

A Revolution of Singularities:
Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Human Freedom

By

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When I was nine years old, my parents, worried about my angry outbursts, sent me to a psychoanalyst. The elderly gentleman, ensconced in a darkened university office lined with mahogany shelves overflowing with books and journals, greeted me with a warm smile. I remember looking at the strange shapes assumed by the gray, orange and red images on his Rorschach Inkblot cards. Although I had been dispatched for only a consultation, I wished I could have spent more time with the kind man. A few years later, when my fury bordered on the violent, my parents often referred to the psychoanalyst's conclusion.

“You have tremendous anger,” they told me.

I felt rebuked. After all, they had taken me to him for answers. I already knew *that* answer.

Many years and an actual psychoanalysis later, I gained an understanding of my rage and its relation to my early life experiences. I felt grateful for how that analyst's presence and attention set me on a path to discover what made me angry and others despair. I *was* a furious boy adolescent young man. That psychoanalyst simply had too little time with me. He could not have helped me identify, articulate, and address my primitive feelings in one meeting.

When asked to respond to the question, “Why does psychoanalysis still matter?” that lovely man immediately comes to my mind. I remember his friendly demeanor and his welcoming office. For me, psychoanalysis transformed an angry teenager into an assertive, opinionated adult. For others, it stimulates growth in varied ways – breaking through barriers guarding traumatic pain, exploring the meaning of symptoms, and releasing untapped talent. In a phrase, psychoanalysis elucidates persons’ subjectivities. It also expands their awareness of how they perceive others, initiating waves of interpersonal, social, and even political change.

Writing a half-century since I met the psychoanalyst-with-the-inkblots, and as an experienced psychoanalyst myself, I believe that psychoanalysis actually matters *more than ever* because of the post-humanist (Wolfe, 2010) era in which we live. In this essay, I describe how psychoanalysis – albeit always teetering on the edge of extinction – serves a crucial role in our contemporary world. I propose that if the field successfully addresses its fragmentation, clearly communicates its mission, and broadly extends its reach, it will more than simply matter. It will thrive.

Why Psychoanalysis Still Matters

In the course of the psychoanalytic process, patients share what they have barely dared to tell themselves. They tell stories – of triumph and failure, of love and loss, of meaning and nihilism. They explore attitudes – biases, distortions, preferences, and stereotypes. They experience feelings – sadness, shame, guilt, anxiety, loss, terror, and joy. Their psychoanalysts, in turn, facilitate transformation by offering *presence*, by *engaging* their patients in dialogue, and by *framing* the “intimate but asymmetrical relationship” (Aron, 1996, p. 43) that forms the crucible of the psychoanalytic process.

These professional behaviors – essentially psychoanalytic modes of *being* – disrupt patients’ *internalization* processes. They bring their intra-psychic conversations into the interpersonal realm, allowing the co-participants to the psychoanalytic process to experience and investigate previously hidden feelings thoughts attitudes behaviors. Numerous psychoanalysts have identified the circular, interior conversations that I call *internalization*. Fairbairn (1941) first described such processes with the phrase “schizoid background” (p. 250). Klein (1946) used “schizoid mechanisms” (p. 99), captured later by Steiner’s (1993) “psychic retreats” (p. 1) and subsequently by Kernberg’s (2007) “narcissistic spectrum” (p. 510).

Symington (2002) believes as I do that *internalization* processes unite all psychoanalytic patients. This retreating, withdrawing process, particularly when excessive, or when characterized by compulsively repeated, destructive patterns, restricts personal freedom. When I was that angry boy teenager young man, my ignorance of what angered me stunted my emotional growth. I was baffled. I had no idea why I felt such rage. I had no strategy for coping. When patients feel chronically insecure or inadequate, are trapped in unsatisfying jobs or relationships, or habitually engage in self-defeating habits, their development is similarly delayed. They live in a state of self-deception, of internal oppression. They lack access to the unconscious themes that cause their emotional pain or their repetition compulsions. Psychoanalysis exposes these dark recesses of human subjectivity, bringing them into the light of day.

Lacan (2008) writes:

The basic thing about analysis is that people finally realize that they’ve been talking nonsense at full volume for years (p. 71).

Terrified of again encountering an archaic “catastrophe” (Bion, 1959, p. 311), patients long ago turned inward and the “talking nonsense” began. They were blind to the indoctrination and to the lies and distortions affecting their perceptions of themselves, others, and the world. Psychoanalysis offers arguably the *only* professional service directly intended to reverse these internalization processes. By enlightening subjectivity, psychoanalysis liberates. Its mission is *freedom*.

Ironically, although Freud intended to introduce a new, modernist form of medical intervention, he instead launched what ultimately evolved into a humanist method for illuminating the human *subject*. In doing so, he re-kindled the Romantic project, that revolutionary reaction to the Enlightenment. He joined the ranks of philosophers political scientists writers such as Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel, Goethe, Marx, Rousseau, Hugo, Balzac, Keats, Shelley, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Doestoyevsky, Tolstoy, Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman. These artists rejected the devaluation of all things that could not be measured, weighed, or quantified. They rebelled against objectification. They privileged the subjective.

They influenced broad swaths of humanity.

Psychoanalysis similarly influences, but slowly, and; one person at a time.

Contemporary culture assaults the unique nature of personal *subjectivity* like never before in human history. The extremely rapid advancement of technology, for example, has altered the *experience* of being human, particularly affecting the way persons communicate. People spend less time speaking face-to-face. Their use of words, gestures, and touch has lessened. They rarely “sit down and have a talk.” They email rather than write. They send texts rather than make calls. As contemporary

comedian Aziz Ansari puts it, “What – are you on fire? Quite wasting my time. Text me that shit!”

And more change awaits us. Soon, common household items will be wirelessly connected to the web. Your refrigerator – rather than your spouse, roommate, or lover – will be telling you which items need replacing. Your automobile will inform you when parts or systems become inoperable. Your house or apartment will advise you, in computer-generated-faux-feminine-soothing-voice tones, of the status of your furnace or air conditioner. One could argue, as did Wittgenstein (1953), that technology frees persons to perform tasks more effectively, allowing them more time to commune with one another. But he died before the invention of Skype, Instagram, Tinder, Facebook, or Twitter. Ironically, these media, intended to accelerate information and to monetize sociability, has the negative effect of drawing persons more deeply inward. People may certainly be talking more.

But they are mostly talking to themselves.

And when not talking to themselves, they are forced to listen. Their only silent space exists behind their noise-cancelling headphones. The international media hurl information at people at unimaginable rapidity. People, in turn, passively cooperate by staring at television sets, computer monitors, or mobile phone screens. Persons are exposed to thousands of different brand names each day. These oppressive, invasive mechanisms of interpersonal influence objectify, stultify, and imprison subjectivity, compromising persons’ capacity to freely think, feel, behave – or even imagine.

Foucault (Chomsky and Foucault, 2006) differentiates between societies organized around the “city-citizen game” (p. 190) that balances between the rights of

individuals with the rights of others, and the “shepherd-flock game” (p. 190) that elicits master-slave dynamics. The mass media push people into the latter category. Once accustomed to living life as experiencing subjects, they exist as consuming objects. Foucault (1977) refers to the modern human as “object of information, never a subject in communication” (p. 200). By exalting human subjectivity, the psychoanalytic project runs counter to these cultural forces.

The global regression to modernism has impacted psychoanalysis itself. Contemporary “audit culture” (Strathern, 2010, p. 2) mandates empirically based and objectively measurable interventions in educational, medical, and other institutions. Striving to comply with this zeitgeist, some psychoanalysts seek inclusion in the medical-industrial complex (Wohl, 1984). I applaud the work of some who, like Shedler (2010), Waldron, Gazzillo, Genova, and Lingiardi (2013), and Curtis (2014), have empirically established the effectiveness of psychoanalytic approaches. But these investigations do not detract from the fundamental premise of psychoanalysis as a process of personal liberation. The symptom-reducing benefit of psychoanalysis occurs as a byproduct of enhancing personal subjectivity. It empowers persons. Further, psychoanalysis offers help for many more than simply persons whose emotional discomfort meets the criteria for officially recognized categories of mental disorders.

The various treatments that comport with this renewed spirit of logical positivism, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), lack an emphasis on personal freedom and autonomy. They serve a legitimate purpose of providing rapid symptom relief but, by design, avoid uncovering or altering unconscious themes. For example, if a Barista at Starbucks becomes depressed, the firm’s Employee Assistance Program

counselor would likely refer the employee for a short-term, behaviorally oriented therapy rather than a psychoanalytically oriented one. The CBT psychotherapist would strive to reduce the employee's emotional discomfort and return him or her to work as rapidly as possible. Such a therapist will likely *not* pursue the *meaning* of the emotional discomfort. If the symptom represents a minor adjustment problem, then perhaps no harm will be done. But if, for example, the Barista's psychological problem betrays an insufficient understanding of authentic interests or needs, then CBT or similar forms of behavioral psychotherapy serve the interests of corporations rather than of individuals. They maintain the status quo. They maintain work forces that function effectively but at the price of limiting rather than by expanding subjectivities.

Chomsky (2006) argues that such cultural forces – ones that treat humans as mechanical objects rather than human subjects – must be overcome

by a society of freedom and free association, in which the creative urge that I consider intrinsic to human nature will in fact be able to realize itself in whatever way it will
(Chomsky and Foucault, 2006, p. 39).

Psychoanalysis directly facilitates such a realization process. Once liberated from internal and external oppressive forces and introduced as much to others' subjectivities as to their own, patients treat others differently, potentially affecting many others.

Berardi (2011) addresses the adverse impact of the muting of human subjectivity on just such a global level. He describes how increasingly alienated workers have lost contact with the products or services they produce and have become estranged from

those who supervise them. He anticipates a “sort of revolution without a subject,” adding that

In order to subjectivate this revolution, we have to proliferate singularities (Berardi, 2011, p. 152).

Psychoanalysis grows the types of singularities to which he refers. Berardi (2011) defines a singularity as

[...] an agency that does not follow any rule of conformity or repetition, and is not framed in any historical necessity or sequential understanding of history – it is an emergent, self-creative process (p. 152).

Ruti (2012) identifies psychoanalysis as working in precisely this fashion, stimulating creative processes in persons. She describes psychoanalysis as striving

to unearth this distinctive character from underneath the conformist yearnings that masquerade as our desire; its task is to release the singularity of our being from underneath the Other’s oppressive signifiers (Ruti, 2012, p. 49).

Here, Ruti (2012) acknowledges the essential role of freedom in the psychoanalytic process, working as it does to liberate patients from oppression on all fronts – in the internal world, in the external one, and even as it exists embedded in language itself.

Ensuring that Psychoanalysis Continues to Matter

Partly because it liberates, psychoanalysis threatens a global society intent on indoctrinating humans into behaving like consuming *objects* rather than feeling, thinking, and behaving *subjects*. Any endeavor daring to explore the ambiguous,

shadowy world of human subjectivity could become – irony intended – *subject* to suspicion. You’ve seen the assault. It’s ubiquitous. Although essentially just the messengers, major media conglomerates such as Time magazine and the New York Times have repeatedly proclaimed psychoanalysis’ demise. Training in psychoanalysis has all but disappeared from the curricula of clinical psychiatry and psychology programs. Formal psychoanalytic training institutes have difficulty filling their classes (Schechter, 2014).

In Act I of Arthur Miller’s play, *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman’s wife proclaims, “attention must be paid!” She adds, “He’s not to be allowed to fall in his grave like an old dog” (Miller, 1949, Act One). She could just as easily be addressing we psychoanalytic practitioners. If psychoanalysis is to continue to matter, its significant problems require attention, and urgently so. No person, organization, or governmental agency will rescue the profession. If anything, dark sociocultural forces already impacting the field will only make it more difficult for psychoanalysis to survive.

Like Toynbee’s (1934) quip that all civilizations end the same way – by committing suicide – the greatest threats to psychoanalysis come from within the field itself. The psychoanalytic project has become stalled by its own internal, circular conversations. A half century ago, Rangell (1974) decried the splintering of psychoanalysis, noting that the field had already shared “the history of the 20th century: expansion, diffuse application, use and misuse, explosion, disaster” (p. 3). Stepansky (2009) coins the word “fractionation” (p. xvii) and, along with Aron and Starr (2013),

worries that its lack of coherence could threaten its survival as a distinct profession.

Psychoanalysis needs more of a union organizer than another theorizer.

If psychoanalysts succeed in channeling energies previously fueling theoretical infighting into scholarly and political work towards developing a cohesive profession, then the field should easily survive. Even those psychoanalysts who adhere to specific theoretical models, retaining their authority as the “subject presumed to know” (Lacan, 1998, p. 232), offer the same psychoanalytic service as their colleagues who utilize varied models of mind. All clinical psychoanalysts use *presence, engagement, and framing* with their patients; their theoretical differences represent little more than a “diversity of explanatory metaphors” (Wallerstein, 2013, p. 36). Advocating for a cohesive model for clinical psychoanalysis, Baranger (2013) encourages psychoanalysts

[...] to immerse themselves in the project, theoretically and clinically, so that, in a postmodern future, an ‘umbrella field’ is created for psychoanalysis (p. xviii).

The development of a unified model is attainable, but certainly not by passively waiting for psychoanalysis’ historical problems to somehow resolve spontaneously.

I encourage us to come together still further, to clarify the nature of our work, and to find better and more understandable ways to explain it. Unfortunately, the name of the profession itself – *psychoanalysis* – contributes to the public’s misperception of it. The actual word used to denote the discipline contains within it an emphasis on reason, on rationality, which runs counter to the nature of human subjectivity.

The *psycho* component of the word implies a fixed, isolated physiological entity, like a liver or kidney, while the *psyche* is *always in action, contextualized*, more verb than

noun. An extremely dynamic entity, *psyche* arises out of many complex determinants – biological, cultural, historical, social and more. *Analysis* implies a sequential linearity that fails to account for the vitality and creativity of actual psychoanalytic sessions. I have suggested that the phrase “transformational encounters” (Author, 2014) replace the word *psychoanalysis* because it more accurately describes what actually occurs in psychoanalysts’ offices. Further, by emphasizing an interactive meeting between two human beings, it eliminates the objectification suggested by the word *psychoanalysis* itself.

The profession would also benefit from expanding its reach – a project heralded by Rangell (1955, 1968, 1974, 1975, 2006). Beginning during the mid-20th century, persons with a wider array of psychological problems and, even those simply struggling with the complexities of life, began consulting psychoanalysts. The two World Wars brought traumatized soldiers and civilians alike to seek help from psychoanalysts. During and after the Vietnam War, as Feminism and Civil Rights came to a head, European Existentialism gained in international popularity, and adherence to religion waned, persons feeling alienated, inauthentic, experiencing marital conflicts or having other problems in living began cascading into psychoanalysts’ consulting rooms. As a result, psychoanalysts found themselves helping persons deal with tragic losses, with fragile senses of self, or with feelings of loneliness just as frequently as they treated individuals with mental disorders.

Even if psychoanalysis again receives recognition from the insurance industry as a legitimate method for treating mental disorders, the field must overcome its reputation as an exclusive service for those wealthy enough to afford it. Shortly after

psychoanalysis emerged as a distinct profession, Max Eitingon and Ernst Simmel formed the free Berlin Poliklinik in 1920, Eduard Hitschmann organized a similar institution in Vienna in 1922, and Sandor Ferenczi another in Budapest in 1929 (Borden, 2006). Provision of psychoanalytic services for free, or at reduced cost, would do more than help those with limited financial means. It would expand societal knowledge of psychoanalysis as a profession that fosters personal liberation.

Further, with more than a century of experience helping such a wide spectrum of humanity, psychoanalysts have developed expertise in facilitating dialogue and resolving conflicts. They have discovered effective ways for interrupting repetitive, destructive patterns. We psychoanalysts could offer more assistance in addressing social problems on a global level, positively affecting governments, educational and health care delivery systems, businesses, and more.

Psychoanalysis transformed me from a baffled, enraged teenager into an active, engaged adult. When my parents dropped me off for that first meeting with the psychoanalyst – learning only that I had “tremendous anger” – I felt rebuffed. I had to remain in hiding, unable at that point to discover why I was literally going *mad*. I later learned through more extensive meetings with psychoanalysts why I had become so enraged. More importantly, I worked through the tremendous loss and sadness that lie beneath my fury, causing that primitive emotion to lessen in strength and to morph into assertion, engagement, meaning, and passion. I ultimately explored those feelings with my parents, helping create dialogue that brought greater understanding, even closeness. Just as it worked to free me, the psychoanalytic process releases persons from shackles inside and out, providing for a unique form of liberation. It privileges subjectivity and

singularity. It helps patients not only experience less pain, but to cope more effectively with life's ongoing challenges. It encourages authenticity, allowing lives to be led with fullness and vibrancy.

In a sense, psychoanalysis, the profession, is also an angry, stunted patient, caught up in an internal conversation rife with conflicts that prevents it from assertively moving forward. A passionate supporter of achieving unity in the field, Rangell (1955, 1968, 1974, 1975, 2006) brought the fervor of a revolutionary to his efforts to bring cohesion to the profession of psychoanalysis. He unabashedly used humor and bravely self-disclosed in the popular Huffington Post. He brought the relevance of psychoanalysis into contemporary culture. His scholarly works remain an active part of the psychoanalytic dialogue today. If we practitioners persist in our efforts to find commonality, even unity, we will join Rangell in helping to strengthen a profession that necessarily counteracts the post-humanist forces of our era. If we succeed, we may well create a psychoanalysis that matters more than ever before.

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