

## The Two Concepts of Action and Responsibility in Psychoanalysis

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THERE ARE TWO MAJOR CONCEPTS OF responsibility and action found in the writings of Freud and in the current psychoanalytic literature. Both sets of concepts are part of our "ordinary language." Perhaps influenced by his philosophy teacher, Franz Brentano, who argued that every psychological phenomena is characterized by intention (Kenny, 1963), Freud may have divided the general case of intentional action into two somewhat more specific cases: deliberate and nondeliberate intentional actions (Freud, 1893, p. 10n.); (1901, p. 254). When Freud wrote about actions directed toward conscious goals, he employed a teleological intentional causality which includes the "deliberate." He contrasted these more or less conscious "pulls" from the future with "pushes" from the past in the form of other varieties of intentional though nondeliberate actions, namely, behaviors that follow from drives and unconscious wishes. As Strachey (Freud, 1901, p. 10) comments, "intentionality merely indicates the existence of a motive and carries no implication of conscious intention." Because Freud, as a therapist, appeared more concerned with a person's actions, including thoughts as "an experimental kind of acting" (1911, p. 221), than with his accidents or reflexes, he held his patients responsible for what they did with their lives (Freud, 1925, p. 133). Responsibility and action concepts are usually linked, and

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there are a variety of meanings to these responsibility and action concepts. In both Freud's and in more recent writing, these separate but interdependent concepts are often confounded. My aim here is to clarify the meanings of action and responsibility and draw out some of their implications for psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Conceptual confusion is of more than academic concern and may lead to confused practice and understanding. For example, Spence's (1982) critique of the clinical implications of Schafer's (1976) "action language" is marred by a failure to separate action and responsibility concepts, and this is unsurprising since Schafer's own writing makes these distinctions less than clear. Spence is concerned that an analyst who follows Schafer's action and responsibility considerations will force his analysis into an adversary relationship. This concern is, on the one hand, realistic and, on the other, trapped by a confusion of the varied meanings.

Responsibility concepts, explicit or implied, are central to the language and practice of psychoanalysis, especially insofar as there is a therapeutic desire to make the unconscious conscious. The therapeutic goal of insight through interpretation increases the domain of mastery and results in increased personal responsibility, ethical or otherwise. Responsibility and ethics are also linked concepts. This eligibility to assume personal responsibility is basic to what is legally and philosophically meant by "persons." The various concepts of responsibility are part of our usual commitment when we use the term "persons," and we use the idea of responsibility differently when we talk about persons than when we talk about other things (Schwartz, 1982). Personal responsibility concepts derive their meanings and consequences from the fact that we see ourselves as persons apart from other natural objects, and created from this conceptualization of ourselves are the categories of moral, ethical, legal, and esthetic (Ossorio, 1981). Psychoanalytic theory tends toward confusion when addressing these subjects and categories. It is my hope that the conceptualization I shall outline below will be of some aid in sorting out these matters.

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The conceptual confusion I wish to address involves *first*, the idea of responsibility for one's choices and deliberations and *second*, the notion of responsibility for the manifestations of one's personal characteristics.

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Clarification of these issues is a prerequisite for adequate understanding, use, and critique of action language whether in psychoanalysis or in the humanities.

## Deliberate Action and Ethics

We ordinarily hold each other responsible for our choices and deliberations. Ethical and legal attributions of blame or praise arise naturally as a consequence of the acts that follow from our deliberations. If I adequately consider the various ways of reaching a goal and choose a particular course, without undue constraint or coercion, and then act on that deliberation, I am ethically responsible for the result. This is part of the usual structure of the concept of "ethical responsibility." Ethical responsibility and deliberation go hand in hand.

Erikson (1964) differentiates the "moral" from the "ethical." He defines the *moral* as based on rules of conduct grounded in fear. This is a prudential concern with the avoidance of "outer threats of abandonment, punishment and public exposure" or a personal sense "of guilt, of shame, or of isolation." Morality is grounded in prudence rather than ethics. A person afflicted by his moral sense does not experience much awareness of his grounds for conduct nor of his choices in proceeding or refraining. Erikson defines the *ethical* as concerned with "rules based on ideals to be striven for with a high degree of rational assent and with a ready consent to a formulated good..." (p. 222). This definition of the ethical is predicated on a person being able to actively choose, hence consent, to a course of action. Erikson's account is consistent with other accounts of the ethical as grounded in deliberate action (Ossorio, 1981) and based on an intrinsic concern with justice (Pitkin, 1972). Erikson goes on to say that, "the moral and the ethical sense are different in their psychological dynamics because the

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moral sense develops on an earlier more immature level." Accordingly, the moral seems assigned to both the unconscious and the superego. In contrast, one's ethics by defined necessity are available for conscious deliberation, although perhaps not prethought in narrative. Deliberate action as conscious consent is a prerequisite for ethical action. This is not to say that an ethical action is preceded by a narrative train of deliberate thought focusing on justice or the common good, but rather that the person who acts ethically has preconsciously available a disposition for such thought and the ability to automatically appraise a situation as calling for such concern. To act ethically a person does not have to "think through" his actions, but he has to have the current potential to do so.

## Intentional and Deliberate Action

In a formal presentation of the concept of "persons," Ossorio (1973), (1981) clarifies the relation of deliberation to intent. He describes persons as intentional actors who are able to observe and describe their actions, and to criticize, *sometimes deliberately*, their descriptions. Description and critique are special cases of intentional action facilitated by language or languagelike representation. People are not always engaged in deliberate action, but in certain situations they are expected to be and are held by other people accountable for their actions in those circumstances. Whereas nonlinguistic intentional action is the form of animal behavior in general, deliberate action is a form of intentional behavior specific to people. Deliberate action is an intentional action in which the person's behavior follows from his appraisal of the available options. Specifically, the person considers the options that correspond to his descriptions of the world. Hence, in deliberate action the person does not merely distinguish actions, but also chooses among alternative actions. The effectiveness of the resulting action will depend, in part, on the accuracy of the descriptions. *In the basic case of intentional action only a goal must be desired, distinguished, and sought; in deliberate*

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action a choice in ways of achieving the goal is also recognized. In deliberate action one sees that there are many ways of reaching a goal and that the goal may conflict with other goals. Also, in deliberate action one may choose

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not to pursue the goal. Renunciation is a form of deliberate action.

Intentional action is goal-directed action which may be consciously, pre-consciously, or unconsciously performed. But since deliberate action involves a more or less self-conscious choice among appraised alternatives, it is usually considered conscious behavior. Ordinarily, when people engage in a deliberate action, they are self-aware of both their circumstances and of a set of values they assume to be relevant. Of course, the person may be mistaken about the nature of his motive and situation, but the person proceeds in relation to what he takes his reasons and circumstances to be. One of the tasks of psychoanalysis is to chart out the ways a person may self-deceive in these matters. Adequate and accurate self-conscious deliberation is an uncertain achievement as psychoanalytic practice time and again demonstrates. All the same, we expect the achievement of accurate self-conscious reflection to be a regular feature of a person's everyday life and an achievement that corresponds to his depth and breadth of reality testing.

Ossorio (1973), (1981) has described intentional action as the performance and achievement that follow from certain standing conditions of motivation, knowledge, and skill. The motivation, knowledge, and skill can be unconscious and may correspond to the person's drives and unconscious wishes and fantasies insofar as drive and wish have an actual motivational status. Psychoanalytic theory holds that unconscious wish and fantasy have motive force. Hartmann (1958, p. 101) asserts, "The psychology of action is inconceivable without the psychology of instinctual drives." Knowledge that serves as the object of intent may be an actual environmental object, including one's body, or it may be a psychological object in the form of representations of unconscious wish and fantasy. Ossorio distinguishes hedonics, prudence, ethics, and esthetics as intrinsic

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classes of intentional motivation. Elsewhere (Schwartz, 1982), I have indicated that hedonics and prudence are motive categories that follow from our biological status and serve as the motivational descriptions of drive and affect. I have argued that ethics and esthetics are motivations that require a potential for the self-awareness of choice, especially the choice of renunciation. Ethics and esthetics, in contrast to hedonics and prudence, do not follow directly from our body's biology as do our drives and affects, but rather from our use of language and deliberation. Because we are organisms we have pleasures to chase and pains to avoid, and because we are persons we experience ethical dilemmas in our pursuits and evasions.

To summarize: (1) Intentional action is the general case of purposeful goal-directed behavior. The motive may be grounded in drive, wish, or reason and may be conscious, pre-conscious, or unconscious. The general case of intentional action does not require language. (2) Deliberate action is a special case of intentional action in which the person does not merely distinguish the object of his desire, but also distinguishes alternate pathways and alternate objects and goals. Deliberate action is conscious or pre-conscious action and presupposes the ability to be realistic, to decide, to value, and to choose. Language or language-governed imagery (Arnheim, 1969) facilitates deliberate actions by providing a logical structure of rules and an infinite potential for representation (Wittgenstein, 1953). Language or language-governed imagery enable a person to perform "experiments in acting," without having to otherwise perform the deed. Persons use deliberate thought to represent not only the consequences of what they intend to do, but also to represent what they do not intend to do.

Consequently, the key distinction between the general case of intentional action and the more specific case of deliberate action is the recognition of choice or option. In the minimum full case of intentional action, the actor merely distinguishes an opportunity to get something he wants, consciously or unconsciously, and he may act on this recognition impulsively. Drive-governed

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behavior and emotional behavior are examples. The "something he wants" may be represented in the real world as an actual object or it may be a purely psychological object, a hallucination, and so on. In deliberate action, when the

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actor encounters an "object of desire," he is also aware of the dilemmas of going after it. He may recognize alternative approaches or may wonder whether he should refrain from the act. The choice is his. Erikson (1964) recognized these issues when he wrote that "purpose" is "the strength of aim-direction fed by fantasy yet not fantastic, limited by guilt yet not inhibited, morally restrained yet ethically active" (p. 122). Deliberate action is multidetermined action and may reflect the compromises of drive, wish, opportunity, and consciously held aim. This conceptualization of deliberate action as dependent upon *option*, *decision*, and *effectiveness* is also in line with what Hartmann (1958, p. 67) called "rational behavior." He said, "... only the choice of appropriate means to a given goal may be called rational." Hartmann also observed that although people are able to behave rationally, they often do not and that, "the role of the highly differentiated rational functions is neither general nor absolute" (p. 69). Hartmann recognized that deliberate action is a necessary feature of the ego psychology of the healthy person and that, "We usually consider it pathognomonic if people find it difficult to make decisions, are not masters of their actions..." (p. 83).

### **Deliberate Action and Dreams**

Although deliberate actions are a regular feature of daytime activity, their effective nature is usually absent in dreams. Although some apparently deliberate thought occurs in dreaming, such thinking is much less evident in the dream than in our daytime activities. This deficit of deliberate thought is an explication of what Freud (1900) acknowledged about dreaming when he wrote that "The renunciation of voluntary direction of the flow of ideas cannot be disputed" (p. 590). In dreams,

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the deficit in deliberation corresponds to a diminished concern with reality and effective action. Paraphrased, this is a description of regression in which regression involves intention freed of the constraints of the real world. Deliberation, in contrast, usually occurs in relation to a sense of the constraints of reality. Effective daytime activity in its concern with the real often makes deliberation necessary. The issues that generate deliberate thought are less functionally significant when we are asleep and out of harm's way. Sleep's temporary freedom from the dilemmas of effective action, in contrast to the walkabout world, allows our dreams to safely develop a wide range of representation which includes, by virtue of condensation and displacement, the nonsensical and the absurd, side by side with the imaginary and the real. Awake action, on the other hand, requires more attention to reality in order for our activities to have their intended effect. Deliberation and reality testing tend to go together. By restricting representation to the actual or the possible they constrain the mind but produce effective results.

As I shall argue below, the potential for deliberate action and reality testing confers on a person his eligibility for being held, by himself and others, responsible for the manifestations of his personal characteristics. This potential for deliberation will sometimes include his being held ethically responsible, but we would do well not to equate all meanings of responsibility with ethical responsibility, that is, responsibility following from choice.

### **Responsibility for Manifestations of Personal Characteristics**

"Obviously one must hold oneself responsible for the evil impulses of one's dreams. What else is one to do with them?" (Freud, 1925, p. 133).

Some of our personal characteristics are readily open to our inspection and some are not. In Freud's 1925 essay on "Moral Responsibility for the Content of Dreams" he is adamant that in some fashion a person is and can be held responsible

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for his personal characteristics even if they are generated by or a function of the repressed. A person needs to experience himself as the agent or owner of the repressed since the repressed affects his actions in the real world. It

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returns. If a person claims he is not responsible for his unconscious attributes, then, to quote Freud, he will "be taught better by the criticisms of [his] fellow-men, by the disturbances in [his] actions and the confusions of [his] feelings" (p. 133). Even though a person cannot ordinarily be said to choose his unconscious condition, he may be held responsible for its ramifications. If he is capable of insight he may also be held *ethically* and *legally* responsible in the sense that is seen in the various doctrines concerning criminality, tort, and negligence. Here I mean the familiar "know or ought to know" standards (Prosser, 1941). Because people are able to deliberate they are expected to do so in certain circumstances.

Often, however, a person has characteristics, such as unconscious wishes or fantasies, that he cannot adequately deliberate about because he does not accurately know about them, except perhaps as features of his dreams and symptoms. Psychoanalytic theory treats unconscious fantasy as latent content that serves in the formation of dream and symptom. One of the hallmarks of psychoanalytic theory appears to be its demonstration that a person's wishes and fantasies, conscious and unconscious, are personal characteristics in the form of standing conditions or states of readiness. Standing conditions and states of readiness are motivational and are the basic form of those personal characteristics classified as "dispositions." In psychoanalytic theory unconscious fantasies serve as dispositions toward repetition of earlier actions and traumas when the current circumstances serve as a releasing context. Such action occurs in the varieties of transference, symptom, and so on. But when unconscious fantasies produce symptomatic actions, the afflicted cannot competently choose to act or refrain from this acting, that is exercise self-control, because they literally do not know what they are doing. It is this lack of needed insight that

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must be filled, and this is where psychoanalysis and kindred psychotherapies attempt a remedy. Intentional actions involve motivations, knowledge of circumstance, and skill, and any or all of these aspects may be unconscious. To choose to either continue or to refrain from an intentional action, that is, to behave deliberately, one must first know to some necessary extent what the action at issue is. One of the tasks of a psychoanalyst is to bring to the patient's awareness useful knowledge of what he is doing so that he can be in a position to decide what he wants to continue to do. It is in this fashion that insight connects ethical responsibility, deliberate action, and self-control. Here self-control is liberation through a recognition of one's unconsciously driven aims.

Loewald (1978) explains that Freud tied his basic concern with responsibility not to moral or ethical values, "but to the fact that the power of the unconscious or id is part of myself, and neither is of divine origin nor comes from alien spirits" (p. 9). Yet, as Loewald points out, there is an impersonal quality to acting unconsciously, and these unconscious aspects of the person infuse his choices. As recent criticisms of Strachey's translation of Freud have indicated (Bettelheim, 1982); (Ornston, 1982), some of this impersonal id (it) must in the course of an analysis be transformed into a personal ego (me). The amoral impersonal must become personal before it can become ethical. Similarly, Klein (1976) said, "The ego as the 'agent' of responsibility takes on meaning when it implies a self-schema to which actions 'belong.'" Such a viewpoint "may reveal Freud's (1933, p. 80) adage, 'Where id was, there ego shall be,' as a moral appeal, based on standards of responsibility that develop in relation to a self that is always seeking meaning—that is, seeking to make experiences syntonic, to preserve continuity in this syntonicity, to integrate societal claims and expectations to that end" (p. 283). To behave in an ethically responsible fashion, one must first claim, own, or know one's personal history and

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one's self. Disowning the unconscious is self-deception, and self-deception blocks self-control and freedom.

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Consequently, the two basic action and responsibility concepts are interdependent as follows: (1) as an intentional agent a person is responsible for the manifestations of his personal characteristics, but since he may be unaware of them and he cannot often be said to choose these characteristics, it is questionable whether he is ethically responsible; (2) a person is held ethically responsible for his deliberate actions and, of course, these follow from his circumstances and his specific personal characteristics. There is here a necessary circle of meaning. One of the tasks of a clinical psychoanalysis is to strengthen a person's grasp of this circle.

Schafer (1976) also recognizes the distinctions between responsibility for mere agency (manifestations of personal characteristics, e.g. unconscious attributes) and ethical responsibility when he writes, "attribution of responsibility may be carried out on the basis of *whether* one has done the action or on the basis of *how* one has done the action, or both. *How* involves the notions, 'deliberately,' 'impulsively,' 'accidentally,' and so forth..." (p. 233). A person is responsible both as the agent and as one who can sometimes choose what he does. Had Schafer clarified these distinctions between mere agency and deliberate behavior, Spence's (1982) critique would carry less weight.

From the above remarks it can be seen that the distinctions between intentional and deliberate action have parallel formulations throughout psychoanalysis. For example, the primary and secondary process distinctions concern two domains of cognition central to two forms of action. Whereas the primary process, unreflected upon, can only lead to unconscious intentional actions, the secondary process may lead to intentional actions performed unconsciously, preconsciously, or consciously. Some of these secondary-process intentional actions as preconscious or conscious behavior may also be deliberate actions. Whereas the primary processes are a flow of uninhibited intent or sheer desire, the secondary processes include

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the deliberate, the linguistic, and the controlled. We do not hold each other ethically responsible for our primary-process cognitions, but only for our secondary-process reflections and controls. The dilemma is, of course, that our cognitions and actions are governed by the rules of both processes, more or less. It is the balance of the "more or less" that informs psychoanalysis.

## Responsibility and Free Association

If, in some fashion, the patient is told or led to believe he is morally or ethically responsible for his free associations, he will probably stop free-associating. The patient is required to report his feelings, including his moral ones, but it should be clear that the analysand *is not* ethically responsible for the content of his associations in the sense that I have been describing here, since he is not fundamentally engaged in a deliberate action and *should not be*. If he is mainly choosing what to say to his analyst, then he is not engaged in a free association, but in a secondary-process verbal deliberate action. As analysand, he has renounced the option to hold back, which is an option always present in behavior that is judged for its ethical value. Even if he is free-associating and has a visual image and has to decide how to describe what he "sees," he is not free to choose whether to speak at all; he has pledged to give up that choice. There are choices involved in free association, but they do not include the choice to speak or to refrain from speaking, but only how best to describe what comes to mind in the cases in which the content of consciousness is image or affect. In his agreement to try to keep the fundamental rule, the analysand agrees to try to articulate whatever comes to mind. If he is trying to free-associate, he is only ethically deliberate in his choice to both enter analysis and to try to follow the fundamental rule.

If the clinical psychoanalytic position is that a person is an agent responsible for his personal characteristics, then psychoanalysis is concerned with the patient's potential for ethical action. Personal

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characteristics are exhibited to self and others through the manifestations of all classes of intentional actions, some of which may be worthy of scorn or praise. But during analysis, the analysand's actions, insofar as he adheres to the

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rule of free association, are nondeliberate intentional actions, and since the analyst has accepted the role of neutrality, the patient's associations will not be praised or scorned. The wisdom of neutrality respects the logic that only deliberate actions are necessarily connected to the ethical. By giving up deliberate action, the analyst steps outside the realm where ethical judgment is a proper response to his utterances. Analytic neutrality agrees and Freud and Schafer accordingly do not assign an ethical value to the associations themselves, but to the patient's honest, brave, and deliberate attempt to follow the fundamental rule. The analytic patient, by choosing to follow the rule and thereby create opportunity for new insight, assumes an ethically responsible position by "irresponsibly" saying whatever comes to mind. The analyst is not held ethically responsible for what he *has* to say so that he may become ethical in what he *chooses* to do.

## Free Will, Determinism, and Liberation

Discussions of "choice," "decision," and "responsibility" almost always bring up the topic of "free will" and "determinism," and these are all concepts that Freud hazarded to use. He frequently wrote that his theory was deterministic and this has created tension in both the philosophical and psychoanalytic communities in regard to clinical psychoanalytic goals. Philosophers such as MacIntyre (1958) have argued that clinical psychoanalysis is a treatment that enhances or expands the patient's rationality even though the theory is assumed to negate free will and the usual meanings of ethical choice. MacIntyre points out that, "This clash between the language of rationality and responsibility and the language of determinism remains unresolved in Freud's writing" (p. 92). The dilemma here is that

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the therapy makes conscious the unconscious, or ego out of id, and this is a good basis for ethical responsibility and choice, yet "if everything was determined, it could not have been otherwise" (and so choice an illusion?). What I would like to show is that for psychoanalysis this is a false dilemma and one that stems from conceptual confusions. For psychoanalysis, free will versus determinism is a false issue that obscures the central claims of psychoanalysis—that behavior has multiple determinants and can be said to be "overdetermined." The useful distinctions are between motivated and nonmotivated behavior. Psychoanalysis stresses that few if any behaviors are nonmotivated and that the motivation for a behavior may be largely unconscious.

Freud's free will was a philosophical straw-man and his determinism not only an *historical-causal determinism* of, say, repressed infancy, but also a *teleological determinism* of adult striving. There are both "pushes from the past" and "pulls from the future" in psychoanalysis. When Freud (1901, p. 254) said, "determination in the psychical sphere is carried out without any gap," he was writing about conscious and unconscious motivation and contrasting the motivated with the case of the "free—and unmotivated—will." In effect, he said that where the pulls from the future falter, there will be pushes from the past. Freud's concept of free will is not the rational and the deliberate pursuit of a goal, but the behaviorally empty categories of the "unmotivated," the "random," the "chanced," and the "arbitrary" which were his meanings for free will in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Freud's determinism is not in contrast to the intentional and the deliberate, and his notion of free will does not correspond to them.

Schafer (1976) indicates that in psychoanalysis, "we are in a universe of discourse in which the idea of free will has no place" (p. 142). But this is not to say that persons are not responsible for their actions. Persons are not responsible for the random, the unmotivated, and the arbitrary. They are responsible

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for their actions, their choices, and their decisions. Motivation creates responsibility; freedom and choice are degraded if equated with the random and the arbitrary. People have their reasons or motives for what they choose to do and it is never a random or arbitrary decision. Decision and intent are not random but in the service of a person's

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status as both an organism with drive and affect and a conscious deliberator with ethical aims and goals.

Personal freedom is reflected in the quality of a person's decisions and the adequacy with which he can claim to own or know his personal characteristics. When acting deliberately, a person can have his reasons for action "more or less" consciously before him. His remaining relevant unconscious motives may color or distort his behavior, but unless the unconscious actually negates his conscious aim he is "more or less" his own master. Clinical psychoanalysis is often spoken about as a method of personal liberation. In regard to his nature, a person is metaphorically both master and slave. What is liberated in a clinical psychoanalysis is the slavery of unknown and driven repetition and that which is so freed expands the domain of the deliberate and the ethical.

## SUMMARY

I have presented two major concepts of action and responsibility which have a role in psychoanalysis and have been confused in the recent literature. Intentional action is the general action concept concerning consciously, preconsciously, or unconsciously enacted goal-directed behavior. Deliberate action is a type of intentional action, performed consciously or perhaps preconsciously, that involves a choice among specific possible ways of achieving a goal. Persons are ethically responsible for their deliberations and also responsible as the agent, deliberate or not, of the manifestations of their personal characteristics. Responsibility for mere agency is not the same as ethical responsibility, but since it is easy to confuse these two concepts

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they may be hazardous as features of clinical dialogue. Finally, "free will" and "determinism" are discussed as issues that historically attend the above subject matter. "Free will versus determinism" is argued to be a false issue properly replaced by Freud's actual interest in the "overdetermined" multiple motivations of behavior.

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