

The Problem of the Intermediary: On the Compatibility of Psychoanalytic Theory and Religion

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Abstract. Psychoanalytic theory appears to suggest that neurotic individuals need the assistance of a psychoanalyst to achieve psychological wholeness. Religion also posits the necessity of an external force if the individual is to achieve psychological wholeness. According to religion, however, this force is God. Attempts to make psychoanalytic theory compatible with religion appear to suggest that the psychoanalyst serves as a kind of intermediary between the patient, or analysand, and God. According to Kierkegaard, however, this would amount to making one human being “a god in relation to another human being.” But this, on his view, is precisely what religion denies. No human being can be a god in relation to another human being. This essay argues that the apparent opposition between the fundamental assumptions of psychoanalytic theory and religion is merely that: *apparent*. Psychoanalysis, properly understood, I argue, does not claim god-like significance for the psychoanalyst, and religion, properly understood, allows individuals to play significant roles in helping one another to achieve psychological wholeness.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, Christianity, witch doctors, neuroses, wholeness.

Introduction

“It is constitutive of neurotic conflict,” writes the philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear, “that the parts [of the psyche] are cut off from each other, and that real communication between them has become *impossible*. The aim of the psychoanalyst,” he continues, “is to overcome this structural impasse.”¹ Only by overcoming this impasse and thus reestablishing communication among the disparate parts of the psyche, Lear explains, can psychological wholeness be restored.

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¹ Jonathan Lear, “The Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis,” *A Companion to Socrates* (Blackwell, 2009), p. 453.

Psychoanalytic theory thus appears to suggest that the neurotic individual cannot attain psychological wholeness on his own, that he needs the assistance of some external force, namely, the psychoanalyst. Religion also posits the necessity of an external force if the individual is to achieve psychological wholeness. According to religion, however, this force is God. Any attempt to make psychoanalytic theory compatible with religion would appear to suggest that the psychoanalyst could serve as a kind of intermediary between the patient, or analysand, and God. But this, according to Søren Kierkegaard, is something no human being can do for another human being. The view, he argues, that a person needs the assistance of someone else in order to establish the proper relation to God, makes the assisting individual more than merely human. On this view, asserts Kierkegaard, a human being would be “a god in relation to another human being.”² But this is precisely what religion denies. No human being can be a god in relation to another human being.

I’m going to argue that the apparent opposition between the fundamental assumptions of psychoanalytic theory and religion is merely that: *apparent*. Psychoanalysis, properly understood, I will argue, does not claim god-like significance for the psychoanalyst, and religion, properly understood, allows individuals to play significant roles in helping one another to achieve psychological wholeness. That is, I will argue that psychoanalytic theory is not inherently anti-religious, and that religion allows psychoanalysis to play a role in helping individuals to achieve psychological wholeness.

I. The Religious Perspective on Psychological Wholeness

Kierkegaard takes up the question of how we are related to truth in his *Philosophical Crumbs*. According to Kierkegaard, there are two mutually exclusive ways of understanding our relation to truth. The first, which he identifies as “the Socratic account,” is that we are essentially in possession of the truth. The second, which he refers to initially only as “the alternative

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Crumbs and Repetition*, tran. M. G. Piety (Oxford, 2009), p. 165.

account,” but which he later reveals is the Christian account, is that we do *not* have the truth. “The Socratic view,” he asserts,

is that each individual is his own center and the world is centred around him, because his self-knowledge is a knowledge of God. This is how Socrates understood himself and, according to him, how everyone must understand himself and, with this in mind, how he must also understand his relation to another individual, always with equal humility and equal pride.³

The difficulty with such a view, according to Kierkegaard, is in its making self-knowledge equivalent to knowledge of God. Christianity posits a split between God and human beings that makes any attempt to understand God, or the ultimate nature of religious truth, problematic, so problematic, in fact, that the solution can be achieved only by God revealing it to human beings through the vehicle of the incarnation. One could argue, however, that the problem is not specific to Christianity, but to every religion that posits religious truth as transcendent. We may indeed be able to come to understand something about that truth merely through introspection, or with the assistance of the right sort of Socratic interlocutor, but something about it will always escape us.

From the Socratic perspective, we have the truth essentially, but have contingently forgotten it. We need a “teacher” only as an occasion to help us “remember” the truth we already possess. From the religious perspective, on the other hand, we do not have the truth. We are defined as “being outside the truth..., or as being in error.”⁴ But just as Socrates saw getting people to appreciate that they did not know what they thought they knew was prerequisite to their being able to attain true knowledge, so does religion assume that people must first appreciate the truth about their subjective situation before they can come to have the proper relation to religious truth. According to Christianity, this relation can be established only with the help of God’s appearance in the person of Christ. Christ, in Kierkegaard’s *Crumbs*, is referred to as “the teacher.” Unlike the Socratic teacher, however, Christ, Kierkegaard explains, “cannot contribute to the learner’s

³ Ibid., p. 90.

⁴ Ibid., p. 92.

remembering that he really knows the truth, because the learner is actually in a state of error.” Christ reminds the learner “not that he already knows the truth, but that he is in error. With respect to this act of consciousness,” Kierkegaard explains, “the Socratic applies. That is, the teacher, whoever he might be, even if he is a god, is only an occasion; because I can discover my own error only by myself. Only when I discover it, and not before, has it been discovered, even if the whole world knew it.”⁵

Kierkegaard’s concern in *Crumbs* is not initially with our knowledge of God. It is with our knowledge of ourselves, because until we come to understand our subjective situation as characterized by a profound need for transcendent truth, we won’t seek such truth. Yet it is only after we have first sought and then found transcendent truth that we can experience psychological wholeness.

II. The Nature of Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is an important means of attaining self-knowledge. The popular perception, however, is that psychoanalysis assumes a fundamental inability on the part of the patient, or analysand, to achieve this knowledge on his own. Analysts tend to be viewed as either possessing insight into the nature of the human psyche, and hence an ability to heal damaged psyches, that those who are not schooled in psychoanalytic theory cannot possibly possess, or as pretending to such knowledge and skill. They are seen as elevated above their patients, or as elevating themselves above them, as being viewed almost as gods, and at least occasionally, as encouraging such adulation.

Lear argues in an essay entitled “The Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis”⁶ that psychoanalysis is effectively a Socratic conversation where the analyst and the analysand are essentially on equal footing. Freud, observes Lear, “came to think that neurotic suffering was the outcome of conflict between different parts of the soul,” which is to say between the id, the ego, and the superego. Lear’s thesis is that psychoanalysis is a type of

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶ Jonathan Lear, “The Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis,” in *A Companion to Socrates*, eds. Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar (Blackwell, 2009), pp. 442-462.

conversation that helps to “bring about structural change in the psyche” that undoes the “neurotic structure” and establishes “healthy relations between what had hitherto been warring parts.”⁷

But does such structural change in the psyche *require* the assistance of an analyst? Lear’s account of psychoanalysis actually suggests that it does not. Lear gives an example which he takes from an article by Lawrence Levenson in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*⁸ of an analysand, whom he calls Mr. A, who sought analysis because though he was outwardly successful, “inwardly he felt anxious and inhibited.” He felt that he was wearing a mask to conceal his *real* “ugly, nasty”⁹ self. Toward the end of an apparently successful analysis, Mr. A developed a cough that he interpreted himself might be an expression of angry feelings he harboured toward his analyst.

But why, he wonders, would he be angry with his analyst? The analyst had not done anything but “been there.” “Maybe that’s why,” the analyst responds. This response gives rise to a torrent of hitherto unacknowledged angry feelings from Mr. A. “What is striking about neurotic conflict,” observes Lear,

is that it makes thoughtful evaluation *all but* impossible. Mr. A is disappointed he has not received a magical cure; and he is angry at his analyst for not giving him one. But he would also be embarrassed to recognize those wishes. And he is afraid of his own anger – indeed, he is angry at himself about his own anger. On top of that, he is genuinely grateful to his analyst for all the help he has received. He has grown in many ways, and he is proud of that. Nevertheless, instead of being able to take up all these conflicting and ambivalent feelings and think about what he wants to do with them all, he develops a cough. The cough becomes a kind of nucleus of the conflict – expressing his angry feelings while also keeping them under cover. This is what makes Mr. A’s conflict neurotic: the aspiring and pretending parts of the soul cannot find

⁷ Ibid., p. 452.

⁸ Lawrence Levenson, “Superego defense analysis in the termination phase,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 46 (1998), pp. 847-866.

⁹ Ibid., p. 453.

any genuine way to communicate; and lacking this, they conflict in ways that have bizarre and often unwelcome manifestations.¹⁰

But instead of offering Mr. A an interpretation of the psychological significance of his cough, “the analyst invites the analysand back to his own just-spoken words.”

“You haven’t done anything but been here.”

...

The analyst’s remark – “Maybe that’s why” – brings Mr. A back to his own words [continues Lear] – and thus back to the feelings of gratitude and puzzlement he has just been experiencing – and invites him to listen to another voice [i.e., the voice of complaint] that may also be getting expressed in the here and now.

...

In effect, the analyst’s remark invites Mr. A to use his own words to perform a bridging function between the aspiring and pretending parts of the soul. He can now actually consider his conflicting feelings and think about how he feels overall.

...

It is important [observes Lear] that by ‘maybe the analyst actually means *maybe*. The analyst, like Socrates, genuinely does not know. Instead of offering an answer, the analyst extends an invitation to the analysand to *bring out the irony for himself*.¹¹

But if the analysand *is* actually able to bring out the irony for himself, then communication between the parts of his psyche has *not* actually become *impossible*, as Lear initially claimed, but only very difficult, as is indicated by the wording with which the presentation of this case begins: “What is striking about neurotic conflict,” observes Lear, “is that it makes thoughtful evaluation *all but* impossible.” Not *actually* impossible, “all but” impossible, which is to say, only very difficult. Thoughtful evaluation is facilitated by the analyst, but the analysand is essentially capable of it on his own, even if it is very difficult. It is precisely because the analysand is essentially capable of such evaluation that the role of the psychoanalyst is Socratic.

¹⁰ Lear, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 455-456; emphasis added.

But to say that a person is essentially capable of doing something on his own is not the same thing as saying he *will* do it on his own. Socrates demonstrates in Plato's dialogue the "Meno" that Meno's slave boy is essentially capable of understanding the Pythagorean theorem on his own, but even students in an intro philosophy class know it's extremely unlikely he would ever do so without the assistance of Socrates' questions. This essential capability is profoundly mysterious in that while most people have no trouble understanding the Pythagorean theorem with the right instruction, they would not be able to come up with this geometrical insight on their own, but can arrive at it only as a product of a particular type of human interaction.

Genuine understanding is not the product of didactic instruction, or a superior teacher imparting to an inferior student information of which he had hitherto been ignorant. Genuine understanding, Plato makes clear, while it may require the right kind of questioning from the right sort of interlocutor, is a product of an individual's working out the insight for himself (Meno 85 c10-d4). According to Socrates, only after an individual has worked out the logic of a truth for himself, has he really understood it. Genuine instruction is thus a conversation of a sort, between equals. This is as true of psychoanalysis as of instruction in geometry. The psychoanalyst can no more force self-knowledge on an analysand than Socrates can force knowledge of the Pythagorean theorem on a slave boy.

Human beings are profoundly social and hence need one another not merely in a practical sense, but in a spiritual sense as well. "[T]he deeper meanings which shape a person's soul and structure his outlook," writes Lear in *Love and Its Place in Nature*, "are not immediately available to his awareness. A person is, by his nature, out of touch with his own subjectivity. (...) The only way to get at these deeper meanings is through a peculiar human interaction."¹² "The unrelated human being," writes C. G. Jung, one of the founders of psychoanalytic theory, "lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a 'You'."¹³

¹² Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 4.

¹³ C. G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Transference," *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 16 *The Practice of Psychotherapy* (Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 244.

The human psyche is so complex that no one can come to understand himself without a great deal of effort. Just as there was a Pythagoras, however, so are there likely human beings who need little *explicit* assistance from others to come to understand themselves. Most of us *do* need such assistance, however, if we are to come to know ourselves at the deepest level. But the assistance offered by the psychoanalyst does *not* elevate him above his patient in a God-like manner. No psychoanalyst can force self-knowledge on an analysand. Analysis is essentially a conversation between equals, even if one of the parties in the conversation is a little more expert than the other in directing the conversation in productive ways.

Jung expressed the view that psychoanalysis was essentially a conversation between equals in 1935 in an essay entitled “Principles of Practical Psychotherapy.”¹⁴ “If I wish to treat another individual psychologically at all,” he writes,

I must for better or worse give up all pretensions to superior knowledge, all authority and desire to influence. I must perforce adopt a dialectical procedure consisting in a comparison of our mutual findings. But this becomes possible only if I give the other person a chance to play his hand to the full, unhampered by my assumptions. In this way his system is geared to mine and acts upon it; my reaction is the only thing with which I as an individual can legitimately confront my patient.¹⁵

The therapist, explains Jung, is not “an agent of treatment but a fellow participant in the process of individual development.”¹⁶

III. Psychoanalysis and Religion

Psychoanalysis is often considered inherently atheistic. This is due partly to Freud’s critical remarks about religion in his famous work *The Future of an Illusion*,¹⁷ but also undoubtedly to the increasing hostility

¹⁴ C. G., Jung, “Grundsätzliches zur praktischen Psychotherapie,” *Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie*, VIII (1935): 2, pp. 66-82. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (*The International psycho-analytic library*), 1928.

toward religion of contemporary Western intellectuals as exemplified, for example, in the writings of the so-called “new atheists.”¹⁸ This hostility is likely shared by at least some practicing psychoanalysts whose views of religion are so unsophisticated as to reduce it effectively to superstition.

The psychoanalytic community was not, even in its earliest days, universally hostile, however, to religion. The Swiss priest Oskar Pfister was, for example, one of the founding members of Zurich branch of the *Internationalen Psychoanalytischen Vereinigung*. Pfister published many works in what is now known as pastoral psychology, including a response to Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*, entitled “The Illusion of a Future,” in which he asks whether Freud’s belief in the eventual triumph of reason over religion did not itself conceal a wish that created a new illusion – a scientific (i.e., *wissenschaftlich*) illusion.¹⁹ Jung observed that all religions were in essence “psychotherapeutic systems” (Jung, p. 193). “Not only Christianity with its symbols of salvation,” he wrote, “but all religions, including the primitive with their magical rituals, are forms of psychotherapy which treat and heal the suffering soul, and the suffering body caused by the soul” (Jung, p. 16).²⁰ But to assert that religions have psychotherapeutic value is not the same thing as asserting that psychoanalytic theory is essentially compatible with religion. Perhaps psychoanalysis is a superior psychotherapeutic system that necessarily supersedes these earlier systems. If we return, however, to the view of psychoanalysis as a type of conversation between equals, we can see that it does not conflict with the religious view that psychological wholeness can ultimately be found only in the proper relation to transcendent religious truth. And indeed, Lear argues convincingly for the compatibility of religion and psychoanalytic theory in his book on Freud.²¹

¹⁸ The “new atheists” is generally taken to refer to Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens.

¹⁹ Oskar Pfister, “Die Illusion einer Zukunft” *IMAGO*, Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften XIV (1928) 2-3.

²⁰ This might perhaps explain the fact that research suggests witch doctors are often as effective as are psychiatrists in the treatment of psychological disorders. That is, witch doctors presumably belong to what Jung identifies as “primitive” religions and hence also have their own psychotherapeutic systems. See E. Fuller Torrey, M.D., *Witch Doctors and Psychiatrists: The Common Roots of Psychotherapy and Its Future* (New York, Harper & Row, 1986).

²¹ Jonathan Lear, *Freud* (Routledge, 2005), pp. 203-209.

The purpose of the psychoanalytic conversation is to deepen self-knowledge in a way that is empowering to the analysand. Such self-knowledge is essential from the perspective of religion because it includes a knowledge of one's need for transcendent truth. Even if we do not immediately appreciate this about ourselves, we would appear to have at least an intimation of it. We want to know ourselves, and even Socrates appears to have found this challenging. "Despite the fact," observes Kierkegaard,

that Socrates used all his powers in an effort to understand human nature and to know himself, despite the fact that he has been lauded through the centuries as the person who best understood human nature, he claimed the reason he was disinclined to contemplate the natures of creatures such as Pegasus and Gorgon was that he was not quite certain whether he (the expert on human nature) was a stranger monster than Typhon* or a gentler and simpler being, that by nature participated in something divine (*cf.* Phaedrus, 229e).²²

Socrates did achieve *some* insight into human nature, however, or at least into his own nature, and that insight is expressed in his humility. He did not know the nature of his relation to the divine. This knowledge is precisely what we lack as well, according to Kierkegaard. Like Socrates, however, we can come to understand this about ourselves, and this understanding is a crucial step in what one could call our path toward the divine. "With respect to this act of consciousness," Kierkegaard asserts, "the Socratic applies." What we cannot do is get beyond this ignorance without divine assistance, and psychological wholeness, according to religion, requires that we get beyond it.

The truth, according to Kierkegaard, is that God is love, and what that means for us as individuals is that we are loved, which is to say that we are lovable. But this "insight" about ourselves is something we find almost impossible to sustain. Ultimately, according to Kierkegaard, only God can make this possible for us. In order for God to make this possible, however, we must first come to understand that we need God, and making us aware, in a sense, of this need is something with respect to which it appears our fellow human beings, and in particular, psychoanalysts, can play a role.

²² Kierkegaard, *Crumbs*, p. 111.

But religion does not necessarily limit psychoanalysis to a merely negative role in establishing psychological wholeness. Psychoanalysis can do more than help us come to understand how much we need God. Faith that God is love is inseparable from faith that we are loved by God, and hence *lovable*. It is this faith that ultimately enables us to come to know ourselves as we truly are, according to Kierkegaard. But would such faith in *divine* love be possible if we had not first experienced *human* love? How could we understand that God is love and hence that we are loved, if we didn't know what love was? We must first learn what love is, it would seem, from our relationships with other human beings.

This is where psychoanalysis can play a positive role in the life of a religious individual or in the life of an individual from the perspective of religion. Tanya Lurhmann writes in her book *Of Two Minds* that "Freud remarked, in a letter to Carl Jung, that psychoanalysis is a cure through love."²³ This is Lear's position in his book *Love and Its Place in Nature*. "Love in Lear's sense," Lurman explains, means "wise nurturing. He sees that nurturing embodied in a fundamental analytic commitment

that for therapy to be therapeutic, an analyst must engage emotionally with a patient and must empathize and sympathize (to some extent) with the patient, and that through this process the patient may grow into a better-formed individual with a more developed sense of inner responsibility and freedom. Analysts believe that respect and love for others grow along with respect and love for oneself and that respect and love for oneself can be nurtured by a caring analyst. Analysts talk about their patients as if they thought of themselves as wise mentors or parents. They obviously care for their patients, and they care deeply. No other word but "love" quite captures this emotional tone of an analyst's involvement with his patients.²⁴

Ultimately, for Kierkegaard, a person will not be able to love himself properly until he has accepted that God is love and that hence to love both oneself and others is what one could call the proper order of the universe.

²³ T. M. Lurhmann, *Of Two Minds: An Anthropologist Looks at American Psychiatry* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), p. 200.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

The loving attention of the analyst can serve not only to help an individual discover for himself his profound need for transcendent truth, it can also be an important means of helping him to understand something of the nature of that truth. We understand what love is, however imperfectly, because we have experienced it ourselves in our relationships with other people.

The analyst is not an intermediary between the patient and God any more than any other loving human relationship, properly understood, inserts itself between the individual and God. All love points toward God as its transcendent source. Each of us can be a sign in that sense for others. Religion requires, in fact, that we endeavour to do this. The psychoanalytic conversation is one of the ways we do this, even if the “other,” the “You,” we are ultimately seeking is not the “you” of the psychoanalyst, but the person of God.

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