

## *Psychoanalysis: Science or Nonscience?*

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The debate regarding the scientific status of psychoanalysis is considered by many psychiatrists to be a sterile one; this leads to a polarisation of views in which those in favour of psychoanalysis, feeling themselves to be losing, retreat to the position of stating that meaning is more important than scientific status, while those against argue that because psychoanalysis is unscientific it is meaningless and thus should not remain part of our psychiatric practice; the debate being reformulated as psychoanalysis: sense or nonsense? The consequence of giving up this debate is that it allows us also to give up the struggle to define science adequately to ourselves, and to question the relationship between psychiatry and science. Our understanding of science reflects directly on the quality of our research; this is particularly relevant to research in the practical application of psychoanalysis. Before we consider our understanding of science, however, we should consider our epistemological theories, or how we know things.

Empirical realism, one such theory, states that the only knowable things are those which we perceive through the senses, like this page of print, empirical because it deals with the objects of our sense-perceptions, and realist because it assumes a world 'out there'. A scepticist theory suspends judgements about certainty; we accept that some phenomena are real, but we cannot know which, since our sense-perceptions can and do deceive us, optical illusions being an example of such deception. Other theories state that it is possible to know certain things through their effects, if we cannot perceive them directly, for example a magnetic field which we can only perceive through its effects, but which we believe exists nevertheless.

According to our models of epistemology, we construct models of science. Traditional scientific activity, as exemplified by the physical sciences, corresponds to a realist theory, that science is the study of objects and/or their effects on the world, by means of experiments which test our hypotheses and find them to be correct or incorrect. According to Popper<sup>1</sup> science proceeds by imaginative hypotheses (conjectures) to observations designed to falsify these hypotheses (refutations). 'The criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability' (ibid.) We can see here that Popper implies that falsifiability is the same as testability; clearly they are not the same, since by testing a theory one can prove it to be correct or incorrect. If we agree with Popper's statement, that a discipline which cannot generate falsifiable theories cannot be a science, we exclude psychoanalysis without further thought.

However, there are several problems with Popper's philosophy of science. Firstly, scientists spend much of their time working on hypotheses, experimentally, proving them to be correct. Experiments are designed to produce

observations which test the degree of truth in a hypothesis; they are not designed to prove it to be incorrect. Secondly, when a theory is challenged it is not rejected, as Popper suggests, but modified or subsumed under a theory which explains the phenomena more completely. For example, Newtonian theory has limited explanatory power and becomes incorrect beyond these limits, but it has been incorporated into Einsteinian theory, instead of being rejected. Thirdly, the problems of observations: it is well known that observations to a large extent depend on one's theories, so that one sees what one expects to see, and designs experiments which generate the data that one expects. (We are familiar with the methodological problems of unvalidated questionnaires). Popper attempts to solve this problem by assuming that proving our theories to be wrong will somehow purify our observations, but we still fall into the trap of expecting our data to show that we are wrong.

There is thus a fundamental discrepancy between what Popper says scientists do (a prescriptive model) and what they actually do (a descriptive model). While falsifiability may be an ideal it does not characterise how scientists work, and thus cannot serve as an exclusion criterion to demarcate science from nonscience. I have laboured this point because it disturbs me to find some of my colleagues accepting Popper so uncritically and using his philosophy to justify their own positions.

A model which has recently attracted interest among psychiatrists and psychologists is 'transcendental realism' as expounded by Bhaskar<sup>2</sup> and later Will.<sup>3,4</sup> This theory states firstly that a world exists outside of men which transcends our human consciousness. Secondly, that science tries to understand the principles of this real world. Thirdly, that natural laws are real, not merely descriptions of patterns of events seen in experiments, and that they are descriptions of 'generative mechanisms' which cause observed patterns of events. Scientific activity develops in three stages: first, the empirical identification of a phenomenon using existing cognitive materials; second, a plausible explanation for the phenomenon is invented in the form of a possible generative mechanism; third, the reality of this imagined generative mechanism is tested empirically.

Science thus proceeds by moving from manifest phenomena to the structures that cause or generate them. Once the generative mechanism has been tested, it itself becomes the manifest phenomenon that is investigated by proposing a further generative mechanism. Science is therefore a stratified activity that corresponds to the real stratification of the phenomena studied. An example from chemistry illustrates this idea: a chemical reaction between an acid and a base is explained by a generative mechanism,

# Psychoanalysis As Science

**Christian G. Meyer**



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