

Why Hasn't Philosophy Capitalized on Psychoanalysis?

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Abstract

The famous saying “know thyself” (*gnôthi seauton*) is a cornerstone of the philosophical quest for wisdom. One would therefore expect philosophers to take a keen interest in psychoanalysis. However, most see psychoanalysis as a rival to be ignored, dismissed, or defeated. Whereas philosophical training is grounded in the reading of texts and thinking for oneself, psychoanalytical treatment is grounded in establishing a relationship through speech with another who is physically present. In addition, the philosophical concept of self-knowledge is steeped in an ideal of being like God and in a desire for control. In psychoanalytical treatment, by contrast, patients work toward surrendering their self-control in order to connect with thoughts and desires that contradict their sense of self-transparency. Philosophical training generally implies trusting in shared meaning and does not afford exposure to clinical psychology. Psychic suffering is the common lot of neurotics. Philosophers, like all human beings and even Freud himself, need ways to protect themselves from it.

The academic world tends to be leery of psychoanalysis. It is seen as a foreign body without a clear place in its halls. Had Freud not invented the talking cure and simply written books and theorized, his academic fate would most likely have been different. He might have joined the ranks of the other psychologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who, like him, had scientific ambitions. In all likelihood, his writings would have had a more lasting impact than those of his teachers Franz Brentano or Josef Breuer. However, they would not have sparked the intense reactions we still observe today more than a century after the publication of his magnum opus, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1901).

Other psychologists addressed unconscious thoughts or affects before Freud did. What sets him apart is that his theses are based on an analysis of what his patients said to him rather than on medical, psychiatric, or philosophical knowledge. Freud claimed that listening to their associations—particularly about their dreams—opened a door into the unconscious side of their psyche. What is more, he claimed that by talking to him about their suffering, his patients were doing mental work that could attenuate it. Had Freud's work been purely academic and not inextricably tied to the “talking cure,” it would not create such an unsettling effect on readers.

Freud's writings are not intended for psychiatrists and clinical psychologists only, but rather for anyone who seeks a deeper understanding of human nature for personal or professional reasons. Naturally, philosophers come to mind. Freud deemed their discipline too speculative, and he hardly expected them to listen to him. Yet, his theses and therapeutic approach were bound to have an impact on a discipline whose cornerstone is the saying "know thyself" (*gnôthi seauton*, or *nosce te ipse*), which many professors cite at the beginning of their introductory philosophy classes. Moreover, both Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot demonstrate the intimate relationship in ancient philosophy between the quest for wisdom and "care of the self."

However, philosophy has thus far not capitalized on psychoanalysis. Philosophers tend to view psychoanalysis as a rival, to be dismissed outright or taken into account only so that it can be outdone, criticized, even assimilated. Paradoxically, some Christian contexts have been more accommodating to psychoanalysis than philosophical ones (most likely owing to confession and the Jansenist tradition).

Philosophers' Rivalry with Psychoanalysis

Before addressing the reasons why philosophy has not capitalized on psychoanalysis, I will give a few examples of how philosophers react to it. The most recent reaction is Michel Onfray's 600-page work on psychoanalysis entitled *Le Crépuscule d'une idole: L'affabulation freudienne* (2010). While this book discredits Freud and psychoanalysis from a philosophical standpoint, it says nothing not already stated in *Le Livre noir de la psychanalyse*¹ (which runs to over 800 pages). Shortly after his book hit the stands, Onfray concluded an article in *Le Monde* with a representation of truth (which is philosophical) being attacked by illusion (which is psychoanalytical) in the following terms:

The battle is hopeless. The onanist climaxing on make-believe from the comfort of his inner world cannot be converted. Psychoanalysis is indeed a *folie à plusieurs*, another name for a collective hallucination. Woe unto the philosopher who strips the Freudian king of his raiment! After being impaled, whipped, tarred, and eviscerated, he is burned at the stake. . . . But who remembers the name of the accuser of Socrates, who was sentenced to death for having philosophized?

¹ Edited by Catherine Mayer (2005), this work is a collection of some forty papers. Peter Gay's *Freud: Une vie* (2002), a sympathetic account that provides useful information without being hagiographic.

What a selfless task philosophers must undertake as they are to drag their friends from the darkness of the cave! Onfray—who fortunately escaped the multitude of tortures he refers to—thus sees himself as Socrates, the founding hero of Western philosophy, who was unjustly condemned but who ultimately triumphed over a contemptible adversary.

In *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) relegate psychoanalysis to the ranks of philosophy's other unworthy rivals. After claiming that philosophy is a "condition of possibility of thought itself" and that it holds the "exclusive right of concept creation," they refer to the "rivalry . . . between the philosopher and the sophist," the pseudo-sage. "Closer to our own time," they add, "philosophy has encountered many new rivals." First, the "human sciences . . . wanted to replace it . . . Then it was the turn of epistemology, of linguistics, even of psychoanalysis . . . In these successive challenges, philosophy confronted increasingly insolent and calamitous rivals that Plato himself would have never have imagined in his most comical moments" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 3, 8–10).

Like Lacan, René Girard analyzed mimetic rivalry, but in more general terms. He saw Freud as a rival whom he had, of course, defeated. At a conference on the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics,² Girard stated that Freud wrongly believed himself to be revealing "things hidden since the origin of the world."

Sartre watched as Freud's works gained prominence in the marketplace of ideas, and he too felt compelled to vie with psychoanalysis. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre admits that psychoanalysis can help the subject overcome resistances and attain deeper self-knowledge (Sartre 1943, 619). Yet he proposes an enhanced, more thorough version of it called "existential psychoanalysis." Writing on the German occupation in 1944, Sartre noted that "we were brought to the verge of the deepest knowledge that man can have of himself," and thought it useful to add that "for the secret of a man is not his Oedipus complex or his inferiority complex: it is the limit of his own liberty, his capacity for resisting torture and death." Sartre's *Baudelaire* (1988) serves as an example of existential psychoanalysis, and is intended to show its superiority over the original version.³

In his first lectures at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault (2011) analyzed Sophocles' *Oedipus King* at length, focusing on the different types of knowledge and

² Seminar at Bibliothèque Nationale de France, October 21, 2002.

³ Pierre Bourdieu's view of psychoanalysis is somewhat similar to Sartre's seeing it as emulating psychoanalysis rather than competing with it. Like psychoanalysis, sociology seeks to uncover the unconscious reasons for human behaviors and judgments.

authority as well as their confrontation at work in the tragedy. Here, the discourse of truth that has become predominant in Western societies is at work. Foucault claims that Freud was wrong and that *Oedipus King* is not really about human desire—an odd conclusion, because no logical contradiction exists between Foucault’s thesis and Freud’s. All fictional narratives evoke desire in those who read or hear them, which is why most of them portray some form of transgression. Moreover, Oedipus’s story is not uniquely Greek but has been transmitted orally throughout Europe in the form of a folktale.⁴ Obviously, that does not prove that Freud was right, but neither does Foucault’s interpretation prove that Freud was wrong. Rather, his conclusion evidences his intent to discredit Freud.

In his last lecture (2009), Foucault spoke at length on parrhesia, or genuine observations from a friend for the purpose of self-improvement. According to Plutarch, the relationship we have with ourselves is one of *philautia*, or “self-love,” which leads us to overvalue ourselves and turn a blind eye to our shortcomings. Therefore, although this is difficult to admit, we need someone else to tell us the truth about ourselves. Does talking to a therapist serve that function? Foucault sidesteps that question.

Although more amenable to psychoanalysis, Paul Ricoeur nonetheless relies on philosophical thinking to put Freud to rest once and for all. In 1965, he published a lengthy collection of essays on Freud’s work. Although the work is scrupulous, the end result is disappointing because reading Freud’s works without any knowledge of the clinical realities that underpin them or of his thinking invariably leads to misconceptions. This is a recurrent issue. The most recent example is Alfred I. Tauber’s philosophical interpretation of Freud. In *Freud, the Reluctant Philosopher* (2010), Tauber attempts to rehabilitate Freud by folding him into philosophy. Another example is *Le Nouvel Inconscient* (2006) by neurobiologist Lionel Naccache. He boasts of having read Freud more attentively than his colleague Antonio Damasio. However, he completely neglects to consider the clinical aspect of neuroses—the human realities Freud devoted his life to studying—and instead brings Freud before the court of neuroscience as if it alone had the authority to pronounce judgment on the pertinence of psychoanalysis.

This gap between the interpretation of Freudian texts and the realities they deal with accounts for the disagreements between philosophers and psychoanalysts. I will therefore say a few words about that gap before coming to the reasons why philosophy sees psychoanalysis as a rival.

⁴ Type 931 in the international classification of folktales.

Common Sense and the Need to Guard against Pain

Academics and most laypeople generally base their opinions of psychoanalysis on common sense. Someone might admit to being incompetent about a topic from the “hard sciences” but then turn around and argue that no special knowledge is required for postulating on the human psyche. Common sense—as understood by Bachelard to mean our spontaneous conceptions—suggests that we are transparent to ourselves. As a result, we believe that we are capable of postulating on the human psyche on an equal footing with those who have spent their entire professional lives in daily contact with patients suffering from neuroses and psychoses. Since psychoanalysis claims to shed light on human nature in a way common sense cannot, it inevitably vexes common sense which, for its part, assumes that it has an adequate and first-hand experience of human nature.

Is this a natural presumption, as already pointed out by Montaigne? Yes, but not only that. Our relationship to psychic suffering also has a bearing. Talking cures deal with linguistic manifestations of anxiety and inward pain. To those suffering, the causes of their pain are so hidden to them that their only option for relief is to repress them or project them onto an external cause. Yet the suffering endures. No matter how intensely the subject denies it and escapes into thoughts and activities that serve as painkillers, he can never get away from the fact that something is eating away at him in the background even as a shadow threatens to engulf the well-being on the surface.

Montesquieu claimed to have successfully overcome suffering by reading. Other activities can also serve as painkillers. The intellectual activity and socialization the university experience affords are cultural fixes for keeping suffering at bay as much as possible. Yet the very object of our intellectual activity can sometimes undermine the pleasure or the numbing quality that activity can offer. For instance, objects of study such as wars, slavery, or genocides bear witness to equally painful realities.

Contact with people whose pain engulfs you in its dark light is even harder to bear, particularly since their anxiety can awaken anxiety that might be sleeping within you. We expect our relationships with others, our involvement in society, and our daily activities to protect us against “black thoughts”—caused by insomnia, for instance—that provoke a feeling of malaise. When the relationship we have with a person burdens instead of enhances the way we think about ourselves, we tend to distance ourselves from that person or place a protective barrier between that person and ourselves.

Psychoanalysis puts people who work with it—above all therapists—in a difficult situation. Whereas the exercise of thought has a natural tendency to push pain away, the realities psychoanalysis deals with threaten to make pain resurface. That being the case, it is not surprising that readers of psychoanalytic works are more attuned to theories than to the human factors on which those theories are based. In principle, philosophers are drawn to anything that might help answer the question “What is mankind?” Yet they too succumb to the same tendency. Philosophers have many good reasons for investing so much in the exercise of thought. However, one such reason is the anesthesia thought provides (less radical, of course, than the ataraxia the stoics sought, but easier to attain). Moreover, the study of philosophy deals primarily with learning how to read texts, to understand them, to respond to them, and to write essays and dissertations. Therefore, as several philosophers have lamented, the reality of the text itself tends to overshadow the realities it describes. This forms a protective cozy bubble around those who read and study psychoanalytic literature. It is therefore entirely possible to read works by Freud and other psychoanalysts without seeing them in light of any clinical experience whatsoever and without asking naive questions such as: “Does this apply to my own life?” In short, simply reading Freud—no matter how diligently—is not enough if we are to grasp what treatment itself entails.

However, it would be unfair to blame misunderstandings about psychoanalytic works solely on readers. Their authors are also to blame. The fact that they feel the need to compensate for the many hours they spend listening to patients by wielding the discourse themselves is to be expected. Seminars and theoretical works are their outlet for doing so. Obviously, the desire for mutual enlightenment also plays a role, but so does the desire for prestige and power. As a result, discourses often flaunt theoretical mastery. This is particularly the case in circles where the desire for recognition, owing to mimetic admiration for Lacan, perpetuates a taste for emulating the oracular obscurity of the “master.”

Love of knowledge and emulation (or rivalry) among psychoanalysts are not the only forces that fuel their theoretical ambitions. Psychoanalysis is a profession that demands a strong personal commitment, and some analysts believe it is well suited to reinterpreting knowledge from the human and social sciences since it focuses on aspects of the human condition those sciences find it difficult to deal with. As the psychoanalysts themselves might put it, “Simply admit that our contribution is more valuable than yours.” Obviously, such pretension, particularly when expressed in the technical language reminiscent of *esprit de corps*, can only inspire disdain or indifference among researchers in the human sciences.

Compared with Lacan's seminars (which, I might add, I benefited greatly from reading), Freud's writing is easy to understand. Freud was struggling to make sense of his clinical cases. He faced an enigmatic phenomenon he admitted he did not really understand and thought that his patients' words might help him make sense of it. In his work, the tension he experienced throughout his life is palpable. On the one hand, he had a desire for mastery and was highly ambitious (he saw himself as a conquistador). On the other hand, he acknowledged not having the knowledge he coveted and that his own dreams knew more about him than he did. This accounts for the alternation in his practice between patient listening and spot-on interpretations, writings attesting to his tireless curiosity, tenacity, and clinical sense, and others in which he gives free reign to his theoretical ambitions, which makes for tedious reading (but which keep critics busy). Freud's writings on clinical cases are more about setting forth the material for his investigation and his inferences than about providing a simple description and account of the cases themselves. As a result, his patients' pain is often put aside and overlooked even though it was the reason they came to see him in the first place.

Like any other doctor or therapist, Freud had to protect himself from the suffering and anxiety of his patients. His gift for intellectual activity, to which he devoted so much effort, afforded him the analgesic effects such activity produces, particularly when put to theoretical use.

In *Civilization and its Discontents* [*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*] (1929), Freud undertakes an analysis of the human condition. An old man outlining his anthropological vision comes to mind. Almost apologizing for pointing out what everyone already knows, Freud temporarily puts his theories aside and returns to the principal sources of suffering: a body "doomed to decay and dissolution," the external world, which "may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction," and "our relations to other men," which will always be problematic regardless of any measures we might take to smooth them over (1929/1962, 24). Surprisingly, Freud makes no mention of a fourth source of suffering, which is the one he faced daily in his decades-long practice of psychoanalysis, namely that free-floating anxiety, the sources of which, to use the archeological metaphor Freud was so fond of, can only be excavated at the cost of patience, and which he goes on to explain too simplistically as the conflict between our drives and the requirements of civilization. In this work, Freud also looks at defense mechanisms against pain. One is the fix drugs offer (in his youth, he studied the benefits of cocaine) as well as libidinal investment in a professional activity and in "internal mental processes" (1929/1962, 25–6). He could have used this work

to explain how his own intellectual activity protected him from suffering—his own as well as that of his patients. However, it is not easy to admit using a defense against pain, for the mere act of admission weakens the defense.

Now that the inevitable and profound misunderstanding due to the gap between clinical and textual realities has, I hope, been elucidated (although not settled, which would be impossible), I will return to the rivalry.

Why does Philosophy See Psychoanalysis as a Rival?

We see an activity as a rival when it has similar aims as our own, but instead of lending credence to ours, challenges its pertinence. Philosophy and psychoanalysis both seek truth, specifically the truth about our very being and the way we lead our lives. However, they are in complete disagreement about both the nature of that truth and ways of reaching it. Their disagreement—indeed, their incompatibility—concerns two concepts: control, and completeness.

Firstly, the philosopher's discourse of truth is the product of an intentional, methodical, and controlled practice of thought. The Western philosophical tradition considers such thought the highest human faculty. Plato sees this kind of thinking as the means for discovering—or rather rediscovering—a truth that tends toward the contemplation of the divine. Aristotle also sees thought as leading to contemplation. Although Descartes may have diverged from this position, which might be called religious, he also sees methodical thinking as the highest activity.

Philosophy can thus be taught. It develops concepts and dispenses knowledge that benefits people in the form of lectures or philosophical texts. Based on Socrates' oral teachings, Plato's dialogues are intended to transmit a philosophical teaching. Truth is revealed in the form of statements conceived by the highest part of our soul in much the same way as it conceives geometric truths. Truth is a source of wisdom because, once engaged by our will, we acquire self-mastery and control over desires and can thus attain the highest good by ourselves. Stoicism also teaches truths that conform to the *logos*, or reason. Reaching them is the way to free ourselves from vain desires and our dependency on others. Although stoicism has a slightly different religious framework from Platonism, both seek transcendence of the human condition. Their ideal is to live like a god.

The talking cure, by contrast, does not pursue the sovereign good. It does not claim to cure us of the human condition but rather to help us “make do,” that is to live with its

problematic nature. Psychoanalysis acknowledges that life is stronger than thought. The truth of what we are is in our life, itself bound up with other lives. Conscious thought may well experience life and itself as independent, but the reality is that our life did not originate in conscious thought. Instead, our life emerged through vital physical, neurological, psychic, and relational processes that predate and thus elude thought, but on which thought is heavily dependent. Thought is one of these vital processes, just as the brain (as Damasio pointed out) is part of the body and performs the complex task of maintaining our psychic and physical integrity. Thought can therefore only grasp part of the truth of what we are. Thought must let go of the desire for completeness that drives Western philosophy and thus forego the pleasure that a sense (or an illusion) of completeness brings. Whenever something of our true essence manifests itself in a language our conscious can hear (at least partially), it is not surprising that this language, which conveys a piece of our truth, is different from the language we use to express logical statements about the knowledge we control, whose certainty should be seen by all.

Nonetheless, the talking cure requires high-level thinking. How can the type of mental work the patient undertakes be described? It is not about a type of thinking that controls and thereby derives enjoyment from itself, but, as I argued, of thinking that “makes do.” The patient must—gradually and not without hardship—subdue the desire for control that spontaneously besieges thought and, insofar as possible, abandon himself to a form of mental activity that, while conscious, meets with and tames, so to speak, another form of psychic activity operating within him but is outside of his will and consciousness (like dreams, for example). This mental activity reveals his way of being (or not being) and desiring, and bears testimony to an economy of desire that predates will and came into being without it and that will is thus helpless to change. However, over the course of sessions, as the patient works to tame this psychic activity and to speak to the analyst, this economy of desire can be remolded into one that connects with the world of human coexistence and makes space not only for itself but for others too. Contrary to what Freud suggests, it is not the insight itself that brings about this change. Rather, it is the change that enables this insight to emerge. The analyst’s comments are not interpretations intended to spark the flash of insight, but rather the words—which are also “making do”—that accompany and assist the patient through the process.

The second aspect of the control issue is that going from philosophy to psychoanalysis is shifting from an “on my own” outlook to a renouncement of the idea that self can progress on its own. The patient’s practice of thought and speech occurs without a need for control. More importantly, due to the absence of that need, it lends itself to being listened to by

another. Patients expose themselves to the risk of saying something of their truth that the analyst can hear but which they do not. Patients feel the analyst's presence very strongly, hence the apprehension and anxiety. In fact, in the analyst's presence, the patient has his back to the wall: he is there to face something that is bothering him. Given this context, the patient can express himself in a way that is not possible in other human relations and thus serves as an aid and a recourse.

In these conditions, the patient does not experience the analyst's words as everyday speech because their content (that is, what they signify explicitly) is inseparable from the value they have as relational acts (what linguists call "speech acts"). They provide the patient with the opportunity to stop focusing solely on the explicit content of what he says and to learn instead to hear how his words bear witness to what he is, to the place he holds in relation to others, and to the desire that "smuggles" itself in.

The patient expresses his mode of being—which is inseparable from his mode of relating—through whatever stories, associations, and remarks come to mind. At the same time, he experiences and enacts his mode of being through his relationship with the therapist. The therapist's duty is to examine what he knows about his patient in light of the relationship that has formed between himself and the patient and by taking into account the way the patient reacts to his mode of being (or counter-transfer). No matter how much experience the clinician may have or how much he may know, he still has to question his perceptions and reactions (which is what he discusses with his own analyst).

The Western concept of the individual, which was forged by our philosophical tradition, draws a distinction between our "real being" and our relational behaviors (which are likened to "roles").⁵ However, even if we accept that concept in theory, we put it aside in practice, since the only way we can form an idea of what others are is by observing their mode of being. The Western concept of the individual thus does not protect us from being profoundly affected by our relationships—whether good or bad—with those close to us, of which literature provided countless examples before the advent of psychoanalysis. However, this non-separation between what I am and my relations with others as depicted by literature, clinical psychology, and psychoanalysis goes much further than the reassuring concept of the relational subject that predominates today. Rather than challenge the Western concept of the

⁵ American social scientists have superimposed scientific window-dressing on the notion of role, which was so important to the Stoics. See Ralph Linton's use of the term "role" and "role model" in *The Cultural Background of Personality* (1968). For a critique of the notion of "inner self" or "authentic self," see "Be Yourself!" (Flahaut 2006).

individual, it perpetuates it, with slight alterations. There is no harm in stating and repeating that there is no “I” without “you” and that we have a need to be recognized. The same goes for extolling multiple identities and openness to others. Being just as far removed from the violence of our affects as from the psychoanalytical experience, this benign vision of the relational subject explored by Saint-Exupéry in *Citadelle* (1948) and, from a more philosophical standpoint, by Paul Nédoncelle in *La réciprocité des consciences* (1942), not to mention Levinas, is rooted in a humanism that has the merit of appealing to our worthy sentiments but which by doing so confuses what should, according to a proper methodology, be clearly differentiated as what we are versus what we want to be, what is described versus what is desired.

I trust that readers now have a better understanding of why philosophy finds it difficult to embrace Freud and psychoanalysts’ view of man, namely their view that we did not create ourselves and that a major part of us therefore exists prior to self-awareness and escapes its attention, but—and this is an aggravating factor—which others can perceive. Given the aims of philosophy, how could it see the narcissistic renunciation the patient must experience as a step to wisdom? How could philosophers—and academics in general—not see this as a kind of abdication? The answer is that their desire to exist is strongly devoted to the mastery of knowledge and the power of thought. Their training and professional activity have turned that desire into a *habitus* and a way of persevering in their being. Therefore, psychoanalytic theory, and treatment in particular, is seen as an assault on the sense of self that they have internalized.

“*Nosce te ipse*” and *Imitatio Dei*

Of course, things would have turned out differently had the founder of Western philosophy stuck to the meaning the Greeks gave to *gnôthi seauton*. To them, “knowing thyself” meant accepting that the barrier between self and the gods is impenetrable, learning to see oneself within the framework of the human condition, and knowing one’s place in the world in relation to others. However, Plato turned that maxim against itself: knowing thyself, he claimed Socrates said, is to reawaken the memory of the divine world that is the real homeland of the soul. For him, the aim was “to become like God, so far as this is possible.”⁶ Since the words of language correspond to ideas emanating from divine reason, of which our

⁶ Theaetetus, 176b.

soul is a depositary, the search for wisdom consists of learning to wield language in harmony with the *logos*—the order of ideas—and to conduct oneself in harmony with the knowledge thereby created. Whereas Christians see God’s gift as his saving grace, the Platonists, Stoics, and neo-Platonists—who had the most resounding influence on our philosophical tradition—see the *logos* (or reason) as that which lifts mankind above the beasts. One of the great advantages of this belief is that, despite having a religious origin, it can be adapted to a secular mode (or one that appears to be secular), which is precisely what happened.

Over the next millennium and a half, the oft-interpreted saying “know thyself” continued to invite seekers after wisdom to experience the relation to self as divine and the relation to the divine as self. In 1635, Pierre Charon wrote in his treatise *De la Sagesse* (On Wisdom):

The most excellent and divine counsel, the best and most profitable recommendation to all, though the least practiced, is to study and learn to know ourselves. [. . .] God is perpetually taken up with viewing, considering, and knowing Himself. [. . .] Man has this engagement to study and know himself, since it is natural to him to think.⁷

To know yourself is to acknowledge being made in God’s image and to see yourself in the divine mirror. Likewise, ancient authors (such as Saint Augustine) and medieval authors (such as Guillaume de Saint Thierry in the twelfth century) point out that while the eye of the body cannot see itself, the soul can, like God, perceive itself through *cogitatio*. The ego ideal of philosophers thus mirrors the Platonic God, the Zeus of the Stoics, and the Christian God. Epictetus also saw Zeus as a model to be imitated: just as Zeus lives for himself and converses with his own thoughts, we too must “know how to do without others” (Epictetus 1962, 988).⁸

No one from a long tradition of philosophers and theologians has interpreted this supposed power of the soul in light of Jesus’ famous parable: “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?”⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, a fifteenth-century German theologian, may be the only exception:

So indeed the eye of the flesh, while peering through a red glass, judges that everything it sees is red. In the same manner, the mind’s eye, wrapped up in limitations and passions,

⁷ Cited in Pierre Courcelle 2005, 730.

⁸ On this passage from *L’herméneutique du sujet* (2001), Michel Foucault underscores the link between care of the self, *gnôthi seauton*, and the ideal of self-sustaining circularity.

⁹ Luke 6, 41.

you, who are the object of the mind, appear according to the nature of the limitations and passions. A human being cannot judge except in a human way.¹⁰

Put simply, Western philosophy sees wisdom as stemming from a relation to self instead of a relation to others. Reaching the divine ideal implies working on the self without it being understood that working on the self is inseparable from working on our relations with others. Hesiod's *Theogony* and other Greek tragedies enacted relational conflicts and, in doing so, put forward an anthropological view as well as a wisdom. After Plato, that precious legacy was abandoned in favor of philosophy and the idea of contemplating *hubris*, or self-deception, and the role that our relationships with others play in the quest for wisdom faded away.

The Unconscious before Freud

Instead of seeing the Freudian exploration of the unconscious as the continuation of an investigation already underway in ancient Greece, philosophers choose to believe that Freud was the first to refer to the idea of an unconscious. They assume that if Freud had not existed, no one would have felt the need to examine what they see as merely conjecture, if not as a pet theory of Freud.

Of course, Freud was not the first to realize that human beings were not transparent to themselves. Blindness to and ignorance of one's own desires and the refusal to recognize them is a common theme of Greek tragedies. Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* is a good example. Various characters come to see Prometheus. They express sympathy for what Zeus has done to him, yet try to make him see that he is not an innocent victim. However, Prometheus explains why he thinks he is in the right and defends his position with unwarranted aggression. Motivated unknowingly by a desire for excessive self-affirmation hiding behind what he thinks is his right, he defies the Olympian master. However, Prometheus refuses (or is unable) to be swayed.

What the ancient Greeks referred to as *hubris*, French seventeenth-century moralists called love of the self (*amour-propre*). They too saw unconscious desires at work. In the words of La Rochefoucauld, "Self-love is often invisible to itself. One can neither sound its depths nor penetrate the darkness of its abyss."¹¹ Of course, we do things of which we are conscious out of our desire for being, yet the reasons why we tell ourselves and others that we did these things are not really the ones that impelled us to do them, since they are

¹⁰ *De Visione Dei*, Chapter VI.

¹¹ See Todorov, 157, Maxime 1.

unconscious. On this point, Spinoza concurs with La Rochefoucauld and other Jansenists of that time when he writes that: “Men think themselves to be free because they are conscious of their desires and volitions, but ignorant of the causes by which these are determined” (Spinoza, 1985). Therefore, for the authors of Greek tragedies (and, by extension, for some of those who read or watched them) as well as for Jansenists, the unconscious was not a hypothesis. It was a fact of life.

Today, many proverbs reflect this fact and remind us that we are partially blinded to ourselves. For instance, the biblical image of the mote and the beam—which contradicts the claim that the self is transparent to itself—has reached proverbial status. Others point to the resistance we feel vis-à-vis truths that hit “too close to home” (“there’s none so deaf as those who will not hear”) or the uneasiness truth causes (“some truths are better left unsaid,” “the truth hurts”). And yet, sometimes we simply have to “tell it like it is.” Supposing, as Adam Smith claimed, that we have an “impartial spectator” in us, that spectator can never be truly impartial for, as the French would say, “everyone sees noon at his door,” a notion Valéry called “noon the just” in *Graveyard by the Sea*, referring to the sun at its zenith, or the brightest part of the day that allows us to see things as they are).

Another telling proverb is, “He who has a mind to beat his dog will easily find a stick.” Since we are conscious of our reasons for despising someone, we bring those to the fore and repress the enjoyment we derive from despising that person. By toying with the idea of satiating that desire, we spare ourselves the displeasure of becoming conscious of our meanness.

These proverbs underscore the fact that, as we relate to others, we are all aware to varying degrees of the fact that a gap exists between what we know about ourselves and what we do not know. This is visible in everyday interactions. Let us imagine three people: A, B, and C. A and B are talking about C. They make judgments about C, which they do not reveal to C (they are talking about C “behind his back”). A and B are perfectly aware that if they come out and reveal those judgments to C, they will upset C and risk starting a feud between A/B and C. However, when B and C are alone together, they exchange ideas about A. Likewise, A and C talk about B. The ability of two people to see a facet of another’s way of being of which that being is not aware gives them the comforting sensation that they are more lucid about themselves. By complaining about C being a “blabbermouth,” for instance, A and B offer each other mutual reassurance that they do not possess the same flaw. This is a common method used by people in conversation to reinforce each other’s feelings of superiority and control, which feeds their sense of existing. It is tempting for them to do so at

the expense of the person about whom they are speaking, which exposes them to the risk of going from pertinent observation to (here) bad-mouthing and, when envy becomes involved, from bad-mouthing to outright slander. In the words of La Rochefoucauld, “if we did not have so many faults of our own, we would not take such pleasure in pointing out those of others.”¹²

The Divide between What We Think and What We Are

This way of reassuring oneself—or complicity between an “I” and a “you” talking about a “him”—is illusory. Of course, just because you see a flaw in another does not exempt you from that same flaw. Here, the proverbial retort, “You should take a look in the mirror sometime!” comes to mind. Imagine someone complaining about people who complain. That person is unaware that he is displaying the same flaw he is criticizing. However, the person he is speaking to knows it. For instance, as X describes Y as a blabbermouth, X’s listener may think that X is monopolizing the conversation.

How can others’ ways of being be a subject of thought whereas our own ways of being, or at least some of them, are sealed off from our faculties of observation? As pointed out, according to Western philosophy, since it sits atop the hierarchal chain of being, thinking (rationally, of course) should govern our passions and behaviors (or at least should have the capacity to do so). In reality, this hierarchy is questionable given that thinking is only one manifestation of life, one activity embedded within a group of vital activities that constitute our physical and mental being. Thinking follows its own unique channels and, of course, enjoys a certain degree of independence. However, thinking still faces the need to bolster our fundamental inclination to “persevere in our being,” to use Spinoza’s expression, even though at the service of knowledge, our mental activity cannot rise above the need to serve our desire to exist, since that desire is more vital than the desire for knowledge and thus sometimes takes precedence over it.

However, some of our desires, affects, and ways of being can only bolster our sense of existing insofar as we are not conscious of them because if we were, we would experience them as detracting from our being, that is, as a weakness, a flaw that lowers the esteem in which we expect others to hold us and bruises our self-worth. Therefore, it is hard—if not impossible—for us to apply to ourselves the thoughts we have about others when those

¹² Todorov 1999, Maxim 31, 91

thoughts concern aspects of ourselves which, if we became aware of them, would strike a blow to our sense of being.

There is a second reason for the more or less opaque barrier that exists between what we think and what we are. This works in tandem with the barrier discussed above and concerns the nature of human language. In our primate relatives, behaviors generally thought to constitute a form of language are really relational acts, or modes of interaction. Their informational content, if one exists, is minimal. The same does not go for humans: insofar as it is a speech act, speech is obviously a relational act. However, it is also always a meaning-carrying statement. In some instances, the relational act is signified by the statement (“Thank you,” “Pardon me,” “I swear to you,” “I baptize you,” etc.).¹³ Most often, however, the contents of the statement and of the relational act that occurs as a result of it being verbalized do not coincide. For instance, the content of an argument expressed at a meeting is one thing, whereas the deep reasons for its being expressed are another. Of course, in some cases, words are spoken for reasons that are contained in the statement itself, but they can also be spoken for entirely different reasons. A speaker can either be conscious of that inconsistency or convinced that he says what he says for the reasons he says owing to his ignorance of some of the reasons for saying what he says. In the latter case, the speaker is unaware of what is really at stake in the relational act he is undertaking. This is what some linguists as well as Lacanian psychoanalysts mean by the “gap between statement (*énoncé*) and utterance (*énonciation*).”

Self-awareness occurs through language: we know what we think based on what statements mean to us. Yet, in human language, our own words speak to us before those of the people around us. These words can only convey what is happening inside us or emanating from within us (such as desires, affects, ways of being, or relational acts) in a rudimentary, approximate, or metaphorical way. Moreover, in most instances, relational acts are not transmitted to the listener directly through words themselves but via the filter of the implications and collective associations we attach to them. Therefore, the content of statements occupies the forefront of consciousness, and whereas the speaker’s conscious mind focuses on the meaning of that content, the speaker remains in the dark as to the existential and relational significance of the words being spoken (that is, the enunciation).

In everyday use, the proverbs and banal conversational modalities cited above are not used theoretically. Since they and psychoanalysis use very different forms of discourse, we rarely draw a parallel between such observations on everyday life and the Freudian

¹³ These are examples of what Austin (1970) and Searle (1972) call “performatives.”

investigation of the unconscious. In fact, Freud's colleagues freely shared anecdotes about their patients' sexual preoccupations among themselves, yet they were not ready to embrace his theory on the sexual etiology of neuroses. This shocked Freud since what they knew and said in private, they denied when speaking in the name of science.¹⁴

There is another form of separation in addition to the one between everyday comments and learned discourse. Such comments familiarize us with the idea that others are partially blind to themselves. Psychoanalysis encourages everyone to recognize that I too have an unconscious. Therefore, any trait that makes someone else a human being also applies to me. Yet, as we have seen, our need to uphold our sense of existing is often more powerful than even the most rigorous syllogism.

Everyday comments about what others are unconscious of should give even those with no specialized knowledge of the topic a good idea of what is at stake in psychoanalytic therapy. Yet the thought that we must admit that such comments can equally be applied to ourselves can spark withdrawal, even hostility. Making that first appointment with an analyst is like "going to Canossa."

Psychoanalytic Exploration of the Unconscious and the Quest for Wisdom

Reading a travel brochure about a faraway country and actually living there afford two very different experiences. Likewise, experiencing one's own resistances is totally different from reading about resistances in the psychoanalytic literature. However, the patient notices that what he is doing on the couch was foreshadowed in that literature and that he was anxious about it. It is hard work to unearth something that goes against the idea I have of myself, an experience I fear will be too intense, even too violent, but which is no less part of me.

Moreover, the experience will also reveal things the patient did not suspect. Instead of letting me talk aimlessly through an entire session, why doesn't the analyst just tell me what is really going on? That question goes hand in hand with the preconceived notion that the analyst simply needs to tell me what is wrong so I can understand it and then get better.

The patient also discovers that repression not only serves to keep certain desires or particularly unpleasant affects at bay but also to protect something dearer to him than

¹⁴ See Mannoni, 50–2.

anything else. But what exactly? That something is intangible. It could be a fantasy, a relationship to completeness, a self-image related to the absolute, or some kind of obscure, intimate, and singular higher purpose. The patient doubts that talking about it can lead him to jettison unwanted baggage, to water down his position, and to renounce something he clings to dearly before he is able to see the benefits of doing so. In fact, talking about it is to gradually bring into contact with the realm of coexistence that which refused to go there. As the saying goes, “a fault confessed is a fault half redressed.” Another way of putting it is that a desire that was initially unconscious but that comes to be expressed and that as a result encounters the requirements of coexistence is a desire that, through that act, backtracks on its initial demands: whereas that desire formerly only made room for self, it now occupies one space among others.¹⁵

The treatment process challenges what might be called a division of labor that occurs spontaneously between the conscious and the unconscious. For instance, my conscious desire tells me that I love you, a feeling I approve of and that keeps me from realizing that my unconscious desire is to subjugate you and to have power over you. By doing so, I am trying to have my cake and eat it, or, in other words, to sanction the fact that I am playing the game of co-existence while continuing in an underhanded manner to enjoy some of the benefits I receive for not giving in to it. However, those benefits have a price, namely the psychic suffering created by an imbalance between self and others and the jamming of life forces which, if a balance could be struck, would be maintained and nurtured through perpetual exchanges between self and others and between self and a range of things and cultural forms, which are also constantly being exchanged among us.

In his work *Ce qui circule entre nous* (2007), Jacques Godbout makes a major contribution to our thinking about Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le don*. In short, a patient who is better is a patient who moves through the various modalities of giving, receiving, and reciprocating with greater ease, vitality, and happiness.

To use Lacan’s famous expression, a neurotic is someone who is always packing a suitcase for a trip he will never take. He dreams of fulfilling himself and satiating grand desires. As a result, he misses out on the chances life offers him because he does not see them as being up to par. He does not know how to receive, and serendipity is not his forte.¹⁶ It is as

¹⁵ Here, I am paraphrasing the well-known saying by Freud, which Lacan often used: “*Wo es war, soll ich werden*” (Where id was, there shall ego be).

¹⁶ Many well-known tales deal with the philosophy of serendipity. See Flahault 2011, “La sérendipité dans les contes.”

if he is always expecting reparations. He thinks that something essential is owed to him, yet nothing is ever good enough. His desire is not something positive. It is a need. Never fulfilled, it darkens his life. As a result, he finds it difficult to find his place in the various forms of non-commercial exchanges that make up the web of life. His exchanges with others are biased and unequal—or at least that is what his friends think, for he himself is not aware that he demands more than he gives and that his way of being is a burden on others.

No one happily embraces the incompleteness that goes hand in hand with coexistence (that is, the gap between dreams and reality, being one among many, or having to make way for the next generation). The neurotic is simply a little more haunted than others by a silent and unconscious revolt against the human condition, and he clings a little tighter than others to what the human condition requires him to give up. As Aristotle pointed out long ago, desire is without limit.¹⁷ From the age of around two, the space of our psyche—the place of the self—opens up to the limitless and the absolute as well as infatuation with all-powerful thinking that is too exiguous for two, as illustrated by the significance of the figure of the “big bad wolf” starting around age three and the childhood fears that occur over the next few years. It is a cosmic tragedy, as it were, but one that is experienced directly and embedded within the unique aspects of our personal history, in the love and hate that joins us to the parents who dominated our existence, on whom our existence was founded, and in relation to whom, unbeknownst to us, our first desires, our way of existing, and our difficulty existing began.

In conclusion, I will return to the quest for wisdom, which is supposedly what philosophers devote themselves to. In reality, that quest seems to be the least of their concerns. Let us imagine a philosopher who is really seeking wisdom and who practices the care of the self. Does he need to undertake psychoanalytical treatment? Not necessarily, since that option is reserved for those who experience ongoing or recurrent psychic suffering that has not been cured by any of the usual remedies. Nonetheless, our hypothetical philosopher would do well, in my view, to take an interest in psychoanalysis, or at least in the realities with which psychoanalysis as well as clinical psychology must deal. Our philosopher should also heed the processes of speech that are conducive to thinking “out of the box,” starting downstream of the social world toward which our activities are generally directed and moving upstream toward the hidden origins of what we are. The problem is that he will end up questioning the foundations of Western philosophy, at least if his enquiry is serious and

¹⁷ *Politique*, I, 9, 1257–8 a; II, 7, 1267 b.

sincere. This is a difficult—if not impossible—task for someone whose years of training and teaching have forged a symbiotic bond between his intellectual activity and this rich tradition.

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