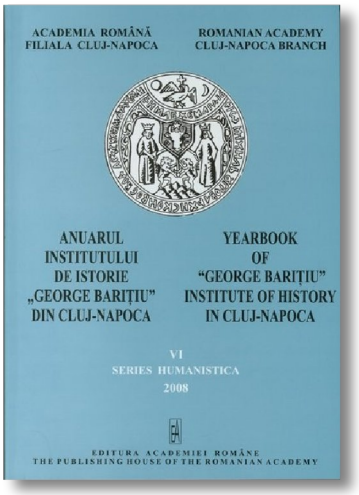

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BETWEEN FREUD AND POPPER

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Abstract. *Popper criticized Freud severely for his claim that his theory is scientific even though it is untestable and for his ad hoc alteration of his refutable – and refuted – theory of dreams as means for the prolongation of sleep. Popper's admiration for Freud is unnoticed, largely due to the science-oriented obscurantism that denies any intellectual value to anything outside science. Freud's discovery of intellectual content in non-science and even in the plastic arts refutes this obscurantism. On this Freud and Popper are allies against most of today's analytic philosophers.*

Of *The Interpretation of Dreams* Sigmund Freud said, "insight such as this fall to one's lot but once in a lifetime." Karl Popper has called it "a great achievement" (*Realism and the Aim of Science*, 1983, §18). The idea is this. Dreams prolong sleep by devising wish fulfillment. The rest is elaboration. A common example for it that Freud mentions is the dream of being awake and preparing to go to work.

Popper says, Freud is right on basics yet some of his discussion is defensive attempts to dismiss refutations of his many marginal errors and the avoidance of refutability. The refutations, says Popper, are anxiety-dreams (which awaken). It is not clear how right it is. The dream of being awake and preparing to go to work fails: sooner or later, Freud observed, the sense of responsibility forces us out of bed. So possibly the anxiety dream aims at keeping us asleep but the anxiety prevents this. Possibly, this is Freud's assessment.

Things look simpler than they are. Consider the dream that accompanies bed-wetting. It persists even after bed-wetting is overcome – by the sense of responsibility, said Freud. He related responsibility to guilt. Popper agrees, it seems, but insists that the view of all of us as suffering from a sense of guilt is not empirical. Suppose that Freud's theory is irrefutable, then. There is no test, then, for the theory that dreaming of getting up is meant to prolong sleep, or that wish fulfillment dreams prolong sleep, or that all dreams are meant to prolong sleep.

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This is an observation report, perhaps: drinking dreams accompany thirst, urinating dreams accompany pressure on the bladder, wet dreams accompany semen-sac pressure, etc. And refuted observation reports should not be left without correction: an old discovery should be restated with proper qualification after a newer discovery limits it (Newton, *Opticks*, Query 31). Dreaming of drinking still appears with thirst. What excited Freud, however, is not this dream but the ones that indicate suppressed: veiled wishes.

Freud's theory was superseded. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict has discovered that in some older cultures the sense of shame plays the same role as Freud has ascribed to the sense of guilt (*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*). This goes well with Plato's *Laws*, where slaves are denounced as having no sense of shame. Legal historian David Daube then found in parts of the Hebrew Bible shame and guilt alternate as deterrents. All this refutes the general views of Freud. So does the observation that dreams occur when rapid-eye-movement sleep takes place. It is reported that interrupted rapid-eye-movement sleep refute Freud's observation. So we can restrict his observation to cases of dreams strong enough to be remembered.

The philosophical consensus on the status of psychoanalysis is substandard. It foolishly rejects Popper's view of scientific character as refutability, and it foolishly endorses his faulty application of it to the case of psychoanalysis. He dismisses psychoanalysis as unscientific, as irrefutable – even he also said, Freud's theory of dreams is refuted.

Adolf Grünbaum offers a different view – also substandard. He tries to apply to Freud the received view that scientific status is gained by empirical support. Popper views support as the resistance to efforts to refute. Does Grünbaum agree? He has refuses to take up my challenge and say what counts as support. What he says sometimes agrees with Popper's view, as when he demands double-blind tests, and sometimes it contradicts Popper's view, as when he says, Freud's output is refutable yet it cannot be empirically supported.

The scientific status of an idea should point at its valuable role as enlightening or as useful. So perhaps we better study its value and ignore its status. This should be done, yet it may be insufficient: Popper values Freud's ideas as myths, akin to those of Homer. It is not that Popper deprives Homer's works of intellectual value, but that he claims it differs from those of later Greek thinkers, not to mention modern science.

The idea that Homer's works have intellectual value is contrary to another folly of the philosophical consensus, which is obscurantism of one sort or another. Obscurantism may favor science, oppose it, or devalue it. Post-modernism devalues science, granting it the value that equals that of propaganda (Feyerabend). The anti-science obscurantism now in vogue is Martin Heidegger's aggressive variant. Fortunately, where Freud is concerned, all this may be ignored. Freud considered aggression sick. And he confesses total inability to comprehend hostility to science even as he expresses his deepest misgivings (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*).

Pro-science obscurantism is hardest to dismiss. It has infected even towering souls like David Hume, that lover of reason and of culture. He said, a book that has neither mathematics nor science may be thrown into the flames: it is no book. He could not have meant it: we must see it in context. Some of the books that Hume admired fail to pass his criterion. This includes both Homer's works and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* that ridicules pro-science obscurantism. Hume's philosophical books, too, are neither mathematical nor empirical (but critical), observed Popper. They evoked Einstein's gratitude (in his intellectual autobiography).

The latest variant of the old pro-science obscurantism is the product of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his cohorts. He valued art (including poems, fairytales and plays), but insisted that it contributes no single informative sentence. How narrow!

Freud went the opposite way. A most valuable yet least noticed contribution of his is his view of art (including plastic art) as possibly informative. He articulated the informative content of some art, thus blurring the line between art and science sufficiently to sully a decisive refutation of pro-science obscurantism (that of Wittgenstein included). It does not refute Popper, who has stressed that not all information is scientific, and who has expressed admiration for Freud in this very respect. It is hard to imagine how stunning was the transition from traditional dry-as-dust psychology to psychopathology, especially Freud's exciting, well-written studies that could compete for insights with the high art that he loved to discuss. This compels gratitude.

(Parenthetically, regrettably Freud rejected modern art and reported being tone-deaf. His passionate interest in music undermines this report. He may have blocked his having stopped his elder sister's musical education early in the day. She never forgave him, not even after his death. Nor did he, it seems. This is another refutation of his illogical claim that self-analysis had freed him of all repression.)

Pro-science obscurantism denies intellectual value to non-science though this includes most of our cultural heritage. Endorsing it, Grünbaum is left with the question, is there anything valuable in Freud's writings? He finds one valuable statement there. It is a quotation from Henri Poincaré. This must be lip service. Grünbaum's oversight of Popper's respect for Freud, then, rests on the same inability of his: he dismissed or overlooked Popper's appreciation of Freud, then, as mere lip service.

Many people follow scientists in deciding scientific status. They may then follow Einstein here. He reported to Freud his having found support for his ideas. I have no detail: he made the report in a brief friendly letter that met with a rude reply that apparently stopped the exchange. In his reply Freud said, it is now clear that your earlier expressions of respect for me were lip service. For, how could you grant me respect without endorsement? He thus equated the admission of empirical support with endorsement and with respect. This is neither true nor appropriate. Many admired him without endorsing his ideas, and even while flatly rejecting

them. He dismissed these people (in his autobiography and in his correspondence) as not serious. Pro-science obscurantism has power even on people as enlightened and enlightening as he was.

The question that arises repeatedly is, do we endorse Freud's views? All answers to this question are unserious. To be serious about the matter we need first to compile a list of Freud's ideas, and then a separate discussion of the status of different sets of them. This demands discrimination and disinterest regardless of endorsement or rejection. The consensus should accept a version as canonic not on authority but on merit. This is not easy. Even central theses, such as the one on infant sexuality, come in divergent variants, and each has diverse interpretations. The task is too vast, and so decision has to be made as to what is important about Freud's ideas. There is a vicious circle here, of course, so we can perform the task in stages, beginning with some impressionist idea and getting to detail in small steps. This need not discourage us. Today's canonical versions of Newton's theory of gravity, after all, came centuries after it was introduced.

We have to start with the difference between theory and practice. The consensus identifies science as the body of empirical theories. Erroneously. Empirical theories in technology and applied mathematics are scarcely mentioned in science proper. Every new model of complex machinery, such as a powerful aircraft, rests on empirical ideas and approximations that are scarcely of any scientific value. *Ad hoc* corrections of superseded theories and diverse approximation methods all rest on rules of thumb. They are nonetheless wonderful means for finding new techniques. The application of applicable refuted theories is made easier by their refutations, as refutations delimit domains of applicability. Perhaps they also hint at useful *ad hoc* modifications. (These are easier to find in the light of new theoretical progress.) A modified theory is a new theory, and it invites new tests. To enter the market, a technique resting on it may have to pass standard empirical tests with prescribed degrees of success.

All this was said with no reference to scientific status. Why then is it important to declare a theory scientific? Pro-science obscurantism makes it imperative, as it declares only science important. Alternatively, scientific theory is deemed the right object of belief. This is an error: science decides the logic of the relations between ideas and information; it is not faith. Valued ideas should be criticized and stay valued even after they are refuted. The value of science rests on its ability to enlighten in special manners, including its ability to use empirical tests and to help develop a scientific *Weltanschauung*. On this Freud and Popper would heartily agree.

The standard question regarding psychopathology is not theoretical but practical: should psychotherapeutic techniques pass some tests? The application of a theory is seldom obligatory; the question is, should it be permissible prior to its passing of some prescribed tests? The law decides what kinds of applications require prior tests. Its aim is to eliminate harmful results as best possible. Standards

of obligatory test are not for philosophy to select. Ideals apart, received standards are defective and open to the criticism that may lead to their improvement. So, the question should be put on public agenda for discussion: which psychotherapeutic technique is possibly harmful and so should be tested prior to practice?

The law prescribed tests in the rare cases of possible risk to the public. Tests are much more often desirable. We better find out our failings, physical, mental, intellectual and practical. Hence, we should seek refutations for claims for the perfection of our souls, ideas, bodies and machines. We should put our repair techniques to thorough tests too. But we must be tolerant. To take an example, nature-therapy cannot succeed overnight, if at all. Honest practitioners always admit this to prospective patients. This therapy is hardly testable, and its specific techniques are seldom tested. Therefore, in Western countries the access to medications allowed to its practitioners is limited to those that may be purchased over the counter. In Canada, their access is wider, and so they have to pass certain exams first.

Tests are attempts to refute, to find empirical counter-evidence. The most important question for its result concerns its scientific status, since hardly any evidence is scientific. The only rule generally received within science is that only repeatable and repeated evidence is count. What evidence is repeatable is hard to characterize. Fortunately, it is a repeated fact that this is scarcely problematic.

Freud presents in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* some repeatable experiments: eat salty food before going to bed and you will dream that you drink. Most of his evidence is not repeatable. Though controversy on psychoanalysis will not die soon, at least it should rise to a reasonable level. Discussion of repeatable evidence may do this and invite further progress. The search for repeatability and the listing of all known repeatable evidence should help raise the venture to reasonable level. Hopefully.