

A Forlorn Hope: Psychoanalysis in Search of Scientific Respectability

Review of *The Evolution of the Emotion Processing Mind* by Robert Langs

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REVIEW OF: Robert Langs (1996). *The Evolution of the Emotion Processing Mind*. International Universities Press, xvi + 233pp. ISBN: 0-8236-1775-0. Price: \$US35.00 hbk.

1. The Future of Psychoanalysis

Robert Langs sets himself a difficult task in attempting "a hierarchical theory of psychoanalysis to render it as complete a theory of the emotional domain as presently possible" (p. 47). He knows the criticisms that have been leveled at psychoanalysis, and he separates himself from other apologists for the theory. He is forthright in acknowledging that psychoanalysis up to now has been unfalsifiable and is sharply critical of Freud and subsequent psychoanalytic theorists in failing to take seriously the lessons of evolutionary science. Langs stays true to Freud's view of his theory as a scientific one and does not embrace the move towards hermeneutics taken by many other contemporary psychoanalytic theorists. The task before him is to reform psychoanalysis into a scientifically respectable theory by incorporating the viewpoints of "formal science, systems theory, and psychoanatomy" as it says on the book jacket. The

fundamental methodological point that drives this book is that "psychoanalysis cannot advance hypotheses inconsistent with the fundamentals of evolutionary theory."

For many philosophers and psychologists the first question that may come to mind when hearing of Langs' task is "why bother?" Psychoanalysis has been so thoroughly discredited as a scientific theory that it is hard for some to see why it is any longer worth any serious attention. Langs himself generally takes it for granted that his task is worthwhile, and presumably there are enough like-minded theorists working today for him to have an audience, but they are a group largely isolated from the rest of contemporary research on the mind. There are dangers of intellectual isolation that are apparent in Langs' book. Despite all his claims to the contrary, the book is largely programmatic and does not manage to set psychoanalysis on a respectable scientific foundation. Instead, it aims to explain the development of the unconscious and of death anxiety via a speculative evolutionary history. This work is occasionally thought provoking, bewildering at almost every point, and never convincing.

Considering the problems of Langs' work, we might generalize our skepticism and ask what relevance any psychoanalytic theory can have for modern psychology. Should it aim to fit in with mainstream approaches, and is Langs correct in his insistence that psychoanalysis should aim to be consistent with the fundamental ideas of modern science? Or should psychoanalysis nurture its renegade position with respect to current psychological research and proceed autonomously? Maybe it should give up entirely.

To state my own position at the outset, let me say that I am sympathetic to broad features of the psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious and I am particularly convinced of the importance of the psychoanalytic tradition for philosophy and psychology. Although it is deeply flawed in many ways, Langs' book also is a rich source of ideas on which to draw. Modern cognitive science has many virtues, but it suffers from narrowness, especially in its neglect of the emotions. Psychoanalytic theory can provide a useful corrective to overly cognitive approaches.

The question then is what profitable role can psychoanalytic theory play in modern theorizing about the human psyche. The baroque ornateness of the forms of psychoanalytic theory adopted in post-structuralism, literary theory, and some feminist theory is a dead end, it seems to me, although I will not argue for this view here. I am confident that Langs has no time for those appropriations of Freud. I also agree with Langs that retreating from scientific approaches to purely hermeneutic conceptions of psychoanalysis is the wrong way to go. (Indeed, the whole distinction between scientific and hermeneutic approaches to the mind is problematic, in my view, being based on a crude caricature of science and an untenable categorical distinction between reasons and causes.)

Langs' response to the predicament of psychoanalysis today is to try to fit it in with cognitive/evolutionary models. As I explain below, I am unimpressed by his results. This raises the question whether his failure is simply a result of the inadequacy of his arguments, or whether there is a more general lesson to learn for those interested in

exploring the importance of psychoanalysis. I suspect that there is a more general lesson to learn. Langs' major premise is that to gain scientific respectability, psychoanalysis must lift itself up to the level of other current scientific approaches and conform to their major results. Given the difficulties faced by Langs, we might reasonably conclude that psychoanalysis is currently in no condition to meet this demand.

But there is another way for psychoanalysis to proceed. Langs is mistaken in his assumption that it is necessary for psychoanalysis to achieve integration with the rest of modern psychology, because he has an overly narrow conception of scientific methodology. It can be useful for science to have a diverse set of research programs proceeding concurrently, and this is especially true when it comes to the human sciences. It is a moot point whether we should ever expect to arrive at a grand unified theory of psychology or psychiatry. Some philosophers of science have suggested that science can proceed rationally without insisting that new theories be consistent with old theories. Paul Feyerabend (1978) argued that there are no rules governing scientific progress, and so it could be perfectly rational to adopt and elaborate theories that are in tension with well accepted theories. However, I am not suggesting that we should be ready to do away with well-confirmed aspects of evolutionary theory. More recent philosophers of biology (Dupre, 1993, 1996; Rosenberg, 1994) have argued against assimilating biology with other sciences, and granting it some autonomy. We need not expect science to be a unified, seamless whole. Similarly, we need not expect the wide range of theories within biology to form a seamless whole. Biology combines diverse forms of theorizing, from molecular biology to evolutionary psychology, and different branches of biology should have some autonomy from each other.

Furthermore, there are many more ways for theories to be in tension with each other than strict contradiction. Theories can have different sorts of inspirations and be associated with different world-views. It is generally possible, and sometimes reasonable, to protect one's theory from contradiction with the observed facts or well-accepted theories, for instance, by surrounding it with ad hoc hypotheses. Two theories can be at different levels of explanation or description, where the relation between them is unclear. For example, it is not clear if biological and psychological explanations of behavior are really competing, or instead are just compatible theories at different levels.

So there are reasons to allow a certain amount of disunity among scientific theories. Furthermore, it is certainly premature for us now to be insisting on theoretical unity at this primitive stage in our theorizing. As Kitcher (1992) points out, Freud put psychoanalytic theory at a particular disadvantage in his stubborn insistence on backing theories in other disciplines that had already been shown to be wrong, but any interdisciplinary theory is likely to suffer if it tries to do too much. If one theory is linked with another theory, then the first loses credibility if the second is discredited. If a theory is linked to many other theories, it is especially vulnerable to the possibility that one of those theories will be discredited. A research program can make itself less vulnerable to the misfortunes of other theories if it remains relatively isolated. Of course, by doing so, it also gets less confirmation from other theories, and so would be unlikely to be very well accepted. But at least it could give itself some space in which it could grow.

The issue for psychoanalytic theory today is whether it can avoid being a degenerating research program, to use the terminology of Lakatos (1978). Too much isolation from the rest of science will simply make it even more irrelevant, and it will simply wither and die away, or at least, be used only in literary criticism as a device for interpreting novels. If it is to be a viable theory in psychological science, it needs to find a balance between building on its distinctive strengths by drawing on the resources of its own tradition, on the one hand, and on the other, building bridges to other parts of psychology and biology and showing it how it is compatible with well-established theories.

2. Programmatic Arguments

I will now turn to Langs' book and try to explain his project in more detail. Some features of Langs' view are clear. He believes in a dynamic unconscious, in which repressed fears and other emotions operate outside of consciousness. He believes that one of the most important unconscious emotions is our anxiety about death. And he believes that we can give some account of this through an evolutionary model.

But many features of Langs' style make his views hard to assimilate. He seems almost compulsive in his list making. There are about 57 lists in this book, with an average of nearly 4.8 items per list. Within those there are about 100 sub-lists, sub-sub-lists, and sub-sub-sub-lists, with an average of about 2.7 items per list. (A good number of those lists have only one item in them.) But rather than this helping to clarify the logical structure of his argument and his view, it tends to be distracting and even confusing.

Langs apparently aims to build on the work of some others. In the early chapters he makes frequent reference to Kitcher (1992), Slavin & Kriegman (1992), Plotkin (1994), and Dennett (1995), among others. Later in the book he relies heavily on Donald (1991). Langs refers critically several times to the psychoanalytic sociobiological writer Christopher Badcock's *PsychoDarwinism* (1994) (which has not been published in the US). But that's as specific as the references get: at no point is any chapter referred to, let alone a page number, and so of course there's no discussion of the details of any arguments. Langs refers to his own writings at many points: in the bibliography he has some twenty books or articles by himself (five of which are co-authored with A. Badamenti). (The book jacket sleeve says he has written 36 books and 130 papers, so he has been relatively selective in mentioning his own work.) In referring to these other works, Langs does not so much build on the work of himself and others as merely map his ideas with respect to other large and no so large landmarks. Those landmarks may or may not be useful to the reader. For instance, speaking for myself, before embarking on this review, I had a detailed knowledge of Kitcher (1992), a basic idea of what Dennett (1995) is about, and no familiarity whatever with Donald (1991), Slavin & Kriegman (1992), Badcock (1994), or Plotkin (1994).

It is, of course, a perennial danger of interdisciplinary work that it requires a broad range of knowledge that few have. Langs is trying to combine a great many ideas and

approaches. It is inevitable that most readers will be unfamiliar with many of the works of which he makes use. But it is precisely because this is a predictable state of affairs that Langs has a responsibility to give more of an explanation of these ideas and the arguments that have been made to support them. He does this to some extent, but not enough to make his case clear or convincing.

To give just one example, it is an essential assumption of the book that the mind is a Darwin machine, a term he takes from Plotkin (1994). His explanation of Darwin machines takes a page or so (pp. 70-1), and left me little wiser as to what he meant. He gives no examples and stays at the level of vague generalizations. The idea as he explains it is this, paraphrasing Langs' own wording: our means of learning is to operate as Darwin machines, which is to say, according to the g-t-r heuristic. The elements of this heuristic are:

1. the generation of variety due largely to chance mutations or variable environmental factors;
2. a test phase, during which selection operates to effect the favored reproduction of adaptively successful strategies;
3. regeneration of the favored forms plus the introduction of new chance variants.

The primary heuristic is that of biological genetic development, which programs the organism selectively to know and adapt to its environment. Secondary heuristics include the immune system, the human brain, the human mind, and aspects of emotional cognition. There is a tertiary heuristic that stems from culture and the sharing of knowledge among individuals.

What I understand from this is that our minds evolve to be able to learn about the world around them, according to the familiar evolutionary process. It is clear that Langs supposes that there is a close connection between the mind and our genetic nature (although I am at a loss as to why our immune system is directly relevant, even if we can learn some useful lessons from the evolution of immune systems [see Gazzaniga, 1992, chapter one]). But that is about all I get from these couple of pages, so either I have missed something important, or else Langs is saying something simple in a convoluted and unhelpful way. I suspect that latter option is closer to the truth. This is not an unusual example. I am left with the same impression after almost every paragraph.

A further factor that makes this text difficult to negotiate is the issue of the credibility of different sources. As I mentioned before, I am familiar with Kitcher's (1992) book, and I have great respect for it. In it she sets out an interpretation of Freud's theories as an interdisciplinary cognitive science and details the mistakes made by Freud and the weaknesses inherent in his methodology. Dennett is of course a well respected philosopher, but his ideas are controversial, and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* has had a mixed reception. Donald (1991, p. 14) presents "an evolutionary thesis that is a best guess

as to how we arrived at our present state, and a corresponding cognitive model of the transition from apes to humans." He hypothesizes two major biological adaptations with the evolution of *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens*, and then a third non-biological adaptation for more modern humans. This third adaptation relies on technological developments of storage media external to the brain. Slavin & Kriegman (1992), an attempt to explain the nature of the mind using psychoanalysis and evolutionary theory, is clearly a scholarly and sophisticated work. But it is still immersed in the psychoanalytic tradition and makes use of many of the main concepts of the theory, such as repression, resistance, and transference. It also seems to rely heavily on case studies for corroboration of its claims, and this methodology is highly suspect. So I can only suppose that it is just as controversial as other recent psychoanalytic texts, which is to say, some would view it with derision, while others would swear by it. Plotkin (1994) attempts to develop an explanation of the nature of our cognitive abilities using evolutionary ideas, and draws consequences for philosophical views about knowledge, such as Kant's conception of knowledge. This is such a wide-ranging book that, even without looking at the details, we can be sure it is extremely speculative and will not be able to provide a convincing detailed argument for controversial theses. Langs prides himself on not simply relying on the authority of Freud as so many of his colleagues tend to do. But relying on a curious and diverse mixture of more recent authors is little better. So if one comes to Langs' book with suspicion, wondering whether it is worth taking seriously, as I think most readers will and should, Langs' method provides one with little reassurance.

3. On the Status of the Claims

Maybe I have been unfair to Langs so far. One might counter my criticisms by saying that his book should not be judged on its stylistic shortcomings or the credibility of the literature on which it draws. Rather, it should be judged on its own terms.

This defense of Langs might be buttressed by the observation that he is not trying to prove his theory in this book. At the end of chapter one, he sets out the five goals of the book (pp. 17-18). These are, briefly, to offer a new approach to the unification of the theories of evolution and psychoanalysis; to define the adaptive capabilities of the emotion-processing mind in the light of its evolutionary history; to delineate an adaptationist program that accounts for the history of the mind; to provide support for the contention that emotionally charged behaviors have evolved; and to advance the idea that significant aspects of the current adaptive operations of the mind are governed by Darwinian principles. Very little of this project is to argue for the plausibility of the ideas. He is only trying to outline his program.

If it is true that Langs is not trying to defend his view, but just outline it, then his project is rather less interesting than it might have been. But even if that is all he is trying to do, it is impossible to really understand what the project is in any detail without knowing how he would go about defending it. The issue of plausibility is inescapable. And there are several parts of the project which seem quite implausible.

The book is divided into four parts: Darwin and Freud; some biological principles for psychoanalysis; evolutionary scenarios for the emotion-processing mind; and the emotion-processing mind as a Darwin machine. The first two parts largely set the context for discussion. It is in the third part that Langs at last gets to one of his main challenges, "the delineation of an adaptationist programme for the emotion-processing mind" (p. 103). This is where he makes most of his substantive and controversial claims, and he makes far fewer references to other works. I will turn to this second half of the book in the next section.

The last chapter of the second part, which is the longest chapter of the book, contains an extended discussion of a fictitious clinical vignette, a therapy session of Ms. Wells. (A great opportunity was lost in not calling the chapter "Looking Deep into Wells"; instead it is called "Architecture of the emotion-processing mind.") In this vignette, he sets out some details from a therapy session, with apparently ordinary examples of therapeutic interactions and details of everyday unhappiness. From these, Langs infers that Ms. Wells has an "unconscious delusional belief in one's immunity to loss for both patient and therapist" (p. 99). He also reveals some quite strict views about therapeutic method, in his disapproval of using one's home as a place for doing psychoanalysis and of letting one patient refer another to the analyst for therapy. (Freud was never so strict.) He concludes that the vignette "has amply confirmed our initial formulations regarding the architecture of the emotion-processing mind" (p. 99). Of course, given the difficulty that any psychoanalytic theory has had in finding confirmation, it would be highly surprising if Langs had produced evidence that amply confirmed such a view of the mind. This leads the skeptical reader to scrutinize the argument.

Langs says that the emotion-processing mind should be the unit of evolutionary study. One advantage to this approach, he claims, is that, "clinical research has fathomed major aspects of the architecture of the emotion-processing mind and has unearthed several unexpected features of this mental module" (p. 77). This is why he goes into a clinical example in some detail. He says in a footnote that the vignette is used solely as a model and narrative illustration (p. 78). He goes on to interpret the behavior, thoughts and feelings of his fictitious Ms. Wells, attributing unconscious responses to her, and then summarizing what her set of conscious and unconscious responses "reveals about the architecture of the emotion-processing mind" (p. 91). We can see that what Langs says leaves the status of his claims unclear. At one point he claims that he is only illustrating a view, but then he goes on to say that something has been revealed about the mind. Of course, he better be only making the former claim, because the latter is highly implausible. He has demonstrated nothing, but only forced one interpretation on a fictitious example. Whatever claims Langs might be making to have shown how clinical experience confirms views about the structure of the mind are given no credible support in this book.

4. The Details

So we see that even judging Langs' work purely on its own terms, ignoring the stylistic problems and the reliance on the work of others, he faces deep problems. I will now come to the same judgment concerning the third part of the book. He begins by setting out what model of the mind he is adopting. Among his assumptions are the claims that our minds have both conscious systems, which has its own superficial unconscious subsystem, and a deep unconscious system. The deep unconscious system is intelligent and efficient, and has two main subsystems, for wisdom and fear-guilt. It is also exceedingly frame-sensitive. To explain this, I need to explain what frames are.

Unfortunately Langs never explicitly defines what a frame is, but the basic idea is clear enough:

The most powerful class of emotionally charged triggers for unconscious adaptive responses as revealed through their encoded narratives are almost always frame-related. For patients, these are interventions that are constituted as their therapist's management of the ground rules, setting, and other conditions of the treatment situation.

Years of experience indicate that encoded, unconsciously validating narratives and images from patients speak for a universal, ideal secured frame for a psychotherapy experience that holds the patient safely - and the therapist. (p. 30)

I take it from this and similar passages that a frame is something like a setting or context which the patient is used to. They are classified along with the rules and boundaries with which a patient is familiar. So when Langs writes that the unconscious is frame-sensitive, he means that people are unconsciously disturbed when they are in an unfamiliar setting.

Langs lists five aspects of the mind that are unexpected and puzzling. His aim is to show how these are compatible with, and might be explained by, evolutionary theory. These features are:

the existence of the conscious and unconscious systems;

the tendency of the conscious system to repress knowledge which would be useful;

the tendency of the conscious system to seek out frame changes when coping with emotional difficulty;

the tendency of the unconscious system to try to keep to stable frames; and

"the emotion-processing mind is split and experiences on one or the other level a sense of danger and threat" (p. 109).

(This fifth item seems to be the conjunction of the third and fourth items.)

There have been a number of works published on the evolutionary development of hominid cognitive and affective capacities. Langs relies on this literature to support his own views. He does not acknowledge how speculative this work must be, but rather treats it as established fact. He starts off with the Australopithecus, who first appeared 4-6 million years ago. He tells us, "the main form of cognition in Australopithecus was episodic, in that it was concrete, situation-bound, and non-reflective-time-bound to the present moment." (p. 118). He goes on,

There is no suggestion of repression or denial in Australopithecus, although repression may well have existed in crude form as some kind of automatic exclusion mechanism directed against painful memories when fresh, relevant events linked to past traumas took place. (p. 121)

Langs justifies this by saying that "nature seldom creates a mechanism de novo," so the fact that later hominids did have the ability to repress suggests that this ability must have existed in primitive form in earlier hominids. Of course, this is not an extrapolation of our present knowledge; it is speculation on stilts. Langs suggests that a critical development was that of focussed attention, and that this emerged in *Homo erectus* about 1.5 million years ago. But it is only with *Homo sapiens sapiens*, about 200,000 years ago, that the critical developments in emotional capacities occurred. Then began internalized conflict, awareness of personal mortality, the lethal danger of conspecific fighting with weaponry, and the stresses that stemmed from language acquisition (p. 134). Emotional stresses threatened to overload the cognitive system's processing capacities; language acquisition increased the ways humans could inflict emotional damage on each other; and the prospect of personal death and the loss of loved ones made life more difficult. Langs' approach is to consider various possibilities for how the mind could have evolved to cope with these difficulties. He assesses these options, and shows the problems that each faced. Of course, he ends up with the psychoanalytic model of the mind that he favors, with a deep unconscious consisting of two subsystems, dealing with wisdom and fear-guilt respectively. Langs attempts to show that the surprising features of the mind (as he sees it) were in fact adaptive to the problems at hand. He draws the depressing conclusion though that evolution has done a bad job: the human mind is dysfunctional.

Clearly, the very fact that we are threatening ourselves with extinction, and that we are unable to control our violent impulses towards each other, speaks for a dysfunctional mental design with serious consequences. Indeed, the realization that the emotion- processing mind is at the heart of civilization's current woes places psychoanalysis at the very centre of our struggles for personal and collective survival. (p. 205).

Thankfully, he does not propose that everyone go into psychoanalytic therapy, but Langs does not tell us his vision for how psychoanalysis can save humanity.

I parenthetically note that some of Langs' ideas here might be of interest to philosophers and psychologists interested in our powers of rational reasoning. Some social psychologists have demonstrated how persistently humans make errors in reasoning,

(summarized in Stein, 1996, chapter 3) and others have questioned whether cognitive rationality is necessarily useful to us (e.g., Stich, 1990, chapter 3; and Stein, 1996, chapter 6). Langs' work here could be a useful addition to the speculation as to ways in which irrationality might be adaptive.

I will not attempt to assess the details of Langs' argument. It is entirely too general and speculative for any meaningful assessment of the details to be made. There is just not enough hard evidence for us to test different theories against each other here. The speculative story is interesting in its own way, if one is sympathetic to psychoanalysis. If one judges the book in terms of Langs' stated goals as listed above, he has been moderately successful. It would be going too far to say that he has "unified" evolution and psychoanalysis, but he has at least shown that they might be compatible. He has set out some broad features of an approach that would account for the psychoanalytic features of the mind, if they exist. But in accomplishing goals such as these, Langs has done nothing to alleviate the current crisis of psychoanalytic theory. He might have made the first steps in showing one way in which one might try to give some scientific support to psychoanalysis, but the entire project is so speculative that it is hard to see how it could ever be carried out. We are unlikely to ever have enough evidence from hundreds of thousands of years ago that could give specific confirmation to the psychoanalytic hypothesis as opposed to alternative theories of mind.

5. Conclusion

Modern psychoanalysis now resides in an intellectual ghetto. As a theoretical research program, it has clearly been stagnating in the backwaters of psychoanalytic journals over the last several decades, and if it is not to become completely irrelevant, it needs some method of rejuvenation. I applaud Langs' effort to do this, even if I think his particular attempt was misguided. His work might even have a salutary effect on psychoanalysis in spurring further innovation. But those trying to make use of psychoanalysis need not try to bring it up to the level of other scientific theories. Instead, they can develop it in other directions. If one wants to pursue interdisciplinary integration, I would point to the work of John Bowlby (1982) as one of the most satisfying developments of strands of psychoanalytic thought in recent decades. Bowlby brought together object-relations theory and attachment theory, with primate research and anthropological study. But one might go in quite different directions, following those aspects of psychoanalysis which are shared by few other parts of psychology, such as the emphasis on the psychodynamic unconscious, the death drive, ego-psychology, the analysis of narcissism, and so on. (Eagle, 1984, provides one of the best summaries of recent developments in psychoanalytic thought, and I commend it to the reader.) While such ideas are likely to remain on the sidelines of mainstream psychology for some time, it is a sign of a healthy discipline that it allows and even encourages such diversity.

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