

# The Undergrowth of Thought



Chris Judd, 1994

## Part 3

### Shortcuts

*We are not, in the first instance, concerned with how people represent their states of mind to others but with how they represent, and mis-represent, these states to themselves, to their own 'organ of consciousness'. Donald Meltzer, 1986, p.102*

*Art is endless. We have to learn to cope with the eternity of it. Chris Judd*

'My aim', Money-Kyrle writes, 'has been to outline a theory of this interaction (between our perception of truth and the will to distort it).' (Money-Kyrle, 1968, p.417) What he is suggesting in this paper is the idea of a preconception of truth as the basis of knowledge. This implies a something in the mind waiting for a content that will then be recognized to fit well in the elusive 'empty thought' (Bion) or unthinkable 'form' (Plato) integral with the nature of the mind's recognition of truth. This 'truth' remains provisional (and tantalisingly elusive) and requires to be sought, and cumulatively established, through experience. This process employs imagination to test experience against a faculty, itself unimaginable, namely the preconception.

The idea that Money-Kyrle's of his sets out in this late paper tentatively to establish is that all mental disturbance may be predicated upon a misconception. In other words, mental illness, excepting physical causes, from the slightest to the most severe is a consequence of mismatch between a belief and the mind's innate capacity to know the truth when it sees it. I am unable to agree or disagree with this, and indeed a brilliant mind like Money-Kyrle approaches the hypothesis with compelling reserve as it were an invitation to thought. And now through engaging with my own dreams and linked to the dream-work I have done with others, challenged with the daunting task of understanding what is going on, and in the process of striving to be true to a calling, coming up against the limits of my powers of imagination, I find this thought of misconception excites me. It prompts me to pay more thorough attention to the

whispers of the undergrowth of thought and here the image is of a chink opening in my waking and dreaming, which, with the force of a partial vacuum sifts the fragments caught up in its current. The need for patience that this underlines and the inevitable sense of steps forward and back is focused in Bion's comments on the vicissitudes of the development of thought and the mother's capacity for reverie. 'If the mother fails then a further burden is thrown on the infant's capacity for toleration of frustration for now its capacity for toleration of thought itself is tested.' (Bion, 1962, p. 37). Hence the ubiquity of shortcuts.

From this, then, I take the very interesting idea that a preconception may be said to be the innate capacity of the unformed mind in terms of its potential to think to recognize and create a symbol of what appropriately belongs within it. A further aspect of the preconception derives from its link with emotions (love and hate) which modify the idea of recognition and distinguish it from the purely conceptual so that this truth-seeking capacity inherent in the mind and coloured by emotion is able to sort experiences into ideas as to what satisfies and what frustrates as a criterion of truth. It further seems to be the case that a preconception exists mutually between infant and mother. And that it exists always in a context of confusion and not knowing.

The mother's breast which affords initial sustenance to the newborn on several levels may be, Money-Kyrle suggests, considered the primary member of a basic preconception, though, it occurs to me, even this may have predecessors, concepts connected with the womb, primary containment, and with the birth process, the thrust to separation so that the emotional selection process may already have been alerted to anticipate frustration so as not to exclude it from membership of what (in the longer-term) may satisfy, tolerance. Also the allowing of surrogates as members of a preconception, for example a bottle for the breast, may be enabled by the established concept not simply of the breast but of the nipple-mouth object and thus suggests a way of populating the preconception with a diverse membership of satisfying concepts.

Finding myself engaged by this train of thought that has been flowing in the direction of an awareness of self-deception and its relation to misconception seems to me to indicate an *intention* in the undergrowth of thought. Arising from a dream ideograph of a syntactical puzzle (how to relate concepts to one another coherently) continuous with what may symbolise an arrested pre-birth experience (a long uphill tunnel) my thinking leads to the possibility of a fresh concept that will satisfy the criterion of truth. To be born satisfies and a symbol is formed which has moved into common parlance as 'light at the end of the tunnel' or as awe-inspiring beauty, and may be what moves us in beholding the collective triumph played out on centre court, of coming through, the great spur to being at the top of one's game, the great prize, a revelation of beauty and keeps alive anticipation: What next? To deny the process and to emerge as though not having been born, obstructed and beaten may turn the value system into a lie based on the unconscious misconception of not having been born, of still being downhill of the tunnel, or having been ejected, so that one's identity is symbolised as an interloper. What the atmosphere of the dream and 'bad' dreams in general may embody is the presence of a death wish, acted out in self-destructive attitudes and behaviour. It is possible to think of this as a profound misconception.

Freud's idea of 'overdetermination' helps to think about thinking about, not only dreams but, other forms of communications from the undergrowth of thought, dream-thought, autonomous symbol formation or 'locations'. Freud in his great work *The Interpretation of Dreams* introduces the idea of *condensation* by referring to elements that 'found their way into the content of a dream because they possessed copious contacts with the majority of the dream-thoughts because, that is to say, they constituted "nodal points" upon which a great number of the dream thoughts converged and because they had several meanings in connection with the interpretation of the dream... each of the elements of the dream's content turn out to have been "overdetermined"' (Freud, S. 1900, p.183). This 'fundamental fact' (*ibid.*) facilitates our thinking about this hypothetical continuity of my dram so that the syntax puzzle, namely what is the true expression – a lexical dimension of truth – can be seen to be occurring, with an illusion of sequence, simultaneously with the forwards-backwards motion related to being physically, not wholly psychically, born or conceived of. This operates like a double meaning or poetic allusion in the language of the dream – first the intellectual problem then the physical journey – but coincidentally – images bearing on one ineffable idea as if a preconception were drawing in layers of mutually hermeneutical images to create a concept, in this case a *concept of misconception*. In other words, in these subterranean passages, confronted by sequential reflections on defensive (the need to falsify the guilt of destructiveness), and demented, states of mind (*The Street of Crocodiles*) as well as thoughts about the vital place of communication (embodied in Mark's tale of exorcism) and patience with the ever inconclusive nature of creative thought (the 'outsider' artist Chris Judd), I find the idea of misconception to have floated to the forefront of my mind.

The concept, however, teases the mind with the question: how can a preconscious process able to select what is true be satisfied with a misconception. That would at first seem to me to be inscrutable. I understand Money-Kyrle to be saying that a misconception results from emotional impediments, perhaps a want of reverie on the part of the (m)other, which militate against the formation of a concept. 'When a concept is not available to complete an act of recognition, its place is usually taken by a misconception' (Money-Kyrle, *op.cit.*, p. 423). In other words, a misconception is itself not a concept; the concept *misconception* arises in the context of thinking about mental disturbance, thought of in popular terms as a state of being misguided, and in particular in an analytical setting, and faced with the struggle to comprehend recalcitrant psychological setbacks being played out as a desperate form of communication. What may be encountered is an absence of a truly satisfying concept, constituting some degree of inner turmoil – a frustrated preconception. A sense of intellectual competence may become bedevilled by a conviction of stupidity and a confused inability to make decisions, which may hypothetically be thought of as bringing about a sense of satisfaction. This would seem to indicate a confusion desperately in search of a symbol that might give it a name that would allow it to have a place in thought, and that in the absence of the emergence of a symbol and with the limits of tolerance of waiting, and to put an end to the catastrophe a shortcut is taken. In such an emergency not knowing takes of the myth of knowing. But confusion is only kept at bay and constitutes a series of disorderly events. In other words, something unsatisfactory supersedes the waiting for the preconception to find its true symbol. Perhaps Eliot meant this by saying that hope may be for the wrong thing. A shortcut in this sense is where something 'evil' (unsatisfactory and thus with potentially evil consequences) is turned into good.

All hope excluded thus, behold, in stead  
Of us out-cast, exil'd, his new delight,  
Mankind created, and for him this world.  
So farewell, hope; and with hope farewell, fear;  
Farewell, remorse! all good to me is lost;  
Evil, be thou my good.

*Paradise Lost* (bk. IV, l. 108)

This becomes concrete because, unlike the fitting symbol, it does not allow of amplification and capacity for connection and the gathering of symbolism by the imagination. Take the misconception *competence* as a substitute for the unthinkable confusion or chaos. It is a thing in itself. It has no relativity to an acceptable concept of not knowing nor does it like a symbol would, allow for the necessary place of confusion in arriving at the truth. Also it is concretised by an act of projection by which the real world is judged, by foregone conclusion, to be frustrating as if a conspiracy were in place. The basic conspiracy is the shortcut. This is close to the self-delusion, which came to my notice in claiming to have read a book I in fact hadn't. It shows up in the pretext, where an irritation attaches to one thing after another in a way that seems to make no sense. This flourishes in the absence of being in touch with a primal setback deemed to be inadmissible to consciousness. The recipient of the projection, whether a person or a thing, is experienced as tormenting. Something is felt to be deceitful and untrustworthy. That a misconception is a concept of truth is a basic self-deception. In Macbeth's case the reversal of truth has become justified by his conscious greed for power. But in mental disturbance the basic shortcut is to a large extent unconscious.

Granted that there are degrees of it, and a popular way to identify self-deception would be to say that someone is (obviously) lying to himself. Yet it does not seem at first right to equate self-deception with lying; it seems more apt to talk about a mistake (misconception). In that case, accusation of lying is unlikely by itself to bring about the recognition of a lie. It is, however, a lie, in that it is a reversal of truth taking place where the process of concept formation is automatically aborted, and is likely to be sensed to a greater or lesser degree as a disturbance. The cover-up occurring unconsciously is symbolised in a dream very similar to my railway saboteur dream. The dreamer has pulled out the plugs causing a fatal de-programming of a row of industrial washing machines. When the owner appears on the scene, the culprit is bare-faced, adopts a foreign language, produces and uncorks champagne. Guilt is in process of being dissolved. This symbolises a deception (it wasn't me, no harm done, come-on relax) the conscious mind may not recognize, but may show as a fragile sociability and may be represented by an accident-prone tendency, or a tendency to over-stretch oneself, an unrealistic estimation of what one is capable of. It could be behind anxiety in connection with the role in the job specification. Unattended it could have tragic consequences. A misconception underlying this may be a profound confusion between childhood and adulthood where a child has been treated as an equal and with a kind of triumph pours contempt on a need for dependency.

Thus to me the challenge is presented: how to unpack this concept and to discover how it may help to elucidate presentations of disturbance. But first a word about

theory. The theory of *misconception* is a speculation or a construction coming from the mating of a process of dream-thought and the seasoned thought of an outstanding mind (that of the philosopher and psychoanalyst Roger Money-Kyrle). It neither has its origin in logic, nor, while hypothetical, is it 'pure conjecture'. It arises from the practice of analysis, clinically derives, but can't be simply applied in casework; awaited is the better word. It is not a diagnosis or a remedy, nor does it categorise. It exists in the practical and reverential exercise of an analytical method. In such a context it is a preconception of process. It is a receptive item that invites flights of the imagination. As Money-Kyrle remarks at the outset of his important paper, it may only be a hook to hang what has been conceived of in other terms. What I take that to mean is having the function of a temporary and timely container for the symbolising of as yet nameless senses, or to put it, somewhat tongue in cheek, a nudge in the direction of a timely adjustment of truth. It arrives out of the undergrowth and returns there of its own sweet will. By contrast, theory can be a straitjacket, a misconception.

The work of analytical therapy offers many arresting moments when after difficult passages a stirring in the undergrowth is detected. I will mention just one. This was a young man who always arrived in an exhausted state of considerable depression, and spoke very slowly with long pauses of how he was convinced he was of little account to anyone, all but invisible to work colleagues, and valued by the family only so long as he went along with its collective collusion of helplessness and acted as a dogsbody. He could not effectively complain because no one, he felt, paid any attention except to tell him to get on with it. He kept up a constant recitation on the theme with example after example of how unfairly he considered himself treated, reinforcing over and over again what he believed to be an unfortunate fact of life. Despite the debilitated message he gave there was a sense in it of a certain omnipotence. He knew the way things were and nothing I could say could change that. He kept me focussed on what the others were perpetually doing to keep him in his place. The very idea of breaking ranks was in a context of infinite postponement for in the event there was no image of freedom.

This recitation in session after session also seemed designed to deflect attention from himself, and the actual effect of it was sleep-inducing. I saw it as diversionary tactics to ward off the possibility of coming into relationship with me. After many exasperating doses of this, I struggled to keep myself alert as if the family stasis was somehow transferred to me. Then an almost undetectable event took place. He reported in his usual lifeless voice having attended, almost by default, an office party during which he had experienced the strange illusion that he was outside looking in (which might just as well have been, I felt, being inside something looking out). The action seemed to him to be taking place on the other side of the window. What struck me was the change of tone as if attention were being paid to something new. What was it, perhaps he was thinking, that those on the other side of the 'window' were doing. And something about it had the feel of a dream. But then that was that. It was dropped as if swallowed up by quicksand.

What happened next may have several explanations. Did it belong to him, or was it my attempt to hang on to this lifebelt that had floated our way. A cartoon began to unfold in my imagination. I had some reticence about mentioning this but did. He looked on without any flicker of emotional involvement. The animation of the cartoon had a particular quality. The characters were automatons. They had no legs or faces

and moved from point A to point B within a two-storey house as though on an invisible conveyor belt which itself was hidden by a device of the animator. The house had no wall so that I could see it as if I had opened the side of a dolls' house. So there I was on the outside looking in. The construction of the scenario of the sessions was being symbolised, in terms of the outside/inside. The continuous upstairs and downstairs motion had something in common with the long take of the overhead chain of buckets carrying coal or slag from the open-cast mine at the start of Bela Tarr's film *Damnation*, and there was a frisson of the Quay brother's animated film *Street of Crocodiles* with its evocation of clockwork movements within a hermetic scenario. I also had an uncomfortable association with the macabre world of David Firth's *Salad Fingers* whose soundboard effects had allusions to the delivery of the patient.

Did this amplification of a waking dream, I wonder, really represent something of the sense of being a nobody as promulgated by the patient's 'authorised version', which lay behind the depression, and was thus a symbolic representation of how I was experiencing our sessions? But I had a more serious question: Was it his dream or mine? Was being a legless automaton close to the misconception that had in effect put paid to the pain of being in a relationship to an absence (of reverie) and which cancelled the possibility of imagining the latter? What seemed to be suggested was that whereas a lie was being given absolute provenance, the dream-thought 'I am outside' had suddenly created a space. I was, perhaps, perceiving the emergence of a *location* of the thought: 'party' and how this 'location' (the locating of the dreamer as outside looking in) acted as an irritant, like the grain of sand in an oyster, and betrayed the presence of a misconception ('being without worth' or, to introduce the notion of the mutual situation of maternal reverie, 'not having being *conceived of*'). A slight change had taken place in what purported to be unquestionable fact, the *fait accompli* against which there was to be no argument, a form of omnipotence, which had almost at once reasserted itself, the 'dream' sinking back into the unconscious. Something had broken in with the symbolism of an inside and an outside and the footage of a cartoon begun to roll, which either was projected upon my mind, or was a product of my imagination and possibly contaminated itself by misconception. The cartoon footage portrayed the misapprehension of being sub-human, a figure drawn by someone else and devoid of vital parts or organs, (legs, for example,) and with emotional lacunae, a humanoid like David Firth's creation. As such it was new and surprising if not also frightening. Yet I held to the sense I might have been seeing the initiation of a process of change from 'I am a nobody' to 'I am outside and looking', for not to look would be to be invisible. It brings into prospect a consideration of vital importance, the capacity to bear the pain associated with being seen as separate and dependent.

The symbol 'outside' here indicates 'not contained, or held by another's reverie. This capacity for reverie in the mother is the ground for the growth of emotional meaning (concepts) in the infant. 'But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart' Luke 2:19 and her child might reply in the words of the psalmist 'Thou hast enlarged me when I was distressed... lift thou the light of thy countenance upon me.' Psalm 1:1,6. The 'outside' of this patient is 'outside of ' or 'beyond hope', Milton's 'out-cast, exil'd'. The dread of this seemed to have created a spurious inside that was, however, claustrophobic. In the absence of a satisfying concept of being inside and contained by reverie which made sense of things there was a misconception

bedevilled by frustration and foreboding. Shakespeare's Macbeth, 'defrauded' uses the same phrase as Milton's, 'Evil, be thou my good'. For him this was not an unconscious act. It was a commitment to hanging on to power in face of his terror of being usurped.. He chooses to cling to the witches' misbegotten counsel but continues to suffer the torment of hallucinated guilt – again a misconception at the root of mental illness. But the recognition of being outside was not a delusion. It allowed for the possibility of further thought, unlike a misconception cast in concrete.. It was for him the inside that was the self-delusion – inside with the witches.

Later in the session he remarked he never would have thought it but he had just realised that he had become exactly like his father. This implied no space existed for a range of enlivening feelings between him and his father. It made sense to think of this as a concrete state. The image *father* did not bring anything to life. Father and son were fused together, *inside* the family, encapsulated and merged in such a way as to allow of no conceivable differentiation. 'Incorporation will here be discussed as a mode of interpersonal relationship in which a person feels himself to be at one with the person with whom he is in interaction and is unaware of any separateness between his personality and the personality of the other.' (Harold Searles, 1951 p. 39) However, a misconception (an identification acting as an absolute fact) had momentarily given way to a symbol that had come from within. The image that had formed placed him as an individual outside of the family (or the working environment perceived as unsupportive and engaged in some inscrutable activity) looking in and beginning to project symbolic images about what he saw going on (the cartoon).

The former state (undifferentiated) is concrete in that it cannot be distinguished from the external world. Outside and inside, there is only the one thing. It is solid. Another way of putting it is that a continually transforming internal reality is lacking. In contrast, the latter state (the dream-thought), entailed a latent capacity to host an uncanny symbol, not an omnipotence, a condition of tolerating not knowing, wondering, and entertaining fear and excitement.

The advent of the symbol *inside-and-outside* ushered in *ipse facto* the distinction between external and internal reality. A flash from the 'undergrowth of thought' (in the form of a dream-thought, the condensed essence of a waking dream) had caused a crack in the concrete and called a misconception into question. He had in that moment a precious concept of himself, bleak though its content appeared. This elusive viewpoint: *outside looking in* came as unexpectedly as did my encounter with the JAR number plate which, combined with the door ajar in the moment of my stepping out into the street, gave me nothing other than a sense there was something in the wind, an enlivening anticipation a new concept might be about to be created.

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