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Psychoanalysis in a New Light

What kind of a science is psychoanalysis? What constitutes its domain? What truth claims does it maintain? In this unique and scholarly work concerning the nature of psychoanalysis, Gunnar Karlsson guides his arguments through phenomenological thinking which, he claims, can be seen as an alternative to the recent attempts to cite neuropsychoanalysis as the answer to the crisis of psychoanalysis. Karlsson criticizes this effort to ground psychoanalysis in biology and neurology and emphasizes instead the importance of defining the psychoanalytic domain from the vantage point of the character of consciousness. His understanding of the unconscious, the libido and the death drive offer new insights into the nature of psychoanalysis, and he also illuminates and develops neglected dimensions such as consciousness and self-consciousness. Karlsson's approach to psychoanalysis is rigorous yet original, and this book fills an intellectual gap with implications for both the theoretical understanding and clinical issues of psychoanalysis.

GUNNAR KARLSSON is Professor in the Department of Education at Stockholm University. He is also a private practising psychoanalyst.

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Preface

> Know thyself
> *Inscription at Delphi*

> Don't be ashamed that you are human, be proud!
> Within you, vault opens up behind vault ad infinitum.
> Never will you be finished, and that's as it ought to be.
> *Tomas Tranströmer*
> *For the living and the dead*

Psychoanalysis has been pronounced dead a number of times, despite its short history within the scientific field of study. Psychoanalysis has not only been dismissed due to its alleged lack of scientific character. Per Magnus Johansson (1997: 10) provides a sample of some of the other types of accusations that have been made against the psychoanalytic method:

> Psychoanalysis has, during its hundred year old history … among other things, been accused of: pansexualism, encouraging sexual frivolity, being a Jewish science, for possibly being more suitable to the people of Southern Europe, but hardly applicable to those living in Northern Europe. It has also been assumed to be suitable to the Nordic population but not the Latin. Psychoanalysis has been criticised for exclusively analysing and being applicable to upper-class women, and for being captive to an oppressive patriarchal system, for being a bourgeois science. It has also been criticised for being too time-consuming and expensive, for being unscientific and for not having any evident therapeutic effect, and even for being harmful and dangerous.

The scientific status of psychoanalysis deserves an in-depth discussion. It is indeed a complex science. I hope that this book can be

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viewed as a contribution to the discussion of the scientific nature of psychoanalysis. What is its scientific domain? What constitutes this scientific domain? What truth claims does it maintain? These are some of the main topics I will discuss in my book. I have not based my discussion on an evaluation of the scientific and/or therapeutic effectiveness of psychoanalysis. Such research on psychoanalysis is valuable, but has its limits if one wishes to understand the nature of psychoanalysis. The basis of my work has been to examine instead the actual psychoanalytic process (what actually happens in the psychoanalytic interaction between the analysand and the analyst) as a scientific project – that is to say, research project – namely psychoanalytic research. Psychoanalytic research, roughly described, strives towards self-knowledge. I thus wish to discuss the scientific domain, conditions for and character of psychoanalysis/psychoanalytic research.

I have to some extent borrowed from phenomenological philosophy in order to carry out this task. Phenomenology as a philosophical movement is approximately as old as psychoanalysis, founded by the philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Psychoanalysis and phenomenology belong to the dominating traditions of thought that were developed during the twentieth century. There has been a certain amount of discussion between the two traditions, but these two exciting and sophisticated sciences have not had as much to do with each other as would have been expected. By taking some of the phenomenological ways of thinking into consideration, I believe that psychoanalysis could achieve a more profound self-understanding as a science.

In chapter 1 I will discuss the relationship between phenomenology and psychoanalysis in general. A brief introduction to phenomenology and some of its main concepts will be provided. I will identify a number of points in common that allow for a fruitful interchange between them. In this book, phenomenological philosophy and its theory of knowledge will assist in the understanding of psychoanalysis, its scientific domain and its conditions.

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Chapter 2 deals with the issue of how scientific descriptions of the world are preceded by as well as preconditioned by everyday experiences. Husserl has given this prescientific experience of the world the term 'life-world'. The life-world, in other words, is the world we are born into and in which we grow up. The life-world is of epistemological importance to the phenomenologist, as it constitutes the foundation from which sciences can be constructed. The life-world cannot be reduced to purely (natural) scientific descriptions, as the so-called 'naturalistic attitude' seeks to accomplish. The chapter contains a critique of naturalism, the idea that the natural scientific descriptions of the world are descriptions of an objective reality, independent of the subject/man. In the naturalistic attitude, the primordiality of the life-world, both logically and chronologically, is neglected in relation to the natural scientific method of describing the world. Through the use of Husserl's phenomenological reflection, I will argue for the primordiality of the life-world in relation to natural scientific descriptions of the world. The chapter is important for two reasons. Firstly, it clarifies the overarching function of phenomenology in this book. Secondly, the chapter provides background for the critical examination of a neuropsychoanalytic project conducted in the following chapter.

The relationship between psychoanalysis and biology has been debated, and one can find various ideas among psychoanalysts regarding the question of the relevance of natural scientific biology for psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic practice. The question is complex and in chapter 3 I will limit myself to critically examining a neuropsychoanalytic project that encompasses a discussion on the age-old philosophical problem of the relationship between body and mind, as well as the creation of a new discipline: neuropsychoanalysis. Neuropsychoanalysis claims to show a way out of the dead end that traditional (non-neurological) psychoanalysis has supposedly found itself in. My examination of *The brain and the inner world* (Solms and Turnbull 2002), in particular, demonstrates that neuropsychoanalysis suffers from a variety of problems – among others,

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serious self-contradictions. In accordance with the background of chapter 2, in which I argue in favour of the epistemological priority of the life-world in relationship to the (natural) sciences, neuropsychoanalysis as examined in chapter 3 shows itself to be an example of a naturalistic attitude. According to the naturalistic attitude, one does not do justice to subjectivity or life-world experiences. These have a tendency to be reduced to natural scientific descriptions, in this case clothed as the unconscious.

After examining this (neuro)psychoanalysis, it is deemed urgent to find an appropriate starting point for the examination of the domain of psychoanalysis, not least the unconscious. Chapter 4 contains a discussion on the psychoanalytic conceptualization of the psychical in psychoanalysis and attempts to discuss the conditions for and the character of the unconscious. In my view, it is important that an investigation of what the unconscious is starts where the unconscious reveals itself in clinical practice. This is where the issue of consciousness enters, since the psychoanalytic process begins with the conscious self-understanding of the analysand and moves forward through the use of conscious validations of interpretations made in relation to the unconscious.

In order to understand what the unconscious is, we must understand what essentially characterizes consciousness, and here we can make use of phenomenological analyses of consciousness. In phenomenology, the essence of consciousness is that it is intentional (meaning-bestowing). My thesis, discussed in the chapter, is that the unconscious, in its most radical form, breaks with the synthesizing function of consciousness. The unconscious has a dissolving character and shows itself as something contrary to and foreign in relation to the conscious intending of the ego. I concur with the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche's (b.1924) ideas of the unconscious as untamed and wild, as it is expressed in Freud's id (*Das Es*) or Laplanche's own original version of the death drive.

Furthermore, my argument is that the unconscious can only emerge given certain pre-sexual prerequisites, in the form of a

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self-contained bodily ego. The unconscious can be said to be positioned in between something I call 'the ego's conscious intending' and a rudimentary body-ego experiencing. The thoughts introduced in chapter 4 are developed in the following chapters. Concerning the unconscious and its basically libidinal character, these thoughts are further developed in chapters 5 and 6, and in chapter 7 I return to the ideas concerning the pre-sexual conditions of the unconscious.

In chapter 5, Freud's theory of drives is discussed.[1] Sexuality has played the central role in Freud's theoretical work from the very beginning. The libido or sexual drives can be said to be the core of the unconscious according to Freud. However, sexuality is not everything, and therefore psychoanalytically it should be understood in relation to a counter-force of sexuality – for example, the ego or the ego-/self-preservative drives. In this chapter I attempt to show that Freud's characterization of sexuality differs from the conventional notion of sexuality as a natural condition limited to an adult heterosexual genital relationship. According to Freud, sexuality must be considered in a broader context and infantile sexuality must be taken into account. Furthermore, I argue that the libido concept, or the sexual drives, should not be understood as experienced sexuality, or even as possible to experience. The concept of libido should rather be understood as a theoretical construction, and as such expresses itself most clearly in Freud's economic, energy point of view.

The unconscious in its most radical, constructed character can be captured through the use of different descriptions. We can think of such important concepts as Freud's pleasure principle and its striving towards the immediate discharge of energy; the Nirvana principle, where the energy of the drives aims at a discharge to point zero; or Freud's death drives as Laplanche has interpreted them. Laplanche

[1] For Freud's German concept *Trieb*, I have chosen throughout the book to use the word 'drive' rather than 'instinct' (as is often the case in English psychoanalytic texts). However, when quoting English texts – for example, Strachey's translation of Freud's Collected Works – I comply with the text in question, even though this has meant rendering *Trieb* as 'instinct'.

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argues that the death drive belongs to sexuality when it functions according to the principle of free energy. Such a description reminds us of Freud's wild and untamed id, which is part of Freud's structural theory. Laplanche means that Freud provides a deeper understanding of the unconscious with the help of the id. My point is that these different ways of seeking to grasp the unconscious are idealized, theoretical constructions.

An important idea presented in chapter 5, which later provides the starting point of chapter 6, is that Freud's view on sexuality is not based solely on his clinical practices. For Freud, the importance of sexuality in psychopathology – and in life in general – had the character of a vision (May 1999), which he attempted to verify in his scientific work during his lifetime. This is an idea that I will explore further and develop in chapter 6, where I argue that Freud's constructed libido (or the sexual drives) is founded in prescientific sexual life-world experiences.

Chapter 6 fulfils an epistemological function in the sense that the psychoanalytic concept of libido is founded in the sexual life-world experiences. The theoretical concept of libido becomes comprehensible by identifying its roots in the life-world experiences and by illuminating the measures/achievements that are required for moving from experienced sexuality to the theoretical construction of libido, which psychoanalysis uses in its project. In this chapter, certain characteristics of the life-world are described phenomenologically, such as how this experience of the life-world 'normally' appears to us, as well as a form of life-world experience that differs from the 'normal' experience of the life-world, namely experiences of injuries and illness. These different types of life-world experiences then function as the ground against which the conscious sexual experience of the life-world can be delineated. It is on the basis of this unique character of the sexual life-world experience that the psychoanalytic concept of libido can be constructed. The libido, or sexual drive, provides psychoanalysis with a perspective from which the subjective life can be understood and explained.

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Chapter 7 returns to a theme discussed in chapter 4, namely the psychic achievements that are the conditions for the unconscious system governed by the pleasure principle. The vantage point of the discussion in chapter 7 is Freud's essay *Beyond the pleasure principle*, written in 1920, after he had come to the realization – on the basis of everyday as well as clinical experiences – that the pleasure principle is not universally prevailing in the psychical apparatus. Freud postulated in this essay something that is beyond the pleasure principle, which gradually came to be understood as the death drive. It is in this essay that Freud discussed the death drive for the first time and his last theory of the drive was presented. The essay is complicated and contradictory, but interesting, and it has given rise to various interpretations.

It seems to me that one can sense two conflicting meanings of the death drive in Freud's essay. It is the first meaning that Freud discusses initially, which has to do with the compulsion to repeat, which I give particular importance to in chapter 7. From an economic metapsychological point of view, the compulsion to repeat is about the binding of energy, which thus expresses something completely contrary to the death drive's discharge of energy, which is the other interpretation one can find in the essay. My idea is that what is beyond the pleasure principle – or, better expressed, that which is prior to the pleasure principle – is an affirmation of existence, which I discussed in chapter 4. This is a prerequisite for the activity of the pleasure principle. The discharge of energy is better qualified for the term 'death drive' and is, as mentioned above, the other meaning that can be found in Freud's essay. The essay is distinguished by the fact that Freud attempts to ground the death drive in biology, in a highly speculative manner. In my interpretation of the compulsion to repeat and death drives, I will instead make use of phenomenological insights regarding time.

Scientific activity seeks to obtain knowledge and find truths. I have made the assumption throughout this book that the concrete psychoanalytic process, consisting of the analyst and the analysand,

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is a scientific project and not solely a psychological treatment. Concrete psychoanalysis is about gaining self-knowledge and finding truths about oneself. We are thereby confronted with the question of what kind of truth concept is applicable to the concrete psychoanalytic project. As I pointed out initially, there are different ideas regarding the scientific status of psychoanalysis. Given that one conceives of it as a science, there are many opinions about what kind of science it is. Bearing this in mind, it is hardly surprising that consensus is lacking as to what truth concept could be applicable to the psychoanalytic project.

In chapter 8 I deal with the topic of the truth concept in psychoanalysis. The discussion evolves around the two conceptual pairs: construction – reconstruction and historical truth – narrative truth. In the first part of the chapter, these concepts are discussed from a historical context, focusing on Freud's point of view, the narrative tradition in psychoanalysis and a few of Wilfred Bion's (1897–1979) ideas. It is obvious that these three specific traditions encompass different views on the truth concept in psychoanalysis. The view of the narrative tradition differs significantly from Freud's idea that the task of psychoanalysis is to reconstruct historical truths. Within the narrative tradition, one rejects the possibility of saying something that is historically valid concerning the life of the analysand. The task of psychoanalysis, instead, is to construct convincing truth narratives. Bion's idea of invariant transformations can be interpreted as a third alternative regarding the relation between construction and reconstruction. Construction and reconstruction are not seen as incompatible concepts; rather, the reconstruction of psychoanalysis – or, in Bion's terminology, 'invariant transformation' – cannot be achieved without a psychoanalytically constructing perspective.

Bion's position is a challenging starting point for the second part of the chapter, in which I attempt to integrate the concepts of reconstruction and construction, as well as historical truth and truth narratives. I argue that the unconscious, captured through the use of a psychoanalytic construction, must be integrated with the

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analysand's reconstruction of his/her life story. The psychoanalytic project enables the analysand to create a new story that claims historical validity. It is important in this context, however, not to perceive the term 'historical' in an objectivistic manner, as if it were a question of disclosing objective historical facts. It is instead suggested that the connection between 'the-past-as-it-was-experienced-in-the-past' and 'the-past-as-understood-from-the-present' can be understood in terms of 'fusion of horizons', an expression borrowed from the philosopher and hermeneutist Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002).

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