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Philosophical assumptions of psychotherapeutic paradigms

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Abstract

In the collective mind and even in that of some professionals, psychotherapy belongs to a field of strictly scientific specialisation, with empirically verifiable results, stemming from and confirmed by clinical practice. If that is the case, then philosophical speculations seem to be out of place here, as everything is based on techniques and procedures which can be tested and confirmed pragmatically. Our study sets out to highlight the philosophical commitment, which is sometimes implicit, other times explicit, but always present, of psychotherapeutic paradigms, a commitment which constitutes the very founding theoretical reasoning of the said practices.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between philosophy and science, in general, and philosophy and psychology, in particular, has known a certain historical dynamics. On the one hand, modern sciences, as we have come to define them today, have been born out of philosophical speculations the moment the maturation of the field reached the stages of

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empirical testability. Newton still named his fundamental work *The mathematical principles of natural philosophy* (1687). The separation from philosophy starts to become more evident, as various fields start to demand autonomy and scientific independence. The same thing happens with psychology, which at the end of the 19th century claims its status as an empirical science, claiming its own field of research and a typical methodology for the investigation of facts. Still, psychology, maybe more so than any other science, continues to be marked by a certain philosophical view about the world. This fact is evident even in the case of psychotherapy, which is the most obvious domain for theoretical testing at the level of empirical practices. We will argue this idea with explicit references to the three major paradigms of modern psychotherapy: the psychoanalytic-dynamic approach, the existential-humanist one and the cognitive-behavioural approach.

2. The relationships of the creators of the psychotherapeutic paradigms with philosophy

A first clue, though not the most relevant, when it comes to the relation between psychology and philosophy, is the relationship of the creators of the paradigms to philosophy.

The specific context for the creation and consolidation of psychology's scientific status made that psychologists, even if aware of a philosophical lineage, denied it in public, so as not to compromise the status of the still young science as well as their own professional condition. Illustrative of this attitude is the stance of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud.

From his biographer E. Jones (1970), we find that the young Viennese student of medicine comes in contact with systematic philosophy through Franz Brentano, by whose appointment he translates into German a volume of "The Collected Works" by J. St. Mill. In his private correspondence, Freud admits that in his youthful years he aspired "only to the philosophical knowledge", also stating that he imagined philosophy as a "goal and refuge for old age". On the other hand, in public, the creator of psychoanalysis carefully avoids any contact with actual philosophy, especially after at The World Health Care Congress held in London in August 1913, where Pierre Janet maliciously claimed that psychoanalysis is first and foremost a form of philosophy, and proposes that its presentation be held in the quiet atmosphere of the Congress of Philosophy (Assoun, 1997). This explains why metapsychology, the founding theoretical part of clinical practice, appears as an epistemic construction that invokes data from clinical observations, when in fact it stands on an unspoken philosophical project. The nucleus of Freudian philosophical references is represented by Schopenhauer, fact indirectly revealed: "Maybe you will say, shrugging your shoulders, states Freud <<But this is Schopenhauer's philosophy of which you speak and not a scientific theory>>. And why, pray tell, ladies and gentlemen, the psychoanalyst continued, would a bold thinker not have guessed what the slow and dry observation that followed would later confirm." (Freud, 1994:64). P.L. Assoun points out fifteen express references to Schopenhauer in Freud's written work (Assoun, 1997:192). Around Schopenhauer revolve other philosophers, primarily Plato, Kant and Nietzsche, but sporadically are brought about the names of Empedocles, Diderot and other philosophers. Freud's tactic consists of the explicit employment of some philosophical ideas to enhance the dignity of his ideas and also to diminish the opposition of his contemporaries, while simultaneously distancing himself from philosophy, so as not to put in danger psychoanalysis's scientific status. "Almost all of the specific ideas outlined in psychoanalysis, states Rollo May (2013, p.107), could be found explained in further details by Nietzsche, and more profoundly by Kierkegaard." A similar stance is taken up also by M. Onfray, who states that "Freud is a philosopher who elaborates truths claiming to be universal, with the help of his intuition." (2011, p.55), psychoanalysis being nothing else but "Freud's philosophy" (Onfray, 2011, p.75).

On the other hand, things change when it comes to the creators of existential and humanist psychotherapy. The initial exercise of delimiting psychology from philosophy with the purpose of publicly solidifying the idea of its pure scientific nature is not justified anymore. Psychology has earned the prestige of a scientific discipline, open to interdisciplinary dialogue. Humanist psychology, "the exuberant American relative" of existential psychotherapy (Yalom, 2012:24), opens the way for the use of philosophical ideas in the practice of psychotherapy, and psychology's scientific status is no longer doubted for its use of such intuitions. The representatives of existential psychotherapy (Binswanger, 195, May, 2013, Frankl, 2008, 2012, Yalom, 2013), openly admit their philosophical precursors, starting with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and going on with Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcus, Fromm, Sartre, Camus, Buber, Levinas etc., as well as their literary precursors, starting with Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy or Kafka.

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