

Psychoanalysis as a Meeting Ground for Philosophy and Science

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Abstract

Psychoanalysis is one of the most influential and intensely discussed fields in academia, including medicine. One important question that has always been a topic of discussion is whether Psychoanalysis is a branch of philosophy or science. This question has sparked ongoing debate. This paper attempts to analyse the theory of psychoanalysis to understand its philosophical as well as scientific nature. One of the most important proponents who is also the pioneer of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud claimed psychoanalysis to be a science throughout his life. Many people accept Freud's claims, although many others criticise and reject his claim outrightly. Karl Popper outrightly refuses to accept psychoanalysis as a science because the theories of psychoanalysis are not testable or falsifiable, and whatever cannot be falsified cannot be a science. Grünbaum offers a philosophical critique of the work of Sigmund Freud in his book *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis: A Philosophical Critique* published in 1984. Grünbaum evaluates the status of psychoanalysis as a natural science, criticises the method of free association and Freud's theory of dreams, and discusses the psychoanalytic theory of paranoia. According to Grünbaum, Psychoanalysis has only a weak position to claim a scientific status. While there are a range of views on the topic of whether psychoanalysis is in fact scientific, or just a philosophical or a kind of religious "cult", but any satisfactory approach to understanding mind and behaviour requires an approach that is at once both philosophical and scientific. Accordingly, to even approach the question regarding the scientific nature of psychoanalysis, a foundation comprising a sophisticated conceptual and philosophical framework is required. This paper seeks to explore the theoretical foundations of psychoanalysis to better understand its philosophical and scientific dimensions.

Key Words: Psychoanalysis, philosophy, science, Falsification, Freud

Introduction

The discussion about the status of Psychoanalysis has always been very intriguing as much as it is interesting. The multifaceted nature of Psychoanalysis has intrigued scholars across disciplines including Medical Science and Philosophy. The central question of whether Psychoanalysis should be included in philosophy or science has sparked a never ending debate. Psychoanalysis has never been given a clear-cut position in the field of science or in Philosophy. But interestingly it is a part of both. It actually is the meeting ground for both fields. Just like a naughty rebellious child, psychoanalysis refuses to fit in the box or follow the clear-cut rules & the criteria of any of the mentioned fields, therefore those familiar with contemporary Psychology understand that Psychoanalysis is the black sheep of the field. Throughout his life, Sigmund Freud, the pioneer of contemporary psychoanalysis, maintained that psychoanalysis is a science. Both praise and criticism have been directed towards Freud's perspective. Freud's assertion has been famously contested by critics like as Karl Popper, who maintain that psychoanalytic ideas are not testable or falsifiable, two necessary conditions for any scientific field. Popper argues that a hypothesis cannot be regarded as scientific if it cannot be empirically tested or possibly refuted. Sigmund Freud, due to some controversial ideas, has been discredited. Objections to Psychoanalysis have resulted mainly because of either the moralistic disgust with Freud himself or charges that Psychoanalysis does not fit neatly into a framework of positivist science. Although Freud's theory and approach were considered innovative, and without a doubt, all credit goes to Freud's theory for the further evolution & development of Psychopathology. Nevertheless, right from the early beginning, Psychoanalysis has faced criticism from renowned people from different backgrounds. Starting in 1919, Karl Popper, the famous philosopher of science began to criticise Psychoanalysis especially because of the fact that Psychoanalysts were always able to explain the symptoms of their patients through their theories, but would not come up with predictions subject to experimental verification, something that purely scientific ideas always did. Pertinent to mention that Karl Popper had earlier been an enthusiast of Psychoanalysis, but then he could not digest the fact that although there was an impossibility of Falsification in Psychoanalytic methods, yet Freud was hell-bent on calling it a science. The scientific validity of Psychoanalysis has been challenged over the years by some prominent figures such as linguist Noam Chomsky, physicist Richard Feynman, evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould and psychologist Steven Pinker. Some of the critics who have highlighted the shortcomings of psychoanalysis are the philosophers Frank Cioffi and Adolf Grünbaum and psychologist Malcolm Macmillan, among others. But what really needs to be understood is that no theory of any field including the Falsification theory can simply discredit or decide whether a theory is scientific or nonscientific. After all, Falsification is itself a bad theory of science.

Psychoanalysis is even criticised for failing to fit in the criteria of philosophy too. The difficult relations between philosophy and psychoanalysis arise primarily from the fact that both investigate the same field, human experience (including sexuality, life, death, suffering, and relations with the world in culture and work) but operate within this field according to opposite principles, consciousness in the case of philosophy and the unconscious in the case of psychoanalysis. The unconscious is expressed in everyday life but is especially present during analysis, where transference and resistance occur. Except for Derrida, most authors do not really consider the reality of transference and its paradoxical nature. One thing is certain, however. A dialogue with philosophy and epistemology will enable psychoanalysis to understand better its ambiguous status, which falls somewhere between science and fiction.

In one of his addresses, *Lines of Advance in Psychoanalytic Therapy* (1919), an attempt by Freud is quite evident at the philosophical “care” and the scientific “cure” Freud says, “It is possible to foresee that at some time the conscience of society will awake and remind it that the poor man should have just as much right to assistance for his mind as he now has to the life-saving help offered by surgery; and that the neuroses threaten public health no less than tuberculosis, and can be left as little as the latter to the individual members of the community. When this happens, institutions or out-patient clinics will be started, to which analytically-trained physicians will be appointed, so that men who would otherwise give way to drink, women who have nearly succumbed under their burden of privations, children for whom there is no choice but between running wild or neurosis, may be made capable, by analysis, of resistance and of efficient work”

Alliance between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud, the most popular & influential person in Psychoanalysis, before entering the field of medicine & psychology, was very interested in Philosophy. Although he did not get any formal degree in any Philosophy course, yet that did not stop him from attending the philosophical lectures given by the famous Viennese philosopher Franz Brentano from 1874-1875. Freud was so inspired by Brentano that he decided to take a PhD in philosophy & zoology, an idea that he revealed to his friend Edward Silverstein. Freud had also read some noted philosophers like Nietzsche & Schopenhauer.

A lot of criticism has been directed towards Psychoanalysis by some important philosophers of science including Karl Popper, Earnest Nagel and Alfred Grünbaum. There have been some internal critics from the field of Psychoanalysis itself who have challenged traditional psychoanalysis. Some of the important critics include Jaques Lacan who was also a student of Freud, Otto Rank, Sandor Farenzi, Melanie Klein, Erich Fromm etc. But the fact is that Psychoanalysis has been targeted more than it deserved. Freud might as well have been wrong about some of his theories or therapeutic methods, but no intellectual giant can ever claim to be perfect because after all, they are humans too. Psychoanalysis is as much related to philosophical ideas as Philosophy itself. It has tried to touch on some of the very philosophical questions about the human psyche, the unconscious thought process, the resistance, human behaviour & its cause, the emotions & the experience etc. Freud's theory has especially been recognised for its philosophical character. The speculative nature of Psychoanalysis makes it a philosophy. Though there are many speculations made by people about different things and not all of them are philosophical. But it is the nature of Freud's ideas & speculations that makes it philosophical. These speculative interests began to play a significant role in his writings after 1917. In *An Autobiographical Study* Freud says: "In the works of my later years *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), and *The Ego and the Id* (1923), I have given free rein to the inclination, which I kept down for so long, to speculation, and I have also contemplated a new solution of the problem of the instincts" (Freud 64).

This philosophy is evident even in some of Freud's famous books like *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Philosophy is a discourse that tries to question the seemingly unquestionable. Similarly, psychoanalysis tries to understand the incomprehensible “Unconscious”. Both Philosophy and Psychoanalysis are concerned with unravelling some of the mysterious questions related to human existence and the human psyche. Even a very well-known philosophical concept of Catharsis given by Aristotle in chapter 6 of *Poetics*, succeeded in finding its place in Psychoanalysis as a psychotherapeutic method to treat neurotic patients. Catharsis as used by Aristotle means the purgation of emotions primarily through dramatic art. But in Psychoanalysis the term Catharsis was first used by an Austrian Physicist and a colleague of Freud, Joseph Breuer. Breuer used Catharsis as a psychotherapeutic method to treat his patients. Breuer's patients recalled traumatic experiences while they were under hypnosis. One of his patients, Anna O., was diagnosed with hysteria; her symptoms included headaches, hallucinations, partial paralysis, blurred vision, inability to drink liquids, and loss of consciousness. Anna began telling stories about her experiences, particularly about her father's illness and death; after several narrations, her condition eventually improved. She called the technique “talking cure” or “chimney sweeping”. A very famous phrase in Psychoanalysis, the “talking cure” was coined by Anna O. herself. Therefore, the concept of “Talking cure” that comes from Psychoanalysis can clearly be linked with the concept of “Catharsis” which is a philosophical concept given by Aristotle.

Alliance between Science and Psychoanalysis

There are several claims that Freud made about Psychoanalysis, but his most important claim was about the status of psychoanalysis as a science. In the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* Freud claimed that Psychoanalysis is not concerned with any kind of *Weltanschauung*, unless there is such a thing as Scientific *Weltanschauung*. *Weltanschauung* is a German concept that cannot be easily translated into English. Freud defines it in one of his works, *Civilization & Die Weltanschauung*, wherein he diverts from the field of abnormal psychology and the study of sexuality to write about the relationship between economics, civilization, philosophy, religion and science. Freud defines *Weltanschauung* by saying the following,

“I mean an intellectual construction which gives a unified solution of all the problems of our existence in virtue of a comprehensive hypothesis, a construction, therefore, in which no question is left open and in which everything in which we are interested finds a place” (Freud 1)

Being a trained scientist Freud had a perfect understanding of the experimental method. His theory does not fail to meet the basic scientific standards as charged by many. He worked hard to make his work an empirical science and was always ready to modify his theories whenever needed. Moreover, like any pure science, Psychoanalysis is subject to verification as in the case of the pre-verbal development through the study of child psychology.

Like Science, Psychoanalysis also follows the experimental method of data collection and the creation of hypotheses which can be changed or abandoned when not in harmony with the empirical data. The data in the case of Psychoanalysis can be the memories and experiences in the conscious and unconscious mind which are unravelled through psychotherapies including the "talking cure".

However, the objections to Psychoanalysis did not stop. The main reason being that the critics of Freud were usually focused on just a few of his theories, ignoring psychoanalysis as a whole. One frequent objection to Freud's theory was that the concept of "Oedipus Complex" was phallogocentric, Eurocentric and androcentric. The theory of Oedipus Complex and castration anxiety is indeed very important to Psychoanalysis, but it is in no way the foundation of Freud's theory. In fact the concepts of "unconscious", "repression" and "transference" are central tenets of Psychoanalysis. And there is evidence of successful psychotherapies based on these ideas of Freud. It is totally illogical and unfair to compare this discipline based on the qualitative data with the disciplines based on the quantitative data and this obviously does not make sense and is an unfair comparison. The point that Aristotle makes is relevant in this context: "It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits." (Nichomachean Ethics, Book I, Section 3).

Karl Popper's application of Falsification theory just for the sake of solving the problem of demarcation which differentiates science from pseudoscience is problematic. Therefore, depending upon Karl Popper's theory is not a good idea as it renders not just Psychoanalysis & all social sciences but some pure sciences too as pseudoscientific. Karl Popper's falsification hypothesis, which demands that a scientific theory be falsifiable in order to distinguish science from pseudoscience, has serious drawbacks when used in isolation. Similar to the scientific sciences, psychoanalysis and other social sciences study complicated human behaviors that are difficult to evaluate. Furthermore, the development of scientific knowledge demonstrates that many theories including those in the pure sciences have gone through stages in which it was not initially feasible to verify them empirically. The notion of continental drift is one historical illustration of how scientific acceptability may change over time with new techniques. Furthermore, a strict application of falsifiability may not take into account the multidisciplinary nature of modern science, which frequently mixes empirical study with theoretical and philosophical analysis. Therefore, a more complete approach that takes into account the intricacies and developing nature of scientific research is required, as depending simply on Popper's theory runs the risk of labeling psychoanalysis and other social sciences, as well as certain pure sciences, as pseudoscientific.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is safe to conclude that a large portion of the criticism aimed at psychoanalysis is unjust and without merit. Sigmund Freud developed Psychoanalysis, which has frequently been questioned and scrutinized. Nonetheless, it is critical to acknowledge that psychoanalysis is an interdisciplinary field of study that requires critical examination based on the knowledge of its fundamental ideas and wide range of applications. Psychoanalysis though not an absolute science itself, has its roots in psychology, a scientific field that uses methodical research and empirical data to try and explain human thought and behaviour. However, psychoanalysis goes much beyond what is considered to be conventional psychology. It explores the nature of consciousness, the human experience, and the fundamental causes behind human behaviour, delving into the philosophical domains. Psychoanalysis offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending human behavior and mental processes by fusing ideas from both philosophy and psychology. In addition to using empirical methods like case studies and clinical observations, it also integrates theoretical ideas that speak to more profound and frequently abstract aspects of human nature.

Psychoanalysis is multidisciplinary, thus it cannot be clearly divided into pure philosophy or pure science. Rather, it

lives at the nexus of these two fields, addressing philosophical issues of existence, identity, and the purpose of life while simultaneously using scientific approaches to study how the mind functions. Because of its dual nature, psychoanalysis can provide special insights that are beneficial to both disciplines.

Critics who disregard psychoanalysis as just speculative or unscientific fail to see its intricate and sophisticated methodology. The relevance of this discipline is highlighted by its impact on numerous intellectual and cultural movements, its therapeutic uses, and its contribution to our knowledge of human psychology. Therefore, psychoanalysis needs to be valued for its multidisciplinary contributions and assessed in light of its philosophical and scientific components. Understanding its dual character enables one to fully appreciate its breadth and the insightful viewpoints it offers to the field of psychology and behaviour research.

I would like to end with the remarks made by Marcia Cavell, a philosopher and a psychoanalyst, about teaching philosophy. She says,

“It needs to encourage creativity as well as clarity, a sense for psychological relevance as well as for logical relevance, the capacity for synthesis as well as for analysis, a sensitivity to where feeling is appropriate and even a prerequisite for thinking philosophically, some comprehension of the complexity of reason itself and an understanding that there are different models of both rationality and objectivity, none of which is indispensable”.

So Philosophy and Science go hand in hand in Psychoanalysis. It cannot be called a pure science and it is not a pure philosophy either, but it is a part of both and cannot be separated from these two disciplines.

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