

Philosophy and psychotherapy: conflict or co-operation?

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Philosophy is the childhood of the intellect, a culture that tries to skip it will never grow up. (Nagel, 1986, p. 12)

None of these vocabularies or purposes will be more true to 'human nature' or to the 'intrinsic character of things' than any of the others, though the purposes served may get better. (Rorty, 1997, p. 18)

The principle of mythologization lies in our needs to find someone or something responsible for everything that happens. (Bouveresse, 1995, p. 34)

A world that was simple enough to be fully known would be too simple to contain conscious observers who might know it. (Barrow, 1999, p. 3)

... there is no point in asking whether a belief represents reality, either mental or physical reality, accurately. The right question to ask is, 'For what purpose would it be useful to hold that belief?' (Rorty, 1999, p. xxiv)

There is a theory which states that if anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened. (Adams, 1995)

Whatever you say it is, it isn't. Korzybski.

The way the world is includes appearances, and there is no single point of view from which they can all be fully grasped. Objectivity of whatever kind is not the test of reality. It is just one way of understanding reality. (Nagel, 1986, p. 26)

Over the years, Spinelli has become increasingly aware of the philosophical naivete of many therapists. (Fly-leaf Spinelli, 1994)

*The history of ideas is the gateway to self-knowledge. (Annan's Foreword to *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*—Isaiah Berlin, edited by Hardy & Hausheer, 1998, p. xiv)*

Abstract *The long history of philosophy, its continued virulence and increasing popularity suggests that it is a response to deep human needs for understanding and for the creation of meaning. The*

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permeation of scepticism within the philosophical tradition indicates a reluctance to merely accept any specific meaning. Philosophical thought has sometimes created meta-narratives and sometimes engaged in critique of meta-narratives. In particular, whether one sees philosophy and psychotherapy as conflictual or co-operative is likely to depend on one's attitude to the meaning milieu of psychotherapeutic theories. If the attitude is that any adopted theory is essentially true in its major aspects and that it has more rather than less universal applicability, then philosophy—in particular epistemology—is likely to be perceived as threatening and too much exposure experienced as an existential and theoretical shock. This paper attempts to put psychotherapeutic theorising under epistemological scrutiny in ways which challenge essentialist approaches to psychotherapeutic theory and which suggest that unexamined essentialist theorising is likely to be epistemologically untenable. I have met some resistance from psychotherapists to epistemological challenges and I suspect that a sense of defensiveness has resulted from a perception of threat. Philosophical investigations are not peripheral to psychotherapy but may be marginalised if perceived as threatening. My view is that psychotherapy and philosophy could have similar and co-operative aims and I take as a fascinating challenge Wittgenstein's notion of 'philosophy as therapy'. It is apposite to state that this paper started life as background reading to a module on the taught element of a doctorate of psychotherapy course. There was no doubt as to the impact on psychotherapists of the challenges arising from a study of epistemology.

The Aims of this paper are:

1. To justify the study of philosophy in psychotherapy and to explore some possible resistances to a philosophical approach to psychotherapeutic theory and practice.
2. To provide an example of the way in which a philosophical approach to language (labels attached to common-sense objects) can reveal complexity out of simplicity.
3. To explore issues relating to how we know and what we know (epistemology) and to suggest scepticism about some commonly accepted concepts in psychotherapy.
4. To establish a sense of moral and intellectual necessity for psychotherapy trainers to include a philosophical dimension to their training based on a critically reflexive involvement with their chosen theoretical perspective(s).
5. To challenge: over-commitment to a particular theory (ies) of psychotherapy; essentialist/universalistic assumptions about the application of psychotherapy concepts to all human beings.
6. To suggest a constructivist approach to foundational concepts such as self, identity, the mind.
7. To suggest a sceptical framework within which to develop a creative style of critical reflexivity in relation to theory, to self, to therapeutic practice and to psychotherapy training.
8. To propose that the concepts used to construct psychotherapeutic theories are mind myths, mental metaphors.
9. To establish the need for psychotherapy to engage with philosophy in order to critique psychotherapeutic theorising and practice and in order to avoid philosophical vacuity.

Justification and resistances

Philosophy is the childhood of the intellect, a culture that tries to skip it will never grow up.
(Nagel, 1986, p. 12)

I feel a need to explain and justify the reasons for suggesting the inclusion of philosophy in a course on psychotherapy training. The relative, or even complete, absence of philosophy in psychotherapeutic theorising and training suggests that issues of resistance also need to be

addressed. I shall do this first by describing what I see as some significant socio/cultural shifts which are the context in which contemporary psychotherapy takes place. I shall then discuss the nature of philosophy and explore the question:

What is the relevance of philosophy to training in counselling and psychotherapy?

The idea of including a study of philosophy as an integral part of psychotherapy training may seem odd, daunting and even otiose to those with no previous knowledge of the ways in which philosophers address issues. Its very oddity may require some sort of justification. My experiences of tutoring on postgraduate counselling and psychotherapy courses and involvement in university validation of psychotherapy courses certainly confirms my view that students, and even tutors, do not expect to engage with philosophical issues and concerns. I have also come to the view that tutors, in the development of such courses, are quite strongly resistant to the inclusion of philosophical approaches—or even any approaches which are likely to challenge the basic premises and practices of the psychotherapeutic theory which is the focus of their training. Their primary aim seems to be the teaching and learning of a body of knowledge and allying this to personal development and clinical skills which will enable the ‘trainees’ to become therapeutically effective. This could, with only a small degree of simplification, be termed a ‘training model’, an ‘apprenticeship’ model the basis of which is to pass on received knowledge from the ‘master’ to the ‘apprentice’. Some therapeutic cultures have attracted the criticism that they foster a ‘guru’ culture which is resistant to criticism (Ivey *et al.*, 1993, p. 328). I would contrast this with an ‘educational model’ in which various approaches to the topics and issues are not only encouraged but required, and in which a critical and sceptical stance is also essential.

My experiences with the above therefore confirms the quotation from the fly-leaf of Spinelli’s (1994) book:

Over the years, Spinelli has become increasingly aware of the philosophical naivete of many therapists.

Howard (2000) presents what impresses me as convincing arguments for the study of philosophy within the counselling and psychotherapy world. In his Introduction he states:

So what is philosophy? Here is a simple answer: It is what you end up doing if you keep asking questions about the basis of previous answers. (p. viii)

He goes on:

In my view it is time to take stock, and look at the ground and context within which all these schools (of counselling and psychotherapy) operate ... I want to examine the depth and strength of the cultural and philosophical roots of this activity. (p. ix)

In order to ‘take stock’ Howard explores the philosophical traditions of the West from Pythagoras (580–500 BCE) to Sartre (1905–1980 CE).

Further confirmation of the absence of psychotherapeutic engagement with philosophy is evidenced from many of the standard (traditional) texts which are used in mono-theoretically based counselling and psychotherapy training programmes. There is a marked absence of philosophical debate as to the epistemological foundations of these theories. In other words there is absence of deep engagement with issues relating to how the theoretical and knowledge base of the theory was constructed. It rather seems as if people’s altruistic desire to help others, allied to the desire to propagate their theory, overcomes the requirement for a deeply reflective and sceptical approach to the basis of the theory which is chosen as the therapeutic medium. From my point of view: altruism is not enough. Counsellors and

psychotherapists are, of course, not alone in the need to adopt dominant models of helping without exploring the underpinning epistemological basis of confidence in the evidence base and researched practicalities of the effectiveness of the specific theory *per se*. In passing I would also note the frequent lack of engagement by psychotherapy with discipline-related subjects such as sociology, neurobiology, cultural studies, feminist studies, evolutionary psychology and the political dimensions of the psychotherapeutic project.

In essence, and in the context of the title of this paper, engagement should focus on questions such as: What sorts of knowledge are contained in the vast range of psychotherapeutic theories? In other words, what is the epistemological basis of these theories? What is the level of confidence that the knowledge base of these theories arises from independently researched evidence? Should psychotherapy seek to attain scientific status with all that is involved in terms of formulation of hypotheses, research, development of a paradigm, peer and independent review? On the other hand, is *belief*, even sincere belief, in a theory a sufficient basis for its being practised on the public? Should serious attempts be made to reduce the 480 or so 'theories' (see Karasu's research in 1986, quoted in Dryden & Norcross, 1990, p. 4) to a few, or even one, carefully evidenced theory? Conversely, should the plethora of theories be taken to indicate that psychotherapy is not and should not aspire to scientific status but instead be seen as a series of discourses in which individuals' narratives can be (potentially) located, none of which attempts to be scientific, but each of which is believed to be relevant to the distressed and existentially confused position of those who seek therapeutic help? Are iconic gurus a suitable basis for believing in theories?

I propose that these are neither trivial nor avoidable questions and issues. I also propose that such questions should be integral to psychotherapy training and not perceived as irritating side issues which detract from the main aim of inculcating a particular theory.

That constitutes a brief justification for addressing philosophical issues.

At the commencement of this paper I also want to spend some time exploring the possible reasons for *resistance* to philosophical approaches to psychotherapy and to the scepticism which will inevitably ensue from engagement with a philosophical approach to psychotherapy. Scepticism is inherent when epistemological issues are tackled. I also wish to address some reasons for what Spinelli (1994) calls: the philosophical naivete of psychotherapists.

In my view some possible reasons for resistance to an engagement by psychotherapy with philosophy are:

1. The perception of philosophy as distant from real life concerns and normal experiences could be a source of resistance to studying philosophy on psychotherapy courses.

I note, however, the continued popularity of Gaarder's (1995) *Sophie's World* and the publication of Williams' *Pooh and the Philosophers* (1995). This book has already gone into a number of reprints. Even Harry Potter is now in search of the Philosopher's Stone! [For non-English speaking readers not familiar with them, the 'Harry Potter' books are best-selling children's fantasy adventure stories.] The recent TV series by Alan de Botton and book (2000) on *The Consolations of Philosophy* also indicates its contemporary currency. I will pre-empt an idea which I shall mention later, namely the notion that philosophy is therapeutic, hence de Botton's notion of 'consolations'. The Icon Series of Philosophy for Beginners testifies to the increasing interest in philosophy. I think that there may be reasons for this contemporary interest which I will not explore at this time, only to mention that people may be seeking new ways of thinking about extremely complex moral and existential issues given that traditional religious frameworks have, for many, evaporated in a secular world which lacks any overarching metaphysic or meta-narrative. There may be a fantasy that philosophy will provide answers; more importantly and

- more realistically philosophy provides ways of thinking about problems which clarify questions and issues if not providing answers. (See Grayling, 2001.)
2. The ways in which traditional psychotherapeutic theories have been presented as rather self-contained bodies of knowledge within their respective training courses in their somewhat enclosed, often private, institutions is very different from mainstream psychological and neurobiological theorising and research, some of the results of which are debated in a public arena and are the subject of philosophical debate. This relative theoretical 'enclosedness' during initial psychotherapy training may be a source of psychotherapists' resistance to open engagement with philosophical and methodological issues both during the initial training and subsequently. My recent work with students on a doctoral programme in psychotherapy indicates that their previous postgraduate training did not expose them to any philosophical questioning in relation to the epistemological problems of theory construction. It is not an exaggeration to say that epistemological scrutiny came as a quite profound shock leading, for some, to a sense of theoretical and existential nihilism.
 3. Psychological and neurobiological theorising and research have generally sought to emulate an objectivist scientific approach which has tended to eschew the vagueness and unquantifiability of subjectivity, consciousness and phenomenology. Perhaps some psychotherapeutic theorising has on the other hand, and rather defensively, opted for the subjective side of this 'divide' but with longing glances at a scientific approach. However, this subject/object or first person/third person divide is being addressed with increasing rigour and the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* and the *International Journal of Psychotherapy* are manifestations of a growing empirical/phenomenological dialogue. Recent volumes of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* are devoted to research on 'The Self' (Vol. 6, No. 4, April 1999 and Vol. 8, Nos. 5–7, 2001). Subjectivity is not an hermetically sealed 'no go' area. It is increasingly being scrutinised, and in my view psychotherapeutic research and training should be at the leading edge of this critical scrutiny.
 4. There is a widespread tendency to elevate scientific methodology into an icon of theoretical and practical clarity, certainty and confidence. I suspect that there has been a tendency to wish for such a confident base for psychotherapeutic theory and practice, which has been called 'physics envy', but there has not been the necessary testing of carefully articulated hypotheses by equally rigorous research projects. I also suspect that in some respects the charismatic popularity—and narcissistic need?—of some psychotherapeutic theoretical originators and proponents, resonating with deeply held cultural value systems and allied to a need to replace outdated religious dogma as a guide for effective living, have all conspired to create a climate of 'wanting to believe'. Psychotherapists are not immune from the power of unconscious processes! A sense of wanting to be a believer and to belong to a body of 'true believers' is, for me, strongly evidenced in some psychotherapeutic training. The sheer fragmentation of theories and approaches seems to replicate the schismatic and cultic tendencies in religions. Perhaps, like some religious believers, psychotherapists are defensive about the incursions of scientific and philosophical scepticism into their belief worlds whilst at the same time, and paradoxically, aspiring to the status of being 'scientific'.
 5. The difficulty in accessing philosophical terms and the apparent stupidity of questioning the very existence of the familiar and 'obvious' may be a source of resistance. I shall deal with some of these terms and the apparent idiocy of 'virtual tables' later. Indeed the very existence of mind itself has been called into philosophical question, and it is perhaps understandable that psychotherapists dismiss philosophical scepticism which may be perceived as having the potential to undermine their *raison d'être*. (O'Hear's (1998) edited book deals with many issues which are directly relevant to anyone intending to develop a

contemporary theory of mind. Cornwell's (1998) edited book deals with current thinking in relation to artificial intelligence and minds.)

6. There is a further possible cause for resistance which is arising in other areas of study—the increasing tendency to remove exclusive and excluding barriers between subject areas. Interdisciplinary studies are now accepted components of some university curricula allied to modularisation of programmes of study. For purists the move to interdisciplinarity dilutes the focus of their work. For others it is a cutting edge concept which challenges the reductionist and exclusionary insularity of the arbitrary epistemological boundaries of traditional subjects/disciplines and which attempts to take a more interconnected approach to issues relating to the human knowledge condition. A consequence of interdisciplinarity is that one needs to broaden one's knowledge base with all the uncertainties of losing confidence in a theoretical framework into which one was professionally and academically socialised. This more holistic, interdisciplinary move is seen in medicine, psychology, consciousness studies and in the production of popular science books which explicitly attempt to bring together in accessible ways a multi-perspectival approach. I have a sense that some psychotherapy training is reluctant to engage in reciprocal dialogue in a multi-disciplinary mode. Multi-disciplinarity is a confusing arena in which to engage particularly if philosophy is included. On this complex issue Samuels (2001) has this to say:

As far as psychotherapy reductionism is concerned, a shift is taking place in favour of multidisciplinary work. There are attempts in many disciplines to find linkages with psychotherapy and its underlying psychologies; for example in religious studies, sociology, art history and theory, even such fields as law and theoretical physics. These disciplines are linking up, not only with psychotherapy but also with each other, in ways that the conventional Western academy could not have imagined even in the mid-1970s. (p. 11) Many attempts to link psychotherapy and social issues have tended to present everything as exclusively psychological, thereby keeping the therapist in control and above the fray ... It is crucial not to confuse or conflate the processes that go on within an individual with what happens on the much more complex level of society. (p. 75)

Watson (2000) provides a fascinating exploration of people and interdisciplinary ideas which have shaped the modern mind. Wollheim (1999), a philosopher, treads on psychotherapeutic ground in his book: *On the Emotions*.

In this climate of multi-disciplinary communication based on leading edge research and thought the public increasingly expect to have more understanding of that which they are being 'told'. 'Trust me, I'm ...' is increasingly an invitation to suspicion and ridicule. In this climate psychotherapeutic theories are being held to account. A number of texts are supportive of this move to psychotherapeutic accountability such as: Macmillan (1997) *Freud Evaluated*; Spinelli (1994) *Demystifying Psychotherapy* and (2001) *The Mirror and the Hammer: Challenges to Therapeutic Orthodoxy*; Pilgrim (1997) *Psychotherapy and Society*; Smail (1998) *How to Survive Without Psychotherapy*; Wolpert (1999) *Malignant Sadness: The Anatomy of Depression*. There is a diminishing hiding place for psychotherapeutic dogma, mystification, un-evidence based practice and the abuse of hegemonic theoretical power over people in emotional or existential distress—or even in training programmes. Psychotherapy—in theory, in training and in practice—should not be allowed to continue in a mono-disciplinary vacuum and in an epistemology-free zone.

7. A related cultural tendency which seems to me to be in some respects complementing the move towards interdisciplinary studies on the one hand and public accountability on the other is the breakdown of traditional sources of personal, social and existential meaning. An overarching term for this is post-modernism. Post-modernism criticises the Modernist/

Enlightenment assumption that there is a truth waiting to be discovered by dint of better theorising and more rigorous experiment. (See Porter's book (2000): *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*.)

I do not intend to go into too much detail about this fiercely debated and contested concept of post-modernism. A useful introduction is provided in Appignanesi and Garratt *Postmodernism for Beginners* (1995). Bertens (1995) provides a deeper discussion of post-modernism.

Anxiety about the enormity and complexity of these issues may result in psychotherapy seeking to remain in a cul-de-sac of apparent comfort and security avoiding issues of post-modernism. (See my critique (2000) of Roberts (1999).)

8. Feminist approaches to the construction of knowledge, and of course Foucault, have provided serious challenges to the idea that knowledge is somehow 'neutral' and value free. My sense is that some psychotherapeutic theorising has, until influenced by feminist critiques and perspectives, operated on the assumption that such theorising is 'knowledge neutral' and therefore generally applicable to women and men in a gender-free way. I think that there have also been assumptions that psychotherapeutic theories have been culture free and work by Kareem and Littlewood (1992) and Pedersen (1997) has been challenging this assumption. To take feminist critiques seriously requires a radical review of psychotherapeutic theories and perhaps such a radical review has been deeply resisted. It is an urgent necessity. (See Worell & Remer, 1996.)
9. A final source of resistance to philosophical study in the psychotherapy project may, of course, be simply down to ignorance. Psychotherapy training has not traditionally included philosophical study, and that absence may tend to be merely perpetuated.

A wider perspective

None of these vocabularies or purposes will be more true to 'human nature' or to the 'intrinsic character of things' than any of the others, though the purposes served may get better. (Rorty, 1997, p. 18)

A belief which has driven Western thought in general and scientific endeavours in particular is the notion that we are capable of understanding reality in a way which transcends uncertainty and arrives at a truth position. If only we can devise better technology, if only we can sharpen up our theorising, if only we can construct the experimental situation carefully enough we can find out what is there and capture it if only we could find the right words, symbols or formulae. This, in jargon terms, is the Enlightenment or Modernist project. The pursuit, and discovery, of truth.

Christian and other beliefs, traditions and texts have to some extent supported this 'truth seeking' by belief in a rational God whose created works are capable of being discovered by the rational exercise of divinely provided rational minds. In other words, Western Modernism is embedded in a culture of truth seeking—religiously and scientifically.

The psychological origins of this search for truth are described by Varela *et al.* (1993) in the following way:

as one becomes mindful of one's own experience, one realizes the power of the urge to grasp after foundations—to grasp the sense of foundation of a real, separate self, the sense of foundation of a real, separate world, and the sense of foundation of an actual relation between self and the world. (p. 225)

The deep assumption in this 'urge' is that a thinking, Cartesian self exists which is independent, autonomous and able to capture the foundations of both its self and of the

world in which the self exists. This Modernist project has been subjected to increasing scepticism which has perhaps led in some respects to vertiginous views that there is no such thing as reality—only our perceptions of it. Merleau-Ponty (1962) referred to ‘contingent objectivity’—that is our perception of objectivity is contingent upon the mental, bodily and inter-personal processes which enable us to construct a sense of objectivity. There is no unmediated objectivity. There is no ultimate language with which to explain reality.

Pietersma (2000) deals with phenomenological approaches to knowing in his extremely lucid and cogent book: *Phenomenological Epistemology*. He analyses ways in which the ‘rational mind’ has frequently been invisible in the supposedly objective construction of the perception of the object. His approach could be seen as a challenge to the hidden *cogito* of Descartes’ stance. It is not so much that I know because I think, it is that I know because I am an agent in the world, and without this active, mediating, agency I cannot know. The world is both there and is constructed by my bodily involvement with that world which I construct.

Nietzsche (Kaufmann & Hollingdale, 1968 translated and quoted in Dancy & Sosa, 1993) stated:

Facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations.

If it is the case that there are no unmediated facts in relation to the external world, then this has inevitable and significant implications for the ways in which we formulate concepts which relate to the internal, subjective, world. We are in the area of meanings, concepts, myths, metaphors and beliefs. In her discussion on the impact of Darwinian and neo-Darwinian theorising and research on our concepts of human nature, Radcliffe Richards says:

None of these positions should be regarded as a body of doctrine, only as a belief about how relevant Darwinism is to our understanding of ourselves. (2000, p. 56, emphasis in original)

Post-modernism in its multi-facetedness is certainly having an impact on Western thinking, whether or not people are aware either of its origins or its premises. Pluralism is one manifestation, multi-culturalism another. Terms like: deconstruction, incredulity towards meta-narratives, post-structuralism are the signs of post-modernism. Authors such as Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Rorty are all digging the grave of the certainties of Modernism.

Rorty (1998) calls himself a ‘contingent ironist’ by which he means that he is aware that what he believes to be important in his philosophical thinking and in his life choices are ultimately choices and not based on truths which he has discovered.

Rorty’s general approach is discussed in Watson (2000, pp. 669ff.). In this chapter Watson emphasises Rorty’s view that whereas some philosophers (example logical positivists) have sought to emulate the kind of knowledge and certainty which is characteristic of some forms of scientific knowledge, Rorty himself eschews this as a snare and a delusion.

Philosophy should be ‘edifying’ in the following sense: ‘The attempt to edify (ourselves) ... may ... consist ... in the “poetic” activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions ... For edifying discourse is supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.’ (Rorty, 1980, p. 363)

It is in this sense that Rorty synthesises—for example—Freud, Sartre, and Wittgenstein. Freud (like Marx) realised that people could change when their self-consciousness changed, a change that could be brought about by words; this concept of a changing self was central to Sartre’s existential notion of ‘becoming’ and to Lacan’s idea of ‘success’ in treatment;

and to Wittgenstein's focus on the central aspect of language, and that metaphysics is a 'disease' of language, underpins Rorty's reevaluation of what philosophy is.

In this context I propose that psychotherapy too should disassociate itself from its tendency to identify with scientific, systematic forms of knowledge and embrace the poetic, the literary, the narrational—the 'edifying' approach to self-awareness and self-change. (These themes are explored by Phillips (2000) *Promises, Promises* and Parker (1999).) To put this more bluntly: either psychotherapy stands or falls by thoroughly researched scientific criteria (and there is no sign that individual theories are thus supported), or psychotherapy takes itself seriously as providing forms of discourse, literary forms, opportunities for people to create their own creative narratives untrammelled by the clutter of archaic or contemporary mono-theories which are, after all, only systems of belief—myths of the mind, mental metaphors (Spinelli, 2001). The benefit of myths and metaphors is that they do not commit one irrevocably to any particular interpretation. They do not restrict options. They are not fixed. Well, they are not fixed unless they are believed to be immutable. But then the whole point of myths and metaphors is their unprovability and their mutability. They may be believable but not provable. To describe psychotherapeutic theories as myths and metaphors is not to denigrate them but to liberate them from the defensiveness of pseudo-essentialism. They do not have to be defended as 'truth positions' against all-comers, they are either useful in enabling some people within some cultures to make some sense of their distresses and dilemmas—or they need to be changed to fit the case. To try to fit all people into one theory is to perpetrate a form of existential oppression—a Procrustean problem.

I think the most useful general way of formulating what psychoanalysis is, is simply to say that it is an art of redescription ... in what sense is a redescription a translation? ... when a patient feels translated by the analyst they don't feel transported, moved over to a better place, they feel radically misunderstood in a peculiarly disabling way. It is my impression that when my patients say that I have translated what they have been saying, they feel I have done them a kind of violence. (Phillips, 2000, p. 131)

In Rorty's sense a *translation* is into a *system*, whereas *redescription* is (maybe) *edifying*.

There are always other possible ways of thinking, constructing, believing, being and acting and the 'other ways' do not necessarily include or imply the theory believed in by the psychotherapist. You might ponder the Necker cube below (Figure 1) p. 12.

Another aspect of this breakdown of traditional sources of personal, social and existential meaning is the realisation that other religious faith traditions have interesting and useful things to say about the possibilities for the human condition. The book *Space in Mind: East-West Psychology and Contemporary Buddhism* by Crook and Fontana (1990) proposes some implications for broadening the sources of faith positions in order to create more space for thinking about human experience and possible meanings. Varela *et al.* (1993) entitle their book: *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* and they too draw on a wider than usual range of possible frameworks for their exploration of ways in which the brain/mind enactment can be construed. They make the following point:

The overall concern of an enactive approach to perception is not to determine how some perceiver-independent world is to be recovered; it is, rather, to determine the common principles or lawful linkages between sensory and motor systems that explain how action can be perceptually guided in a perceiver-dependent world. (p. 173)

Their notion of 'perceiver dependent' puts the emphasis on the possibilities for variety rather than the necessity for, or feasibility of, uniformity. Feminist approaches to knowledge construction have reintroduced and problematised the notion of the 'subject' which tends to

become what Longino (in Lederman & Barstch, 2001, p. 218) calls: *'the theory of the unconditioned subject'*. In other words she is challenging the presumed invisibility and detached accuracy of the mind and of the subject—the pseudo neutrality of the subject. She is challenging the, inadequate, notion that the subject is pure observer who views reality as if from nowhere. There is never a view from nowhere, there is always a view from somewhere, and the somewhere is the complex matrix of experiences and meanings which constitute the individual subject, located in the cultural milieu which is its psycho-social and biological ground and being. Longino's chapter on: 'Subjects, Power, and Knowledge' is a stimulating alternative to the Cartesian individualistic mind set which has so dominated Western assumptions about the ways in which the knower knows.

Olson (2000) puts the matter as follows:

In contrast to the static world envisioned by Kant and Descartes, postmodernists emphasise becoming, contingency, and chance ... Within the world of flux, there are no universal and timeless truths to be discovered because everything is relative and indeterminate, which suggests that our knowledge is always incomplete, fragmented, and historically and culturally conditioned. Therefore, there can be no foundation of philosophy or any theory, and it is wise to be suspicious of any universal claims to validity made by reason. (p. 16)

One is reminded of Lyotard's famous injunction to incredulity:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives. (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv)

By contrast, Humphrey's book: *A History of the Mind* (1992) is still a very Western/Modernist approach to mind matters—the mind seeking the truth about the mind. None the less interesting for that, founded as it is in a Darwinian perspective which is driving much of Western thinking and research into both mind and body within evolutionary psychology. A powerful meta-narrative.

Add to religious faith-frameworks what might be called 'ecology faiths', identity politics and alternative lifestyles and it becomes clear why pluralism is the term used to label our contemporary condition. Indeed we do live in a multi-cultural society, and not only in terms of a plethora of defined religious belief positions, but also in terms of great shifts in the presuppositions of our thinking and of an exponentially increasing number of belief choices available to us. There may have been other times when changes were also causing existential problems, and one recalls Heraclitus' (5th century BCE) famous dictum: *'You never step in the same river twice.'* It is sometimes difficult these days to know where the river is—or even what a river is!

It is possible to see two rather oppositional tendencies at work here.

On the one hand, evidence that some people want to believe in the new and the fashionable—although what appears to be new and fashionable may sometimes be a resurrection of forgotten and rather old. Evidence alternative medicines and a multiplicity of personal development fads and fashions and note that Karasu (1986) (quoted in Dryden & Norcross, 1990, p. 4) discovered over 400 different forms of counselling and therapy. This supermarket range of choices seems to evidence a consumerist approach to self and relationships which extends consumer choice from shops into existential and therapeutic options. Purchasable at a cost. Less cynically, people seem to be needing to exercise control over complexity by exercising choice—choice of fashion, therapy, medication, image, belief system. The commodification of being. (See Crook *et al.* (1992): *Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society.*) This notion of the 'commodification of being' is not intended as a trite comment—it seems to me to be an important statement about the ways in which self and identity are being

constructed and by which agency (being-in-the-world) is carried out in our Western society. A far cry from the sense of self as needing to be obedient to the laws and demands of God so prevalent in the mediaeval church and still present in orthodox and fundamentalist churches today.

Thus, for me, self and identity are not immutable entities but socially, culturally and linguistically constructed and therefore capable of being deconstructed in a multitude of ways. Sense of self, identity and agency change over time and in different cultural milieux. (See Taylor (1992) and Yardley and Honess (1987).) Harré's comment in the latter book is:

There is no 'entity' at the centre of our experience of ourselves. But there are standard ways in which we express comments upon our own mentation. (p. 41)

Gallagher and Marcel have this to say (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6(4), April 1999):

Because reflexive consciousness is thought to have a close connection with selfhood such considerations lead again to scepticism about the concept of a single subject of consciousness. If reflexive conscious states can be dissociated, then there is little reason to assume a unified self, or even a single self in one body or brain. (p. 16)

The variations in these 'standard ways' and scepticism about the unitary nature of self suggest that we have options about our construction of our sense of self.

On the other hand, this very choice-led culture, this relatively autonomous and insecure self, throws into relief problems about the bases or criteria for choice. What criteria are there to help us in our choice? How do I know (choose) what to believe? What kind of evidence is relevant to my belief choice? What sources of information and guidance are available? What are the options and resources for my choices as to what/who I want to be? In other, philosophical, words: how do I decide on my epistemological criteria for choice and how does my epistemology influence my choice of beliefs?

Increasing choice results in increasing confusion. This may explain the search on the Internet for (apparent) instant intimacy and the considerable interest in 'people books'—best-sellers which affirm that others involved in the same search have made the same choice. A new form of virtual normativity.

In this context of multiplicity and complexity I propose that any pressure to require psychotherapy trainees, and therefore their clients, to adopt a mono-theoretical approach to psychotherapy is forcing them into the adoption of another person's voice in which to attempt to express their own. It is an attempt to 'translate' them into a theory devised by another. Mono-theoretical psychotherapy is a foreclosure of options for understanding human experience.

To adopt a mono-theoretical psychotherapeutic stance is to be dominated by someone else's vocabulary. It is to accede to someone else's voice and choice. Rigid adherence to a mono-theoretical position is a nostalgic throwback to a time, still with us, when there was a fantasy that a single 'truth' could encapsulate human reality.

Spinelli's latest book (2001) demonstrates his own scepticism from the 'inside' as it were.

Unwittingly philosophical

The principle of mythologization lies in our needs to find someone or something responsible for everything that happens. (Bouveresse, 1995, p. 34)

It seems clear to me that philosophical problems and philosophical methods are, sometimes unwittingly, being addressed, although not perhaps by such a name. Once human beings developed the ability to use language reflexively, they became capable of asking unlimited

questions—some of which eventually turned out to have answers (or high levels of probability) for which there was evidence—thus science developed. Some of the questions remained mysterious and required (or were given) mythical answers based on beliefs—thus religions developed. We seem to have a propensity for finding causes, for allocating responsibility and even blame. This form of dichotomy is still very much alive in spite of attempts to provide physicalist unity and is interestingly addressed by Gould (1999). Wilson (1998), the father of socio-biology, stated his belief/myth (masquerading as an achievable project):

When we have unified enough certain knowledge, we shall understand who we are and why we are here. (p. 5)

This is a version of metaphysical realism which Wilson would not perhaps recognise.

Gulick (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8(9–10), p. 1, 2001) introduces the volume on ‘Emergence’ with the following, rather more qualified, statement:

Though most contemporary philosophers and scientists accept a physicalist view of mind, the recent surge of interest in the problem of consciousness has put the mind/body problem back in play. The physicalists’ lack of success in dispelling the air of residual mystery that surrounds the question of how consciousness might be physically explained has led to a proliferation of options. Some offer alternative formulations of physicalism, but others forgo physicalism in favour of views that are more dualistic or that bring in mentalistic features at the ground-floor level of reality as in pan-proto-psychism ... How the current psycho-physical crisis will be resolved as yet remains unclear; revolutions may or may not be needed.

Wilson’s assertion seems beyond question. In contrast Gulick’s position invites questions.

The fact that we can pose questions seems to presuppose that they are capable of being answered—indeed ought to be answered. Not so. As Melott phrases it: *A great deal of time we are deluded into thinking questions are meaningful because they can be framed in our native language.* (In Ashman & Baringer, 2001, p. 30.) Philosophy could be described as ways of posing potentially important, frequently unanswerable but existentially relevant questions. They are quest-ions indicating quest rather than arrival. It is important to note that questions are typically framed from within meta-narratives and the deep assumptions of these meta-narratives are used to validate both questions and answers.

When questions are framed in a more careful way they take on a more philosophical feel. For example:

How do I, how could I, know that what I know is valid knowledge?

What is it reasonable (possible) to believe even though we may not have much evidence on which to base our belief?

Does belief need (preferably) to be based on reason?

If belief is not based on reason what might be other criteria for believing?

What is ‘reason’ and is it subject to (rational?) critical scrutiny or does it give the appearance of being self-authenticating?

What is ‘the’ place of feelings in relation to beliefs?

How do we decide what counts in the category of ‘knowledge’ and what to retain in the category of (useful) ‘belief’?

What counts as convincing evidence which enables (seems to require) a transition from belief to knowledge?

Is an act of faith the only basis for what we choose to believe?

Why might we change what we know and what we believe?

If we are to criticise our own and others' knowledge and beliefs what are the bases for our criticisms?

Do you believe that there is a fundamental truth (One Real Truth) to be pursued and if so, what are the methods which you choose to pursue this truth? How would you know when you had found this truth?

How would you feel/respond if others decided to criticise your truth?

How do you respond to others who adopt a different 'truth'?

What are the relationships between your chosen psychotherapeutic theory and notions of: knowledge, truth, belief? (In other words we are back to epistemological issues related to how we know what we think that we know.)

Do you think that it is the case that whatever human knowledge exists only exists as a result of the human mind's ability to create and develop ever complex symbol systems?

Do you think that our language not only helps us to understand and make meanings in relation to our world and ourselves, but also enables us to pose unanswerable questions?

Do your theories, in particular in the context of this paper your psychotherapeutic theories, represent anything more than partial constructions of what you think may be the case in relation to the human mind?

Are psychotherapeutic theories more like 'mind myths' or 'mental metaphors' than accurate or truthful statements?

If your chosen psychotherapeutic theories seem to work, does it matter whether or not they are 'true'?

Who says that they 'seem to work'?

Why might they 'work' even if they are (only) mind myths or mental metaphors?

To summarise all these questions: *is our epistemology determined by our language which in turn is framed within a hegemonic meta-narrative?*

Simply to pose these questions in a rather formal way reflects two tendencies:

1. *To indicate that we are prone to think philosophically without realising it.*
2. *To indicate that when we begin to clarify and articulate these kinds of philosophical questions we have a tendency to become confused.*

I also suggest that their formulation indicates the importance of posing carefully constructed questions prior to accepting other people's ready made answers, and in this context the acceptance of mono-theoretical psychotherapeutic approaches.

Perhaps the philosophical naivete referred to in Spinelli's (1994) book is founded on an unconscious resistance to posing and exploring such puzzling and confusing questions, the responses to which may undermine our knowledge/confidence base. Pietersma (2000) pursues these kinds of questions with particular attention to Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

It is the case that most counselling/psychotherapy training courses still do not include

modules or other formally assessed study sections on philosophy and its relationship to the basic concepts in the theories which are the foci of the psychotherapy training. This may be due, not only to lack of knowledge about formal ways in which philosophy might be used to explore basic concepts, but may also represent an anxiety about maintaining a degree of false security in the maintenance of the theoretical knowledge base. In my view such absence is to be deplored and could even be construed as immoral and should not be perpetuated. Decisions about curriculum content have an ethical dimension.

There are, I believe, disturbing tendencies to dogmatic over-confidence and, in extreme cases, of psychotherapeutic arrogance—a form of psycho-fundamentalism. Dogma and arrogance may be linked to a general resistance to critical reflection on both the culturally limited validity of the psychotherapy project *per se* and on the origin and basis of the theory specific theoretical tenets and assumptions. Resistance to serious engagement with other theories and with philosophy could be a form of theoretical xenophobia.

(Philosophy) challenges, and makes people realize that what they take for granted is not necessarily true. Yet this can also be a very constructive exercise. It is much better to have beliefs which can be rationally defended. It is important to know why you and others hold them. Otherwise, when you are eventually challenged, your trust in your beliefs can be shaken merely because you have not got the means to defend yourself. (Trigg, 2002, p. 2)

Philosophy—a therapy for dogma

A world that was simple enough to be fully known would be too simple to contain conscious observers who might know it. (Barrow, 1999, p. 3)

At this juncture I therefore pose the following fairly precise questions:

1. *How do you know that the basic conceptual framework of your chosen psychotherapeutic theory has epistemological and psychological validity?*
2. *Why do you consider that, on balance, other psychotherapeutic theories are less valid—i.e. not valid enough for you to adopt?*
3. *What forms of criticism would you level at psychotherapeutic theories with which you (strongly) disagree?*
4. *To what extent might these criticisms of other theories be directed by yourself and/or others at your own chosen theory?*
5. *What confidence do you have that your theory is not merely a limited, Western, culturally specific artefact—a Western mind myth? What is the basis of this confidence?*
6. *In what respects might your theory be part of the problem and not part of the solution?, i.e. the problem of understanding the human brain/mind.*
7. *In slightly more glib terms: if your theory is the answer, what were the carefully phrased and researchable questions? Or was your theory merely adopted as a ready made answer?*

Careful, sustained and deep contemplation of these questions is likely to become an antidote to dogma.

So far I have tried to avoid technical philosophical terms only using two such terms: epistemology and meta-narrative. I have deliberately tried to use non-jargon language to indicate that jargon is not necessary in order to explore some profound issues. Philosophical analysis, especially that which focuses on epistemology, depends on trying to be clear about questions/issues and tries to explore the kinds of foundations on which we may begin to establish knowledge frameworks. However, these ‘foundations’ are anything but secure.

We come to see that the pictures and models that initially seem to us so straightforward and

explanatory actually make no connection with the phenomena they are designed to illuminate. Thus we come to see that there is nothing in our actual practice of using language that is explained by the image of our manipulating a system of rules; that the idea that the meaning of a word consists in its standing for an object is a vast oversimplification which is entirely lacking in explanatory power ...

Thus McGinn (1997, p. 25) discussing Wittgenstein's view of philosophy as therapy. Wittgenstein seems to have meant that we have 'pathological' ways in which we use language because we believe our language re-presents the real world. The 'therapy' which he proposes results from another way of seeing language—seeing language as a phenomenon itself which is therefore incapable of transcending itself, epiphenominally, to reach the certain reality of those things which it merely symbolises. To see language as non-representational is to be relieved of the domination of fixed ways of constructing the world. The 'therapy' is the emancipation from metaphysical domination, from essentialist thinking and from pseudo-certainty. Wittgenstein's (1953) philosophical thought, in his *Philosophical Investigations* mode, opened up a variety of ways in which the world can be verbalised. His way of seeing language frees us from domination by the fantasy that things are fixed in language. There is a form of tyranny in assuming that words correspond to reality. The tyranny is the fixity of thinking and of the mindset which confines our options as to how we 'must' view the world as if we had achieved a final language. This assumed word/reality correspondence is even more tyrannical when applied to mental processes. Thus psychotherapeutic theoretical essentialism becomes oppressive because it assumes that some people's words are true for all people. Psychotherapeutic theorising is very prone to essentialist thinking and therefore to tyrannising those on whom this essentialist thinking is practised.

Watson (2000, p. 670) has much to say about current philosophers' critiques of essentialist thinking. He quotes Rorty (1980, pp. 367–368)

On the periphery of the history of modern philosophy, one finds figures who, without forming a 'tradition', resemble each other in their distrust of the notion that man's essence is to be a knower of essences. Goethe, Kierkegaard, Santayana, William James, Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, the later Heidegger, are figures of this sort. They are often accused of relativism or cynicism. They are often dubious about progress, and especially about the latest claim that such-and-such a discipline has at last made the nature of human knowledge so clear that reason will now spread throughout the rest of human activity.... These writers have kept alive the suggestion that, even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day. They have kept alive the historicist sense that this century's 'superstition' was last century's triumph of reason, as well as the relativistic sense that the latest vocabulary, borrowed from the latest scientific achievement, may not express privileged representation of essences, but be just another of the potential vocabularies in which the world can be described ... the mainstream philosophers are the philosophers I shall call 'systematic', and the peripheral ones are those I shall call 'edifying'. These peripheral, pragmatic philosophers are skeptical primarily about systematic philosophy, about the whole project of universal commensuration. In our time, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger are the great edifying, peripheral thinkers. (emphasis in original)

I can well appreciate that those psychotherapists who wish to ally themselves with a scientific model in order to attempt to achieve certainty, status and security will feel very unsettled by this kind of philosophical thinking. Anyone who believes in an essential truth either to be sought for or to have been discovered will be uneasy by Rorty's way of thinking. There is unlikely to be co-operation between psychotherapy and philosophy if that unease remains to

unsettle—even deconstruct—the psychotherapeutic project. However, if psychotherapy is to be ‘edifying’ rather than ‘systematic’ in Rorty’s terms, then the transition from ‘systematic’ to ‘edifying’ needs to be made. I suppose it’s a matter of psychotherapy becoming critically reflexive, culturally sensitive, autonomous and self-confident in a way similar to that recommended as goals for clients.

Psychotherapy is a way of believing, not a way of certainty. I would even suggest that psychotherapy would do better to disengage from the Modernist project of the pursuit of truth and settle for a post-modern position of being a perspective.

The way the world is includes appearances, and there is no single point of view from which they can all be fully grasped. Objectivity of whatever kind is not the test of reality. It is just one way of understanding reality. (Nagel, 1986, p. 26)

Phillips (2000), from within the psychotherapeutic frame, puts the matter somewhat more bluntly:

... what could be more narcissistic, more grandiose, than the belief that one is in a position to recognize anything as it really is, the intrinsic essence of something (or someone)?
p. 156)

I think that the sooner the ‘essentialist tendency’ in psychotherapy accepts this way of thinking the sooner it will be able to deconstruct itself as ‘*just one way of understanding reality*’ and cease trying to become a new meta-narrative with assumptions (delusions?) about intrinsic and universal validity.

Applied philosophy

... there is no point in asking whether a belief represents reality, either mental or physical reality accurately. The right question to ask is, ‘For what purpose would it be useful to hold that belief?’ (Rorty, 1999, p. xxiv)

I shall now focus the discussion rather more tightly on philosophical methods.

There are various responses to the question: What is philosophy? Nagel in his book: *The View from Nowhere* (1986) provides some responses to issues of philosophical methodology and he is also dealing with issues relating to the philosophy of mind. The many responses to the question: What is philosophy? imply that there is no single answer which is definitive. As I suggested previously some philosophical approaches are ways of posing unanswerable but existentially significant questions. Perhaps I should qualify ‘unanswerable’ and suggest that these questions are answerable by the formulation of *beliefs*. Pietersma (2000) explores ways in which beliefs and concepts can be constructed in the context of perceptual frameworks which create the parameters within which we try to make sense of reality. He analyses ways in which we are seduced into unreflective assumptions about the ways in which our beliefs can be transmuted into ‘facts’, but presses the function of philosophy as a challenge to any such easy lapses into unreflective realism. The inherent scepticism of philosophy can be perceived as challenging and even threatening. Nagel is well aware of this potential for perception of threat:

It is natural to feel victimised by philosophy, but this particular defensive reaction goes too far. It is like the hatred of childhood and results in a vain effort to grow up too early, before one has gone through the essential formative confusions and exaggerated hopes that have to be experienced on the way to understanding anything. Philosophy is the childhood of the intellect, and a culture that tries to skip it will never grow up. (Nagel, 1986, p. 12)

Philosophy does not adopt a single, agreed methodology for carrying out philosophical

investigations. Philosophers do not have a precise agreement as to the focus for their work. Philosophy does not result in consensus as to what is known or how what is known can be known. Indeed, if there were to be consensus the very reason for philosophy would cease! Consensus would become dogma and philosophy would have lost its critical reflexivity and its *raison d'être*. Philosophy, in general terms, asks questions which are intended to go under the surface of accepted views and common-sense assumptions. Philosophical questions may, at first, seem odd. Reading philosophy and attempting to think philosophically may induce a feeling of strangeness—even the feeling of existential and theoretical disorientation experienced by my postgraduate student group. Philosophical questions may raise issues which seem, and indeed do, put 'reality' and 'common sense' under pressure. Philosophical investigation adopts ways of testing deeply held assumptions which, without such testing, may never surface as assumptions and may simply be believed (assumed) as being the case. Philosophy tests notions of truth. Philosophy operates on a sceptical level. It has to be said that some philosophical positions are themselves rather dogmatic (logical positivism for example, or a strong belief in a Platonic metaphysical basis for human knowledge) but some philosophical approaches are sceptical, tentative, questioning, open-ended, common-sense challenging. Some philosophers are keenly aware that they are not going to find the truth about anything.

Davidson is one:

Truth as correspondence with reality may be an idea we are better off without ... truths do not come with a 'mark', like the date in the corner of some photographs, which distinguishes them from falsehoods. The best we can do is test, experiment, compare, and keep an open mind. But no matter how long and well we and coming generations keep at it, we and they will be left with fallible beliefs. We know many things, and will learn more; what we will never know for certain is which of the things we believe are true. Since it is neither visible as a target, nor recognizable when achieved, there is no point in calling truth a goal. Truth is not a value, so the 'pursuit of truth' is an empty enterprise unless it means only that it is often worthwhile to increase our confidence in our beliefs, by collecting further evidence or checking our calculations. (article by Davidson in Brandom, 2000, pp. 66–67)

Nagel is another such:

Too much time is wasted because of the assumption that methods already in existence will solve problems for which they were not designed; too many hypotheses and systems of thought in philosophy and elsewhere are based on the bizarre view that we, at this point in history, are in possession of the basic forms of understanding needed to comprehend absolutely anything. I believe that the methods needed to understand ourselves do not yet exist ... if truth is our aim, we must be resigned to achieving it to a very limited extent, and without certainty ... this lack of confidence should be an integral part of the enterprise. (1986, p. 10)

With such a degree of vagueness one might be forgiven for wondering about the value of a philosophical approach to anything, and I suspect that some have given way to such frustration and by-passed philosophy. I believe that avoidance of a philosophical approach is a mistake. I also think that it is a mistake to seek answers before we have spent time and effort sharpening up questions. We (in the techno-saturated West) live in a world in which others provide ready made answers for us: medical answers, technological answers, answers which repair the telly when it goes wrong. Generally we have no idea what questions the invisible and unknown scientists posed. We have no idea about the length and content of their training. We have no idea about the biology and chemistry which are the bases of the drugs which we take or of the physics behind the domestic conveniences which we merely switch on. We are surrounded by other people's answers to questions which we never thought of

asking—and I suspect that we carry over this need for answers into other aspects of our lives for which there are actually no answers at all, other than one's which we choose to construct for ourselves.

And here is the point of Nagel's idea that we feel *victimised* by philosophy. We feel victimised to the extent to which we are conditioned to want and expect answers—ready made answers, and philosophy simply does not provide them, nor, I suggest, should psychotherapy be seduced into the attempt to supply answers. I would even go so far as to suggest that answers are irrelevant until we have taken time to become aware of the questions and of the significance of the questions. Philosophy is, however, very useful if we want to spend time sharpening up our question posing abilities. Erwin's (1997) *Philosophy and Psychotherapy* is an attempt to redress the rather anti-philosophical tendency of psychotherapy theory construction, training and practice as is the book by Howard (2000).

Recently there has been a spate of books on philosophy which have been written in an accessible style and have become good, if not best, sellers. Gaarder: *Sophie's World* (1995), Williams: *Pooh and the Philosophers* (1995) and the Icon 'For Beginners' Series which deals with such daunting philosophers as Derrida, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and the trend called Post-Modernism. Philosophy sells. Some contemporary philosophy is breaking out of academic, esoteric moulds and is attempting to deal with questions which increasing numbers of people seem to be posing at a time of breakdown of traditional 'received' wisdom. Another way of putting this is that philosophers are attempting to grapple with the change from a somewhat monolithic belief system, represented by religion and the (Western) Enlightenment to a plural society in which difference and diversity are accepted as valid, but which calls into question single, simple views on the nature of human knowledge. The TV series by Alan de Botton and his book *The Consolations of Philosophy* (2000) indicate a market for philosophy.

Yet another way of expressing this is to say that philosophers and others are attempting to respond to public needs for existential meanings after the demise, for many, of traditional meta-narratives—grand narratives of reality which presume to define the parameters of investigation and the individual narratives which derive from these meta-meanings. Grayling (2001) takes this philosophical task in relation to meaning very seriously, not least by quoting Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *The meaning of things lies not in things themselves, but in our attitudes to them.*

I think that psychotherapy would do well to avoid the mono-theoretical attribution of meanings to minds and rather explore people's meanings.

Psychotherapy, I believe, cannot and should not avoid philosophical issues and exploration and their impact on ways in which psychotherapists theorise their concepts and put their theorisings and their meanings into practice. I say 'cannot' because others, if not psychotherapists themselves, will pose the uncomfortable philosophical questions about the validity and meaning of psychotherapeutic knowledge. I say 'should not' because I believe that there is a moral imperative for psychotherapy to address complex issues about its own foundations with rigour and with necessary courage. Psychotherapy should not (and again I am aware of my moral stance) attempt to become yet another meta-narrative which seeks to create a normative way of thinking about the human mind and the meaning of human condition. Normative knowledge tends to create 'victims'. It could be argued that psychotherapy is a form of applied philosophy.

Essentialist and constructivist ways of thinking

Bouveresse (1995, p. 43) indicates the difference between scientific studies and those which address the mind and consciousness:

Psychoanalytic theorising, then, is ultimately ungrounded, for reasons inherent in the irreducible and unexplained fact of consciousness, in a way that seems to have no equivalent in a science like physics.

He is picking up the dichotomy to which Gulick (2001) refers and he points to a dichotomy which runs through the rest of this paper and that is the distinction between essentialist and constructivist ways of thinking about the world and about people. Before I attempt to clarify the implications of the distinction, I shall provide two short definitions.

An *essentialist* way of thinking about the world and people assumes that there are *essences* of things and *essences* of people. The assumption is that all objects essentially exist as different objects, distinct from the person who is perceiving them as objects and that we are able to perceive them as essentially for what they are. The assumption that we are able to perceive things as they essentially are is again premised on an assumption that the mind is some sort of object—*independent entity* which has direct and unmediated access to things as they are. This version of essentialism is called ‘realism’ in philosophical terms because objects are assumed to be both real in themselves and it is also assumed that we can perceive them as they real-ly are. It may further be assumed that when the human mind gives a word-label to an object there is a complete, or close, correspondence between the word-label and the object which is thus labelled. (See Pietersma’s (2000) excellent Introduction for a detailed analysis of these realist traps.)

In this essentialist way of thinking, there seems to be a givenness about the world and a common-sense response to the givenness of the world such that to begin to query the way we see the world is to be considered to be more or less un-hinged. Things are as we say they are. Language and world correspond. It has been called ‘naïve realism’. In this form of realism the human mind is somehow absent from the process. It seems to be assumed that the nature of the mind is such that it can ‘see’ things as they are and form concepts which real-ly represent the objects as they are in themselves.

A significant consequence of this essentialist—and dualist—way of thinking is that words and the objects to which they are assumed to correspond results in reification. Word/object seem to constitute a ‘thing in itself’. A tree is a tree because we say it is a tree. Obviously different people have different attitudes to trees—firewood potential or aesthetic experience—but the word/object singularity is still the tree. Reification is the merging of the concept of the tree with the ‘real’ tree so that concept and object become united. The issue becomes more problematic when words are assumed to represent the real states of the human mind, so that ‘the unconscious’ is assumed to real-ly exist. In an essentialist/realist mode of thought the words for things and the things themselves correspond with each other. I simply pose three questions: Is it the case that this word and only this word should be attached to that thing? Is ‘the unconscious’ a thing to which a label can be attached? Are other people’s words which they attach to this ‘thing’ inevitably wrong—do they need to learn the ‘right’ language for things? These questions are challenges to simplistic tendencies to reify complex concepts.

These differences of attitude to the tree—pragmatics and aesthetics for example—may not create too many problems as applied to the world of trees, but even here there are seriously different responses on the part of conservationists and would-be road builders. However, the different attitudes become quite crucial when an essentialist approach is adopted in relation to invisible attributes of the human mind. I shall deal with some of these issues later, but in the meantime I simply pose two further questions:

What kind of word-label correspondence is there between the word ‘unconscious’ and the human mind?

What level of confidence can we have that there is an essential correspondence between the word 'consciousness' and the functioning of the mind to which it is assumed to refer?

The same questions could be posed about all other central psychotherapeutic words: transference, projection, repression, the Field and so on. Most, if not all, major psychotherapy theories seem to make essentialist assumptions about both the components of the mind and the word-labels which are attached to these assumptions. In my view they fall into the trap of reification. They assume correspondence between the psychotherapeutic terms and (assumed) features of the mind. Assumptions of correspondence keep our minds restricted to that particular view of the world.

I remind you of Harré's comment:

There is no 'entity' at the centre of our experience of ourselves. But there are standard ways in which we express comments upon our own mentation. (Yardley & Honess, 1987, p. 41)

These 'standard ways' of thinking easily, slip into essentialist ways of thinking and theorising.

I also remind you of Rorty's view:

None of these vocabularies or purposes will be more true to 'human nature' or to the 'intrinsic character of things' than any of the others, though the purposes served may get better. (Rorty, 1997, p. 18)

And Nagel:

The central problem of epistemology is the first-person problem of what to believe and how to justify one's beliefs—not the impersonal problem of whether, given my beliefs together with some assumption about their relation to what is actually the case, I can be said to have knowledge. (Nagel, 1986, p. 69)

To repeat: the assumption behind reification is that the words used actually correspond to the mental reality to which those words are attached. Further, it is assumed that these words and the mental processes to which they are attached are true for all people and not limited to the linguistic culture in which the words originated. Essentialism merges into universalism. You may have noticed a tendency to use the definite article—'I analysed *the* transference'. I suggest that this kind of use of the definite article implies a form of reification, that is the implication that the transference actually exists—that word and reality correspond.

I think that both reification and essentialism are dangerous—dangerous in the sense that they presume to know how things are and to know precisely what words to use to describe how things are. The danger is in the certainty. The danger is dogmatism. A further danger is that this dogmatism is practised on the public—on clients' sense of being. The dilemmas which they experience tend to be forced into the reified mould of the particular psychotherapeutic theory. Yet another danger is lack of scepticism.

One more question: Where does the idea/assumption come from that the human mind is capable of understanding the essential truth about anything? It's a strange assumption when you begin to think about it.

There is another way of thinking about the world and the word-labels which we use to make sense of it. This is *constructivist*. The assumption here is that the human mind is not capable of directly contacting the world through any of the senses which we have. Each of the senses transforms the external inputs through the neural and biochemical systems during the onward transmission to the brain where other biochemical and existing memory processes are added. In addition to these biochemical and neurological processes there are other added cultural frameworks of meaning and concepts by which we have already learned to make

sense of the incoming data. Thus we sometimes see what, on careful reflection, is not there. There is no unmediated knowledge.

Think for example of the Necker cube (see Figure 1). But more importantly what we see as there is the subjectively constructed result of the interaction between the processes briefly referred to above. There is always a gap between what is there, in the external world, and the constructed perceptions which we create. A facility of the mind is that, rather than being aware of its own processes, it internalises and then externalises perceptions of the world and then responds to those externalised perceptions as if they were in the world and not as creations of the mind. External reality is always and unavoidably mediated through our senses (our bodies) and constructed in the cultural concepts within which we create meanings. Knowing and knowledge are embodied.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804 CE) was one of the greatest Western philosophers and a central concern for him related to problems about knowing about the world. He concluded that we could not have direct access to external reality but only to our conceptualised awareness of that reality. Hence his view that understanding is of phenomena (things not as they are but as they appear) and not of the underlying noumena (things as they are in themselves). The concepts which we construct about things do not leap out at us from the things themselves, they are our ways of perceiving the things. In this sense concepts are transcendental, they transcend the things themselves, they are not the things in themselves.

A constructivist epistemology is therefore anything but dogmatic. It assumes that a thousand (pluralist) flowers can bloom—and bloom viably. Constructivism takes seriously a sceptical view about the mind not being able to have direct access to the essences of things as they are in themselves. Constructivism leads directly to relativism in terms of the validity of any form of knowledge, including ethics. If relativism concerns you, then I suggest you ask at least the following questions:

If you think that your own views on ethical matters are essentially correct and true, what is the basis for your confidence? What, in other words, is the epistemological basis of your ethical security?

If my own views on ethical matters differ considerably from yours, how would you begin to try to persuade me that I am wrong and you are right?

Given that your views on ethical matters will be related to your value system, what is your value system? What are the sources of your values? How do you know whether you can trust these sources? Have you changed your values over time? If so why? What do these changes in your values over time suggest to you in terms of your current values being essentially true?

Harré and Krausz (1996) deal with issues of relativism by discussing four forms of relativism: semantic, epistemic, ontological and moral.

I imagine that the frustration which these kinds of questions are likely to evoke supports Nagel's views about feeling that philosophy makes you feel like a victim—like you're being undermined.

Bouveresse (1995, p. 73) puts the distinction between constructivism and essentialism in terms of the differences between 'reasons' and 'causes'.

The partisans of a very strict distinction between rationalization and causal explanation observe that the relation between a reason and the action it explains is a logical and internal relation, since a reason consists of redescribing the action with the effect of making it intelligible, whereas the relation of cause and effect is an empirical and external relation between two events.

He thus indicates that causes (essentialist ways of thinking) are empirical, verifiable and are only capable of one sense or meaning, whereas reasons (constructivist ways of thinking) are intended to make actions intelligible, but are not closed to other reasons, interpretations or meanings.

Critical reflexivity changes your mind

There is a theory which states that if anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened (Adams, 1995).

Figure 1 shows a Necker cube after the psychologist who first considered its complex and puzzling visual properties.

There are two points which will become ‘clear’ as you view the ‘cube’. One is that you will be making up something which is not actually there. That is to say, you will be seeing a three-dimensional picture when the ‘reality’ is that there are only lines on a flat page. The second is that you will be able to ‘do’ things with that which is not really there. You will be able to make the sides of the cube ‘move’ from front to back and from back to front.

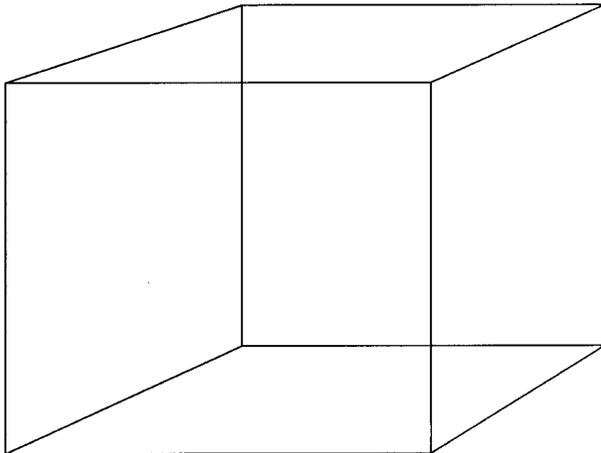


FIGURE 1. Necker cube.

I shall use these two perceptual phenomena (non-existent three-dimensionality and visual movement) in order to emphasise the distinction between essentialist and constructivist ways of thinking. You may consider: it is actually *impossible* to see what is essentially there (flat lines on a flat page). We can only see what we construct—and what we construct is not actually there. You might like to explore some implications of this visual illusion for the ways in which ‘normally’ we see the world. There are many implications for the ‘reality’ of psychotherapeutic theories. For example, if we see what is not there in terms of a *visible* illusion, what is the status of the concepts/labels which we give to *invisible* mental processes, their causes and treatment? Constructed concepts can easily become ‘standard ways of thinking’.

This is all to do with the complex relationships between perception, language and the objects which we use language to label and describe.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951 CE) is a recent philosopher who raised the issue of language and its relationship to reality to a level which has had a profound influence on philosophy this century. He wrote a book which earned him the Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge (*Tractatus Logic-Philosophicus* translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness,

1961, 2nd edn 1974). In this book he assumed, along with Bertrand Russell and many others that careful application of logic to language could identify basic concepts which were true, logical and expressible.

The theory that fixes the bounds of sense in the Tractatus assimilates sentences to pictures. A sentence can achieve sense only in one of two ways: either it will picture a fact, or else it will be analysable into further, more basic sentences which picture facts ... the words in a basic (elementary) sentence are supposed to stand for objects in the same way that points on a surface stand for points in physical space. (Dancy & Sosa, 1993, p. 524)

This period of Wittgenstein's thinking could be called his *essentialist* phase. Language could be used to picture reality and therefore in a sense explain reality. There could, potentially, be an essential correspondence between reality and words if only we could cut through accretions of language to the accurate and logical correspondence.

He then changed his mind, and in doing so changed the way that many philosophers and others have thought since. In terms that I am using in this paper, he became a constructivist. He concluded that language could not *explain* reality but could only operate at levels of *description*. His change of mind resulted in the book which has had a huge impact on later philosophical thought: *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

There is a significant difference between *explanation* and *description*.

Explanation is based on the assumption that we can know about the causes of things and events. It assumes that we can be clear and certain about how things happen. It assumes that we can somehow get to the essence of things and events. It assumes that we can choose correct words in order to capture the actuality of things. Explanation is *discovery*. Having discovered we can explain in a way which is essentially accurate and correct. There is no gap between our words and the things as they are in themselves. We can know that one thing, and only that one thing, causes another. If this position is correct, then there is only *one* explanation for events and that explanation is *necessarily correct*. We would '*have faith that a complete knowledge of the causes would eliminate all other possibilities*' (Bouveresse, 1995, p. 100).

Description, on the other hand, is more phenomenological. That is, description is concerned with what we perceive, the sense that we make, the meaning which we construct. Description is *invention*. Different people may describe the 'same' situation in validly different ways, whereas different explanations would all be wrong—with the possible exception of one. In a description there is always a gap between what we think is there and what is there. There is another likely gap, and that is the gap between our thoughts about what is there and the language in which we express our thoughts as to what is there. Explanation assumes that both these gaps can be bridged and that we can arrive at the essence of what is there. I suggest that psychotherapeutic theorising should be seen as a hermeneutic enterprise rather than as an essentialist or causal project. '*Everything has a meaning*' ... *is in any case quite different from the statement: 'Everything has a cause'* (Bouveresse, 1995, p. 95).

Wilkinson (1998, pp. 147–164) explores aspects of correspondence between language and phenomena and the mediatory function of hermeneutics in his article: 'Phenomenological causality and why we avoid the nature of causality in psychotherapy: a dialogue'.

Psychotherapeutic theories have to do with description and as such are redescribable, mutable and are only *possible* reasons for behaviour, feeling and thought. This is an invitation to be puzzled about the viability and validity of the terms of the theory. An invitation to change, abandon, adopt, adapt and to privilege the client's owned narrative rather than to translate it into the terms of the 'temporary' theory. (See McLeod, 1997 on *Narrative and Psychotherapy*.)

I have a sense, from my teaching, my reading and discussions, that there is a tendency for some to confuse ‘explanation’ and ‘description’. I also think that whilst people may use the latter term, they imply the former. The reason why I mention the issue is because if ‘explanation’ (or its incorrect synonym ‘description’) is adopted/assumed, and if psychotherapeutic theory used as if it were *explanatory* then the theory becomes a serious blockage to understanding. The reason for this is that the key concepts of the theory are assumed/believed to be in correspondence with the mental processes which they can only in fact symbolise in myths and metaphors. Assumptions of explanation and correspondence restrict understanding. They reify concepts which should be kept open and flexible. In relation to the human mind and hermeneutics assumptions of explanation represent closed thinking. That’s why Wittgenstein is of the view that philosophy is ‘therapy’. Philosophy is ‘therapy’ for those who adopt an essentialist and explanatory approach to language. It is also therapy for those who assume (hope?) that language is grounded in a metaphysical (Platonic) world in which our reason represents the ultimate source of reason. Philosophy is therapy because it emancipates people from the pathology of thinking in non-optional terms.

But to return to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In this phase of his philosophical journey Wittgenstein coined the term ‘language game’ which has had a wide influence in areas other than philosophy. The main point of this term is to emphasise that human knowledge is not a seamless robe, but is disjointed. It only seems to be seamless because of the similarity of the grammar which we use to express our language. We simply do not notice the many disjunctions between the different forms of discourse and of categorisation which we use because the structure of the language we use hides the disjunctions. Different forms of language (he also used the term ‘forms of life’) allow different meanings to be ascribed to different situations. There is a wide—perhaps immeasurable—range of ‘language games’ which apply to the variety of human ways of thinking and the rules/concepts which govern our interactions with each other and the world. Just because sentences are constructed in the same grammatical way does not mean that they carry the same levels of meaning or the same kinds of meaning. ‘*I see the cat sitting on the mat*’ does not have the same kind of meaning as ‘*I see transference in that relationship*’.

Edmonds and Eidinow (2001) label Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* as Wittgenstein II and have this to say:

In seeking answers to these questions, Wittgenstein II believed, philosophers make foolish errors. They look for an explanation, a universal answer, a theory to cover all cases, a generalization to fit all types; they stare at objects and feel they can somehow penetrate the phenomena and reach the immaterial core. (p. 182)

Bouveresse again, this time discussing the attempt by Freud to ground his theory in reality:

But the resolution of the transference also implies that the patient can be persuaded of its real meaning. (1995, p. 124, emphasis added)

Transference *may* be a *reason* for that behaviour in that relationship. But on the other hand it may not be. Explanation assumes knowledge of causality but is unprovable no matter how tempting it is to believe in causal explanation of mental processes. The temptation is to turn myths and metaphors into ‘realities’. Another version of this temptation is to turn beliefs into knowledge. Fideism into epistemology.

To emphasise the epistemological warning: there is a seductive tendency to treat the two kinds of meanings as similar because of the sameness of the grammar used. This is another example of reification—treating the concept of transference as if it were ‘real’, that it ‘explains’ and is explainable, that the concept (transference) is the only one which fits. Greenfield (2000) is keen to critique tendencies to reification.

Genova (1995) puts Wittgenstein's position as follows:

Meaning results from the application of language. Instead of turning to the human mind to explain the functioning of language, Wittgenstein turns to the pragmatics of language, i.e. to all the practices that surround the use of methods of representation which he calls a 'language game'. His earlier mistake (in the Tractatus) of grounding the possibility of language in the structure of the world shall not be repeated by now grounding language in the structure of consciousness. Meaning, like intention, is embedded in a situation and requires recognition of the conventions of use. 'Our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings'. (p. 150)

To use another philosophical term: the two sentences referring to 'cats' and 'transference', whilst grammatically similar are *hermeneutically* very different. That is, they convey very different meanings. To say as much seems to be banal, but the importance of making the point is that the grammar leads us to think that the words are being used in explanatory ways and substantially true ways, i.e. stating how things are, rather than merely, and more puzzlingly, establishing different forms of meaning.

Language does not, cannot, state facts, but it does create meaning. These meanings have differential degrees of probability depending on how they are tested. Physics is a category of meaning creation which endeavours to create high levels of probability, but even here levels of probability change over time as new experiments challenge previous ways of creating meaning and of probability. The levels of probability also change dramatically in relation to whether the physics is at macro (cosmic) level, midi (Newtonian) level or micro (quantum) levels.

No matter how persuasive the grammatical structure, no matter how 'solid' nouns appear to be, language does not state facts. Grammar and language do not create facts because words never totally correspond in all respects to that to which they refer. They do—importantly—create socially constructed and socially mediated meanings. It is within these culturally constructed meanings that we live and move and have our being. It is also within these cultural meanings that (some) cultures have developed the project of psychotherapy.

We need to be careful to avoid being seduced by similar grammar into thinking that forms of language are each similarly describing, let alone explaining, different kinds of reality. Judith Genova (1995) and Marie McGinn (1997) have each written careful and accessible elucidations of Wittgenstein's thinking and made linkages between his thinking and other areas of human experience. Cray and Read (2000) have also edited a current analysis of the impact of Wittgenstein's ideas.

Another source of summary of the distinction between 'description' and 'explanation' is:

Constructivist traditions emphasize processes of knowing and orient toward assessing the viability (utility) as opposed to the validity (truth) of an individual's unique worldview. (Neimeyer, 1993, p. 2)

Incidentally I make the point that critical reflexivity tends to destabilise your sense of self and of your normal ways of understanding. I suspect that you cannot but change during a process of critically reflecting on your basic belief systems. Critical reflexivity about one's beliefs quickly leads one to the awareness that as beliefs differ widely among people, and it being the case that there is no ultimate way in which the validity of one set of beliefs can be confirmed against the 'invalidity' of all the others, a sense of destabilisation can occur. This will be the greater the more unaware one has been about the constructed and temporary nature of beliefs and meanings prior to critically reflecting on them.

Viability and utility are *constructivist* concepts. Validity and truth are *essentialist* concepts.

In order to adopt a critically reflexive approach a number of conditions need to be met:

1. There needs to be a willingness to be sceptical about one's self, belief system, values,

knowledge base, theoretical commitments and assumptions about common sense. To exercise continual scepticism is not easy but it is necessary to avoid complacency and fantasies that one has the 'truth'. Scepticism is the antithesis of dogma.

2. There needs to exist in the mind of the critically reflexive thinker a number of different and competing frameworks which can be used to think reflexively.
3. It is not possible to think in a critically reflexive way by dogmatically holding on to a chosen psychotherapeutic theory/religious creed/political system. Certainly not by assuming that there is only one way in which reality can be understood.
4. It is not possible to be a critically reflexive thinker if you are deeply defensive about your theoretical position.
5. You need to expose yourself deliberately and consistently to a range of positions and ideas which are challenging to your own position. This range of positions and ideas will involve awareness of a range of related subject areas.
6. Critical reflexivity requires engagement with a broad range of inter-related subject areas in order to be feasible. These subject areas currently include: philosophy: epistemology, linguistic philosophy, philosophy of mind; cognitive science; neurobiological studies; gender studies; multi-cultural studies; consciousness studies; brain physiology; evolutionary theory; evolutionary psychology; philosophy of science; the political—and even imperialistic—significance of all theories and 'people theories' in particular.
7. An awareness of contemporary work in the above will provide a basis for critical reflexivity.

Longino (Lederman & Bartsch, 2001, p. 219) has suggested that in order to achieve what she calls 'transformative discourse'—which I am assuming to be similar to 'critical reflexivity'—the following four criteria need to be operative:

1. *There must be publicly recognized forums for the criticism of evidence, of methods, and of assumptions.*
2. *The community must not merely tolerate dissent, but its beliefs and theories must change over time in response to the critical discourse taking place within it.*
3. *There must be publicly recognized standards of reference to which theories, hypotheses, and observational practices are evaluated and by appeal to which criticism is made relevant to the goals of the inquiring community ... The general family of standards from which those locally adopted would be drawn would include such cognitive virtues of accuracy, coherence, and breadth of scope, and such social virtues as fulfilling technical or material needs or facilitating certain kinds of interactions between a society and its material environment or among the society's members.*
4. *Finally, communities must be characterized by equality of intellectual authority. What consensus exists must not be the result of the exercise of political or economic power or of the exclusion of dissenting perspectives; it must be the result of critical dialogue in which all the relevant perspectives are represented.*

I propose that mono-theoretical psychotherapeutic approaches should take note.

An un-hinged trip into tables

Whatever you say it is, it isn't. Korzybski

At the risk of confirming any suspicion that philosophy deals with nonsense I shall explore an example using a familiar component of philosophical furniture: the table.

For most (uncritical) situations this word-label 'table' corresponds to and real-ly re-presents the object to which it refers. 'Table' constitutes a *socially agreed fact* (Searle, 1995, *The*

Construction of Social Reality). It is such a deeply socially agreed fact that even to contemplate suggesting that it is not a table is to invite early stages of certification. However, before you switch off you may just recall that famous painting by Magritte: *This Is Not A Pipe*. Did you see it? What did you see?

Belief in the existence of the table originated in an interpersonal context in which the infant is constantly told: 'That hard object is a table'. Varela *et al.* (1993) in *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* explore what they call the 'enacted' processes whereby human minds create consensually agreed constructions of reality (see also Hobson 2002). Powerful adults dictate the words with which we, as children, learn to name the world. Likewise powerful professionals dictate (indoctrinate?) or more modestly authenticate the theories which trainees adopt to name the intra- and inter-psychic world addressed by psychotherapeutic theories. The process of psychotherapeutic socialisation has similarities with the socialisation of children into the 'real' world of 'tables' in that trainees are taught to attach certain theoretical concepts to what the trainers will assert to be the real mental process under 'observation'. This process of naming and labelling can thus become a process of reification of psychotherapeutic terminology and may easily become a version of concrete, essentialist and inflexible thinking for which Wittgenstein proposed the therapy of philosophy. A process of believing is uncritically transformed into a process of knowing.

The origin of the linkage between the external object and the internally constructed word-label 'table' is primarily social and is constantly reinforced by visual/tactile stimulation and by an increasing ability to appreciate the functions of the object—eating meals, playing games, exhibiting flowers and ornaments, polishing. Thus we are taught to name the world and as agents we engage with the world as we construct it. Thus our common sense arose and this form of common sense is a 'realist' common sense. Things are as we say they are. The naming/creative power of language is sharply stated in the opening verse of the Gospel According to Saint John: *In the Beginning was the Word*. In a sense, this essentialist, theological and metaphysical linguistic assumption has been with us ever since. Because 'the Word' created reality, we can understand reality by using words. This is a metaphysical approach because it assumes that reality is theologically verbal (rational?) and that our human minds have within them that which is correspondingly verbal (rational?). After all, in this religious tradition we are made in the image of God. So we seem to capture and re-present reality as we speak it. To state this is merely to reiterate a rational real-ist approach to mind and language and reality. The idea of God is used to validate the existence of the world and the existence of minds which can know the world. Even though for many the idea of God as the ultimate validator of knowledge has gone, there remains the deeply residual, Cartesian, notion that 'mind can access reality in a real way. The mind is assumed to be an invisible given which can directly see and label reality.

Back to the table. (By sheer coincidence as I am checking an early draft of this paper I have been asked to 'lay the table'. I wonder what would happen if I said that I do not think that the table has an essential existence? End of relationship I think.) The indisputability of tables is based on something like the assumptions above. We engage with real world tables. To challenge this common sense is to risk being pathologised, but that is what I am about to do.

The word 'table' is taken to refer to the factual existence of an object in the external world which totally corresponds in all significant respects to the word-label chosen to name its existence and to define it as an existing object. Totally corresponds? Well, we sometimes qualify the table—round, long, low, oak, drop-leaf, broken, antique—but the 'tableness' of the table is assumed to exist essentially and substantially without qualification. Plato would agree. Even if there was no-one present to see it, the table would have its essential existence as a table intact, minus perceiver. There are just a few problems with this linguistic correspondence theory to which I wish to bring to your attention.

Does the table exist when it arrives in a flat pack ready for construction?

Well, you may respond, it is capable of becoming a table, so even in flat-pack form it is 'really' a table in potential form. You may consider that I have difficulty in putting flat packs together and what I end up with may not look like a traditional table. So, again I press the question: Is the flat pack only potentially a *table*? Could it potentially become something else? That is, of course, a rhetorical question. The flat pack has the potential to become all sorts of things if I change my mind and decide, for example, to make it into a children's farmyard play area. Also recall that all tables were in various forms of 'flat pack' before they were constructed as tables. You may also consider that the *idea* that the flat pack is 'really' a table is in my mind and the minds of those who put the flat pack in its package. The idea of the table allows me to construct the flat pack into a table. Yes, but I may have other 'ideas' for the flat pack, in which case I think you will agree that it is my ideas which determine the outcome of the flat pack. Furthermore, this wretched 'table' was once a tree, and the tree was once a seed and the seed was ...

Is a table still a table when it has been burned in an unfortunate domestic conflagration?

Well, it was a table before it was burned and one can still see signs of legs and screws. I can still clearly remember the table—indeed with sadness. I shall miss it because it was a wedding present from someone now dead. I now sense the loss of the table, the memory of which I shall treasure. But in what sense is there still a table other than as a concept in my mind?

Is it still a table when the four legs have been used as small posts in the garden fence and the top cut up and used to provide the sides of a frame for garden plants?

Well, the bits still exist and could be reconvened into a table, so, as with the flat pack, it is still *potentially* a table.

Is it a table to a wood-worm?

I am now going to make an assertion: the table is artefactually and culturally and functionally a table but it is not *essentially* a table. It is *virtually* a table. It isn't essentially anything in particular—except what it is and I don't know what it is. Indeed I cannot know what it is essentially in itself—can I? Before you think I've lost my marbles remember that Kant would agree with me. It would be a brave person who would allege that Kant was a few marbles short of a full set. It's useful to have Big Names on one's side!!

Enough lateral thinking. I shall get to the point. Is there, in an Ideal world—a metaphysical world—the *Idea of Tableness* to which real tables conform and to which our minds, reflecting the ideal world, can respond by giving a word-label 'table'? Plato pursued these ideas and believed in 'ideal' tables of which visible tables are examples. You can't be a Bigger Name in philosophy than Plato but I beg to disagree with him.

In other words, is there (potentially) a *total correspondence* between:

Ideal → Real world → Word-named world?

Is our naming of the world a **real** naming? Can we continue with unabated confidence in our increasingly extended naming of the world in the sure *knowledge* (not merely belief) that we have got it right? Certain that our words correspond with explanatory accuracy to the objects to which we attach them? (See Pietersma (2000) 'Introduction' for detailed discussion.)

Is word/reality an indivisible and accurate unity which is resistant to the incursions of sceptical probing? Or, disturbing thought, is there an unbridgeable gap between our words/labels and the 'reality' to which we (tentatively) attach them?

Hobson (2002) makes this same philosophical point from the perspective of developmental psychology in his fascinating exploration of current research on the development of mind and thought:

In the first place, then, a person is aware of the distinction between having thoughts and perceiving things. In addition, and perhaps more obviously, the person is aware

not only that thoughts are connected with things—after all, they are about things—but also that they are separate from and distinct from the things they are about. Thoughts are mental whereas things are physical. Thoughts and things have very different properties (p. 96). In other words, symbols do not really stand for things themselves. ... Rather, the words evoke particular ways of conceptualizing or remembering or experiencing the things. To be more precise, they evoke how the writer and the reader have experienced the things in question. Symbols ground ways of construing the world (p. 97).

Words are symbols. Words are the constructors of meaning. Words are the symbolic expression of physical reality. Words are attempts to express experience. Words are not in direct correspondence to reality either external or experiential. There is always a gap between words and that to which they are applied.

Do you see the importance rather than the triviality of these questions? (Remember the irritating flexibility of the Necker cube.) Do you see why it is necessary, not merely tangential, to raise questions about the validity of the words used to label *assumed mental processes*? Epistemology is crucially an exercise in trying to come to terms with the validity and viability of terms which we use. Olson (2000): *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Philosophy: two paths of liberation from the representational mode of thinking* provides a contemporary analysis of many of the issues to which I am only briefly referring.

I wish to establish two contradictory but necessary positions in order to respond to these questions.

First, I am deeply puzzled by modern physics which introduces notions of quanta, black holes, string theory and parallel universes—all of which have very confusing implications for the way in which we understand the linkages between symbols (verbal and mathematical) and ‘reality’. Ever since Robert Oppenheimer’s concept of complementarity and Heisenberg’s principle of indeterminacy we have been introduced to the complex necessity of having to hold two apparently contradictory statements about sub-atomic particles at the same time. Neither of the statements can be taken, by itself, as an accurate or adequate version of events. A consequence of this information suggests that we are unlikely ever to be able to make accurate, factual statements about ‘reality’ but are condemned by our curiosity to keep on trying. However, the situation is much worse with the addition of string theory, parallel universes and black holes. There is even a report in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (9 February 2001, p. 22) by Lijun Wang of the NEC Research Institute, New Jersey, of an experiment with light speed which showed that a pulse sent through a certain type of cell appeared to exit the cell before it entered. As Wang points out, this throws assumptions about causality into disarray—an effect occurs before a cause. Could we then prevent cause by interfering with the effect? I have no idea what sense to make of this finding, except to include it as another example of the problems of common sense and reality. Quantum physics is having an affect on epistemology.

Second, I am impressed by Searle’s (1995) views of a socially constructed reality which both creates, and allows us to live in, a social world in which words have a sufficient degree of similarity of shared meaning to permit some form of relational cohesion and conversation.

*The feature of language essential for the constitution of institutional facts is the existence of symbolic devices, such as words, that by convention **mean** or **represent** or **symbolize** something beyond themselves. My claim that language is partly constitutive of institutional facts amounts to the claim that institutional facts essentially contain some symbolic elements in this sense of ‘symbolic’: there are words, symbols, or other conventional devices that mean something or express something or represent or symbolize something beyond themselves, in a way that is publicly understood. (Searle, 1995, pp. 60–61)*

Whilst I think that Searle is saying something useful about the creation of our social world, I wish to make the supplementary point that the social world which we mentally inhabit and through whose terms we live in a named world of objects, it is not a *unitary* social world. It changes for the individual over time, it changes within the same culture over time, and it differs significantly in different cultures at the same time and over time. And furthermore, the social world seems to change even in the process of thinking about it. In addition to which even the shared nature of the meanings attributed to words still creates problems of communication. After years of discussing philosophical and psychological issues with my friends there are still huge areas of unclarity and uncertainty as to what we mean. Even when we think that we each know what we mean there are problems communicating this meaning to the other, and in the process of the attempt to communicate this meaning it can change in slippery ways. I conclude that the social world of ‘common sense’ which I was brought up to believe in as secure and real is actually mutable, flexible, ultimately insubstantial. As I type this draft of this paper on Shakespeare’s birthday I am reminded of *The Tempest*:

*The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind.
We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep ...*

It strikes me that Shakespeare was an anti-realist!!

However, the important point about Searle’s views, with which I agree, is that the socially constructed world, because it is constructed, can be deconstructed. It is porous and mutable and permeable. New ways of thinking about ‘the same’ things can and do emerge, and these new ways of thinking mean that in some senses we live in a different world once we have adopted new ways and words by which we conceptualise the world. Rorty (1999) has a section entitled: ‘A World Without Substances or Essences’ which develops this odd idea that reality is neither static nor graspable. Changes in our language change our sense of self and our sense of meaning and agency. Our epistemologies have existential significance.

Francesca Klug (2000) explores the significant changes in the values and meanings of human rights over the last 250 years or so, which could be summarised as a change from ‘freedom from’ to ‘freedom for’. These changes in human rights are not merely changes to legal entities but, as they become assimilated into our sense of self and identity, they come to represent changes in how we understand ourselves and our sense of agency in the personal, legal and socio/political world.

Changes in human rights change our sense of permissions, aspirations and responsibilities. Such changes change our sense of self-in-relation and of self in community.

It is also argued by Foucault (English translation 1970) and others (e.g. see Moss, 1998) that a social world which is premised on the power of powerful groups to define that social world is so defined in ways which meets the needs of the powerful and suits their purposes. It is also a characteristic of some human beings to resist this dominant definition and to create definitions which meet different needs and create different ways of making meaning. (See Collins, 1992, chapter on ‘The Power of Self-Definition’ in the context of Black slaves in the time of the slave trade). This chapter discusses the ways in which slaves who had been the recipients of massive and consistent negative labelling nevertheless, in some cases, defined themselves in their own chosen terms, for example as children of God and as being the recipients of God’s love. Thus some attained the power of self-definition.) Challenge can change reality. Language is political as well as descriptive and inventive. Language and its embedded knowledge is the locus of this power—power to define, power to pathologise, power to treat, power to include and exclude. To adopt a sceptical attitude to the essential givenness of language changes our view of reality and my view of my self as a sceptic. Scepticism is a threat to those who need and hold on to power.

I propose that, in summary, the consequences of the references to physics and socially constructed reality above are:

1. That language, or other symbols, never captures the essence of either objective or subject reality. We are never in the position of being able to explain everything. Rose and Rose (2000) argue against the totalising explanations offered by the ultra-Darwinists. They are, I believe, justifiably, very critical of scientific fundamentalists such as Wilson (1998, pp. 10–11) who offers what is actually a metaphysical view of the world disguised as fact:

Science offers the boldest metaphysics of the age ... the world will somehow become clearer and we will grasp the true strangeness of the universe ... there is a general explanation of the human condition proceeding from the deep history of genetic evolution.

- He doesn't seem to appreciate that the mere assertion of an accessible and unifying metaphysic bears no necessary relation to its scientific, or indeed any other kind, of rational validity. The assertion of the (believed) validity of a metaphysic is a claim to the power of one's metaphysic and its consequent knowledge. (Foucault 1997).
2. That language allows us to create a world which we are constantly in danger of thinking is the only way in which the world can be conceptualised.
 3. That all theories, and in this context psychotherapeutic theories, are constructions, and should be capable of being tested, not in order to prove their rightness, but in order to provide evidence of their usefulness in certain, defined situations. Such theories would be better understood as possible reasons—as tentative meanings, as discourses which allow narratives offered to clients for consideration.
 4. That a humanly constructed world of meaning has an important moral dimension to it in that it allows an emancipatory potential. The fixity of essentialism implies rigidity of opportunity. Examples of rigidity are, in my view, seen in the assumption of essentialness in the concept of intelligence and its measurement, and in the dogmatism of classical psychoanalysis. But these are not the only examples of theoretical rigidity in the area of psychology or psychotherapy. Roberts, in his article in the *British Gestalt Journal* (8(1), 1999) clearly espouses a dogmatic and concrete use of terms which brook no debate in his mind. His use of 'The Field' and 'experience' seem to him to be 'facts'. He uses them to 'explain' the human condition. (See Heath, 2000 'A Constructivist Attempts to Talk to The Field' for a contrary point of view.)
 5. That a constructed sense of our humanity(ies), a constructed sense of self and identity(ies) is a model which allows for some personal choice, for options in agency, for freedom-in-relationship, and for valuing of diversity. This model can be summarised in a phrase which I use in a paper on 'Anti-oppressive Approaches to Psychotherapeutic Theory and Practice' namely, *identity is contingent upon agency*. If I change my sense of agency I change my sense of self. Conversely if I change my sense of who I am then I have different options for being an active agent in the world. An important aspect of who I am relates to the words which I have with which to label myself and the world in which I live. Not only is identity contingent upon agency but language too influences identity. Language also relates to agency. Issues of changes in senses of self and agency are explored in Klug (2000), Taylor (1992) and Watson (2000). Klug in particular, traces what she calls the three 'waves' of human rights formulations and emphasises not only the value bases of these different formulations, but also the different senses of agency and individual power which the different formulations tend to induce in those to whom the formulations apply. Her book is a most interesting and readable study of ways in which values impact on sense of self and identity.

Creswell's (1998) book: *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions* provides an excellent example of ways in which the premise of a socially constructed reality can be usefully explored without making any assumptions about the final truth of humanly experienced reality. Personal truth, culturally located and relationally and narratively constructed, is foundational for human experience and meaning, but it does not need further validation by being credited with absolute or essential truth. Indeed, my argument would be that the attribution of absolute or essential truth to human experience actually diminishes the potential for human creativity and self-definition. Absolutes all too quickly become existential prisons.

In the meantime I wish to make some further points arising from the 'table' illustration. (I suspect that you will never look at tables in the same way again!)

Multi-perspectival realism

The way the world is includes appearances, and there is no single point of view from which they can all be fully grasped. Objectivity of whatever kind is not the test of reality. It is just one way of understanding reality. (Nagel, 1986, p. 26)

The table would not be so labelled had not our, and other cultures, constructed functional artefacts which can be used for a range of purposes and which are stable and at a convenient height. In some other cultures the artefact could have been called an 'altar' with highly symbolic functions encompassing prescribed rituals such as the location for sacrificial offerings. It took a long time for generally usable 'tables' to emerge. The idea of 'tableness' does not exist in the cosmos—it only exists when we create tables and develop the idea of 'tableness'.

External objects, and I am not solipsistically seeking to deny the existence of external reality, interact with human brain processes in ways which result in naming and other forms of symbolisation. We then relate to this internalised named world. Early versions of the named world were resistant to change because of the apparent self-evidence of the correspondence between the name and the world. It was not until some human beings began to observe the world in different ways that alternative namings emerged. Alternative namings create different options. Typically such people had a rather rough ride because of the tenacity with which the traditionally named world gripped human minds. (You will recall that Socrates met his death because of his persistent tendency to ask his fellow Greeks basically simple questions as to how they could be certain of what they thought that they knew. Socrates is one of de Botton's (2000) chosen philosophers in his book: *The Consolations of Philosophy*.)

The naming of the world is not only, seemingly, a naming of facts, but it also carries existential and, for some, religious security. The naming is deeply embedded in the psyche as reality. For some religious people the named world is a divinely named world and therefore the naming of the world is immutable. To rename the world (to create alternative descriptions) is hubristic and a form of blasphemy for these religious fundamentalists. I suspect that there are versions of psychotherapeutic fundamentalisms indicated in the theoretical 'turf wars' which bedevil some exchanges.

But there is more than naming embedded in the psyche. There is the need for power. Those who name have power over those to whom names are applied. The source of the anonymous saying that: '*Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me*' misunderstood the insidiously damaging effects of labelling. But then the formulator of the saying did not have the benefit of reading Foucault on power. This is the power of all professionals—they name the world of the non-professionals so that the professional can then sort out the distresses and dilemmas of the non-professionals. Naming is about power. Language is about power. Finding your own voice is empowering. Not having a voice with which to name for yourself is de-powering. In these short sentences I summarise the thrust of the feminist movement and the

anger and anguish of all those who have their reality (forcibly) named for them by others. Equality of opportunity is in part equality of power and opportunity to name the world. For this reason the dominant power of existing Western psychotherapeutic theories should be challenged. The challenge is to deconstruct these theories in order to allow them to become more porous to alternative ways of constructing the world and of the mind. Deconstruction is the destabilising of meaning. To propagate these theories as valid to the exclusion of deep challenge and deconstruction is to impose the language of the few on to the many. Such theoretical imposition is oppressive. Just as there are multiple perspectives on the world of objects, so there are multiple perspectives on the nature of the mind and of the meanings which minds invent. There is no definitive perspective on mind or meaning.

Sceptical challenges to the traditional naming of reality causes anxiety even for the sceptic and sometimes fierce resistance from non-sceptical others. Wittgenstein captured the ontogenic and psychological significance of language when he said: *The limits of my language are the limits of my world.*

You will, no doubt, see where all this philosophical discussion is leading. If you have taken the point about the temporary, but functionally useful, loose relationship between the word 'table' and the object on four (six, three?) legs, then you will probably be willing to entertain at least the same, if not greater scepticism, about the allocation of word-labels to mental processes.

Skepticism, if you will, has become an essential ingredient of knowing rather than its arch enemy. (Genova, 1995, p. 196)

Do you also take the point about multi-perspectival realism? By this term I mean that I assume that there is an external reality—generally known as the world—out there, independent of my viewing of it. By this term I also mean that there are various perspectives which may be adopted by which that external world can be sensed and made sense of. Not only is it the case that scientific progress has been made by the adoption of different perspectives on the world (Cetina, 1999), but this multi-perspectivalism is even more apparent in the culturally constructed diversities of ways of viewing the world. By 'culturally constructed diversities' I mean more than cultures as societies, I also mean that within a culture there are likely to be various ways of constructing the social world in which we live. We (and I mean a heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous 'we') are now much more aware that there are significant differences among the ways in which women and men in our own culture view social situations. These significant differences imply that women and men see situations differently and therefore have a different sense of agency in situations. Even use of the same language to describe situations may not mean that women and men 'see' the same situations. These differences are due to different cultural locations. Another consequence of feminist challenges to 'male-stream' language is to challenge the very language which is used to describe situations and possible responses. Other sources of difference are, of course, diversities of ethnicity and religious and humanistic world views. It is problematic to use 'we' in its old homogeneous, and frequently imperialistic, sense. (See Tanesini, 1999: *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies.*)

Famous people including philosophers have tried to unify and certify knowledge. Descartes (1596–1650 CE) famously tried to be sceptical about everything in order to see if he could arrive at something which he could not doubt. He arrived at his indubitable and immutable notion and couched his findings: *Cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore I am.* In other words, doubt as he might he could not doubt that it was he (his mind) which was doing the thinking about doubting.

His rational, cognitive relief has been a bedrock of Western thought for a long time until some philosophers, not to mention behaviourists and cognitive scientists, began to doubt the existence of 'the mind' at least as an autonomous source of knowing distinct from that which

it is knowing. There are problems here addressed from the selected perspectives of philosophers by Robinson (1998). Cornwell (1998) also deals with a range of philosophico/psychological issues. I shall point up some of the problems by asking rather frustrating questions:

How do I know that I have a mind?

‘Have’ implies ownership or possession—can I lose my mind and still be me? This, of course, is not a playful question with Alzheimer’s in mind (!).

What is the ‘I’ that knows it has a mind?

Do I have a mind, or am I a mind?

Do you have a mind?

How do I know that you have a mind?

What is ‘a mind’ and why the indefinite article—could I not have ‘minds’?

Is it possible that the mind is a linguistic artefact with different constructions arising in different linguistic cultures?

How might I distinguish between ‘I’, ‘self’ and ‘identity’?

Do the terms: ‘I’, ‘self’ and ‘identity’ have different meanings in different cultures and in the same culture over time? And how to translate these different meanings from one language into another. (See Phillips, 2000 for an interesting discussion in Chapter 8: ‘On Translating a Person’. See also Nagel, 1995: *Other Minds* for a series of his essays which includes a discussion of the philosophy of Freud.)

There is an interesting section in Longino’s chapter on ‘Subjects, Power, and Knowledge’ (in Lederman and Bartsch, 2001, pp. 214ff.) in which she discusses the need to ‘change’ the subject from the invisible knower of Descartes to the problematic knower who has a standpoint and whose standpoint constructs the act of knowing as well as what is known.

You will notice that in some respects there are similarities between these questions and the way in which I ‘disposed’ of, or deconstructed, the table, but these questions are more existentially disturbing. You will also notice that the grammatical structure of the questions gets us into all sorts of difficulty because the questions are dominated by the grammar and not by the non-sense, or at least the complexity, of the questions. The posing of them, and the answers which may be provided, have profound significance for the whole project of psychotherapy. In some respects different psychotherapeutic theories provide different answers, but they all have in common minimal assumptions that brains have (are) minds and that human dilemmas, distresses, concerns, anxieties, traumas can be labelled and understood theoretically and alleviated therapeutically. Susan Blackmore’s book: *The Meme Machine* (1999) argues against the reality of mind as we have been traditionally taught to think of the mind.

Each psychotherapeutic theory will have different sets of assumptions as to how the mind and mental processes are theorised, and what kinds of evidence are deemed to count as supporting the theory. Incidentally, I have a strong sense that many if not all psychotherapeutic theories are not constructed on a research basis of evidence, but are dreamed up by men, mostly men, without any basis other than that they seem to be good ideas which may fit with the current meta-narrative of selves and identity. I sometimes listen to people giving presentations of their espoused theories which omit any consideration as to the epistemological validity of the theory. It has to be noted that some exponents of psychotherapeutic theoretical positions are somewhat resistant to being put under philosophical and research scrutiny either for validity of their concepts or efficacy of theoretically based therapeutic interventions. There seems to be a tendency among psychotherapists to give the convincing

appearance of insecurity and defensiveness if their theories are put under philosophical and/or research scrutiny. Simply to ask the question: How do you know? can evoke defensive responses. I find this worrying and puzzling. In fairness there are others who thrive under such epistemological scrutiny and this journal is evidence of that.

Given the profound and unresolved issues around 'mind' I propose that a multi-perspectival approach is realistic and avoids unnecessary arguments about which theory is real-ly true. A multi-perspectival approach allows for a range of constructions and discourses in response to reality. It basically avoids the assumption that concepts and reality correspond in an immutably interlocking way.

Philosophy—necessary not optional

Over the years, Spinelli has become increasingly aware of the philosophical naivete of many therapists. (Fly-leaf Spinelli, 1994)

With these kinds of questions and issues in mind, I now come to some philosophical and psychological issues which are central to my concerns and represent the reasons for this paper.

It may be useful to clarify why I distinguish between philosophical and psychological issues.

Philosophical issues relate, in this context, to problems of knowing what we are talking about, and what kind of evidence we choose to give us a degree of confidence that we know why we are talking about what we are talking about. In this context I am using philosophy to focus on epistemology.

Psychological issues relate to assumptions which we make about mental processes and the functioning of the brain/mind *per se*.

The two must, of course, be related in complex ways. (See Damasio, 1999 for a neurobiologist's discussion.) However, I sense that such an important distinction is not always made or the need for it recognised.

Again, a few questions:

What is the psychotherapeutic theory which most informs your psychotherapeutic practice and is the core model in the training which you provide?

Why did you choose this theory in particular given the wide range of those on offer?

What are sources of evidence which persuaded you to accept the conceptual framework of your chosen theory as opposed to other theories which are available?

Did you tend to accept the theory merely on the basis of the 'credibility' of the tutors?

What sets of interconnected assumptions about the nature of the human mind does your theory presuppose?

How would you criticise the main concepts of a theory which you strongly reject?

Which aspects of your criticism of this rejected theory would apply to your theory by a believer in the theory which you reject?

Does your psychotherapeutic theory include any concepts relating to the brain/mind relationship? If it does not, why do you think that the brain is (oddly) absent from your theory? (see Damasio, 1999; Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1999)

How far were you 'allowed' to criticise the central tenets of the theoretical model before you began to feel that you would not be welcome to continue on the course of psychotherapy training?

Was there a sense that the tutors and members of the course constituted a group of 'believers'?

Was 'belief' confused with 'knowledge' on your course of training?

Was the theoretical model on your training presented in an essentialist or constructivist way?

Was scepticism encouraged or resented? If 'resented' what does this indicate about the tutors' confidence in the theory being taught?

How do you address the above questions from an epistemological point of view?

I refer again to the chapter by Longino in Lederman and Bartsch (2001, pp. 213–224) because she not only analyses typical ways in which knowledge is inadequately constructed in hierarchical settings, but also constructed by the exclusion of necessary perspectives which would challenge normative, and frequently male, ways of thinking. She asserts: *As long as representatives of alternative points of view are not included in the community, shared values will not be identified as shaping observation or reasoning* (p. 219). In other words, if dissent and difference are not invited then value-laden 'normative' and hegemonic collusion may go unnoticed and become normatively oppressive.

Choose some central concepts on which your psychotherapeutic theory is premised. For example: unconscious, ego, splitting, transference, the field, projection, empathy, repression, introjection. From a *philosophical* point of view: how do you *know* that these key concepts 'exist'? Recalling that the allocation of the word 'table' to an object does not definitively describe the essence of the object but states something about the way people have labelled objects like that and the functions that tables normally have, what does your labelling 'unconscious', for example, say about the existence of and 'essence' of the unconscious? In what respects does the concept of the unconscious *function* in your theory? Would your theory collapse if it was discovered that the unconscious did not exist? Is the 'unconscious' merely a normal and 'standard' way of talking since Freud? What are the benefits/disadvantages of 'believing' these theoretical terms?

From a *psychological* point of view how do you *know* that these key concepts exist? That is, what kinds of psychological research evidence is there for the existence of these key concepts?

Suppose, and I think this unlikely given the problems related to objectifying subjectivity, that in the future cognitive scientists come to agree that the unconscious does not 'exist'. Suppose that further work in brain physiology and function along the lines of imaging and observations of brain function deficit following short- and long-term lesions—suppose that such work called into serious question the value of the concept of 'unconscious'.

Take these two suppositions reasonably seriously—what impact would their consequences have for your psychotherapeutic theory and for your practice as a psychotherapist?

Would the foundations of your theory collapse? Would 'unconscious' and an asserted scientific way of exploring it seem merely the creation of Freud's fantasies subsequently supported by wish-fulfilment on the part of generations of (unconsciously) optimistic psychotherapists? Bouveresse (1995) deals with some of these issues.

There are two reasons why I am posing and pressing these kinds of questions:

1. They represent questions which are actually being asked by a range of enquirers into the human condition. They also filter down to thoughtful people who do not pursue the questions with academic or professional vigour and rigour. These thoughtful people (potential psychotherapy 'trainees' included) may increasingly require carefully articulated responses before committing themselves to the projected benefits of therapy or training in psychotherapy.

2. They are questions/issues which I believe *ought* to be included in psychotherapeutic training. On the one hand to avoid blinkered commitment to the theory which the training offers, and on the other to encourage trainees to develop a sceptical sense of reflexivity in relation to themselves, their espoused theory, the 'iconic' (idolised?) originators of the theory, their practice and the massive amount of information which areas of related study are producing.

Addressing these questions/issues should, I believe, not only be integral to the nature of contemporary psychotherapy training, but should also be part of a wider responsibility of accountability and theoretical transparency vis-à-vis the general public. Like all matters which relate to people, there is an ethical dimension. Likewise there is also a political dimension. (See Samuels, 1993, 2001.)

I am well aware that some, probably most, psychotherapy training courses do not formally address these issues and I suspect a degree of anxiety and insecurity in relation to their probing nature. I also note the paradox of psychotherapy of all disciplines being defensive about exploring the validity of its own preferred concepts and practices.

And finally I notice that there is a proper and increasing pressure on the medical profession to provide 'evidence based medicine'. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence has been established for this purpose. In contrast to this and yet allied to it is the well-known placebo effect. There are, I propose, epistemological and evidence issues for psychotherapy here.

Summary

An over-commitment to a mono-theoretical psychotherapeutic position represents a romantic and simplified view of ways of being human and of the variety and diversity of human experiences.

Philosophical analysis is an essential ingredient for critical reflexivity and as such should be a necessary aspect of psychotherapy training.

Philosophy is in conflict with, and challenges, all forms of dogmatic knowing so it is therefore in conflict with dogmatically held psychotherapeutic 'mind myths' and 'mental metaphors'.

Epicurus stated: *Just as medicine confers no benefit if it does not drive away physical illness, so philosophy is useless if it does not drive away the suffering of the mind.* (Quoted in de Botton, 2000, p. 55.) Wittgenstein asserted that philosophy is therapy. Perhaps the potential for philosophy to provide therapy for therapists should be taken seriously.

And perhaps a challenge for psychotherapeutic theorising from Nagel (1986, p. 10):

I believe that the methods needed to understand ourselves do not yet exist.

But he is, perhaps, in sympathy with the psychotherapy project to the extent that he asserts:

We are in a sense trying to climb outside our own minds, an effort that some would regard as insane and that I regard as fundamental. (p. 11)

And a final quotation from Nagel, a philosopher whose work I find especially stimulating. He provides a summary of the task which perhaps psychotherapy and other related disciplines should espouse and for which philosophy is a necessary fellow traveller:

What is needed is something we do not have: a theory of conscious organisms as physical systems composed of chemical elements and occupying physical space, which also have an individual perspective on the world, and in some cases a capacity for self awareness as well ... An integrated theory of reality must account for this, and I believe that if and when it arrives, probably not for centuries, it will alter our conception of the universe as radically as anything has to date. (p. 51)

Philosophy is, potentially, a co-operative venture with psychotherapy but only if psychotherapists are willing to take the theoretical and existential risks and uncertainties involved in being philosophical. Philosophy could be therapeutic, but certainly not cosy. Co-operation is by no means a simple and collusive option.

I suggest that what Revonsuo (chapter on 'Prospects for a Scientific Research Programme on Consciousness' in Metzinger, 2000, p. 73) advocates for consciousness could be applied with similar validity to 'bizarre philosophical views' of psychotherapy:

In order to start developing a viable metaphysical foundation for the empirically based biological research programme, we need close collaboration between philosophy and empirical neuroscience, instead of the two fields finding themselves in opposition to each other. Postulating increasingly bizarre philosophical views of consciousness that could not be taken seriously as empirical scientific hypotheses will not be of much help. (p. 73)

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Résumé *La longue histoire de la philosophie ainsi que sa virulence continue et sa popularité croissante suggèrent qu'elle est une réponse aux besoins humains très profonds de comprendre et de créer une signification. La percolation du scepticisme dans la tradition philosophique indique la réticence d'accepter n'importe quelle signification spécifique. La pensée philosophique a parfois créé des Meta narratifs et s'est parfois engagée dans une critique des Meta narratifs. En particulier, la perception d'un conflit ou d'une coopération entre la philosophie et la psychothérapie dépend probablement de l'attitude vis à vis du contexte significatif des théories psychothérapeutiques. Si la théorie adoptée est considérée comme étant essentiellement vraie et applicable de façon universelle dans ses aspects majeurs, alors la philosophie—en particulier l'épistémologie—risque d'être perçue comme une menace et une exposition trop poussée ressentie comme un choc existentiel et théorique. Le but de cet article est de scruter la théorie psychothérapeutique au travers de l'épistémologie de manière à remettre en cause les approches essentialistes et la théorie psychothérapeutique et suggère que les théories essentialistes risquent de ne pas être tenable d'un point de vue épistémologique. J'ai rencontré une résistance de la part des psychothérapeutes à ce défis épistémologique et je soupçonne que cette position défensive est la résultat du sentiment d'être en danger. Les investigations philosophiques ne sont pas périphériques à la psychothérapie mais risquent d'être marginalisées si elles sont perçues comme une menace. Je pense que la psychothérapie et la philosophie pourraient avoir des buts de coopération semblables et je trouve la notion de Wittgenstein de la «philosophie en tant que thérapie» une remise en cause fascinate. Il est a propos de mentionner que cet article a vu jour grâce à une recherche bibliographique de fond pour l'enseignement d'un module conduisant à un doctorat en psychothérapie. L'impacte sur les psychothérapeutes de la gageure provenant d'une étude de l'épistémologie ne fait aucun doute.*

Zusammenfassung *Die lange Geschichte der Philosophie, seine fortdauernde Virulenz und zunehmende Popularität deutet an, dass sie eine Antwort auf die tiefen menschlichen Bedürfnisse nach Verständnis und die Kreation von Bedeutung ist. Die Penetration von Skepsis innerhalb der philosophischen Tradition weist auf eine Verweigerung der Annahme von spezifischer Bedeutung hin. Philosophische Gedanken haben manchmal Meta-Erzählungen kreiert und sich manchmal mit der Kritik von Meta-Erzählungen beschäftigt. Ob man Philosophie und Psychotherapie als konfliktbeladen oder kooperativ betrachtet, hängt wahrscheinlich von der eigenen Einstellung zu der Bedeutung psychotherapeutischer Theorien zu Milieu ab. Wenn die Haltung bedeutet, dass jegliche adoptierte Theorie im Grunde in ihren Hauptaspekten wahr ist und das sie eher mehr als weniger universelle Anwendbarkeit findet, dann kann Philosophie—speziell Erkenntnistheorie—als bedrohlich und als existentieller und theoretischer Schock aufgefaßt werden. Dieser Aufsatz versucht, psychotherapeutische Theorien derart unter erkenntnistheoretische Untersuchung zu stellen, dass existentialistische Annäherungen an psychotherapeutische Therorien herausgefordert werden; diese lassen vermuten, dass ungeprüftes essentialistisches Theorisieren aus erkenntnistheoretischer Sicht nicht unhaltbar ist. Ich bin auf einigen Widerstand unter Psychotherapeuten auf erkenntnistheoretische Herausforderungen gestoßen und vermute, daß eine Verteidigungschaltung aus der Empfindung von Bedrohung entstanden ist. Philosophische Untersuchungen sind nicht peripher für Psychotherapie, können aber marginalisiert werden, wenn als Bedrohung aufgefaßt. Meiner Ansicht nach könnten Psychotherapie und Philosophie ähnliche und kooperative Ziele haben, und ich nehme Wittgensteins Vorstellung von, „Philosophie als Therapie“ als faszinierende Herausforderung an. Es ist angebracht zu erwähnen, daß dieser Aufsatz als Hintergrundinformation für ein Element einer Doktorarbeit in Psychotherapie begonnen wurde. Es gab keinen Zweifel am Einfluß auf Psychotherapeuten betreffend die Herausforderungen, die aus der Studie von Erkenntnistheorie entstehen.*

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