

Internal Object Relations and the Logic of the Unconscious

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Abstract: This article explores internal objects as a kind of non-existent and analyses the role of internal objects and internal object relations in unconscious thinking. My aim is to outline a project of ‘logic of the unconscious’ based on object relations theory. Drawing on the approaches of Melanie Klein, Susan Isaacs, Joseph Sandler, Thomas Ogden, and Linda Brakel, I clarify unconscious thinking in terms of the notions of primary process and phantasy and explore the nature of internal objects as background phantasy figures. In addition, using psychoanalytically relevant clinical examples, I analyse condensation, displacement, and transference as primary mental operations and suggest that considering internal objects as abstract particulars helps to clarify their role in unconscious thinking. Finally, I formulate a project of the logic of the unconscious as a logic of object relations.

Keywords: Internal objects; logic of the unconscious; non-existent objects; object relations theory; phantasy; primary process.

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1. Introduction

The problem of the ontology of non-existent objects is a long-standing philosophical issue that has been discussed since Parmenides and Plato. In modern times, it was reformulated by Franz Brentano as the problem of “intentional in-existence” (Brentano 1995, 68) and re-emerged in the twentieth-century analytic philosophy after Alexius Meinong introduced his theory of objects (Meinong 1904) and Bertrand Russell published his critique of the theory (Russell 1905). The problem was addressed by W. V. O. Quine in “What There Is” (Quine 1948) and Rudolf Carnap in “Meaning and Necessity” (Carnap 1956). A review and comparative analysis of different approaches to the problem of non-existents, including most recent developments in analytic metaphysics, can be found in (Berto and Plebani 2015) and in a special issue of “Monist” on metaontology (Berto et al. 2014). Paradigmatic examples of non-existent objects include fictional objects (e.g. Sherlock Holmes or the Holy Grail), impossible objects such as the round square, and purely intentional objects (see Bebee et al. 2011, 148). More generally, the domain of non-existent objects encompasses all objects that do not exist spatiotemporally, including various kinds of abstracta.

The problem of the intentional in-existence of merely intentional objects has to do with the fact that “sometimes people imagine, desire, or fear things that do not exist” (Reicher 2022, 2). For example, “if my nephew is scared of the monster under his bed, the monster is the object of his fear but it does not exist” (Beebe et al. 2011, 148). Merely intentional objects have been studied extensively in the psychological sciences under the name of mental objects (see, e.g., Perlow 1995). An important type of mental object is what are called internal objects: internalised and transformed figures of our previous meaningful relationships. Most psychoanalysts and psychotherapists today accept some form of object relations theory, according to which the person’s inner world is structured by an interaction between the person and her internal objects. However, despite their crucial role in psychotherapeutic theory and practice and their enormous influence on the way we perceive and act (see Auchincloss and Samberg eds. 2012, 175–178; Svrakic and Zorumski 2021, 4), internal objects have not yet been so far subjected to philosophical scrutiny as ‘non-existents’.

What makes internal objects an elusive subject of study is that, on the one hand, they are formed on the basis of subjective experience, and, on the other, as unconscious formations, they often remain beyond the reach of first-person conscious mind. Fortunately, we can understand the dynamics of the formation and development of internal objects by analysing their role in unconscious (i.e., primary process-based) intentionality. Understanding mental objects means grasping how they function in the mental operations in which they are involved. Operations involving internal objects have been studied within theoretical psychoanalysis; the corresponding field of research, which explores the peculiarities of ‘unconscious thinking’, is known as ‘the logic of the unconscious’. If we engage with these studies, we will find that primary process-based mental operations, such as transference, displacement, condensation, and the like, involve internal objects that can have different kinds of in-existence: being perceived, imagined, feared, desired, and so on (see section 8 below). Many of these operations can be modelled using contemporary non-classical logic (see Vasylychenko 2015), which allows us to elaborate on a logical theory of internal objects, to clarify their nature, and ultimately to include them in debates about what kind of being, if any, non-existents can have.

In view of their psychological significance, the logical challenges they pose, and the metaphysical possibilities they might open up, internal objects are reasonable objects of philosophical inquiry, perhaps no less diverse and intriguing than, say, the fictional objects or unobservable entities of the theoretical sciences. The integration of internal objects into philosophical logic and analytic philosophy has been prepared by recent developments in the analytic theory of intentionality, notably Graham Priest’s logic of intentionality (Priest 2005) and Linda Brakel’s theory of primary psychological attitudes (Brakel 2009). The aim of this article is to analyse internal objects as a kind of non-existent, to clarify their role in unconscious thinking, and to elaborate a project of a formal ‘logic of the unconscious’ based on object relations theory. I consider the realisation of this aim to be a first step towards the reception of internal objects in analytic metaphysics.

2. Logic of the Unconscious

Contemporary developments in the ‘logic of the unconscious’ take their origin in the ideas of Eilhard Von Domarus, Silvano Arieti, and Ignacio Matte Blanco. Among such ideas are Von Domarus’ principle that, in unconscious thinking, shared attributes imply identity (Von Domarus 1944), Matte Blanco’s idea that any object is unconsciously considered as equivalent to a class of which it is a member, and his suggestion that the unconscious treats most relations as symmetrical, while some specially selected relations are treated as asymmetrical, which finally led Matte Blanco to his idea of “bi-logic” (Matte Blanco 1975; 2005). These ideas, together with the well-known general characteristics of the unconscious suggested by Freud (we will consider them in section 3) and the statement that unconscious thinking does not comply with classical logic, especially with the law of non-contradiction, constitute the essential (although not exhaustive) list of intuitions usually pursued in logical formalisations of the ‘logic of the unconscious.’

Since the time Arieti and Matte Blanco put forward their projects of the ‘non-Aristotelian’ logic of the unconscious, contemporary logic underwent a period of enormous development. Although the idea of formalising the logic of the unconscious by non-classical symbolic logic is relatively new, we find today a variety of mathematical and logical formalisations that rely on the intuitions stated above but have expanded to the neurosciences. Thus, Matte Blanco’s insights have been implemented in quantum logic and topology-based systems and laid down the scientific discipline of computational psychoanalysis (Khrennikov 2002; Lauro Grotto 2008; Battilotti 2014; Iurato 2018; Battilotti, Borozan, and Lauro Grotto 2023). Some other quantum logic formalisations have been made outside the bi-logical framework (e.g., Zizzi and Pregnolato 2012); in (Selesnick and Owen 2012), Von Domarus’ principle is discussed. Besides, recently, new conceptual models for the ‘logic of the unconscious’ were suggested: in (Saad 2020), unconscious thinking was clarified through negationless logic; in (Saad 2022), a theory of unconscious concepts as drive-based properties was developed and applied to the analysis of unconscious processes; and in (Vasylchenko 2015), Graham Priest’s logic of intentionality was applied to the analysis of

internal objects and their primary process-based dynamics. The number of studies in the area is growing, but a comprehensive review of the results has yet to be written.

Looking at the development of psychoanalysis from a broader historical perspective, we can state that in the second half of the twentieth century there was a shift in the understanding of the structuring factors of the unconscious: Freud's structural model that put the relations between id, ego, and superego in the centre of the 'inner¹ world' was replaced by a model of internal object relations. Most psychoanalysts would agree that today, "object relations theory has become a crucial starting point for psychoanalysis and its practice" (Hensel 2014, 147). The human mind, according to object relations theory, is essentially object-seeking. An '(internal) object relation' between the person and her internal objects is a cognitive-affective psychological structure derived from early interaction experiences with significant others. Internal object relations organise all our experiences and structure the unconscious mind. From the standpoint of object relations theory, much of the unconscious activity of the mind is rooted in its attempts to project internal object relations outside and reproduce them in interpersonal relationships (Auchincloss and Samberg eds. 2012, 175–178; Scharff ed. 2005).

From the perspective of object relations theory, the main focus of the logic of the unconscious shifts from the general characteristics of the unconscious to the issues that stem from the impact of subjective psychological formations – internal objects and internal object relations – on mental activity. Although the idea of reproducing *relations* by substituting external *objects* – actually, persons – instead of internal ones seems to be tempting for logical formalisation, no systematic, logical theory of internal objects and internal object relations has been proposed so far.

The task of building logical models of unconscious mental operations involving internal objects and internal object relations calls for a reconsideration and development of the ideas and intuitions lying behind the 'logic of the unconscious.' My objective in this inquiry is to outline a project on

¹ Applying the adjective 'internal' or 'inner' to some phenomena in the psychoanalytic context, we thereby indicate the intrapersonal or subjective nature of these, differentiating them from intersubjective and objective phenomena (cf. Ogden 2004, 131).

the logic of the unconscious on the grounds of object relations theory. I treat ‘thinking’ as a sequence of mental states involving cognitive, conative, and affective intentional attitudes. The difference between ‘unconscious’ and ‘conscious’ thinking is clarified on the basis of Freud’s distinction between primary and secondary processes. To clear the ground for the articulation of philosophical and metapsychological assumptions of the logic of the unconscious from the perspective of object relations theory, I consider a number of questions. Some of them to start with are: What is the primary process? What is its place in mental life? What is the nature of internal objects and internal object relations? What is their impact on the primary process?

3. Unconscious Thinking: Primary Process and Phantasy

Freud introduced the notion of the primary process in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1953) as an unconscious mental activity provided by the unconscious system (Ucs) and aimed at overcoming the tension between wish and reality through the creation of an illusion. The notion of primary process is acknowledged by most psychoanalytic authors and supported by empirical and clinical evidence (Bazan et al. 2013; Brakel 2018). According to (Freud 1957a), the most general characteristics of the primary process are replacing external with internal reality, condensation, displacement, the exemption from negation and contradictions, and timelessness (Smith 1999, 120-131; see also Rayner and Tuckett 2005, 7ff.).

In this paper, we understand ‘unconscious thinking’ as ‘primary process mentation.’ Characterising the primary process as unconscious does not imply that its mental content is necessarily repressed or sequestered as consciously unacceptable (although it might happen to be so); instead, it is pre-reflective thinking developmentally prior to conceptual rational deliberation (Robbins 2018, 196). The primary process is unconscious in another sense: it consists of uncontrolled, non-reflective mental operations that do not require any rational justification or reality check and are ruled by defensive or adaptational ‘mechanisms.’ Although the primary process is not intrinsically reflective, its manifestations (arising mental contents) are often conscious. Robbins argues that the primary process is a “primordial

consciousness,” and its characteristics can be found in dreaming and psychosis but also in creative and spiritual experience and mythologically driven everyday thinking.² Considering that the primary process is not necessarily pathological, Brakel calls this mode of thinking “a-rational” (Brakel 2009; 2018). The results of empirical research show the predominance of the primary process over rational secondary cognition in the thinking of pre-school children, psychotic patients, and persons in anxiety states related to stressful situations (Brakel 2018, 179). However, even in most rational thinking, where the primary process is not predominant, it is still present in the background.

As Robbins notices (Robbins 2018, 189), there is another concept in psychoanalysis that shows a great deal of similarity with Freud’s notion of the primary process: the concept of unconscious phantasy.³ According to Melanie Klein and her followers, phantasies “underlie every mental process and accompany all mental activity” (Spillius et al. eds. 2011, 3). Phantasy has the character of unconscious thinking and unconscious psychic reality *par excellence*. Susan Isaacs argues that “reality thinking” cannot operate without “fantasy thinking,” that these mental activities constantly interweave (Isaacs 1948, 93), and the latter supports the former, providing the continuity of the inner world (ibid., 80). Summarising Isaacs’ approach, Thomas Ogden considers phantasy as “the process that creates meaning, and is the form in which all meanings – including feelings, defense ‘mechanisms, impulses, bodily experiences, and so on – exist in unconscious mental life” (Ogden 2011, 940). Later, the philosopher Richard Wollheim (1984)

² A deep connection between primary process mentation and creativity has been explored in the works of Silvano Arieti (e.g., 1976; 1978).

³ Further on, I will use the term ‘phantasy’ in the meaning of ‘unconscious phantasy.’ Although psychoanalytic theory maintains a differentiation between unconscious and conscious phantasies, emphasising links between them is no less essential (cf. Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 316–17; Steiner 2003, 10; Bell 788). I use the spelling ‘phantasy,’ accepted by James Strachey in Freud’s *Standard Edition*; for Strachey’s argumentation in favor of this choice, see SE, vol. I, *xxiv*. Nevertheless, paying tribute to different views on the controversy in spelling, I keep intact ‘fantasy’ inside quotations. For the spelling controversy and the different meanings of the term, see (Steiner 2003, 54; Spillius et al. eds. 2011, 3–16; Auchincloss and Samberg eds. 2012, 85–87).

proposed an extended interpretation of phantasy as the basis of mental life. David Bell, who shares and develops Wollheim's approach, states that phantasies, supporting our investigation of reality, constitute "the 'thread' of our personhood" (Bell 2017, 793).

The concept of phantasy can be traced back to Freud's description of the case of Anna O., who was living through fairy tales in her "private theatre" (Breuer and Freud 1953; see Laplanche and Pontalis 2003, 109) – an imaginary scene of immediate wish-fulfilment, in which the person interacts with her background phantasy figures known in the Kleinian tradition as *internal objects*. Many psychoanalytic authors disagree with the expansion of phantasy into the realm of the unconscious or the inner world as a whole. However, the wish-fulfilling nature of phantasy, its role as a scene of interaction with internal figures, and its crucial influence on the structuration of the inner world are universally recognised.⁴ Thus, Joseph Sandler, writing about "unconscious fantasy presences" with whom we "have dialogues in fantasy," states:

We can...speak of the relationship, interaction, and dialogue with an unconscious phantom presence as being intimately connected with the individual's wish fulfilments. This formulation is a much more specific one than that of simply equating the notion of an inner world with a world of unconscious fantasy, an equation that treats the whole of the inner world as being in the experiential realm... (Sandler 1990, 877).

Linda Brakel considers phantasy as the basic cognitive attitude that, unlike conscious cognitive attitudes, does not require the checking of reality (Brakel 2009). Brakel's approach, which I also take in this paper, allows us to do justice to both primary process and phantasy without conflating them. The primary process includes phantasying as its essential aspect but goes beyond it. It is a sequence of mental states involving different intentional attitudes (e.g., primary beliefs, wishes, and drives) managed by the causality of defensive and adaptational psychological 'mechanisms.' So, for example, when we are saying that a wish generates the phantasy of its fulfillment,

⁴ For different psychoanalytic accounts of phantasy, see (Steiner ed. 2003).

or the combination of a phantasy with some other attitudes unconsciously generates another phantasy, we thereby appeal to primary processes.

4. Unconscious Categorisation

Now we can take a closer look at the traits of the primary process, starting from the characteristics mentioned above that were described by Freud in “The Unconscious.” Brakel writes that primary processes “operate at a developmental level at which there is yet to be a stable self, capable of grasping (in any fashion) continuity-in-experience” (Brakel 2015, 132). Most fundamentally, at this level, we cannot distinguish between external reality and the “inner world of the mind ... with its own dynamic laws and characteristics” (Isaacs 1952, 80). Correspondingly, primary process does not deal with any spatiotemporal objects as such, so there is no space-time and hence no past or future beyond the “unexamined present” (Brakel 2015, 131). Presumably, there is no negation either, as we start to learn what “being not the case” might mean only through a reality check. However, there is no reality check in the primary process. Furthermore, if there is no negation, there is no contradiction either, so, for example, there is nothing wrong in being dead and alive or in being a child and adult at the same time, as happens in dreams (cf. Rayner and Tuckett 2005, p. 20).

All these intrinsic features of the primary process are perfectly manifested in phantasy. In one of Brakel’s examples, a person, Ms A, during her psychoanalytic session, longs for a relaxing break from work. As a result, Ms A fantasies that she is both participating in her session and, at the same time, taking a break from her analysis to enjoy a London afternoon (Brakel 2009, 113–114). Phantasy has the fortunate ability to provide an immediate illusory fulfillment of our wishes; no reality check or actual time reference is needed for such fulfillment.

The disregard for reality, the absence of time, and the toleration of contradictions are general features characterising the mental content of our phantasies. Displacement and condensation have a different nature: they can be seen as mental operations or primary process procedures rather than characteristics in the proper sense. Leaving them aside for a while, we will first explore how the unconscious mind identifies and categorises objects.

Eilhard Von Domarus pointed out that the thinking of schizophrenic patients demonstrates what he called “predicative thinking” (Von Domarus 1944, 111). Silvano Arieti summarises Von Domarus’ observation in the following way: “Whereas in normal (or secondary process) thinking identity is based only upon the basis of identical subjects, in paleologic (or primary process) thinking identity is accepted upon the basis of identical predicates” (Arieti 1976, 69). Arieti provides several clinical examples confirming this feature of unconscious thinking, which he calls *identification based upon similarity*:

A red-haired young woman in a schizophrenic post-partum psychosis developed an infection in one of her fingers. The finger’s terminal phalanx was swollen and red. She told a therapist few times, ‘This finger is me.’ Pointing to its final phalanx, she said, ‘This is my red and rotten head.’ She did not mean that her finger in some way represented her; she saw it either as a duplicate of herself or, in a way that is incomprehensible to the normal person, literally herself. Another patient believed that the two men she loved in her life were actually the same person, although one lived in Mexico City and the other in New York because both of them played the guitar and both of them loved her (Arieti 1976, 68).

The ability of the unconscious mind to identify things on the basis of a common property has been extensively explored in the works of Ignacio Matte Blanco. According to Matte Blanco, the “deep unconscious” treats external spatiotemporal objects through the optics of emotively marked properties (if we describe its treatment in an intensional way) or classes of similar objects (if we put it extensionally): “the objects are, true enough, individual objects but at the same time they are not. They can at the same time be sets of objects and also general ideas or propositional functions, such as ‘breastness’ or ‘motherhood’” (Matte Blanco 2005, 209). Furthermore, things that satisfy the same instinct or provoke the same emotion are perceived as “belonging to the same class.”

Milk, for instance, and a book are quite different things, but both are elements of the class of objects which give oral satisfaction, physical or symbolic. They are identical but only in that aspect. In the so-called deep unconscious, instead, these two objects,

owing to the fact that they are felt or treated as elements of the same class, are not at all different; they are the same thing (Matte Blanco 2005, 224).

Similarly, in the deep unconscious “an authority is felt not simply as a substitute of the father, as is seen in classical logic; he is the father” (ibid., 39).

Brakel states that primary process thinking is “associatively based” (Brakel 2009, 7) and, in addition to the characteristics described in (Freud 1915), distinguishes “feature-based categorising by resemblance” and “categorisations by contiguity in time and/or space, and substitutions of part for whole” as hallmarks of primary thinking (Brakel 2009, 8). In another article, Brakel writes that, in the primary process, categorisations are “as-associatively constructed, with similarity predicated upon small, superficial, or insignificant features constituting a category” (Brakel 2018, 177).

When we speak about unconscious identification or categorisation, the choice of whether to use the term ‘identification’⁵ or ‘categorisation’ depends on whether secondary thinking is involved: where the person’s unconscious mind sees two objects as being one (as both Arieti and Matte Blanco insist), the rational outsider, and the person herself, on the level of secondary thinking, would consider these two objects as falling under one concept or category (as Brakel puts it). In experientially and emotionally neutral contexts, the associations employed by primary thinking can be arbitrary, creatively constructed, and often based on (what seems to be) insignificant features, as in wit and creative art. However, as soon as emotionally significant, subjectively meaningful, painful, or traumatic mental content becomes reflected by similarities, the identifications built upon these similarities by the unconscious mind become definite, steady, and unquestionable, as Arieti’s examples show.⁶

In other words, the individual unconscious mind suggests its own emotively marked reasons for classifying objects. That is, as emotional

⁵ The term ‘identification’ can have different meanings in psychoanalytic contexts (cf. Weiss 1947). I use it here with the same meaning as Arieti when he writes about ‘identification upon similarity’ – namely, ‘equating’: to identify two objects is to state that they are identical.

⁶ We will consider more examples of similarity-based identification in sections 8 and 9.

beings we are inclined to group objects according to their subjective similarities.

True, emotions are inconstant. Is there anything in the ‘inner world’ that could provide a solid ground for our subjectively arranged systematisation of external reality? To answer this question, we will turn to internal objects.

5. Internal Objects

In psychoanalytic contexts, ‘object’ refers to other persons or things, both *per se* and as they are represented in the mind (Auchincloss and Samberg eds. 2012, 170). Among objects considered in psychoanalysis are ‘significant others,’ primarily parents, “whose interactive impact has been internalized and continues its influence on the mind from within” (Svrakic and Zorumski 2021, 4). These previously internalised and transformed figures of our significant relationships reappear in our phantasies as ‘objects’ that share some characteristics of real persons, having been at the same time altered by phantasy. They might be variously called within different psychoanalytic approaches: ‘introjects,’ ‘personifications,’ ‘illusory others,’ and the like (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 11). The term ‘internal object’ was introduced in the early works of Melanie Klein (1984) and developed later by Ronald Fairbairn, Otto Kernberg, Joseph Sandler, Thomas Ogden, and many other authors (see Mijolla ed. 2005, 849–851; Spillius et al. eds. 2011, 40–62; and also, Mitchell 1981; Ogden 2004, 131–165; Sandler 1990; Grotstein 1997; Sandler and Sandler, 2003; Hensel 2014).

There is a difference between phenomenological and metapsychological perspectives on internal objects as phantasy figures (Spillius et al. eds. 2011, 41). Phenomenologically, internal objects are figures that inhabit our deep phantasies. Primarily, in early childhood, internal objects are the introjects of parents and other emotionally significant persons from the infant’s environment. The baby feels her parents “in the concrete way in which deep unconscious phantasies are experienced” (Klein 1984b, 345). As a result, “an inner world is being built up in the child’s unconscious mind, corresponding to his actual experiences of the external world and yet altered by his own phantasies and impulses” (ibid.). Later, the content of phantasies

broadens to embrace other “figures inside us, at first in simple and then in increasingly complex relations with each other” (Bell 2017, 793). During the period of growing up and adulthood, the realm of the individual’s internal objects can be enriched by any encounters involving sufficient emotional or psychic intensity. The process of the ‘settling down’ of internal objects in the mind, called *internalisation* or *introjection*, is provided by deep phantasies.⁷

Metapsychologically, internal objects have been seen from various perspectives and interpreted within various theoretical frameworks differently. To mention just a few landmarks, they have been treated as expressions of instinctual drives (Klein 1984a), “dynamic endopsychic structures” (Fairbairn 1944), components of “object relations units” (Kernberg 1976), and unconscious suborganisations of the ego (Ogden 2004).⁸ Metapsychological interpretations vary in the emphasised functions of internal objects and the assumed ways of their integration into the structure of personality. However, the variety of conceptualisations keeps intact the initial evidence of the background figures that appear in dreams, phantasies, and therapy room narratives.

So, for example, the patient may bring experiences of being frightened of policemen. He tells the analyst he is frightened of his bank manager. He is frightened of colleagues at work, and, of course, he is frightened of the analyst. As the analytic work progresses, we can show the patient how there seems to be a frightening *internal figure* [the italics are mine – A.V.] which is externalized in the transference onto the person of the analyst (Sandler 1990a, 171).

Our primary purpose is to explore the role of background phantasy figures in unconscious thinking and to suggest a project of the logic of the

⁷ Not *every* phantasy ensures the formation of internal objects. For that reason, W. R. D. Fairbairn proposed “to replace the concept of ‘phantasy’ by a concept of an ‘inner reality’ peopled by the Ego and its internal objects” (Fairbairn 1994, 559). I use the notion of ‘deep phantasy’ to distinguish permanent personality-structuring phantasies from a mere play of imagination that may come and go.

⁸ For the analysis of different conceptualisations of internal objects, see (Ogden 2004; Grotstein 1997; Knox 1999; 131–65; Boag 2014; Brodie 2020, 125–40).

unconscious. For this purpose, we have to delineate a concept of the internal object *qua* phantasy figure that would involve as few theoretical assumptions as possible and articulate these assumptions. The more the concept is equidistant from various metapsychological frameworks, the better the resulting logical project will apply to different object relations theories.

An excellent point to start with is dictionary definitions. According to the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, “‘internal object’ refers to the mental representation that results from introjection, incorporation, or internalization of the relationship to an external object” (Mijolla ed. 2005, 849). In *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, we read that “the term ‘internal object’ means a mental and emotional image of an external object that has been taken inside the self” (Spillius et al. eds. 2011, 40) and, further, “the concept of internal object implies an object that is or has been animate and with whom there is an emotional connection. By and large, the term implies some degree of permanence or recurrence of experience of the object” (ibid., 43). Similarly, in the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, we find that the internal object is “an image or representation of a person (particularly someone significant to the individual, such as a parent) that is experienced as an internalized ‘presence’ within the mind” (VandenBos ed. 2015, 553).

In all these definitions, first, the internal object is considered as a ‘representation’ or ‘image.’ Second, an internal object, being more than a creative play of imagination, is characterised by permanence, recurrence, or ‘presence’ in the mind. Third, the internal object is invested with emotional content: it is a “mental representation of another person that one invests with drives and affects” (Svrakic and Zorumski 2021, 4).

6. Imagos and Imagery

In this section, we will try to find out what kind of ‘representation’ or ‘image’ the definitions of the internal object involve.

Klein, in her earliest writings, before coining the term ‘internal object,’ used the term ‘imago’ to refer to phantasy figures that substitute parents in the child’s mind (see Perlow 1995, 27–31). Isaacs employs the contrast between ‘imago’ and ‘image’ when she explains internalisation dynamics.

The earliest phantasies are built mainly upon oral impulses, bound up with taste, smell, touch (of the lips and mouth), kinaesthetic, visceral, and other somatic sensations; these are at first more closely linked with the experience of 'taking things in' (sucking and swallowing) than with anything else. The visual elements are relatively small (Isaacs 1948, 92).

Later, "when the visual elements in perception...begin to predominate over the somatic, ... making clearer the distinction between the inner and the outer worlds, the concrete bodily elements in the total experience of perceiving (and phantasying) largely undergo repression" (ibid., 92–93). Finally, the visual elements become 'images,' "representations 'in mind' (but not, consciously, incorporations in the body) of external objects recognized to be such. It is 'realized' that the objects are outside the mind, but their images are 'in the mind'" (ibid., 93).

So, *imago* can be considered as a proto-image that is yet to be internalised; unlike the image, it is not 'within,' not yet *internal*. As unconscious image, "'imago' ... usually refers to a person or part of a person" (ibid.). Further,

'imago' includes all the somatic and emotional elements in the subject's relation to the imaged person, the bodily links in unconscious phantasy with the id, the phantasy of incorporation which underlies the process of introjection; whereas in the 'image,' the somatic and much of the emotional elements are largely repressed (Isaacs 1948, 93).

It is plausible that the internalised image (internal object) that originates from an initial imago preserves the repressed somatic and emotional content based on its hereditary link with the imago. Thus, Maria Torok makes a distinction between an internal object as "the fantasmic pole of the introjective process" and the imago as "precisely all that resisted introjection" (Torok 1968, 121). If so, we can assume that what the subject experiences as a (usually visual) image of a phantasy figure is, in fact, a more complex, even if repressed, representation that involves different senses, such as auditory, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory. The repressed emotional content towards the figure might manifest in phantasies or dreams; it can also make its way to reality through occasional slips of the tongue or involuntary behavioural dispositions.

The type of representation that allows various sensory modalities and thus might be relevant for representing phantasy figures is known as *imagery* (also ‘mental imagery’). In the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, imagery is defined as the “cognitive generation of sensory input from the five senses, individually or collectively, which is recalled from experience or self-generated in a nonexperienced form” (VandenBos ed. 2015, 524). Bence Nanay defines imagery as “perceptual representation not triggered directly by sensory input. This leaves open the question what it is triggered by” (Nanay 2021, 1.1).

“If you close your eyes and visualize an apple, what you experience is mental imagery – visual imagery. But mental imagery is far more pervasive in our mental life than just visualizing. It happens in all sense modalities” (Nanay 2021). “Just as perception can be visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, gustatory, etc., the same goes for mental imagery” (ibid., 1.2). Mental imagery is often involuntary and ensured by early cortical processes; it is sensitive to the allocation of attention.

Furthermore, mental imagery, just as perception, can be unconscious as well as conscious (Nanay 2021a). Typical examples of involuntary mental imagery are flashbacks, earworms, hearing voices, phantosmia, and visual hallucinations. In each of these cases, there is a change in the cortex subjectively interpreted as image, sound, or smell; however, there is nothing on the retina, eardrum, and smell receptors. What takes place in the cortex is not caused by any external stimuli.

Phantasies involve imagery: in the process of phantasying, consciously or unconsciously, we subjectively sense the figures of our phantasies as psychically present. Edoardo Weiss, describing the phenomenon of the “psychic presence” of such figures, writes that the presence can reveal itself not only by a visual image but also “in an acoustical way,” for example, as the voice of a crying mother (Weiss 1939, 181). The term ‘image’ applies in psychoanalytic contexts “to conscious or unconscious experiential data arising from all the sensory modalities, including proprioceptive or kinesthetic experiences” (Sandler 1990a, 166).

That is, phantasy figures look like persons and sound like persons; they are like persons by touch and move us emotionally in the same way as persons do.

If so, why are internal objects defined as representations and not as *representables*?

7. Internal Objects as Representations

Meir Perlow, the author of an influential work on mental objects (Perlow 1995), states that the concept of representation in psychoanalysis differs from that in cognitive psychology and points out two aspects of the difference. First, representations in psychoanalysis have emotional-cognitive rather than merely cognitive character; second, psychoanalysis is concerned more with the influences of drives and wishes on a representation than with its adequacy in representing reality (Perlow 1995, 2). Perlow defines the psychoanalytically relevant concept of representation as an anticipatory set that organises experience:

Thus ‘object representations’ were not considered to be only specific ‘images’ of objects revived in response to the awakening of various wishes ..., but also the amalgamation of all the experiences the individual has of his objects, including his actual interactions with them and their emotional meanings, as well as the distortions of realistic aspects under the influence of drives and phantasies. As such, a mental representation of an object refers to a ‘schema’ which, on the basis of past experience (not necessarily realistic), organizes present experience and provides a context for both present perceptions and for the recall of past memories” (Perlow 1995, 120).

According to Perlow, representation is just a theoretical construct not subject to first-person experiences, while internal objects as special objectual phantasies are experiences, ‘psychic presences’ (ibid., 120–127). So, on this account, internal objects are *not* representations.

For Joseph Sandler, on the contrary, internal objects *are* representations and not first-person experiences. Sandler’s theory of internal objects integrates the Kleinian treatment of internal objects as phantasy figures into non-Kleinian mainstream psychoanalysis. We will consider Sandler’s approach in more detail.

Sandler states that the term ‘representation’ “can ... be a source of confusion, in that it relates to subjective experience on the one hand and to what can be called a nonexperiential organization on the other” (Sandler 1990a, 166). He emphasises the significance of the differentiation “between the experiential content of a mental representation – the perceptual and ideational content – and the structural organization behind that content, an organization that lies outside the realm of conscious or unconscious experience” (Sandler 1990, 869). In the centre of Sandler’s approach is the distinction between the experiential and nonexperiential “representational realms.”

The experiential realm can be regarded as the world of subjective experience, the phenomenal world projected, as it were, onto different aspects of an experiential screen. It is the world of perceptual images, of sensations, of memory content and of the content of visualization and imagination; it is also the world of feelings....The nonexperiential realm is the world of biological and psychological structures and apparatuses in the sense of enduring organizations. It is a world of functions, of plans and schemata, of forces and energies and of the tools of intrapsychic adaptation (Sandler 1990a, 165).

Accordingly, internal objects can be considered as ‘representations’ in two distinct senses of the term: as perceptual images in various sensory modalities and as nonexperiential “enduring organizations” “structured by subjective experience” and “capable in turn of affecting perception, memory, and fantasy” (Sandler 1990, 870). Sandler criticises Kleinians for the lack of distinction “between the processes involved in the creation of a perceptual image of the object...and the setting up of the object as an internal authority figure” (ibid., 863). He claims that the term ‘internal object’ in its most appropriate meaning applies not to an image but to the background “enduring organization” or “structure” shaping phantasy images (ibid., 871).

In Sandler’s view, there is a two-way connection between perceptual images appearing in phantasy and thought and internal objects as enduring organisations lying behind them. On the one hand, internal objects are built up on the basis of the perceptual and phantasy experience of the person. On the other hand, they are the source of new phantasy images – “internal

‘presences’ with which the person constantly unconsciously interacts” (ibid., 859). Sandler describes this two-way connection as follows:

So, I want to suggest that the world of internal objects in the nonexperiential realm be considered as giving rise to a fantasy and thought, to a (largely unconscious) phantom world in which we live at the same time as we live in the real world. This inner world is a world of unconscious ghost object images which we have constructed during the course of development, objects in unconscious fantasy whose presence is gratifying, wish-fulfilling, and reassuring. While we can conceive of the internal objects as relatively unchanging structures, the figures in this fantasy world, derivatives of the internal objects, do change as they are updated and modified... (Sandler 1990, 877–878).

The connection between an internal object and its experiential representations – momentary images or ‘presences’ – is further clarified by Sandler’s following clinical example:

A patient brings a report that he was afraid when a policeman stopped his car, sure he had done something seriously wrong, but the policeman only wanted to tell him a rear light needed repair. The patient tells of receiving a letter from the tax authorities and of his panic before opening it at the thought of the tax evasions he might be accused of and penalties he would face. He brings several similar reports, and the analyst is able to show the patient how afraid he is of being accused of some awful misdeed by the analyst. From material such as this, with its obvious recurring theme, the analyst may eventually construct a notion of a threatening internal object which is externalized in a variety of situations ... The internal object, as it has been conceived of here, is only evident in the shape of its derivatives. What is perceived by analyst and patient is referred to the hypothetical internal object in its relation to the patient’s own self (Sandler 1990, 875).

The patient’s reports contain descriptions of concepts and images – a policeman, tax authorities, the analyst – that not only *refer* to a background figure but also *represent* it. Sandler writes that ‘internal objects’ should be regarded as either theoretical or clinical constructs, “organizing concepts

employed in the conceptualization of the patient's inner psychic structure" (Sandler 1990a, 170). So, they are not first-person representations or, as Sandler says, not experiential representations. Instead, 'internal object' is a third person construct that refers to what is experienced from the first-person perspective as a background phantasy figure. That is, both theoretically and clinically, internal objects *are* background phantasy figures.

Sandler's nonexperiential "world of psychological structures and apparatuses" is the theoretical world to which psychoanalytic terms refer and in which they require their meaning. From the semantical point of view, this world should be characterised not as a separate domain of representations but as the theoretical realm of abstract objects, their properties, functions, relations, and causal processes, just like various other theoretical realms, for example, those of mathematical analysis, theoretical chemistry, or quantum physics. Within this perspective, internal objects are abstract objects; we will further develop this approach in section 10.

8. Object Relations

Object relations theory is one of the major schools in contemporary psychoanalysis (Scharff ed. 2005; Auchincloss and Samberg eds. 2012, 175–178). In this section, for the sake of clarity and completeness, we will explicitly state its main ideas. Due to multiple differences and variations, it is more relevant to speak about object relations theories rather than theory; however, we will focus only on the common ground shared by different approaches.

It is within the framework of object relations that internal objects obtain their psychological significance. An *object relation*, also called *internal object relation* or *internal object relationship*, is an intrapsychic structure consisting of three parts: a self-component, an object-component, and a representation of an affectively charged interaction between them (Auchincloss and Samberg eds. 2012, 175). For example, an internal object 'mother' is always related to an internal self-referring component, say 'child,' as its counterpart. We apply the term 'internal object' to refer to either the self or the object component of the internalised relations. Internalised object relations supply the person with potential relationship roles, the accompanying dispositions and expectations towards others.

Contemporary studies in early developmental psychology (e.g., Chambers 2017; Holmes and Slade 2019) confirm John Bowlby's seminal idea that infants have "an inbuilt need to be in touch with and to cling to a human being" (Bowlby 1958, 350). Our need to be in attachment relationships is independent of the needs for food and warmth, and as fundamental as they are. This lifelong need creates the ground on which all our internal objects and internal object relations are formed and developed. As Sandler writes, "we can speak of attachment between a person and a fantasy object just as we can speak of attachment to the real external objects in the person's life" (Sandler 2003, 16).

The main points of object relations theory can be formulated, according to (Auchincloss and Samberg eds. 2012), in the form of the following four postulates.

- 1) All psychological experience, from the most fleeting fantasy to the most stable structure, is organized by object relations. In other words, object relations are the basic unit of experience.
- 2) The human mind is object-seeking from birth; the basic motivation for object-seeking is not reducible to any other motivational force (as, for example, drive in Freud's theory).
- 3) Internalized object relations are built up in the course of development through the interaction of innate factors (such as inborn affect dispositions and cognitive equipment) and relationships with others (primarily caregivers).
- 4) Interpersonal relationships reflect internalized object relations; psychopathology, especially serious psychopathology such as psychosis, and borderline and narcissistic personality disorders, is best conceptualized in terms of object relations (Auchincloss and Samberg eds. 2012, 175).

As a result of the development of object relations theory, the inner world is often seen in psychoanalytic metapsychology as being structured by previously internalised patterns of the person's relationships with significant others. Thus, Thomas Ogden writes about "the development of a radically revised psychoanalytic theory of thinking" consisting of "the replacement of Freud's structural model with a model of an inner world structured by phantasied internal object relationships" (Ogden 2011, 926). Internal object relations constitute the quintessence of our previous experience of

interactions and thus create the optics through which we perceive the external world. This optics is being formed and transformed by different primary mental operations and processes considered in object relations theory: introjection, projection, identification, projective identification, transference, condensation, displacement, splitting, and the like. All these operations contribute to the formation, development, transformation, or reactivation of the patterns of internal object relationships involved (see, e.g., Ogden 2004; Sandler ed. 1988). To get an idea of the dynamics of the development of internal objects, we will consider closer transference, displacement, and condensation.

Transference is “the externalization of an internal object relationship” (Ogden 2004, 151), which is the opposite of internalization. As mentioned above, the internal object relationship comprises the self-component and the object component. Correspondingly, “transference can take one of two forms, depending on whether it is the role of the object or that of the self in the internal object relationship that is assigned to another person in the externalization process” (ibid.). As long as ‘internal object’ can refer to either the self or the object component of the internalised relations, the *externalisation* (or *projection*) of an internal object can refer to either form of transference.

An example of the externalisation of the self-component can be found in Freud’s paper on Leonardo da Vinci, in which Freud analyses the formation of Leonardo’s phantasy of love: “The boy represses his love for his mother: puts himself in her place, identifies himself with her, and takes his own person as a model in whose likeness he chooses the new objects of his love” (Freud 1957, 100). Commenting on Freud’s analysis, Bell writes that Leonardo “needs to sustain in his mind a particular scene/phantasy where he is being loved by his mother, and to achieve this he distributes different elements of this phantasy between two figures: himself and his lover” (Bell 2017, 788).

Displacement is a shift of ideas or feelings from one object to another. Eric Rayner describes a patient who was afraid of spiders:

...it was fairly easy to discover that her mother and the class of spiders had several qualities in common, such as activity akin or identical to weaving webs that entrap. Spiders in themselves were known to be harmless, but, as they had something in common

with her mother, they took on other maternal attributes, and then being afraid. A defense of denial may then come into play so that the idea or feeling is not consciously recognized as belonging to the primary object but only to the secondary one – the patient was thus not afraid of her mother but of spiders instead (Rayner 1995, 42–43).

Finally, *condensation* is a conflation of features of different external objects in one internal object. Rayner gives the following example:

Before a holiday, a patient dreamt that she was going down a ski slope with her instructor. Part of the way down he stopped but she continued the rest of the way easily by herself. The session then showed how she had experienced parting from ‘givers of instruction’ at different times of her life. The ski-instructor could be recognized as a condensed timeless image of her mother, father, elder brother, and her analyst, as well as the knowledgeable side of herself (Rayner 1995, 42).

It is worthwhile to note that, in each of the examples of unconscious mental operations considered above, different objects are seen in phantasy as identical upon similarity: they are similar in *emotionally charged* properties of internal objects. In Leonardo’s case, described by Freud, the identifying property is ‘looking like young Leonardo,’ where ‘young Leonardo’ is an internal object. In the example of displacement, the reason for unconscious identification is ‘weaving webs that entrap’; in condensation, it is the property of ‘being a giver of instructions.’

So, coming back to the question of what can provide a ground for subjective systematisation of external reality, raised in section 4, we can suppose that phantasied internal object relations will do.

9. Transference and Distinctive Similarities

In this section, we will consider two examples illustrating the role of identification upon similarity in transference.

Transference gives humans a chance to connect their inner world with reality. It occurs because “there is a constant need in every individual to

externalize his or her internal objects (the introjects), to anchor the inner world as far as possible in external reality” (Sandler 2003, 19–20). The unconscious mind chooses an object for externalisation due to an emotionally charged property shared (or perceived as such) by the internal and external object. To put it otherwise, some perceived properties of real persons can activate in us phantasies of our internal objects. As Sandler puts it, “transference elements are present to a varying degree in all relationships and are often determined by some characteristic of the other person who has an attribute of an important figure of the introject” (ibid., 19). We will call such emotionally charged properties capable of provoking transference *distinctive similarities*.

The following case description – *Walter and Sandra* – is borrowed from Robert Kraut:

Sandra and Walter have been living together for some time. He tells her that he loves her. He undoubtedly exhibits the kind of behavior toward her that we are inclined, given other details of Walter’s global psychology, to call love behavior. Sandra is upset. One evening she tells him: ‘It isn’t really me you love.’ Walter is confused. ‘But you’re the only one I share my joys and sorrows with, the one I most enjoy talking to, etc. And you’re the only one I sleep with.’ Sandra says: “I know I’m on the receiving end of your love behavior. But that’s not enough. I want to be on the receiving end of your love. And I’m not’ (Kraut 1986, 413–414).

Sandra’s predicament can be explained by the account that we can feel love, hatred, fear, desire, or repulsion not only towards persons and their properties but also towards our internal objects. Thus, we can assume that something in Sandra, namely, a distinctive similarity between Sandra and Walter’s internal object initially related to his mother – say, her hairstyle or manner of walking – has once provoked Walter to project his maternal figure onto Sandra. We can also imagine that Walter experienced a deficiency in his mother’s care for him as a child. Now, identifying Sandra with his maternal figure, he externalises not only the figure itself but also his wish for maternal care, trying to make up for the deficiency in this way and being unaware of this aspect of his feelings towards Sandra.

Once the transference has happened, in Walter's phantasy, the distinctive similarity merges with his desperate unconscious striving for maternal care. Walter might become rigidly attached (let us imagine) to Sandra's hairstyle: of course, he wants it to remain constant, for this constancy gives him a (perhaps illusory) promise that his strivings after care will eventually be satisfied. Walter's attachment is directed primarily toward his internal love object and only secondarily, due to displacement, toward Sandra. Furthermore, Sandra might perfectly experience what happens, as the actualisation of transference in relationships is often accompanied by "subtle attempts to manipulate others" (Sandler 2003, 19).

Walter's example also shows that internal objects are not fixed once and forever. Instead, each internal object results from a series of internalisations, deep fixations, and externalisations, usually occurring on the ground of an internalised pattern of significant relationships. When Sandra becomes a part of Walter's internal love object, the object acquires her properties: for example, her femininity, her manner of movement, hairstyle, the blue color of her eyes, the touching way she whispers and raises her voice, her unique manner of giving irrelevant answers or keeping silent when she does not want to answer. In addition, this very object is endowed in Walter's phantasy with his mother's loving care, even though Walter, in real life, had never experienced such care. Furthermore, one should not be surprised if, due to condensation, the object contains Walter's aunt's charming way of giving in to pressure and even a unique smile typical for Marie-Louise, Walter's first teacher of French.

Marvel and his hamster. Marvel is a man who once, as a little boy, lived on his father's neglected farm in Illinois, far from the big cities. They mostly lived there together with his father. His father cherished Marvel and, at the same time, controlled him. This combination of tenderness and control created a feeling of safety for Walter. On Sundays, his father used to take Marvel to the nearest town for ice cream – of course, only if little Marvel earned such a trip with his behavior. Marvel was happy on his father's farm in Illinois.

Marvel is now over 40, and he is lonely. Looking in the mirror, he sees more and more features of his father. Marvel has tenderness inside him and carries it within himself. He also has a hope, or rather, a wishful phantasy, that one day he will have someone to care for.

One day, Marvel goes to the pet store and buys a smooth-haired hamster there. The hamster has chubby cheeks – exactly like little Marvel in his childhood photos. He also buys a cage for the hamster. Since this day, Marvel's life has changed because now he has someone to cherish and control. His phantasy is fulfilled; Marvel internally returns to his father's farm.

In this example, Marvel not just accidentally externalises his internal object but acts out of his phantasy to externalise his internal father-son relations upon a distinctive similarity between 'little Marvel' and the hamster (chubby cheeks).

10. Towards the Logic of Object Relations

Now, we are in a position to articulate the main assumptions of the logic of the unconscious from the perspective of object relations theory. The assumptions presented below summarise our analysis of psychoanalytic notions; they are made from the logical point of view and thus involve logical and semantic idealisations where necessary.

The assumption of particularity. Internal objects are neither images nor representations (*pace* dictionary definitions, cf. sections 5-7); they are *abstract particulars of their own kind*. An internal object as a *representable* should be distinguished from its representations, just as we distinguish a fictional object from its descriptions or a natural number from its definitions.

The same internal object can have different representations. For example, the images of two different persons can represent the same object, as in Arieti's example of the patient who believed that two men are the same person (section 4).

Each internal object, being an abstract particular, has its properties, including intentional properties perceived or conceived by the first person. For example, 'weaving webs that entrap' and 'being a giver of instructions' are conceptual first-person properties of the corresponding internal objects in Rayner's examples (section 8).

The assumption of intentionality. Our emotive *objectual attitudes*, such as love, hatred, fear, anger, envy, jealousy, or attachment, can be directed towards internal as well as external objects. Similarly, our cognitive, conative, and emotive *propositional attitudes* can be directed towards states of

affairs involving properties of internal objects and internal object relations. Some of our propositional attitudes are unconscious, that is, are not based on reflection, and, as mental states, can occur out of the first-person awareness. Internal objects possess their perceptual and ideational properties *in phantasy*, which makes them background phantasy figures.

The assumption of object relations. Phantasied relations between the self and its internal objects are basic psychological structures that supply the person with potential relationship roles, the accompanying dispositions, and expectations towards others.

The assumption of the primary process. The mental process (or thinking) is a sequence of mental states involving intentional attitudes. The primary process (section 3) is a particular kind of mental process that consists only of uncontrolled mental operations, such as internalisation, transference, identification, and the like (section 8), managed by the causality induced by defensive and adaptational psychological ‘mechanisms.’

The assumption of similarity-based transference. Transference is a primary mental operation grounded in the object-seeking nature of the mind and its need to externalise internal object relations. It consists of creating the phantasy of identity between the internal object and a real person or thing. *Transference is caused by a distinctive similarity* – an emotionally charged property shared by the internal and external object (section 9). Distinctive similarities are also involved in other primary mental operations, particularly displacement and condensation.

These five assumptions create a ground on which the logic of the unconscious can be built as a logic of object relations. The necessary logical tools of such logic must include intentional modalities, an implication that formalises causality, and equality. Other requirements to the logic of object relations include providing an account for the cases of replacing perception with phantasy, formalising atemporality and paraconsistency regarding unconscious contents, modelling transference, displacement, condensation, and other primary mental operations, and explicating the impact of identification upon similarity on perception and other intentional attitudes, such as beliefs.

The logic of object relations should be easily applicable to psychotherapeutic and psychiatric cases and to other mental phenomena that involve unconscious intentionality.

11. Conclusions and Further Issues to Explore

In this article, relying on the study of the notion of the internal object in psychoanalysis and considering the main psychoanalytic approaches to unconscious thinking and object relations theory, I suggested a logically grounded interpretation of internal objects as abstract particulars. The logic of object relations built on the ground of the assumptions suggested in section 10 should include in its syntax the language of first-order logic with equality, operators of intentional attitudes, and so-called ‘triggering’ implication modelling causality. A possible world semantics of such logic can be built on the basis of the semantics of intentionality introduced by Graham Priest (2005), taking into account the theory of primary psychological attitudes developed by Linda Brakel (2009).

In my earlier paper, I proposed a preliminary sketch of the required logic type (Vasylychenko 2015). However, the logic of object relations is yet to be developed more systematically and axiomatised on the basis of the research undertaken in this article. Presumably, the logic of object relations will include three types of axioms: axioms of intentionality, axioms of the universal properties of internal objects and internal object relations, and axioms of causal primary process regularities.

Another direction for future research involves further clarification of the ontological status of internal objects. Internal objects are a kind of ‘non-existents’ – objects lacking actual spatiotemporal existence – on a par with fictional objects, abstract, past and future objects, and causally counterfactual objects. The universal properties of internal objects as a particular sort of non-existents are yet to be explicated. I hypothesise that, unlike possible spatiotemporal objects, internal objects are *possible* abstract particulars, and unlike objective mathematical or intersubjective fictional objects, internal objects are *subjective* possible abstract particulars.⁹

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