

Psychoanalysis and the power of deconstruction-reconstruction
of symbolic, semiotic and existential life experiences
– the talking cure in severe trauma

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Abstract

The linear approach to reality that supports the division of human existence in “have(s) and have-not(s)”, as any dichotomy, enables simplification and the perceived expectation of control which, in turn, leads to the organization of solutions to these black-and-white problems. This reductive approach has some advantages but it blocks the way to an alternative that accepts the risks of an open-end approach. This alternative approach may focus on complexity and not on problem-solution quick-fixes. The key issue is that partial and local solutions may be searched for and used whilst - and simultaneously - their intrinsic limitations are constantly being questioned. This implies that their frailties may be dealt with through continuous openness to better answers and to greater degrees of understanding. Meaning-making, symbolic reasoning and open interpretation are examples of approaches that characterize human being’s capacity to question and to inquire and that may be seriously limited through the experience of severe traumatic events. Trauma leads to closure and to the interruption of natural developmental processes of mental growth. Psychoanalysis offers powerful theoretical and therapeutic insights that have opened the ground for intervention in these cases. This intervention is complex in itself and the workings of the talking cure may be better understood through their impact at symbolic, semiotic and existential levels of life as it is experienced, both by the patient and by the psychoanalyst. The present paper addresses these processes and it argues that relational psychoanalysis, centred on the dynamic experiences on the analytic pair, are crucial, both for the understanding of the power of psychoanalysis and for the understanding of the process of cure itself, of this cathartic healing talking cure.

No conflict of interests apply.

Key-words: mental growth, development, psychoanalytic cure, symbolic reasoning, semiotics, existentialism, relational psychoanalysis.

Psicanálise e o poder da desconstrução-reconstrução das dimensões
simbólica, semiótica e existencial da experiência de vida
– a cura pela fala no trauma agudo

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Resumo

A perspectiva dicotómica e redutora, a preto e branco, que divide a existência humana entre “os que têm e os que não têm”, não importa a que factor diga respeito, factor entendido aqui como problema a ser resolvido, permite a simplificação e a percepção de uma expectativa de controlo, a qual, por sua vez, leva à organização de soluções para estes problemas. Esta abordagem redutora tem algumas vantagens. Contudo, bloqueia as saídas que explorem alternativas ligadas a abordagens de final aberto, uma vez que não permite aceitar esse tipo de risco. Estas abordagens alternativas focam a atenção na complexidade e rejeitam a busca de respostas automáticas e minimalistas. A questão central é a de que soluções parciais e locais podem ser procuradas enquanto, simultaneamente, as suas limitações intrínsecas são tidas em conta e, ainda, tais soluções são permanentemente questionadas de forma construtiva. Assim, estas abordagens alternativas implicam que as fragilidades podem ser geridas através da abertura contínua a melhores soluções e a níveis crescentes de entendimento dos fenómenos em causa. A construção de sentido, o raciocínio simbólico e a interpretação aberta são exemplos de abordagens que caracterizam a capacidade do ser humano para questionar e para inquirir, as quais, estas capacidades, podem estar seriamente limitadas pela experiência de acontecimentos traumáticos graves. O trauma leva ao fechamento e à interrupção dos processos naturais de desenvolvimento e de crescimento mental. A psicanálise oferece quer poderosas concepções teóricas, quer eficazes abordagens terapêuticas, as quais permitiram abrir caminho para a intervenção nestes casos de trauma agudo e grave. Esta intervenção é complexa em si mesma. O processo de funcionamento desta cura pela palavra pode ser melhor entendido através do impacto ao nível simbólico, semiótico e existencial da vida, tal como esta é experimentada, quer pelo paciente, quer pelo analista. O presente artigo aborda estes processos e argumenta que a psicanálise relacional, centrada nas experiências de relacionamento dinâmico entre o par analítico, são cruciais para a análise e compreensão do poder da psicanálise e do processo de cura em si mesmo – a cura catártica pela fala.

Não se verificam conflitos de interesse.

Palavras chave: crescimento mental, desenvolvimento, cura psicanalítica, raciocínio simbólico, semiótica, existencialismo e psicanálise relacional.

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Introduction

The present paper presents an analysis of trauma through the broader lenses of the civilisation issues that are at stake, whenever a complex multidimensional concept is being scrutinised. It argues that certain misconceptions and reductionist approaches – civilisation based dominant thinking misconceptions - present serious limitations regarding the capacity to interpret limit-situations such as severe trauma.

Once the broader picture is misaligned with reality, with a more complex and subtle perspective of reality, then there is a sequence of limitations that may prevail. Part of these limitations is the consequence of an excessive abstraction from the experience of life, from how life is lived. Therefore, there is the need to highlight how trauma analysis may be integrated in the life-long processes of meaning-making, that is, of making sense of existence. Furthermore, this analysis must take into account this experience of being alive both in daily quotidian life and in intensive turning-points, both positive and negative, as happens in limit-situations.

The present work is supported by both psychoanalytic and philosophical literature. The relational approach to psychoanalysis is crucial as it addresses the issues of intersubjectivity, which may go the furthest way possible in terms of interpreting psychoanalysis as a continuation of how life itself is lived. This focus on how life is experienced enables the integration of the psychoanalytic process in an effective way, one which considers both sides of the analytic pair. Further still, it assumes the frailties and power of both sides, both analyst and patient.

More importantly, relational psychoanalysis is patient-centred, that is, it unconditionally shifts the balance of power to the patient. Patient's empowerment creates the best possible conditions for the emergence of his or hers full potential. No matter the seemingly chaotic state, de-structured reasoning and dysfunctional modes of existence, there must be a total faith that the little power that remains in the patient's own hands, will be sufficient to invert the previously fixed vicious circle that imprisons him or her into themselves.

This insight, this patient-centred focus, must first come from the analyst side. Critically, it must be grounded in a thorough familiarity with the analyst's - as well as the civilisation's dominant thinking - limitations and misconceived perceptions. Only from this foothold is it possible to break the walls of passivity and accommodation to that which renders humans infinitely miserable in terms of their experience of how life itself is lived.

The relational tradition of psychoanalysis may be traced back to Bion (1984) and Winnicott (2000), as well as to the Portuguese authors, such as Matos (2006) and Dias (2008).

Psychoanalysis, existentialism and semiotics have been explored through different angles by a myriad of thinkers, from Jung (1959), to Frankl (1970), Lacan (2004) and Kristeva (1998).

Semiotics, in the twentieth century, has been grounded in the works of two giants, Saussure (1959) and Peirce (1955).

Existentialism and ontological phenomenology, from life philosophy to practical philosophy, to anti-philosophy, also covers a wide spectrum of authors, including Heidegger (1962), Jaspers (1971), Henry (1975), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Ricoeur (1981), Gil (1996), Wittgenstein (1958) and Foucault (1970).

As the present paper focuses on how life itself is lived and on how such lived experience is framed by our worldviews, then, there is no limit to the literature that may support this positioning. In particular, the focus of this work is on the lived experience framed by worldviews that are, in turn, framed by the civilisation specificities and idiosyncrasies that offer a historical context and a geographical environment to such cosmology or worldview.

Biographical texts (eg. Hillesum, 1996), as well as literature in general (eg. Llansol, 1994, Lispector, 1943 Arendt, 2007, Riccobono, 2011), are prolific in offering such interpretations and insights, of both life as it is experienced and of how civilisation frames that experience.

1 Scientific communities and psychoanalytic practice

The effectiveness of psychoanalytic practice is rooted in contemporary perceptions of how humans think about themselves, that is, humans frame their thought through their civilisation lenses' dominant-thinking. The present section addresses the importance of scientific communities' self-critical practices and of how the identification of such thread may lead to new directions in terms of how psychoanalysis may manifest its full potential.

In Western society and the contemporary world, science is central. Many civilisation misconceptions are made visible through the frailties of the scientific processes. These processes include knowledge production and knowledge sharing, and include both individual and collective dimensions of such knowledge production and sharing.

The impact of misconceptions is particularly visible in terms of the fundamental role of scientific communities in validating and acknowledging disruptive contributions to science. This validation and acknowledgement implies that scientific communities are actively exercising their critical capacity, because novelty forces questioning previously taken-for-granted assumptions, that is, previous misconceived perceptions of reality. This de-constructive and positively enhancing self-critique positioning, taken by scientific communities, is primordial if one wants science to be at the service of humankind and of common good, as the Enlightenment movement proclaimed.

An example of this type of disruptive contribution to science has been the role assumed by philosophy of science itself (eg. Kuhn, 1962, Popper, 1959), as well as by disruptive contributions to science in general (eg. Polanyi, 1958, Lewin, 1951, or Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

The present paper claims that Freud's science is disruptive, because it extends novelty to its limits. More importantly, it argues that this disruptive innovation, this over a century old science of psychoanalysis, has still a long way to go in order to be able to integrate radical contributions that may enable the emergence of psychoanalysis' full potential.

Consequently, the paramount impact of psychoanalysis has not been fully explored and this is particularly visible through the scarcity of psychoanalytic studies that explore its epistemic and transdisciplinary especial grounding.

An illustration of this potential power is that psychoanalysis has had such an impact in scientific and in philosophical spheres that almost every philosopher of the twentieth century has felt the need to address it, either by denying it or by cherishing its kernel contributions to humankind.

However, the inverse has not yet happened. That is, psychoanalysis has fallen prey of closed-onto-itself scientific practices that do not pay homage to its universal and unavoidable contribution, of addressing the following issue: to take to the limits human being's capacity to think about themselves.

Psychoanalysis may still be ahead of its time, and the challenge is to explore it in such a way that enables the full emergence of its signification power. As has been argued elsewhere (eg. Nobre, 2010), human structures are civilisation structures. If this broader perspective is overlooked, then, it is possible to trace examples of situations where humans fall into their own traps, constantly denying life, themselves and reality.

Denying existence, or self-denial, is a fallacy. It implies the denial of every human being's ability to profit from all that life has to offer, from its full potential, no matter the circumstances. This constitutes the history of humankind, this open journey. The idea of life itself, and of that which the present work aims at illustrating, is the need – and the urgency - to make this journey lighter, softer, pleasant, and more gratifying and rewarding. That is, the idea of living life in full and thus taking it to its limits.

Civilisations are structured by dominant-thinking patterns, as well as by the conflict and paradox that emerges from heterodox and non-dominant perspectives. Western civilisation has been structurally centred on the idea of problem-solving, interpreting life itself as a problem to be solved (Nobre, 2010). Simultaneously, coexist non-dominant world-visions that play a critical role in the process of bringing in new questioning perspectives. This questioning is itself a new source of transformation, evolution and development.

Psychoanalysis fits into the paradigm of the non-mainstream, non-dominant thinking, questioning stance. The best way for psychoanalysis to pay homage to its primordial characteristic of psychoanalytic thinking, to its inquiring power, is through its practice. Consequently,

psychoanalytic scientific production must be able to illustrate the kernel role of the therapeutic relationship, focusing the issue of its complexity instead of taking a cause-effect approach.

Therefore, psychoanalytic scientific production must faithfully give evidence of the argument that the central contribution to human development is linked not only to the breadth of its theoretical knowledge but especially to its practice. The structuring relationship between research, supervision and personal and didactic analysis is a fundamental and mandatory ingredient of the psychoanalytic scientific community. The challenge in proving and in giving evidence of the effectiveness of psychoanalytical practice is the enhancement of the symbolic, semiotic and existential dimensions of human life, as it is experienced through the eyes of psychoanalysis, i.e. as it is lived by the pair, patient and analyst.

2 Trauma as a subjective experience

Trauma is a subjective experience and the concept itself tells more about whoever is using the term than about whatever is happening in reality. This is the power of trauma, to reveal the other side of the mirror.

The use of the concept trauma fits into the need to define and circumscribe an event than can then be dealt with as a problem to be solved. However, the signification power of such concept lays precisely in its ability to capture a movement, a process, and a dynamism, which characterises life per se.

If life is understood as a problem to be solved, then the focus goes towards seeking a solution. This is positive, as there are indeed situations that fit into this problem-solution paradigm. Yet, again, the need to use a term like trauma necessarily implies that there is more to be said about it in terms of holding a wider horizon of interpretation about life itself.

This wider perspective on trauma implies that it holds a whole vision of whatever reality it is trying to grasp. This power of trauma to reflect a world view and a specific positioning in terms of how human beings make sense of the world makes trauma a privileged term to access that which constitutes humans as such.

The arguments to be developed in order to explain a concept such as trauma will reflect a collection of items, which, themselves, hold the key to the puzzle or enigma. Enigma in terms of mystery, of that against which there is opacity and yet, the urge to unveil it and to bring it to the ground. That, which cannot be located, defined and resolved once and for all, which cannot have a one-fits-all solution and, as such, it is able to capture something that is continual, that never ends. Questions that are open to always renewed answers fit into this pattern.

Therefore, this effort to define trauma as an open concept implies that it holds the power to question, to bring into perplexity, to puzzle and, thus, to provoke an inquiring movement. This

inquiring movement may be contrasted with a static classification where both the emissary and the receptor, the one who uses the term and the one who is confronted with such statement, fix the term as a technical, objective, problem-solution type of answer.

This fixing is an implicit agreement between both parties and yet, due to the intrinsic and open nature of the concept, may be broken at any moment. That is, both sides of the equation may suddenly discover that what has been previously said no longer holds and that something does not make sense, something is missing and there is the need to reformulate whatever situation is being considered.

As happens to all open concepts, every time one comes into contact with its formulation, a special moment may emerge, an eureka moment. This is subtle, it is instant and irrefutable, it comes as something that seems automatic, that cannot be refused and that cannot be even noticed, unless one makes a specific effort to go back and to revise that that is what is happening.

It is not an answer, it is not a new formulation, or a new fixed description but rather it is a simple gesture. It comes as the need to adjust one's body to a chair, a light movement that enables a new sitting position, like stretching one's back or uncrossing one's leg.

This special moment is a change in perspective and thus it brings forth that which could not be seen from the previous standpoint. Something new emerges and it opens a tiny, infinitesimal possibility of confronting, denying and questioning that which had been previously accepted as valid.

This open interpretation process and process of denial, of suspicion, is there forever and this is true for both parties, for both sides, for both whoever emits the statement and for whoever receives the message. Open concepts are like an active engine constantly producing new possibilities of interpretation.

In a written text, both the author and the reader may find new interpretations every time they come into contact with the text, as if the words have acquired a life of their own, independent from the initial setting. Creation is a never ending process so that the written word, once it is presented as an open concept, enables this constant, rich, complex and never ending process of constituting new interpretation possibilities, new formulations, elaborations, and arguments that aim at capturing that volatile and turbulent world of how reality manifests itself.

This is the *hic et nunc*, the here and now perspective, the magical moment where new possibilities become accessible, either when the author reads its own text, or someone else reads it, or when there is a conversation, an oral expression of a statement, and both the one who emits the statement and the one who hears it may grasp it and this cannot be fixed once and for all.

That is, every time there is the need to refer to such statement, to such previously fixed formulation of an open concept, there is this risk and this possibility of the emergence of something new and this happens because this is constitutive of reality itself, reality as an open movement. If one would take this process to the extreme, humans would become mute, as there would be no possibility to freeze, to pinpoint, to define, or to classify reality. There would be only wonder and puzzlement, almost as a prison, cement, a human turned into a statue, into stone.

Life as movement, reality as movement and humans as movement bring us into this dead-end where nothing can be said because it is already gone. This paradox, this conflict, this ambiguity captures a creative tension that itself may define life, reality and humans. It is an open movement of perplexity that enables reaching a different standpoint from where new possibilities may emerge. Again, it is not a perfectly defined answer but rather a subtle repositioning that prepares the ground for the possibility of novelty to occur.

Consequently, open concepts have this concealing capacity that no one can hold on to indefinitely. One freezes an open concept into a fixed definition and it may remain untouched forever if no one ever questions it. But this questioning possibility is intrinsically there, and there is no escape from this risk.

A trauma phenomenon is of this order. It is fixed into a negatively painful pattern and, yet, it holds the possibility for a new pattern to emerge and for growth to happen.

3 Life, reality and human existence

Two sides of this open interpretation process, or interpretation of an open concept, may be taken into account from this point onwards. On one side, the link between reality, life and human existence. On the other side, the time-space grounding of life's experience.

Reality is the most open concept of all. From an extreme perspective it is a void term and it is a fruitless process to try to freeze it. Once more, whatever can be said about it defines more easily whoever is trying to define it than the term itself.

That is, it is only possible to approach an open concept by making explicit a series of items that enable the construction of an argument, of a script, a narrative, a story and a statement that itself represents a world of meaning, a closed set of assumptions and presumptions that are made explicit by its author and that take into account the author's interpretation of its public, its reader, and its interlocutor.

Going back, to this inherently impossible process of aiming at fixing an open concept, it does reflect the author's effort of constructing an argument, and this construction takes into account its imagined public, but it also unavoidably contains an infinite set of contributions that may be

represented by schools of thought and by their constant and continual production of sets of assumptions, presumptions, arguments and definitions.

Consequently, the impossible task of defining reality as a once-and-for-all effort makes explicit the contradictions that are present in the experience of defining and freezing and open concept. This happens because the process itself holds a world, a universe of meaning that it is fixed onto a statement.

One may accept such statement for a lifetime and, even so, there is the possibility of the open concept escaping the prison of a definition when a subtle doubt, an itch, an uncomfortable expectation suddenly emerges. And this is the beginning of inquiry and the possibility of creation of new worlds of interpretation.

To make it crystal clear, open concepts implicitly imply open interpretation possibilities. The consequence of this is that the present effort of capturing the open concept nature of the term trauma involves an exercise of designing sets of assumptions and of possibilities of interpretation that involve the author, its world and universe, its imagined public's world and universe of meaning, as well as the context within which such meaning may be expressed and such statement may be uttered. Author considered here as the figurative image of the narrator of a traumatic event, such as a patient that seeks help.

This implies that the use of the term reality carries an idea that is unavoidably considered as a whole, because meaning itself comes in worlds and in universes of meaning. One cannot take meaning into pieces and combine it differently. When one does that one has to go back, again and again, until a new world of meaning is possible to be presented, constructed, and created.

This is the absurd exercise of freezing an open concept. No matter the absurdity of this possibility, this open nature character of an open concept, must, unavoidably, be present at the moment such statement is pronounced.

That is, the absurd effort of using an open concept, as may be exemplified with the open concept reality, exposes the impossibility of freezing it eternally and thus reveals the provisory nature of all definitions. Harder to grasp, precisely because it is presented in such an obvious, pornographically hard-core way, is that the open concept reality must, unavoidably, contain an idea of unity. As has been claimed above, meaning comes in wholes, in worlds and in universes of meaning. The confrontation with something that seems absurd exists precisely because it may not fit into the previous world of meaning where it once made perfect sense.

4 Meaning comes in universals - the enigma of the inquiring process

In a step-by-step process, the interest in discussing a term like trauma is related to the possibility of interpreting it as an open concept and, as such, of unveiling the inherent complexity of reality.

Reality, whatever may be said about it, cannot escape the open concept verdict and therefore it is the ultimate and primordial example of this futile exercise of aiming at freezing an infinite moving process.

Again, the enigma is solved by identifying this creative tension that systematically produces sense-making statements and then it is confronted with unexpected possibilities, and this impossibility of avoiding this new interpretation, interpretation in a fuzzy and opaque way, itself brings new stages, new possibilities, new answers, again, new frozen statements that will be challenged from one moment to the next.

Meaning comes in worlds and in universes of meaning and this implies that meaning is itself a set of universals, of statements that unavoidably contain perfect and complete worlds of meaning. That meaning is meaning does not take us very far. But if one considers meaning as an open process and as a creative engine, then it is possible to argue that meaning itself comes in a step-by-step process where there is a constant freezing and refreezing of whatever it is being made explicit, stated, and expressed, and that this process contains its determination and its non-determination, its affirmation and its denial, and that this seemingly absurd story is itself the enigma-solving paradigm that captures reality as it may be approached, defined, stated and expressed.

This is not a choice between a meaningful statement and an absurd one. Firstly, it is the confirmation that sense and nonsense are two sides of the same coin and that the trick, the solving of the enigma involves accepting this risk; secondly, it implies daring to stand the tension of this state of crumbled universals; and finally, it means actively seeking ways to permanently feed this radical and original process of inquiring, of questioning, and of doubting, and, from this subtle suspicion, to start, once more, the construction of meaning, of new worlds and of new universes, of entire wholes that may integrate the scattered parts of the blow of previous determinations, assumptions and statements.

This slow, long, circular, repetitive and fragile process of aiming at dismounting and at unveiling the richness of a concept such as trauma, is an illustration of the way out of trauma, of the de-constructing process and de-coding of the traumatic part of a particular event. It means re-constructing and re-coding, and this is life at its best.

The presentation of the argument that the signification power of the term trauma lays precisely in its ability to present itself as an open concept and as an infinite process of interpretation, is crucial. This happens because life itself is lived, sensed, experienced fully in pivotal situations, in limit-situations, both good and bad. Good and bad not always obvious because, again, this is an intrinsically subjective experience.

The assumption that that which is to be captured is not an unquestionable statement but rather the creative tension that is unavoidably present in all reality, is a natural consequence of understanding and interpreting a traumatic event as an opportunity, not desirable, in itself, not intentional, but once confronted with the fact that it is already there, one might as well make the most of it, and take it as an opportunity to reframe one's existence and one's approaches to how life itself is lived.

The affirmation that there is an unquestionable and unavoidable paradox between the need, the urge, the impetus to make sense of reality, and that this sense-making process cannot come out without the act of enunciation, of expressing, of presenting and of determining, that is, of freezing that which is being understood, is of primordial relevance. That is, this enunciation process has a paramount role to play if one wants to analyse trauma from an innovative and positive perspective, i.e. able to produce effective and rewarding change. Taking this to the limit, this enunciation implies that life, itself, is said. Again, this therapeutic process is an intensively gratifying exercise. When this possibility emerges, no matter how painful it had been, for both patient and analyst, the needed course to get there, it makes life possible, and it makes life worth living.

This paradox, of both needing to de-freeze reality, and then needing to re-freeze it again is but one side of the issue. On the other side of the paradox lays the inherently provisory nature of all statements. Consequently, the aim must not be directed at the statement itself but rather at the mounting exercise of making impossible pieces fit together in a coherent pattern.

From these statements comes the following conclusion, and conclusions, per definition, cannot be present in the assumptions but in the articulation of the exposition. What has been presented is an impossible task. It is a moment of perplexity and of impasse. Why? Because it may only be solved subjectively and, in particular, intersubjectively.

This is the analytic process at its best. This impasse is solved with the analyst and with life as a whole, with life as it is lived. The analytic process, the talking cure, does not happen in the patients head, neither in the analyst's head. The couch is life itself. Early caretakers are critical in psychoanalysis. Yet, psychoanalysis also radically and originally claims that, throughout life, one never knows who are our mothers and fathers, because there is a sequence of them, and many situations become life-givers.

Psychoanalysis is radical and original. The term radical comes from roots, and original comes from the origins. And this is precisely the reason why psychoanalysis addresses the universal experience of human existence, stretching this possibility to its limits, highlighting its intrinsically potential rewarding nature. That is, accepting the risk of living a rewarding existence, of living live to its limits.

This is not as hard as it seems because once we accept trauma as an open concept and reality as the paradigmatic example of an open concept, then it is just a question of maintaining, of holding the creative-tension, the inquiring quest, firm enough and long enough, creating new patterns, new structures and new modes of existence. Again, this is the impossible argument of aiming at defining the indefinable and of claiming that that is precisely our ultimate and most genuine and unique experience of being. Again and again, life is said.

5 Existential experience and symbolic reasoning

Trauma has been presented as an open concept. Reality has been presented as the most open of open concepts. Life becomes the second in the list of extreme examples of open concepts. This happens because life may be defined in objective and technical terms as a biological process but this definition itself must inherently and unavoidably assume the existence of non-living, non-organic and non-biological reality in order for it, life, biological life, to exist.

As such, when one refers to life, one has to implicitly consider both sides of the equation, the bio and the non-biological worlds, because one risks trying to define void wholes and that is a non-possibility, an in-determination, not of the open concept type but of a dead-end type.

As has been claimed above, thought and meaning are only possible in terms of universals, of worlds and of universes of thought and of meaning. What is critical here is the moving and plastic nature of whatever is assumed to be an open concept, because the solving of the enigma is possible when infinite sets of assumptions are agreed upon as being valid as a standpoint for new elaborations, that is, for the integration and articulation of new meaningful inputs. Symbolic reasoning is precisely this process. A symbol is constituted in such a way as that its interpreting power never ceases to unfold. Once frozen, it becomes a sign, having an agreed upon interpretation, like a technical term.

Water understood as H₂O is not exactly and precisely the same as water that is understood as the source of life. And this is not a poetic or literary difference but an example of how the common use of language unavoidably contains ever vaster and vaster worlds of meaning, larger and larger universes of possibility, and of infinite processes of interpretation.

The enunciation of the term H₂O implies a living experience and direct contact with reality that includes not only the enunciator and the receptor of the message but, more importantly, the whole infinite process of elaboration of meaning that includes all existence, because, again, this, the enunciation of a meaningful statement, may only come about as a whole, as a unity. If not, this statement, could not be even thought, enunciated, articulated, let alone communicated or formalised.

Paradox is a key component of the sense-making process because it enables breaking the varnish of forgotten assumptions that are no longer valid if one wants to integrate new material, new possibilities that could not hold onto the closed universal wholes that enabled its previous enunciation, or the previous version of the enunciation of the statement, which is the process described above as the creative tension risk, overture, and possibility.

The confrontation of H₂O and source of life incarcerates, embodies, and illustrates the subtle and pernicious acting of the paradox phenomena. One needs both ends of the equation, both the geometric and universal language of mathematics, the seemingly reductive formal and explicit definition of a universal and quotidian life experience, and also the enunciation of that loose and imperfect end, the metaphorical process that may link impossible links. Once it is enunciated, it cannot be denied. If it was possible to be enunciated it is already present, already there to be seen, heard, integrated or ignored, but can never be erased or be brought back to a non-existence state.

Paradox and unity are then key terms for the understanding of the volatile and turbulent movement of sense making. Unity, a universal, a whole, is a tyranny, as it is a singular and individual experience. If millions of individuals agree upon themselves of the validity of a certain enunciation, it does not make such enunciation less of a tyranny or of a barbaric act. To put it more strongly, it remains an individual and singular act. This implies that the spectrum of meaning-making does not go from singular to collective or from individual to shared experience. It is pure paradox because it may only be experienced individually, personally, and yet the meaning-making process that enables the formulation, the identification of whatever event as such, as existent, necessarily implies a learning, shared, and collective experience, that is, the sharing of those assumptions that, in turn, hold, support and sustain collective interpretations of purely individual and singular events.

In radical terms, there is nothing more universal than an original individual experience. This happens because the more one deepens each singular experience the more one stretches the general possibility of its replication.

Therefore, for the understanding of trauma as an open concept, and open concept such as that which is illustrated by the use of the terms reality, or life, such argument needs to be sustained by elaborations around the terms paradox and unity, and such elaboration process may not be understood as an either individual *versus* collective experience but rather as a spectrum that is represented by the extremes unity and diversity. And now a new jump is possible, from the denial of the importance of the individual/collective duality to the denial of the universal/diversification polarity.

That is, in a step-by-step approach, one aims at identifying key ambiguities, sources of paradox, and from those extremes it is possible to bring in new perspectives of thought and meaning. The

next step emerges from the possibility of joining the previous polarised extremes and to confront them with yet another new and unifying insight.

Mathematical reasoning is relevant not just to illustrate ideas such as linear and non-linear relationships and multiple relationship factors and dimensions. More importantly, the development of marginal analysis has enabled the verification of the following hypothesis.

Even when one is not able to identify relationships between variables that enable the estimation of stable relationships, and all that exists is the possibility of analysing infinitesimal changes, that is, the minimal impact of one variable upon another variable, then there are key lessons to be learnt.

To put it more clearly, it does not matter if the whole relationship cannot be figured out as long as it is possible to gradually map minimum changes around a given point. This holds for the reasoning around paradox, unity and diversity that has been followed above because it captures the essence of this type of phenomenon.

One search for dualities that may be considered as being part of a single whole, like considering meaning-making as being represented within a spectrum that is created by the tension between two extremes, such as an individual *versus* a collective dimension, then, instead of polarising the extremes, considering them as being confronted to yet another perspective, another dimension, another spectrum.

This design or this formatting and configuration, the polarization in a spectrum, may enable strong developments but, once there is the possibility of identifying yet another unity, one that is able to integrate, to hold, to sustain, and to support both the first dualism and to introduce another whole, another idea of unity which integrates the first dual elements as being one end of another spectrum, this new one that contrasts new dimensions and that enables new insights and new changes of perspective, then the secret is captured, the enigma is solved, not as bricks that cumulatively form a wall but as a cocktail mixture where the initial liquids cannot be removed or separated one from the other.

Unity is not confronted to diversity: it forms a single and complex whole. Individual meaning making processes and collective meaning making processes are not to be contrasted but form a single whole. Paradox is not to be confronted with coherence, consistency, and stability but they form a single whole. And life, reality, trauma, may be explained from any starting perspective possible because no matter the extreme, the polarity, the duality one starts with there is no avoidance of complexity. A drop of water contains the pattern of the whole ocean.

6 Time and space dimensions and Lego constructions

If one takes into account relativity theory and quantic physics, one may move from nano, to macro and to cosmic dimensions, in terms of scale, and from material to energy and vice-versa. But keeping the attention on everyday life, on life as it is lived, the experience of the world, the experience of existence is time and space bound. It is a bodily and embodied experience. But through memory, imagination, phantasy, dreams, delirium or hallucination, one may experience a non time and space bound reality. This statement is counter intuitive, again, because of its hard-core nature: it makes explicit something so immediately obvious and constantly present that it comes as a shock. Once again, this is the subtle issue that is not commonly considered precisely because of its ubiquity. That is, it corresponds to something that is permanently there and that is spontaneous in everyday life.

Imagine that someone is referring to a present event and that there is the proposition of an alternative perspective, insight, or point of view. This novelty comes as a surprise and as something apparently impossible to be explained in terms of why it had not been considered before. This exemplifies the capturing of another liquid, another subtle aroma, in the cocktail mix of meaning-making, in the barman and barwoman art of cocktail mixing. Again, this process may stop there or it may be prolonged and replicated. The key issue here is that the idea of process has been captured. Process here understood as movement, as dynamism and as the unfolding and manifestation, or expression, of reality.

Now instead of someone referring to a present event, one refers to a past one. If new insights are possible to be deciphered then past reality is not past but it is open to change. This is not a magical trick but the pure and straightforward use of words and the functioning of language.

That is, sense making is like a Lego game. One may use a single Lego piece, two, three, or more. There is permanently the idea of unity that quiets down the search for new possibilities of interpretation and, simultaneously, there is constantly the possibility for such questioning and suspicion to emerge.

One creates, i.e. produces and fabricates meaning through this connecting and disconnecting of Lego pieces, using different arrangements and combinations. One considers life as it is experienced as being able to be traced according to time dimensions such as past, present and future. However, this is misleading. It is not wrong in the sense that Newton physics is not wrong when confronted to quantum physics but rather it contains a change of register, a new world of meaning, and a new universe of possibilities.

From this perspective, there is no distinction of past, present and future but rather the experience of pure present, of the immediate reality, the here and now, *hic et nunc*, given moment. When this happens it is the process itself that is being captured, and this process is experienced as a new whole, a new possibility.

7 Creativity and meaning-making

The possibility of entering into the meaning-making, creative, life stretching process is directly related to the lessons learnt in limit-situations, both positive and negative, as limit situations imply that each individual is already doing its best to overcome its own limits, to profit from its own capabilities and to overcome its own blockages. Trusting leads to risk taking and to playing with impossible formulations, new ways-out, out of what previously seemed to be dead-ends. Fear leads to lack of capacity to react, to reformulate and to re-programme ways of being, of behaving, of functioning and of making sense of reality.

This trust *versus* fear perspective is both an active and a passive mode of being. Whilst our actions and reactions are often possible to identify, to pin-down, and to be made visible, explicit and formal, our passive role is subtle and, as such, it is decisive. Implicit, subtle and invisible processes are far harder to be acknowledged, recognised and valued than explicit ones. Yet nothing that becomes explicit may come to life on its own, that is, that which is visible, formal and explicit must necessarily emerge from that which is invisible, informal and implicit.

The reason why the passive side of human existence is more important than the active one is due to the natural inclination to dismiss it as non-existent. This passivity is the category that corresponds to the possibility of being impressed, of being affected, marked, by something. It is not important if this something is internal or external, or if it is an individual or collective movement, process and dynamism. What counts here is the possibility of taking into account something that is revealing in itself, that enables the emergence of novelty and that profits from a process that is self-fuelling and *auto-poietic*, that is, self-organising, as in a virtuous circle.

Like the infinite skins of an onion, each complex situation holds on itself an inner capacity to unfold indefinitely as meaning calls for further meaning in a never-ending process. In contrast, vicious circle patterns function as a snowball effect, where there is constantly a recurrent process that kills the possibility of considering new solutions.

This vicious circle entropy is a perfect example of a negative active functioning, based on fear and thus creating self-sustaining blockages. More importantly, fear, deep fear, becomes a recurrent pattern simultaneously as the capacity to be impacted from novelty ceases to grow. No learning, and thus no life, is possible. Life is lived as pure misery.

The more flexible, open and elastic the modes of functioning, the more effective the passivity role, precisely because passivity is the capacity to be impressed, confronted, marked, moulded and formatted, re-formatted, over and over again, by the emergence of dynamic processes, opening movements and by the process itself through which reality manifests itself. This is the lesson of serendipity.

There is a choice, a choice in terms of starting position, in terms of a *click* that is subtle, almost imperceptible, and that may lead one to choose between unknown risks or straightforward and visible patterns of expected development. There is a choice in terms of endurance, of resilience, of the capacity to integrate frustration and of the ability to maintain a subtle and almost invisible opening to novelty. This choice comes rather from routine-like patterns of behaviour than from visible and seemingly critical crossroads.

The more important the crossroad, the more likely it is that defence mechanisms and locked-in effects come into action. This implies that creating self-fuelling mechanisms is more of a marathon than of sprint training. It is the automatisms and reflexive actions that need to be trained and exercised, and not the consciously visible formal choices. This is possible by the double movement of recognising and valuing passive like structures and modes of functioning and by relaxing in terms of that which involves the active role in decision-making.

This is a consequence of the self-immunity system that may become programmed against itself, feeding on its own toxins. That is, passivity is the most important functioning role because it enables openness to novelty, in a fruitful and self-sustained process. And the active role is misleading as it may give the impression of command and of control whilst it merely is reinforcing hidden blockages.

These patterns of behaviour, these ways of functioning, these positioning in face of both that which seems routine and familiar and that which seems accidental and weird, once again, are not individual nor collective, nor internal or external, choices. These patterns are embodied in social practices, which, in turn, constitute communities, societies and civilisations.

8 Life as movement and change

If trauma is a process that holds that capacity to represent an infinite set of inputs, of impressions and of ways of behaviour, that is, if trauma is to be considered as being a complex concept, an open concept, then if one wants to consider trauma in a clinical setting it is necessary to distinguish between health and pathology, between equilibrium and disequilibrium, and between rigid, static and inert ways of being and flexible, dynamic and living existences.

From what has been said above, and interpreting life as a journey equipped with self-survival tools, there is a subtle issue to be deciphered. If the only tool that someone is familiar with is a hammer, everything will look like a nail.

Time-bound existence eludes us into arranging life stories and its lessons in a past, present and future chronological pattern. This is misleading because it diverts our attention from that which is essential, from the essential of the essential part of life, which is, once again, the capacity that is constantly open to every individual in every circumstance to remain open to novelty, to life's

dynamism and flowing movements. In a here and now perspective, this is all that counts, the capacity to be open to new meanings, new learning, new construction, which inherently implies deconstructing meaning, un-learning and reconstructing signification processes.

Therefore, health and non-health are not two ends of a spectrum or of a pendulum effect. There is no objective line between non-pathology and pathology. One possible way to explain this is by stating that from a here and now perspective, everything that has happened since the origins of humankind or of the universe is already, as such, reality's best possible result. That is, looking back, there is a maximum potential that is already being manifested, unfolded into existence. Simultaneously, in that slip of the second of the here and now existence, the only one that we have access to, when looking forward nothing is closed, determined or lost and all possibilities remain open. Perfection is an act of openness, a call for unfolding and for questioning. Perfection may be confronted with perfectionism, which may be described as a vice and as a dead-end approach to reality. Perfectionism, guilt, culpability, fear and self-denial are life-denying mechanisms; they are misconceptions of what life is and of what human being's existence signifies.

In the same way that both individual and civilisation existences may hold on to more positive and gratifying or to more negative and pernicious modes of functioning, the same may be said about health in general and about mental health in particular. Human existence represents an open process where there is a common pattern from the cave ages to the post-humanist future. This open process crosses immemorial ages and, simultaneously, is present within each individual life and each individual situation. Again and again, there is fear and closeness onto itself *versus* confidence and trust, and the ability to integrate, to value and to acknowledge novelty. What is true for individuals is true for the human species. Life comes in patterns and these are needed in order to create routines and to save energy. More importantly, they also must be constantly revised, dismissed, substituted, reformulated and updated.

9 Trauma as work-in-progress

Trauma is pathological and health menacing because it represents an unfinished business, an unresolved task and a viciously repetitive pattern and system. Humans need the term trauma in order to pinpoint diffuse patterns that become encoded into the modes of existence of individuals and of collections of individuals, such as societies and civilisations.

The inverse relation of its degree of visibility defines the severity of trauma. The more hidden, subtle and apparently obvious, natural and common a situation may be, the more its degree of traumatic effect may be felt. This happens because that which becomes immediately visible also immediately triggers defence and protecting mechanisms.

Trauma, being a subjective experience, cannot be linearly tied to direct extrapolations and though it may be expected that aggressive, violent and threatening situations may be more damaging than those with a softer dose of visibility, the inverse can be true.

Trauma, as all clinical symptoms, represents something more than itself. And this something more connects to life as a whole, as a diverse unity, and as an open process.

From a here and now perspective, a life-long trauma may cease to exist from the moment onwards when it is possible to integrate it and to reformulate it. That is, to frame it and to enunciate it in such a way that it articulates with present resources, capabilities and modes of existence. From this moment onwards, trauma has become an opportunity for growth and for development as it has enabled an opening to reality, to the manifestation of reality and of its full potential. And this is human existence at its best.

10 Deconstructing civilisation

Certain key concepts help to build the block that may explain the present state of affairs regarding the potentially pathological nature of trauma from a less conventional perspective.

The first concept is the relationship between dominant and non-dominant thinking. The argument is that Western civilisation has evolved from the creative tension built out of the inner conflict between a conventional mentality, on one hand, and the contesting perspectives that gradually deny the validity of mainstream thought, on the other. The conventional approach within each epoch is the one that has served well in the past and that resists adaptation and change. As reality becomes more and more distanced from this conventional view, the less conventional perspectives gain strength and gradually replace the main view. In turn, these new views from the periphery become themselves mainstream and the cycle continues.

The second concept is that institutions are a central unity for the perpetuation of this cycle. It is at institutional level that both the creative and the destroying forces emerge, both within and between institutions. That is, within each single institution, the tensions between mainstream and non-mainstream thinking are replicated, and there is a succession of stability, and dominance of a certain approach, and then the contestation and change to new approaches. But this process may occur also in the relationships between institutions, where some may represent more stable and conventional perspectives, which are then challenged by peripheral institutions that represent alternative views, forcing the former ones to either change or perish.

The third concept is that reality is constantly manifesting itself. This manifestation process is an endless flow, which itself constitutes a form of rationality, of intelligibility.

The fourth concept alters the logic of the above mentioned succession of stable and turbulent stages, adding that besides this specific pattern there are certain founding dilemmas that have a

defining role of the civilisation itself. That is, they have managed to keep the civilisation together as an open unity. Therefore, the pattern is repeated across different epochs, in a continuous cycle and, in parallel, specific issues remain central, unique, characterising the civilisation within which the different epochs are succeeding themselves.

Taking these four concepts it is possible to draw the following argument. First, Western civilisation has had its birth in the Ancient world, both Greek and Roman.

Second, the Greek world brought the world vision; “the ‘world’, in Greek terms”, as is still referred today, implies this broad conception and interpretation of reality, which constitutes a unified whole, even if several versions or visions may co-exist at the same time.

Third, the Romans systematised, operationalised and disseminated a certain Greek vision of the world, creating a legal and institutional structure to support it.

Fourth, a defining characteristic of Western civilisation is the dilemma between two possible perspectives, developed in Greek times. One is the conviction that the human being’s environment is intrinsically hostile and that reality is inherently negative, deficient, and that must be put right by constant human efforts and interventions. In this vision human knowledge is the key to success, thus the term ‘gnostics’ and ‘gnosticism’. And reality itself may be divided in bad and good categories, thus the term ‘maniqueism’; the bad, the unknown, the uncontrolled and the unpredictable, i.e. un-intervened reality, and the good, the aspects that may be addressed and dealt with through human intervention. The opposing perspective, present in pre-socratic times and throughout all ages ever since, has a positive view of reality and of its uncontrollable features, thus promoting a constant openness and willingness to absorb unexpected developments and to learn from them.

Fifth, translated in present language and in epistemic terms, though both these views have been present across different ages and the tension between them characterises Western civilisation, the first one has tended to be connected to each epoch’s dominant thinking, and it is out of the second perspective that novelty has come to life. Moreover, the first perspective is anthropocentric and reduces reality to a fixed model, predefined and rigid, whilst the second has a vision of the cosmos as a unity and interprets human existence as part of that whole. Once the first perspective became connected to dominant thinking, it was the one highlighted and promoted by the Romans. Therefore the formal, visible, explicit and naturalised perspective of Western civilisation is today, and has been since its origins, that of a human constructed model through which reality may be captured and, tentatively, controlled. The fact that the second option became invisible and present in informal terms, implicit and hidden, does not make it a less defining feature of Western civilisation. Quite the contrary, it is precisely this less obvious and less naturalised vision the one

which is better able to interpret, to respond to and to address the complexity of constantly changing reality.

Sixth, the XXI century globalised world is no longer the home of an imperialist European intervention, as it has been since the Discoveries times to the colonial powers of the XIX and XX centuries. Nevertheless, the European roots of the Western civilisation have become present in a global way, in dialogue or else in open conflict with other prevailing civilisations, mutually influencing one other. Yet, the early tension between two opposed world visions at the root of Western civilisation is still today a crucial interpretation reading map of both present crisis and of past crises. That is, if there is one single, monolithic perspective that reduces reality to its own model of reality, then the only way that this perspective may continue to prevail is through the use of force, by the use of power and the destruction of alternative and threatening perspectives. However, once alternative perspectives do manage to survive and to gradually gain influence, then these will succeed by being open to reality's changing challenges and continuously absorbing and integrating reality's intelligibility.

Seventh, these dilemmas, conflicts and creative tensions are recognisable across different levels of society and are particularly relevant within economic, political and scientific spheres of action. The social dimension, the social impact of the crisis, is left out, not because there is no social influence or pressure but because of simplification reasons, in order to highlight that the social consequences are as the tip of the iceberg that hides a much larger picture.

11 Fundamental concepts and key insights

As has been argued above, civilisation frames us. This obvious assumption is easily forgotten, in particular within the practices and language use that constitute everyday life. In a clinical setting, life has to recover its ticking movement and its dynamism. Certain crucial insights enable us to fit loose pieces together in a signifying and, more importantly, in a possible to communicate, way.

(i) The relationship to the unknown is that which radically defines, characterises and determines that which will succeed afterwards. This unknown is not just natural cataclysms, the fear of death or other forms of obvious threats. More importantly, it is the hidden and less evident unknown, in particular the unknown in others, and, worse, in oneself.

(ii) The Ancient world, in particular the Romans, privileged the side of individual human beings related to unity and identity, and ignored and neglected the side related to multiplicity and ambiguity. This happened for purely strategic reasons, that is, no institutional and legal system could survive without a clear set of rules that unambiguously traced and was able to punish its individual members, forcibly, if necessary, imposing its law.

(iii) We have seen that it was the radical fear of the unknown that has triggered the need to predict, and, consequently, to control. All Greek efforts were directed to these objectives. Radical in Latin means to the root, or origin. In the dictionary, “thoroughgoing or extreme, especially as regards change from accepted or traditional forms”.

(iv) Yet, the non-mainstream Greek thought started from a different premise, one that maintained that the cosmos is, in itself, intelligible, first, and, second, that the human being’s intelligibility emerges from its being part of that diversified unity, that reality, that cosmos.

(v) Anthropocentrism, that places human beings at the centre of the universe, is usually interpreted as having emerged out of the secularisation movement that characterised modern age. Nietzsche, the first pos-modern thinker, and the inheritor of three generations of puritan pastors, declared the death of god. However, in Ancient times, mythical religion and, later, other religions, though being Theo-centric, were understood as if these divinities delegated in the human being their earthly representers.

(vi) The two sides of Greek thinking, the dominant, obsessed with prediction, and the non-dominant, open and inquisitive, interpreted their deities accordingly, the former fascinated by crime and punishment narratives and the later intrigued by the mystery of creation, of existence, of nature, of the cosmos.

(vii) Religious thought, spirituality and symbolic reasoning, together with the development and use of language and the participation in social practices, constituted kernel elements in the early development of the human species. Aristotle’s “rational animal” emerged out of these earlier and millenary experiences.

(viii) The religions of the book, the monotheist movements of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which developed in geographically proximal areas, being the Mediterranean basin also the origin of several millenary civilisations, including the Western one, share this same dichotomy. That is, there is this constant tension between the need to formalise, define, register, legalise, in contrast with the creative drive to innovate and to challenge preconceived ideas. The religions of the book are therefore the religions of the written law. But, that which is written may have many interpretations and certain factions may interpret written law in a literary form, closing and restricting its meaning, whilst other factions will take the opposite direction, continuously reading and rereading new meanings out of ancient texts. This later form is the one that gives birth to revolutions or to gradual, integrative and subtle change, depending on the resistance that it faces, the greater the oppression, the stronger the reaction.

(xix) Fear of the unknown leads to the need to predict and control. Confidence that the unknown is not necessarily bad, negative and menacing, is a statement that reflects more than a black-or-white issue. That is, the fear of the unknown is related to the vision of the world as being divided

in good and bad, the good being that which is clear and proximal, and the bad that which is alien and distanced. However, the attitude of positive confidence in the unknown is quite different. It is not a denial that good and bad exist as human values but rather that reality is infinitely complex and that this complexity is itself both intelligible and a source of intelligibility. In this complexity, the worst may become the best and the best, the worse. That is, idealised images of goodness may be corrupted by closer inspection and diabolised and tragic images of evilness may be transfigured by the development of other interpretations, other developments of reality itself.

(x) Attribution of value is key and this attribution is inherently an affective process. It has value that which leads to positive affects, to feelings of belonging and of wholeness. Affects are a sophisticated version of biological evolution. The formation of crystals or the orbits of the moons form part of this organised reality even if there is no life, no biological processes involved. Affects are this ultimate development of reality's manifestation of its full potential.

(xi) Affects lead to values and values lead to openness to complexity, that is, to openness to new interpretations, and to curiosity, creativity and ingenuity. If religious thought is understood as one of the earliest manifestations of rationality and of the early development of the human species, then the question to be asked is the following: is the unknown to be feared or to be trusted? These are the dilemmas that have determined both the crises and their overcoming throughout the development of Western civilisation.

(xii) The need to predict and control, and the distrust for the unknown, lead to the creation of rules, models, rigid and formalised knowledge. Reality is itself interpreted through these models, these reading lenses. Those parts of reality which do not fit the picture may be ignored. And those parts which may question or contradict the fixed model are denied and openly opposed. The confidence in the unknown, the openness to complexity, and the development of the inquiring capacity, may result in a different kind of knowledge, and of a different kind of model of reality. In this version the models are a tool, and they are provisory knowledge, to be used and reinvented as reality imposes its rhythm.

12 Food for thought

The present paper addresses the issue of how civilisation imprints, and new interpretations of such imprints, may enable new perspectives to emerge. In the sphere of policy making, in particular within mental health contexts, scientific communities have a fundamental role to play. This work represents a call for action, as it calls for innovative and empowering practices within clinical settings, framed by solid psychoanalytically grounded approaches.

Consequently, this text is pointing to new directions, in its search for new interpretations of the present state of affairs of the scientific and philosophical standing of mental health practices in general and of psychoanalysis in particular. It has been argued above that clinical practices are

the result, as the tip of the iceberg, of larger and more complex movements, which themselves reflect the intrinsic dilemmas of Western civilisation.

These dilemmas are not errors or deficiencies of a well-oiled machinery but rather they are an expression of the complexity of reality. This same process may occur within an institution or even within an individual human being. That is, this scalability from civilization to singular individuals indicates that reality manifests itself in a process, a movement, a dynamism that affects its participants, whatever the scale. This reality, or rather, this process through which reality manifests itself, is both internal and external, collective and singular, unified and diversified.

Central to the rationale of the present text is the relationship between theory and practice, and between science and technology. The issue is the following: are these dualities autonomous, linearly and cause-effect related, with a preponderance of theory and science over practice and technology? Or else are they intrinsically and necessarily related, as two sides of the same coin, mutually influencing one another, with a preponderance of practice and technology over theory and science? There is a possible parallelism between the phenomena addressed above, dealing with the tension between two foundational perspectives of the Western world, the urge to predict and control versus the confidence and openness to the unexpected aspects of reality, and the confrontation of these dualities, now referred. The issue is that both science and theory tend to privilege abstract knowledge, intellectual generalisations and rigid models, whilst practice and technology, benefit from the direct contact of material, bodily and temporal reality, the here and now world of daily life and therefore are fostered and nurtured by such direct contact. From this direct contact, from knowledge learnt from practice, from technology which is itself bringing in new solutions, pointing new directions, posing new questions, true development emerges. Consequently, new theories and new science are revealed, manifested and brought to life.

Lessons learnt: the Western world is captive of an intellectual, abstraction bias; we hear and do not listen, watch and do not see; the urge to predict and control, the obsession for perfect models and the myopic reduction of the subtleties of reality, the ones that are able to show its complexity, have become, once again, mainstream practice and thought. This threat is severe and its consequences are long lasting. Over the course of its history and referring only to its influences from Antiquity, since 500 BC, and not to its roots, which may be traced back to 9000 BC, successive crises have developed out of the conflict between rigid models that had brought success and positive results to past problems, but that have shown catastrophic performance in dealing with new problems. No alignment, no learning, no adaptation or transformation is possible and the crisis is installed. However, again, this is merely the tip of the iceberg, the answers are already there, already at work, already present, non-intentionally hidden, invisible and becoming gradually more visible, more present, necessary and obvious.

Periphery and centre are in conflict and gradually their positions and roles are inverted. Theories, models, abstract knowledge, intellectual elaborations, science, conceptualisations, all forms of human cognitive activity are essential and positive in themselves. The issue is the role they take, the power they absorb and the position they acquire in relation to their antidote, that is, how these theories are themselves recreated and reinvented. More importantly, what does this reveal about how human beings regard themselves, what is their anthropology? Humans understood as being part of reality, affecting and being affected by such reality, being products and producers of both their internal and their external realities, this is what unleashes humans creative power, ingenuity and talent. Questioning and the search for new answers is at the root of scientific thinking, yet science, once established and institutionalised, loses this innovation drive, and so do individuals and so does society.

Conclusion

Trauma is a powerful tool. Tool making implies experience in tool use. Within the process of deconstructing how clinical practices are framed by scientific settings, which, in turn depend on policy-making options, once more framed by civilisation imprints, the issue is not only to assume, and to identify and trace, such imprints but rather to recreate them. New and innovative mental health practices and structures may be designed once these links, the whole assembly line of mental health, is taken into account. This is the kernel idea: “doctor, doctor, take your own medicine”. And Freud and his tradition are the masters of this artisan work.

Trauma interrupts the flow of life. Life is something that one goes through, and this experience of existence is a flow of energy, a dynamism and movement. If trauma is to capture and to retain its signification power it must feed this movement of inquiry, this search for answers that have to be reformulated every time one seeks to use the term trauma in order to refer to a particular situation.

The Stone Age did not end because we have run out of stones. The role of the analyst is to prove that a stone may become a fundamental tool for unleashing life’s power to reinvent itself. This consists of a tool for empowering effective meaning-making processes. Therefore, the role of psychoanalysis’ scientific communities is to create the conditions for such development to occur, empowering analysts who can then empower their patients. This is the emergence of life, of new life, as it is life manifesting its full potential.

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