

What is the matter with psychoanalysis?

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I. Psychoanalysis as antidote

Blaise Pascal observed in the seventeenth century that, “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things” (*Pensees*, 13). Contemporary American culture is no different. We live in an age of outer sensationalism and inner mediocrity, where philosophy is relegated to academia and an earnest effort to live an examined life is dismissed as navel gazing. Psychoanalysis stands in firm opposition to that culture, resolutely insisting on thinking about “such things.” It rejects the superficial happiness of an unapologetically extraverted and future-oriented culture. In a society that exalts youth, psychoanalysis provides a model for maturity. In the rancorous battle between scientific reductionism and religious fundamentalism, psychoanalysis represents a third formulation of human experience and knowledge. As the medical model of mental life turns to pharmacotherapy to manage existential suffering, psychoanalysis seeks a more profound and lasting transformation of the inner world. Psychoanalytic thinking is by no means a panacea, but it represents a potentially powerful antidote to many troubling features of modern life.

Shortly after its inception, psychoanalytic concepts became firmly entrenched in contemporary culture. But in the public discourse both then and now, those concepts have been reduced to a handful of bullet points, diluted for (and by) popular consumption. As such, the breathless embrace or summary rejection of psychoanalysis today is too often founded on a shallow understanding of psychoanalytic theory and practice (Chessick, 2010; Rangell, 2002). The psychoanalysis I defend here is not the caricature of “the suburban matron discussing her child’s Oedipus complex” (Sontag, 1961), but something at once more radical and more nuanced. Sontag claims that “the disenchantment of American intellectuals with psychoanalytic ideas [...] is premature,” and notes that “disenchantment is often the product of laziness.” But then, so too is enchantment. Let us eschew laziness altogether and consider anew what aspects of psychoanalysis might enrich contemporary culture.

If we are to mount a defense of psychoanalysis, we must first admit that despite valiant efforts to articulate and defend a definition (Rangell, 1954, 1967, 2002), any consensus is elusive. Psychoanalysis comprises theory, technique, and therapy—and the history of psychoanalysis is one marked by internal debate over all three. We can nevertheless point to the object and objectives of psychoanalytic inquiry. The object—namely, the interior life—is the *sine qua non* of human experience. Plato’s *Republic* describes a tripartite psyche and explores the irrational forces that underlie inner conflict and outer behavior. In his second-century *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius exhorts himself to “Remember that what pulls the strings is hidden within—hidden from us” (Book X:38). The objective of psychoanalysis is to *uncover* what is hidden, to *identify* the forces that pull the strings, governing and guiding the inner experience. Despite the pluralism of contemporary psychoanalysis (Chessick, 2000, 2010; Kernberg, 2011), its original aim stands: namely, the attribution of meaning to, and the authentic expression of, the interior life. Conscious and unconscious efforts to censor or deny those hidden forces invariably fail. Different strings may be pulled, but the forces remain, and their capacity for destruction only grows.

To answer the question “Why does psychoanalysis still matter?” I propose that we ask, “What is the matter with psychoanalysis?” After all, something is the matter—otherwise, it wouldn’t need to be defended. But this is not the same as to ask, “What *ails* psychoanalysis?” Because the question “What is *the matter*” also asks us to define the proper object of psychoanalytic inquiry—and I would argue that the *failure* to do so is precisely what ails psychoanalytic apologists. The epistemology of psychoanalysis should begin with the unapologetic admission that the “matter” in question is not *matter* at all. Its proponents should not flounder when asked whether psychoanalytic knowledge is real; instead, they might take the question as an opportunity to probe the assailant’s own ontology and epistemology. Do we really care whether it is *real*? What are we actually saying when we ask? Might we consider things to have *being*—and to admit of systematic inquiry—even if they are not material (and therefore not tractable within the *particular* system of science)? We have become comfortable defining the concepts of matter and force as distinct, though entangled. The biological sciences restrict their study to matter—but in doing so, they do not deny the *reality* of force; they simply do not consider it to lie within their epistemologic domain.

As we turn to psychoanalysis, we might likewise ask, is language real? It is mediated by, but is not an intrinsic property of, matter. Language is central to psychoanalytic activity—and therefore central to the *matter* of psychoanalysis. That very centrality distinguishes psychoanalysis from other modes of inquiry against which we might mount a defense. The example of language both points to and encapsulates psychoanalytic epistemology. As such, I will briefly discuss language and meaning-making in psychoanalysis. I will then discuss the ostensible threat posed by contemporary neuroscience, and the ways in which a clarification and assertion of psychoanalytic epistemology might contribute to the public discourse on knowledge, truth, and how we decide what matters at all.

II. Psychoanalysis as meaning-making

We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages*

To discuss the the “talking cure,” we must first consider that “how we understand this depends on how we understand language and its relation to conscious thought, the unconscious, and subjectivity” (Kirshner, 2014). As anyone who has attempted to translate poetry can attest, words are not merely labels. They at once contain, reveal, and create meaning. Language is not simply a tool by which we communicate ideas; it gives being to the ideas themselves. It is both *potent* and *effective*. It is the *fiat* by which there is light. The ontological potency of psychoanalytic language is at work in both the theory and the method of psychoanalysis. Having sketched out the concept of regression, Freud writes (1912): “We have done no more than give a name to an inexplicable phenomenon.” And yet, “What is the point of this nomenclature if it teaches us nothing new?” Freud’s nomenclature does indeed accomplish something new: it identifies the phenomena (regression being

just one among many). But the very act of naming both *presupposes and creates* the phenomenon—a paradox explored in hermeneutic phenomenology, developed in the context of psychoanalysis by Habermas (1971), Ricoeur (1970, 1981), and others (discussed in Chessick, 2002; Fusella, 2014). In identifying them, the language bringing them into the realm of conscious experience, making an “inexplicable phenomenon” explicit. The nomenclature thus creates a novel theoretical framework for articulating—and thereby understanding—the intensity and texture of subjective experience. The words and their attendant concepts provide a vocabulary—and thus a language—by which the phenomena can be explicitly, *consciously*, identified. Psychoanalytic metaphors provide both a creative and an interpretative lens by which subjective experience—and its outward manifestation in verbal, nonverbal, and behavioral phenomena—is rendered intelligible. That intelligibility is the goal of psychoanalysis. But it is different in kind from the goal of experimental science.

Just as language is essential to the organization of psychoanalytic theory, it is also central (in free association, parapraxis, dialogue, etc.) to psychoanalysis as a technique and a therapy. Jacqueline Rose writes (1995) that for Freud, “language was always redolent of what is both hardest to articulate and most pressingly in need of speech.” The practice of psychoanalysis, like psychoanalytic theory and translation, is also an act of interpretation. It takes seriously the implicit meaning of words, speech patterns, and silence, and its task is to make that meaning explicit, orienting it within the framework of psychoanalytic theory. “In this setting,” writes Kirshner (2014), “the patient uses the analyst as Other to hold the possibility of linking experience to words and into new combinations of signs, using the voices of others within and without to escape frozen configurations of the self.” Prior to analysis, the man had already “had the experience but missed the meaning,” as T.S. Eliot writes. But in undergoing analysis, one embarks on “an approach to the meaning” which “restores the experience/In a different form.” The approach is a specific method; the destination is meaning; and the form is different both in terms of extension—for regression does not involve time-travel—and in terms of an *interior* orientation.

This conceptualization of psychoanalytic knowledge might therefore be better described as psychoanalytic understanding or insight. Orange and colleagues (1998) write:

“Psychoanalytic work, in our view, must recognize that both participants bring a structured (organized) subjective world of experience into the treatment, and that the psychoanalytic process involves understanding together (the hermeneutic process) the intersubjective contexts, both developmental and analytic, that make the patient’s way of organizing experience so problematic, painful, and, until now, necessary.” (Orange et al, 1998)

The analysis both uses and provides a language for unfolding the *meaning* of the experience. This is the thrust of psychoanalytic insight, in which past experiences and their attendant forces “suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange” (*The Tempest*, Act I, Scene ii).

III. An ostensible threat

The importance of meaning is seldom discussed in the public discourse on knowledge, where reductionism—at times even positivism—abounds. Many such crusaders have little direct experience or understanding of the practice, philosophy, and proper objects of scientific inquiry, and are far less modest in their claims than either the history or the modern practice of science actually allow. Instead, a florid *scientism* underlies much of the rhetoric. The concepts of “falsifiability” and “objectivity,” are wielded as weapons against “pseudoscience,” with little reflection on the meaning—the implied epistemology—of any of those terms. I would argue that these weapons pose little *intrinsic* threat to psychoanalysis, as I will discuss below. However, they are wielded by such a loud and boisterous army that any defense might sound feeble by comparison. I would therefore suggest that proponents of psychoanalysis might engage more enthusiastically in the public discourse, to make their own voices heard. But in doing so, they need not—indeed *should* not—invoke the language of the battlefield. Neuroscience is not an enemy to be feared or overcome. I imagine that few supporters of psychoanalysis would summarily reject the notion that human interiority is mediated by neural circuitry, or that the inner transformation precipitated by long-term analysis has biological correlates. Controlled studies can adjudicate some aspects of psychoanalytic theory, as they have already begun to do (Luborsky & Barrett, 2006; Snodgrass, Shevrin, & Abelson, 2014). Still more aspects of psychoanalysis admit of experimental investigation at least in principle, even if the tools of modern neuroscience are as yet too crude for the task. There is thus clearly a place for concrete engagement with the experimental sciences in psychoanalytic research, and the field must be receptive to reformulations of analytic concepts on the basis of discoveries in the research laboratory. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis *is not* “neuropsychology” (Blass & Carmeli, 2007; Ramus, 2013). Psychoanalytic thinking should not end—and needn’t even begin—with that concrete engagement. “If we remain secure in our science,” Rangell insists (1967), “I am less concerned about being ‘swallowed up’ than I am about the symptom of isolation and the resulting atrophy which can result from the fear of it.” By “our science” he does not mean the scientific method. Though he “would reassert the role of psychoanalysis as a research tool,” he insists that:

In this revival of a research attitude I do not mean research by allied fields, by professional ‘researchers,’ by academic psychologists or methodologists, or experts in the philosophy of science, or even by our own trained researchers (which does not mean that I neglect or minimize the importance of the latter; Wallerstein has recently reported specifically on this aspect.) I am rather referring to and stressing psychoanalysis as research, the everyday treatment of every case by the average psychoanalytic practitioner. (Rangell, 1967)

To defend “psychoanalysis as a research tool” is therefore not to bring psychoanalysis into the laboratory (though that, too, might have its place). Nor is it simply to adopt a more optimistic orientation toward neuroscience, ever seeking the “rapprochement” heralded by Kandel (1998). Instead, to be “secure in our science,” we must see that psychoanalysis is a form of empirical—albeit not experimental—research that can, when applied to its proper object, produce knowledge. But I would argue that the proper object—the *matter*—of psychoanalytic knowledge is not *matter* itself. The object of psychoanalytic inquiry—the *matter* not of *science*, but of “our science”—is interiority. Through psychoanalysis the analysand acquires *self-knowledge*—and self-knowledge is not self-*information*. Just as neuroscience should not be feared, it should also not be

uncritically embraced as the only method needed to study everything that *matters*. To study “what pulls the strings” is not the same as to study the strings themselves. When we turn on the scanner and observe brain activity, we are examining some aspect of life, to be sure—but we are not living the examined life.

A hermeneutic formulation of the concepts, methods, and practice of psychoanalysis is by no means the only approach we might take to interrogate the epistemologic usefulness of psychoanalysis (Fusella, 2014; Grünbaum, 1979; Luyten et al, 2006; Wallerstein, 1986, 2009; Zepf, 2010). Moreover, some would argue that there is no longer a legitimate distinction to be made at all between hermeneutics and contemporary science, as the latter is now understood to be an “interpretive discipline in which there is no escape from the mutual influence of observer and observed” (Orange et al, 1998). Fusella (2014) argues for a “post-humanist twenty-first-century hybrid science” that respects the contribution of both hermeneutic and systematic empirical approaches:

The analyst thereby helps the analysand come to a better self-understanding of how his or her psychic forces play a role in shaping the quality of his or her life for better or worse. In this way, the role of the analyst in the clinical realm is one of empirical-analytical observer as well as intersubjective interpreter, undergirded by traditional empirical science *and* the hermeneutical perspective together, helping the analysand on the road to self-understanding and freedom from the maladaptive invariant organizing principles that led to suffering and brought the analysand to analysis in the first place.

This perspective is in line with the synthetic perspective described by Rangell (1967), who states, “I do not agree with those who feel that advances from the biological end as well as pressures from community needs constitute threats to psycho-analysis from opposite directions; rather I feel that our insights are complementary to each.” Those who would defend psychoanalysis and seek the “majesty of comprehensive psychoanalytic theory” (Levy, 2004) must further explore that complementarity, which is the basis of psychoanalytic epistemology. Again, consensus is difficult in a discipline that, despite being relatively young, is rich with theoretical and therapeutic self-conceptualizations. But those conceptualizations must be further clarified and articulated, both within the psychoanalytic community and to the public. Only in doing so can psychoanalysis again emerge as a dominant influence in our culture.

IV. Final thoughts

Psychoanalysis becomes a pseudoscience when it claims to uphold the scientific method to the exclusion of all others, including its own. Even an effort at systematic empiricism is not the same as experimental science. The disenchantment with psychoanalysis, both within and outside the psychoanalytic community, begins here, in the confusion of science and scientism, neglecting the history and philosophy of science in favor of a shallow confusion of epistemology for ontology. *Science* is not a threat to psychoanalysis, because science restricts its objects and methods; it makes no assertions about what lies outside its scope. Scientism, by contrast, is a threat. Not because it has intellectual power, but because it has captured the contemporary

imagination, generating arguments with little content that are nevertheless loudly expressed. Psychoanalysis must clarify its objects, methods, and objectives. Having done so, it must enter into the public discourse to reassert its epistemology.

In a society fixated on objects, psychoanalysis insists on the subject. It must do so not in defiance of the biological sciences, but in concert with them: taking science seriously, but insisting all the while that certain objects and objectives of psychoanalytic inquiry, namely, meaning, interpretation, understanding, and insight, lie outside the scope of the *scientific* method as commonly understood. To admit this is to be, with Rangell, “secure in our science”—to be neither enchanted nor disenchanted with psychoanalysis, but to see it as a path to, and an affirmation of, what *matters* most to us.

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