



On the Scientific Status of Psychoanalysis: Commentary on David Lotto's Paper

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In "On the Scientific Legitimacy of Psychoanalysis: The Controversy that Won't Go Away," David Lotto (2017) provides a comprehensive review of the controversy between objectivist and hermeneutic-constructivist understandings of psychoanalysis and concludes they are ultimately incommensurable. In the following, I argue that hermeneutic-constructivist readings can generate hypotheses sometimes capable of being empirically tested. The argument that psychoanalysis cannot claim the status of objective science because its propositions are incapable of falsification (Popper, 1974) has itself been falsified: the theory of primary narcissism or undifferentiation at the beginning (a central tenet of Freudian theory long rejected by the Kleinians) has been falsified by empirical infant research (Stern, 1985). This demonstrates that psychoanalysis can at times meet Popper's criterion and qualify as a science.

In *Psychoanalytic Thinking: A Dialectical Critique of Contemporary Theory and Practice* (2018), I identify a range of polarities characterizing classical and contemporary psychoanalysis—narcissistic vs transference neuroses, oedipal vs pre-oedipal conditions, insight vs relationship, Guilty man vs Tragic man, paternal vs maternal function, the metaphysics of presence vs the metaphysics of absence, etc.—and argue in favor of the dialectical transcendence of such either/or thinking. This is tantamount to saying it is time now for psychoanalytic theory and practice to advance from the paranoid-schizoid toward the depressive position. I wish here to suggest the possibility of such transcendence *vis-a-vis* the objectivism vs hermeneutic-constructivism debate.

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In response to Crews's (2017) latest compendium of Freud's errors and sins, Prochnik (2017) points to the conundrum entailed in the fact that the founder of a theory and practice widely held to be scientifically discredited still figures, along with Shakespeare and Jesus, as one of the three most influential sages of Western culture. According to Menand (2017), the original appeal of psychoanalysis was that it was held to be inductive science, not mere literary creation. Unlike *Paradise Lost* about which, says Menand, no one asks "but is it true?", the propositions of psychoanalysis could claim to be veridical. But what strikes me about Menand's argument is its devaluation of literature as a mere "magic lantern show," as if one could never hope to find timeless truth in works of great literature—as if the literature we consider great and preserve in contrast to the lesser works we allow to fall into oblivion has nothing whatever to do with its truth content. Is it really true that no one asks of *Paradise Lost*, is it really true?

While it might be tempting to follow Menand and others and distinguish "poetic truth" (not to mention "existential truth" and "moral truth") from scientific truth, I feel it is essential to insist on the unitary nature of truth while recognizing a variety of different methods for arriving at it. To assimilate the truths contained in, say, *King Lear*, it is necessary to read the play, think about it, interpret it, read other interpretations that draw attention to elements of the text that either support or cast doubt on one's interpretation, and so on.

While such activity clearly qualifies as hermeneutic, the term "constructivist" can be misleading in this context in that there is an objective reality to the text that requires meaning to be *found* and not merely dreamed up and that justifies some readings over others. But there is a sense of the term "construction" other than the one that suggests something entirely invented or manufactured out of whole cloth. In Freud's (1937/1964) "Constructions in Analysis," far from being taken either as empirically veridical or entirely fabricated, our constructions are considered hypothetical, ideas of how things are or might have been, not to be confused with conclusions of how things actually are or were. In this sense our constructions do not replace a non-existent reality but merely serve as hypotheses

to be held as such until they can be verified or at least falsified in light of relevant empirical data of some sort.

In my view, natural science, as reading the text of nature, is not a fundamentally different process. In both natural and human sciences, we seek evidence either supporting or falsifying our interpretations. It is the term “constructivist” that sometimes connotes an arbitrariness of meaning bestowed upon rather than found in the text of nature, or literature, or the analytic session, that is problematic, suggesting an intellectual relativism and nihilism in which “truth” is only manufactured, never discovered.

Freud posited a universal Oedipus Complex but long before he did so, the triangular complex of desire, rivalry and jealousy had been vividly represented in the myths and literature of diverse cultures. In the associations of patients in psychotherapy and analysis it is easy to quickly identify such triangular issues, though therapists frequently fail to distinguish between the pre-ambivalent triangles of the paranoid-schizoid position and the ambivalent, and hence truly Oedipal, conflicts of the depressive position. In listening to patients and noticing such triangular themes and in exploring them, analysts are engaged in hermeneutic interpretation. But in positing a universal Oedipus complex much more than this is involved. Freud sees sexual rivalry as at the core of such conflicts. Is this true? Could the essence of triangular conflict be narcissism rather than sex? Is sexual desire as Freud thought at the root, or is it rather the type of desire Lacan (1977) posited as the desire of the other—one’s desire to be desired? How might we arrive at the truth?

Erich Fromm (1951) advanced a revisionist, socially conditioned and relativistic rather than universal theory of the Oedipus complex in which it is not primarily about sexual jealousy but about authority and, in Western culture at least, about the father-son conflict. He writes: "Freud gives a universal meaning to a feature that is characteristic only of patriarchal society. ... [where] the son is subject to the father’s will; ... As always, oppression leads to hate, to a wish to liberate oneself from the oppressor, and in the last analysis, to eliminate him" (Fromm, 1980, p. 29). Other Marxists also made the Oedipus about hostility and domination rather than sex, utilizing Malinowski's (1927) data on the

Trobriand culture where the boy's hostility is not toward the man who sleeps with mother (his father) but toward the man who holds authority over him (his maternal uncle).

Anthropologist Anne Parsons (1964) reviewed Malinowski's data and found Trobriand culture full of brother-sister incest myths, jokes and taboos, because the culture makes her brother the most important man in a woman's life. Her son perceives that while his father merely sleeps with her, he has little importance in his mother's and uncle's matrilineal and matrilocal milieu and is easily divorced. The mother's brother is the really significant man in her life. So while the Oedipus is not about narrow sexual jealousy, it *is* about jealousy in a wider and more fundamental sense. It stems from narcissistic desire more than sexual desire: *the desire to be the apple of the mother's eye*. This narcissistic desire is universal, existential, though directed differently under different kinship arrangements. So Fromm is right that the Oedipus is not fundamentally about sex, but neither is it fundamentally about authority, though resentment of authority may certainly play a part, and in our society the male authority figure also sleeps with mother and is often the most important person in her life.

While Freud unnecessarily sexualized the Oedipal conflict, Fromm unnecessarily relativized it sociologically. Aside from Lacan, most analysts have underestimated the universal narcissistic desire to be preeminent and the rivalry, jealousy, envy and aggression that result from competition. The narcissistic project is, in my view, an unavoidable by-product of attachment (Bowlby, 1969-1980). While certainly not drawing on attachment theory, Lacan (1977) argues that “man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other” (p. 58)—that is, I desire to be desired. While such desire is universal the resulting aggression and competition are inflamed in a competitive capitalist culture, while a socialist culture could mitigate them in various ways. A *qualified essentialism* that following Marx, recognizes the distinction between human nature as such and human nature as modified under particular economic, social and historical conditions (Carveth, 2017) is able to grasp the fact that the narcissistic project is irreducible to either the biological or the cultural but is existential, inevitable. But it also understands that it can

either be socially inflamed or tamed, channeled into positive, prosocial directions, creatively sublimated, etc.

Freud proposed the universality of the Oedipus Complex understood as triangular conflict grounded in sexual jealousy. Fromm and others sought to use Malinowski's data on Trobriand culture where the boy's hostile rivalry is not with the man who sleeps with mother to refute Freud's sexual theory. Instead, they argued the boy's hostility, in both Western and Trobriand culture, concerns authority and domination by the father and uncle respectively. Anne Parsons' review of Malinowski's data highlighted the emotional importance to a woman of her brother, a bond to which her son responds with jealousy. All this suggests the Oedipus complex is less about sex or authority than about *priority*—not who sleeps with or dominates whom, but who is most important to whom. This data seems congruent with a Lacanian rather than a Freudian concept of desire—not a desire for intercourse but for the desire of the other, the wish to be desired. In other words, the Oedipus is not fundamentally a sexual project but a narcissistic one.

In listening to patients, we identify triangular themes having to do with jealousy and resentment. Insofar as we do so, we are practicing hermeneutics. But in abstracting from these themes and proposing a universal complex, we are stating an objective hypothesis. But is this universal jealousy and resentment complex grounded in sex, or in authority, or in narcissism? I have described the use of cross-cultural data that support the latter hypothesis. But my wider point is that the hermeneutic-constructivist and objectivist perspectives are not necessarily incommensurable. A hermeneutic-constructivist reading of a session, or a life, or a culture may sometimes generate testable hypotheses leading to objective scientific knowledge in psychoanalysis.

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