Part I

The interpersonal approach

"All theory, dear friend, is gray, but the tree of life springs ever green."
Goethe

1 Social phobia in interpersonal perspective: a conceptual framework and theoretical statement

In this introductory chapter, I aim to present an explanatory theory of social phobia set in an interpersonal perspective. It presupposes a familiarity with social phobia, that some of the readers may not have. To such a reader I suggest starting with Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 describes social phobia in two ways. First of all, it presents it naturalistically and objectively, as if observed in its natural habitat. Secondly, it presents it empathetically, in an attempt to convey something of how it is experienced by individuals living it. What social phobia is and how it came to be that way are both illustrated by means of several cases and described analytically by pointing out its various features.

Having acquainted ourselves with social phobia either recently (after reading Chapter 3) or a long time ago, it is natural to wish to make sense of it. It is our final destination.

Before setting out, however, I shall consider the intellectual scaffolding necessary for the construction of the explanatory framework.

Choice of an appropriate level of analysis

Understanding in a scientific sense is, by necessity, advanced by means of theoretical statements. These create hypothetical constructs that postulate the grouping of certain observed phenomena and trace (hypothetical) links between them. Even if they appear to be supremely insightful or plainly plausible, such explanations remain speculative and their value uncertain. To gain validity, these constructs and their relationships need to be confirmed foremost by (natural) experience but also by (artificial) experimentation. A sound theory cannot be a-priori contrary to experience or reason; nor can it selectively focus on some of the relevant facts while glossing over others. Ultimately, a theory is an attempt to structure a boundless and amorphous natural reality and to reveal the (often hidden) processes accounting for what is being observed.

If done deliberately and reflectively, any attempt at understanding complex natural phenomena has to start with a preliminary theoretical choice of the most appropriate level of analysis. In principle, this could extend from astronomic (e.g. planetary positions at birth) to sub-atomic physics; the plausible range is probably narrower. The range to be considered could be represented as a funnel of ever-decreasing units of analysis or vice versa. In the present case concerning social phobia, the plausible range of where the explanation might be found would span the extra-personal, interpersonal and intra- (or sub-)personal factors.

At the sizeable end (in terms of scope of potential units of analysis) may be found the social world embedded in the physical environment in which humans dwell. This could mean group- or society-wide structures (sociology) and processes (anthropology). A narrower focus centered on the individual within the social environment would constitute an interpersonal level of analysis – the manner in which an individual engages with others and the resulting dynamic interplay. This would constitute the study of a person operating in his or her natural and social habitat in *relational* terms. Lower down along the continuum, are found intrapersonal explanatory notions, contemplating as it were processes within the body. These activities are typically separated into two kinds and identified as the "psychological" and "biological." Assuming further that these putative domains are relatively independent, a "psychological" perspective would deal with postulated mental systems (e.g. cognitive), whereas a "biological" perspective would be limited to investigating bodily structures and processes (e.g. anatomy, physiology) within the person. These in turn could be approached on various levels: systems (e.g. endocrine), organs (e.g. brain) or cells. Further reductions in the level of analysis are conceivable: the molecular, as in the case of genes and their products. Speculatively, a purely atomic or even sub-atomic level of analysis is conceivable but given the state of our knowledge, would make little sense.

By way of illustration of the dilemmas involved, how are we to understand, for example, the misleadingly labeled (as satisfying the patient) "placebo effect" – the oft reported observation of improvements in the state of the individual engaged in a culturally sanctioned healing process?

The question is this: what is the "placebo"? Is it the inert pill or the cultural transaction in which the pill serves as a "theatrical" prop?

If it is the former, is the sub-personal level of analysis appropriate? Does identifying the neurobiological (e.g. Benedetti, Mayberg, Wager, Stohler and Zubieta, 2005; Faria *et al.*, 2012) or "mental" (e.g. Colloca and Benedetti, 2005) processes involved, illuminate the placebo response?

Alternatively, would conceptualizing the phenomenon at an interpersonal level, emphasizing both the social transactions (e.g. Henderson, 1935) as well as the cultural settings in which these are embedded (Moerman, 2000), bring the placebo responses into sharper focus? Does the "placebo effect" in any way intersect with the equally well-documented effect of amulets and potions (see Chamberlain, 2007, and Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'amore*) on the one hand, and pilgrimage, prayer, confession and other religious rituals (see Scott, 2010) on the other?

The choice of level of conceptualization is not an empirical matter; the decision has to be taken deliberately, on theoretical grounds. This may not be easy, as certain set assumptions prevail.

The choice: intrapersonal versus interpersonal

The all-important issue of choice of level of analysis arises against the currently prevailing a-priori view favoring what might be termed "reductionism" – the metaphysical assumption, advocated by Descartes (see Cottingham, 1999, pp. 4–7), that causation is likely to run from lower to higher levels. Put differently, this doctrine maintains that the behavior of the whole person (or non-human organism), is best explained by the inherent characteristics of certain constituent elements or processes. This doctrine is widely considered to be the hallmark of science.

What processes would account for social phobia reductionistically? These processes are of two kinds, in keeping with another metaphysical assumption (Cottingham, 1999, pp. 4–7).

In the recesses of philosophical debate, reductionism (see Bennett and Hacker, 2003, pp. 355–377; Murphy and Brown, 2007, pp. 42–104) is intimately tied to the philosophical doctrine of mind–body dualism (Bennett and Hacker, 2003, pp. 111–114; Barendregt and van Rappard, 2004), its modern formulation identified with Descartes (see Sprigge, 1984, pp. 13–14). In a nutshell, it postulates that humans (and nothing else) are made of two utterly distinct substances: material and mental.

Dualism – the notion that human beings are a compound of body and soul, understood as separable entities – has roots in a religious outlook first expounded by Plato and refashioned by Augustine. In Descartes' view, all natural phenomena, with the exception of human thought and action, were to be understood in material and therefore mechanical terms. The human body, being material, was construed as machine-like. Nowadays, the brain and its workings are considered its main mechanism and wellspring. Although mind was characterized by Descartes in terms of "thought," thought was described as "everything

in which we are aware of as happening within us" (quoted in Hacker, 2007, p. 24). This description would be characterized as consciousness today.

In contrast to the activities of the body, then, conscious experiences that do not lend themselves to be formulated as concrete occurrences (Sarbin, 1964, p. 631) were postulated as being made of a mental (i.e. a non-physical) substance – revealed by "introspection" alone. The exact nature of "introspection" and its subject matter is not clear.

Although existing nowhere, the mental – in its modern guise – is often spoken of as a kind of space (mind) where meanings are grasped and "cognitions" (i.e. desires, beliefs, memories, intentions, etc.) are (metaphorically) stored, retrieved and allegedly exert their influence (Lourenço, 2001). According to the Cartesian view, the mind is somehow contained in the body but does not necessarily have to be connected with it. How the mind influences the body, in seeming violation of the laws of nature, remains an unresolved puzzle.

Prior to Descartes, medieval scholastic Aristotelians considered mind narrowly as the possession of certain faculties, namely reasoning, exhibited only by humans. As Descartes redefined mind expansively to include anything to be caught in the net of "introspection," it came to encompass in addition to reasoning, emotions and sensations.

Wishing to make minds the exclusive preserve of humans, and in the process turning human emotions into states of mind, Descartes was led to assert – in today's terms – that animals lacked consciousness (and therefore sensations and emotions) and indeed were merely complex mechanisms (see Cottingham, 1978; Searle, 1994 for discussions). One can only wonder at the consequences for philosophy and by extension psychology, if Descartes had observed a house cat or a dog he cared for, or, at a distance, had marveled at animal migration.

Many animals (e.g. birds, butterflies and salmon) are able to perform feats of navigation (see Gould and Grant Gould, 2012) – let alone endurance and cooperation – unimaginable in humans without long and arduous training and imposed discipline. By means of internal "clocks" and "compasses," the earth's magnetic field, the position of the sun or the stars and internal (e.g. infrasound; see Hagstrum, 2013) maps refined through experience, animals are able to navigate distant trajectories (e.g. 6,000 miles of non-stop flight in formation by the curlew; a 2,000-mile journey from Canada to Mexico by the monarch butterfly), with astonishing precision (Gould and Grant Gould, 2012).

Whether sentient and intelligent behavior may be deemed "mindless" (see Gould and Grant Gould, 2007) is a moot point.

As it is, the doctrine of dualism has drawn much philosophical criticism (see Fesser, 2005, pp. 19–48 and Jaworski, 2011, pp. 34–67, for summaries), not least concerning the logical problems arising from the postulated interaction between the material and the mental domains (McGinn, 1982, pp. 24–25; Fesser, 2005, pp. 38–46; Phemister, 2006, pp. 147–165; Jaworski, 2011, pp. 55–59).

A contemporary of Descartes, the skeptical Pierre Gassendi, had this to say: "In a word, the general difficulty still remains of how the corporeal can communicate with the incorporeal and what relationship may be established between the two" (quoted in Phemister, 2006, p. 147).

Among modern objections to dualism is that it clashes with the theory of evolution that must maintain that mind comes from matter – something a dualist can hardly accept (McGinn, 1982, p. 25).

Centuries of philosophical criticism notwithstanding, dualism and its ramifications (e.g. the world as mechanism, the existence of mind without body and mind as the true self) remain woven into the prevailing "folk psychology" (Churchland and Haldane, 1988) – at least in the Western world. More worryingly, dualism is also widely and unquestioningly regarded as expressing the natural order in psychology/psychiatry.

This "mechanistic" world view – social phobia as defective clockwork, literally or figuratively – is reflected in the bulk of research on social phobia (see Stravynski, 2007). It mostly fits within the intrapersonal reductionist (and dualist) perspective. The reductive search operates on several levels. Its thrust is to identify either "mental" or bodily processes – or more precisely their aberrations – that would account for an "abnormal" anxious state allegedly characterizing social phobia. The "abnormal" anxious state, in turn, is presumed to account for the socially phobic pattern as a whole.

Needless to say, these assumptions are going to be challenged and an alternative perspective charted in the following chapters. The first step in this direction is the choice of a non-reductive level of analysis.

The interpersonal level of analysis

Bearing in mind all intellectual considerations involved, I shall make the case for an interpersonal level of analysis, invoking several justifications for that choice.

First of all, the interpersonal domain is the appropriate level of analysis since socially phobic behavior is other-oriented and played out in a social context even at a remove; this is where life takes place. Thus, socially phobic activity is complemented by the presence of others; even the most

private preoccupations are characterized by this social aspect. Public and private behavior are both nested in current social and cultural practices (e.g. job interviews, courtship, dress, appearance).

Secondly, several decades of research have provided only tenuous support for an intrapersonal perspective. In other words, no intrapersonal factors can be shown to characterize social phobia; this calls for an alternative theoretical outlook integrating this most important fact. This perspective has to be broadly holistic and ecological; it is hardly conceivable that an exquisitely structured complex social behavior (e.g. dissembling, prevaricating), so well attuned to the complex social and institutional settings (Svyantek and Brown, 2000) in which it is displayed, can be accounted for reductionistically (Fan, 2007).

Thirdly, unlike a dualist perspective (that sustains reductionism) with its distinct two universes (a machine-like body animated by a ghost-like mind), an interpersonal level of theorization is integrative. This inclusive outlook is capable of accommodating all known facts about social phobia, regardless of their theoretical provenance.

Fourthly, and perhaps comfortingly, the interpersonal perspective – although resting on its own metaphysics (see below) – demystifies psychological understanding. In contrast to mind-reading or even gazing at brain imagery, sequences of interactions, if not plain at every particular moment, are tangible and observable and, when completed and set in context, perfectly intelligible.

Last but not least, the choice of the interpersonal level of analysis is apt because – as I shall argue – social phobia can only be characterized in interpersonal terms.

A few words are in order to lay bare the metaphysical principles underlying the interpersonal perspective I am favoring. This perspective has strong affinities with an "organicist" – or in a modern idiom – a systemic outlook (e.g. Noble, 2008; Gatherer, 2010) drawing on Aristotle. It maintains that living organisms are best understood as a fully integrated organic whole. This holistic view lays stress on the organization of an organism and the structure of its activities, rather than its composition (e.g. Strohman, 2000). Seen holistically, the unitary organic whole determines the activities of the parts and their interrelationships. In this sense, it is a mirror image of the (reductionistic) mechanistic perspective in which any part has an impact and therefore determines the functioning of the whole.

Furthermore, as all life is embedded in an environment and sustained by interactions with it, the holistic view is also ecological. The Aristotelian organicist/systemic outlook will be developed fully in Chapter 6, concerning causality.

The critical stance inherent in the interpersonal approach towards Cartesian dualism and the concomitant reductionism draws mostly on the anthropological psychology, refined and elaborated by Wittgenstein. This is part of what is usually called analytical philosophy (see Jost, 1995; Kenny, 2005). Various aspects of these ideas have been also advanced by other earlier (e.g. Dewey, 1930; Mead, 1934) and contemporary (e.g. Ryle, 1949) theorists (see Brinkmann, 2011 for a discussion).

Wittgenstein rejected outright all Cartesian doctrines, including the mind–body dichotomy positioning the mind as an independent agent (see also Ryle, 1949). According to Hacker (1996, p. 117), Wittgenstein maintained that:

> It is a confusion to suppose that there are two domains, the physical and the mental, each comparable to the other, each populated by objects, properties, states, processes and events, which differ only in that in the first domain they are material and in the second immaterial. And it is equally erroneous, on the rebound from dualism, to suppose that the mental domain is really the neural in disguise, let alone to suppose that in the fullness of time, psychology will achieve maturity and be able to replace gross qualitative psychological descriptions with quantitative neurological descriptions.

Like Aristotle, Wittgenstein "held that such attributes as consciousness, perception, cognition and volition are attributes of the living animal, not of its material parts, such as the brain, let alone of its allegedly immaterial parts such as the mind" (Hacker, 2007, p. 28). Contrary to the Cartesian representation of behavior as bodily motion and speech activated from an "inner" realm, "Wittgenstein emphasized that human behavior is, and is experienced as being, suffused with meaning, thought, passion and will" (Hacker, 1997, p. 5).

"Wittgenstein put the human being – a psychophysical unity, not an embodied *anima* – a living creature in the stream of life" (Hacker, 1997, p. 5). A cardinal upshot of this outlook is that an individualistic psychological account, be it "mental," behavioral or somatic, cannot be intelligible. There are two reasons for this.

First of all, persons are whole and unified organisms. Human activities therefore are not an expression of an inner realm. Nothing hidden from view (but observable privately) goes on "behind" the behavior. Rather, in action all human powers combine together in a meaningful way. Human conduct is permeated with thought, emotion and desire; these are manifest in it.

Secondly, and most importantly, humans are social beings. Put more forcefully, human beings live their lives through relationships. As Godelier (quoted in Carrithers, 1992, p. 1) strikingly puts it: "human beings in contrast to other social animals, do not just live in society, they produce

society in order to live." Human relationships, then, are the soil in which human life flourishes; human survival in its absence is unimaginable. Our very sense of who we are emerges from considering ourselves in relation to others.

Human relationships are nested in a large variety of social systems (all based in diverse physical environments) embedded in larger societal and cultural systems (see Carrithers, 1992). These encompass language, ideas about the nature of the universe, a system of morals often embedded in a religious outlook, a political and economic organization, kinship, dress, diet, and so on. Human existence is inextricably woven into a certain form (or mode or way) of life (see Gier, 1980; Rudder Baker, 1984; Scheman, 1996; Schatzki, 2000).

A mode of life is a system of relationships, exhibiting regularities of patterns and configurations of social conduct organized and informed by formal and informal frameworks. It is evident from the fabric of human existence within it (e.g. Ledeneva, 2008). A way of life is thus simultaneously the extent of its practices and the norms governing (i.e. meanings attached to) it. Thus, all human attributes are involved in a dialectical interaction with their social environment and fashioned by it. "Individuals are socially constituted and the social context within which this occurs is a complex of practices" (Schatzki, 2000, p. 103).

Social practices (e.g. worship, commerce, food, education, courtship) are a set of considerations that govern actions (Schatzki, 1996, p. 96). Among social practices, communicative behavior (especially language) is of supreme importance (Schatzki, 1996, pp. 88–132), blended as it is, in socially patterned ways ("language games"; see Kenny, 1995, pp. 126–140), into almost every activity – including thought. Words in themselves are actions, affecting other people as well as the utterer. As such they are constitutive of reality. Through language, the individual is impregnated with societal processes permeating words and manner of speech. We think in words (and therefore language patterns); language is the vehicle of human thought (Budd, 1989, p. 128). Language provides us with the framework from which we build up our understanding of the world.

Socially, typical ways of saying things (e.g. flippantly) are integrated with an intonation, a bearing and a manner of behaving (and dress and grooming) fitting, or sometimes at odds with, a social occasion. Action is purposeful in being attuned to the social setting and therefore to the cultural context manifest in it. Stated differently, every action is embedded in a social role or arrays of roles (one's place in society as one's part in a play) anchored in institutions (see Zurcher, 1983). Consequently, meaningful action fulfils a function within a certain way or form of life (i.e. cultural community) at a certain period (see Sarbin, 1986, pp. 88–97).