Peter Madison. Freud's Concept of Repression and Defense: Its Observational and Theoretical Language. Review

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His antagonism to certain branches of statistics on logical grounds, so evident in *Statistical Theory*, is here undiminished and still lacking in persuasiveness—though not in interest—to one reader.

The book concludes with two papers about what we might call the New Atuhortarianism within science: the willingness to accept the pundit’s views, to be a disciple, to join the Atom Smashing Establishment. Science is founded on and pays homage to original thought and independence of mind—but it is quite possible that scientists exhibit it less than non-scientists, proportionately speaking. An intelligent man who is a citizen is not necessarily an intelligent citizen. There is a discussion in the last chapter which illustrates this, on the impossibility of regarding socialism or free enterprise as *per se* desirable without referring to the size, resources, and sophistication of the social unit involved. It is a point of modest difficulty, not original but rare in our contemporaries scientist or not, and crucially important for our thinking and our survival. We are indeed a scientific society, as the nineteenth-century was an industrial one; but also a stupid society. We need more Hogbens. *Michael Scriven, Indiana University.*

**PETER MADISON.** *Freud’s concept of repression and defense, its theoretical and observational language.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961. 205 pp. $4.75.

Although psychoanalysis is over sixty years old, its many critics have correctly pointed out that its scientific status is by no means established. Two problems immediately arise (a) What precisely is wrong with psychoanalysis from a scientific standpoint? (b) What can be done about it?

The first question was answered clearly and unambiguously by Professor Ernest Nagel at a New York conference of philosophers and psychoanalysts:¹ Psychoanalysis lacks a clearly formulated observational language and rules of interpretation that link the observational language to its complex and highly metaphorical theoretical language. Without this observational language and rules of interpretation for the theoretical language, psychoanalysis remains no more than speculative metaphysics—incapable of empirical disconfirmation and always capable of being saved by numerous *ad hoc* assumptions in the light of *prima facie* conflicting evidence.

The answer to the second question, although not explicitly given by Nagel, seems to follow as a matter of course from his answer to the first question: Reformulate psychoanalysis in such a way that it has a clearly formulated observational language and rules of interpretation, and then begin verification studies.

Philosophers of science who have argued as Nagel has might pause to answer an important question: How can one actually establish that psychoanalysis does, in fact, lack a clearly formulated observational language and rules of interpretation?

One method of determining if Nagel is correct might involve some sort of empirical investigation of the behavior of psychoanalysts. One might, for example, question psychoanalysts and see if they can specify what evidence would count against their theory. This method, to my knowledge, has never been attempted in any systematic or extensive manner although unsystematic questioning of a few psychoanalysts by Professor Hook² seems to confirm the suspicions of Professor Nagel.

For those of us who do not have psychoanalysts readily available for questioning, another approach is feasible: We can read psychoanalytic literature carefully in an effort to determine the empirical content (if any) of the theory. This approach has been attempted for the first time in a detailed and systematic way by Peter Madison in *Freud’s Concept of Repression and Defense, Its Theoretical and Observational Language*.


Madison, by a careful and scholarly examination of Freud's writing, has attempted to separate the theoretical language of psychoanalysis from the language used to report the overt behavior of patients and has tried to extract rules of interpretation from the context of the uses of the two languages. It should be clear that the results of his study are of the greatest importance to anyone interested in the scientific status of psychoanalysis. His results can be summarized as follows:

(a) For many major aspects of psychoanalysis no observational language is available. For example, Madison could find no observational language in Freud's writing describing the behavior of infants undergoing the hidden workings of primal repression or the behavior of children undergoing a castration trauma. Madison argues that indirect verification of these hypotheses e.g., by verbal reports within the clinical situation, is illegitimate (p. 178). Madison concludes that because indirect verification is illegitimate and direct verification is impossible verification of these aspects of psychoanalysis is impossible.

(b) For other aspects of psychoanalysis an observational language is available in Freud's writings. For instance, for the process of resistance Madison discovered a number of behavioral symptoms specified in Freud's clinical writings e.g., periods of silence in the therapeutic session. On the basis of these symptoms Madison suggests certain techniques for measuring resistance.

In summary, Madison would have us believe that certain aspects of psychoanalysis are not confirmable while other aspects are not only confirmable but are even measurable. A close examination of the evidence Madison cites reveals, however, that such conclusions are unwarranted.

(a) In the first place it should be noted that Madison is mistaken in inferring on the grounds that he does that indirect confirmation by clinical evidence e.g., verbal reports, is illegitimate. He argues that the clinical evidence would always need interpretation by means of Freudian assumptions, hence it cannot be used for validating Freudian assumptions. Thus someone's reported fear of being bitten by a horse cannot be taken as confirming the existence of a childhood castration trauma, Madison argues, because the theoretical assumption underlying the castration complex is that fear of being bitten = fear of being castrated. But it is no objection that this indirect method of verification uses theoretical assumptions (for example, that fear of being bitten = fear of being castrated). Surely it is necessary only that these theoretical assumptions are confirmed by evidence (for example, verbal behavior) that is independent of the evidence interpreted by these assumptions. The problem with this indirect clinical method of verification is not, therefore, what Madison suggests.

There are other problems, however, with this method which Madison fails to mention.

(i) From Freud's writing it is very unclear just what this independent clinical evidence might be. So whether these theoretical assumptions are confirmed or even confirmable is uncertain.

(ii) Even if we knew precisely what sort of clinical evidence validated the theoretical assumptions, we would have to be extremely wary of any validation they might receive in the clinical setting, for recent experimental studies suggest that the whole process of clinical validation is suspect. These studies—both from learning theory and the social psychology of persuasion—indicate that psychoanalysts are very probably unwittingly influencing their patients to produce evidence that speciously confirms their theory. In the light of this experimental evidence it is hardly surprising that psychoanalysis is "confirmed" in the psychoanalytic session by the verbal behavior of patients.

(b) Madison is also incorrect in concluding that the observation language suggested in Freud's writing permits certain aspects of psychoanalysis to be confirmed or disconfirmed.

(i) Whenever Freud does hint at the behavior on the basis of which hidden psychic processes e.g., resistance, are inferred his language is vague to the extreme. Freud's statements at best only suggest the path which a reformulation of psychoanalysis into testable hypotheses might take. For instance, Freud suggests that "periods of silence" in the clinical situation are behavioral symptoms of resistance. But what constitutes a "period of silence"? A second? A minute? Madison suggests that the ratio of the patient's silence to non-silence in a 50 minute analytic session would be one measure of the amount of resistance manifested by a patient (p. 151). But it should be clear that Madison's suggestion would be a useful one only if we knew what part of an hour is spent in silence normally i.e., when there is supposed to be no resistance. Freud, as one might suppose, gives us no help in answering this question, and Freud's other statements about behavioral symptoms are even more sketchy and impressionistic.

(ii) Madison does not always distinguish between his presentation of Freud's vague suggestions and his reformulation of them. For example, Madison's "silence ratio" is an improvement over Freud's vague suggestion about "periods of silence," yet it seems at times as if Madison is attributing the notion of a silence ratio to Freud. But it is not clear what Freud meant, hence it is not certain whether the notion of a silence ratio does measure what Freud intended.

(iii) Freud does not tell us whether the absence of certain symptoms specified by Madison for, say, resistance indicates the absence of resistance. Nothing Freud says excludes the possibility of saying that a patient was resisting no matter what the evidence. In short, Freud's vague suggestions about behavioral symptoms do not warrant the conclusion that we have a hypothesis that could be disconfirmed.

This does not mean, of course, that psychoanalytic theory cannot be given a clear empirical meaning and that it cannot be reformulated into a testable theory. Indeed, it is to be hoped that Madison's most interesting book will pave the way towards a testable reformulation of psychoanalytic theory. Because of Madison's work we should be clearer than ever before just where empirical consequences are lacking in psychoanalytic theory, where they are dimly suggested by Freud, and where reformulations might be fruitfully attempted. Despite my critical comments it should be clearer that Madison's book represents a pioneering effort—the first step towards a systematic reconstruction of psychoanalytic theory, a reconstruction that may eventually lead to its scientific acceptability. Michael Martin, University of Colorado.


This book does not contribute to the literature on the great problem its title suggests. The author is a philosophical amateur—nor would he, I hope, want us to think of him otherwise. Fortunately, most of the book is not about the relation of determinism and free will at all but merely a popular exposition of the "new physics," and as such takes its place in that genre of interesting books which attempt to explain the new conceptions of the mathematical physicists to the layman. Such books, e.g., Einstein and Infeld's Evolution of Physics, are usually interesting and informative and there is always room for one more of them. The challenge of rendering the original mathematical conception by simple prose and pictures is a never ending one for the ingenious writer.

This book's chief contribution to this genre is that instead of complaining that he must omit mathematics (due to the reader's presumed abysmal shortcomings) Munn provides it handily available for us to peruse. This is done by the typographical device of parallel columns, one mathematical, the other prosaic, the latter serving as a commentary on what is going on in the former. The book is thus very useful for the person who has not quite enough mathematics to make a frontal attack on contemporary physics.

Put forth in the last two chapters is Munn's main thesis—the part of the book which I find totally unsatisfactory. It is a version of a simple-minded view held by various people in the last few decades: this confuses free with indeterminacy, then goes on to