

Introduction to Monographic Section

# What is Psychoanalysis Today? A Critique of Psychoanalytic Theory and Clinic from the Philosophical Point of View

*Introducción a la Sección Monográfica*

*¿Qué es el Psicoanálisis Hoy? Una Crítica de la Teoría y la Clínica Psicoanalítica desde el Punto de Vista de la Filosofía*

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## Abstract

In this paper, we seek to draw new lines of demarcation in relation to the debates concerning both Philosophy and Psychoanalysis. Through the historical trajectory of the psychoanalytic movement, the reader is shown the importance of disciplinary mixtures. Namely, interdisciplinary dialogues that psychoanalysis in its theory and practice maintained since early times. It is proposed to think Psychoanalysis and Philosophy as a knot that finds its usefulness and responsibility in the social and political field. That is to say, the mixture and the collision between the conceptual machineries of both fields of knowledge contribute to think and analyze the situation of our century.

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis, philosophy, 21st Century, concepts, psychoanalytic clinic.

## Resumen

En el presente documento, se busca trazar nuevas líneas de demarcación en relación con los debates que conciernen tanto a la Filosofía como al Psicoanálisis. Mediante el recorrido



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histórico del movimiento psicoanalítico, se evidencia al lector la importancia de las mixturas disciplinarias. A saber, diálogos interdisciplinarios que el psicoanálisis en su teoría y práctica mantuvo desde temprana data. Se propone pensar al Psicoanálisis y la Filosofía como un nudo que encuentra su utilidad y responsabilidad en el terreno de lo social y lo político. Es decir, la mixtura y la colisión entre las maquinarias conceptuales de ambos saberes, contribuyen a pensar y analizar la coyuntura de nuestro siglo.

**Palabras clave:** psicoanálisis, filosofía, siglo XXI, conceptos, clínica psicoanalítica.

## 1. Introduction

I am daily ever more convinced that theoretical work accomplishes more in the world than practical work. Once the realm of representation [Vorstellung] is revolutionized, actuality [Wirklichkeit] will not hold out.

G.W.F. Hegel.

Whether the analysis is wise or foolish, whether it is right in its thesis or falls into gross errors, is not at stake between us.

Sigmund Freud

In 1895, Sigmund Freud announced the beginning of psychoanalysis with the interpretation of *“The Dream of Irma’s Injection”*. The proof of this historical event is found in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess (1900) in which he wrote: “Do you suppose that some day a marble tablet will be placed on the house, inscribed with these words: ‘In this house on July 24th, 1895, the Secret of Dreams was revealed to Dr. Sigmund Freud.’ At this moment I see little prospect of it” (p. 322). That incipient assumption would later be transformed into a commemorative plaque found in the Hotel Belle Vue, that building being formerly that of a sanatorium where Freud was an assistant. In studying these events, Manuel Hernández (2016) states that “it is possible to conjecture that the deciphering of the dream of Irma’s injection was the subjective event that initiated psychoanalysis” (p. 12).

Years later, Freud would publish *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, thus facilitating another way of understanding and investigating the diseases of the mind, body and soul.<sup>1</sup> This new method of clinical research would be built from the study and analysis of the dream world of patients in analysis. Fourteen years later, Freud himself (1914/1917) used his public exposure in defense of psychoanalysis as follows:

For psychoanalysis is my creation; for ten years I was the only one occupied with it, and all the annoyance which this new subject caused among my contemporaries has been

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<sup>1</sup> According to Hernández (2016): “The psychoanalysis of what is often called ‘Irma’ deserves a separate place, given that it provoked in Freud that historical formation of the unconscious” (p.13).

hurled upon my head in the form of criticism. Even today, when I am no longer the only psychoanalyst, I feel myself justified in assuming that none can know better than myself what psychoanalysis is, wherein it differs from other methods of investigating the psychic life, what its name should cover, or what might better be designated as something else (p.1).

In this period, Sigmund Freud (1914/1917) exposes the essential principles of what he conceives as “Psychoanalysis” in his text *The History of the Psychoanalytic Movement*. The quote above, which undeniably appears in a high point in the text, is marked by disjunctions in the contemporaneous production, scopes and edges of psychoanalysis. In this way, after visualizing the condition of the environment in which his creation came about, the father of psychoanalysis proposes to delimit and to impose what would be the history of the development of Psychoanalysis since its appearance in its pre-analytical condition, thus stipulating clear distinctions<sup>2</sup> from Adler’s “Individual Psychology” and Jung’s “Analytical Psychology”.

Our current project is both ambitious and modest. Ambitious in the sense that we have proposed to rethink the modifications that the psychoanalytic device has had — and will have — in relation to the political<sup>3</sup> framework on which an analytic discourse is configured in our time. It is from the transformations in its epochal becoming that the device must be reassembling theoretical and clinical modalities. We identify in this sense, as one of the challenges of psychoanalysis, the position of the analyst, specifically the resistance of the figure of the analyst who refuses to see psychoanalysis as a device that goes — and must go — beyond intellectualization, and a field to be involved with the socio-cultural and therefore with philosophy.

On the other hand, the objective is very modest because we have proposed to use the philosophical question as a reflexive tool to think about the re-configuration of a new way

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<sup>2</sup> The contradiction is particularly active in Freud himself (1914/1917) who, in the same text, affirms: “In his theoretical contribution to the *Studies of Hysteria* Breuer, wherever obliged to mention conversion, has always added my name in parenthesis, as though this first attempt at a theoretical formulation was my mental property. I think this allotment refers only to the nomenclature, whilst the conception itself occurred to us both at the same time.” (p.2). Although such an affirmation emerges in relation to the adjudication of a concept, it is possible to extrapolate it to more general fields where, while on the one hand he proposes the intellectual property of a trend, on the other he denies believing in intellectual property and confesses to being close to the conceptual and intellectual swell that ideas themselves produce.

<sup>3</sup> According to Yannis Stravakakis (2010) one of the contributions of Lacanian theory to the challenges of our time is that it “radically questions the credibility of individualism and subjectivism by proposing a new conception of subjectivity: the subject at fault. The benefits of such a conceptualization are obvious. First, it avoids positing a positively defined essence of subjectivity and thus goes beyond psychological reductionism and individualism. Secondly, it allows us to grasp in depth the socio-symbolic dependence of subjectivity: due to the centrality of lack in the Lacanian conception of the subject, subjectivity becomes the space in which a whole ‘politics’ of identification takes place” (p. 465).

out, a psychoanalysis accessible to all, insofar as psychoanalysis is understood as inseparable from culture, society, politics and history.

One of the questions that Jacques Lacan (1986/1997) asked himself in the seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* followed the previous line:

Can we, in fact, close off that city so easily nowadays? It doesn't matter. However we regulate the situation of those who have recourse to us in our society, it is only too obvious that their aspiration to happiness will always imply a place where miracles happen, a promise, a mirage of original genius or an opening up of freedom, or if we caricature it, the possession of all women for a man and of an ideal man for a woman. To make oneself the guarantor of the possibility that a subject will in some way be able to find happiness even in analysis is a form of fraud (p. 303).

Having said that, if psychoanalysis is in principle a swindle, it is convenient to start by asking ourselves about the role of psychoanalysis and to identify some of the places where it has been placed/established in the course of history.<sup>4</sup> How far have we gone on with this swindle? We need to take a critical perspective towards ourselves, the self-criticism of our theoretical, academic, clinical and research work enables a diverse analysis of the socio-political implications and political resistances that sustain us. It is necessary to turn towards what we ourselves have made invisible.

In Lacan's (1986/1997) own words:

A little more rigor and firmness are required in our confrontation with the human condition. That is why I reminded you last time that the service of goods or the shift of the demand for happiness onto the political stage has its consequences. The movement that the world we live in is caught up in, of wanting to establish the universal spread of the service of goods as far as conceivably possible, implies an amputation, sacrifices, indeed a kind of puritanism in the relationship to desire that has occurred historically. The establishment of the service of goods at a universal level does not in itself resolve the problem of the present relationship of each individual man to his desire in the short period of time between his birth and his death. The happiness of future generations is not at issue here (p.304).

In retrospect, from the beginning, we find the birth of critical perspectives in line with politics as processes of resistance to hegemony, for example, those resistances that emerged in the historical development of formal paradigms that remained a-critical, a-social and promoted depoliticization which germinated largely from psychology.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1914 Freud (1917) affirmed some of the first anchors that psychoanalysis had in relation to the discover-ies of technique: "It was proved that psychoanalysis could not clear up anything actual, except by going back to something in the past. It even proved that every pathological experience presupposes an earlier one which, though not in itself pathological, lent a pathological quality to the later occurrence." (p.4).

We find “critical discourse analysis”<sup>5</sup> (Van Dijk, 1999) and other critical modalities from the social sciences (Bimbaum, 1971; Hymes, 1972; Prilleltensky, 1997; Turkel, 1996), which since the 1970s burst onto the intellectual scene in a subversive way and proposed to create alternatives to the dominant perspectives.

During the twentieth century, the Frankfurt School<sup>6</sup> stood out in terms of its transversal contribution to the social sciences by proposing critique as the central axis of the theory and the process of theoretical construction. According to Fromm (1941/1993), at the time when the Frankfurt School turned towards philosophy, the theoretical bases that were previously linked to Marxism, turned towards the contributions of Nietzsche and Freud — this being one of the important links in relation to the turn that was made from the theory, in line with the philosophical foundations and the proposals that Freudian psychoanalysis dealt with at this moment in history.

Lazo (2004) refers to this situation proposing that “the approach towards these thinkers was driven by a reevaluation of individual factors as determinants of human action” (p. 439), accordingly, it is added that also psychoanalysis is an antecedent of various disciplinary fields — for example, such was the case of psychosocial studies (Walkerline, 2008; Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Redman, 2016; Pavón-Cuéllar y Orozco, 2017) among many others.

Now, from one perspective, psychoanalysis is sustained by the myth of origin, with a foundational stance that produced an opening to three diverse outlets: 1) psychoanalysis as a new research method; 2) psychoanalysis as a new clinic that makes possible another modality of access to the cure and, 3) psychoanalysis as a subversive theoretical proposal for the conditions of the historical moment of its appearance. Even then, it should be pointed out that these paths assure us a certain absolute originality of psychoanalysis, from a dialectical look at the frontlines where we confront the position that looks down at psychoanalysis as a repetition of ideas, which formerly were already being gestated from an ambiguous reading.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Van Dijk (1999), we find: “Critical discourse analysis is a type of discourse analytic research that primarily studies the way in which the abuse of social power, domination and inequality are practiced, reproduced, and occasionally combated, by texts and speech in social and political contexts. Critical discourse analysis, with such peculiar research, explicitly takes sides, and hopes to contribute effectively to resistance against social inequality. Certain principles of critical discourse analysis can already be traced back to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School from before the Second World War (Rasmussen, 1996). Its characteristic orientation towards language and discourse began with ‘critical linguistics’ born (mainly in the UK and Australia) in the late 1970s (Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew, 1979; Mey, 1985)” (p.23).

<sup>6</sup> According to Silvana Laso (2004) in studying the importance of critical theory in the social sciences, she proposes that: “The Frankfurt School was a very important concentration of outstanding German intellectuals who shared a critical theoretical approach and progressive social thought, among them were: Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, and others. Weil was an amateur researcher but also a millionaire, who founded the institute to devote itself to the scientific study of Marxism, trying to strike a balance between his class position and his sympathy for the left. The new institute maintained a free association with the University of Frankfurt and opened for left-wing German scholars a door for the study of political and economic Marxism at the university level” (p. 438).

Accordingly, we can think of psychoanalysis like the mixture of other ideas that allowed the birth of a new idea while mixed up with other previous ones. Psychoanalysis is a surge, and as such, produces waves.

In this sense, Freud (1926/1969) was already “concerned as to who practices analysis” in *The Question of Lay Analysis* (p. 1); but if we revisit Freud’s earlier text, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1955), we have the following account of the changing aims of psychoanalysis:

Twenty-five years of intense work have had as their result that the immediate aims of psycho-analytic technique are quite other to-day than they were at the outset. At first the analysing physician could do no more than discover the unconscious material that was concealed from the patient, put it together, and, at the right moment, communicate it to him. Psycho-analysis was then first and foremost an art of interpreting. Since this did not solve the therapeutic problem, a further aim quickly came in view: to oblige the patient to confirm the analyst’s construction from his own memory. In that endeavour the chief emphasis lay upon the patient’s resistances: the art consisted now in uncovering these as quickly as possible, in pointing them out to the patient and in inducing him by human influence — this was where suggestion operating as ‘transference’ played its part — to abandon his resistances. (p. 18).

From these pieces of data, we can begin to find clues about the structure built under the signifier “psychoanalysis”, and understand that it is not a solid, immovable, stable and perdurable construction, but rather, a construction that is always in transformation and that allows mobilization and transgression within itself. It is the subversive tendency of Psychoanalysis, which allows it to still be considered in our time as a key tool to analyze and explore the political movements that plague our societies.

## 2. Resistance and controversies

In 1920, psychoanalytic technique already maintained elements radically different from the initial ones, the guiding thread of the analytic device works by way of a constant replacement of purposes and a never-ending process of investigation. So, what happened along the way, that nowadays the resistances that were initially only external, focused on the epochal irruption of psychoanalysis, now moved on to operate as internal resistances to the psychoanalytic sphere itself? Why is it that the psychoanalytic field resists variability and censures in a radical way any research that delivers new foundations to the psychoanalytic technique?

In Donald L. Carveth (1984) we find a partial answer, I quote:

... despite Freud’s recognition as one of the architects of modern thought and sensibility, and despite the important work of a wide range of psychoanalytically oriented sociologists, he is an unsung hero — perhaps even an anti-hero — in sociology. Freud remains a figure honored more through the rituals of refutation than affirmation, or



honored only indirectly, and often with considerable distortion, in the work of his self-styled followers in Freudian-Marxism and critical theory (p. 1).

In the previous argument, we find one of the first coordinates from which we can begin to trace the path that makes possible an attempt to explain the resistance that develops when we try to expand the current limits of psychoanalysis. Although Carveth's affirmation responds to the relationship of psychoanalysis with related or close disciplines in the field of the social sciences, this same logic of exclusion and invalidation of some contributions becomes radical in the exchange of knowledge, questions or reflections among psychoanalysts themselves.

It is not only the resistance to, for example, the exchange or acceptance of contributions from the European continent to the Latin American, but it is also possible to find this refusal before the incorporation of the same ideas or contributions among our closest colleagues — an issue that we will try to address in more detail later on.

The above becomes incomprehensible, since Freud himself (1920/1955) reminded us that psychoanalysis is and goes on a path. However, it is a path that must be explored in its entirety with its complex roads, paths and alleys; how could we remain faithful to a path if it does not lead us to any exit or if we forget that staying on a path is precisely to wander, advance, explore and find various exits? In his words we find the following:

But it became ever clearer that the aim which had been set up — the aim that what was unconscious should become conscious — is not completely attainable by that method. The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past. (Freud, 1920/1955, p.18)

The investigation, the refutation or confirmation of hypotheses, the process of investigation as such, was what allowed Freud to have a critical debate and produce the subsequent reformulation of the theoretical foundations on which psychoanalysis was developing. Psychoanalytic research prevailed from its beginnings with an always uncertain objective. According to Assoun (2006), the same resistances present since the establishment of the psychoanalytic approach helped to make its progress possible.

Currently, the objective seems to be only one: to try to keep the psychoanalytic discourse and technique afloat, to avoid the effort and commitment involved in its transformation. The result is empty and opposite to what was expected, as we can see with greater clarity that it is the same psychoanalytic circles that sink psychoanalysis because of their resistance and the lack of depth or a self-critical outlook at their practice as psychoanalysts. Regarding Lacanian psychoanalysis or the legacy left by Lacan, for Zupančič (2008/2013) “Despite

his persistent assertion that “psychoanalysis is not philosophy”, Lacan developed his theory through a constant dialogue with philosophy” (p. 13).

Once again, the usefulness and adaptability of psychoanalysis is discussed with respect to the discursive, theoretical, and practical tools that made it possible for us to continue on its path. Without questioning as a tool drawn from philosophy, without the reflexive process that makes the articulation of clinical hypotheses possible, psychoanalysis could not be directed towards a cure. Psychoanalysis is a living philosophy par excellence, and it does not stop or deny the philosophical process.

In the 1953-1954 seminar, “Freud’s papers on technique,” Jacques Lacan (1973/1991) already left some clues about the above when he stated that:

More specifically, the ease with which the question of practical rules to be observed is dealt with shows us the extent to which they were, for Freud, an instrument, in the sense that one says one has a hammer firmly in hand. *Firmly held by this hand of mine*, he says in short, *and this is how I am accustomed to holding it. Others may possibly prefer a marginally different instrument, which sits better in their hand.* (p. 9)

This is precisely Lacan’s approach in his return to Freud, which allows us to continue thinking about the relationship of psychoanalysis with other disciplines. If psychoanalysis is a symptom of culture, it is necessary to start thinking about the psychological, economic, philosophical and existential frameworks that sustain culture — it is in the quagmire of human existence where the outbreak of psychoanalytic discourse occurs.

In the current state of psychoanalysis, we are witnessing a predominant rivalry between two groups: the opposing perspectives that accept a relationship and interexchange between psychoanalysis and philosophy, and the other group of psychoanalysts who are inclined to exclude the mixture of philosophy and psychoanalysis. Besides this rivalry, we can also see the current situation which obliges us and implicates us into accepting the different modalities of psychoanalysis since right now is not the moment of falling back into the idealization of psychoanalysis’ purity.

The paths we have available to explore when we observe the controversies and resistances of our time are wide and diverse. We also find the inevitable hypothesis that announces the defeat of the subject of the 21st century with regard to the conceptual/experiential components and struggles that are disseminated and promoted. As Elisabeth Roudinesco (2000) warned “the more society proclaims emancipation, stressing the equality of all before the law, the more it accentuates differences” (p. 15). In this direction, it is also important to consider the alliance between the dominant ideological discourses and the critics who maintain an a-critical view of their own hypotheses and attacks — such is the case of groups of psychoanalysts or anti-psychoanalysts who try to defame theory and practice through myths of psychoanalysis.

The previous issue is not only evident in institutions or disciplines related to the social sciences; the myths of psychoanalysis have been incorporated in the field of biographies being



a new space of misrepresentations of psychoanalysis. Namely, there are many claims that propose to defame Freud, Lacan and others in order to try to overthrow the technique, theoretical and clinical practice through appeals to morality. That is to say, by taking the figure of the founders of the psychoanalytic movements, they seek to eliminate or censure the findings, advances and modalities of approach, putting the individual biography of the founders as an obscure and hindered point to the permanence or perdurability of psychoanalysis in our time.

Even in 2023, the passions aroused by psychoanalysis continue to be an endless and infinite sea of love, hatred, loathing, sadness, fanaticism, melancholy and a wide range of feelings and emotions that live and survive both in psychoanalysts and in those who go against the movement.

While it is true that these attacks — which do not focus on the ideas or on the work and findings, but emphasize the persons and personal lives of those who publish these findings — somehow manage to lower the debate to a vulgar and shameful level, they also manage, in a parallel way, to feed psychoanalytic production. That is, the work of unserious intellectuals produces a serious and rigorous response to such empty and poor attempts to sully the important aspect of the device.

Finally, this quagmire has a fundamental flip side, related to sustaining the psychoanalytic act, in societies such as those that produce and configure the political logics of the 21st century. The usefulness and necessity of psychoanalysis is easily identifiable as a product of the psychic suffering of individuals and the high demands for healing that the suffering of living in our time manifests. In this sense, as mentioned at the beginning, not only the resistances of non-psychoanalysts are fundamental to address, but also, the modalities of approach, the formations, self-critical views and techniques used by psychoanalysts become urgent to look at.

### 3. Conclusion

What is Psychoanalysis? Is it possible to think of an inside and/or outside of the psychoanalytic movement? What is the Psychoanalysis that is so much talked about? Why do people try to demarcate the limits of psychoanalysis by trying to propose only one form of Psychoanalysis?

The death of the psychoanalytic experience, the destruction of psychoanalysis, the resistances of the analyst and the growing search for a pure psychoanalysis, have only degraded psychoanalysis by insisting on treating the psychoanalytic movement as a church or a sect which only some have the privilege of joining. This is the question we have set out to explore in this dossier, a question to which the various papers have attempted to contribute by further extending the initial question. Drawing on philosophy, literature, psychology,

cinema and sociology, various proposals for thinking about psychoanalysis in our time have been configured, from both theoretical and clinical perspectives.

So, to conclude, philosophy and psychoanalysis are not external to each other; they do not relate to each other as a universal worldview and a specific science and practice of mental disorders. But, as it became clear to Lacan and his followers, psychoanalysis compels us to redefine the very domain of philosophy: what is external reality? What is a human being? And vice versa: only philosophy allows us to perceive the most radical dimension of the psychoanalytic discovery, how psychoanalysis shatters our most common view of reality and our place in it.

The proposal of this project remains focused on the future. That is to say, the need to continue with the critical, rigorous and serious work focused on the diffusion and transmission of psychoanalysis, tying it to the urgencies and questions that the times are posing.

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