

# Introduction

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Psychoanalysis—as a form of conversation—is worth having only if it makes our lives more interesting, or funnier, or sadder, or more tormented, or whatever it is about ourselves that we value and want to promote; and especially if it helps us find new things about ourselves that we didn't know we could value. New virtues are surprisingly rare.

—Adam Phillips

WE LIVE IN a world of fragile things: fragile selves, fragile psyches, fragile loves. One of the most distinctive features of human existence—what makes it recognizable as human and what gives it its characteristically bittersweet quality—is that we tend to be acutely aware of its precariousness even when we are more or less courageously focused on taking advantage of the various opportunities that it affords. Human life is therefore inherently paradoxical in the sense that we strive to make the most of circumstances that we know will end disastrously, with our own death. As Schopenhauer once put it, we insist on living our lives “with great interest and much solicitude as long as possible, just as we blow out a soap-bubble as long and as large as possible, although with the perfect certainty that it will burst.”<sup>1</sup>

In this book, I take a broadly philosophical approach to the question of what it means to be a human being. More particularly, I am interested in basic questions about what makes our lives meaningful, worthwhile, or interesting, what gives us a sense of aliveness, and how

we might be able to meet the world in creative ways. However, rather than developing this line of inquiry along traditionally philosophical lines, I am eager to establish what psychoanalysis as a theoretical discourse—as a rather peculiar theory of what it means to be human—can tell us about the existential strategies that allow us to survive the precariousness of our lives. How do we cope with the uncertainties of existence—with our relative powerlessness with regard to our own destiny—without falling into states of anxiety, inaction, or hopelessness? How do we make the most of our everyday realities without becoming paralyzed by their ephemeral nature? How do we manage to appreciate the beauty and intricacy of our lives while haunted by the certainty that the bubble *will* eventually burst?

The fragility of our life-worlds asks that we approach them with a combination of tenacity, grace, and wisdom. Western philosophers since Socrates have called the attempt to arrive at an effective combination of these ingredients the “art of living.”<sup>22</sup> This art of living is premised on the idea that there is a complex craft or poetics to human existence that elicits our thoughtful participation—that even though death escapes our control, life is not something that simply happens to us in a passive manner, but rather a process that invites our active and lively engagement. The Western strategy for coping with human frailty has therefore frequently been to transform a potentially vulnerable condition into an empowered one, to insist that while fate cannot be dictated to, it *can* be manipulated and shaped according to our hopes, wishes, and aspirations. Though this line of reasoning is far from universal, it can be found in various key currents of Western thought since Socrates’s famous assertion that only the examined life is worth living all the way to Sartre’s insistence that the human subject is in the final analysis responsible for the choices that it makes in its life. The philosophical response to the idea of human helplessness has thus often been to recast this helplessness as a site of possibility and self-overcoming.

This book develops a specifically psychoanalytic account of the art of living. We will discover that this account not only deviates from, but in many ways contradicts, some of the most cherished principles of the traditional art of living. Nonetheless, psychoanalysis shares with the

latter the fundamental insight that the human subject is not born into the world with a fully formed self, but must, to the best of its ability, fashion itself along the way. This process of becoming a singular person—of molding a distinctive character, identity, and mode of inhabiting the world—is a challenge that resides at the very heart of human existence, and it would be difficult to imagine what our lives would be like without this ongoing endeavor.

By this I do mean that we are all consciously or deliberately involved in the task of assembling our selves. I also do not mean that we are free to compose our lives as we please, independently of our historical and sociocultural setting. I simply wish to suggest that the question of how we should proceed with our lives—what characteristics we would ideally like to acquire and what we deem significant in the world—is woven into the very texture of our existence in ways that lend it much of its meaning and substance. In a sense, we form our identities through what Jonathan Lear describes as our “living engagement” with this question.<sup>3</sup> It is, as it were, the very act of asking this question, and others like it, that induces us to grow in psychic depth and complexity. Moreover, because there is no fixed or definitive answer to this question—because we are likely to respond to it differently at various points in our lives—it is the continual process of grappling with it that most intensely shapes us as individuals. To arrive at a final answer, to decide once and for all what it means to be a person, would imply that we would no longer be participating in the art of living in any profound sense.

To the extent that psychoanalysis facilitates the process of asking important questions about the shape and direction of our lives, it by definition endorses a certain art of living. What is more, the fact that psychoanalysis promotes the idea that psychic transformation is possible—that we can over time modify not only our conscious, but also our unconscious inner processes—implies that it assumes that we possess the potential for various types of self-fashioning. The very idea that symptoms can be alleviated, that we can loosen psychic fixations and exchange rigid patterns of thought, feeling, and action for a more flexible manner of experiencing the world, suggests the possibility of

psychic renewal and regeneration. The possibility of such subjective revitalization, I would like to propose, constitutes a crucial component of the psychoanalytic art of living.

Traditional accounts of the art of living tend to describe it as a matter of cultivating a unitary and internally consistent self.<sup>4</sup> Theoretical advances in how we think about subjectivity—from Freud’s discovery of the unconscious as an inherently disruptive element of psychic life to postmodern depictions of decentered, fragmentary, and polyvalent subjective realities—have made it impossible to conceive of the art of living in these terms. As a result, a contemporary art of living—an art (and practice) that would be relevant to the peculiar psychic realities of postmodern subjectivity—cannot be directed at making our lives more coherent, but must instead convey something constructive about coping with their intrinsic incoherence. Its aim cannot be to conjure away life’s tensions, ambiguities, and points of bewilderment, but rather to teach us how to live through these without breaking our spirit. Psychoanalysis, I believe, can help us to develop such a contemporary alternative to traditional versions of the art of living because it takes the incoherence of human existence for granted. It is in fact deeply suspicious of excessive displays of coherence, for it recognizes that such displays frequently function as psychic defenses that thwart the fluid circulations of our creative energies. Self-consistency taken to an extreme, psychoanalysis intimates, can be an impediment to psychic vitality and multidimensionality.

Psychoanalysis—at least the kind of psychoanalysis that concerns me in this book—makes a virtue out of life’s contingency.<sup>5</sup> By this I do not mean that psychoanalysis does not respect our desire to feel grounded in the world, but merely that it emphasizes that the best we can do for our well-being is to learn to cope with the fact that life’s unpredictability invariably exceeds our capacity to control it. As a matter of fact, the more we cling to the notion of predictability, the less dexterously we are able to deal with life as the erratic and capricious stream of unanticipated events, encounters, and developments that it often is. No matter how carefully we strive to organize our lives around certain centers of security—ideals, ambitions, or rela-

tionships, for instance—it is our lot as human beings to learn to survive less than secure circumstances.

I am here talking about insecurity as an existential predicament rather than as a state of affairs that arises from unequal or oppressive social arrangements. While the latter can be ameliorated by rearranging the conditions that make some lives more insecure than others—that in fact render some lives unbearable while artificially cushioning others—the former is something that none of us, insofar as we are creatures of consciousness (and unconsciousness), can elude. We all know this. However, it is one thing to agree with the truism that few aspects of life are as constant as its inconstancy, yet altogether another to be able to move from the pursuit of stability to an acceptance of, and tolerance for, instability. Psychoanalysis at its best—when it curtails its dogmatic and prescriptive tendencies—can empower us to embrace the unforeseen with a measure of resourcefulness.

To put the matter differently, psychoanalysis can help us to envision what it might mean to be the agents of our lives in a world that questions the very possibility of agency. The issue of agency—how much creative freedom we have with respect to our lives, to what extent we can be the authors of our own meanings, and how (if at all) we might be able to escape the dominant sociocultural structures that surround us—remains one of the most contested topics of contemporary philosophy because its stakes are quite high. Whether we think of the human subject as a self-directing entity or as a mere plaything of external forces that reside beyond its control has tremendous implications for some of our most deeply held beliefs—beliefs about what it means to be a human being, whether originality and creativity are possible, what the status of inspiration is, what self-actualization entails, what it means to take responsibility for our actions, how we might go about changing the world for the better, and what social justice would look like.

One of the merits of psychoanalysis is that it recognizes that we are neither fully agentic nor entirely disempowered. Like many other contemporary theories of subjectivity, psychoanalysis operates under the assumption that human beings are constituted through social processes of language acquisition and acculturation—that our identities are

reflective of our placement in a specific historical setting rather than of a divinely endowed or metaphysical kernel of humanness. In short, psychoanalysis believes in the socially constructed nature of subjectivity and psychic life. This means, among other things, that it recognizes that we are always obliged to work within the cultural materials at our disposal, that our attempts at self-constitution inevitably take place within a social context that places limits on what we can envision and attain. At the same time, psychoanalysis contends that the fact that we exist in a world of predetermined meanings does not imply that we cannot inventively contribute to the production of meaning—that we cannot generate the kind of meaning that means something to us personally.

Though there is no such thing as a stable or coherent self, and though we can never be the authors of our existence in any pure or unconditional sense, each of us does have a self, and most of us would probably like to be able to actively intervene in the unfolding of our destinies. In this context, one of the most empowering insights of psychoanalysis is its acknowledgment that the self's constructed status enhances, rather than diminishes, its creative potential. Instead of advancing the somewhat facile idea that the sketch of our personhood is ingrained within our being from birth—and that it is our task to fill in and actualize, as accurately as possible, the outlines of this sketch—psychoanalysis emphasizes that we form ourselves in response (or resistance) to the innumerable external influences that surround us; precisely because we are not tied to a predestined blueprint of what we are supposed to become, we have a much greater degree of leeway in carving out the contours of our existence.

Psychoanalysis is not a practice of discovering who or what we are in any essential sense, but rather of finding evocative modes of signifying facets of existence that in one way or another feel valuable to us or that manage to spark our desire to know more. From this point of view, one could say that psychoanalysis invites us to reconsider the very meaning of agency. Rather than conceptualizing agency as a function of heroic feats of self-actualization that are designed to enable us to overcome the constraints of our positionality in the world—as is often the case with more traditional notions of transcendence—psycho-

analysis encourages us to view it as a matter of our ability to inhabit our actual circumstances in ways that allow us to make the most of these circumstances. Instead of the goal of rising above the demands of everyday life, psychoanalysis promotes our capacity to feel effectively connected to the here and now, to the tangible (yet also fleeting) density of living our lives. Agency is therefore not a question of a sovereign human will pitted against the world, but rather of our uniquely human capacity to imaginatively play with (and within) the possibilities presented by the world. This suggests that though redemption or existential consolation in any absolute sense is an impossible aspiration, we possess enough creative ingenuity to enter into the current of our lives in rewarding ways. As a matter of fact, to the extent that the act of renouncing transcendent ideals of redemption and consolation redirects our energies from the otherworldly to the worldly, it may enable us to better discern what in our daily lives is worth our care and solicitude. This is one sense in which psychoanalysis provides us with a new understanding of the art of living.

Psychoanalysis also takes the art of living in a novel direction because it, by definition, encourages us to take a curious and inquisitive attitude toward our unconscious psychic states. By now it is common to admit that we tend to unconsciously produce the conditions of our psychic torment in the sense that we unwittingly, and often repeatedly, place ourselves in hurtful, disappointing, or self-undermining situations. Freud developed his influential notion of the repetition compulsion in part to explain this perplexing phenomenon. But it is important to underscore that the unconscious impacts our lives in even more fundamental ways, by shaping what we, generally speaking, consider possible in our lives. Since the unconscious pays tribute to and seeks to preserve archaic forms of psychic meaning—forms of meaning that derive from our family history and early infantile experiences—it can cause us to think and act according to formulas derived from the distant past. These formulas—the emotional rules of engagement that we bring to our interactions with the world, so to speak—may have little to do with our conscious aspirations. Yet they can be potent enough to guide our behavior in life-defining ways. They can, for instance,

channel us into specific existential tracks by virtue of the fact that they, in ways that we are not entirely aware of, persuade us to pursue certain directions and life choices while simultaneously barring others. This suggests that theories of subjectivity that fail to consider the unconscious—that strive to understand the self on a purely rational level—by necessity have a limited and ultimately limiting vision not only of what it means to be a human being, but also of what it means to try to transform our lives.

Like its more traditional counterparts, the psychoanalytic art of living accentuates the importance of the examined life. However, from a psychoanalytic perspective, no matter how resolute our efforts to modify our lives on the conscious level, we will fail to bring about genuine transformation as long as we are incapable of effectively arbitrating between our conscious and unconscious processes of making sense of the world. This is why one of the aims of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice is to enable us to develop an actively interpretative relationship to our unconscious motivations. It is when we lack an adequate understanding of these motivations that we get caught up in the meshes of the repetition compulsion—that we end up reenacting destructive patterns in a passive and uncontrollable manner. This is why it is essential to learn to read our unconscious impulses to obtain a more accurate sense of what might be neglected or underdeveloped in our psychic lives. Once we come to see that we are not merely the helpless victims of these impulses but can take a dynamic role in deciphering them, we can begin to alter our lives. This is what it means, in Freudian terms, to move from a passive repetition of the past to an active working through of this past. Working through as a form of conscious remembering and reconstruction of the past breaks the cycle of repetition because it allows us to catch our unconscious in the act, as it were, before it has had the chance to dictate our next move.

At this juncture, it may be useful to underscore that developing an interpretative relationship to the unconscious is not the same thing as colonizing it. The point is not to drain the psyche of all of its mysteries, but merely to cultivate an ongoing rapport between conscious and unconscious psychic processes. As a matter of fact, while “solving” a



specific unconscious mystery may shed light on a particular aspect of our existence, it can at the same time pave the way for a dozen previously undetected mysteries to find their way into our consciousness; our every effort to access the unconscious generates new forms of unconscious meaning. In this sense, the more we probe, the more there is to probe. The more we know, the more aware we become of what we can never know.

Our attempts to know ourselves more fully therefore tend to expand the realm of the unknowable. In this sense, although psychoanalysis aims to improve our capacity to read the unconscious, it can also deepen our appreciation for the fact that some parts of ourselves will always remain enigmatic and indecipherable; it can make us more receptive to what we do not or cannot comprehend about ourselves and our lives. Indeed, it is the persistence of these inscrutable elements that makes the psychoanalytic method viable in the first place, for they ensure that there is no limit to the layers of interpretation that can be brought to bear upon the psyche. As Adam Phillips notes, it is to the extent that life resists examination that it remains “endlessly examinable”—“that it can always be described in different ways, from different points of view.”<sup>6</sup>

During earlier times, what was enigmatic about the self tended to be explained in religious, mystical, or superstitious terms. In the post-Freudian universe, it is the unconscious that—for some of us at least—has come to house the mysterious (and therefore awe-inspiring) elements of existence. Another way of stating the matter is to say that the unconscious has in many ways come to replace what was traditionally conceptualized as fate. As we have seen, one of the most noteworthy things about the unconscious is that it can land us in the same place over and again, without our conscious understanding or consent. This implies that the logic of our existence is much less random than we might assume and that at least some of the events and episodes that appear to simply come to pass in our lives are brought about by the pressure exerted by our unconscious on our conscious lives.<sup>7</sup> The repetition compulsions that drive our behavior obey their own internal rationale, which is precisely why they can create the illusion of an

impersonal force (or curse) that determines our destiny. Even when—or perhaps exactly when—we believe that we have finally managed to overcome a destructive pattern, we can find ourselves enacting it anew and with renewed vigor. Indeed, it is difficult to know what is more exasperating: not knowing how things will turn out or knowing exactly how they are likely to turn out despite our best efforts at a different outcome.

This raises the question—and this is one of the central questions of psychoanalysis as well as of this book—of whether it is possible to alter our fate. Can we change our unconscious patterns and responses? I have been implying all along that we can. Indeed, if we could not, there would be little point to psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice. Psychoanalysis asks us to take a careful look at our past precisely so as to empower us to construct a new fate out of the elements of the old. While the disillusionments of the past inevitably assert themselves in the present through the unconscious, one of the goals of psychoanalysis is to enable us to work through these disillusionments until they yield some sort of wisdom or insight. From this point of view, the fact that our lives rarely unfold according to linear progress narratives, but contain delays, detours, mishaps, breakdowns, and moments of disenchantment, is not merely an unavoidable part of life, but can initiate us into a more multilayered manner of responding to the world. In fact, knowing not only how to survive such setbacks, but also how to work through and beyond them to more affirmative psychic states, indicates that we have grasped something fundamental about the psychoanalytic art of living.

Psychoanalysis, perhaps more than most philosophical representations of subjectivity, foregrounds the fundamental fragility of human life in the sense that it recognizes that things can go terribly wrong—that the self can be wounded, damaged, shattered, or stretched beyond its ability to cope. Because psychoanalysis begins with the symptom—with the indication that something in the subject's psychic life has gone amiss—it possesses a keen appreciation for the fact that some fates are simply too agonizing to endure. It is for this reason that psychoanalysis cannot be merely a practice of self-enrichment, but must engage the unconscious in a process of transformation. While it is fashionable

these days to talk about the inherently subversive nature of the unconscious—and there is no doubt that the erratic energies of the unconscious can be harnessed for countercultural purposes—for those whose unconscious lives bear the traces of past trauma the more valuable lesson may be the idea that pain can be creatively transformed, that pain is not necessarily useless. Developing an active relationship to our unconscious in the sense that I have described may be the most important step in being able to productively work through a devastating past. Such transformative reworking of the past changes the way that we understand our history, which in turn changes the way we live in the present and reach toward the future. This means that the past loses its power to indiscriminately impact the present. This is exactly what it means to rewrite fate. And I would say that it is also what it means to participate in the psychoanalytic art of living.

The first chapter of this book outlines the main characteristics of the philosophical art of living as it was historically portrayed. After contemplating the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional philosophical conception, I move on to the question of how we might best think about subjective authenticity and singularity in the contemporary context. I maintain that the challenge of developing a distinctive character is less a matter of unearthing innate and deeply buried dimensions of being than it is of our capacity to embrace an ongoing and open-ended process of becoming. I believe that this model of the art of living enables us to acknowledge the radical contingency of existence while simultaneously taking seriously our need to fashion a personality and a mode of life that possess enough consistency to feel psychically manageable. I also reflect on the complex—and at times profoundly antagonistic—relationship between the demands of social conformity and our desire to attain a measure of individual uniqueness.

Chapter 2 proposes that the fact that we often feel internally lacking and alienated constitutes the very foundation of our ability to interact with the world in creative ways—that it is our perpetual dissatisfaction with ourselves that causes us to approach the world as a space of possibility that has the power to awaken our attention and make us marvel at its vibrant details. I consequently suggest that we undermine

our chances for happiness when we envision it in terms of healing the void within our being, achieving a state of unalienated wholeness, or ascending to a transcendent realm beyond our daily lives. And I surmise that we increase the likelihood of happiness when we concentrate our efforts on learning how to take advantage of the largely fortuitous twists and turns of our existence. Within this framework, I consider how we might be able to work our way from painful psychic histories toward a more hopeful future—how we might be able to transform the hardships of our past into an existential opportunity.

Chapter 3 investigates what it means, from a specifically psychoanalytic perspective, to rewrite one's fate. Beginning from Freud's insight that the way in which we unconsciously relate to the world—particularly our repetitive tendency to reenact self-debilitating subjective scenarios—in large degree determines our destiny, I delve into the question of what it might entail to move from a passive repetition of petrified psychic patterns to a more enabling reworking of these patterns. In this context, I review Hans Loewald's suggestion that the unconscious contains our psychic potentialities in an embryonic form and that molding a distinctive identity is therefore a matter of gradually appropriating these potentialities on a higher level of inner organization. I moreover examine Loewald's conviction that becoming a self-realized character involves the eagerness to singularize—as well as to take responsibility for—our unconscious. Finally, I delineate the manner in which the dispersal of our habitual unconscious responses expands the field of existential possibilities, thereby enabling us to reconfigure our destiny.

Chapter 4 returns to the relationship between inner lack and creativity by drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan who regards lack to be constitutive of the human condition. Lacan furthermore contends that fantasy formations—particularly those that are designed to buttress the narcissistic grandiosity of the ego by offering us an inflated image of ourselves—mislead us by covering over this lack so as to make our identities appear more integrated than they actually are. As a result, they make it difficult for us to appreciate the possibility that lack may render us inventive by inducing us to undertake ever-renewed exploits

of meaning-production as a means of compensating for our gnawing awareness of insufficiency. That is, fantasies obscure the fact that our inner void serves as a fertile kind of emptiness that animates our subjectivities. Against this backdrop, I suggest that it is only the fall of our most treasured fantasies that allows us to transition to a more imaginative and creatively engaged psychic economy. More specifically, the disbanding of fantasies enables us to better listen to the idiosyncratic particularity of our desire, and in so doing to begin to forge a singular identity apart from the social conventions that seek to determine the parameters of our being.

Chapter 5 discusses creativity as a productive means to mourn the various losses that punctuate our lives. Whenever we experience a loss, our psyches struggle to find a substitute for what we have lost. A symptom is one such substitute, standing in for the lost object, ideal, or way of life. Creative activity, I posit, is another—infinately more rewarding—manner of responding to loss. I illustrate that creativity is essentially a process of playing with absence whereby our losses are knitted into the delicate composition of our imaginative undertakings. Creativity, in this sense, offers us an indirect means of holding onto and honoring what we have lost. At the same time, it allows us to take a degree of distance from our losses, to transform our sadness into signification, and, in so doing, to gradually diffuse the pain caused by loss. While loss—the absence of a beloved other, for instance—can momentarily debilitate us, it can also (precisely insofar as it compels us to look for substitutes) give rise to inspiration. This is why the ability to move from loss to creative expression is one of the most central components of the psychoanalytic art of living.