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How Psychoanalytic Should Psychoanalysis Be?

Dr Yianna Ioannou
University of Nicosia
Center for Therapy, Training and Research
66 Metochiou Street, 1st Floor,
2407 Nicosia
Cyprus
Email: yianna.ioannou@gmail.com

This paper explores the current epistemological position of psychoanalysis as an *interdisciplinary* field of study, literally a field positioned *between* the humanities and the sciences. This position of in-betweenness generates a split between psychoanalysis as a theory and as a clinical practice: while psychoanalytic theory is rather popular in literary studies, psychoanalytic practice is increasingly marginalized in the ranks of psychology and psychiatry. In academic psychology, being psychoanalytic is perceived as diametrically opposed to being scientific. Indeed, clinical psychoanalysis is often criticized for not being an “evidence-based treatment,” a term that is reserved almost exclusively for behavioral and cognitive-behavioral therapies that document their therapeutic effectiveness through outcome studies of symptom reduction. Psychoanalysis is unable to compete in this race as its therapeutic value lies in its ability to induce qualitative changes, which cannot be expressed in quantifiable terms. It should not be surprising then that in the context of a system which operates on the

basis of market-forces where value must be measured in numbers, psychoanalysis is going bankrupt.

The Epistemological Status of Psychoanalysis

The dubious position that psychoanalysis occupies between the sciences and the humanities makes it difficult to definitively determine its epistemological status. Psychoanalytic knowledge has been traditionally produced and transmitted in freestanding psychoanalytic institutes, which often choose to resolve the question of its epistemological status unilaterally. However, the medical establishment is now openly questioning the clinical legitimacy of psychoanalysis, so that if it does not put itself to the scientific test it may soon be disqualified as sheer quackery.

The question of the epistemological status of psychoanalysis is as old as the field itself, from Freud's early preoccupation with establishing a *scientific* metapsychology, to the divisive debate of the 1970s and 80s, which sought to settle whether metapsychology could indeed render psychoanalysis a science, and eventually forced psychoanalysts to seek alternative routes to scientificity. Currently, psychoanalysts attempt to legitimize psychoanalysis as a science through the systematic analyses of clinical encounters, attachment research of parent-infant dyads (also regarded as the analyst-patient metaphor par excellence), efficacy studies of its therapeutic value, and neurobiological findings consistent with psychoanalytic theorizing (which have led to the emergence of neuro-psychoanalysis).

All these efforts notwithstanding, the uneasiness regarding the epistemological status of the field persists; a few sample titles of publications that have appeared since the

last decade are quite telling: “The Status of Psychoanalytic Theory Today: There Is an Elephant There,”ⁱ “What Is Psychoanalysis?,”ⁱⁱ “What Is Psychoanalysis?,”ⁱⁱⁱ “What Is Psychoanalysis?,”^{iv} “What Kind of Science Is Psychoanalysis?,”^v “The Identity of Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalysts,”^{vi} and so on. The anxiety is palpable. Regardless of how one might choose to resolve it—by declaring psychoanalysis a science, a hermeneutic practice, a secular cure, or even a religion—more than a hundred years since psychoanalysis appeared as a new form of knowledge there continues to be a strong desire and pressure to assign it a place in the realm of scientific practices. It is precisely the nature of this desire that this paper wishes to question.

Freud’s own desire to establish psychoanalysis as a science is evident from his earliest psychoanalytic work, the posthumously published “Project for a Scientific Psychology,”^{vii} to his latest, “An Outline of Psychoanalysis”^{viii} published in 1938, where he insists that the psychology of the unconscious

enabled psychology to take its place as a natural science like any other. The processes with which it is concerned are in themselves just as unknowable as those dealt with by other sciences, by chemistry or physics, for example; but it is possible to establish the laws which they obey and to follow their mutual relations and interdependences unbroken over long stretches—in short, to arrive at what is described as an ‘understanding’ of the field of natural phenomena in question (158).

Freud placed his bets for a scientific psychology on metapsychological theorizing, an attempt to systematize the laws and principles according to which the unconscious operates, by borrowing and transposing physical laws of natural phenomena onto the realm of the intrapsychic. At the same time, he recognized, not without discomfort, that metapsychology might not stand the scientific test. The oft-quoted passage from “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,”^{ix} one of his last works, is quite revealing. At

a point in his theorizing where he takes up the issue of whether an instinct can be tamed, he remarks:

If we are asked by what methods and means this result is achieved, it is not easy to find an answer. We can only say: ‘So muss denn doch die Hexe dran!’ [We must call the Witch to our help after all!]¹⁰—the Witch Meta-psychology. Without metapsychological speculation and theorizing—I had almost said ‘phantasying’— we shall not get another step forward (225).

In summoning the help of the witch-metapsychology, Freud is making a direct allusion to the witch in Goethe’s “Faust” who, by magical (or metaphysical) means, will grant Dr. Faust his youth. The witch-metapsychology too, can just as magically resolve Freud’s theoretical impasse; not by scientific investigation but through speculating and (almost) phantasying. As much as Freud desired to render psychoanalysis scientific through metapsychology he eventually had to concede, perhaps inadvertently, that his object of inquiry required a process of speculating, imagining and “phantasying” afforded by the humanities.

Indeed, despite his frequent claims to scientific knowledge, Freud did not hesitate to openly utilize the knowledge-base of the humanities. Literary references abound in his work, not simply as mere illustrations, but as legitimate evidence in support of theoretical constructs. In “Freud’s Literary Culture” Graham Frankland goes so far as to suggest that “the authority Freud imputes to writers is of a different order; their ‘evidence’ is sufficient to prove a scientific theory.”¹¹ Indeed, the myth of Oedipus is a prime example of his turn to the literary tradition, not as a means of explicating but of *constructing* the core tenets of psychoanalysis.

In fact, in “The Question of Lay Analysis”¹² (which he wrote in response to the charge of “quackery” that was brought against Theodor Reik, a non-medical member of the

psychoanalytic society in Vienna) he imagined proper psychoanalytic knowledge to emerge out of the interplay between multiple and broad forms of scientific and non-scientific knowledge; to emerge, that is, between disciplines so that psychoanalytic knowledge would amount to interdisciplinary knowledge. His ideal school of psychoanalysis would share much of what is taught by the medical faculty, and

alongside depth-psychology, which would always remain the principal subject, there would be an introduction to biology, as much as possible of the science of sexual life, and familiarity with the symptomatology of psychiatry. On the other hand, analytic instruction would include branches of knowledge which are remote from medicine and which the doctor does not come across in his practice: the history of civilization, mythology, the psychology of religion and the science of literature.

“Unless he is well at home in these subjects,” Freud declared, “an analyst can make nothing of a large amount of his material” (246). If Freud envisioned psychoanalysis as an “interdisciplinary discipline,” then why did he insist on claiming for it a scientific status? Why did he feel he had to “console” himself, as he put it elsewhere, “that the case histories [he wrote] should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science?”^{xii}

The Legitimacy of Psychoanalytic Knowledge

What was at stake for Freud, and continues to be at stake today, is the legitimacy of psychoanalytic knowledge. Without the “serious stamp of science,” psychoanalysis would risk being perceived as a lower form of knowledge or, worse yet, as quackery. Freud feared, in other words, that psychoanalysis would turn into what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges,” “knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.”^{xiii} The claim of psychoanalysis to a scientific status then is

a desire to climb up the hierarchical structure of knowledge, which is first and foremost a hierarchical structure of power. In desiring to enter the ranks of scientific disciplines, psychoanalysis legitimizes the established power structures of knowledge and participates in the very process of creating a hierarchy among disciplines.

Foucault cautions against such blind participation and urges instead that we seek to expose the claim to power concealed in the hierarchy of knowledge:

Even before we know to what extent something like Marxism or psychoanalysis is analogous to a scientific practice...we should be asking the question, asking ourselves about the aspiration to power that is inherent in the claim to be a science. What speaking subject, what discursive subject, what subject of experience are you trying to minorize when you begin to say: 'I speak this discourse, I am speaking a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist.' What theoretico-political vanguard are you trying to put on the throne in order to detach it from all the massive, circulating and discontinuous forms that knowledge can take? (10).

The desire of psychoanalysis to “speak a scientific discourse,” Foucault would argue, is not simply a desire to claim a “rational structure” whose propositions are “the products of verification procedures” but rather, a desire to claim “the power-effects” that the West has ascribed to science (10). Insofar as science has been ascribed primarily a privileged access to truth, it is ultimately a desire to earn this privileged access.

The desire for the power-effects of science has become inseparable from the “desire to know,” or what Lacan has called “the epistemological drive,” the drive of the master-discourse that commands: “Continue. March on. Keep on knowing more and more.”^{xiv} As such, the master-discourse appears in stark opposition to the discourse of the analyst who commands: “Keep talking. Speak. Keep on talking more even if, or especially if, you don't know what you are saying!” Psychoanalysis does not seek to

obtain some ultimate knowledge but to expose whatever knowledge we hold as only half-truth, incomplete, fragmented, lacking. As Dany Nobus and Malcolm Quinn aptly put it in “Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid,” an exposition on psychoanalytic epistemology through a Lacanian lens:

Rather than facilitating the accumulation of knowledge, the analytic position is geared towards the ‘fall of knowledge,’ which implies that the search for (better, truthful) knowledge is turned against itself, in the direction of an emergent non-knowledge. . . . If anything, the analyst attempts to exorcise the spectre of ‘full knowledge’ by pinpointing its fundamental inconsistency and clearing the ground for its dialectical counterpart—the subject-less, acephalic knowledge that goes by the name of the unconscious.^{xv}

And further into their argument: “Rather than endorsing the psychoanalytic value of this command to know more, Lacan insists on the value of stupidity, ignorance, loose talk and bullshit—the disavowed waste products of the epistemological drive” (123).

While the epistemological drive strives towards some future state of “full knowledge,” the psychoanalytic drive always returns, not to a past, lost knowledge, but to that which lies beyond knowledge, to what is left of the subject when knowledge falters; it tries to exorcise knowledge-as-truth, and allow bullshit to emerge in its place, for “bullshitting,” Lacan maintains “is truth.”^{xvi} That is, psychoanalysis seeks to unveil the non-sense of the symptom, that which does not make sense from within the frame of established knowledge, and reveals the subject to be a discontinuous, fragmented, irrational being.

What the specter of “full knowledge” (which is equivalent to absolute, or scientific knowledge) minorizes then, is the very discontinuity of knowledge (it is no secret, for instance, that scientific research which yields non-significant findings is unlikely to be accepted for publication, as though “non significance” is not in itself significant!). Psychoanalysis has the potential and the responsibility to expose the specter of “full

knowledge” as a mechanism which minorizes, and to create the space for what is minorized, or repressed, to emerge so that the subject may construct a new position with respect to his own truth.

But in insisting on its claim to a scientific status, psychoanalysis colludes with the process of minorization: not only does it repress the non-knowledge it pretends to encourage while in the consulting room, but it also minorizes the already subjugated forms of knowledge which can serve as allies in its task of challenging conceptions of “full knowledge,” of subverting the dominant narratives of knowledge and truth, and of negotiating the power relations embedded in the claims to full knowledge; that is, the very tasks which constitute the analytic position. There is a battle to be fought and it cannot be fought either from within the privacy of the consulting room, nor from within the solitary structures of psychoanalytic institutes. It is not a battle for scientific legitimacy; rather it is a battle against minorization which is equally felt among all forms of inquiry whose methodology may not be strictly scientific, but (and perhaps because of that) who are able to grapple with paradox, inconsistency, discontinuity and the limits of knowledge. Psychoanalysis must rediscover that exposing “full knowledge” as a specter is also the work of the philosopher, the literary critic, the political theorist, the creative artist. If it renounces its interdisciplinary nature so as to claim a position among the sciences then psychoanalysis must also renounce the legitimacy of non-knowledge, the legitimacy of the unconscious, and therefore its own legitimacy.

ⁱ George Frank, “The Status of Psychoanalytic Theory Today: There Is an Elephant There,” *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 17 (2000): 174-179.

ⁱⁱ Richard D. Chessick, "What Is Psychoanalysis?," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry* 28 (2000): 1-23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Szasz, "What Is Psychoanalysis?," in *Who Owns Psychoanalysis?*, ed. Ann Casement (London: Karnac, 2006).

^{iv} Lawrence Friedman, "What Is Psychoanalysis?," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 75 (2006): 689-713.

^v Bertram J. Cohler and Robert Galatzer-Levy, "What Kind of Science Is Psychoanalysis?," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 27 (2007): 547-582.

^{vi} Arnold David Richards and Arthur A. Lynch, "The Identity of Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalysts," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 25, no. 2, (2008): 203-219.

^{vii} Sigmund Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology* [1895], ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 1, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 281-391.

^{viii} Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* [1938], ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 23, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 139-208.

^{ix} Sigmund Freud, *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* [1937], ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 23, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 209-254.

^x Graham Frankland, *Freud's Literary Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 18.

^{xi} Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis* [1926], ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 20, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 177-258.

^{xii} Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* [1893], ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 2, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 160.

^{xiii} Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 7.

^{xiv} Jacques Lacan, *Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jacques Alain-Miller, ed. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007), 120.

^{xv} Dany Nobus and Malcolm Quinn, *Knowing Nothing Staying Stupid: Elements for a Psychoanalytic Epistemology* (London: Routledge, 2005), 22.

^{xvi} Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 127.