

Thompson, M.G. (2000). The Crisis of Experience in Contemporary Psychoanalysis*. Contemporary. Psychoanalysis., 36:29-56.

The Crisis of Experience in Contemporary Psychoanalysis*

M. Guy Thompson, Ph.D.

As We Come to The Close of the twentieth century and prepare to embark on a new one, I am tempted to reflect on the monumental and even catastrophic change that our world has suffered over the course of this century. Advances in technology have made it possible to raise the standard of living for many human beings, especially in Europe and North America, to heights that were unimaginable when our century began. Technology also brought us to the brink of destruction when the unbridled arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union took us to the precipice of nuclear war.

Yet, for all their potential for danger, the greatest threat that faces us today is not war or even the famine and poverty that many continue to suffer; indeed, it is those of us who appear to be protected from such horrors that have the most to lose. What we are in danger of losing is not the material comforts to which we are accustomed, but something much closer to our intrinsic humanity. I am thinking about the fragile condition of what was once taken for granted: *our capacity to experience*.

This may sound strange when, after all, our capacity to experience is something we generally take for granted. We invoke this term every day with such frequency that we seldom give it a second thought. Yet philosophers have written voluminous treatises on the nature of experience, and many psychoanalysts have even included the term in the titles of their books, including **Wilfried Bion** (*Learning from Experience*, 1962, *Experiences in Groups*, 1959); **Neville Symington** (*The Analytic Experience*, 1986); **Thomas Ogden** (*The Primitive Edge of Experience*, 1989); and **R. D. Laing** (*The Politics of Experience*, 1967; *The Voice of Experience*, (1982).

I am indebted to Prof. Martin Jay for his lecture presentation, "The Crisis of Experience in a Post-Subjective Age" (1998), that served as the inspiration for this essay. The following is an expansion of my discussion of Prof. Jay's presentation, which was in turn presented as the Keynote Address at the Annual Conference of the Instituto de Investigacion en Psicologia Clinica y Social, Mexico City, February 27, 1999.

The fact that we use a term, however, doesn't necessarily insure that we understand it, or that we treat it with the attention it deserves.

For the most part, philosophers remain ambivalent about the place experience occupies in their investigations. With the exception of the empiricists, who embraced experience as their most important philosophical principle, philosophers have tended to emphasize our capacity to reason over what is contrasted with the “senses.” Inasmuch as philosophy is that singular discipline that celebrates our capacity to think, it is hardly surprising that the place philosophers typically reserve for experience is an afterthought, at best. Yet, many thinkers during the course of the twentieth century have expressed concern over the status to which experience has been relegated. Some have even warned that we are in danger of losing our capacity to experience altogether. **Adorno (1992)**, for example, observed, “One may say that experience is the union of tradition with an open yearning for what is foreign; but the very possibility of experience is in jeopardy” (vol. 1, p. 55). Adorno's concern about the potential demise of experience was shared by many philosophers, historians, and intellectuals of his generation, including Walter Benjamin, who pointed to the increasing “poverty of experience” that seems to characterize our age (cited in **Jay, 1998**). Jay observed that the very concept of experience means so many things to so many people that the term is virtually unintelligible.

*Although we can make attempts to communicate what we experience
...only the subject really knows what he or she has experienced.
Experience, to put it differently, cannot be defined, for to do so is to reduce
it to other commensurable words or concepts, which is precisely what
invoking the term is designed to forestall. [p. 3]*

Jay argues that there is an undeniable antipathy between academics and psychoanalysts on one hand and artists and common folk on the other concerning the place to which experience is allotted in our lives. I do not attempt a definition of experience per se, but explore its relevance to psychoanalytic theory and technique. In so doing, I point to its singular absence in psychoanalytic theory and the gradual, if unwitting, decline of experience in its literature over the course of the century. Though psychoanalysts, like everyone else, use this term all the time, the word “experience,” as Jay observes, seems to have no specific definition. That being said, I offer the etymology of the term as a useful place to begin.

For example, the English word “experience,” is derived from the Latin *peritus*, meaning peril. This lends to the term an ominous sensibility, implying that experience is something we may choose to embrace or resist, depending upon the experience in question. The Latin *peritus* also means “to try out,” or “to test.” On the other hand, the Greek root of “experience,” which is older than the Latin, derives from the word *empeiria*, which gives us the word “empirical,” a term that was adopted by the British empiricists (e.g., John Locke and David Hume) who reduced their philosophy to the study of *sensual* experience alone. According to Jay, the Greek *pathos* (or *pathe*) is yet another antecedent to what subsequently became “experience” in the English language, most notably when we think of experience as something that happens *to us*, passively. And finally, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to experience something essentially means “to feel,” or “to suffer,” and even “to undergo,” in the sense that what we experience is not of our own making. Also, the word “experience” gives us the term “experiment,” which has been adopted by science as the means by which one may test a theory through practical application. In our century, the words “empirical,” “experiment,” and “experience” are often used interchangeably, though each has vastly different connotations when invoked outside of a scientific framework.

Over the past two centuries the German language has offered particularly subtle variations on the types of experience of which we are capable, lending to the concept a diversity that the English language subsumes under the one term. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that German philosophers have dominated the nineteenth- and twentieth-century investigations into the nature of experience that subsequently spilled over to other European countries, including France, Great Britain, and Spain. I'm thinking specifically of Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger, each of whom elaborated on the notion of experience in great detail in their respective philosophies, giving the concept a central role in phenomenology and existential philosophy. These German philosophers influenced, for example, the French existentialists, including Sartre, De Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Marcel, as well as the Spanish philosophers Miguel Unamuno and Jose Ortega y Gasset. I say more about phenomenology later, but first I want to say a few words about the German conception of experience and the etymology from which their designations are derived.

The first is the German *Erfahrung*, which derives from the word *Fahrt*,

meaning “journey.” Hence, *Erfahrung* suggests the notion of *temporal duration*, such as, for example, when one accumulates experience over time, including the accruing of wisdom that comes to those who live to old age. The other German term for experience is *Erlebnis*, which derives from the word *Leben*, meaning “life.” Hence, the use of the word *Erlebnis* connotes a vital *immediacy* in contrast to the more historical notion of *Erfahrung*. When invoking *Erlebnis*, the speaker is emphasizing a primitive unity that precedes intellectual reflection.

I now summarize the implications of what the etymological aspects of the word “experience” suggest and the many senses that the concept, whether of Greek, Latin, English, or German origin, seeks to convey. In the scientific community the notion of experience suggests the accumulation of empirical knowledge through the use of experimentation, an inherently active enterprise. On the other hand, experience may also suggest something that happens to us when in a passive state and most vulnerable to stimuli, such as what occurs in a movie theater. It may also suggest the process whereby we submit to education, entailing the accumulation and memorization of knowledge over a considerable period of time. The term may also be used to connote a journey I have taken while traveling to a foreign country, perhaps in wartime when I am faced with obstacles and danger, the experience of which may have expedited my journey into manhood.

As you can see from this brief excursion into the etymology of this term, even while it offers tantalizing hints as to what the notion of experience in all its variety has been taken to mean, there still remains something that is essentially ineffable about the concept, defying categorization and even definition. This presents us with a paradox, for the word has often been used, according to **Jay (1998)**, “to gesture towards precisely that which exceeds concepts and even language itself” (p. 3). Indeed, the word “experience” has frequently been used as a marker for what is ineffable and so private or personal that it cannot be rendered in words. One's experience of love, for example, is an experience that many insist is impossible to express or grasp in words alone, precisely because love is *experienced* long before it is understood, if at all. Even when I try to communicate what I experience to others, only I can possibly *know* what my experience is, and there are degrees to which even I am capable of acknowledging the full force of my experience to myself. Just as experience resists definition, our efforts to convey our experience is necessarily imperfect, because it is impossible to reduce to words

alone. This observation has enormous consequences for the experience of psychoanalysis for both patient and analyst, who rely almost exclusively on the passage of words between them.

What, then, does the essential nature of experience entail? Is experience antithetical to one's capacity for reason, as some have suggested? Or is our ability to reason *dependent on our capacity to experience* the very thoughts that our words endeavor to convey? Perhaps the greatest travesty to our commonsense notion of experience occurred among the humanistic psychologists of the 1960s who sought to replace the intellectual bias of psychoanalysis with the curious exercise of "getting in touch" with their feelings. What they meant by "getting in touch" with them was never clear, but the insinuation was to dispense with the need for reasoning altogether by simply abandoning oneself to whatever feelings emerged, whether anger, sorrow, or desire. The vehicles through which this exercise was said to be accomplished were devices such as "encounter" groups and the like. For people who experienced difficulty in feeling anything at all, these exercises must have been powerful, indeed, though the therapeutic gain has been notoriously difficult to assess.

On the other end of the spectrum is the more recent state of contemporary philosophical fashion (I'm thinking of the French school),¹ as well as cutting-edge theories in psychoanalysis² that appear to assign experience *to nonintellectual activity*. As we know, many of this century's philosophers and academics have sought to reduce human activity to language, suggesting that the capacity to experience is mediated through words and, hence, is secondary to the power that words possess. This view argues that preverbal experience is inconceivable, so that even the experience of pain depends upon one's knowledge of what pain is. Many of the features of structuralism, deconstructionism, poststructuralism, and the postmodernist perspective argue that the notion of a conscious, sentient self, capable of determining its own truth, is an antiquated idea that should be replaced with a schema that views the subject, not in terms of an *experiencing* agent, but as an "effect" (or construct) of hidden forces.

One of the questions that naturally comes to mind is whether this

1 See **Roger Frie (1997)** for a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between language and subjectivity and those contributors who have popularized its significance.

2 See **Todd Dufresne (1997)** for a comprehensive collection of essays that are representative of the trend in the second half of this century to conceive of the unconscious from the perspective of linguistics.

perspective is symptomatic of a twentieth-century neurosis or whether we have struggled with this paradox in one form or other throughout the history of Western civilization. On reflection, it appears that our collective confusion about the role to which experience has been assigned goes all the way back to the origins of philosophy itself, starting with the impact that Plato and Aristotle have had on the evolution and development of Western culture.

The Greek Attitude about Experience

Overall, the place that experience enjoyed among the Greek philosophers was not as important as we might assume. The post-Homeric philosophical era began around 600 B.C. with Thales, who was followed in quick succession by Heraclitus and Parmenides (circa 500 B.C.), then by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, by far the greatest of the Greek philosophers (circa fourth and third centuries B.C.). The novelty of philosophy proper coincided with the abandonment of mythology and an inherently religious perspective in favor of a rationalistic and predominantly secular one. Though some of the early pre-Socratic philosophers and even Socrates himself continued to make reference to “gods” and “myths” with which to buttress their arguments, for the most part the philosophers who succeeded them were committed to demonstrating man's capacity for reason, arguing that the origin of the universe and all it contained could be explained by what we today would call “science.” In order to grasp where the Greeks were coming from it is important to appreciate that, until recently, the terms *philosophy* (literally, “the love of wisdom”) and *science* (literally, “knowledge”) were used interchangeably. Both terms signified a departure from the Homeric era, when most people believed that human behavior could be attributed to divine intervention.

Though the Greek philosophers weren't necessarily opposed to religious faith in principle, where questions of human motivation were concerned they gradually developed a bias that favored the independence of the mind over the influence of deities. The most influential among them, Plato and Aristotle, professed that the capacity to reason was man's greatest achievement. Hence, our other faculties (such as, for example, “sensual” experience and the knowledge we presume to obtain from it) were assigned a secondary status in comparison with the mind's capacity to reason its way to objective reality, unsullied by the “corruption” of the senses. Though the pre-Socratic philosophers who came before

Plato were not as wedded to reason as those who followed, Plato and his successors sought the absolute certitude that they believed rational, deductive thinking could provide over the inherently ambiguous and more uncertain features of *empeiria*, or experience. According to the American pragmatist **John Dewey (1987)**, the classical philosophers distanced themselves from what they believed was the unreliable nature of experience due to three principal shortcomings:

- (1) They contrasted what they called empirical “knowledge” — which, in fact, they characterized as nothing more than “belief” or “opinion” — with scientific knowledge that could be apprehended with the mind.
- (2) They contrasted the “restricted” nature of *practice* with the relatively “free” character of *rational thought*.
- (3) They elaborated on what they deemed the “metaphysical” basis for the two defects of experience listed above: that sense and bodily action are confined to the realm of “phenomena,” whereas reason is akin to *ultimate reality*.

Dewey goes on to argue that,

[T]his threefold contrast thus implies a metaphysical depreciation of experience, an epistemological one, and, coloring both of the others and giving them their human value, a moral one: the difference in worth between an activity that is limited to the body and to physical things, originating in need and serving temporal utilities, and that which soars to ideal and eternal values. [p. 74]

According to **Jay (1998)**, “Plato had thought experience meant being enslaved by the past and habit rather than reason, [whereas] Aristotle restricted its use to the confirmation of universal laws” (p. 7), laws which, it should be emphasized, were derived exclusively from man's *capacity to reason*. Whereas Plato elevated our capacity for reason to that of an “ideal” state that exists independently of the physical world (a world that, by definition, could never measure up to the “perfection” of ideas), Aristotle applied the generalizing tendency of reason for the purpose of developing an inventory of “sciences” that served to reduce the universe and everything in it to categories (e.g., politics, ethics, economics, physics, metaphysics) that have survived to this day, more or

less intact. Though the sciences have developed in dramatic fashion over the course of the last two millennia, we can credit both Plato and Aristotle for having provided us with the foundation for the sciences as we know them today, and even the means by which they are generally investigated.

Yet, contrary to what many assume, Plato and Aristotle were not the only Greek philosophers to have exercised such a profound influence on our age, even if the vast majority of commentary on the Classical literature is devoted to their contributions. I'm thinking of the Hellenistic philosophers in particular, whose influence flourished after Aristotle: the Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics. Whereas the Stoics and Epicureans also favored the role of rationality over that of experience and more or less agreed with Plato and Aristotle that experience plays a secondary role to that of our capacity to reason, they shared with the Sceptics the goal of transforming philosophy from the accumulation of knowledge in principle (epistemology) to the more practical means of obtaining happiness (ethics). Whereas the Stoics and Epicureans, however, were convinced that happiness could be attained through rational means alone, the Sceptics believed that each person must find her own means of obtaining happiness (or “equanimity”), based on what she is able to learn from a critique of her experience.

The Sceptics flourished over a period of nearly seven centuries, beginning around 300 B.C. (during Aristotle's lifetime) and lasting until around 300–400 A.D., when they more or less vanished after the rise of Christianity. According to **Groarke (1990)**, traces of the Sceptic attitude can be detected as early as Democritus and Socrates (circa 450 B.C.), when the Greeks formulated three philosophical trends that were subsequently incorporated into Scepticism: (1) an antirealist bias; (2) the turn to a more subjective attitude about truth; and (3) the development of philosophy away from epistemological investigation in favor of an ethical criterion for obtaining happiness (i.e., “equanimity” or *ataraxia*). The origin of Sceptic philosophy is attributed to Pyrrho of Elis, who lived around 300 B.C.—about 150 years after Socrates—during the time of Alexander the Great, to whom Pyrrho was an adviser. Pyrrho's teacher, Anaxarchus, successfully employed sceptic arguments to convince Alexander that he wasn't a god, but not all monarchs were as receptive to his interventions. When Anaxarchus employed a similar argument with the king of Cyprus he was put to death, proving that the attempt to shatter illusions can sometimes be fatal.

The Sceptics believed that most philosophers were of little use to the common man and, like Socrates before them, devoted their efforts to exposing the fallacy of what philosophers claimed to know. Their principal philosophical method was a state of mental attentiveness they called *epoché*, which entailed abandoning dogmatic assertions by suspending judgment on matters that were beyond their personal experience. By maintaining an air of open-mindedness,³ a precursor to free association, the Sceptics sought to rid themselves of the search for certitude and its attendant anxieties by learning to take the largely unfathomable nature of life in stride. The Sceptics characterized the state of equanimity that resulted from such efforts as a state of gentleness or kindness, even openheartedness. This may sound simplistic to our ears in the complicated era in which we live, but the method the Sceptics advocated was a precursor to the free association method conceived by Freud, probably transmitted to him through the essays of Michel de Montaigne, whom Freud is known to have admired.

Historically, the Sceptics were the first philosophers to emphasize the role of subjectivity in Western thought and, hence, *were the first philosophers to emphasize experience over reason (Groarke, 1990)*. Although most people today share the mistaken assumption that the Sceptics were simply proponents of an inherently abstract argument that it is impossible to know anything, there were actually two schools of Scepticism, each with its own set of concerns: the Academic Sceptics, who took control of Plato's Academy and were concerned with the epistemological limitations of knowledge; and the Pyrrhonian, or therapeutic, Sceptics, who were concerned with the more practical task of determining the proper way to live. Whereas most of the Classical philosophers saw their role as that of *thinkers* whose task was to reason their way to wisdom, the Pyrrhonian Sceptics saw themselves as *therapists* whose task was to help people obtain equanimity by learning to accommodate the inherently ambiguous nature of existence. It may be argued that the Sceptics were the first “psychoanalysts,” because many of them, including Galen and Sextus Empiricus, were physicians whose treatment methodology relied on trial and error instead of theoretical explication. Despite its momentary disappearance, the Sceptical attitude has survived more or less intact to the present era and has even played a critical role in the

³ What Freud was to term two millennia later “free floating attentiveness.” See **Freud (1912, pp. 111–120)** and **Thompson (1994, pp. 145–154)** for sceptical aspects of Freud's technical recommendations.

way that psychoanalysis was originally conceived. This is exemplified in the observation that contemporary analysts would probably agree that it isn't "knowledge" per se that ultimately relieves patients of their conflicts,⁴ but the ability to access experiences that must be suffered⁵ over time, the nature of which resists rational explication or indoctrination.

The Treatment of Experience in Modern Times

Hence, our very notion of experience and the place it has occupied in our intellectual heritage may be credited to the Sceptics, without whom such recent philosophical movements as empiricism, the commonsense philosophy of Thomas Reid, and the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger may have never developed. Yet, after the emergence of Christianity and its adoption by the Roman Empire, Sceptic philosophy more or less vanished for a thousand years. Scepticism might have been lost forever had it not been for the discovery of some lost books of Sextus Empiricus in the fifteenth century, around the time the printing press was invented. Sextus's books were subsequently translated from Latin into other languages and their method became the object of intellectual debate throughout Europe.

By this time, most philosophers were preoccupied with employing rational means in order to prove the existence of God, resorting to philosophical arguments that were said to confirm the "logic" of his existence. The Age of Rationalism dominated Europe to such a degree that some philosophers (e.g., Bishop Berkeley) even questioned the existence of the physical world, arguing that existence is essentially mental (i.e., "ideas") and that the world of perception is an illusion. Francis Bacon was one of the first philosophers to argue against this view by proposing that reason alone can become a form of enslavement if philosophers fail to put their speculations to the test in order to verify their credibility. Bacon can be credited with reintroducing the importance of experience into philosophical debate by countering that our capacity to reason is even more unreliable than what we are able to derive from our senses. Hence, it was Bacon who proposed that the claims of scientific theories

4 See my "The Sceptic Dimension to Psychoanalysis: Toward an Ethic of Experience" (in press) for a detailed explication of the sceptical dimension to Freud's conception of free association and the rule of neutrality.

5 It should be kept in mind that the words "experience" and "suffering" derive from the same etymological root, *pathos*, so the notion of *suffering* one's experience or *experiencing* one's suffering is a tautology.

should be “tested” by subjecting them to *experimentation*; by repeating such experiments (a corruption of “experience”) over and over, the investigator is able to render his *subjective* experience *objectively* reliable. The philosophical school of empiricism subsequently became a dominant force in England, with John Locke and, later, David Hume serving as its principal proponents.

When the rebirth of Scepticism subsequently swept across Europe, Hume was one of the first philosophers to place it at the core of the scientific method, leading to the identification of modern science with what to this day is deemed the empirical method. Nevertheless, Hume doesn't appear to have appreciated the subtlety with which Pyrrhonian Scepticism was employed by the ancients. In order to make his brand of Scepticism scientifically respectable, Hume substituted the Pyrrhonian reliance on *subjective experience* with a more detached form of *objective experimentation*. In so doing, Hume virtually abandoned the essence of sceptic inquiry, because of his failure to understand that, according to the Sceptics, *any claim to have obtained objective knowledge, empirical or otherwise, is a dogmatic argument, not a sceptical one*. Hence, the empiricists turned out to be just as devoted to the acquisition of objective knowledge as the rationalists; the two schools simply disagreed as to which was the more reliable, the mind or the senses.

Yet, elements of Pyrrhonian Scepticism infiltrated European culture despite Hume's efforts to render it more scientific, and its influence became so pronounced in the seventeenth century that Descartes, who saw its increasing popularity as a danger, wrote his *Meditations* in an effort to refute it. The fact that most people today have never even heard of the Sceptics serves to confirm the antipathy that Western culture has typically displayed toward matters of the heart. Despite this philosophical bias, most of the existential philosophers who emphasize existence over rationality (e.g., Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty specifically) are in this respect sceptical in their thinking and owe much of their perspective to the Sceptics, either directly through Sextus Empiricus or indirectly through Montaigne.

In fact, the heritage of Pyrrhonian (what I am calling “therapeutic”) Scepticism was not passed down by the empiricist philosophers, but through men of letters, such as the French aristocrat Michel de Montaigne. Famous for his invention of the essay, a literary genre noted for its deeply personal and autobiographical style, Montaigne lived in France during the time of Shakespeare, who incorporated sceptic arguments

into some of his plays. Montaigne loved another man dearly and, when his friend died, fell into a depression from which he was unable to recover. He subsequently retired to his castle outside Bordeaux and immersed himself in a study of the Sceptics, Stoics, and other ancient philosophers, in hope of obtaining relief from his melancholy. Montaigne began to write “essai” for his friends and confidants, for the purpose of unburdening himself of observations he had accumulated over the course of his life, including such topics as the nature of fear, the education of children, solitude, friendship, cowardice, cruelty, conscience, experience, and so on, more than a hundred in all. Writing the essays and sharing his intimate observations with others offered Montaigne a means for obtaining insight into his condition while providing him with a voice with which to express his feelings of anguish and torment. Whereas the simple revelation of his feelings for others to hear was probably what finally cured him, Montaigne credited his recovery to the Sceptic method of inquiry to which he became devoted.

Because of his aristocratic privilege, Montaigne was also active in community affairs, even serving as mayor of Bordeaux, which brought him to the attention of the king of France, to whom Montaigne subsequently became a counselor, or “psychotherapist.” With this new commission, Montaigne applied what he gleaned from his study of the Sceptics to his therapeutic relationship with the king. Entire sections of his essays are devoted to the proper handling of such a delicate position, presaging many of Freud's technical recommendations by nearly three centuries.⁶

Even today, Montaigne continues to influence philosophers, writers, and thinkers of every persuasion, including phenomenologists, such as Heidegger and Sartre, and existential philosophers, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. On a close examination of his essays one may notice that Montaigne employed both senses of experience that are depicted in the German language as *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, which were in turn subsequently incorporated by Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger into their respective philosophies. Montaigne spoke at length about the quality of his experience in the sense of *Erfahrung*, the *accumulation* of experiences over time, as well as *Erlebnis*, the immediacy of having an experience that he could subsequently talk about and reflect upon, thereby revealing

⁶ See especially Montaigne's essay “On Experience” for a detailed description of his “therapeutic” technique with the king.

to him aspects of his personality. Both of these senses are faithful to our commonsensical notion of experience and reflect the way we typically employ this term every day. I may speak, for example, of being an experienced psychoanalyst because I have accumulated more than twenty years of experience treating patients, but I may also speak of having an experience, which is unique to me and me alone, in a sense that is more or less an outcome of my subjectivity. *What I experience and how reveals to the psychoanalyst, for example, the person I am.* Psychoanalysts make use of both kinds of experience as a matter of course, but I say more about this later.

The Contribution of Phenomenology

Both of these inherently commonsensical notions of experience pale when contrasted with the enormous contribution that phenomenology has made to our understanding of “potential” experience and what experience specifically entails. In order to appreciate the contribution of phenomenology to our understanding of experience it is necessary to explore in greater detail the difference between the two forms of experience that are distinguished by *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. Phenomenology is concerned almost exclusively with the nature of *Erlebnis*, in other words, with the question: *What does it mean to actually experience something?* As I noted earlier, empiricist philosophers such as Hume separated experience from rationality by consigning to experience sensual data alone. Hence, modern scientific methodology, which endeavors to combine the experience we derive from our senses with our capacity to think about and reflect upon the nature of such experience (through the methodical testing via experimentation), is unable to account for the human subject's experience of ideas, thoughts, and imagination. In other words, philosophers have traditionally split the human being in half, assigning one portion of the human project to rationality (i.e., the mind) and the other portion to sense experience (i.e., the body). The closest they have come to bridging the gap between them, offered by Kant, was through our capacity to reflect upon our sensual experience. Yet, this doesn't explain how the two are ever finally connected, given the categorical split that separates them. Moreover, given the basis of this schema, the possibility of reconciling the two is theoretically impossible.

The singular contribution of Husserl at the turn of the century was to reconcile the split between sense experience and rationality by suggesting

that what we experience and how is already inherently thoughtful, because the nature of consciousness is *intentional*, which is to say, *the act of consciousness and its object are given at one stroke*. One is not “related” to the other, because each is irrevocably dependent on the other for its existence, so that neither can stand alone. As Buddhists have traditionally argued, the presumed split to which Western thought has been devoted is illusory because the two are actually One. Hence, phenomenology is able to claim that there are degrees of experience I am capable of accessing, just as there are levels of awareness or consciousness, depending on how diligently I set out to “see” (rather than understand)⁷ what my experience is already, always disclosing to me. This thesis is especially relevant to psychoanalysts who endeavor to direct the patient's attention to unformulated experience by interpreting the latent meaning of the patient's verbal utterances. Viewed from this angle, a good interpretation is never intended to explain one's experience, but to *deepen* it, in the phenomenological sense.

Whereas Husserl was, like Hegel, invested in finding a means through subjective experience to absolute knowledge, or certitude, Heidegger rejected absolute knowledge in principle by adopting a more sceptical approach to what experience makes available for the subject who is undergoing it. For Heidegger, experience is essentially the “revealing” of Being; in other words, my experience discloses (to me) who I am as well as the world I inhabit. I am neither strictly constituted by the world (behaviorism) nor is my world simply constituted by me (Kant); rather, the two are mutually interdependent, because each serves to constitute the other. Whereas Hegel believed that one's capacity to experience accounts for psychological change—that experience, for example, comes as a shock because it alters who I am—**Heidegger (1959, p. 57)** suggested that my capacity to experience discloses (i.e., uncovers) truths I am always in the process of discovering about myself (see also **Heidegger's, 1950**, treatment of Hegel's conception of experience). The critical feature of experience from a Heideggerian perspective is its latent power to “shock” the world I inhabit at the roots, so that it is both transformative and transcendent in the most radical sense. According to **Heidegger (1959)**,

⁷ The implication of Husserl's thesis is that experience is “given” directly, that it is more closely akin to a perception than a conceptualization. **Merleau-Ponty (1962)** subsequently developed this theme by depicting his phenomenology of experience as a “phenomenology of perception.” See also **Thompson (1985, pp. 118–135)** for an explication of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

To undergo an experience with something—be it a thing, a person, or a god—means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us. When we talk of “undergoing” an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. It is this something itself that comes about, comes to pass, happens. [p. 57]

My experience is never entirely passive because I always have a hand in it; hence I am able to anticipate my experiences with a specific aim in mind, thereby *making use* of my experience to gain insight into the kind of person I am. In other words, there are degrees to experience; it isn't all or nothing. This is why I am also capable of *resisting* experience, avoiding it, and even “forgetting” experiences that, due to resistance, are too painful to bear. In turn, the degree to which I am finally *able* to experience anything, whether a piece of music, a hazardous journey, even a psychoanalysis, is determined by how willing I am to *submit* to the experience in question. Indeed, the notion of submission, a favorite theme in Heidegger (as well as Freud),⁸ is vital to the role experience plays throughout my life, because it determines the uses I am able to make of it. Hence, experience is my contact with the world and the only means by which I am able to apprehend reality.

Freud and Phenomenology

Now we must ask, What does the phenomenology of experience have to do with psychoanalysis? Some people would suggest: nothing. After all, psychoanalysis is concerned with exploring the unconscious whereas phenomenology is devoted to examining the vicissitudes of personal experience, as it is lived. **Jay (1998)** noted that the crisis of experience in the postsubjective age in which we live began with the erosion of subjectivity as a concept, bringing into question, “*Who* can be said to experience something if there is no one *to whom* such experience can be assigned?” One of the principal features of the deconstruction of Derrida, the postmodernism of Lyotard, and the structuralism of Lacan is the disappearance of the traditional *subject who experiences* in favor of a decentered subject that is reduced to an “effect” of invisible forces, whether

⁸ See **Thompson (1994)**, pp. 192–204) for a discussion of Freud's reliance on passive aspects of experience when explicating his conception of working through.

such forces are manifested in the guise of society, language, or the unconscious.

Jay has pointed out that Nietzsche and Freud were in the vanguard of a trend at the close of the nineteenth century that has now, a hundred years later, taken center stage, a trend that questions the very existence of a subject who is capable of *experiencing* anything. I would be the first to allow that Freud has contributed to this trend and even played a principal role in it. But to give Freud his due it must be added that he was also ambivalent about this question and, hence, inconsistent with the role to which he assigned experience in both his understanding of psychopathology and its treatment. Despite what Freud said about the ego no longer being the master of his own house, I submit that experience nevertheless plays a vital role in Freud's conception of both the treatment situation and the conflicts that analytic patients typically suffer. Yet, the direction that psychoanalytic theory and practice have taken over the course of this century has diverged from Freud's in significant ways. Basically, Freud believed that *our capacity to bear painful experience* as children more or less determines whether we will develop neurotic symptoms (or worse) when we grow up. This is actually a Heideggerian conception of experience, though Freud never knew this. According to Freud, if a child is faced with an experience that is too painful to bear, the child simply represses it from consciousness, making the experience of frustration magically disappear (see **Thompson, 1994**, for a thorough discussion of Freud's conception of psychoanalysis). The only problem with this short-sighted solution is that the repressed⁹ memory finds an alternate means of expression, transforming it into a symptom that the adult subsequently suffers and complains about, but hasn't a clue what caused the symptom or what purpose it surreptitiously serves.

For Freud, the purpose of pathogenic symptoms is relatively straightforward: they serve to shield the individual from a painful disappointment that the individual wants desperately to escape. In order to evade the full force of such disappointments, the individual employs repression (or denial) in an effort to erase its incidence; but because the disappointment in question was only repressed, not actually eradicated, the individual instinctively *avoids experiencing similar disappointments and anything that may serve to remind him of it in the future*. The irony in

9 For the sake of simplicity, I use Freud's conception of repression as the prototypical defense mechanism; the same can be said no matter which specific defense is in play: denial, splitting, projection, reaction formation.

this thesis is that so-called traumatic experiences aren't actually *experienced* as such, but are deferred until a later date when, with the help of a psychoanalyst perhaps, the repressed memory may be elicited and finally experienced, but for the first time.

Based on Freud's hypothesis, psychoanalytic treatment is nothing more than an investigation into the patient's experience, suffered over the entirety of his or her life. Hence, analysts seek to learn about the experiences—*Erfahrung*—that patients remember over the course of their history; they also seek to understand the patient's experience of the analytic situation—*Erlebnis*—which is to say, the patient's experience of his or her relationship with the analyst, the so-called transference phenomena. But analysts are also interested in eliciting what may be characterized as “lost” experience (what Heidegger would call “potential” experience) through the patient's free associations. Change comes about through the patient's ability to *speak* of her experience instead of concealing it, as she has in the past. In other words, giving voice to one's experience serves to deepen it in the Heideggerian sense, but only if the kind of speech elicited succeeds in plunging the patient to the depths of her existence.

So far, what I have said about psychoanalysis sounds a lot more like phenomenology than psychoanalysis per se. All I can say in defense of this observation is that psychoanalysis *is* phenomenological, at least in the way that Freud conceived it. On the other hand, there is something about Freud's notion of the unconscious that is explicitly nonphenomenological when it alludes to things going on “in” a person's mind of which the person has no awareness. In fact, the phenomenologist and the psychoanalyst alike recognize that we are perfectly capable of engaging in acts of which we claim no awareness and, hence, no experience. Awareness and experience, from a phenomenological perspective, though not identical, are interdependent concepts. According to Husserl, experience presupposes an “I” who *suffers* his experience, so that no matter how decentered or obscure one's “I” or “ego” may be, the concept of subjectivity is invariably consistent with experience itself. Yet we saw in Heidegger how it is possible to account for levels or degrees of experience, depending on whether we are prepared to undergo the suffering that is necessarily entailed in determining precisely what our experience is.

The proposition that there are levels of experience and, hence, levels of consciousness as well offers profound implications for what Freud

depicted as unconscious motivation and intentions which, when interpreted, are seldom remembered by the patient to whom such intentions are attributed. Yet, there are undeniable moments in every treatment when the patient does remember or realize her part in a drama that had heretofore been erased from memory. Just because one has a thought, idea, or intuition does not guarantee that one will actually have a full-throttle *experience* of it. The phenomenologist accounts for this phenomenon by suggesting that (Freud's depiction of) the unconscious is nothing more than a mode of thinking (i.e., consciousness) that the patient is unaware of thinking. In other words, the patient has no *experience* of thinking the “thoughts” attributed to her because she did not *hear herself thinking* (and, hence, experiencing) such thoughts when they occurred. At the time the thoughts in question were uttered, her mind was “somewhere else.” The psychoanalyst says she was unconscious of what she was thinking, but the phenomenologist would say she simply failed to *listen* to, and hence experience, what was on her mind. Thus, the psychoanalytic experience is designed to reacquaint us with that dimension of our Being that we typically conceal; by listening to what we say to the analyst when it is uttered, we reflect upon our consciousness at the moment we share our free associations and, thus, “hear” it for the first time, by finally *experiencing* it, in the phenomenological sense.

Whereas Heidegger would say that the nature of experience is inherently mysterious and should be regarded with a compatible frame of reference, Freud would say that our experience has been repressed and rendered “unconscious.” In Freud's schema, something must be done to retrieve and, hence, return our repressions to consciousness *by giving voice to our experience as it occurs to us in the analytic situation*. The edifice from which psychoanalytic treatment derives assumes that neurotics live in their heads and have lost touch with what they think and how they genuinely feel about the issues with which they are in conflict. Consequently, the purpose of psychoanalysis is to return the analytic patient to the ground of an experience from which she has momentarily lost her way, in order to finally claim her experience as her own, as she recounts it to her analyst.

It doesn't take much effort to recognize that the two ways of talking about the two perspectives in question—Heidegger's and Freud's—are perfectly compatible with each other and always have been. Yet, not everyone approaches Freud's conception of the unconscious phenomenologically; consequently, psychoanalysis has unwittingly contributed to

the crisis of experience that is occurring at the close of the century. This reading of psychoanalysis is probably unfamiliar to most analysts because it is an inherently existentialist reading of Freud from the perspective of phenomenology. Surprisingly, this reading of Freud, and by extension, of psychoanalysis, is barely evident in the psychoanalytic literature, though there have been attempts to address the situation by incorporating some of the basic tenets of phenomenology into psychoanalytic theory (Loewald, 1980, p. viii; Leavy, 1980, 1988; Atwood & Stolorow, 1984; Schafer, 1976). In the main, however, these efforts have fallen short of reframing the corpus of psychoanalytic theory and practice along phenomenological lines, which would necessitate greater emphasis on the psychodynamics of what experience specifically entails. Indeed, the mainstream of psychoanalysis has more or less factored the very notion of experience (in the phenomenological sense of the term) out of existence. Recent interest in the so-called intersubjective dimension to psychoanalysis, which borrows heavily from the interpersonal tradition, still employs an empiricist account of experience, not a phenomenological one.

The Demise of Experience in Contemporary Psychoanalysis

I now offer an example of what I mean by the crisis of experience in psychoanalysis, and how the absence of experience as a technical term has affected the development of psychoanalytic technique over the second half of the century.¹⁰ Though I address my remarks in the context of Kleinian theory, it is an example that is nonetheless representative of the direction psychoanalytic theory and technique have taken over the second half of the century to a considerable degree, irrespective of the school to which a given analyst belongs, R. D. Laing was the first psychoanalyst to incorporate the phenomenological perspective on experience into his treatment philosophy in the early 1960s, when he had just completed his own analytic training at the British Psychoanalytic Institute in London. Melanie Klein was all the rage then, just as she subsequently became in South America and the United States, especially on the West Coast. Laing began his second book, *Self and Others* (1969),¹¹ with a

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of how the phenomenological aspects of Freud's technical recommendations were suppressed over the second half of this century see **Thompson, 1994, 1996a, 1996b.**

¹¹ Laing's first book, *The Divided Self* (published in 1960), was devoted to a phenomenological critique of schizophrenia, whereas *Self and Others* (2nd. rev. ed., 1969) was devoted to a phenomenological critique of psychoanalysis.

critique of a paper by Susan Isaacs, who was explicating Klein's notion of "unconscious experience," a contradiction in terms for the reasons we just examined. Following Klein's thesis, Isaacs (in **Laing, 1969**, pp. 3–17) argued that the nature of the psychic world is such that every human being lives two parallel lives, one that is conscious and one that is unconscious. The conscious one we are all aware of and the unconscious one we have no awareness of and never can. Hence, according to Isaacs, we must resort to *inferring* what is going on "in" the unconscious if we hope to determine what is there. Isaacs insisted that the unconscious has aims, wishes, and motives of which we are not, and cannot become, conscious and, in the sense that we have been discussing, could have no experience of, either. Hence, the nature of unconscious fantasy, says Isaacs, is such that we suffer "unconscious experiences" of which we are unaware but that determine what we are capable of experiencing consciously. The implications of this theory are considerable, because what Isaacs proposes about the nature of experience says a great deal about the way in which many contemporary psychoanalysts view the experiences of their patients, their own experience of their patients, and the way analysts interact with their patients, in turn.

For example, the Kleinian conception of projective identification has not only displaced Freud's conception of repression as the prototypical defense mechanism, but has virtually inverted conventional notions of transference and countertransference as well, or altered their original meaning to such a degree that they are virtually unrecognizable. Following Klein's thesis, **Bion (1959)** concluded that the only means the analyst has available to determine the patient's unconscious experience is *through the analyst's experience of his own countertransference*. Hence,

The experience of countertransference appears to me to have a quite distinct quality that should enable the analyst to differentiate the occasion when he is the object of a projective identification.... The analyst feels he is being manipulated so as to be playing a part ...in someone else's phantasy.... From the analyst's point of view, the experience consists of two closely related phases: in the first there is a feeling that whatever else one has done, one has certainly not given a correct interpretation.... I believe the ability to shake oneself out of the numbing feeling of reality

that is a concomitant of this state is the prime requisite of the analyst. [p. 149]

In other words, Bion appears to believe that the patient's “unconscious” experience (!)—an experience that, according to Bion, is inaccessible to the patient—is periodically *experienced by the analyst* via the analyst's experience of his own thoughts and feelings: thoughts and feelings that the analyst, according to Klein's theory, is obliged to construe *as originating in the patient's unconscious*. Notwithstanding the speculative nature of interpretations that seek to determine whether such experiences originate in the analyst or the analyst's patient, Bion's conception of experience is such that it is rendered virtually meaningless by any philosophical perspective with which I am familiar. In effect, experience can be said to mean anything that the analyst wants it to mean, whether or not the interpretations that the analyst attributes to the patient's (so-called) experience are subsequently confirmed by the patient. Some of the implications of this technical innovation are discussed later, but first allow me to summarize the gist of what I have just said.

Freud believed that we repress intolerable experiences in order to deny their existence. Hence, the goal of analysis is to contrive a situation in which patients feel safe to speak their minds, eventually giving voice to the experiences that had at one time been “forgotten” (i.e., repressed). On the other hand, Klein is saying that the nature of what is going on in one's unconscious has *always been unconscious and always will be*. Hence, the patient's disclosures will never reveal in any direct way what is going on there. How, then, from a Kleinian perspective, is one supposed to determine what is going on there?

According to Klein (and Isaacs, as well as Bion), it must be interpreted by the analyst to the patient, since there are no other means available for the patient to grasp it. In other words, whereas Freud says that the goal of analysis is to make the unconscious conscious, Klein says that the goal is for the analyst to interpret to the patient what the unconscious is harboring. Whereas the phenomenologist would say that the purpose of interpretation is to help one's patients get in touch with their experience, Bion (following Klein's theoretical perspective) uses interpretation to “translate” to his patients what they are (presumed to be) “experiencing” in their unconscious. On reflection, analysts working from a Kleinian perspective have no choice but to follow this model, given the developmental theory that Klein adopted. Whereas Freud believed the critical

stage of development that analysts should consider in their interpretations are clustered between the ages of three and five—a stage of development that most patients are able to recall—Klein believed that the critical stage of development is the first year, an age that no patient is able to remember. Hence, in Freud's schema, analytic patients are endeavoring to “remember” experiences that have been lost, but have the potential for recovery. Moreover, it isn't until the child is able to *experience* his or her feelings (in the Heideggerian sense) that “trauma” can even occur, because without foundational experiences there would be nothing to repress. If experience is that feature of consciousness that the subject is capable of reflecting upon, then the developmental period of childhood that Klein is concerned with is not only prelinguistic, but for the reasons we have discussed, is preexperiential as well. Hence, in Freud's schema, psychoanalytic treatment is concerned with the recollection of (conscious) experiences that have suffered repression, whereas in Klein's the analyst is obliged to “experience” the patient's preverbal experience *for* the patient, since the patient has no direct access to such experience himself. The implications of this thesis for analytic interpretation are at turns comical and heartbreaking, as I demonstrate in the following clinical vignette.

The following is what Bion (in **Klein, Heimann & Money-Kyrle, 1957**) characterizes as “the essentials” of two sessions with a schizophrenic patient whom he had been treating for five years, five days a week, in psychoanalysis. This is offered as an example of how Bion makes use of interpretation, employing a Kleinian perspective. Interpretations, according to Bion, should be offered in language that is simple, exact, and mature.

Patient: I picked a tiny piece of my skin from my face and feel quite empty.

Analyst: The tiny piece of skin is your penis, which you have torn out, and all your insides have come with it.

Patient: I do not understand ...penis ...only syllables and now it has no meaning.

Analyst: You have split my word “penis” into syllables and now it has no meaning.

Patient: I don't know what it means, but I want to say, “if I can't spell I can't think.”

Analyst: The syllables have now been split into letters; you cannot spell—that is to say you cannot put the letters together again to make words, so now you cannot think.

The following day, the exchange goes as follows:

Patient: I cannot find any interesting food.

Analyst: You feel it has all been eaten up.

Patient: I do not feel able to buy any new clothes and my socks are a mass of holes.

Analyst: By picking out the tiny piece of skin yesterday you injured yourself so badly you cannot even buy clothes; you are empty and have nothing to buy them with.

Patient: Although they are full of holes they constrict my foot.

Analyst: Not only did you tear out your own penis but also mine. So today there is no interesting food—only a hole, a sock. But even this sock is made of a mass of holes, all of which you made and which have joined together to constrict, or swallow and injure, your foot. [pp. 229–230]

It goes without saying that clinical case material can be interpreted any number of ways. I am not, however, interested in whether Bion's interpretations are meaningful or meaningless, right or wrong, good or bad. No one is in a position to make that determination with authority, and we cannot even be sure how Bion's patient experienced these interpretations himself, even if Bion is convinced they were right on the money. What I find remarkable in these interpretations is the presumption with which they are offered, the dogmatic nature of their delivery, and the lack of caution with which Bion offers them, as though they were messages from the gods and he is the Prophet who was assigned to divine their meaning.

Because the patient doesn't know why he suffers and is unable to make sense of his own symptoms, Bion concludes that the analyst needs to compensate for what the patient doesn't know about himself, by employing frequent interpretations of the patient's unconscious drives and defense mechanisms. Though Bion is concerned with determining what the patient's experience is and how it is manifested in the patient's transference with the analyst, he presumes that the patient is incapable of determining what his own experience entails. Bion's analytic theories are complex, and many of his followers would argue that to condemn his clinical behavior without recourse to their theoretical rationale is to ignore the most important aspect of Bion's contribution to psychoanalysis. Moreover, Bion modified his theories subsequent to this clinical example, so one could surmise that his clinical technique was modified also, though I have not been able to find any evidence to this effect. I submit, nonetheless, that it is possible to offer a compelling theory that has little

relevance to how the analyst actually works. Bion's clinical vignette reveals more about his technique than anything he might argue theoretically, and this is the problem with theory in principle. After all, no matter what Bion may say about the role of experience "theoretically," his use of interpretation in the vignette demonstrates the role he assigned to experience in his clinical technique.

How Bion could possibly know, for example, that his patient's remarks are manifestations of his unconscious wish to tear Bion's penis to bits I do not know. Neither do I know what his patient meant by his bizarre remarks. That, it seems to me, is the point: How can one know, unless we take the time to incur the right conditions so that, in time, the patient can tell us himself? Following Kant, Bion adopts the notion that his patient is unable to experience his feelings because he lacks the concepts with which to experience them. Hence, Bion provides him with words that are presumed to depict that experience and, after invoking them, the patient is believed to be in a position to somehow "experience" them himself, if not consciously, then somewhere in the depths of his unconscious. Bion doesn't appear to be interested in *what* his patient experiences or *how*, because he is so eager to apply (and demonstrate) his psychoanalytic theory to the treatment at hand. Because it isn't necessary that his patient confirm or disconfirm the value of the interpretations offered, it is virtually impossible for Bion (or you and I) to determine whether his interpretations are sound or absurd. Moreover, such confirmation is unnecessary, because the theory that Bion adopts has eliminated the patient's experience as an object of investigation, replacing it instead with a model in which the analyst's *theory* effectively displaces the patient's experience of the treatment situation. Theory has assumed such precedence over technique in this schema that virtually anything the patient might do or say may be construed to "confirm" the theory under discussion. In his commentary on Bion's case report, **Laing (1982)** states that

It is difficult to imagine what the patient could say that could tell Bion anything he does not think he [already] knows. Bion's view is based on, and follows from, Bion's way of listening.... Anything anyone says can be heard and processed in this very unusual way. It is difficult to imagine anything anyone could say which could possibly reveal to Bion that his constructions could be wrong, or [that] they are a grinding machine which reduces any sense to total nonsense. It is difficult to fathom the difference

between Bion's psychoanalytic phantasies and what is usually called a psychotic delusional system. [p. 52]12

Laing observed that if the reader didn't already know that Bion was the psychoanalyst, his remarks would probably appear just as delusional as the person with whom he is conversing. Indeed, without knowing who the two are, Bion's responses to what he believes his patient is “actually” saying to him could, in turn, be interpreted as the ravings of a paranoid schizophrenic. Of course, we know that Bion was not a paranoid schizophrenic, but a highly respected analyst who both impressed and inspired a generation of analysts with his intellect and imagination, though he apparently suffered greatly himself. This makes it all the more distressing that he would conduct himself in this fashion. Had Bion been more in touch with (and accountable for) *his* experience, instead of ferreting about for (what he construes to be) the experience of his patient, perhaps he would have exercised greater sensitivity with the patient depicted in his vignette.

I don't single out Bion as though he is a reprehensible example of a psychoanalytic practitioner; I admire some of Bion's contributions and have benefited from them in my own psychoanalytic work. Neither do I have a bone to pick with Melanie Klein or Susan Isaacs; they merely exemplify a direction that psychoanalysis has taken over the course of the century that has forgotten what the phenomenon of experience entails. What is the consequence of this dramatic alteration in Klein's, Isaacs's, and Bion's (and by extension, virtually any psychoanalytic) conception of experience? Basically, it has done away with it. I am no longer conscious or in any discernible sense aware of what my most important experiences are and, according to Klein, I never will be. Consequently, I must rely on others to tell me what is going on in my own mind and explain to me the content of my experience in order to finally know myself. This development speaks to a crisis of experience in contemporary psychoanalysis because it has demolished any vestige of what we take subjectivity, experience, and personal responsibility to be, even in the most sophisticated sense of these terms.

Ironically, recent efforts to incorporate the phenomenological conception of intersubjectivity into the psychoanalytic landscape have misconstrued phenomenology's aim as that of doing away with the notion

12 See **Thompson (1997)** for an account of how Laing employed phenomenological principles in his treatment of psychosis.

of subjectivity altogether (e.g., **Reis, 1999**; Atwood & **Stolorow, 1984**; **Stolorow, 1997**; **Stolorow & Atwood, 1992**; **Benjamin, 1990**). Although Heidegger has been responsible for replacing the Cartesian preoccupation with subjectivity with a so-called decentered dimension to personal existence, Heidegger never did away with the subject entirely and even deemed it the instrument *through* which the vicissitudes of our personal existence must come into being. On the contrary, the specific focus of phenomenology is and always has been to delineate *the precise features of experience as they become manifest in the here and now of the situation one is in*, whether the situation in question is of a personal, clinical, or philosophical nature. Any model of intersubjectivity that proposes to dispense with this critical component of the phenomenological method ceases to be “intersubjective,” properly speaking, and withdraws by fiat into a *socialization* of the therapeutic process that is closer to the interpersonal tradition than a, properly speaking, phenomenological one. The entire range of recent so-called intersubjective contributions to contemporary psychoanalysis are prone to committing this error.

The Crisis in Contemporary Psychoanalysis

I don't have to belabor the observation that psychoanalysis is in a state of crisis. This crisis appears to have affected the United States more than other parts of the world for reasons that are too complicated to go into at this time. In the United States, our culture is turning away from psychoanalysis and, as a consequence, there is considerable debate in the psychoanalytic community concerning what has accounted for this state of affairs. Though this trend began in America, it appears to be spreading to other parts of the world for reasons that are similar to those that have engendered this crisis in the U.S. Some blame it on managed care and less expensive and more accessible forms of therapy, while others blame it on the psychoanalysts themselves. This second group accuses psychoanalysts of having oversold analytic therapy in its infancy, thereby misleading people into expecting it would work miracles by marking all of their woes and suffering go away.

We all know that it cannot, and was never really intended, to do anything of the sort.

All that psychoanalysis has ever been good at is to help us get in touch with our experience, by talking from our experience and about it, while sharing it with another human being who, no matter how misguided or

crazy our account of our experience may be, is capable and willing to accept it all the same. In that acceptance and implicit recognition of who we are and who we are not, difficult choices can be made that will improve, if not our existence, then at least *our relationship with ourselves*.

Some see this as an indulgent preoccupation that hardly merits the enormous cost and time that is typically devoted to it. Others have countered that this simple exercise holds the potential for helping us feel better about ourselves and, hence, more tolerant of the incredible frustrations and disappointments that are unavoidable in life. This isn't a novel idea; after all, it was being practiced by the Sceptics over two thousand years ago. But we have also seen how history has seen fit to take this notion, once a flourishing part of the culture, and bury it. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves guilty of doing so again.

References

- Adorno, T. (1992), Notes to Literature, 2 vols., trans. S. W. Nicolsen. New York: S.U.N.Y. Press.
- Atwood, G. & Stolorow, R. (1984), Structures of Subjectivity: Explorations in Psychoanalytic Phenomenology. Hillsdale, NJ & London: The Analytic Press.
- Benjamin, J. (1990), An outline of intersubjectivity: Recognition and destruction. *Psychoanal. Psychol.*, 7(Supp.):33-46.
- Bion, W. R. (1959), Experiences in Groups. New York: Basic Books, 1961.
- Bion, W. R. (1962), Learning from Experience. New York & London: Jason Aronson, 1983.
- Dewey, J. (1987), John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, vol. II, 1935-1937, ed. J. A. Boydston. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Dufresne, T., ed. (1997), Returns of the "French Freud": Freud, Lacan, and Beyond. London: Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1912), Recommendations to physicians practising psychoanalysis. Standard Edition, 12:109-120.
- Frie, R. (1997), Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Modern Philosophy and Psychoanalysis: A Study of Sartre, Binswanger, Lacan, and Habermas. New York & London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Groarke, L. (1990), Greek Scepticism: Anti-Realist Trends in Ancient Thought. Montreal & Kingston, London & Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1950), Hegel's Concept of Experience. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.
- Heidegger, M. (1959), On the Way to Language. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- Jay, M. (1998), The crisis of experience in a post-subjective age. Public lecture, University of California, Berkeley, CA, November 14.
- Klein, M., Heimann, P. & Money-Kyrle, R. E., eds. (1957), New Directions in Psychoanalysis. New York: Basic Books.
- Laing, R. D. (1960), The Divided Self. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Laing, R. D. (1967), The Politics of Experience. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Laing, R. D. (1969), Self and Others, 2nd rev. ed. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Laing, R. D. (1982), The Voice of Experience. New York: Pantheon Books.

- Leavy, S. (1980), *The Psychoanalytic Dialogue*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press.
- Leavy, S. (1988), *In the Image of God: A Psychoanalyst's View*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press.
- Loewald, H. W. (1980), *Papers on Psychoanalysis*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962), *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Montaigne, M. (1925), *The Essays of Montaigne*, 4 vols., trans. George B. Ives. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ogden, T. (1989), *The Primitive Edge of Experience*. Northvale, NJ & London: Jason Aronson.
- Reis, B. E. (1999). Adventures of the Dialectic *Psychoanal. Dial.* 9:407-414
- Schafer, R. (1976), *A New Language for Psychoanalysis*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press.
- Stolorow, R. D. (1997). Principles of Dynamic Systems, Intersubjectivity, and the Obsolete Distinction Between One-Person and Two-Person Psychologies *Psychoanal. Dial.* 7:859-868
- Stolorow, R. & Atwood, G. (1992), *Contexts of Being*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Symington, N. (1986), *The Analytic Experience*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Thompson, M. G. (1985), *The Death of Desire: A Study in Psychopathology*. New York & London: New York University Press.
- Thompson, M. G. (1994), *The Truth about Freud's Technique: The Encounter with the Real*. New York & London: New York University Press.
- Thompson, M. G. (1996a), The rule of neutrality. *Psychoanal. Contemp. Thought*, 19:57-84.
- Thompson, M. G. (1996). Freud's Conception Of Neutrality. *Contemp. Psychoanal.* 32:25
- Thompson, M. G. (1997). The Fidelity To Experience In R. D. Laing's Treatment Philosophy. *Contemp. Psychoanal.* 33:595-614
- Thompson, M. G. (in press), The sceptic dimension to psychoanalysis: Toward an ethic of experience. *Psychoanal. Psychol.*