

On the Inherent Idiosyncrasy of Psychoanalysis

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Psychoanalysis, all along, has entertained complex relations both with evidence based scientific research and with the artistic domain. While offering an in-depth mapping of psychic structures, it holds on to a dense and layered poetic language that is marked by ample speculativeness. This short essay comes to share some thoughts about these threefold relations between psychoanalysis, science, and art.

The empirical agenda of translating internal objects into external and measurable data clashes with that of psychoanalytic thinking not only because psychoanalytic concepts are hard to measure in a non reductive manner, but also because in spite of its repeated marking of truth as its object of inquiry – psychoanalysis resists, inherently, the empirical dimension of knowledge. Writing about the artist's "inherent dilemma", Winnicott (1963) offered a fascinating argument: Though artists use their art in order to deepen their understanding of themselves, one cannot imagine an artist reaching the end of this task that preoccupies him so absorbingly. This dilemma is relevant to psychoanalytic thinking as well. On the one hand, psychoanalysis seeks to investigate the human psyche as well as itself as a meta-theory. On the other hand, there seems nothing more dreadful for psychoanalytic thinkers than the possibility of their arguments transforming into solid matter, thus becoming measurable and finite.

The difficulty the psychoanalytic community has in letting go of its idiosyncrasy can be likened to the patient's reluctance to give up on his infatuation with his symptom. This difficulty is connected with the fact that the symptom itself is not a foreign organ that can be removed at will: It is ingrained in the subject's identity and constitutes an important dimension of it. In the same manner, the language of psychoanalysis is not a foreign body that somehow attached itself to the method. It expresses and represents what psychoanalysis essentially consists of: A many-layered, rich corpus of thinking whose complex form is a vital enactment of the subject matter it addresses.

In a chapter dedicated to the nature of esthetic judgment, Donald Meltzer and Meg Harris-Williams suggest that in the encounter between self and object, two modes of contact are exposed: *carving* and *enveloping* (Meltzer & Harris Williams, 1988, pp.186-187; see also Amir, 2016). Whenever the human mind encounters a new object it performs two unconscious actions, either in succession or simultaneously: On the one hand it "envelops" the new object with a familiar context, while on the other hand it encounters it as absolutely and wholly alien. This is the basis of "knowing about" as opposed to "essential knowing" (Meltzer & Harris, 1988, p.186-187): While "knowing about" relates to the object from an external perspective, enveloping the new and include it as a part of a continuum, "essential knowing" is the encounter with the alien as such.

Every method of knowing includes this movement back and forth between carving and enveloping. But psychoanalysis, more than any other method of investigation, pursues carving. I am not saying that psychoanalytic theory in general does not consider itself as a continuum, or as a part of a sequence. What I am suggesting is that through its layered and dense language, psychoanalysis maintains the dimension of carving even when apparently presenting a structured and coherent theoretical enveloping.

Spence (1982) argues that since fascinating, attractive narratives are tempting to be read as historical truths – psychoanalytic thinkers' achievements are the result of their articulating coherent narratives rather than of their mapping an actual reality. Although I disagree that the power of psychoanalytic theoretical models depends mainly on their rhetorical sophistication – I do believe that Spence touches on a fundamental truth related to the critical role played by psychoanalytic aesthetic structures. Back to Meltzer and Harris' ideas – since knowing always carries some of its object's features, there are objects of knowledge that are more suitable for “knowing about”, while others can only be penetrated through “essential knowing”. Mysterious, complex and impermanent, the object of psychoanalytic thinking can much less be grasped in the way of “knowing about” than in the way of “essential knowing”. In this sense it is indeed closer to the speculative nature of art than to evidence based science.

It is exactly thanks to its speculative character that psychoanalysis holds out its very essence. Theories are not created only to explain phenomena or for operational purposes. They are also part of how the human community validates its existence and renders it meaningful. The beauty of a theory matters, not because it aspires to artistic status, but because beauty stirs the mind to seek, and in this sense constitutes one of the most powerful forces of thinking. Psychoanalysis has always recognized it. Its idiosyncrasy, which at times chooses beauty over simple causal logic, isn't a mere defense. This is how it protects its core, preserving the quality of carving within the quality of enveloping, the uncanny within the homely, the mystery which exactly by not being revealed – turns out to be the foundation of all revelation.

References

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