, where person *A* deceives person *B* into believing that *p*, when person *A* believes that not-*p*, then the self-deceiver at once believes that *p* is false whilst deceiving him- or herself into believing that *p* is true, which raises the question of how this could be possible:

Paradox seems inevitable if we attempt to understand self-deception on the model of other-deception. Other-deception, as in the ordinary case of lying, requires that the deceiver know the truth while keeping the deceived from knowing it. But in the case of self-deception, the two parties are collapsed into a single person, and the problem arises of how one person can simultaneously

know (as he must, if he is to be a deceiver) and not know (as he must, if he is to be deceived) a single thing. (Neu, 1988, p. 82)

The paradox surrounding repression cannot be dismissed as merely a 'philosophical concern', since if repression is truly a concept of central importance in psychoanalytic theory, as Freud and others maintain, then any challenge to the concept challenges the foundations of psychoanalysis itself, and casts both serious doubt upon attempts to integrate repression into mainstream psychology (e.g. Erdelyi, 2006) and upon questioning the coherency of other defensive processes commonly discussed within the literature, such as 'denial' and 'dissociation' (cf. Maze & Henry, 1996b). On the other hand, if a solution can be found, then a logically coherent platform can be used as a basis for understanding repression specifically, and further help conceptualize other forms of defence and varieties of self-deception.

Furthermore, although volumes have been written on Freud, such writings have not always been rigorous, especially with respect to Freudian repression (see Boag, 2006c), and rather than abandoning Freud's theory and starting elsewhere, there are several reasons justifying focusing on his work. To begin with, nearly all the relevant subsequent work on the concept of repression has been an extension or modification of Freud's original theory, and a 'very minimal version of Freudian theory is accepted by almost all who accept any version of psychoanalytic theory, so ... it is not necessary to talk about different kinds of psychoanalytic theory' (Erwin, 1988, p. 243). Furthermore, as Jonathan Cohen and Warren Kinston write, 'Freud's work remains the most complete, searching and self-critical statement of the theory [of repression] in the literature' (p. 412). This aside, a more general rationale for using Freud's theory is that he provides a broader framework which is committed to realism, empiricism and determinism (see Freud, 1933/1964a, p. 182), and his position has long been recognized as an important conceptual platform for developing a coherent realist theory of mind (e.g. Anderson, 1953/1962c; Maze, 1973, 1983). The present paper first develops the logical problem of repression as presented by Maze and Henry (1996a) and demonstrates that the problem extends to the clinical phenomenon of 'resistance'. Any account of repression must be capable of explaining how repression is maintained, including resistance and secondary repression, as well as accounting for the lifting of repression. Maze and Henry's solution in terms of 'affective blocking' is found to be limited in this respect. The paper then proposes a solution to the paradox in terms of mental partitioning and neural inhibition preventing knowledge of knowing the repressed, before discussing theoretical implications of this analysis.

## Outline and Extension of the Problem

Freud (1915/1957h) once wrote, '*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious*' (p. 147),

and, following his rejection of the seduction theory, the targets of repression became typically wishes and fantasy (as cited in Masson, 1985, p. 239; cf. Boag, 2006c). Repression, however, does not destroy the repressed. Instead it remains causally active and persists in the direction of conscious thinking (Freud, 1900/1953, p. 577; 1919/1955d, p. 260; 1915/1957i, p. 166; 1933/1964a, p. 68; 1939/1964b, p. 95): ‘the unconscious ... has a natural “upward drive” and desires nothing better than to press forward across its settled frontiers into the ego and so to consciousness’ (Freud, 1940/1964c, p. 179; cf. 1920/1955e, p. 19). This follows from the *continuous* character of the physiologically based motivational systems Freud termed *Triebe* or ‘instinctual drives’ (Freud, 1915/1957g). The theoretical importance of such drives for explaining human behaviour deterministically, as well as for providing a biological foundation for psychological conflict, has been gaining greater recognition in recent times (Boag, 2005, 2006b; Maze, 1983, 1993; McIlwain, in press; Petocz, 1999). Furthermore, neurological evidence suggests that such drives are not theoretical fictions (e.g. Bancroft, 1995; Blundell & Hill, 1995; Panksepp, 1999, 2001, 2003). After repression, the endogenous nature of the drives provides a ‘constant’ source of activation to the repressed desires, insofar as the drive remains unsatisfied (Freud, 1915/1957g, pp. 118–119; 1933/1964a, p. 96). Consequently, the repressed remains explicitly intense: ‘The mark of something repressed is precisely that in spite of its intensity it is unable to enter consciousness’ (Freud, 1907/1959a, p. 48). Indeed, due to ‘the damming-up consequent on frustrated satisfaction’, repression creates the conditions for even *greater* than normal intensity (Freud, 1915/1957h, p. 149). Subsequently, the repressed is characterized by ‘insatiability, unyielding rigidity and the lack of ability to adapt to real circumstances’ (Freud, 1910/1957b, p. 133), and portrayed as analogous to a person expelled from a lecture and now clamouring at the doors of consciousness (Freud, 1910/1957a, pp. 26–27).

The picture, then, in Freud’s model is one of continuous, active struggle between repressed wishes and forces actively blocking their access to consciousness:

‘Repressed’ is a dynamic expression, which takes account of the interplay of mental forces: it implies that there is a force present which is seeking to bring about all kinds of psychical effects, including that of becoming conscious, but that there is an opposing force which is able to obstruct some of these psychical effects, once more including that of becoming conscious. (Freud, 1907/1959a, p. 48)

Furthermore, this activity requires persistent effort: ‘The process of repression ... may thus be compared to an unending conflict; fresh psychical efforts are continuously required to counterbalance the forward pressure of the instinct’ (Freud, 1907/1959c, p. 124; cf. 1915/1957h, p. 151; Freud, 1926/1959g, p. 157). In fact, Freud states that this constant activity exhausts the poor ego (Freud, 1910/1957c, p. 146; 1925/1959f, p. 30; 1940/1964c, pp. 172–3), and therapy, in part, aims ‘to save the mental energy which he [the neurotic] is

expending upon internal conflicts' (Freud, 1923/1955f, p. 251). Given this, successful repression involves a psychological stalemate: 'both the prohibition [repression] and the instinct persist: the instinct because it has only been repressed and not abolished, and the prohibition because, if it ceased, the instinct would force its way through into consciousness and into actual operation' (Freud, 1913/1955b, p. 29).

This ongoing, active nature of repression is not restricted to the Freudian account but also features in modern versions of repression and defence. For example, Sandler and Sandler (1997) note that '[repression] is a mechanism *that has continually to be reapplied* as the threatening content arises. ... The relevant content is repressed over and over again as it is pushed forward towards consciousness' (p. 177). Similarly, 'repression is not an all-or-none matter. Once a putatively dangerous content has been repressed, the struggle continues between the content pressing toward consciousness and the defence opposing this pressure' (Gillett, 2001, p. 276). Erdelyi (1990), similarly, writes that 'the typical situation—a recurring internal impulse, a conflict, or thought ... is continually being re-presented endogenously. Here repression requires perpetual psychological investment, both of effort and of ingenuity' (p. 16). Indeed, this dynamic interplay between the repressed and repressing force is indispensable to the Freudian account; the repressed persists with the capacity to cause hysterical symptoms and other forms of psychopathology (Breuer & Freud, 1895/1955, p. 123; Freud, 1894/1962a, p. 49), and with the maturing of Freud's theory the symptoms of the psychoneuroses and phenomena such as dreams are explained in terms of repressed wishes acquiring substitutive aims (e.g. Freud, 1926/1959i, p. 267; 1939/1964b, p. 127; cf. Boag, 2006a). Consequently, the Freudian account requires maintaining the view that unsatisfied drives remain frustrated and unsatiated. Any model attempting to explain Freudian repression must take this into account, and attempts to circumvent this are simply not accounts of repression (although they may be referring to other forms of defence). For example, Bower (1990) proposes that repression is analogous to becoming engrossed in a movie to the exclusion of other stimuli:

[Repression] does not imply a 'continual effort to suppress' thinking about it, as Freud suggested, any more than the fact that I get absorbed in a movie means that I am working hard to avoid doing my income taxes at home. Activities can simply be absorbing in themselves, and doing one activity need not involve 'effortful suppression' of others. (p. 219)

However, repression in Freud's account is not merely ignoring knowledge of unpleasurable 'business' but rather a case of both desiring and not desiring some state of affairs (Freud, 1915/1957h, p. 189). Without reference to conflict, or the upward drive of the repressed, such accounts are simply not accounts of repression and unhelpful in explaining how repression, or other varieties of dynamic defence and self-deception, could operate.

## Secondary Repression and the Perception of Association

The situation is further complicated by Freud's view that after primal repression, derivatives (substitutes) for the primary targets emerge, which in turn may also require repressing (Freud, 1915/1957h, p. 149). Again, Freud (1913/1955b) describes secondary repression (*repression proper*) in terms of activity:

The instinctual desire is constantly shifting in order to escape from the *impasse* and endeavours to find substitutes—substitute objects and substitute acts—in place of the prohibited ones. In consequence of this, the prohibition itself shifts about as well, and extends to any new aims which the forbidden impulse may adopt. Any fresh advance made by the repressed libido is answered by a fresh sharpening of the prohibition. (p. 30)

As a selective process, secondary repression is actively cognitive (though that same activity is not necessarily conscious), and the secondary aims must either be perceived as threatening in their own right, or be perceived to be associated with the primary repressed aim (cf. Maze & Henry, 1996a). In the latter case, explaining secondary repression requires cognition of the repressed in perceiving the association between the repressed and the secondary target. If the ego is the subject inferring this, then it must know the repressed, which is precisely what repression is meant to prevent.

## Resistance and the Active Paradox

This problem with repression is particularly well illustrated by Freud's account of resistance, and since '[r]esistance is undoubtedly not only the most important indicator of repression, but a key idea in ... [Freud's] whole theory' (Madison, 1961, p. 43), providing an adequate account of repression requires accounting for resistance. Resistance takes a variety of forms that have in common interfering with awareness of the repressed. It is described as an active, dynamic process occurring as the repressed approaches conscious recognition:

Resistance is pervasive in every analysis. It varies in form and intensity from patient to patient and in the same patient at different stages in the analysis. ... Resistance may take the form of attitudes, verbalizations and actions that prevent awareness of a perception, idea, memory, feeling, or a complex of such elements that might establish connection with earlier experiences or contribute insight into the nature of unconscious conflicts. (Moore & Fine, 1990, p. 101)

Resistance is neither haphazard, nor unmotivated, but rather selective and discriminative, actively opposing some, though not other, mental contents from becoming conscious. Freud (1912/1958a) describes this metaphorically

in terms of an 'opposing force' preventing material from becoming known: 'Every single association, every act of the person under the treatment must reckon with the resistance and represents a compromise between the forces that are striving towards recovery and the opposing ones' (p. 103; cf. Freud, 1910/1957a, p. 30; 1915–17/1963, p. 293). Accordingly, this active nature appears to be a crucial element in accounts of resistance, and attempting to circumvent this active character simply fails to characterize the case adequately. For example, Schafer (1973) attempts to explain resistance as merely faulty or 'inadequate' observation: '[Resistance] means acting unheedfully, inattentively, unobservantly, or inaccurately, or else remembering an action in one of these "inadequate" modes' (p. 273). This conceptualizes resistance as an accidental form of ignorance or inability rather than a motivated, dynamic activity. However, far from a mere neglectful inattentiveness, Freud (1915–17/1963) describes resistance at times as a '*violent opposition ... against entry into consciousness of the questionable mental process*' (p. 294, italics added). Additionally, Schafer himself acknowledges that his account addresses neither why one person does or does not pay attention in any particular case, nor why some and not other mental contents are ignored. Furthermore, if resistance were merely a matter of accidental ignorance, then therapy could proceed along the lines of simply educating the subject. Freud, however, makes it clear that this is not the case. Without removing the resistances, the subject is not in a position to lift the repression and remove the pathology (Freud, 1919/1955c, p. 159; 1910/1957e, p. 225; 1913/1958b, pp. 141–142; 1937/1964e, p. 257). Consequently, any account of repression must be capable of explaining both resistance and the lifting of repression.

### **The Problem of the Ego**

The major difficulty with all this is that from the beginning to the end of Freud's work resistance is said to proceed from the 'ego' (Breuer & Freud, 1895/1955, pp. 269, 278; Freud, 1940/1964c, pp. 179–180), a point on which he remained unambiguous: 'there can be no question but that this resistance emanates from his ego and belongs to it' (Freud, 1923/1961a, p. 17; cf. Freud, 1926/1959g, pp. 159–160; 1933/1964a, pp. 68–69). Furthermore, resistance has an affective basis involving cognition of the repressed; the fear and anxiety that motivates repression persists, motivating resistance: 'If the ego during the early period has set up a repression out of fear, then the fear still persists and manifests itself as a resistance if the ego approaches the repressed material' (Freud, 1926/1959h, p. 224). However, the ego is said to have no knowledge about the repressed, and simultaneously no consciousness of the fact of resisting (Freud, 1914/1958c, p. 155; 1923/1961a, p. 17; 1933/1964a, p. 108). Indeed, the person is also co-operating with therapy: 'In psychoanalysis the patient assists with his conscious efforts to combat his resistance,

because he expects to gain something from the investigation, namely, his recovery' (Freud, 1906/1959b, p. 112; cf. Freud, 1913/1958b, p. 143). Hence, resistance is an active, selective process, occurring independently of the conscious ego's awareness, and Freud attempts to account for this by proposing that unconscious aspects of the ego are responsible for resistance (Freud, 1923/1961a, p. 17; 1937/1964d, pp. 238–239). That being said, although, on the realist account, resisting behaviour could occur unconsciously, there is still a need to account for the subject knowing the repressed and instituting resistances, and if this subject is the ego, then the ego knows what it is not meant to know.

### Proposed Model of Repression

Although it appears difficult to give an account of an active, on-going repression, it is not logically impossible, but first requires questioning the concept of the 'ego' as a unified knower. Elsewhere Maze (1983) and I (Boag, 2005) argue that it is necessary to postulate 'strong partitioning' or multiple knowers to explain *mental conflict*. As Beres (1995) notes, conflict implies *opposition* (i.e. at least two 'sides'), so 'if the human subject is a truly *unified* agent, then it is difficult to account for conflicting intentions and desires' (Boag, 2005, p. 748). Here Maze (1983, 1987) has developed Freud's (1915/1957g) account of drives, since, given that the drives engage the environment psychologically (i.e. forming wishes and desires), they can be considered *psychobiological* systems (Petocz, 1999, p. 222). It is these drives that engage in cognition in their quest for gratification and avoidance of frustration; after learning that their individual gratification depends upon the caregivers, the drives come to associate the loss of parental affection with the learnt experience of helplessness (Maze, 1983, p. 170), or what Freud calls a 'situation of danger' (Freud, 1926/1959g, pp. 154–155). Such danger provides the motivation to prevent behaviours that lead to a loss of parental affection and punishment (such as aggressive and sexual behaviours), since they threaten to bring helplessness and frustration. Freud's early dichotomy between ego and libidinal instincts (Freud, 1910/1957d) is reflected in the developmental conflict of the Oedipal period, where sexual desires directed towards the protecting objects threaten to bring both satisfaction, on the one hand, and (imagined) retaliatory mutilation, and loss of parental love, on the other. In drive theory terms, an overly simplified account could propose that a sexual drive desires the parent as a love object whilst another drive, say pain avoidance, believes that fulfilling this desire will be frustrating (cf. Boag, 2005; Maze, 1983). These drives are now in conflict and, presuming that fear of bodily damage has 'priority' over sexual gratification, Oedipal sexuality is repressed (cf. Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 90).

Using, then, Freud's Oedipal example (1909/1955a, 1926/1959g, 1924/1961b) as a basic template, repression can be understood by proposing at least three hypothetical drives acting as knowers ( $S_1$ ,  $S_2$ ,  $S_3$ ) involved in the initial repression, the maintenance of repression (including resistance), and the lifting of repression. Drives  $S_1$  (sexuality) and  $S_2$  (pain-avoidance) represent the main drives in conflict, whilst the drive  $S_3$  represents the supposed other drive(s). The young boy's sexual drive forms a 'wish to possess the mother' ( $S_1$  desires that  $p$ ). For whatever reason, this wish becomes known by the drive  $S_2$ , and this drive believes that the wish will lead to some imagined catastrophic consequence (e.g. mutilation). Given the *prima facie* belief in the 'self',  $S_2$  believes the dangerous wish to be one of its own wishes, and since maintaining the parent's protective attitude is believed to require not only refraining from certain behaviours, but also denying that the inclination to commit them even exists, the drive anxiously denies knowledge to itself that it knows of the wish. As Freud (1908/1959e) writes, 'The set of views which are bound up with being "good", but also with a cessation of reflection, become the dominant and conscious views' (p. 214). Accordingly, intense anxiety from  $S_2$  initiates repression, whereby  $S_2$  denies knowledge to itself that the wish exists.

The problem for accounts of repression follows from Freud's insistence that under these circumstances  $S_1$  remains active, reinvesting the anxiety-producing wish, such that in the above example the mother again is currently desired, and this desire is capable of becoming known (and hence requiring further acts of repression). To circumvent this, Maze and Henry (1996a) posit a model of neural inhibition ('affective blocking') whereby after repression, the anxiety-producing wish is incapable of becoming conscious. Here, they propose, following Kissin (1986), that since any specific mental act is mediated by a distinctive neural process peculiar to it (termed an 'engram'), recollecting that mental act includes some form of reactivation of that neural process. They propose that intense anxiety during primal repression could set up a 'neural condition' preventing that engram from activation and so preventing the mental act from becoming the object of a second mental act:

It would meet the formal requirements of primal repression if the flood of anxiety immediately consequent on any activation of an engram mediating an instinctual presentation should set up a neural condition such that no neural impulses could pass directly from that engram to any further neural processes capable of registering that the engram existed—registering it in whatever way underlies becoming conscious that the dangerous material had occurred. The precondition of this anxious reaction would be the memory of a previous threat, real or imagined. This neural block is conceived as being automatically set up by the contiguous anxiety rather than as the result of a purposive, informed reaction; in that way the problem of

having to know in order not to know would be avoided (Maze & Henry, 1996a, p. 1095)

Here  $S_1$  could repeatedly wish for the mother, but this wish cannot become conscious by either  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$  or  $S_3$ . One problem here, though, is that this would only mean that knowledge of the wish is prevented, and there would be nothing to stop the wish from being acted upon. Freud (1915/1957h), however, also indicates that repression results in a 'motor fettering of the impulse' (p. 157), so that although  $S_1$  may still actively wish for the mother, repression prevents this drive from acting upon this wish. Additionally, as will be demonstrated later, explaining resistance and the lifting of repression requires being capable of knowing the repressed. If this is the case, then an account of neural inhibition, following Freud, could propose two consequences: repression prevents all the drives from knowing that they know the repressed wish, whilst also preventing the motor responses that would be involved in acting upon the wish. Here, the drives inhibit each other's activity (though instigated by an anxiety response to another drive's 'wish', rather than 'choice'), and thus repression can be conceptualized as a form of 'impulse control' or behaviour inhibition (cf. Boag, 2006a; Cunningham, 1924; Harris, 1950).

A distinctive feature of this account is that the drive responsible for inhibition ( $S_2$ ) remains capable of knowing the repressed so that the drive  $S_1$  may actively wish for the anxiety-producing situation, and  $S_2$  can also know this wish, prompting anxiety, and further inhibiting  $S_1$  from acting upon the anxiety-producing wish. Neural inhibition here does not prevent knowing the repressed but instead prevents all the drives from *knowing that they know* the repressed. The specifics of the underlying neural mechanism can only be answered empirically, although it is of interest to note that several neural inhibitory mechanisms have been identified which are associated with various distortions of thinking (see Clark, 1996; Houghton & Tipper, 1996; Kaplan-Solms & Solms, 2000; Nigg, 2000, 2001; Shevrin et al., 2002; Solms, 1999). More importantly, for the present purpose, there is nothing logically problematic with positing a neural mechanistic account of such inhibition. As Michell (1988) notes, there is no theoretical problem with cognitive inhibition since the *selection* of cognition involves the same complexity:

If it is allowed that the instinctual drives are able to selectively cause cognition, then it requires no further theoretical complexity to allow that they can selectively cause the inhibition of cognition. Of course, the mechanism behind either process is not understood, but there can be no doubt that such a selective process occurs. (p. 245)

Thus, although the question concerning which structures mediate behaviour selection and inhibition is ultimately empirical, it is clear that such an account is logically possible. However, several key aspects of repression still need explaining: secondary repression, resistance and the lifting of repression.

## Secondary Aims and Secondary Repression

Maze and Henry (1996a) explain secondary repression in terms of neural inhibition spreading to associated content. This does not require the 'ego' (or, in this case,  $S_2$ ) knowing the associated material, generating anxiety and prompting secondary repression:

What becomes apparent about the relationship between primal repression and after-expulsion ... is that the condition of being repressed spreads out, as it were, from the primally repressed to the after-expelled material, rather than being imposed on the latter by the conscious ego. The associated perceptions are not so much expelled from consciousness as captured under the umbrella of the affective blocking mechanism as soon as the associative links are activated. (p. 1098)

Hence, the selectivity of secondary repression is explained in terms of 'associative distance' to the primary repressed material:

... there must be points in these manifold chains of association at which the connection with the primally repressed material becomes so attenuated that the associated items beyond those points escape after-expulsion; otherwise, simply everything would be subject to repression. (Maze & Henry, 1996a, p. 1097)

However, one problem with this account is that it lacks explanatory power, since the only explanation for why one content and not another succumbs to secondary repression is that one is more or less 'distant' from the primary repressed wish. Furthermore, it is also difficult to see how this account could explain resistance as an active, dynamic process. Alternatively, the current thesis proposes that maintaining repression does require knowing the repressed (but not knowing that one knows it), claiming that it is the perceived association, and subsequent threat evaluation, that explains secondary repression. Developing the earlier example,  $S_1$  actively wishes for the forbidden situation, and anxiety and inhibition follow when  $S_2$  knows this. This prevents  $S_1$  acting upon the wish, and since acting upon this wish is now not possible, wishing for the anxiety-producing situation is now frustrating for  $S_1$  as it does not result in actions leading to gratification. Freud (1915/1957g, 1933/1964a, 1940/1964c) indicates here that secondary aims develop since the primary aims cannot lead to satisfaction. For instance,  $S_1$ , prevented from its primary object of satisfaction (the mother), equates other females with the mother (e.g. female teachers), and develops fantasies and desires surrounding such substitute figures ( $S_1$  now desires that  $q$ , where  $q = p$ ). On the Freudian account, if this substitute wish is evaluated by  $S_2$  as a threat in the same manner as the primary aim, then it may also be subject to further repression. However, if the secondary aim is not evaluated as a threat, then this may possibly become the dominant expression of  $S_1$ , replacing the original desire of the ungratified need. In this case, the associative connection between the new aim and the repressed material is not recognized by  $S_2$ . Consequently,  $S_1$  no

longer actively pursues the anxiety-producing wish and now actively pursues the substitute.

### The Issue of Reversibility and Re-knowing the Repressed

Freud (1915/1957h, 1895/1962b, 1937/1964e) notes, however, that repression never extinguishes a memory so entirely that it cannot be invoked by *external* stimuli. In Freud's early theory these instances were first referred to as 'auxiliary moments', where the repressed material became re-known after the initial repression (Freud, 1894/1962a, p. 50), and then later as 'contemporary provocations' (Freud, 1907/1959c, p. 123):

Mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which the wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfilment of the wish. (Freud, 1908/1959d, p. 147)

The contention here is that the proposed neural inhibition may be relatively successful in terms of inhibiting *internal* sources of stimulation but not against *external* ones. Here neural inhibition is comparable to a 'reversible lesion' (cf. Epstein, 1998, p. 505), where although  $S_2$ 's anxiety may prevent the drives from knowing that they know of the primary repressed wish, this affective blocking will be undone if prompted by some outside source. One major external source of such stimulation is the classical therapeutic situation. Here analytical interpretation seeks to trace the secondary aims (or symptoms) back to the primary ones (Maze, 1993, 1994). For example, transference behaviours exhibited in therapy may be interpreted as reflecting certain desires and beliefs towards important objects (cf. Blum, 2003), and analysis brings this to the drives' attention. If this external stimulation can re-excite the repressed desire, then  $S_1$  may actively wish for the anxiety-producing situation again, provoking extreme anxiety and resistance from  $S_2$ , such that associations toward the interpretation fail because  $S_2$  re-inhibits knowing that it knows the anxiety-producing wish. Simultaneously, however, the 'analysand' ostensibly has no insight into resisting. Although the behaviours constituting the resistance may be known (e.g. the analysand reports, 'my mind has gone blank'), the cause of their occurrence is not. Furthermore, this resistance involves 'objectless anxiety': 'more often defence failure is manifested only by increased levels of anxiety, whereas the warded off content remains unconscious' (Gillett, 2001, p. 277). Here  $S_2$  knows the re-awakened wish for the anxiety-producing situation, generating anxiety and re-repression, with the result that the anxiety may be known, whilst knowledge of what the anxiety is a response to is not (since knowledge of the repressed wish is prevented from becoming known). Simultaneously, another drive  $S_3$  may also become aware of the anxiety, but not what the anxiety is in

fact a response to, since it cannot know that it knows the anxiety-producing wish. This may further lead to a distinction between *primary* and *secondary* resistance, proceeding from the different knowers involved in this situation. Primary resistance involves the knower  $S_2$  evaluating the threat and generating anxiety, which prompts re-severing of the associations and re-repressing knowledge of the anxiety-producing wish. Secondary resistance is consequent on this first form. Here the drive(s) representing the 'ignorant client' ( $S_3$ ) may be unaware of the cause of the resistance but become aware of feelings of unpleasure. Subsequently, they may rationalize that since the analyst's interpretation is somehow associated with this unpleasure that it must then be wrong, prompting additional secondary resistive behaviours (e.g. terminating analysis). This account supports Freud's claim that resistance has an affective basis, motivated by anxiety consequent on threat evaluation. The targets are known without the resisting drive knowing that it knows the repressed.

### **Confronting the Repressed and Maintaining Repression**

For resistance and re-repression to occur,  $S_2$  must know the repressed wish; there is no censoring agency standing prior to protect  $S_2$ , protecting it from the knowledge of the repressed aim. This, on the face of it, appears to merely re-state the paradox since the threatened drive must still know what it is not meant to know. However, the solution to the paradox hinges upon recognizing that repression prevents knowledge of knowing the repressed, preventing insight into the nature of the troublesome situation. Furthermore, several points also need to be taken into consideration. The main problem of Freud's account of repression is that after repression the repressed continues to push for expression, requiring further repressive acts. That is,  $S_1$  can still actively wish for the anxiety-producing situation, and so this wish could become re-known again, requiring re-repression by  $S_2$ . However, as suggested earlier, repression is motivated by a drive  $S_2$ , believing that the threatening desire is its own, and subsequently anxiously denying to itself that it knows the wish. This could be mediated by neural inhibition, preventing the drives knowing that they know the anxiety-producing wish, and further preventing the drive  $S_1$  from acting upon it. Allowing that this neural inhibition is reversible, then external stimuli pose a problem since they may re-invoke, and draw attention to, the anxiety-producing desire, with the result that the drive  $S_2$  may come to know that it knows the anxiety-producing wish. Here the wish and the threat become re-known, initiating re-repression. However, for re-repression to occur, the awareness of the repressed need occur only as quickly as is needed to generate anxiety, and after re-repression knowledge of the repression is no longer known as before. Furthermore, since the act of repression itself is unconscious in the first instance, the other knowers comprising the rest of the ego ( $S_3$ ) may remain ignorant of its occurrence, for several other reasons. In the first place, these knowers must be motivated or prompted to pay attention to the repressive act for it to become conscious, and

the re-repression may occur so quickly that their attention misses the act itself. Even if this act were noticed, it would promptly be made unconscious again after re-repression. The other knowers may then be left in the position of knowing the interpretation from the analyst of the anxiety-producing wish (or some distorted form thereof), knowing residual unpleasure and products of resisting behaviour, whilst remaining ignorant of the full situation, further leading to secondary resistance. The important point, however, is that maintaining repression and resistance does involve knowing the repressed, but not so that the repression is lifted and the drives know that they know the repressed.

### The Lifting of Repression

The lifting of repression still needs to be accounted for, and here the earlier postulate of re-knowing knowledge of the repressed is pivotal. In Freud's account repression first occurs as a response to an infantile threat evaluation. After repression this infantile attitude may remain unmodified, since '[t]he processes of accommodating old beliefs to new information, and assimilating new beliefs to the old, could not occur with the repressed material' (Maze & Henry, 1996a, p. 1098; cf. Hopkins, 1995, p. 415). That is, since knowledge of the repressed is denied,  $S_2$  cannot re-evaluate its attitude towards it. On the view proposed here, therapy is a re-learning experience requiring a re-evaluation of the initial threatening situations within the context of the significant transference relationship. Here the emphasis is not on memory *per se*, but instead upon the persisting infantile attitude (cf. Boag, 2006c). Specifically, the aim is to re-present the repressed target (the anxiety-producing wish) to the drives and, via interpretation, to allow  $S_2$  to re-evaluate the threat status of the wish. Initially, however, it could be surmised that re-presentation of the repressed aim (through interpretation) makes  $S_2$  know that it knows the anxiety-producing wish again, provoking anxiety and re-repression and resistance. However, the transference in therapy itself creates a conflict situation. The other drive(s)  $S_3$  may actually become motivated to pay attention to the anxiety-producing wish, believing that following the therapist's instructions is necessary for gratification. Accordingly, the therapeutic situation produces competition between the drive  $S_2$ , motivated not to know that it knows the repressed, and those drives motivated to know it ( $S_3$ ). Since therapy does allow the drives to know that they know the repressed, even briefly, in coming to know that it knows the anxiety-producing wish,  $S_3$  may come to know other beliefs about it (e.g. 'I know that the wish is not a threat'). Since  $S_2$  is motivated to inhibit knowing the anxiety-producing wish, which requires knowing the repressed, when  $S_2$  knows the wish it will also know  $S_3$ 's cognitions concerning it (i.e. 'I know that the wish is not a threat').  $S_2$  may then re-evaluate the wish through  $S_3$ 's beliefs concerning the nature of the anxiety-producing wish. The lifting of repression, and undoing the resistances, is comparable, then, to extinction-like processes whereby the threat evaluation

and consequent anxiety are tempered by modifying re-evaluations of the situation (cf. Schwartz, 1987, pp. 495–497). This provides a basis for understanding the claim that therapy allows a ‘corrective emotional experience’ (Eagle, 2000, p. 175; Westen, 1999, p. 1086) and ‘adaptive reappraisals’ (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 96). Similarly, it provides a basis for understanding therapeutic outcomes described in terms of a ‘shift in attitude’:

The demonstration to the patient of the repeated motifs, themes, and other derivatives of the repressed schema brings about a new ability for self-observation and an understanding of the anachronistic nature of the disturbing fantasies. As a consequence, there is a shift in attitude to the repressed. (Slap & Saykin, 1984, p. 122)

Once the infantile threat evaluation is replaced by an appraisal attuned to the present scenario, then the repressive tendency is removed, and the repression lifted. As presented here, this could only occur if knowledge of the repressed wish can, in fact, become known by the drive that was responsible for its repression.

### **Implications Beyond Freudian Repression**

Whilst this analysis demonstrates that Freudian repression is logically possible, potential directions emerge for understanding other varieties of self-deception and defensive processes based on three aspects of this account: (1) the realist appreciation of conscious and unconscious mental processes; (2) the recognition of a plurality of knowers; and (3) the mechanism of neural inhibition. For example, the realist appreciation of conscious and unconscious processes is applicable to the paradox of self-deception (i.e. explaining how someone comes to deceive themselves into believing something that they know not to be true). Given that any mental act itself is unconscious, the act of self-deception itself would be unconscious (until taken as the object of a second mental act), and if this is prevented (say, due to anxiety and neural inhibition), then there is no logical difficulty with proposing that a person could unconsciously deceive themselves. In fact, as the analysis above indicates, this is precisely what occurs in repression. Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates that it is possible to ‘screen’ for threatening information, as occurs in ‘perceptual defence’ (Erdelyi, 1974), since an individual may be threatened by some situation  $x$ , be capable of knowing that situation (and experiencing anxiety), whilst knowledge of knowing the perceived threat is prevented. Additionally, the appreciation of mental plurality shows the matter to be even more complex, since different parts of the mind may know different things, and so no theoretical problem exists with saying that any ‘individual’ simultaneously knows and does not know a given state of affairs (cf. Neu, 1988). The further recognition that various neural mechanisms may underlie

such self-deception opens up empirical avenues for neuroscientific research for investigating such psychodynamic processes. Thus, although further conceptual analysis is necessary for determining whether other varieties of self-deception and defensive processes can be similarly conceptualized, it is clear that a realist framework provides an important conceptual foundation for evaluating proposals and informing solutions.

## Summary

The account of repression here proposes that the paradox is only apparent and that an account of repression can be provided based on a strong partitioning, neural inhibition and a realist account of cognition. The resolution of the paradox hinges upon the recognition that repression inhibits knowledge of knowing the repressed. This is mediated by neural inhibition, and this further prevents the repressed aim from being acted upon. In this account, maintaining repression and resistance does involve re-knowing the repressed, but not so that the drives know that they know. Neural inhibition, here, however, is reversible, and external sources may re-invoke knowledge of the repressed target (constituting an 'auxiliary moment'). Resistance in therapy occurs when interpretation brings knowledge of the repressed wish to the threatened drive's attention, so that it knows the repressed, prompting further anxiety and re-repression. However, the apparent 'paradox' is tempered by considerations that after re-repression, knowledge of the repressed is no longer known, and the act itself is unconscious. An advantage of this account is that it explains the active, dynamic nature of Freud's account of repression and resistance, which is both essential to any account of Freudian repression, and the feature that most threatens to make repression appear impossible. Consequently, there is no *a priori* objection to the theory of repression and further analysis will determine whether other varieties of self-deception and defensive processes can be similarly coherently conceptualized.

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SIMON BOAG is a Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Macquarie University. He teaches personality theory, and has recently published papers discussing the role of repression in dreaming. ADDRESS: Department of Psychology, Macquarie University, Sydney, 2109, NSW, Australia. [email: [simon.boag@psy.mq.edu.au](mailto:simon.boag@psy.mq.edu.au)]