

Psychoanalysis: Theories or Stories?*

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Is there a useful way to distinguish between a theory and a story? At first it may seem that the distinction is "obvious", but this word should start intellectual alarm bells ringing. It is too often used by a speaker to stop a listener from asking questions.

It is often said that a theory is a story about the "real" world. But many of the best stories are also about the "real" world. The questions often asked of theories, are they true or false, is not really a question that a modern philosopher of science would ask. But even the modern alternative, is one theory better than another, can and is asked about stories. Theories have a great effect on our perception of the universe in which we live and of ourselves, but stories often have an even greater one. Creationist stories are often not only more beautiful than the Big Bang story, they have probably been much more influential in affecting our perception of ourselves.

I do not believe that we will be able to usefully distinguish a theory from a story by examining the content of a story, taking it apart so to speak to find its essence, whatever that may be. A useful distinction can be made but it is not contained in the story, rather it is contained in a methodological commitment, itself based on a metaphysical attitude, demanded by the story.

The metaphysical attitude I am referring to is realism as opposed to idealism. There are of course many different versions of these two opposing metaphysical views and many different shades of each. For my purpose a simple distinction is sufficient. By realism I mean the belief that there exists a world out there which is independent of the creations of our minds - the stories we tell about it. Idealism on the contrary is the view that our stories create the world out there.

Except for a few philosophers concerned with deep issues in ontology and epistemology most people deep down are realists in the domain of the natural sciences. Very few people, including the most idealist of philosophers, really believe that if one jumps off a very high building whether one comes down with a terrible bang, or flies like the birds is contingent on one's beliefs about the structure of the universe. Those who do believe this are usually locked up under the provisions of the Mental Health Act.

However, in the social sciences there are many who do believe that there is no world out there independent of the constructs of our minds. Moreover, this attitude has been gain-

ing ground during this century. Two quite different streams of attack on realist views in the social sciences have become prevalent, one from some versions of linguistic philosophy and one from some versions of hermeneutics and phenomenology. But please relax, I assure you that it is not my intent to enter into that debate.

However, there is one kind of argument against the realist position in the social sciences that is based on a misunderstanding of the commitment involved in accepting that position. I have often heard the following kind of argument: How people behave depends on what they believe, what they believe is determined or influenced by the myths and stories they have been subjected to. So the stories we tell affect the world in the domain of the Social Sciences and we therefore have to reject the realist metaphysics. This argument is mistaken. There is no logical contradiction between a realist position and the acceptance of all these propositions about the effect of stories on human behaviour. In fact the statement that humans are affected by the stories told about them is itself based on some assumption about the nature of human beings which is itself a realist position. If one did not accept such an assumption then all one could say is that whether people are or are not affected by their belief systems is itself dependent on their belief system and so on ad infinitum.

That people are affected by the stories we tell about them might and sometimes does cause difficulty in publicly predicting their behaviour. For example, if the reality is such that people always want to frustrate pollsters then every time pollsters predict that party A will win the election Party B will do so. The prediction, if made public, cannot ever be successful.

But this fact in no way affects the realist position, on the contrary the theory is based on such a position.

The metaphysical commitment to realism can not by itself distinguish between a theory and a story. Many stories or story tellers will accept such a commitment. Besides the metaphysical commitment there has also to be a methodological commitment, a commitment to some version of empiricism. Again there are many versions and many debates in the philosophy of science about the exact meaning and status of this methodological position. For my purpose I will define it as the position that to discover anything about the world out there we have to look at the world out there. However much one studies one's navel, or one's own mind, or the language used to tell stories about the world, these activities will not reveal

anything about the world out there. At best such activities will provide illuminating and possibly interesting information about one's navel, one's own mind and about language and its uses and misuses.

I believe that these distinctions and commitments can be useful to distinguish between a theory and a story.

A story becomes a theory if it invokes the world out there as witness to justify itself. If we accept a story as a theory, that acceptance forces on us a relationship between the story and the world out there. In this relationship the story teller, and the listener are irrelevant to the dynamics set up by the story. They have no role to play. The only two actors are the story and the world out there.

On the other hand a story remains a story if all it invokes and demands is a relationship between the writer the story and the reader. Thus, to differentiate a story from a theory what is important is not its content but the commitment that it demands.

Let me stress that these different commitments are not trivial. They constrain the type of discourse that is to be considered legitimate in both cases. Like all methodological rules they set the boundaries for the debate and bar certain kinds of arguments.

To prefer Copernican to Keplerian astronomy because the former is more esthetically pleasing because it contains circles rather than ellipses is to treat them as stories not theories. To prefer Lamarckian to Darwinian evolution because the former is more hopeful and inspiring than the latter is to treat them as stories. To prefer Relativity to Newtonian theory because Einstein was a lovely man and liked Mozart is to treat them as stories. All of these examples invoke a relationship between the story and the reader or writer. The choice is being made on the basis of the impact on the reader. None of them involve a relationship between the story and the world out there, the aspect of the world about which the story is concerned.

However, all these types of discourse are perfectly legitimate when discussing stories. I think The Brothers Karamazov is one of the greatest stories ever told because it had a tremendous impact on me and expanded my ways of looking at the world. That is a legitimate reason to say that it is a better story for me than some novel by Agatha Christie. To say that the impact of reading Primo Levi was heightened by the knowledge that he had spent

time in a camp is legitimate. That is the type of discourse legitimate for stories though it is not legitimate for theories.

Before applying this method of categorization to the question in the title of this talk I want to make a distinction between two meanings of Psychoanalysis and two aspects of the Psychoanalytic enterprise. The first, is Psychoanalysis as a theory of the mind. A theory of aetiology, of why certain states occur and how they occur. This area contains the various theories about repression, defense systems, the death instinct, primary envy, the Oedipus complex and many others. The other aspect of Psychoanalysis is the practice of Psychoanalysis. This area involves theories of how psychoanalytic problems are resolved; the importance of transference in the process of resolution, theories, or practices of particular techniques, whether the process must be done twice a week or three times, whether on a couch or on a chair and many other issues of therapy.

I believe that in much of the discussion of the issues I am concerned with in this talk there has been much confusion arising from not separating these two areas, both by philosophers of science and psychoanalysts. What I want to stress at this stage is that these two areas are not necessarily logically related. We might have excellent theories of aetiology without any good theories, or good practice for successful therapy. We might know what causes AIDS without having a method of curing it.

The converse is also true. We might have a very successful method of therapy which is independent of any theory of aetiology. Herbal medicines have been used successfully in different cultures at different times even though the theories of aetiology were very different. The witch doctor might have believed that the cause of the disease was the introjection by the patient of the evil spirits floating around. He provided the magic herb combined with a few incantations and the patient was cured. The modern doctor might believe that the disease is caused by the introjection of an evil bug. He changes the incantations when providing the herb and the patient is also cured. And often the incantation without the herb can be sufficient. Placebos are often very effective.

Of course, possibly because of the synthetic a priori of causality, people do try to link their theories of aetiology with their practice of therapy. But all that requires is some imagination. I shall return to this issue a little later.

For the moment I want to concentrate on Psychoanalysis as a theory of the mind in the broadest sense.

It seems obvious, I shall justify this statement in a moment, that Freud considered his enterprise as a theory or set of theories in the way I have defined a theory, as opposed to a story.¹ And that he accepted both the metaphysical commitment and the empiricist methodology I defined as characterizing a theory. This should not be surprising. As a student at the University in Vienna from 1873 Freud studied for three and a half years under Franz Brentano. In 1874 Brentano published his influential book Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint which was a major step in the movement back to realism against the idealism of the 19th century. Breuer with whom Freud worked in the late 1870's had an extensive correspondence with Brentano, and in 1895 Freud started work on his then major project, which he later dropped "The Project for a Scientific Psychology" in which he attempted to reduce mind processes to brain processes.² In his works Freud only mentions Brentano once in his theory of jokes about which Brentano had written in his later life. But Freud was not very generous in his attributions of sources.

Let me now try to justify my claim that Freud considered his whole psychoanalytic project as a theory as I have defined a theory.

Throughout his works Freud is at great pains to justify Psychoanalysis as a science analogous to, and with the same structure as any other natural science. In 1938 Freud wrote "Psychoanalysis is a part of the mental science of Psychology...Psychology, too, is a natural science. What else can it be?" (SE 23:282). In 1940 he argued that positing the unconscious "enabled psychology to take its place as a natural science like any other" (SE 23:158) These views are not just a late development in Freud's theories.

In his essay On Narcissism he discusses the relationship between high level theoretical constructs, in this case the assumption of the existence of both a sexual libido and a non-sexual energy of the ego instinct, and observation. He is obviously worried by the need to multiply various energies. In this case an energy of the ego instinct, ego libido and object libido. In his usual Socratic style he asks the rhetorical question that might be asked by a reader to define these concepts and explain the need for them. His answer exemplifies Freud's very scientific approach:

"To be asked to give a definite answer...must occasion perceptible uneasiness in every psycho-analyst. One dislikes the thought of abandoning observation for barren theoretical controversy, but nevertheless one must not shirk an attempt at clarification....A speculative theory of the relations in question would begin by seeking to obtain a sharply defined concept as its basis. But I am of the opinion that that is just the difference between a speculative theory and a science erected on empirical interpretation [read observation]...the latter will gladly content itself with nebulous, scarcely imaginable basic concepts, which it hopes to apprehend more clearly in the course of its development, or which it is even prepared to replace by others. For these ideas are not the foundation of science, upon which everything rests: that foundation is observation alone. They are not the bottom but the top of the whole structure, and they can be replaced and discarded without damaging it. The same thing is happening in our day in the science of physics..." (SE 14:77)

Here he was referring to the various arguments about matter and other basic concepts in physics during this period.

However, probably the most explicit expression of his views about the philosophy of science as applied to psychoanalysis is contained in Lecture 35 of the Lectures. Not inappropriately the title of the lecture is "The Question of a Weltanschauung". Here Freud explicitly accepts both metaphysical realism and methodological empiricism.

The purpose of the lecture is to answer the rhetorical question Freud had asked his audience in the previous lecture "Does psychoanalysis lead to a particular Weltanschauung and, if so, which?" (SE 22:158).

His answer and his analysis of alternative answers are instructive. He first defines weltanschauung "as an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis". He then continues

"If that is the nature of a weltanschauung, the answer as regards psychoanalysis is made easy. As a specialist science, a branch of psychology...it is quite unfit to construct a weltanschauung of its own: it must accept a scientific one....it [the scientific weltanschauung] asserts that there are no sources of knowledge of the universe other than the intellectual working over of carefully scrutinized observations ... and alongside of it no knowledge derived from revelation, intuition or divination. It seems as though this view came very near to being generally recognized in the course of the last few centuries that have passed; and it has been left to our century to discover the presumptuous objection that a weltanschauung like this is alike paltry and cheerless, that it overlooks the claims of the human intellect and the needs of the human mind. This objection cannot be too energetically repudiated. It is quite without basis because the intellect and the mind are objects for scientific research in exactly the same way as any non human thing." (159).

Freud goes on to discuss religion and tries to provide a psychoanalytical explanation for why people cling to religious explanations.

But more interesting for the present discussion is his analysis of the attack on the scientific weltanschauung that comes from a different direction. He compares this attack to political anarchism and accuses it of nihilism.

"One often has an impression in this connection that this nihilism is only a temporary attitude...once science has been disposed of, the space vacated may be filled by some kind of mysticism....According to the anarchic theory there is no such thing as truth, no assured knowledge of the external world. What we give out as being scientific truth is only the product of our own needs as they are bound to find utterance under changing external conditions: once again they are illusion. Fundamentally we find out what we need and see only what we want to see. We have no other possibility since the criterion of truth - correspondence with the external world - is absent, it is entirely a matter of indifference what opinion we adopt. All of them are equally true and equally false.. if what we believe were really a matter of indifference, if there were no such thing as knowledge, distinguished among our opinions by correspondence to reality, we might build bridges just as well out of cardboard as out of stone, we might inject patients with a decagram of morphine instead of a centigram and might use tear gas as a narcotic as well as ether." (176).

I hope that this excursion into exegesis justifies my statement that it is "obvious" that Freud accepted metaphysical realism and methodological empiricism.

Given Freud's methodological commitment he now had to find the arena for the confrontation between his theoretical structure and the world out there. These two had to have at least a brief encounter if he was to follow the scientific programme he had set himself. Where and how was this encounter to occur?

Freud's answers to these questions and his continuing attempts throughout his life to justify these answers in terms of the methodological commitments he had accepted and continued to accept are beautiful to behold.

The encounter was to be staged on the psychoanalytic couch. Here the theories of the mind were to be brought face to face with the world out there, represented by the patient, to be united in a loving embrace. The means by which this encounter was to be transacted was the process of interpretation.

There were two strands in the argument with different emphases at different times and in different works. The first strand was the acceptance by the patient of the interpretation provided by the therapist, the second was the successful long term outcome of the therapy. As we shall see Freud needed both these strands for his arguments.

Freud introduces the first strand of his argument by telling us that the patient's "conflict will only be successfully resolved and his resistance overcome, if the anticipatory ideas he is given [the interpretation] tally with what is real to him" [when he accepts an interpretation] (SE 15:452). Before describing the problems that this argument posed for Freud let me briefly consider the logical relationship between the psychoanalytic theory that Freud tried to confront with the real world out there and this particular method of confrontation.

Even if the patient accepts an interpretation and is cured there is still no necessary confirmation of the theory of aetiology, which is what Freud wants to argue. To make such a connection at least one other proposition is required. The interpretation must be uniquely logically related to only one particular theory of aetiology. If the same interpretation could be made on the basis of two different theories, acceptance of the interpretation could not confirm both of them simultaneously. Recall my previous example of the magic herb. It successfully cures the illness even though the theories of the illness are very different. Just as the success of the herb does not necessarily prove that the disease was caused by the introjection of evil spirits, it cannot by itself prove that the illness was caused by the introjection of an evil bug.

However, for the moment let me accept the necessary subsidiary propositions required for the tally argument to be valid and follow Freud's problems with it.

The problems arose from the conflict between Freud's theory of transference, his methodological commitment, and his desire to distinguish between hypnosis and psychoanalysis.

As you all know better than I, the concept of transference is crucial in Freud's theory of therapy. Transference sets up a strong bond between the patient and the therapist. A positive transference "clothes the doctor with authority and is transformed into belief in his communications and explanations." (SE 16:445) In his much later essay "Construction in Analysis" written in 1937 Freud goes much further:

"The path that starts from the analyst's construction ought to end in the patient's recollection; but it does not always lead so far. Quite often we do not succeed in bringing the patient to recollect what has been repressed. Instead of that, if the analysis is carried out correctly, we produce in him an assured conviction of the truth of the construction which achieves the same therapeutic result as a recaptured memory." [SE 23:267]

The assured conviction that is required is achieved by transference.

All that might be important and fundamental to Freud the therapist but where does it leave Freud the scientific methodologist? How can the acceptance of an interpretation be considered as a confirmation of the theory if the therapist has this power to "produce an assured conviction of the truth of the construction"? The more emphasis Freud put on transference the weaker becomes his use of the therapy as a place in which the theory can confront the world out there. Moreover, and this was of great concern to Freud, how then is

psychoanalysis different from hypnosis which also works, and Freud did believe that it often does work, by suggestion. What is the difference between suggestion under hypnosis and suggestion under the transference?

It is here that Freud brings in outcome as another differentiating variable: In hypnosis "there was a lack of permanence in its success" (16:449). But this introduction of permanence of success radically alters the arena in which the confrontation between psychoanalytical theory and the world out there takes place. It is no longer on the psychoanalytic couch, but somewhere in the world out there. Now, to confirm the theories what is required is follow up studies of patients, methods of defining and measuring what we mean by a long term cure etc. Freud tried hard but I believe was unable in the end to reconcile his methodology with his theory of therapy.³

Compared to Freud's problem the problem currently is surely much greater. Currently there are a variety of psychoanalytical theories claiming adherence and claiming that they are very different from their competitors. Besides Freudians and Jungians there are Kleinians, and Object relations theories, and ego psychology and I imagine that you know many others. I assume, and have some casual empirical evidence, that the practitioners of these different theories all claim that their interpretations are accepted by their patients and that their patients also get cured. If we accept the tally argument how can all these theories be different and yet all be confirmed? There seem to be only three alternatives. Either someone is not telling the truth, an extremely unprofessional assumption; or there are various types of psychoanalytical problems, Kleinian problems, Jungian problems, object relations problems etc. The patient with a Kleinian problem chooses a Kleinian therapist, the one with a Freudian problem chooses a Freudian therapist etc. Just as say, someone with a skin problem will go to a dermatologist, someone with an ear ache will go to an ear and throat specialist etc. Again a very far fetched possibility. Or alternatively the tally argument is wrong. Namely, that the acceptance by a patient of a particular interpretation, and the effectiveness of a therapy throw no light on the question of the validity of any theory of aetiology. If those theories are to confront the world out there the confrontation has to occur in some other arena.

This of course still leaves open the question of how and why the therapeutic process works, for the purpose of my discussion I am willing to grant this, and why does it seemingly

work just as successfully for the many different theoretical aetiological structures, for which there is some evidence?

An alternative way of asking the question is what is the theory of therapy, or is there a theory of therapy which is independent of the many aetiological theories? Why does this magical herb work whether it is accompanied by incantations that supposedly kill off the introjected evil spirit, or those that supposedly kill off the evil bug?

Let me give you a theory that I find plausible. Here I know I am going out on a limb but I hope that when you shoot me down it will be done with compassion.

The process of therapy is a process of story telling. What is important is to tell a good story. You will recall that I defined a story as evoking a relationship between a story teller, the story and the listener. As I understand it that is exactly what occurs in therapy. For the therapy to be successful the story must be plausible to the listener. Putting Freud on his head so to speak the transference relationship might be important because it increases the possibility for the story to become plausible. And if it does bring out repressed memories these can be woven into the story, whatever the story, by the good story teller making the story even more plausible. The content of the story is of no great relevance as long as it is a good story. Of course, as with all stories, what is a good story for one person might not be plausible to another. Different patients might require different stories.

As long as written records go into the past people have needed stories and have told them. The world can be a very frightening place. The function of many myths or stories is to make the world plausible. What Aristotle calls the gift of curiosity, which can sometimes be a curse, seems to be well developed in humans. We keep asking why. Why are we here? Why the moon? Why the stars? Why the lightning? Why death? Telling a plausible story about the world makes it less confusing and less frightening. Often it also gives us a feeling of greater control. If lightning is the thunderbolt thrown by Zeus when angry, we can sacrifice a couple of maidens to appease him.

From the many years that I have been a "groupie" to the psychoanalytical field the various description of patients I hear are of people who are confused, who find the world and possibly themselves frightening, who find it difficult to understand the signals provided by others. Is it not plausible that what they need is a good story? A story that will make their world less confusing and less frightening: A story that might answer the whys they are asking.

The story told and its success in achieving its purpose need not have any relationship with the true reason of why they are in the state in which they are, the correct aetiological theory. All that is required of it is that it satisfies their need for plausible structures into which they can fit.

The distinction I have made between Psycho-analytical theory and the practice of therapy has some important methodological consequences for those who like Freud believe that the criterion of truth is "correspondence with the external world" and that "knowledge [is] distinguished among our opinions by correspondence to reality". If one accepts some version of my distinction between a theory of aetiology and the theory of therapy the confrontation between a Psycho-analytic theory of the mind and the world out there cannot take place either on the psychoanalytic couch, nor in any encounter after the end of the therapy. Neither the patient's acceptance of an interpretation, nor the success or otherwise of a therapy sheds any light on the validity of the theory of aetiology.

Where then can the two meet? The answer must be that the meeting has to take place before the patient enters the psychoanalytic room.

However, to enable such an encounter to take place the structure of the psychoanalytic theory has to be of a particular form to distinguish it from metaphysics. The theoretical terms of the psychoanalytic theory have to be connected with some observable phenomena besides those which the theory wishes to explain. Let me give you an example. Assume a psychoanalytic theory states that an Oedipus complex exists and if unresolved results in a certain type of neurotic behaviour. If this is all it says observation of that type of neurotic behaviour will always confirm the theory. But that is not good enough. For the theory to be confronted with experience in a scientific encounter, the theory must either state that the Oedipus complex occurs or is stronger under certain conditions, or that if it exists and is unresolved it shows itself in a variety of behaviour patterns not just the neurotic pattern that brings the patient to the analyst.⁴

My analysis does pose problems for a theory of therapy. Tests can be made to show whether particular therapies are successful. But what can such tests reveal? At best they can show that certain therapies, or therapists can tell the type of stories that are successful in making the world more comfortable for those who had previously found it frightening or

unmanageable. A theory of therapy would require an analysis of why this is so. Why are some stories or some story tellers more successful than others in providing the appropriate framework?

We may hope, or fear that sometime in the future a general theory of the mind will be developed that will successfully provide both a theory of the aetiology of psychoanalytic problems and a deeper explanation of why certain stories or story tellers are better than others in alleviating these problems.

Footnotes.

¹ This section of the paper owes much and adds little to A. Grunbaum's The Foundations of Psychoanalysis. (1984)

² See Frank J. Sulloway Freud, Biologist of the Mind. (1979)

³ For an elaboration and justification for this statement see Grunbaum (1989).

⁴ For some attempts in this direction see some of the studies in Fisher and Greenberg (1978).