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Alan Bass

12 Questions about Psychoanalysis: Answers by Alan Bass

I – As a philosopher, what is it that interests you in psychoanalysis, and why?

While I teach in a philosophy department I am not a professional philosopher, rather a psychoanalyst with a background in philosophy. The rest of my answers follow from this fact.

II – What is the most significant contribution that philosophy has made to psychoanalysis, at least from your personal approach to psychoanalysis?

In philosophy I am known for my translations of four books by Derrida, including *The Post Card*, which is on psychoanalysis. Among contemporary philosophers it is my impression that no one has had a more profound and extended engagement with psychoanalysis than Derrida. Of course, I fully recognize the very significant contributions of many others.

III – Apart from Freud, what other psychoanalyst, according to you, has contributed significantly to a philosophical reflection on psychoanalysis?

Hans Loewald, who I believe still remains relatively unknown in Europe. While Loewald does not write to make a specifically philosophical contribution, I would say that his mode of thought is philosophical. He wrote in the introduction to his collected papers that he was an early student of Heidegger's. I hear the influence of Heidegger throughout Loewald, particularly in his readings of Freud's metapsychology.

IV – If you have undertaken psychoanalytic training, or if you are a practicing psychoanalyst, might we ask how you view what transpires in a clinical analytic practice? In other words, *what is it that really happens during a cure?*

I have been a full time practicing analyst for thirty-five years. To answer this question, it is important to define what one means by clinical psychoanalysis itself. First there are questions of diagnosis. There are patients for whom psychoanalysis is contra-indicated, although they can be helped in a modified treatment

informed by psychoanalytic thinking. In the large group of patients for whom psychoanalysis is indicated, the process requires the kind of analytic frame that Freud established: at least three sessions a week; sessions timed for at least forty five minutes; use of the couch in most cases; a neutral, abstinent analyst; the patient's free associations accompanied by the analyst's silent associative process while listening to the patient; a lengthy treatment; clear guidelines about fees and responsibility for missed sessions; the analyst's attention to his/her own possible counter-transference issues. Without this framework, I believe an analytic process is impossible. Once the framework is established, as Freud said in his technique papers, each treatment goes its own way, determined by the patient's psychodynamics, I.e. the drives, fantasies, anxieties, defenses, super-ego structure, character structure, patterns of object relations, life circumstances—in a word everything about the patient that he/she brings to the treatment. While the central issues become transference and resistance, because the treatment potentiates transference it occurs both with the analyst and in the patient's life. All of this to be interpreted. Ultimately, a mutually agreed upon termination process.

V – Nietzsche and Freud. Freud admitted having never really read Nietzsche, because he feared discovering that Nietzsche had already said everything essential that Freud himself thought he had said. How do you view the relation between Freud and Nietzsche?

This is an enormous question about which I, and many others, have written. A full answer would demand many pages. So I can only list a few points. In the discussions of Freud and Nietzsche at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1908 Freud wonders how Nietzsche could have come to so many conclusions like his own without clinical experience. Freud's answer is that Nietzsche's psychopathology gave him access to unconscious processes. But Freud here ignores what I believe to be the real answer. Nietzsche's thinking is determined by his critique of metaphysics, especially the privileging of consciousness. Hence his rigor, like Freud's, led to a theory of unconscious processes, and the anticipation of so many psychoanalytic ideas. That said, there are crucial divergences between Freud and Nietzsche. Nietzsche challenged the views of science and truth that Freud subscribed to. Freud makes passing references to the unconscious as a Kantian thing in itself. Nietzsche would have laughed at this. Nietzsche does not have a therapeutic program in Freud's sense, although J. Russell has written an excellent book on the clinical relevance of Nietzsche's thought (*Nietzsche and the Clinic*). I will confine myself to these few, inadequate points. On this issue one should read Ricoeur, who famously conjoins Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the "masters of suspicion"; P.-L. Assoun's very thorough *Freud and Nietzsche*; and Derrida's points about Freud and Nietzsche in "To Speculate—'On Freud,'" my own chapter on Freud and Nietzsche in *Interpretation and Difference*.

VI – From its start, psychoanalysis—including Fenichel, Bernfeld, Reich, Fromm, and others—developed a Freudian-Marxist current among both analysts and philosophers, which still flourishes today. How should we view today the relation amongst Marx, Marxists, and psychoanalysis?

It is well known that there is a direct encounter between Marx and Freud on the question of fetishism. There is here the whole question of ideology, belief, mystification—the meeting of unconscious processes and politics. On the other hand, one knows Freud's skepticism about radical social transformation, the elimination of private property, etc. Unfortunately the current states of Russia and China seem to confirm this skepticism, as does the worldwide spread of severe income inequality. I cannot conceive a psychoanalysis that would not be basically "left" in its convictions.

VII – Do you believe that psychoanalysis can be a useful tool for interpreting political and social phenomena and customs today? And especially for interpreting gender issues and sexual orientations debate? And if yes, in what way?

Yes. We are living through a nightmarish revival of nationalism and racism. I believe that these phenomena must be understood in relation to psychoanalytic thinking on aggression, self-destruction, sadism, narcissism—issues about which Freud and Klein, to name only these two, have made essential contributions. Psychoanalytic knowledge is rarely applied to these phenomena in the public sphere, but without it, I believe that one tends to surrender to hopelessness in the face of such seemingly intractable hatred and violence. To combat something, one has to understand it. As for “gender issues and sexual orientations debate”—with what else has psychoanalysis always been concerned? Certainly there have been important debates within psychoanalysis on these questions, for example the debate that arose in the ‘20s and ‘30s in response to Freud on penis envy. But these debates led to crucial expansions of psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice. If by “sexual orientation” one means homosexuality, or all the sexual practices conventionally labeled “perverse,” one only has to read Freud’s *Three Essays* of 1905. On the question of the issues grouped under the rubric “trans-“, I think that psychoanalysis has perhaps not yet said enough. A psychoanalyst does not take anything at face value, as a “master of suspicion.” So, encountering a patient who considers him- or herself to be transsexual has to be thought about in terms of unconscious dynamics. While this is the most elementary psychoanalytic idea, it should never be based on assumed psychopathology. Pathology there may be, as with all patients, but one has to approach “trans-“ issues with understanding. This means that there would be no assured outcome with a patient who is considering medical intervention to change sex. On a more theoretical level, one has to consider the question of sexual difference in relation to the understanding of difference itself—a question which dominates, for example, the thinking of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze. Is someone who considers him- or herself “trans-“ someone who is a “gender essentialist,” i.e. someone for whom there is absolute sexual opposition, rather than more complex sexual difference, or someone for whom sexual difference itself always implies a relation between male and female such that one can become the other? A psychoanalysis open to a more philosophical approach to the question of difference itself could have crucial things to say here.

VIII– A part of philosophical phenomenology has dealt with psychoanalysis. Even those in Heidegger’s and hermeneutics’ wake have often theorized on psychoanalysis. How do you feel about this phenomenological “appropriation” of psychoanalysis?

Phenomenology can mean many things. Since this has to be brief let me focus on Heidegger. Heidegger always insists that he is attempting to elaborate a phenomenology of being (*Sein*) itself, which is not phenomenology *à la* Husserl. I think that there are enormous resources for psychoanalysis in the phenomenology of being. To take only three examples: the rethinking of time; the rethinking of interpretation; the thinking of difference itself (see the last question). Heidegger addressed some of these issues in the *Zollikon Seminars*, his only extended encounter with psychoanalysis. I cannot quickly spell out why I think that the question of being is intrinsic to interpretability itself or to, for example, timed sessions. Ideally, then, I would not speak of a “phenomenological appropriation” of psychoanalysis, but of a necessary dialogue between the two disciplines. However, I am well aware of work on both sides that I do not think sustain the necessary rigor. Another example: the Merleau-Ponty of *The Visible and the Invisible*. Reacting against a certain phenomenological and existential “appropriation” of psychoanalysis, Merleau-Ponty spells out why he thinks an “ontological” psychoanalysis is necessary—which is what I have just tried (however inadequately) to describe.

IX – Starting with Popper, over the past decades a trend of radical criticism of psychoanalysis has developed that denies its scientific plausibility, comparing it to a mythology, and contesting any validity of the analytic practice. Where do you fit in this debate, if you do at all?

Popper famously bases his critique on falsifiability, as if this is the only criterion for judging scientificity. In their initial formulations natural selection and special relativity were not falsifiable. They were theories

derived from profound, disciplined insight, which eventually were proven true in the conventional sense. We simply do not yet have the means to do the same for Freudian theory, although psychoanalytic empirical researchers have taken some important steps. But if it is true that there are unconscious processes, that they exceed conscious processes in extent, that they have a determining influence on psychopathology, then any form of treatment that ignores these facts is unscientific.

X – Do you find it important that psychoanalysis today confronts itself with biological knowledge (evolutionary sciences, neuroscience), and with science in general?

Yes. This does not mean that there should be a reductive program—e.g. understanding the mind only in terms of neurophysiology. I am hardly expert in this field, but I have some knowledge of it. Two prominent neurophysiologists, Edelman and Kandel, take inspiration from Freud. Three of the most basic findings of neurophysiology are that the brain is the most complex object in the known universe, that the great bulk of brain activity is in interaction with itself, and that the brain is plastic. All of these have profound implications for psychoanalysis. Freud thought that biology was a “land of unlimited possibilities,” and was very concerned with evolutionary theory. At various points he refers to the revolution in physics which was contemporaneous with the birth and development of psychoanalysis. I think that Bohr’s idea of complementarity, that there is a level of reality on which seemingly opposite principles both apply, opens a way of thinking essential for psychoanalysis. Likewise that chance and deterministic processes interact.

XI – Today, psychoanalysis compares itself with rival psychotherapies and theories—behavioral and/or cognitive psychotherapy, systemic-relational psychotherapy, and an assortment of other types of cures. Where do you situate psychoanalysis in all of this? And in particular, can we say that psychoanalysis is a psychotherapy, and if it is, in what sense?

What is great about psychoanalysis is that it is the *only* form of psychotherapy that does justice to the complexity of psychic processes. There have always been, and always will be, forms of psychotherapy that are much more simplistic. This is why psychoanalysis will not die, even if it is much more marginalized than in the past.

XII – Many philosophers are particularly interested in the thought of Jacques Lacan. What value or meaning do you attribute to the Lacanian *après-coup*?

Given my own background in French thought, and the fact that I teach psychoanalysis in a philosophy department, I have to have a relation to Lacan. Obviously, I have been influenced by Derrida on Lacan. This is a philosophical critique, in which Lacan becomes an exemplar of “phallogocentrism.” As a clinician, and long time teacher of Freud, I have great difficulty with Lacan. I often find his “return to Freud” a distortion. It is as if for Lacan the often warranted criticisms of Anglo-Saxon ego psychology lead to a dismissal of everything Freud says about the ego. For example—Lacan’s attack on resistance analysis, his statement that there is only one resistance, that of the analyst. There is no more fundamental idea in Freud than that neurosis is due to defense, and that defense produces resistance in treatment. Freud expanded on this idea his entire life, and always made it central to treatment. Variable length sessions put the analyst in an omnipotent position that I believe to be anti-psychoanalytic. Psychoanalytic training based on the “pass” was a disaster. On the other hand, when I teach Lacan I always find myself in agreement with many of his specific criticisms of various psychoanalytic thinkers. And that Lacan thought an engagement between psychoanalysis and philosophy essential I completely agree with.

Bio:

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