From Cartesian Minds to Experiential Worlds in Psychoanalysis

For
Multiple Perspectives in Subjectivity
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Shocked, but not surprised. No, it’s not the latest political scandal, but that once again an intelligent person, after asking me what I do, has answered with a categorical statement that philosophy is useless, an occupation for dilettantes. “Now, psychoanalysis, there’s something practical,” he continued, “Sometimes people really need that.” Of course I would like to believe that, despite Freud’s well-known aversion to philosophy, no psychoanalyst today would respond in this way. We suspect that the inquiries and disputes of philosophers have something to do with our work. Today I will provide an example of such relevance.

The Cartesian mind, in its origins familiar to many of us from early readings of Descartes’ Meditations, developed over the modern era (Taylor, 1989) into the mental mechanism we know in the work of Freud. Although Freud’s systematic study of unconscious processes undermined an important component of the Cartesian mind, namely its devotion to “clear and distinct ideas”, the psychoanalytic mind, as Cavell (Cavell, 1991, Cavell, 1993) has masterfully shown, has been and continues to be the Cartesian mind.
The Cartesian mind, including its empiricist and positivist variants, has several important qualities, each of which has bearing on our psychoanalytic work. As part of a larger project studying the nature of experiential worlds, I propose briefly to outline these qualities of the Cartesian mind, comparing them and their psychoanalytic consequences, with those of experiential or psychological worlds. My intent is to make it easier for psychoanalysts to say more exactly what we are claiming and criticizing when we call ourselves “post-Cartesians”. In the process, it should be possible to outline an alternative way of thinking, and to give indications of its fruitfulness for psychoanalytic thinking and work.

The Cartesian mind.

Self-enclosed isolation is the quality of Cartesianism that my collaborators and I have already most extensively addressed. In Working Intersubjectively (Orange, et al., 1997), we wrote:

An objectivist epistemology envisions the mind in isolation, radically separated from an external reality that it either accurately apprehends or distorts. The image of the mind looking out on the external world is actually a heroic image or heroic myth, in that it portrays the inner essence of the person existing in a state that is disconnected from all that sustains life. This myth, pervasive in the culture of Western industrial societies, we (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992) have termed the myth of the isolated mind (p. 7). It appears in many guises and variations. One can discern its presence in tales of invincible persons who overcome great adversity through solitary

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1 By “positivist” I mean anti-metaphysical, and devoted to verification and repeatability of experiment as knowledge criteria. The unrepeatability of the human individual makes this
heroic acts, in philosophical works revolving around a conception of an isolated, monadic subject, and in psychological and psychoanalytic doctrines focusing exclusively on processes occurring within the individual person--including, for example, Freud's vision of the mind as an impersonal machine processing endogenous drive energies, ego psychology's autonomously self-regulating ego, and Kohut's pristine self with its preprogrammed inner design. We (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992) have argued that the pervasive, reified image of the mind in isolation, in all its many guises, is a form of defensive grandiosity that serves to disavow the exquisite vulnerability that is inherent to an awareness of the embeddedness of all human experience in constitutive relational systems. All such images of the mind insulated from the constitutive impact of the surround counteract, to paraphrase Kundera (1984), what might be termed "the unbearable embeddedness of being." (pp. 41-42).

The consequences of isolated-mind thinking for psychoanalytic thinking and work are extensive and profound. The patient who meets an isolated-mind clinician may find himself or herself described as perfectionistic, narcissistic, or even borderline\(^2\). Within the psychoanalytic situation, patients are said to be projecting, identifying, resisting, or acting out. Such designations, almost always pejorative toward the patient, betray the clinician's continuing allegiance to the Cartesian mind, and probably serve to protect us from our awareness of our own implication in what we form of positivism unsuited for understanding human experience.

\(^2\) Indeed, patients with experience with isolated-mind mental health professionals may initially describe themselves to us similiarly: “I am a borderline”, “I am a manic-depressive”, and so on. Later, we come to hear the experiential sense that has been obliterated (compounding
too easily describe as “the patient’s pathology.” The atomism of isolated-mind thinking implies that we are not essentially related to each other, that our being is fundamentally self-enclosed.

A second prominent feature of Cartesian-mind thinking is the infamous subject-object split. Cartesian epistemology claims that the object is real (existing independently of any knower), but that the subject (cogito ergo sum) is even more fundamentally real. Whether or not one accepts Descartes’ derivation of the external world from the isolated mind, the division between mental and extended/physical realities has persisted in modern thought. Idealists like Descartes, Berkeley, and even Kant believed physical reality depended on mind, while empiricists like Locke, Hume, and Mill claimed that mind was illusory, or at least derivative. In the twentieth century psychology, this view took the form of behaviorism. The whole dispute, however, depended on a full acceptance of the Cartesian premise of the subject-object split.

In psychoanalysis, this split appears in the contrast between psychical reality, and external reality. Although Freud constructed a mental reality fully as mechanistic as that studied in physics and chemistry, his dependence on the biological theory of instinct gave psychic reality some flexibility (Kennedy, 1998). The object of the subject’s drive was its most variable feature. Today perhaps the residues of subject-object thinking persist most clearly in interpersonal theories, where a therapeutic relationship becomes described as an interaction, and the “interaction” is analyzed in terms of what people, understood though usually not acknowledged as essentially earlier invalidation) by these formulas: “I feel like I’m not real,” “I feel I’m not inside my body”, and so on.
unrelated monads, are doing to each other. Some object relations theories—the term gives the adherents away—speak unapologetically of the subject’s objects—usually understood as mental contents. Ironically, even theories of subject-subject relating may preserve the conception of subjectivity derived from the contrast between subject and object, that is, a Cartesian subject with all the features we are describing.

A third almost-universal feature of the Cartesian mind is the contrast between inner and outer. Inner reality is psychic, outer reality is material or extended in space. Again, the inner is subjective; the outer is objective, real or external, depending on context. The mind is a container, with ideas, fantasies, emotions, and even drives and instincts inside. External reality may affect this container and its contents, but it is always external reality. This feature of the Cartesian mind probably serves a powerful protective function, shielding the Cartesian subject from ownership of many toxic feelings, and from much responsibility for what is outside. Ego psychology was built on this contrast: psychological health meant the adaptation of the ego (Freud’s Ich, though less substantialized, was still inner) to the external world. Cavell (1993), drawing on the work of Wittgenstein, has extensively presented the philosophical criticisms of this inner-outer dichotomy, and has explored its implications for psychoanalytic theory.

Practically speaking, this dichotomy is particularly dangerous in clinical work. Patients and analysts can become endlessly entangled in trying to determine where a particular reality lies, inside or outside, or where responsibility for a reaction, for a life pattern, or for some interpersonal disaster lies. The presumption that everything is either inside or outside the Cartesian mind leads to metaphors like projective
identification or to talk of delusion, and precludes the shared search for profound and personal experiences of self-loss and non-being (cf. Orange, Atwood, and Stolorow, 1997, ch. 4).

The Cartesian mind, fourthly, craves clarity and distinctness. The chaos, process, soft assembling, and emergence so dear to the systems thinking of the late twentieth century would turn poor Descartes over in his grave. Binary logic (true/false), which proved so robust and so fruitful in the development of modern science (Descartes was a contemporary of Galileo and a serious student of the history of science), has demonstrated serious limitations within its own spheres of applicability. Even the computer, binary logic’s creation, has required new and more “fuzzy” logics to develop further, to take complexity into more adequate account.³

The need for Cartesian clear and distinct ideas often appears in psychology as reductionism, the “it all comes down to” approach. Ironically, reductionism is easiest to see in the theories of others. As psychoanalysts, we see this clearly in behaviourism. Post-Freudians can see it in instinct theory. But do we see reductionism in our own favorites: selfobject theories, attachment theories, affect or trauma theories, or whatever the current fashion may be? Only a “contrite fallibilism” (Peirce, 1931-1935), and a devotion to dialogue with the possessors of other perspectives can help us to “make our ideas clear” (Peirce, 1878) without falling into the Cartesian search that leads to reductionism.

³ Even these fuzzy logics may not be adequate to the Geisteswissenschaften (human sciences). At the same time, we may question whether Dilthey’s famous distinction between the Naturwissenschaften and the Geisteswissenschaften (Dilthey, 1989) may not contain its own residual Cartesian dualism. It does, however, remind us that subjective experience is not reducible to its material conditions. Nor, similarly, and this was Dilthey’s concern, is understanding reducible to mere translation. Dilthey, like Husserl, both perpetuates and undermines Cartesian thinking.
In psychoanalysis, we can see that the search for certainty with its “clear and distinct ideas” criterion has both protected us from anxiety and restricted our creativity. Although psychoanalytic thinkers have always recognized complexity—overdetermination and multiple function are good examples of conceptualizing complexity—the search for clear and distinct ideas has persisted. Some years ago I commented on this endurance of this search, as manifested in procedural rules of “technique”, and in discussions of analyzability and correct interpretation:

Why does the search for certainty and for correctness in theory and in practice persist among psychoanalysts? I believe this search concretely expresses our need for selfobject experiences (Bacal & Thomson, 1993) to maintain a stable psychological organization in the face of the chaos and pain we meet continually in our work. Without correct theories, correct interpretation, and correct techniques to rely on in our many moments of doubt, we might lose hold of ourselves. We might feel afraid or fragmented. Old pain and confusion might rise to haunt our work. I think much of the rigidity and of search for correctness detailed above is an attempt to protect us from these frightening threats to our organized sense of stable self-experience. (Orange, 1995), p. 51).

As remedies for the Cartesian search for certainty, I proposed, following American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, the spirit of fallibilism, which includes both a continuing acknowledgement that we may at any time be mistaken, and the understanding that truth can be sought only in a community of scholars, not by the philosophical or psychoanalytic lonesome cowboy. Second, I suggested the spirit of hermeneutics, which recommends taking any strange-sounding utterance as true,
then seeking to understand how a reasonable person could think in this way. Only
so can we begin a dialogue with what seems to us strange. Both hermeneutics and
fallibilism I saw as powerful antidotes to Cartesian thinking, and so their more
famous proponents, Gadamer and Peirce, have seen them. Now I would also
suggest thinking more contextually, and in terms of systems, but that can wait for the
second half of this discussion.

A fifth feature of Cartesian thinking is its reliance on logic alone. We might
even call this “the Cartesian faith.” There is no room for emotion, or for art, in the
Cartesian mind. Freud, in this respect, deserves the revolutionary stature he
claimed. He saw that such a mind must be exclusively conscious, and thus could not
account for psychological experience in health or illness, nor could it account for the
rich productions of human culture with which he found himself surrounded in turn-of-
the-century Vienna. Freud’s solution, however, was to give the Cartesian house a
basement, where the genuine sources of psychic life lived. Unfortunately, the
Freudian unconscious is equally as isolated and atomistic, mechanistic, inner, and
subjective as the Cartesian mind. It is simply hidden from view, and operates
according to a different logic. Apart from my collaborators (Stolorow and Atwood,
1992), I am not aware that other psychoanalysts have attempted to criticize or
reconceptualize “the unconscious” in post-Cartesian ways.

The absence of temporality is a sixth important feature of Cartesian
thinking. It results, sooner or later, in what Taylor (Taylor, 1989), calls the “punctual
self,” the idea of an individual isolated as a point in space, from other human beings,
and from the natural world. Worst of all, such a point in space is atemporal, and thus
has no developmental history, no story to tell. In psychoanalysis, the concept of
transference both manifests and challenges the atemporal Cartesian mind. Past penetrates and shapes the experience of the present, almost like a template, and past experience is always understood and reinterpreted nachträglich⁴, in the light of what comes later. At the same time, there is no doubt, for Freudians, for object relations theorists who speak of old and new objects, and even for some proponents of systems theories, that time is linear and one-dimensional. Old is old, and new is new, and the future usually drops out of consideration⁵. Clinically, I think this leads to some form of “maturity morality,” in which we enjoin ourselves or our patients to grow up. “New” and “old” language can obscure the complexity, sometimes even the richness, of temporal experience, and leave us wondering why our patients’ experience, or our own, does not change in the way we think it should.

Next, let us look at the furniture of the Cartesian mind: the ideas. For Descartes, and even more for his empiricist successors, ideas were copies or representations of things, conceived as individual items in the “external” world or as sense perceptions. This representational theory of mental contents persists in psychoanalysis to this day, both among Freudians, for whom dream images, for example, are representations of the fulfilled drive wishes. Among object relations theorists the mind is furnished with internal objects, and even among contemporary psychoanalysts influenced by infant research, we find many forms of representation (Beebe and Lachmann, 1994). Indeed, the still Cartesian “representational world” of Sandler and Rosenblatt (Sandler and Rosenblatt, 1962), ironically enough, provided for many of us an impetus to move beyond Cartesian representational thinking into

⁴ I do not use this Freudian word to suggest the unreality of what is so understood, but rather to point to the continuing organization and reorganization of all experience.
thinking about the psychological or experiential world (Stolorow, et al., 1978); (Atwood and Stolorow, 1980); (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984).

Clinically, the pernicious effects of representational thinking can be quite subtle. If, with our patients, we picture the mind as full of mental copies, or representations, we can become much too concerned with the accuracy or inaccuracy of the copies, and lose sight of the processes of creating and recreating meaning, of organizing and reorganizing experience. We can also lose the forest for the trees, seeing images, ideas, memories, and fantasies as separate items in a mental file, instead of attempting to understand together the significance of whatever comes up for the sense of a whole life, and a life in its rich, or horrible, contextuality.

Finally, but not last in importance, is the Cartesian concept of mind as substance. The mental thing or item has been stripped of corporeality, and contrasted with extended substance abstracted from mentality. Thus the Cartesian substance is reified, excessively abstract, and completely reduced to a commodity. “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” For psychoanalysis the reduction of mind to thing, item, or substance must lead us to underestimate the aspects of human life that are genuinely mental: emotion, thinking, valuing, aesthetic experience, creativity, and so on. Instead we revert to mechanistic metaphors of projecting repressing and transferring.

Experiential Worlds.

⁵ A good exception to this generalization can be found in the work of Fosshage on the leading edge of dreams (Fosshage, 1989).
World is perhaps the fundamental and defining concept of intersubjectivity theory, that is, of our contextualist view of psychoanalysis. We speak of subjective worlds, of worlds of experience, of personal universes. Psychoanalysis, according to Atwood and Stolorow (1984), “is pictured here as a science of the intersubjective, focused on the interplay between the differently organized subjective worlds of the observer and the observed” (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984), p. 41. Or again, “the specific unfolding developmental needs of a particular child…are assimilated by the psychological world of each caretaker” (p. 68). Later, Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood (1987) characterized the central conception of intersubjectivity theory as “a system composed of differently organized, interacting subjective worlds” (Stolorow, et al., 1987), p. ix. To distinguish this intersubjectivity theory from other uses of the term ‘intersubjective’, Stolorow and Atwood (1992) explained that “we use ‘intersubjective’ to refer to any psychological field formed by interacting worlds of experience, at whatever developmental level these worlds may be organized” (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992), p. 3. And again, “the concept of an intersubjective system brings to focus both the individual’s world of inner experience and its embeddedness with other such worlds in a continual flow of reciprocal mutual influence” (p. 18). Similarly, attempting to situate intersubjectivity in psychoanalytic historical context, Orange (1995) claimed that “the intersubjective approach shares the generality of scientific inquiry and the particularity of empathic concentration on one individual’s organized and organizing subjective world” (Orange, 1995), p. 13. Sucharov (Sucharov, 1994) has explored the concept of world as living system. All of us have continued to work toward a fundamental and far-reaching shift in the concept of the human, from isolated minds and punctual selves (Taylor, 1989)
toward a system-embedded, context-conscious sense of experiential worlds (Orange, et al., 1997).

Now let us consider the features of an experiential world, considered as a radical conceptual alternative to the Cartesian mind. In contrast to isolation and atomism, most contemporary psychoanalytic schools emphasize relatedness, dialogue, and even systems theory. Aron (Aron, 1996) has masterfully surveyed the contemporary relational theories in psychoanalysis, and detailed their rejection and replacement of one-person psychologies. Yet, all of us have Cartesian thinking in our bones—it has become Western common sense—and most of us revert to it at times. The current talk of dyads, particularly indebted to the detailed and painstaking studies of infant researchers, in my view is a significant beginning but does not go far enough toward understanding development or psychoanalysis in context. Serious contextualism requires that personal experience be understood as world, not just as interaction. Interaction, even the best, is only one aspect of the development of emerging, organizing, and reorganizing psychological worlds. A child in treatment, for example, is embedded in relational worlds of home, treatment, school, and others, and can in no adequate way be understood in dyadic terms (cf. Gotthold…). A psychological, experiential world is relationally complex, chaotic, systemic, and emergent.

In contrast to the subject-object assumption embedded in Cartesian thinking, the concept of an experiential world is perspectival.

Perspectival realism recognizes that the only truth or reality to which psychoanalysis provides access is the subjective organization of experience understood in an intersubjective context (Stolorow et al., 1987).
Simultaneously, such a subjective organization of experience is one perspective on a larger reality. We never fully attain or know this reality, but we continually approach, apprehend, articulate, and share . . . Kohut's self psychology views subjectivity as the entire domain of psychoanalysis and sees so-called external events as bearing meaning only as the patient experiences and organizes them. While this view does exclude common-sense realisms, correspondence theories of truth, and scientific empiricisms, it does not exclude the possibility of dialogic, communitarian, or perspectival realism. In such a moderate realism, the real is an emergent, self-correcting process only partly accessible via personal subjectivity but increasingly understandable in communitarian dialogue. (Orange, 1995), p. 62.

In contrast to the inner-outer definition of the Cartesian mind, the concept of a psychological world envisions a kind of mutual inhabiting that is compatible with Gestalt psychology's figure and ground, dependent on the organizing activity of the viewer, and with Wittgenstein's image of the world as the visual field in which the Cartesian subject does not exist. The world replaces the Cartesian subject. A knower cannot be an item in the world. Instead, the experiential world seems to be doubly inhabited. We live in it and it lives in us. We live in our world of family, layers of culture and history, language, taken-for-granted routines and responses (Schutz, 1970), the multiple contexts represented by the oracle (Keren, 1998) and the choruses in Greek drama. In the words of Schutz, “my lifeworld is open both past and future, in respect of my experiencing this world as having existed before my birth and as going to continue after my death” (p. 135-136). At the same time, the world that I am inhabits me: I am the organized and organizing Gestalt of experience that is
a world, and am never away from it, never an isolated mind. Descartes himself could think only in the languages that inhabited him, and that were spoken in the worlds he inhabited. His meditations, the ultimate symbol of thinking in isolation, are in fact an invitation to us to think with him, to ask questions and to be questioned by him. Perhaps all linguistic expression is evidence that the isolated mind, or “the self”, is impossible, that world is the nature and condition for the possibility of individual\textsuperscript{6} human beings.

Clinically, such a focus on the experiential world inhabiting and being inhabited by a patient will surely encourage our awareness of our participation in the process, but not to the exclusion of all other considerations. We will not move from isolated mind to isolated dyad, nor will we continue to impute defenses like projective identification to our patients or to ourselves, understanding these as residues of Cartesian thinking.

Perhaps the most striking shift comes in the rejection of “clear and distinct ideas” in favor of the chaos, complexity, more-or-less quality, and general fallibilism of systems thinking. The experiential world can only fleetingly be the world of logic and reason for which Descartes, and many of us, have longed. Our security will come from the sense that we can rely on our emotional contexts enough to tolerate, and to curiously explore, the endlessly open questions. Such a capacity in the clinician must surely reassure the patient more than any clear and distinct answers,

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\textsuperscript{6} Individuality does not necessarily mean isolation. Nor does it mean reduction to instantiation of a generality (e.g. diagnosis): “I distinguish radically between singularity (\textit{Einzelnheit}) or individuality on the one hand, and particularity (\textit{Besonderheit}) on the other. I term individual what exists without an inner double, is beyond comparison, and cannot identically recur . . . In contrast, the particular is the specification of a universal (of a rule). It can be attained effortlessly by means of deduction. The particular relates to the general is
with their inevitable “Yes, but….” responses, indicating that we have reduced experience to a formula.

Similarly, the concept of an experiential world can encompass a more-or-less sense of awareness, without the traditionally rigid boundaries between conscious and unconscious. Psychoanalysis will always, I suspect, be most interested in those aspects of experience least accessible to ordinary awareness, but we need not define our work as if we had a special esoteric knowledge of a language not known to the uninitiated, and thus exclude people and ideas for being “not psychoanalytically trained” or just “unpsychoanalytic.” We are trained to increase, not to create, our attunement to the emotional, aesthetic, logical, more-or-less conscious aspects of experiential worlds, so that within a specific relational context, these worlds can come to feel more understandable and flexible to those who doubly inhabit them, who inhabit and are inhabited by them.

In contrast to the “punctual self” or Cartesian subject, the experiential world is profoundly historical and temporal. Since the time of Einstein, relativity and systems theories have taught us that temporality is enormously complex, that past, present, and future are not easily distinguishable. Clocks and calendars are not good metaphors for experiential time. Biological systems may be better. There is a plant in Crete that grows like a cactus for twenty years, flowers once (spectacularly), and dies that year. Like us, its development at all times includes its past, present, future, including death and birth of future generations. Similarly, as psychoanalysis replaces the Cartesian self with the experiential world, it will become more and more

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the case to the rule. A case could never modify a rule. It can only instantiate or not instantiate a rule” (Frank, 1992), p. 15.
interested in development, understood in terms of great temporal complexity (some speak of “non-linear systems”, but I fear this is becoming a cliché whose meaning gets lost). The cultural/historical worlds we inhabit and which inhabit us will also become of greater interest to psychoanalytic thinking.

Next, the representationalism of Cartesian thinking gives way to a dialogic (not dyadic), participatory, perspectival, and hermeneutic concept of understanding. To understand a person, I cannot enter that person’s mind, and catalog its mental furniture (ideas, affects, fantasies). Rather, in the only conception of “empathic immersion” that makes sense in post-Cartesian thinking, the participants in the conversation (two or more) immerse themselves in the interplay of personal worlds of experience. Instead of asking myself (as a clinician), “what is wrong with this person?” or “what representations reside in this person’s mind?” I may ask, “What could be the aspects of a person’s experiential world that would lead her to believe or feel that she is a murderer?” “What is the personal lifeworld like of someone who sits or lies on my couch and says he is not really in the room?” “What can a person who feels in this way expect or hope for?” Such questioning attitudes assume that what the other says is reasonable, and that the task is understanding, not evaluation, classification, or judgment. This, I think, is an important part of the “cash value”, or practical import, of replacing the Cartesian mind with the experiential world.

Finally, as we replace the Cartesian mind with the experiential world, mind as thing, item, or substance gives way to mentality as quality of organizing personal experience (including the experiences of disorganization, confusion, disintegration and chaos). Talk of multiple selves, quite common in relational circles, gives way to variously organized experiential worlds, essentially relational but more or less
actually related, and more or less experientially integrated. Personal experience is not mental substance; it is the process, complex in quality and temporality, “messy, fluid, and context-sensitive,” (Thelen and Smith, 1994) of an organized and organizing living system.

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