

PSYCHOANALYSIS, LANGUAGE, AND PRAGMATISM: (DISCUSSING MARCIA CAVELL'S LECTURE "CON- SCIOUSNESS AND THE HUMAN DOMAIN")

Federal University of Bahia. November, 2011.

João José R. L. De Almeida
State University of Campinas
joajose@unicamp.br

Psychoanalysis was founded with the publication of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a book in which he claimed a decisive and crucial role for the unconscious in the psychic life. The unconscious is a subdivision of the mind, responsible for transforming sensations into representations, that is also connected with a repression system. The point is that the psychic apparatus is in charge of self-defense against dangerous representations, and, for that reason, such concomitants of sensations are subjected to distortions (condensations and displacements) in the unconscious when the system learns that they can be threatening. This way they could be discharged as non-threatening responses in action or word-representations. According to Freud, dreams are the royal road to the unconscious just because the work of repression is caught more directly in oniric productions. Dreams always seem puzzling, but, since they are involuntary, the dreamer never tries to give coherence to their distortions, as she can do with her symptoms. Thus, deciphering them, the sort of work which characterized psychoanalysis, means to reach directly the real motives of repression, the same repression which is also the cause of seemingly irrational behavior manifested as symptoms. So, if the basic function of the psychic apparatus as a whole is, according to the book, the pursuit of pleasure, these internal subdivisions of the mind could produce, as a result, not what would normally be expected, the unloading of tensions in the form of word or action (the so-called "pleasure"), but all sorts of symptoms which can also be reflected in dreams.

This is, in a nutshell, Freud's original basic idea of psychoanalytic theory and clinics. But eleven years later, there were a series of attempts to reinterpret the main assumptions of his innovative therapy of psychic suffering. All these attempts, however, turned out to be schisms or dissensions inside the movement.

I would like to remember some of these schisms. Adler, in 1911, was the first to attempt to review Freud. The young Austrian doctor placed the tendency to neurosis in a feeling of inferiority that was repressed as early as the first child's relationship with sexuality. Soon after, in 1912, there was a split with Stekel, a former extravagant and fanatic follower of Freud's theories, who bothered the members of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Society by the suspicion that his case studies were actually made up. In 1913, it was the turn of Jung's break off because of dissensions about the theory of libido. That caused a tremendous impact even on Freud's theory of narcissism, reformed in 1914 primarily to make clear the differences with respect to both Adler and Jung. In 1926, Rank, one of the most faithful of Freud's disciples, claimed that the trauma of birth completely determines the unconscious life, and this divergent thinking led him out of the rows of Freudianism.

Due to such theoretical differences, a Secret Committee was created among members of the Psychoanalytical Society, and developed its functions between 1912 and 1927 which was in fact to ensure orthodoxy as well as to preserve the Freudian doctrine from any kind of unwelcomed distortion. The members of such Committee were Freud, Jones, Abraham, Sachs, Ferenczi, and Rank himself, who was a later heretic and finally put outside the movement.

By means of actions like these, Freudianism was maintained unchanged and became to be known as the most influential psychological theory of the 20th century. Nonetheless, despite all those attempts to keep intact the doctrine, both small and large disagreements inevitably showed up in the years to come, and objections had not been avoided to what began to be viewed at the time as an odd and inexplicable “epistemological dualism”, splitting the theory between the naturalism of the psychological facts and the humanism originating from the need for interpretation of the meaning of those empirical data. I am not claiming that such dualism really exists in Freud’s theory, but actually that Freudianism began to be perceived as an extravagant mixture of scientific empiricism and humanist interpretation. Thus, the emerging criticism denounced the enigmatic coexistence of the energetic with the hermeneutical, the hydrodynamic with the symbolic, and the abstract with the concrete, the method with the doctrine, in accordance with the author’s philosophical preference across time, in the same discourse. As a result, we have seen, for the one side, a kind of lame positivism supported by the psychoanalytic orthodoxy, and, for the other side, schisms, equally positivists, that were divided between reformers and revolutionaries, but all embodied of the same odd and until then inexplicable dualism.

Completely different from the naturalistic and dogmatic taste seen until then, I would like to evoke Lacan’s epistemological innovations. Lacan rejected the mentioned dualism since the very beginning, and sought to return to the sense of Freud’s proposal instead of following the empiricism embraced by most of the psychoanalytic theoretical tradition at that time. Such effort to change the theory was inchoate in the early 30’s and 40’s, but it was powerfully engaged in the 50’s and 60’s, to become a revolutionary dissent in the late 60’s and in the 70’s in the midst of student’s protests and the fervor of the counterculture that agitated Paris in those years. Lacan put psychoanalysis literally by inside out, changing completely all its theoretical concepts and clinical trials, and giving it definitely a not trivial sociological and linguistic status.

I highlight, from these evocations of the history of psychoanalysis, the almost automatic overcoming of the epistemological dualism criticism when one revisit the assumptions of psychoanalysis by means of a theory of language. I am not sure whether one can claim uncontroversially that Lacan has used a theory of language at all, but he is certainly based on a good amount of linguistic assumptions taken from structuralists like Lévi-Strauss and Saussure. Such repertoire permitted him to innovate the theory and the clinics of psychoanalysis permanently, and we were able, for the first time, to escape from the epistemological uncertainty of the psychological theories. This is to claim that an internalized point of view in first-person (characteristic of the Cartesian approach of mind) was replaced, in the “language”, by a view that is externalist or sociological.

In the work that Marcia Cavell has been developing since the 70’s, and mainly in the book published in 1993, *The Psychoanalytic Mind*, such dualism is also automatically overcome by means of the resumption of classic concepts of psychoanalysis through a theory of language. In this case, by means of the *radical interpretation* proposed by Donald Davidson. This philosophy of language allowed

Cavell to think in a coherent way both the status of the subject and of the unconscious as well as the clinical implications of this way to address the psychological facts, so to say. In a way, however, completely distinct from the one applied by Lacan.

Davidson, as we know, was an author who managed to gather very accurately, in a single theory of mind and action, terms as different as truth, belief, desire, action, meaning, reason, cause, world, my mind, other minds and language. Classical logic is perfectly preserved in his thought, the critical dialogue with the philosophy is also respected within the more traditional academic standards, and the development of his theory is consistent from beginning to end. Following the tradition of the best-known productions of analytic philosophy, this philosopher has created one of the most innovative thoughts of the 20th century. Some authors have even compared him to Derrida, a philosopher of a completely different philosophical tradition. Following, however, warnings and precautions that traditionally belong to the analytical philosophy, the metaphysical weight loaded by the Davidsonian theory is much lighter than Lacan's, who, juggling with theoretical concepts, often turns language into a substantiated thing, almost like a third person.

For Davidson, language is not taken as a personality with a life of its own. The so-called "autonomy of language" is, for Davidson, a triangulation between an I, an other, and the world, within an interpretative movement that characterizes language as a form of action. Subjectivity is not treated as a powerless victim of language, but as a form of interacting with it. This form of linguistic action by which language is actually conceived in his theory, came to be called "radical interpretation" – to recall the kinship with the "radical translation" from Quine. Davidson's theory claims that we carry with us a certain amount of necessary assumptions of language and meaning, without which nothing of what we say and do could be understood. It means the following: First, that most of what one says must be true. Second, that there is a causal relationship among what one believes, desires and does. And, third, that the context that surrounds belief, desire and action is a coherent totality.

By means of these parameters, i.e., by means of such rules or required assumptions of sense and language, the challenge faced by Cavell was to explain the neurosis, or irrational behaviors, within a theory based essentially on a consistent logic and rationality. Taking as a starting point such rules, phenomena like irrationality and incommensurability come to be just optical illusions.

How was this task done?

Cavell revisited Davidson's partitioning of mind, elaborated according to Freud's second topics. Under this approach, the mind consists of a number of semi-independent substructures, each one with their own thoughts, memories and desires, which act on their own. This way, considering the best decisions possible, an action may eventually overrule another action of the same person, since one part of the mind works, in terms of reasons and causes, in a manner relatively independent of the other part of the mind, and so it generates a conflict among different subdivisions.

There were criticisms, of course, to the principle of the partitioning of the mind, in the sense that it would tacitly include the homuncular hypothesis of thought. The main one is Mark Johnston's (1988), according to which Davidson's solution to the problem of irrationalism would lead to the assumption that each homunculus would host a different thought and a different will within the same mind. Johnston claims that the solution to the problem of irrationality should be not to understand rationality as constitutive of mental life. He maintains that our conclusions and attitudes must be considered as automatic reactions or blind obedience to a given set of reasons.

One could say that Cavell is right in claiming, in the final chapter of her 1993 book, that to postulate a homunculus inside the mind would be too much given that we cannot think illogically about reasons and causes for an action. The illusion of small selves inside of one self, or an autonomy leading to an action, is merely a difference of temporal stratification of the mind, acting in conjunction with the acquisition of certain habits and automatisms whose reasons are already erased when one compares them to other more recent acquired reasons. This is why much of the psychoanalysis is devoted to understand what happened during infancy.

All of this is in perfect agreement with what Cavell has told us today. That is, that the *I* is not a thing, a Cartesian substance, but a result of the development of self-awareness during the course of multiple interactions a child has with others and the world. It is, therefore, the establishment of a huge dialogical field, composed of several interpersonal relationships along the years, the first of these being, in the life of any person, the relationship with one's mother or her representative.

So, my questions for today are the following.

It is well accepted that Davidson and Wittgenstein widely agree in their philosophies of language (as mentioned by several authors, including Cavell 1993 and today's presentation). If this is true, why do they not agree precisely in taking reasons as causes? For Wittgenstein, cause is grammatically related to the empirical world; and reason is grammatically related to the logical or conceptual world.

Secondly, by dismissing the symbiosis between reasons and causes, could not one say that the weight of rationality and logic in the explanation of actions would be much smaller? And, in this case, could not one say that the mental partitioning theory is weakened?

And, finally, in the third place, given that both Wittgenstein (when he gives priority to act over action), and Lacan (when he gives priority to the real over the symbolic and the imaginary) emphasize the importance of subjectivity regarding language, could not one say that healing comes merely from the claim that meaning (and rationality) is simply a construct?

References

- Cavell, Marcia (1993). *The Psychoanalytic Mind: From Freud to Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Johnston, Mark (1988). "Self-Deception and the Nature of Mind". In: Rorty, A. (ed.) *Perspectives on Self-Deception*. Berkeley: University of California Press.