The Death Knell of Psychoanalysis

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A dolf Grünbaum's examination of the philosophical foundations of psychoanalysis ranks with three other major investigations of Freud's work: Henri F. Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, Frank J. Sulloway's *Freud: Biologist of the Mind*, and G. Zwang's *La Statue de Freud*. It differs from the others by being less concerned with historical facts and developments, psychological considerations, or sociological ones, and by concentrating on the logic of Freud's arguments and their acceptability. It is a long overdue attempt to go beyond the simple-minded assertion by Karl Popper that psychoanalysis (like Marxism and astrology) was pseudoscientific because it did not make falsifiable assertions.

Grünbaum has little difficulty showing that Popper's statement is either meaningless or untrue and that, while the scientific status of psychoanalysis does not stand up to simple Baconian inductivist principles, it does survive very well the Popperian criterion!

Grünbaum first defends Freud from the hermeneutic onslaught, that is, from those who suggest that Freud's efforts to make psychoanalysis scientific were mistaken and that it would have been much better had he never attempted to align psychoanalysis with *Naturwissenschaft* but had instead placed it with the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Grünbaum has little difficulty in showing the inconsistency and, indeed, the absurdity of this view; he sides completely with Freud in suggesting that the effort had to be made of creating a genuine science of psychoanalysis and that those who now smirkingly talk about Freud's "scientism" have simply misunderstood what he was attempting to do.

Grünbaum then asks: "Did Freud vindicate his method of clinical investigation?" As he points out, Freud gave a cardinal epistemological defense of the psychoanalytic method of clinical investigation that seems to have hitherto gone entirely unnoticed. He has labeled this pivotal defense the Tally Argument, and it is this Tally Argument that Freud uses essentially to support his major contentions, including the denial of an irremediable epistemic contamination of clinical data by suggestion; the affirmation of a crucial difference, in regard to the *dynamics* of therapy, between psychoanalytic treatment and all rival therapies that actually operate entirely by suggestion; the assertion that the psychoanalytic method is able to validate its major causal claims by essentially retrospective methods; the contention that favorable therapeutic outcome can be warrantedly attributed to psychoanalytic intervention without statistical comparisons pertaining to the results from untreated control groups; and the avowal that, once the patient's motivations are no longer distorted or hidden by repressed conflicts, credence can rightly be given to his or her introspective self-observations.

Clearly, if these claims could be validated, they would indeed establish Freudian psychoanalysis once and for all as a truly scientific method, and as the only scientific method in psychology. Unfortunately, as Grünbaum makes clear in his merciless dissection of the Freudian argument, the Tally Argument fails in its entirety, and hence leaves Freud exposed to the arrows of his critics without even a fig leaf to cover his nakedness. The destruction of the Tally Argument shows Grünbaum the philosopher at his best, and the development of his critique is an excellent example of how philosophy can aid the scientist in coming to grips with the logic of a given argument underlying a scientific (or pseudoscientific) discipline.

One of the inevitable consequences of Grünbaum's argument is a point that has often been denied by followers of Freud, namely, that the success of psychoanalysis as a treatment is an absolutely vital sine qua non of any attempt to prove the validity of Freudian theories. When I first demonstrated in 1952 that there was no evidence to show that Freudian psychotherapy did better, as far as psychoneurotic patients were concerned, than other types of therapy—or no therapy at all—this conclusion was at first vehemently debated and, indeed, con-

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sidered outrageous. Nowadays it is regarded as commonplace, and the evidence is very strong, from more than five hundred studies, that with the exception of behavior therapy all types of psychotherapy or placebo treatment have pretty much the same kind of effect. (Behavior therapy seems to do significantly better!) With this realization came the claim that the disproof of the effectiveness of psychoanalysis as a method of treatment could not be generalized to discredit psychoanalysis as a general theory; it was claimed that, while the theory might be correct, treatment might nevertheless for various reasons be unsuccessful. The importance of Grünbaum’s argument is that it destroys the very basis of this way of looking at the relationship between therapy and theory. If the therapy does not work, Grünbaum points out, then the theory is fatally wrong. And if, indeed, alternative methods, such as behavior therapy, do work, then this is really the death knell for psychoanalysis as a theory. This argument has never been so strongly and powerfully presented before, and it follows logically from the disproof of Freud’s Tally Argument.

It is noteworthy that Grünbaum accepts much of what Freud says and claims, and he bases his destruction of Freudian theory entirely on a logical analysis of Freud’s own statements. He is not concerned, as others have been, with looking at independent facts and pointing to the strange inconsistency between Freudian claims and the facts of the case. Thus Freudians seem to assume (a) that Freud analyzed his patients’ dreams and (b) that his interpretation of these dreams strengthened his theory. In actual fact, Freud never analyzed his patients’ dreams at all, and such analyses as he made completely disproved his own theories.

It is well known that if dreams are not written down immediately after awakening they soon become forgotten and distorted to such an extent that they bear little relation, when later recalled, to the actual dream. Freud consciously and consistently allowed his patients to tell him their “dreams” days or even weeks after they occurred and without making any notes; it has been established that using this methodology makes it impossible to talk about interpretation of “dreams.” And, regarding the interpretation of these dreams, it is clear that they bear no relation to Freud’s own theory, namely, that they represent repressed infantile sexual material. In every case, the dreams quoted in his book on interpretation are found to relate to perfectly conscious material of a wishful kind that has no particular relation to any assumed infantile sexual repressions.

It is probable that the empirical-experimental look at Freudian concepts and methods is as destructive of his claims as are Grünbaum’s purely logical and textual criticisms, but Grünbaum has left this type of investigation to others and has rigidly restrained himself to look at the philosophical and logical foundations of Freud’s work, with only occasional glimpses beyond. This was probably a wise course to adopt; it makes for a very clear and concise target, and does not invite irrelevant comebacks of a nonphilosophical nature.

Grünbaum’s logical argument is detailed and exemplary in its clarity, and he makes a good case for the claim that many earlier writers, philosophers as well as psychoanalysts, have either misunderstood Freud or given too little weight to his arguments.

Grünbaum’s style is perhaps a little heavy, although not unduly so by philosophical standards. In attempting to nail down the argument properly, he has not hesitated to use the proverbial sledge-hammer; whether the target of this destruction deserves such a whole-hearted effort is of course a question readers must be left to answer for themselves. My own view would be that Freud is no longer taken seriously in academic circles and that the factual destruction of his work by experimentalists and clinicians is now pretty complete.

There are of course still philosophers and others who are tempted by the fairy tales Freud so invitingly told; but, in academic psychiatry and psychology, criticism has been mounting over the past twenty or thirty years, and interest is much more now in biological or behavioral methods of treatment and the theories supporting these than in the vagaries of psychoanalysis. Grünbaum may persuade philosophers that even from the purely logical point of view there is little to be said for this type of old-style mythology. Empiricists have been aware of this for a very long time indeed!