The Ontology of Psychology
Questioning Foundations in the Philosophy of Mind
Linda A.W. Brakel

In this volume Brakel raises questions about conventions in the study of mind in three disciplines—psychoanalysis, philosophy of mind, and experimental philosophy. She illuminates new understandings of the mind through interdisciplinary challenges to views long accepted.

Here she proposes a view of psychoanalysis as a treatment that owes its successes largely to its biological nature—biological in its capacity to best approximate the extinction of problems arising owing to aversive conditioning. She also discusses whether “the mental” can have any real ontological standing, advancing a new form of reductive physicalism—diachronic conjunctive token physicalism (DiCoToP)—which not only provides an understanding of mind/brain properties synchronically but can also be sufficient to address human-sized epistemological considerations that require a diachronic view. She then notes the positive implications of her account for psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Finally, she investigates the uses and abuses of consistency, both in method and content, in the several domains of interest: empirical research, psychoanalysis, thought experiments, and experimental philosophy.

In essence, Brakel articulates different sets of challenges pertaining to: (a) ancient dilemmas such as the mind/body problem; (b) long-standing debates about the nature of therapeutic action in psychoanalysis; and (c) new core questions arising in the relatively young discipline of experimental philosophy.

Linda A.W. Brakel, M.D. is an adjunct associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan Medical School, a faculty research associate in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Michigan, and a faculty member of the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute.
## Contents

*List of Figures xi*
*Acknowledgments xiii*

**PART I**
Introduction
1 Introduction 3

**PART II**
Biological Psychology
2 Extinction Phenomena: A Biologic Perspective on How and Why Psychoanalysis Works 13

**PART III**
Psychological Biology
3 The Ontology of Psychology 41

**PART IV**
Uses and Abuses of Consistency
4 The Uses and Abuses of Consistency in Thought Experiments, Empirical Research, Experimental Philosophy, and Psychoanalysis 95

**PART V**
Conclusion
5 Summary and Conclusions 151

*Notes 157*
*Index 173*
1 Introduction
This is an academic book, one published in the philosophy division of Routledge. I am proud of its placement here; I sought it, and, indeed, for the great majority of the book, I intend to adhere to the standard format and content befitting such an endeavor. However, because I believe my best (and rather) unique contributions can be made only as an interdisciplinary thinker, I will take the liberty of first approaching this introductory chapter as a psychoanalyst so as to offer a highly subjective and rather personal account of this volume’s subject matter.

This book grew out of several experiences of what I shall call epistemological queasiness. The following examples will, I hope, serve to describe, if not fully explain, this phenomenon. The first example concerns my work as a clinical psychoanalyst. Over time I have found myself growing uncomfortable with certain trends in modern-day practice: (1) the burgeoning use of the telephone and Skype visual computerized technology to conduct sessions when patient and analyst are not able to meet in person, and (2) the reduction of sessions from four or five times weekly to once a week. The emergence of these two measures has been attributed to reality constraints on time and money, especially time and money deemed worthy of spending on psychoanalysis in twenty-first-century life. Since these trends were often practiced by the most progressive of psychoanalysts, and since my own self-view does not admit of cleaving to the traditional, I felt uncomfortable with my discomfort and thus motivated to understand just what was so irksome about these seeming improvements, aimed as they are at expanding psychoanalysis to far-off countries and maybe even to a younger demographic. I address this particular uneasiness about psychoanalysis in Chapter Two.

My next example of epistemological discomfort is quite different. While reading in many areas, all broadly considered branches of academic psychology or psychiatry, I experienced a sudden and acute onset of actual epistemological disorientation—I felt a paroxysmal loss of understanding of just what it is that actually constitutes the psychological realm. In other words, I became aware that I could no longer answer the questions: (1) What is it that is psychological? (2) What is the mental? Perhaps triggered most directly by the current emphasis in psychiatry and neuroscience on correlational studies—colorfully mapping various behaviors and their associated neurochemical changes (including those brought about by intervening stimuli, e.g., pharmaco- logical agents and experimental tasks) onto particular brain areas—my epistemic qualms also owe much of their severity to the methodological predominance of quantitative measurements of observable phenomena (including, but not limited to, behavior), in biological, cognitive, and social psychology experiments.

While I understand that changes such as these are objectively measureable and therefore (as an empiricist) cheer their use, and while I also understand that the advances involved in brain imaging are remarkable and must be utilized, the downside of such technology-based studies should not be overlooked. Psychology, the realm of the mental, seems to be disappearing as we center our focus on one or both of the following: (1) The highly complex brain goings-on which are the causal foundations of any psychology; (2) the physical and behavioral manifestations of psychology—psychology’s
observable instantiations. In short, in a pithy phrase (for which I regrettably cannot take credit), psychology seems to be losing its mind! Recognition of this state of affairs as possibly true was the direct precipitant of Chapter Three, in which I undertake a lengthy investigation of classic mind/body solutions with the aim of finding some small steadier place for psychology and the mental realm.

The final instance of epistemological queasiness, which I explore in Chapter Four, is really a composite of many smaller examples and is perhaps the trickiest. It concerns the use of consistency in empirical science generally as well as in thought experiments, experimental philosophy, and psychoanalysis. The first bout of my distress regarding this matter occurred while reviewing various experimental philosophy studies. It became increasingly clear that consistency could be used in a variety of inconsistent ways to both rule in desired exciting/surprising findings and rule out dull or counterproductive ones. But, of course, this sort of epistemic queasiness is not a discrete time-limited and domain-specific malaise. Misguided appeals to consistency occur in empirical experiments, thought experiments, and psychoanalytic theory no less than they do in experimental philosophy. Further, the abuses of consistency, as well as successful uses, appear almost everywhere one looks for them, and probably exist at least as often when one does not.

Because the above is true, of course, for my work too, I must be careful in what I say in this introduction concerning the overarching themes of the book. Indeed, rather than say “careful,” I should have said “truthful.” Thus, much as I would like to claim that my epistemological queasiness, despite being registered in such diverse domains, nonetheless has a singular and important conceptual source; and, more importantly, though I would like to say that this sense of unease points the way to a unifying and striking discovery in the four domains of interest, I cannot, in good faith, make these claims. Moreover, although I would like to present the entire project of this book as a well-integrated program, I cannot do this either. Even to artificially construct one that would be as persuasive as it was smooth is not possible. For, in being my best psychoanalytic self, and my best academic self as well, truthfulness trumps everything, including strong desire and what has become the academy’s standard aggrandizing style. So I will now proceed to present the admittedly much more modest achievements herein.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS
The more general advantages of the volume result from a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach to all the material examined—an approach that, because of my own variegated background, I cannot help but take. The central assumption of a method such as this holds that from within the center of one domain, questions and difficulties obvious to interdisciplinary “outsiders” are not even recognized as problematic. This is not to say that deeper, narrower concerns should not occupy those in the mainstream; they should. But gadflies, working tangentially are necessary too. For this volume the questioning curiosity of the clinical psychoanalyst provides the prototype gadfly model. Analysts feel a version of epistemological queasiness many times each workday: whenever some account is either too facile or found to be subtly incoherent, and more generally when a person’s life fits together coherently but is felt by that person to be “not good.” Thus, based on the underlying assumptions of psychoanalysis, analysts can realistically offer to
patients not only that the underlying meanings of particular situations can be better understood but also that a better, consistent life—a life that subjectively makes more sense to the subject living it—can be worked toward and realized. However, with respect to the issues addressed and then challenged in this volume, unfortunately, no such expansively sanguine promise of “better” or even “more coherent” theory is warranted. Instead, arising from my epistemological queasiness, the following is what I can (and do) realistically offer:

1. I demonstrate how states of puzzlement may lead to formulating serious questions and challenges.
2. I review and discuss several standard solutions, according them their strengths and pointing out their weaknesses.
3. I show that, for some puzzles, new and better alternative answers can be derived. The new answers, although they do not provide or promise grand or sweeping changes, do contribute small steps toward better understanding.

With these expectations in mind, let me turn now to the plan of the book. I will introduce individually the three parts of the book’s main body. Each of the three parts has one chapter. These three chapters along with this introductory chapter and a final summary/conclusion chapter complete the entire volume.

PART TWO/CHAPTER TWO
Part Two, following directly after this introductory chapter, is called “Biological Psychology,” and it consists of a single chapter, Chapter Two, “Extinction Phenomena: A Biologic Perspective on How and Why Psychoanalysis Works.” In this chapter I make the rather bold claim that psychoanalysis actually works, and does so fundamentally on a biological basis. I present and argue for the view that the effectiveness of classical analysis is predicated on its biological potency—focusing not on the currently popular biology of neuroscience, but instead on the biology of conditioning. My argument draws heavily on very recent biological research literature advancing a new view on the extinction of aversively conditioned stimuli. Namely, the current research findings convincingly demonstrate that complete extinction is never possible. However, extinction can be best approximated by deconditioning in a great many different contexts. From here I affirm that, paradoxical as it might seem, only the most classical psychoanalytic technique can work. Why? Because only classical psychoanalysis—patient reclining on a couch for several sessions per week—can regularly deliver the multiplicity of deconditioning contexts necessary to best approximate extinction. How? Through the development of a sufficient variety of intense transference experiences, something classical analytic technique is uniquely able to facilitate.

The chapter opens with an explanation of conditioning—particularly aversive or fear conditioning. Next I illustrate how aversive conditioning can play a central role in much psychopathology, offering a paradigm case example. From here, extinction is described with a particular emphasis on the current research literature, which is unequivocal in propounding the great importance of multiple contexts for any chance of deconditioning.
The last section of Chapter Two characterizes and explains important features of classical psychoanalytic technique, including use of the couch, and the concept of transference, particularly with respect to how it is that intense and myriad transference experiences can serve as the multiple deconditioning contexts needed to approximate extinction.

**PART THREE/CHAPTER THREE**

Part Three is called “Psychological Biology” and also consists of a single chapter, “Chapter Three, “The Ontology of Psychology.” Starting with genuine puzzlement about what is “psychological” and what constitutes “the mental,” and after a lengthy (and I hope even-handed) investigation of the mind/body problem, I propose a modest, but new, partial solution to this ancient/modern problem. In summary form, here is a preview: I embrace a Token Physicalist position and then propose that, in considering the ontology of the mental, one must take into account both the synchronic view—the phenomena of interest at a particular time point—and the diachronic view—the phenomena of interest over time. From a synchronic view—at a single particular time point (time \( t_1 \))—the brain/biologic underpinnings of any event/state/property considered “mental” are what is causally sufficient for the event/state/property. Given this causal efficacy (sufficiency) of the underlying brain goings-on synchronically, at any specified time point (time \( t_m \)), the mental-ness of any mental event/state/property is rendered not only causally irrelevant but ontologically irrelevant. However, diachronically—over time (time \( t_1 \) \( \rightarrow \) time \( t_2 \) \( \rightarrow \) time \( t_n \))—particularly as any mental event/state/property can be (and is) multiply realized by various physical instantiations, the mental event/state/property is causally relevant and has real ontologic standing. This account rests on both:

1. The philosophical concept of multiple realization, particularly as it has received convergent support from recent work in the neurosciences on “biological degeneracy.” Biological degeneracy (a species of redundancy) demonstrates that, even within a single individual, various different neuronal assemblies underpin what is regarded as the same mental state.
2. Considerations of mereological composites—specifically that, despite gradual shifts, sometimes leading to a total alteration in the materials constituting an entity, the entity is nevertheless regarded as “the same entity,” these underlying compositional changes notwithstanding.

It is from the background of these two concepts that the new account—Diachronic Conjunctive Token Physicalism, or DiCoToP—outlined briefly above is proposed, potentially offering a small advance in the understanding of mind/body relations. And yet however pleasing, or even convincing, this small potential step toward a new understanding of a piece of the mind/body problem might be, I must remind the reader (and especially I must remind myself) that any progress this represents is indeed small. The explanatory gap—that between the physical neuronal causal foundations of the mental on the one side and the psychological effects seen in consciousness, qualia, intentions, and mental contents on the other—remains as perplexingly and exasperatingly large as ever.
Although I’ve led with the broad conclusions of this chapter, the chapter actually proceeds according to the following detailed organizational sequence: I begin by exploring some very interesting arguments for dualism. But then, reasons for endorsing physicalism and supervenience are given. Next, I discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of nonreductive physicalism, taking up the major problems and arguments, which include: (1) emergence and epiphenomenalism, (2) the problem with mental (and downward) causation, (3) the Exclusion Argument, (4) the argument derived from determinates/determinables, and (5) the Generalization Argument. Following this discussion, reductive physicalism is likewise reviewed with respect to its advantages and disadvantages, with both type and token reductive (identity) physicalism examined. In these sections, multiple realization and its brain structure/neuronal counterpart, biological degeneracy, figure prominently. It becomes clear that, while multiple realization and biological degeneracy present serious problems for type identity, they provide important assets for token identity, thus leading the way to my particular take on token physicalism.

PART FOUR/CHAPTER FOUR
Part Four is titled “Uses and Abuses of Consistency.” Like the sections before it, this section is made up of a single chapter, Chapter Four, “The Uses and Abuses of Consistency in Thought Experiments, Empirical Research, Experimental Philosophy, and Psychoanalysis.” Also like the earlier chapters, Chapter Four arose in response to my own sense of epistemological unease. In this case, I experienced a growing epistemic squirmish as I realized that a great many of the reported experiments I came across seemed at once too well fashioned, almost perfectly formed, and yet capable of delivering too many exciting, surprising findings. Further, my discomfort was heightened rather than assuaged by observing this phenomenon across the four domains of interest, as if a certain sort of polished regularity yielding striking results represented the current-day overarching norm in all academic endeavors. But, indeed, although the motivation for this chapter is like that of the others, there is something quite unique and a bit disquieting about Chapter Four. This chapter, unlike the others, impels one toward examining one’s own work with a greater critical sense than is usual, insisting on a less than-comfortable scrutiny of this very volume. Thus, while I do have the impulse in this introductory chapter to characterize Chapter Four, and the volume as a whole, as providing a fresh and original and yet coherent, consistent view—an account important and illuminating in its unitary approach to four cognate disciplines—I must follow my own recommendations, present the more modest but more realistic accomplishments herein, and be satisfied.

In Chapter Four I assert that consistency is always among the fundamental elements organizing human endeavors, recognizing, too, that consistency as a concept takes many (and sometimes inconsistent) forms. The opening sections of the chapter explore the many and necessary uses of consistency in empirical research, thought experiments, experimental philosophy, and psychoanalysis. Then, in the sections that follow, I introduce the rather paradoxical notion of “abuses of consistency.” Here specific examples from empirical research, experimental philosophy, psychoanalysis, and thought experiments reveal several types of serious consistency-based problems, all of which seem to be motivated by highlighting, and therefore making more influential, the findings
observed and reported. But striking results cannot be the norm. Moreover, more modest but accurate findings should suffice, and they do. Thus, this chapter endeavors to provide not just a critique of seemingly consistency-based “important” and flashy results but also a positive account for findings that are more routine and less dramatic. This takes place in two stages. First, I diagnose an abuse-of-consistency problem in many of the solutions given to the seminal thought experiment puzzle: the Trolley Case and its many offshoots. Namely, I suggest that a plethora of false (but consistent) parallels are routinely constructed. In the second stage, I offer a curative treatment—the method of intervening stepwise cases. Here I show how better parallels can be derived. The end results are clearly less exciting—they are no longer striking, but they are more realistic. The same could be said for the contributions of Chapter Four.

PART FIVE/CHAPTER FIVE
The volume ends with Chapter Five, “Summary and Conclusions.” In this chapter I will restate and evaluate the main goal of the book—to question certain foundations in studies of the mind, with challenges arising from an interdisciplinary perspective. I suggest that it is only by pursuing mental studies outside the bounds of a single discipline that one can appreciate certain sorts of serious problems—problems that otherwise either go unrecognized within any single discipline or fall between the boundaries of two or more. With this in mind, in the summary and conclusions chapter, I review each of the chapters in the body of the book by first restating the nature of the particular issues giving rise to the problems; next articulating the questions that were posed and the challenges that were raised; and finally evaluating the new understandings and solutions proposed, recognizing their limitations but at the same time appreciating that even modest realistic gains are indeed gains—wins rather than losses.