



Reply to Dr. Carveth's Commentary

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I would like to thank Dr. Carveth for his commentary in response to my article on the issue of the scientific legitimacy of Psychoanalysis. I have followed Dr. Carveth's innovative and erudite work for quite some time. In particular, I think his distinction between super ego and conscience is a significant contribution to psychoanalytic theory and practice. I also much appreciate his emphasis on the importance of guilt, both reparative and persecutory, in understanding what motivates a great deal of human behavior.

His recently published book *Psychoanalytic Thinking: A Dialectical Critique of Contemporary Theory and Practice* summarizes many of his previous contributions and demonstrates his mastery of the history and evolution of Psychoanalytic Theory.

Although much of his commentary is devoted to presenting an argument for reconceptualizing the Oedipus complex, I will respond only to the parts dealing directly with the issues of scientific knowledge and the nature of truth.

I would like to start with a suggested definition of scientific knowledge or truth. It is about a way of understanding how the world works. The world is the whole world, nature, in all of its manifestations, both inanimate objects and how people and their minds work. The method is to interrogate nature, poking it with a stick, experimenting, and watching what happens.

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Here are the places where I think Dr. Carveth and I agree. Psychoanalysis is a natural science concerned with how the mind works. Although the brain may in some sense underlie the mind, and the Neuropsychologists are trying to make some connections between Psychoanalytic theory and brain science – at this point, Psychoanalysis is a theory about the mind, not the brain. We also agree that the propositions of Psychoanalytic Theory can be supported, or falsified, by “empirical data”, that is the truth value of the theory can be judged by comparing it to something out there in the, dare I say, objective world.

Carveth cites Menand’s (2017) epistemological position in which he distinguishes scientific truth from what he calls “poetic truth”; saying that we don’t ask if *Paradise Lost* is true as we would want to ask about anything, we would want to call scientific knowledge or truth. Carveth then goes on to say:

“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.” (p. 2).

This is where we disagree. I would argue, in agreement with Menand, that there is a fundamental difference between scientific truth and whatever one might want to say about *Paradise Lost* or *King Lear*. One can certainly argue for and about which interpretation of a text or work of fiction is better or worse. One might even be able to specify criteria which could be operationalized and generate inter-interpreter reliability. But unlike differing interpretations about the meanings of *King Lear*, psychoanalytic propositions or theories need to be validated, or invalidated by

comparing them to some external reality. As in the example Carveth gives of the theory of primary narcissism being falsified by the data generated by Stern and the other “baby watchers” who studied mother infant interactions. One might discover some long hidden notes by Shakespeare in which he said something about what his intentions in writing the play were. This would certainly be relevant to evaluating someone’s theory about Lear, but who’s to say that Shakespeare’s interpretation is an ultimate truth – a scholar or critic with a different theory might still argue that their position makes more sense than Shakespeare’s.

Carveth concludes his commentary with this sentence:

“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.”

Leaving aside the part about culture, I think what he means is that what an analyst discovers in working with a particular client leads to the thought that this is perhaps true of a lot, or maybe all, people and that this would be an empirically testable hypothesis. So, for example, Freud discovered in his self-analysis that he had what he would come to call an Oedipus complex. He then generated the proposition, which is, at least theoretically, testable and falsifiable, that the Oedipus complex was universal. I agree with Carveth that this can happen and that is potentially a benign and at times beneficial process. I would add that it can work the other way as well – for example, - the discovery of the existence of “mirror neurons” has inspired some to think that they have discovered something important about the mechanism underlying empathy which could well influence Psychoanalytic theorizing about empathy.

However, I would still want to maintain that the two kinds of truth, the hermeneutic/constructivist and the objectivist are, to use Carveth’s term, incommensurable. Interpreting a patient’s free associations, dreams, observing the vagaries of the transference and countertransference, leading to the idea that this

person has Oedipal issues is a very different process from what Malinowski was trying to do with the Trobriand islanders – attempting to test the hypothesis that the Oedipus complex was a human universal.

One last comment. These days, particularly over the last twenty years or so we have seen the birth of Neuropsychanalysis and a resurgence of interest in brain functioning. Monism is making a comeback. As I argued in my paper, the hermeneutic/constructivist and related positions are far more compatible with mind-brain dualism rather than monism. I would argue that Carveth remains a dualist at heart. A couple of quotes from *Psychoanalytic Thinking*:

“While it is important to distinguish existential from neurotic anxiety, . . . authentic guilt from mere “guilt feelings,. . . and persecutory from reparative guilt, . . .these are all conditions of the human *psyche*, which while requiring the existence of a functioning brain, is no more reducible to its organic foundation than a TV program to the TV set that displays it” (p.14).

And:

“Psychoanalysis is inadequately comprehended in terms of other discourses, such as the medical (the analyst is concerned not with the body or the brain, but with the mind), . . . “ (p. 14)

Although Carveth, and many others who consider themselves “dual aspect monists” in which a token nod is given to the brain, as Carveth does:

“In a broader more psychological and less reductively biologicistic form, a theory of libidinal and aggressive *motives* and of oral, anal, phallic, and Oedipal *meanings* (freed from their alleged somatic sources, without of course denying the grounding of mind in brain) –remains significant” (p. 72).

Carveth and just about everyone else who does not put themselves in the Neuropsychanalysis camp functions as a mind-brain dualist, as Freud did when he said:

“. . . Psychoanalysis must keep itself free from any hypothesis that is alien to it whether of an anatomical, chemical or physiological kind, and must operate entirely with purely psychological auxiliary ideas. . .” (Freud, 1916, p. 21)

I think Carveth is correct when he says that the problem of the opposition between the “objectivist” versus the “hermeneutic/constructivist positions lies with the “constructivist” part. Unfortunately the constructivist part is integral to the hermeneutic/constructivist way of looking at the world. The heart of the problem, as I tried to show in my paper, is that the two positions – in their most logically consistent forms - have very different ontologies. Objectivists believe that there is a reality out there, which is largely independent of context. The existence of this reality is a crucial aspect of being able to seek, or even speak of, scientific truth, empirical validation, or falsifiability. Freud, Grunbaum, and Eagle say that the only way to validate, or at least lend empirical support to, Psychoanalytic theory is by using some form of the tally argument. There must be something out there, which can include people’s mind what they contain and how they work, whose nature we can discover and against which we can evaluate the truth of our psychoanalytic theories. Historical truth, not narrative truth; reconstruction not construction.

Hermeneutic/constructivists who stress the centrality of multiple contexts believe that the truth or reality of a statement about the patient’s inner world or what is occurring in a particular therapeutic encounter is to be found in its narrative truth, its pragmatic results, and its agreement with what one’s colleague believe – but not by comparing it

to something out there.

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