

Reexamining the Psychoanalytic Corpse *From Scientific Psychology to Philosophy*

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Historically, psychoanalysis has been marginalized as being pseudoscientific, incoherent, incongruent, and unverifiable and, consequently, has been marginalized from mainstream scientific psychology. Recently, Robert F. Bornstein (2001) added to this criticism by predicting the demise of psychoanalysis unless it jumps on the academic–empirical bandwagon. Throughout this article, the author challenges Bornstein’s central arguments and attempts to show how philosophically informed approaches to theory and method provide a viable and equally privileged alternative to substantiating psychoanalytic thought.

In his recent article, “The Impending Death of Psychoanalysis,” Robert Bornstein (2001) claims that psychoanalysis as a discipline is withering on the vine mainly due to its (a) lack of empirical and scientific critique, (b) marginalization among the fields of contemporary psychology and psychiatry, and (c) tendency toward self-destruction due to mismanagement by its adherents. In the end, Bornstein advocates that only rigorous scientific and research-based interventions can resuscitate the psychoanalytic corpse. Despite the fact that many of us have a favorable attitude toward

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science, Bornstein makes it seem that psychoanalysis has no chance of surviving without it. In my opinion, his arguments are largely misguided, myopic, and in many instances based on informal fallacies. Although I cannot address every concern here, let me attend to a few gross misinterpretations of the overall status of psychoanalysis.

Bornstein seems to be living in a vacuum. Not only is psychoanalysis alive and well, it is flourishing. Psychoanalysis is unequivocally in vogue in academe and has become a central focus of contemporary European and North American intellectual life. Practically every major academic and commercial press has published at least one book (and in many cases several) on psychoanalysis within the past few years alone, and we may especially observe a resurgence of interest in Freud studies as represented by the humanities and social sciences including philosophy, literature, political theory, sociology, anthropology, psychobiology, theory of culture, history, religion, feminist thought, art and film studies, and the history of ideas. Furthermore, Bornstein seems to treat all psychoanalytic theory and technique as the same, neither taking into account the divergent species within the historical movement of psychoanalysis itself, nor showing familiarity with the burgeoning trends in contemporary psychoanalysis (e.g., intersubjectivity theory) that seek to advance conceptual thought and practice. And with the proliferation of psychoanalytic institutes and associations that are popping up in every major North American city, how could one even suggest that psychoanalysis is dying?

Bornstein claims that psychoanalytic concepts have all but disappeared from mainstream psychology; therefore, psychoanalysis must be wrong. There are a myriad of reasons why psychoanalysis does not share popularity among the professional masses, including value bias, conditioning, custom, historicity, and the politicalization of publishing, just to name a few. Quite frankly, psychoanalysis is among the most sophisticated of general psychological and clinical theories due to its convoluted nature, and it is no wonder that only a portion of the professional population (especially those who seek clear, precise, and unambiguous answers) would find this discipline appealing. Of course the majority of empirical-academic psychologists would prefer to research topics that are easier to manage and quantify, are of current interest to the public or the majority of professional audiences, attract attention and grant funding, and have the promise of producing statistical results. Otherwise they would not get published, which is one of their primary motives for conducting research in the first place. Although psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic psychologists may support and admire empirical work, on the whole they

are more interested in theory and applied clinical practice than number crunching. In addition, few have the time or inclination to empirically investigate something that they already believe has conceptual value and pragmatic utility.

One danger to Bornstein's blanket adherence to mainstream scientific psychology is that it devolves into cultural relativism: the consensus—what the majority of empirically trained researchers say—constitutes truth. For example, I did not realize that “free association” was no longer of “value,” or that defense mechanisms such as “repression” are no longer “useful.” Statements like these point to ignorance of the verity of psychodynamically informed clinical experience. Although any decent practitioner would simply dismiss this as nonsense that betrays daily clinical observation and bona fide confirmations from patients themselves, it also selectively ignores the extensive body of empirical literature on projective personality testing that precisely sets out to uncover, measure, and interpret these unconscious processes (e.g., see Exner's Rorschach system). What Bornstein is tacitly saying is that only quantitative empirical science holds the touchstone to truth.

Bornstein's central argument is that empirically controlled science unsubstantiates hence negates psychoanalysis; therefore, it must be so. This is a crass appeal to authority without even questioning the legitimacy of such a claim. When he is not using a straw man argument to erect a flimsy case against psychoanalysis, he is simply begging the question. He assumes that science is the ultimate standard to which psychoanalysis must aspire, and that “fact” and “truth” may only be mediated empirically. Bornstein is arguing in a circle: He takes as his presupposition that which he must set out to prove, namely, that empirical research—science—is the only legitimate means by which to judge the veracity of psychoanalytic doctrine. Although empirical psychology has immense value, it is simply bias and fallacious to equate truth or an absolute standard with empirical methodology at the expense of other equally viable and philosophically defensible methods such as discursive, dialectical, qualitative, phenomenological, hermeneutic, linguistic, historical, post-structuralist, social constructivist, narrative, deconstructivist, feminist, and logical approaches—each with their respective criteria.

A few more irritants: Bornstein complains that psychoanalysis is burdened by excess theoretical baggage and that it fails to follow the law of parsimony, thus leading to inefficiency. The reason why psychoanalysis cannot simply follow Occam's razor and jettison complexity is because the mind (and subsequently our understanding of human nature) is per-

plexingly complex. Psychoanalysis cannot and will not adhere to the “keep it simple stupid” mentality, and its robust theoretical body is what sets it apart from other psychological paradigms, many of which are philosophical embarrassments. Psychoanalysis resists simplicity and reductionistic strategies because, as Whitehead (1925) informs us, complexity would be imperiled by misplaced concreteness. This was certainly the motto Freud lived by: Seek simplicity, then dismiss it.

Bornstein (2001) paints three scenarios that speculatively foretell the fate of psychoanalysis. In the first, he advises us that “prevailing theoretical frameworks must be discarded and replaced with a single integrative model that connects seamlessly with cutting-edge research in mainstream psychology and medicine” (p. 12). But what if psychoanalysis continues to generate new paradigms and conundrums that challenge the mainstream’s way of thinking simplistically and reductively about human development and interaction? What if empiricism poses limitations to capturing a psychoanalytic account of the mind? In addition, there are severe philosophical problems associated with a “single integrative model,” simply because some psychoanalytic tenets clash with others, thus making a purely integrative theory impossible (Mills, 2000). For example, Lacan’s (1977) theoretical and clinical oeuvres radically oppose most psychoanalytic schools.

In the second and third scenarios, Bornstein asserts that other subfields of psychology could subject psychoanalysis to empirical rigor and thus make it a legitimate science under the guise of statistical psychology. These arguments seem to advocate reinventing the wheel and relabeling it as a novel discovery. Here I am reminded of Dollard and Miller (1950; see also Miller & Dollard, 1941), who boasted to have redefined psychoanalytic principles in terms of social learning theory (a cloaked variant of behaviorism), and ultimately explained that all cognitive mediation (including unconscious defense processes) was a motional series of micro-antecedent, stimulus–response (S-R) variants within a larger S-R framework (i.e., S-r-s-r-s-R). This is simplicity at its finest, not psychoanalysis. But to his credit, Bornstein foresees potential problems with his suggestion: he warns us against the possibility of an “unconscious plagiarism” in which researchers who were once exposed to psychoanalytic concepts may have a propensity to forget their source. I find this particularly amusing, as Bornstein (2001) dismisses the usefulness of repression on a previous page (see p. 8). If the fate of psychoanalysis rests on making it appealing to empirical psychology, and the only way it can be digested by the larger psychological community is to strip it of its old garb, divest it

of its original meaning and complexity, deny its ancestry, and corruptly pass it off as a new science with a new name, then who is deceiving whom? Bornstein heralds that psychoanalysis may only be saved if it adopts a firm scientific–empirical attitude, but he does not even bother to explain what he means by science. He implicitly defers to Grünbaum’s (1984) criticism of psychoanalysis as ultimately authoritative when Grünbaum is charged for adhering to a model of science based solely on verification and falsifiability that unfairly distorts psychoanalytic credibility and negates other equally valid conceptual models (see Levy, 1997). Bornstein simply takes it at face value that his criterion is superior when he offers no argument of why psychoanalysis should believe this in the first place. In addition, he also assumes science is a unified voice, when it clearly is not, a point that can equally be said for psychoanalysis. Furthermore, he talks as if empiricism follows the same methodology, when in practice it does not. Although Bornstein does not say this directly, I believe what ultimately fuels his argument is the underlying conviction that only empirical science can deliver us “objective truth” about psychological phenomena when, in fact, objectivity is always subjectively mediated, a point the German idealists cogently argued over two centuries ago.

The contentious nature of my argument is not that empiricism is illegitimate, only that there are other equally privileged ways of communicating and accounting for theoretical and clinical phenomena. Presupposing the superiority of empiricism begs the question of a legitimate discourse on method. In fact, it may be argued that empiricism becomes a fundamentally bankrupt criterion when applied to psychoanalytic concepts that by definition cannot be directly observed or measured. Take, for instance, Freud’s (1900/1953, 1933/1964) thesis that the unconscious cannot be directly known, but known only through the way in which it appears in the form of psychic derivatives. Freud’s approach, like Kant’s (1781–1787/1965), partially rests on an a priori logic of deduction: The unconscious is the noumenal *Ding-an-sich*—the ontological condition for consciousness to emerge. And it was precisely Freud himself who saw his creation as a science, what he later referred to as *Logos*—Reason!—the scientific intellect.

Psychology has a formidable proclivity to create incompatible, false dichotomies between science and philosophy, or what in modernity was referred to as the empiricism–rationalism debate. In fact, it was not until the arrival of William James that the disciplines of psychology and philosophy became sharply divided; up until then science *was* philosophy.

Bornstein will have us believe that psychoanalysis must conform to our current understanding of science as a quantifiably driven, empirically tested discipline which must gain recognition from mainstream psychology or it will die. From my standpoint, this is illusory and neglects the variegated alternative, compatible, and equally privileged approaches to clinical and conceptual truth that attempt to justifiably understand the human condition through philosophically mediated strategies. Many thoughtful psychoanalytic scholars have already argued the value of philosophy for the advancement of psychoanalytic thought (see Hanly, 1992; Lear, 1990; Mills, 2002; Orange, 1995; Ricoeur, 1970; Wollheim, 1990), thus demonstrating the efficacy of conceptual clarity, procedural inquiry, and the puissance of logical justification. And given that hundreds of nonempirically oriented subfields in the humanities and the social-behavioral sciences—relying instead on discursive, conceptual approaches to their work—are embracing psychoanalytic principles, talk of the demise of psychoanalysis seems to me to be merely the propaganda of scientific idolatry. Psychoanalysis does not need scientific psychology in order to survive and prosper; it already has. Although empirical verification may strengthen our position—itself a worthwhile aim to pursue—psychoanalysis will nevertheless continue to flourish and justify itself through clinical efficacy, cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary application, and rigorous philosophical fortification. In this sense, psychoanalysis will never die.

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