

Chapter

Rediscovering the Psychoanalytic Revolution: Contemporary Crisis as the Result of Resisted Fundamentals

Barnaby B. Barratt

Abstract

Considering the contemporary discipline to be in a state of crisis, and as having in a certain sense betrayed its origins, requires that we consider what of Freud's revolutionary discoveries have been forgotten. It is argued that the priority of free-associative praxis led Freud to posit 'helpful notions' that would serve as the fundamental coordinates or 'cornerstones' of his discipline. The extent to which these have been lost in the promulgation of new models is assessed.

Keywords: theory, praxis, repression, sexuality, oedipality

1. Introduction

If the proverbial alien landed on earth today, it would not recognize psychoanalysis as a singular discipline. Not only do multiple approaches to clinical practice cluster under this rubric, but the discipline embraces sharply divergent assumptions about the fundamentals of the human condition. To give just a single example, there are practitioners who labor clinically on the assumption that we are born with rapaciously envious and destructive motives that cause us, even as infants, to aggress against the nurture provided by caretakers. By contrast, there are practitioners who conduct their therapeutic mission on the assumption that babies are born pristinely innocent, taking their place 'center stage' in their relational world, and only coming into difficulties when caretaking fails them.

In short, even though psychoanalysts generally have international allegiances to one or another of only three professional organizations, within these arenas (and notably within the largest of them, the International Psychoanalytic Association, which was founded by Sigmund Freud himself) the discipline splinters into a multitude of practices and modes of fundamentally divergent theorization. In this context, new and not-so-new models of our psychological functioning are propounded, with little regard to their impact upon each other, and even less regard for what of value is lost in the promotion of 'new models.' Responding to this untenable polyglot, some organizations have de-emphasized their consideration of controversies over what

occurs intrapsychically in the consulting room, focusing rather on the relevance of psychoanalytic thinking for community action.

In this brief paper, I point to several aspects of Freud's discoveries that are evident in a specific—and somewhat maverick—reading of his early writings, but that seem to have been lost even in his own later formulations of his discipline, and conspicuously in those of his heirs. That is, I will schematize much of the history of this putative discipline as one in which a revolutionary vision of humanity has been domesticated in the promulgation of 'new models'—models that are, in a sense, pre-Freudian in their assumptions about the human condition. The fuller arguments in support of this thesis have been elaborated elsewhere [1–5].

2. Reading Sigmund Freud's discoveries prior to 1915

There is an understanding—quite consensual within the humanities, but not within the hard sciences—that all readings are tendentious. This is particularly true of the task of reading Freud's voluminous writings, in order to grasp what in them is profoundly unsettling and revolutionary. Not only because there is a restless shifting, reformulation, and regressive or progressive development in his thinking, but also because there are moments of perplexity and internal contradiction. He aspired to hard science ('natural science' under the eminent influence of pioneers such as Karl Rokitansky, the Dean of his Medical School in Vienna). But more than a 'natural science of the mind,' he penned what can be read as the most provocative, instructive, and insightful literature (with ideas that are a profound and powerful guide for praxis). Many of his key ideas are about matters of human functioning that are simply not operationalizable. They are not to be demonstrated, measured, or made ostensible in a manner that would satisfy the rigors of empirical science as established in 'western' discourse throughout the modern era (the hegemony of logical empiricism and analytico-referential rationality).

For example, Freud's 1923 idea (produced over two decades *after* his free-associative discovery of the repressed unconscious) that the operations of psychic functioning can be partitioned into those belonging to the ego organization and to this organization's depiction of reality, to the id's drives, and to the forces of the superego (as well as the ego-ideal) provides a remarkably powerful hermeneutic for the conduct of psychotherapy, but scarcely is it scientifically provable in a manner that would satisfy a hard scientist.

But that does not diminish the revolutionary impact of Freud's ideas. Moreover, it must be noted that those discoveries, which are the most radical and which have been the most resisted subsequently, were the ones he advanced before he became obsessed with the generation of scientific models. To describe this summarily: Prior to 1895, Freud was heavily preoccupied with hard science. In the years after graduating medical school, he dissected the gonads of eels, performed experiments on the nervous system of frogs, and published over 200 neurological papers (also experimenting with the effects of tropane alkaloids on human functioning). Hard science was his passion. However, with the discovery of the repressed unconscious around 1895 and of the fundamentality of erotic energies in our cognitive, affective, and conative operations, he was compelled to relinquish his teacher's (Ernst Brücke) commitment to experimental methods. He discovered the repressed unconscious and the power of libidinal life simply by talking with patients (along with an initial use of hypnotic trances, which he soon relinquished) and asking them to disclose their 'associations.'

Although subsequently he reverted to a conservative position, in its implications, the period of Freud's writing from 1895 to about 1915 is wild and revolutionary, as previously discussed quite extensively [1–8]. During this period, he relinquished—at least somewhat—the challenge of specifying only what might be 'scientifically provable' and documented a radical exploration of the human condition. After 1915 (and especially after World War I, with the death of family members, his aging and ailing health, and the vision of a whole world ending), Freud became significantly more preoccupied both with building a movement invulnerable to apostasies (such as those of Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, and Wilhelm Stekel) and with courting credibility in the general scientific community. Consequently, he began to produce quasi-scientific 'models of the mind'—of narcissism, of object relations, of the structural-functional partitioning of psychic life, of anxiety as a non-conscious signal system, and of the splitting of the ego organization in the face of unbearable events. In different ways, all these objectivistic models have been elaborated and made central to their conception of the discipline by his successors (frequently augmented by a particularly biased reading of Freud's 1920 writing on the 'death drive'). My thesis is that there are losses inherent in these 'developments.'

What happens if we dim the emphasis on post-1915 theorizing and focus on Freud's ideas between 1895 and 1915? A rather different 'take' on the discipline of psychoanalysis emerges.

3. Free-associative method divulges the 'Psychology of Repression'

Even after 1915 (and even though this assertion contradicted the increasingly objectivistic framing of his later theorizing), Freud would repeatedly insist that the *sine qua non* of his discipline is the method of free-associative speaking on the part of the patient and listening on the part of both patient and psychoanalyst [9]. Most of his successors have taken this less than seriously. They reduce free-association merely to a particular technique of 'data-gathering' for the purposes of formulating the patient's functioning in accordance with one or another objectivistic model. Alternatively, seeing the technique merely as clinically valuable in opening channels of communication by which the patient and the psychoanalyst interact, in terms of reciprocating fantasies that have a preconscious or descriptively unconscious status—communications that provide material for the latter's interpretations, which are the instigator of change in the patient. In these frames, psychoanalysis is cast as a primarily epistemological operation (producing information that can then be used instrumentally to change the patient's psychic functioning). This standpoint overlooks the possibility that free-associative discourse itself catalyzes changes in the being-becoming of the individual participants—the possibility that psychoanalysis is primarily an 'ontoethical' venture.

For heuristic purposes, it can be argued that there are twin poles to (or modes of) the processes of free-association. At the more conservative pole, it is a matter of speaking aloud with absolute confidentiality, which enables the subject to say whatever would not ordinarily be spoken in public. In this mode, the individual enunciates chains of stories, each of which more or less 'makes sense,' and the sequentiality of the chaining discloses underlying themes that must have been preoccupying the speaker (presumably without reflective consciousness of the themes that are being expressed).

For example, I talk about my neighbor who is currently suing me in court, claiming she owns a piece of my property. Next, I talk about how I can often smell her unpleasant cooking wafting into my garden. Then I mention a lover with whom I would never stay overnight, because she thrashed about in bed, leaving me no space to sleep. Suddenly I start to recall a childhood incident in which my mother lied to a family friend, claiming that it was I who had told her a falsehood, which I had not. Clearly, whether I realize it or not, there is a theme here concerning my anxiety, rage or fear, of being invaded or overtaken by a female force. It is probably not a theme that would have surfaced like this if I had not been allowing censorship to relax—for example, if I had just been sitting with a therapist trying to ‘figure out’ the reasons for my feelings.

If a person talks freely whatever ‘comes to mind’ without the usual level of interpersonal censorship, then one narrative rolls into the next and themes or sub-themes emerge that are not conveyed adequately by any single narrative, but that gain weight as one listens to their sequencing. This has value in terms of a therapist’s ability to help patients ‘make sense’ of their lived-experiences in ways that are novel (and may often be adaptive). However, it can be argued that this is not yet psycho-*analysis*, where the ‘analytic’ process is not the philosopher’s logical analysis-in-order-to-make-sense (an epistemological labor), but rather the chemist’s task of unsettling the stability of a compound in order for its elements to be free to rearrange themselves (an ontological or ontoethical treatment).

A radicalized method of free-association requires the patient to relinquish any mandate to ‘make sense’ and to speak aloud the stream of consciousness (while lying comfortably and keeping the eyes closed). The patient is enjoined to express the stream of consciousness, rather than to attend to narration. At this pole, the process defies description in writing—in Freud’s words it ‘tolerates no audience and cannot be demonstrated’—because what is expressed becomes quite different from the uncensored sequencing of stories, or indeed anything that appears to make sense. Indeed, what is radical is precisely the speaker’s capacity to disengage the narratological imperative and give voice to all that is within (or, at least, as much as is feasible, since consciousness moves faster than can be given utterance).

This radicalized method of free-association is wild. The emphasis of the process now shifts to the aliveness of the ‘saying’ rather than to the interpretation of what is ‘said.’ With such a radical praxis, vocalization becomes more chaotic, and momentary bodily sensations are more likely to be voiced, as the stream of consciousness meanders, babbles, and crescendos in fits and starts. The speaker’s utterances are invariably more linguistically disorganized and, in an important sense, more energetically, poetically and erotically embodied, as well as more regressive. There are hiccups and hallucinations, meaningful gaps in meaning, syncopations, the voicing of bodily events, and so forth. In this way, the usefulness of free-association not so much as a tool (deployed in order to know), but as an opening of the patient’s being-becoming, an unsettling momentum toward greater authenticity [6–8].

What did Freud believe he had learned from his earliest experiments with free-association? His masterwork of 1900, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, elaborates a depiction of psychic life, as illustrated by the deconstruction of dreamwork [10]. The manifest content of a dream is generated, by operations of condensation and displacement, from ‘latent dream thoughts’ that have been *suppressed* from consciousness. The motor of transformational operations, which take meaning from latent thoughts and express it disguisedly in manifest contents, is energetic. Freud also postulates that psychic life always has an ‘unfathomable navel’—an energetic wellspring of

meaningfulness not itself translatable into representational meaning, and thus *repressed* from consciousness [10–12].

Freud thus distinguishes his discipline from all other psychological frameworks as the ‘psychology of repression’, and he criticizes any endeavor that begins by giving credence to the productions of reflective consciousness—that is, any discipline that does not interrogate or deconstruction these productions for what they render unthinkable [13–15]. Concurrent with the discovery of repression came the realization that what the child realizes is most unthinkable are incestuous impulses, which have to be repressed. Repression is thus always associated with oedipality, and the dynamics of suppression and repression are typically active around conflictual matters of sexuality—in this sense, the energies of the unconscious are always erotic or libidinal [10, 15–16].

In three papers published in 1915, Freud systematizes this depiction [17–19]. These are an effort to summarize what he believed he had discovered in the course of nearly two decades of experience with free-association. There are several ways to read these complex papers. One schematic and nonconventional way is as follows. There is an arena of psychic life that is within the purview of representational reflection. This is one definition of consciousness (called ‘secondary consciousness by some scholars). Then, there are representations that have been cast into exile by what I am calling the operations of suppression. They are persistent, as if indefinitely—but not inactively. Rather, they are impactfully insistent in getting their meaningfulness expressed disguisedly in consciousness, indirectly influencing the contents of its purview (in a camouflage generated by the operations of condensation and displacement). Then, there are representations of thoughts, feelings or wishes, so threatening that they are subjected to repression. It is as if they cross what Freud called the ‘repression-barrier,’ losing their representational form but retaining their meaningfulness as traces of psychic energy—in its genesis, this barrier may be understood as the intrapsychic inscription of the incest taboo. This is a deformation of representation into a meaningful—and embodied—energy trace. Such traces join the energetic source of meaningfulness that Freud in 1900 called the navel of psychic life and ‘the core of our being.’ This energizes the dynamics between what is representationally expressed and suppressed. These then are the findings—formulated by Freud as ‘helpful notions’ rather than disprovable hypotheses—that one arrives at through lived-experience with the method of free-association.

4. The energetics of psychic life

We now come to the most contested and derogated implication of this way of reading Freud’s early writings. Freud’s experiments with the processes of free-association led him to posit a special form of psychic energy that is neither identifiable in terms of neurology nor identical with anything mental (which in this context means representational). In 1913, Freud wrote that he could not avoid the notion of *Trieb* (which we can translate as psychic energy, drive, or desire) as a force ‘on the frontier between the spheres of psychology and biology’ such that ‘psychoanalysis operates between psychology and biology’ [20]. Yet psychic energy impacts and animates both domains.

This is a simple notion that is nevertheless difficult to grasp for those who adhere to the tenets of hard science and the logical empiricist or analytico-referential master discourse of the modern—eurocentric—era. After 1915 (and with the controversial

exception of Freud's 1920 essay), 'drive' in psychoanalytic thinking increasingly comes to refer to forces that are assumed to be innately endowed and inherently biological (in some 'new' models, it is disregarded entirely). Today many practitioners discard the notion altogether.

Even though in 1900 Freud had presented his conjectures about the energetic 'navel' or wellspring of psychic life, his 1915 writings, which elaborate these suppositions, constitute a highly significant break with the precepts of hard science—as indeed he must, on some level, have known [9, 20]. This perhaps explains why so few of his heirs have taken this notion seriously. However, this particular 'helpful notion' now seems profoundly significant and even prescient.

The rigors of hard science require that the existence of things and forces must be empirically demonstrable or logically inferable based on ostensible evidence. Moreover, throughout the modern era (notably since Descartes), science and mainstream philosophy treat axiomatically the binarism that things and forces are *either* material *or* immaterial-mental. Yet Freud's 'helpful notion' of psychic energy meets neither the requirement nor the axiom.

Even though Freud's 1900 publication included his conjectures about the energetic 'navel' or wellspring of psychic life, it is even more evident in his papers of 1915 how much the 'between but within' operations of psychic energy constituted a highly significant break with the precepts of hard science. There are hints that—to some extent—Freud knew this to be the case [9, 20]. The rigors of hard science require that the existence of things and forces must be empirically demonstrable or logically inferable based on ostensible evidence. Additionally, throughout the modern era (notably since Descartes), science and mainstream philosophy treat axiomatically the binarism that things and forces are *either* material *or* immaterial-mental. Yet Freud's 'helpful notion' of psychic energy, with its 'within yet between' functioning, meets neither the requirement nor the axiom. This perhaps explains why so few of his heirs have taken this notion seriously. However, today this particular 'helpful notion' might be seen as profoundly significant and even prescient.

The idea of a 'helpful notion' should be read as meaning one that facilitates psychoanalytic *praxis* (processes that are to be distinguished from the representational maneuvers of psychotherapeutic *procedures*). In this regard, it is unlike a theoretical concept that directs and is adjudicated by application or action—in the objectivistic mode of hard science. Rather, such a notion might be held to facilitate a mode of awareness that guides lived-experience and cannot necessarily be translated into a conceptual reference or representation [4]. The notion of psychic energy is vital to engaging a psycho-*analytic* awareness of the depths of our being-becoming, without the distraction of a preoccupation with the generation of representational formulations. In Freud's pre-1915 thinking, this helpful notion poses as a lifeforce operating within neuronal and representational events, yet going between them, and yet is identical with neither [21–23].

I have argued in previous writings that, in positing the notion of psychic energy, Freud uncovered and became aware of what indigenous (and non-eurocentric) cultures have always acknowledged as both ancient wisdom and ubiquitously present experience. Namely, that there are subtle energy fields and forces that circulate within us and all around us, interconnecting the universe of all that is (and is not). These venerable teachings are conveyed in terms such as *prāna*, *ch'i*, *umoya*, *rukha*, *mana*, *ōd*, and *spirit*. This energy—powerful yet so slight or abstruse as to be impossibly difficult to detect, describe, or comprehend—is what some 'western' philosophers have called the *élan vital*. It is a notion that Freud presents somewhat tentatively up to 1915, but

that then more or less disappears—returning briefly in Freud’s 1920 discussion of the ‘lifeliness’ and ‘deathfulness’ of the movements of *Trieb* [24].

By and large, hard scientists have rejected the notion of psychic energy as unprovable and therefore illusory or delusional—in short, esoteric. However, in recent years, it is remarkable to what extent there has been an acknowledgement of the complexity of the general idea of ‘energy.’ It is being recognized that perhaps the most salient feature of all the prevailing conceptualizations is the difficulty in providing a unified and tenable definition of what it is [25]. In this context, the notion of psychic energy becomes a degree more plausible, perhaps even to a skeptic—the possibility of forces within (and even around) us that the individual might become aware of, but the activities of which cannot be captured in the maneuvers of representational reflection.

Additionally, even within the canon ‘western’ philosophy, greater respect is now being accorded a ‘lineage’ of thinking that runs counter to the assumptions of the mainstream rational-realism. It is perhaps unwarranted to call this a lineage, but the thread that is of interest here are viewpoints that do not require epistemology to be ‘first philosophy’ [26]. One aspect of this is that for changes to occur and to be *aware* of changes does not require that what is changing can be represented or translatable into representation. Accordingly, *conscious* activities, in the reflectively representational sense of this term—are not ‘at the helm’ (which corresponds to Freud’s warning that the ego can never be ‘master’ in its own house). In the ‘western’ tradition, this ‘lineage’ of thinking extends from the pre-Socratic (Anaximander, Heraclitus, Empedocles) and the Stoics, via underappreciated philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz, to 19th and 20th century writers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri-Louis Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze [5, 8].

Freud’s discoveries must be comprehended as falling within this lineage. The free-associative praxis of psychoanalysis comprises a movement of change within an erotic field of subtle energies. Such processes cannot be grasped within our capacity for reflective representationality. They are not epistemologically driven. Rather, they comprise a lived-experience that is ontological or, more precisely, ontoethical. In short, if this ‘spiritual-existential’ way of reading Freud’s revolutionary discoveries is given credence, and then, the processes of psychoanalytic praxis must be understood as an ontoethical prioritization of lived-experience, free-associative discourse, and helpful notions such as those of psychic energy, repression, and the fundamentality of our erotic embodiment.

5. Conclusions

My interest here has been on Freud’s labors as the father-figure who—so to speak—mothered his discipline into existence. Like most, perhaps all, mothers, he initiated it, nurtured it, defended it, stood-up for it, and—in certain specific respects—betrayed it. However, to the end of his life in 1939 and despite all the work he did after 1915 constructing grand theoretical frameworks of metapsychology, he did remain very clear that free-associative speaking and listening are the *sine qua non* of psycho-analysis. He was also convinced that psychoanalysis would be resisted—not only because radical free-association is frightening, but also because it leads inexorably both to the unconscious-as-repressed and to the fundamentally erotic energies that underlay all our cognitive, affective, and conative activities. Despite his lucidity

and prescience in these respects, this clarity did not prevent Freud from generating theoretical models that point the discipline in a profoundly different direction.

Before 1915, Freud knew that it could be the fate of psychoanalysis to ‘disturb the peace of the world’ [27]. In 1913, he articulated quite clearly his vision of the destiny of his discipline as a ‘conflict with official science’ [20]. Yet despite these insights, he remained enthralled with hard science, courted credibility in that context, and became increasingly preoccupied with the construction of theoretical frameworks that both are articulated in a manner that is quite distant from the lived-experience of free-associative discourse and are encouraging of the assessment of his discipline as if it were primarily epistemological.

I have suggested that, in relation to the revolutionary beginnings of his discipline, there is a sense in which—especially during and after World War I—Freud betrayed some of his own best insights into the human condition and the method of liberatory change. Yet as a not-unfair generalization, it can be noted how much ‘new models’ of psychoanalysis (some of which Freud himself initiated, many by his successors) have extended this retrogressive development toward what are, essentially, pre-Freudian ways of thinking. Of course, the cleverest maneuvers of resistance always brand themselves as loyal acts of conformity and the deferential expansion of what the ‘master’ initiated—even while they ignore the most uncomfortable lessons that the master once taught.

We could consider here: structural-functional (ego psychological) theories, object-relational theories, self-psychological theories, social-relational theories, and linguistic-structural theories. Unless we agree to use the term ‘psychoanalysis’ profligately—to encompass any conversation that delves into thoughts, feelings, and wishes—then it must be conceded that the discipline is in crisis. Indeed, it has splintered so licentiously that to refer to it as a singular endeavor is empty and otiose. I doubt that there is remedy for this. Rather, it seems warranted that psychoanalysis, as the method to which Freud introduced us, be rediscovered.

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Author details

Barnaby B. Barratt

Parkmore Institute (www.parkmoreinstitute.org), Wilmington, Delaware, USA

*Address all correspondence to: drbarnabybarratt@yahoo.co.za

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