

FROM SEDUCTION FANTASY TO FAITH: THE EVOLUTION OF FREUD'S CONCEPTS OF TRUTH AND REALITY BETWEEN 1895 AND 1939

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Summary

Aims

The aims of this study are (a) to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the epistemology of psychoanalysis, (b) to provide a specifically psychoanalytic contribution to epistemology, and subsequently, (c) to point to the potential grounds and justification of contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice. These are derived primarily through a critical examination of Freud's concepts of truth and reality as they have emerged in the course of 45 years of his psychoanalytic writing.

Methods

This study is based on conceptual, historical and philosophical methodologies. The study traces a neglected line of evolution within Freud's thought, which begins with his early theories on the reality of seduction and culminates with his view on "historical truth" that lies at the foundation of religious faith. This evolutionary line, embedded in Freud's presentations of his clinical and theoretical formulations, focuses on the concepts of truth and reality. The development of Freud's ideas on these concepts and especially regarding the possibility of our coming to actually know truth and reality as they are, are critically investigated. This process includes systematic exploration and clarification of Freud's writing with special attention to the following:

- (a) Freud's explicit and implicit remarks regarding different categories of truth, such as empirical, artistic, religious, historical, and ethical truth.
- (b) Freud's explicit and implicit psychoanalytic formulations of psychological states associated with knowledge, such as understanding, conviction, doubt, and belief.
- (c) The relationship between the development of Freud's clinical and theoretical formulations and the development of his formulations regarding truth, reality, and knowledge.
- (d) Existing psychoanalytic positions and formulations regarding truth and knowledge (e.g., Bion, Winnicott) and their relationship to those presented in Freud's writings.
- (e) Existing philosophical perspectives regarding truth and knowledge. In addition to the literature pertaining to epistemological issues regarding scientific truth, philosophical perspectives on other categories of truth are also taken into account. Of special importance here are those philosophical perspectives (ancient and contemporary) that elaborate the role of the person, the knower, who is involved in the perceiving or understanding of the truth.

Results

This study brings to the fore an epistemological formulation that is latent in Freud's thinking and which is particularly relevant to the justification of contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice. While explicitly Freud held epistemological perspectives and criteria for justification of his theories that are within the realm of conventional empirical science, this study reveals other neglected perspectives and alternative criteria that are embedded in his thinking and writing. These alternatives

do not do away with the importance of the common scientific criteria, but rather form a broader epistemological framework in which the common criteria are given a new status. At the heart of this broader framework is a concern with the state of mind of the individual knower. The individual is ultimately presented by Freud as one whose mind is basically attuned to perceiving reality as it is. The external world is imprinted on the human mind in such a way that the mind is particularly capable of recognizing the external world. And while according to Freud the individual is driven towards such recognition, the propositional formulation of what we recognize is always inherently limited, distorted by the very words and perspectives necessary in order to convey the reality recognized. More detrimental to the possibility of knowing reality, however, is that fact that the individual's perception of reality is always potentially impeded by his wishes to impose himself on reality and in this way to see in the world what is desired, rather than to discover what is. Within this broad framework to know is based on attaining a certain state of mind, a valid state of conviction. To know is to be assured that one has overcome these impediments to perceiving reality and to experience the attunement between mind and world. The explication of this state of mind and the demonstration of epistemological value is a central part of this project. In this context the attempt to meet common scientific criteria for justification may be seen to be a meaningful step, but also a necessarily limited one.

In the course of this study these epistemological ideas are shown to be inherently psychoanalytical. They are integral to the evolution of psychoanalytic theory from Freud's early ideas on the distortive imposing impact of seduction, through his final ideas on the positive formative impact of trauma. They also are significantly expressed in Freud's clinical formulations of self-knowledge, self-doubt and the possibility of meaningfully attaining these, as well as in his formulations of the instinct for knowledge, and other experiences associated with it, such as the experiences of doubt and conviction. These epistemological ideas also find expression and come alive in Freud's own experiences of doubt and conviction as he put forth his theories in the absence of the kind of evidence that he would formally consider to be necessary for their justification. The implications of this psychoanalytical epistemological framework both for discourse within psychoanalysis and with philosophy are explored. Of special importance in this regard is the fact that this framework maintains a realist, non-relativist position regarding truth, but points to ways in which this truth can be grounded that extend beyond the criteria proposed by common scientific epistemological considerations. Also of importance is the value of this framework to the further elaboration of the philosophical thought of Georg Gadamer. The present study corrects the misreading of his ideas within psychoanalysis, pointing to their compatibility with those implied by Freud. It is shown how discourse between the ideas of these two thinkers enriches both psychoanalysis and philosophy.

Implications for psychoanalysis

The present study contributes to psychoanalysis by providing:

- a. a new perspective on the development of Freud's thinking and its relevance for contemporary psychoanalysis.
- b. a more comprehensive understanding of the epistemology of psychoanalysis
- c. new grounds and forms of justification for psychoanalytic thinking and practice.
- d. an illustration of the value of conceptual research within psychoanalysis
- e. an additional bridge between psychoanalysis and philosophy.

These implications are of special significance in the light of the contemporary debate on the value of psychoanalytic research and the possibility of justifying psychoanalytic propositions. Within this debate several dominant positions have emerged. On the one hand there is the attempt to validate psychoanalysis through the common criteria of empirical research. On the other, there are those who have rejected the value of such criteria through adopting a relativist, anti-realist perspective on truth. There is another dominant position whereby the truth of psychoanalytic propositions is considered to be of utmost importance, but their justification through the common criteria of empirical research is considered to be problematic and foreign to the concerns of psychoanalysis. However, attempts to

justify this last position have also been limited and problematic, at times relying merely on clinical illustration or on emphasis of the uniqueness of the analytic field that sets it beyond justification. The present study overcomes some of these limitations and problems. It shows not only that epistemological questions need to be addressed within psychoanalysis, but that the basic propositions of psychoanalysis have important epistemological implications. These implications when brought together into a comprehensive framework form an epistemological perspective that is fundamentally psychoanalytical and concerned with truth, but at the same does not isolate psychoanalysis, but rather justifies it on the basis of philosophical thought and argumentation.

Keywords

Conceptual research, conviction, epistemology, Freud, Gadamer, historical truth, seduction, trauma, truth

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