

**Weakness of Will and its implications in the quest for a good life:
Psychoanalytic insights**

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

One deploys her reasoning skills to formulate a plan to live a good life as she understands it. However when she starts executing the plan, she finds herself making choices which are not consistent with the ultimate targets of her plan. Reason and will should have been enough for realizing a good life but clearly, in practice, were not, as the will was not prepared to accept the instructions of reason. This weakness of will simply could not happen according to the Greeks, and many that followed them. When knowledge has been firmly established, the will cannot resist. Even if the will is temporarily clouded, it eventually conforms. However, the evidence is overwhelming: the will can persistently deny to comply to reason, and regularly does. Whilst the Greek Philosophers promoted the uncontroversial hegemony of reason, the Greek Tragedians before them seemed to have had a more balanced understanding of the human being as more than merely a reasoning machine. For them reason and emotions were at an interplay with reason not getting its way most of the time. Nietzsche followed in their steps but it was not until Freud founded the psychoanalytic movement that systematic attention was given to the internal battles of the individual. Freud challenged the transparency of the mind hypothesis of Descartes, and claimed that we have no awareness of most of our mind. He called this, out of awareness part of mind, the unconscious and blamed it for neurotic symptoms. Of greater interest to the philosopher is the potential of the concept of the unconscious to explain the phenomenon of the weakness of will. The claim is that the unconscious, left unattended, becomes a powerful force that governs our lives. However through psychoanalysis one can make big parts of the unconscious, conscious, and therefore re-establish the hegemony of reason and uproot weakness of will.

1. Introduction

“How to live?” is the central question of ethics. Once we have examined our life and delved into the knowledge of ourselves, we are expected to formulate a set of goals and execute a rational plan for how to live in order to achieve the elusive “good life”. The mainstream philosophical answer relies on reason to determine the good life and strength of will to execute the good-life-plan. However, many plans for a fulfilling and worthwhile life are poorly, if at all, executed. Or, they are executed religiously up to a point but then, all of a sudden and in many cases without reason, they are self-sabotaged. The individual may be putting in a heroic effort to achieve compliance to his rationally devised plan which however is shown in practice to be fragile and unstable. This fragility is introduced by emotions which disturb execution of the individual’s rational plan. The same emotions that give colour, depth and meaning to life are held responsible for sabotaging the good life.

If emotions can be aligned with reason, then the personality will be integrated ending the fragmentation of the self. This will promote stability and better compliance to the requirements of a good life. Once a connection is established between emotions and the ethical project of the good life, then a deeper study of emotions is called for. But how are we to study our emotions? If through reason alone, then we are limiting ourselves to the domain of traditional philosophy. Of course to suggest that anything other than reason can be used, can be anathema to some philosophers, especially in the analytic tradition. Reason is the main resource of philosophical thinking. On the other hand, does it not sound pointless, when the starting point was the divergence in the commands issued by reason and those issued by emotions, to say that one party alone in the disagreement (namely reason) will adjudicate? What is to be done then? One option is to deny reason a role altogether; the sort of “follow your heart” approach. The other option could be to maintain reason’s privileged status as the ultimate arbitrator, but devise a method that could unlock a wealth of information regarding

the true meaning of our emotions and passions, as opposed to a superficial grasp of some of the facts of our emotional lives. Freud, through psychoanalysis, became the founding father of a movement that aimed at exactly that. This dissertation explores his contribution to, and compatibility with, the traditional philosophical project of know thyself in order to live a life whose noble objectives will not be ravaged at every corner by the menace of the weakness of will.

2. Self-Knowledge

Self-knowledge is a necessary condition for the good life. Socrates famously reduced philosophical commandments to the aphorism “know thyself”. The method for achieving self-knowledge, appropriately known as the Socratic method, consisted of a dialogue between a student and his teacher. Without this work on ourselves, life is worthless according to Socrates: “an unexamined life is not worth living”.

I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that. ... Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?¹

The knowledge of oneself can be achieved through the Socratic method, that is to say, the dialogue between a student and her teacher. The Socratic way to Self-knowledge is of course very efficient, but difficult to practice in modern societies where the hectic pace of life does not leave time for reflection. Most people’s knowledge about themselves is distorted, a phenomenon the psychologists call the “introspection illusion”. Self-knowledge is about understanding our true needs, desires, goals and weaknesses. It requires a deep understanding of our past and current self. Our personal self-narratives about who we are, influence how we behave. An accurate sense of who you are makes self-improvement possible. Our true self is

¹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 229e-230a (Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff trans., in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, Indianapolis, 1997).

made up of our true character, values, desires, emotions and beliefs. Developing self-knowledge allows us to understand how we have been shaped by the many cultural and social expectations around us and what really motivates our goals, desires and actions in life. Self-awareness opens the door to wisdom.

3. Reason and Emotions

No doubt a small percentage of irrational behaviour is due to mental illness. However to use madness as anything more than a niche explanation of irrational behaviour would be to evade the scope of the problem. Courts are regularly invited to consider punishments for cases of irrational action, and in the vast majority of cases people are held fully responsible for their actions. Their behaviour was irrational but they were not mad.

We should therefore modify our conception of rationality as the sole driver of human action. While Rationality should remain at the basis of our actions, we should also allow a role for our emotions. John Cottingham provides a list of emotions that distort reason: pride, vanity, self-importance, fear, embarrassment, self-defensiveness, envy, greed, self-absorption and fantasies of power.² When emotions are overwhelmingly powerful it is probable that something is going on that cannot be understood by mere reason.

The main problem of rationalistic plans of action is the assumption of perfect rationality. Take the example of the stock market which one would expect to be exclusively the realm of pure rationality. However, observation of market activity shows that investors are subject to two very powerful feelings: greed and fear. Greed is present whenever the stock market rises continuously and we are in a so called “bull” market, where traders buy stocks without any

² Cottingham, J., *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

regard for the underlying economic fundamentals. The market then reaches a top, and inevitably begins a slow decline; the decline is accelerated and at some point there is even a market crash provoked by the fear sentiment that has by then set in. That is, even in the stock market realm that is supposed to be ultra-rational, emotions play an important role: investors tend to forget that at their own risk. Discussing emotions such as greed and fear does not deny the value of rationality: rather it is by integrating emotions that truly (as opposed to superficial) rational plans can be executed. Because it is so common to fail to integrate emotions and then watch plans unravel in practice, it is not uncommon for the prudent planner to expect a certain deviation from the rationally devised plan. Napoleon himself was well known to apply a “discount factor” to his battle planning. Once a course of action was decided, he was discounting a percentage off the expected success to account for inherent irrationality of human nature.

One of the central tasks in human life, Aristotle thought, is to train the non-rational part of the soul to “speak with the same voice” as the rational part. This is a remarkable achievement of a balanced psychic life. Though often we fail, in which case the rational and non-rational parts of the soul do not communicate, or worse, they come to be in conflict. In such circumstances we can feel the conflict between judgment and emotion.

4. Will

The power of the will helps to manage impulses, gain composure, and achieve greater levels of control over events affecting our lives. Ultimately it moves us forward into a calmer, more balanced way of living.

Willpower and self-control have deep roots in western culture, stretching back at least to early Christianity, when theologians like Augustine used the idea of free will to explain how

sin could exist in our world. Later, when philosophers turned their focus away from religion, Enlightenment-era thinkers, tried to reconcile free will with the ascendant idea of scientific determinism. The specific conception of willpower, however, as we know it today did not emerge until the Victorian Era. Self-control became a Victorian obsession, with the values of self-denial and perseverance highly promoted in the media of that age. Inversely, the people who lacked willpower were to be held in contempt.

In recent decades we saw a resurgence of interest in the study of self-control. In the 1960s, American psychologist Walter Mischel set out to test the ways that children delayed gratification in the face of a tempting sweet with his “marshmallow experiment.” Young kids, who were his test subjects were asked to choose between one marshmallow now, or two later on. It was not until many years later, after he heard anecdotal information about how some of his former subjects were doing in school and in work, that he decided to track them down and collect broader measures of social, academic and personal achievement. He found that the children who had been better able to resist temptation went on to achieve better results in life. This finding triggered a resurgence of scholarly interest in the idea of willpower.

But can willpower be considered as a muscle to be trained? Viewing willpower as a muscle goes well with some practical applications, such as resisting cravings, and the analogy is reinforced by social expectations going back to Victorian moralizing. However sooner or later “will fatigue” appears. Experiments by psychologists seem to demonstrate that the effort it took to resist temptation depletes willpower and we end up in a worse, frustrated state. For example, dieting can be seen as a means for keeping oneself in a chronically will-depleted state. As a result, the dieter feels everything more intensely—from minor irritations to longings for food or rest and tends to overcompensate by excesses in other spheres of his existence.

Stress strongly depletes willpower because when people are stressed, they tend to go back to well ingrained habits—irrespective of the fact that these habits can be harmful. Rather, people tend to revert to old habits without much thought (let alone philosophical reflection) because they are in a stressed state. On the other hand, the more one strengthens good habits, the more likely they will be there to the rescue when a major stressor comes along.

It takes an enormous amount of effort to suppress our normal personality, preferences, and behaviors. Moreover, it is pointless: people who exert this kind of forced self-control are more easily will-depleted and may find themselves at a disadvantage compared to those who are not in internal conflict.

5. Weakness of Will

First, it needs to be recognized that aiming for the good life is a dynamic process. Perhaps at time 1 when the good life plan was initially devised action A was superior to action B, but by time 2 already action B is superior to action A. There is an underlying assumption here that the good life is not one unchanged form of life, for all people, at all places and in all times. Like the good general in the battlefield changes the battle plan according to circumstances, the rational individual amends his plan for the good life as he is confronted with new information about himself and the world. In fact for most of life's realistic situations it is not even possible to declare an episode as one of weakness of will before a significant amount of time has lapsed since the episode. Bernard Williams writes that

The relevant descriptions of what happened are available, in many cases, only retrospectively, as part of an interpretation that establishes or re-establishes one's identifications of the importance of one reason than another. Consequently, whether an episode was an episode of *akrasia* at all may depend crucially on later understandings. A married man having an affair with another woman and trying to bring it to an end may find himself wavering in that attempt and seeing his lover when they had decided not to meet. If he ends up with his wife, he may well see those episodes as *akratic*. But if in the end he and his wife separate and he goes to live

with his lover, it may be that those episodes will not count as akratic, but rather as intimations of what were going to prove his truly stronger reasons.³

Different people are bound to arrive to different conceptions of the good life. Different genetics, upbringings and cultural influences have a significant role to play in explaining these deviations. Even the same people are very likely to hold different conceptions of the good life at different points of their lives, as they inescapably change with the passage of time.

Despite the variability across people and time, all good life plans share the same aim – to achieve happiness. Most explicitly stated by Aristotle, nothing that followed suggested anything different. The conception of happiness may differ (money? power? contemplation? etc) but there is widespread agreement as to what happiness cannot be. Pointless suffering cannot be part of happiness. To live in continuous fear or with regret similarly cannot be.

Once we agree to this bare minimum that happiness cannot be suffering or fear or regret, whilst allowing for a diversity of ways of life, then we can move to the next stage of trying to execute the arrived at good life plan. In many cases, in practice, I find that I am unable to execute my plan or, at any rate, am unable to execute a big part of my plan and therefore I fail to live the good life, despite knowing the recipe for it. Failure to execute the plan implies that wrong choices were made when confronted with alternative actions. The plan required me to do A, and not B, when having to choose between A and B. I had firmly decided at the moment of rational reflection to do A, and not B, but, when the time came, I chose B over A. I will define weakness of will as my failure to choose what I see myself as the superior course of action when faced with alternatives. Weakness of will therefore appears to be detrimental to the quest for a good life. But why would someone ever choose what she knows to be worse for her? There are a number of possibilities.

³ Williams, B., *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p.45.

There is no shortage of easy answers to these questions: “the man is a coward”, “the woman is weak”, “the student is lazy”. A second round of whys will probably provide answers like “because they are not virtuous”, “because she succumbed to the appetitive part of herself”, “because they did not develop good habits”.

A number of explanations for the phenomenon of the weakness of will have been put forward: The individual may be in the grips of an addiction. She knows it is bad for her to consume that extra glass of alcohol, but she cannot control it. In full knowledge of its detrimental effects, she consumes it. Addiction has stripped her of free will, and her decision making path resembles that of an object thrown from the top of a skyscraper i.e. it is fully determined. Philosopher D.Z. Phillips writes about his one-time neighbour:

I once lived opposite a man who went through the same routine every morning on his way to work. He had doubts over whether he had closed his front door properly. Having pulled it shut, he would rattle and turn the door handle vigorously for some seconds before pushing the door hard. He would then step back from the door before repeating the whole sequence of checks. He would then walk halfway down his garden path, before returning to the door to repeat the checks yet again. Finally, he would come out of his gate and walk halfway along the hedge, before rushing back to the front door to give its handle its last rattle. Certainly, the man had neurotic doubts.⁴

Of greater interest is the case of a person who is not affected by addiction but still knowingly engages in sub-optimal actions. Here, as in the case of addiction, we have a challenge to the Socratic idea that nobody would do bad if in possession of the truth regarding the topic to act upon.

No one who either knows or believes that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course when he might choose the better. To “act beneath yourself” is the result of pure ignorance; to “be your own master” is wisdom... No one willingly pursues the bad, or what he thinks bad. To go for what one believes to be bad, instead of going for the good, is not in human nature; when faced with the choice of two evils, no one will choose the greater when he might choose the less.⁵

However, in real life, it happens all the time. People, without mental disturbances and in a state of full knowledge, make the choice that is not best for them. This is especially puzzling

⁴ Phillips, D.Z., *Introducing Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996), p. 12

⁵ Plato, *Protagoras* 358c-d, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956).

when a key assumption of human action is self-interest. Why would someone act against her own interest?

Aristotle, trying to reconcile such instances of failure with his view of man as the rational creature, referred to such cases as a “temporary clouding” of the better judgement. Whilst this can explain cases of isolated failures to act in accordance with what is conducive to the good life, it cannot explain the case of people who over a period of time, or regularly, fail to act in accordance with their rationally conceived plan. Why would a man who is happily married, financially stable and sees having a family with many children as part of his definition of the good life, never takes the step of actually trying to have children with his wife? Why would a woman who is committed to losing weight as part of a programme to become fit and healthy, cannot resist the bar of chocolate whenever it appears in front of her? Why would the ambitious student who wants to secure high marks to progress to postgraduate studies, systematically fails to keep to his essay writing timetable, leaves the bulk of the work for the day before the deadline and, inevitably, achieves lower marks than would have been the case had he kept to his study plan?

The fact that people who are not in the grips of some compulsion and in possession of full knowledge, show weakness of will and decide to hurt their own interests over extended periods of time, convincingly makes the case that Socrates and Aristotle did not solve this puzzle for us. Their exclusive focus on reason does not seem to suffice in this case. Furthermore, since weakness of will is exhibited in the context of true freedom (freedom from compulsion or misinformation) it involves the attribution of moral responsibility. There is no apparent obstacle that hinders someone who shows weak will from abiding by his better judgment – apart from his weakness of will of course! Being free to do what is right but doing what is wrong brings with it self-recrimination. The sad feeling that we could and should have done better but did not.

Where the Greeks said that weakness of will could not exist, the Stoics thought that the rational understanding of the universe would generate a state of philosophical calm (“ataraxia”) immune to the influence of the passions. All passions are outlawed: the appetitive ones (such as anger and love of money), fear, distress, and pleasure. Stoics share with the Greeks (or with the Greek philosophers more precisely; the Greek tragedians were at the other extreme) the same distrust for the passions. These intellectualist visions of ethics rather than aiming to integrate reason and passions, aim to psychic fragmentation (because the passions do not evaporate simply because it was decided that they should do so) with disastrous consequences for the project of living a good life.

Kant and the utilitarians did not succeed in shedding any more light on the ancients’ unfinished ethical project. The monolithic emphasis on reason, and the exclusion of emotions, was a cornerstone of their ethical theories. Kant requires us to do what is right without any concern for collateral damage. He expects us to become moral saints. His idea being that the road to happiness is wide open once our conscience cannot reproach us. Even the most intensive interference by emotions will fail to shake our happiness founded upon the confidence derived from following the instructions of our conscience. But what if conscience simply reflects the moral code of a particular society (and of course its power relations) as ingrained on us through our upbringing? And how relevant is an ethics fit for saints? Certainly at the political level, Kant’s ethical theory has a positive contribution. The world would be a better place if nobody lied or stole whatever their circumstances. But it does not add much to the debate over the weakness of will mystery.

The utilitarians on the other hand require us to become calculating machines, compromising ethical principles where required. For the so called “greater good” the individual is expected to sacrifice his values. If the prosperity of a town will be ensured by the torture of an innocent old man, we should go ahead and do it. Utilitarian ethics may be more relevant at the public

policy level (when, for example, governments try to calibrate their responses to a pandemic) but have much less to contribute at the individual level. The human psyche is just too complex to be analysed through the simplistic utilitarian calculus. Individual suffering should not be put to the service of the greatest number but instead must be understood and alleviated.

6. Precursors of Psychoanalysis

The hegemony of reason in guiding actions was not always uncontested in ancient times. The Greek tragedians before them had recognized the supremacy of emotions. *Medea* by Euripides is the story of a woman deeply in love with her husband, Jason, for whose favour she betrayed her own family. They live happily, together with their two children, in Corinth in mainland Greece, until Jason decides to leave her and marry the daughter of the King of Corinth in order to advance his political ambitions. Medea seeks revenge and causes the death of the King of Corinth as well as that of his daughter. She is offered to escape to the safety of Athens and start a new life there. Instead of this, she chooses to kill her own two children in order to inflict further pain upon Jason. To destroy Jason's chances for happiness and recovery, she destroys forever her own chances to happiness. Aristotle calls Medea's behaviour irrational. Medea is a mythical story but its truth travels through the centuries to the present times. In 2011 Colonel Gaddafi of Libya was offered, by the then American administration, safe passage out of his country to a place where he could live in comfort and safety the rest of his life. Instead he chose to hide in sewers where, when he was inevitably discovered by rebel forces, he was brutally murdered.

Descartes is not generally thought as having anything to do with psychoanalysis but one can find in his work elements that paved the way for Freud. In Descartes first we see the separation of the nature of the human being from the rest of the creation. Before, in the world

of the Greeks and the Stoics, nature and man were connected. Descartes claims that the universe is indifferent to the human being. Further he claims that it is impossible to know the intentions of God and therefore there is no point to try to connect man to nature through God. Man must understand the laws of nature in order to dominate over it, not in order to live in harmony with it. Nature in Descartes world is not imbued with ethical values. About 300 years later one finds in Freud a similar acceptance regarding this time elements of the human being. In the same way that Descartes accepted nature as it was without an effort to inject it with values, Freud accepted that there are elements of the human existence that are out of the direct control of the human being.

Descartes finds the genesis of emotions in physiological processes. Here he gives us an illuminating example from his childhood:

The objects which strike our senses by mean of the nerves move certain parts of our brain and there make certain folds... [and] the place where the folds were made has a tendency to be folded again in the same manner by another object resembling even incompletely the original. When I was a child, I loved a girl of my own age who had a slight squint. The impression made by sight in my brain when I looked at her cross-eyes became so closely connected to the simultaneous impression which aroused in me the passion of love that for a long time afterwards when I saw persons with a squint I felt a special inclination to love them simply because they had that defect; yet I had no idea myself that this was why it was. However, as soon as I reflected on it, and recognized that it was a defect, I ceased to be affected by it. So when we are inclined to love someone without knowing the reason, we may believe that this is because they have some similarity to something in an earlier object of our love, though we may not be able to identify it.⁶

If one did not know that it was Descartes writing above, she could be forgiven to think it was Freud. First, he highlights the importance of childhood experience in establishing habits that govern our responses in later life. In a remarkable anticipation of Freud, Descartes writes that once he reflected on his till then unexplained attraction to persons with a squint eye, he understood where his attraction was coming from and ceased to be affected by it. There is however a significant divergence regarding the understanding of the mind. For Descartes the mind is transparent, like a goldfish bowl where memories, thoughts and experiences float, available to be drawn as required upon introspection. Each of us has privileged access to his

⁶ Descartes, R., *Conversation with Burman*, ed. and trans. J. Cottingham (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), Letter to Chanut of 6 June 1647.

mind, his very own goldfish bowl. “I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else.”, wrote Descartes.⁷ But what if the mind is not transparent? Does this not then render reflective exercises of limited use in understanding, and therefore mastering, ourselves? In section 7 we will see Freud’s response to this.

To illustrate the complexity of the rational analysis of our emotions, consider the case of altruism. What if our willingness to help others stems from deeply buried selfish inner motives? Nietzsche had already touched the subject of false altruism in his discussion of the conventionally accepted definitions of good and evil. He said that in helpful and benevolent people one nearly always finds a “clumsy cunning” that first rearranges the persons who are to be helped so that they ‘deserve’ their help. Furthermore, it is quite common to expect the person in need, who accepts from her position of vulnerability any help unconditionally, to prove to be deeply grateful, dependent, and subservient to the helper. But isn’t the person then treated like a piece of property? And aren’t they, if they dare express an opinion or exhibit signs of independence, termed “ungrateful”? Whilst Nietzsche speaks of a “clumsy cunning”, suggesting a sort of conscious plan, Freud would later claim that people may be driven by these inferior motives without even realizing it. We may exhibit altruistic behavior and genuinely believe that we are driven by noble motives but, in reality, we may be pursuing a selfish agenda.

Starting with Nietzsche, in the 19th century, rationality and reason as a means to pursue human happiness come under attack. Educated in the Greek tragedians, Nietzsche spoke of the Dionysian components of human nature. Humans do not want happiness above all, he argued, and, furthermore, reason is not the right tool to help us achieve a fulfilling life. Rather it is instinct and a “will to life”, not reason, that can lead to human happiness. Nietzsche turns

⁷ Descartes, R., *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. D. M. Clarke (London: Penguin, 1998), Second Meditation.

philosophy away from the enlightenment assumption that reason will lead to the moral, good, and happy life. Nietzsche saw the mere hedonistic pursuit of happiness, as a dull waste of human life. To show his disapproval of the English philosophy of utilitarianism, with its focus on the happiness calculus, Nietzsche declared that mankind does not strive for happiness. He rejects utilitarianism and uses his parable of the “Last Man”, a pathetic being who lives in a time where mankind has “invented” happiness. The Last Man, in Nietzsche’s mind, was happy but bored and boring.

Nietzsche was obsessed to find meaning in life. He proposed the “Super-man”, as an alternative to the “Last Man”, and offered us the idea of people who were willing to suffer greatly in the name of superior goals. For Nietzsche, those who do great things suffer greatly. Those who have trivial ambitions suffer little or not at all. Nothing is more alien to the “Super-man” than utilitarian calculations in order to decide how to proceed with life. Nietzsche saw happiness as a side effect of the search for meaning. Take, for example, the person who enjoys sculpting little statues. She does not do this because it makes her happy but because she finds it interesting. Happiness is the by-product of sculpting.

According to Nietzsche, it is inherent to our nature to wish to dominate and reach positions of power, as opposed to being driven by reason. Nietzsche admits that we occasionally disobey our will to power and disobey our desire to dominate one another, dubbing that self-control. Yet this self-control, he argues, comes from guilt and is not an expression of freedom. The collective power of society mitigates our aggression drive toward one another. The aggression that is suppressed does not evaporate but transform into aggression against the self, in the form of guilt. The idea that psychic energy does not disappear is later taken over and developed by Freud: Instincts that are not expressed outwardly, are internalized and operate from within. Nietzsche called this the “internalizing of man”. Through this internalization grows in the man what he later comes to call his “soul”. Attempting to give a

rational basis to this tension, risks turning one from Nietzsche's "Super-man" to the utilitarian "Last Man".

The search for the good life, whilst suspicious of the role of rationality in it, gained new impetus in 20th century existentialism. For existentialists, life is better lived if understood as meaningless. Starting from that postulate, existentialists do not pursue the good life in the conventional way. Jean Paul Sartre argued that "existence precedes essence" and that finding out who we really are is a purpose even if there is no ultimate reason for us to be here. That we exist may be meaningless in and of itself, but there is meaning in the process of uncovering our true essence (a sort of "examined life"). This emphasis on self-knowledge is taking place in France, in parallel with the psychoanalytic movement's search for the elusive "know thyself" taking place in Austria. The two movements share the same target but use different methods. Existentialism originated primarily from philosophy, whilst psychoanalysis from medicine, and in particular neurology (Freud was a neurologist, and many of his early followers were psychiatrists).

For Sartre what matters is the authentic life. To live authentically is to reject "bad faith" and refuse to live purely in the roles assigned by society as actors playing out a part. Intellectually it means grappling with freedom of thought. We must, in the end, make our own choices unguided by some concept of God or entities of bad faith. We are born under certain circumstances and society shapes our reality – class, race, gender, religion, etc. But beyond the boundaries and definitions set by the family and societal environment lies the possibility of being free to define what one wants to be.

For Albert Camus, on the other hand, the central question is not directly the good life, but to know if life is worth living to begin with. Camus reminded us the myth of Sisyphus: condemned by gods to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, then have it fall back to the base

of the mountain, then roll it back up, and then down again, indefinitely. Camus decided that even in this futile and hopeless labour one could find satisfaction. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” Camus declared. Struggling in the face of futility is a revolt that gives meaning to the life of Sisyphus who is transformed from a doomed fool to a philosophical hero. One cannot fail but think that it is something greater than reason that kept Sisyphus going. “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” writes Camus.⁸

7. Psychoanalysis

With Psychoanalysis, the debate on how to achieve a good life takes another turn. It is claimed that the philosophical “know thyself”, already difficult enough to achieve, is in fact inaccessible by reason; and as for self-control, it is simply impossible to achieve in practice, simply by trying to check our emotions in order not to contaminate our reason’s workings.

The psychoanalytic model of the mind challenges the ratiocentric model on the grounds that we are unable to supply comprehensive or accurate accounts of our emotions through self-reflection and rational analysis. Emotions are not visible, but hidden behind an iron curtain. And because they are opaque, they are also difficult to perceive, let alone to control. This opacity of emotions is due to the influence of the Unconscious on our emotions. To assure ourselves of reliability in our judgements about how to live, we need to be able to discover the meaning of our emotions – and this can be achieved through psychoanalysis.

Although the earliest visualisations of philosophical activity are of Socrates in the streets of Athens engaging his fellow Athenians in dialogues over fundamental concepts, in the era of modern philosophy came to be seen as a solitary activity without much need for social

⁸ Camus, A., *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by J. O’Brien (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. 29

interaction. One imagines Immanuel Kant who wrote his philosophy without ever needing to leave his hometown of Königsberg. The philosopher came to be seen as a lone man struggling on his own to uncover truth. Even in our days, philosophy is primarily considered as an armchair activity of contemplation.

The psychoanalytic set-up takes us straight back to the Socratic days when the search for self-knowledge was a group activity. However, the search for self-knowledge, according to Freud, is an activity of two exactly, not more: the analyst, who has been trained in the techniques of psychoanalysis, and the analysand, who is searching for self-knowledge. Psychoanalysis and philosophy share the assumption that self-knowledge will pave the way for the good life to be lived. But there are significant differences too.

In terms of architectural set-up the public sphere of the Athenian agora or a modern day philosophy conference is replaced by the intimacy of the consulting room. Where Socrates was inviting his fellow Athenians to think hard and carefully about the subject under consideration, Freud requested of his analysands to speak as freely as possible without stopping to think if what was being uttered made any logical sense:

What the material is with which one starts treatment is on the whole a matter of indifference – whether it is the patient's life history or the history of his illness or his recollections of childhood. But in any case the patient must be left to do the talking and must be free to choose at what point he shall begin ... The only exception to this is in regard to the fundamental rule of psycho-analytic technique which the patient has to observe. This must be imparted to him at the very beginning: "One more thing before you start. What you tell me must differ in one respect from an ordinary conversation. Ordinarily you rightly try to keep a connecting thread running through your remarks and you exclude any intrusive ideas that may occur to you and any side-issues, so as not to wander too far from the point. But in this case you must proceed differently. You will notice that as you relate things various thoughts will occur to you which you would like to put aside on the ground of certain criticisms and objections. You will be tempted to say to yourself that this or that is irrelevant here, or is quite unimportant, or nonsensical, so that there is no need to say it. You must never give in to these criticisms, but say it in spite of them – indeed, you must do so precisely because you feel an aversion to doing so. Later on you will find out and learn to understand the reason for this injunction, which is really the only one you have to follow. So say whatever goes through your mind. Act as though, for instance, you were a traveller sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing view which you see outside. Finally, never forget that you have promised to be absolutely honest, and never leave anything out because, for some reason or other, it is unpleasant to tell it."⁹

⁹ Freud, S., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), "On beginning the treatment", XII: 134-35.

Something magical seems to happen once the analysand starts to speak to her analyst: In the course of speaking her thoughts, more thoughts occur to her, of which she was unaware before she first started speaking, and which further develop the original thoughts. So, the analysand is not merely reporting thoughts but going through a process, the analytic hour, during which the development of self-conscious thought is facilitated. From time to time, and without consciously aiming, the analysand achieves moments of illumination.

There is another striking difference between the philosophical and the psychoanalytic method. Freud encourages his analysands to say whatever comes to their mind, without stopping to think what is relevant or trivial and without trying to organize their speech. This is in contrast to the Socratic dialogues where every participant is on high alert to not say the wrong thing and be caught out by Socrates as inconsistent. Socrates wants to show to the Athenians that where they thought there was knowledge, there was not. Freud, on the other hand, encourages people to freely speak their mind, without shame or order, as he hopes to free some of the information ordinarily inaccessible to the conscious mind. Freud's method reminds of the good teacher who tries to encourage creative discussion in the classroom but knows that the best ideas will not be heard if there exists any fear of punishment in case a mistake is uttered, and so informs her classroom that their performance will not be marked.

The foundational concept of psychoanalysis is the unconscious. To postulate the unconscious is to challenge a foundational concept of much of philosophical thinking; that of the transparency of the mind. So, what is the evidence that there exists such a thing in the mind called the unconscious? Certainly there is no proof that it exists and many in fact positively doubt its existence. However even the harshest sceptics may want to concede that much of human behaviour is unexplained. People who are rational and knowledgeable are not immune, so one really doubts whether reason is the vaccine to unexplained behaviour. To mention a sensational example from recent years, that well illustrates this point: In January 2011 the

Parisian microcosm would experience the biggest scandal of the Fifth Republic – the Strauss Kahn affair. Commentators and observers alike, look for second and third confirmation of what initially seemed a politically motivated rumor or even a bad taste joke. Dominique Strauss-Kahn was seemingly entangled in a sexual assault incident involving a maid in his hotel room, literally hours before his booked flight to Paris where he was expected to officially announce his candidacy for the upcoming French Presidential elections which he was the clear favourite to win. Not that the French are not familiar with such types of scandals; but Strauss-Kahn was not just any candidate: Professor of Economics, Minister of Finance in various governments and International Monetary Fund chief, he represented the archetype of the ultra-rational person that had risen to the top thanks to his superior intellect. What could have driven him to engage in this criminal, irrational and self-destructive behaviour? If we limit ourselves to a detailed rational analysis of the facts, it is unlikely we will gain any insight. After all, how can one hope to explain an unreasonable act by reason?

Philosopher Thomas Nagel, has given us another instructive example, from his own experience:

At a dinner party, an elderly man of independent means, who had spent his life as a private scholar without an academic position, challenged a psychiatrist who was present to explain to explain why, whenever he listened to the news on the radio, he fell asleep just at the point when the stock market report came on. The psychiatrist, knowing these facts, replied that it probably expressed difficult feelings about his father, “My father!”, said the man incredulously, “My father has been dead for fifty years!” The conversation then went on to other things, but the next day, the man telephoned the psychiatrist to report that later in the evening the memory had come flooding back to him that when, in his youth, he had resisted going into the family business, his father had made him promise at least to listen to the stock market report on the radio every day.¹⁰

This story hints to the fact that the search for self-knowledge need not be a solitary project. Our elderly man of independent means who was a private scholar no doubt had spent plenty

¹⁰ Nagel, T., “Freud’s Permanent Revolution”, *New York Review of Books*, XLI, 9 (12 May, 1994), p. 38.

of time on his own trying to explain his falling asleep upon listening to the stock market update on radio. However, no matter how hard he had tried, he could not solve the mystery. The seemingly difficult riddle was instantaneously solved by the psychiatrist who had the advantage of a psychoanalytic education. Importantly our elderly man came to see, and accept, the truth of the hypothesis of the psychiatrist on his own. The hint by the psychiatrist was useful but was not delivered as an authoritative diagnosis. The feeling of self-discovery allows the man to embrace the truth he has uncovered.

These stories are instances suggesting there is more to the mind than what we are consciously aware of. Freud summarized the situation:

Man's craving for grandiosity is now suffering the third and most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavouring to prove to the "ego" of each one of us that he is not even master of his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind.¹¹

The third, and "most bitter", blow Freud refers to is the realization that the ego is "not even master in his own house". This memorable phrase of Freud aptly summarizes his contribution. Freud, rather not modestly, calls his blow the third to man's craving for grandiosity, putting his theory on a par with Copernicus who showed the earth not to be the centre of the universe and Darwin who claimed that humans are to find their origins in the animal kingdom. Freud calls his blow the "most bitter" because humans must now accept that their most precious gift and hope for mastery over nature, rationality, is compromised and is but a small part of the decision centre in their minds. Many of the decisions humans execute with their bodies are taken by this dark force, the unconscious.

Freud, as the founding father of Psychoanalysis, was the first to try to understand the human psyche based on the unconscious. According to Freud, the unconscious is a sort of reservoir plenty of feelings, guilty thoughts, urges, impulses and fragmented memories, sometimes traumatic, that are outside of our conscious awareness and have accumulated there since our

¹¹ Freud, S., *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. by J. Riviere (London: Routledge, 1922), p. 241.

birth. Most of the contents of the Unconscious reservoir are unacceptable or unpleasant, such as feelings of pain, anxiety, or conflict – and trying to unearth them proves painful. The unconscious is where initiate many of our Behavioral Impulses. Contrary to common belief, the conscious mind is not the cause of our external behavior; instead, sudden impulses to act in one way or another are unconsciously activated; consciousness then, takes the role of the “gatekeeper” and sense-maker *after* the fact. That is, an impulse is first generated in our Unconscious inner universe, it triggers an action of whatever sort, and only then conscious processes take place, with consciousness claiming that the action was its own, and experiencing it as such. Till the advent of Psychoanalysis, little was being said about where exactly such unconscious impulses come from. Psychoanalysis, through the concept of the unconscious, raised serious objections regarding the concept of the will. In psychoanalysis, conscious processes are only the tip of the iceberg of mental activity. Thoughts and actions are determined not by the will but by the unconscious. For psychoanalysis, then, will is not a force, but the expression of an unconscious desire. Only when a person is consistent with their desire does the will trigger an act. That is why there are always plans that are delayed and put off for an ever distant future, firm decisions to change that never materialize and best intentions that never turn into actions. In Psychoanalysis will is not an act of force. Rather it stems from our inner psyche.

Throughout our lives we accumulate a stock of preferences, cultural and societal norms and values, past experiences and motives that when required will generate a multitude of behavioral impulses. These impulses will provide us with unconsciously operating motives, that will trigger certain actions, regardless of our strength or weakness of will. Early in our childhood, actions tend to reflect the actions of an unsuppressed mind. Everybody would agree that an infant would fail to endure pain or suppress behaviors in return for some future reward. During child development, though, socialization and learning begin to take a firm

grip on our behavior, and we start to suppress unwanted reactions. This often leads to internal conflict that comes at a cost. Take, for example, the concurrently existing desires to eat (to satisfy our palate and stomach) and not to eat (to comply with certain dietary recommendations).

The problem is that conflict cannot be turned off voluntarily. Inclinations can be behaviorally suppressed, but not mentally suppressed. Unconscious processes come to influence the conscious ones. Inclinations and momentary desires continue to be experienced consciously, even when they are not expressed behaviorally. Unconscious conflict resolution processes thus greatly impact conscious processes when it comes to plan for the future. Unconscious processes are by their nature “unintentional”. They trigger stimuli without awareness of the triggering stimuli.

Understanding the reality of the unconscious helps us take the measure of how revolutionary Freud has been for our understanding of self-control as well as our knowledge of ourselves, that is, two of the critical variables for living a good life. For Freud the conscious mind, which consists of all the self-conscious mental processes is but the “tip of the iceberg”. According to Freud, it is the unconscious mind that is the primary source of human behavior, and not the conscious which shows only what is apparent in our behavior. Like in an iceberg, to use Freud’s famous analogy, the most important part of the mind is the part you cannot see. Then, Freud speaks of the preconscious as a container of thoughts and feelings that a person is not currently aware of, but which can easily be retrieved to the conscious level. The preconscious exists just below the level of consciousness, but above the unconscious mind. The preconscious is like a mental waiting room, in which thoughts remain until they succeed in attracting the eye of the conscious. Medium-intensity (mild) emotional experiences may be in the preconscious but occasionally traumatic and powerful negative emotions are repressed and therefore not available in the preconscious.

Finally, the unconscious mind comprises mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness but that influence judgements, feelings, or behavior. Our feelings, motives as well as our judgements and decisions are actually heavily influenced by our past experiences, and “stored” in the unconscious. But while we are fully aware of what is going on in the conscious mind, we have not easy access to what information is stored in the unconscious mind and how. The unconscious contains all sorts of significant, but potentially destabilizing lived experiences which we need to keep out of our conscious awareness because they are too disturbing for our emotional equilibrium to acknowledge fully. The unconscious mind acts as a repository of primitive wishes and impulses, contained and mitigated by the preconscious area. Freud found that some events and desires were often too frightening or painful for his patients to recognize and so they repressed such information away in their unconscious mind. Freud explained that our unconscious contains our basic instincts for the primitive urges for sex and aggression, “eros” (love) and “Thanatos” (death and killing). These basic instincts, Freud argued, do not reach consciousness because they are unacceptable to our rational, conscious selves, as they have developed through civilized social upbringing. Moreover people have developed a range of defense mechanisms (typically repression) to avoid knowing what their unconscious motives and feelings are. That is, contrary to the philosophical commandment, people, in practice, have constructed barriers to self-knowledge.

Freud believed that the influence of the unconscious reveals itself in many instances of our everyday conscious life, for example in dreams, and in slips of the tongue (so called “freudian slips”). Regarding the latter, Freud gave the example of the British Member of Parliament who referred to a colleague with whom he was irritated as “the honourable member from Hell” instead of “...from Hull”. Freud’s explanation of the reason why

primitive urges remained unconscious, was that in that way individuals were protected from experiencing anxiety.

A basic postulate of Freudian theory is that the unconscious mind governs behavior to a large extent. One of the main goals of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious. In a way thus, Psychoanalysis becomes a precious tool for Self-knowledge. Whilst the unconscious remains unconscious, it drives our actions. Psychoanalysis can illuminate the relation between conscious judgment and emotions generated in the unconscious.

Freudian Psychoanalysis argues that much of the unconscious influence on our emotions comes from experiences of our past. Our emotions have a long psychic history, with regular updates of new emotions of love, hate, fear, joy, and so on, being layered on top of older ones, without though the new erasing the old – far from that: once experienced, an emotional trauma for example, will continue to live in our inner world, even if consciously we have forgotten it. These repressed emotions affect our perception, cognition and motivation in myriad ways. Distortions in our current emotions, then, can be traced in these lived experiences.

But how exactly is information pushed to the unconscious? Since we are infants and all the way into adulthood we make from time to time some thoughts which cause us excessive anxiety. It can be stressful or unacceptable thoughts (e.g. “I need to beat this man”, “I want to cheat on my husband”) which are disturbing to our moral code or our survival instinct (when we are babies before a moral code is established). Imagine that you want to hit your boss because he offended you but know that if you do so will lose your job and face prosecution. You can employ a number a number of defence mechanisms, and a list was provided by Freud’s daughter, Anna Freud, also a psychoanalyst: you can engage in denial (“nothing really happened. He did not really offend me”) or displacement (channel your anger to

another person or thing e.g. kick a table) or projection (convince yourself that your colleague really wants to beat the boss, not you) or reaction formation (express feelings of admiration to your boss, the opposite of what you really felt). Through one of these mechanisms, the trauma of the offence you sustained will be suppressed to your unconscious and be forgotten over time from your conscious thinking. However it will continue to live in your unconscious from where it may drive you sometimes to actions you do not understand (e.g. to be suspicious of your new boss who is actually quite a lovely man).

Freud worked as a sort of “cartographer” of the human mind. He developed a detailed model of the mind, describing the features of the mind’s structure and function. His model of the mind consisted of (a) the animal instincts (“id”, entirely unconscious; Freud’s explanation of the reason why primitive urges remained unconscious, was because in that way individuals were protected from experiencing anxiety) (b) the cultural/family influences (“superego”), and (c) the negotiation of the previous two (“ego”). As part of our nature as humans we are all endowed at birth with certain tendencies: to prefer pleasure to pain, to want to preserve ourselves, to look out for our own interest. After birth, the process of socialization starts. Our parents and our teachers pass to us the rules of the society we live in. The animal in us may want to eat all the food on the table, including what is in the plate of our sibling, but we are told we must limit ourselves to our own plate only. This voice of our parents, our teachers, our community, and society in general, becomes our moral compass and conscience, representing the critical and moralizing part of the mind. The Freudian superego has a role in basic self-control functions—it expends psychic energy to oppose the animal instincts—but it also plays a role in wider ethical judgments. Freud’s model of the mind is an elaboration and evolution of Plato’s tripartite model of the soul, consisting of the rational part, the spirited part and the appetitive part. Plato located the rational part of the soul in the head, the spirited part in the breast and the appetitive part in the stomach.

8. Human Nature

The differences between the philosophical and the psychoanalytic approach can be explained by their different conceptions of human nature. According to Socrates, man is a rational animal only. According to Freud man is an animal and, of course, a rational being too. So, Socrates calls on man to exercise his distinctive faculty of rationality. It is this that separates him from the rest of the animal kingdom and makes him special. Freud, in contrast, recognizes that to focus only on the rational resources of man, devoids him of access to a wealth of information that can be conducive to the search for the good life. Ethics built on unrealistic assumptions about human nature or in disregard of the constraints placed upon us by our nature can only be artificial and ultimately of little practical relevance.

A great paradox occurs when one denies or attempts to banish human nature. Instead of weakening its influence on our conduct, it is strengthened and becomes, through the unconscious, the secret driver of our lives. On the other hand, when one acknowledges human nature, she lays the foundations for a sustainable ethics based on truth and not wishful thinking. Take the case of sexual desire: to try to train it within the limits of Aristotelian moderation or Kant's deontological ethics, threatens to undermine, rather than promote, a good life. In due course the dams of rationalistic resistance are broken, human nature reasserts its power and the individual ends up with less control over his passions than would have been possible through the honest acceptance of human nature.

Carl Jung, Freud's collaborator, said that "nothing influences our conduct less than do intellectual ideas"¹² and Albert Camus, the existentialist philosopher, added that "man stands

¹² Jung, Carl G., *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. by C. F. Baynes (London: Routledge, 1933), p. 48.

face to face with the irrational”¹³. For as long as we refuse to face these facts, we will be building palaces on sand. If, on the other hand, we enrich our perception of human nature with the contributions of psychoanalysis, we end up with a more realistic, and thus more useful, view of human beings.

At the same time one needs to acknowledge that there is variability in human nature. The existence of evil people, like Hitler and Stalin, should not lead us to the unfair generalization that humans are bad by nature. Similarly the existence of good people, like Mother Teresa, should not lead us to the inaccurate generalization that all humans are good by nature. Like so many phenomena, it is plausible that human nature itself follows a normal distribution with few villains and saints and many people somewhere between the two extremes. Similarly, not all people are prone to exhibit weakness of will. Some can have will of steel and be capable to suppress completely and for longer irrational urges. Others can be at the opposite extreme. But it is a safe assumption that most of us are placed somewhere in the middle, and therefore stand to benefit from the reflective integration of the personality promised by psychoanalysis.

9. Moral responsibility and psychoanalysis

Freud thought that morality rose out of the need to curb human aggression. Our ancestors in the state of nature before morality were killing each other without hesitation. Aggression was selected by nature to be a characteristic of humans as the less aggressive were killed early on and were unable to reproduce. As we became more and more aggressive, the thought driven by the instinct of survival occurred that life under the constant fear of murder was intolerable and hence society developed rules that prohibited certain acts. So, in Freud’s theory, morality arose as a solution to the problem of aggression.

¹³ Camus, A., *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by J. O’Brien (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. 29.

Freud held a number of basic beliefs regarding morality which earned him the title of the anti-moralist: (a) Morality makes us unhappy and is in direct opposition to the project of living a happy and fulfilled life – a good life. He was in fact quite pessimistic about the prospects of achieving a good life and declared that the most his psychoanalysis could achieve was to replace neurotic unhappiness with ordinary unhappiness. The mechanism for unhappiness to result is this: the superego (or conscience) inhibits the individual from satisfying his desires. This inhibition generates frustration and unhappiness. (b) The individual can only exist in a state of tension with civilization. The idea that society can be organized in such a way as to serve the individual is a dream. In fact, Freud claims that the individual exists to serve society. Freud famously claimed that civilization was born when two of our ancestors had a fight but both left frustrated for having resisted to attack to kill the other. (c) Guilt is the inevitable condition of trying to comply with moral commands. Furthermore, the more a person tries to comply with what he understands as morality, the more his guilt grows. This may explain why saints tend to see themselves as sinners and the other way round. How many times have we not heard the criminal in his apology at the court to claim that he does not understand what he did wrong? And how many good people have not been harsh on themselves for not looking after well enough their elderly relative when all objective observes can confirm that they have been offering excellent care?

Freud is seen as a determinist. Between animal instincts (id) and oppressive civilizations (superego) very little freedom is left to the individual. Indeed Freud does not share the existentialist or libertarian optimism that complete freedom is possible, and hence, of course, moral responsibility attribution. At the same time Freud did not believe that the individual was pre-programmed and could not escape his fate. He believed that a very limited freedom was possible for the individual. The condition for realizing this very limited freedom is to

subject oneself to psychoanalysis in order to make the unconscious conscious and therefore limit the impact of the unconscious on the will.

So, it turns out, that one can see Freud as a true moralist who constructively sets out conditions for the individual to realize the maximum of the freedom that can be afforded in light of the inevitable constraints existence within any society imposes. Freud does not deny that sometimes the individual can be no more than a passive pawn to inner conflicts and societal pressures but is confident that the individual through psychic integration can be in position of truly choosing between alternatives. Furthermore, the appreciation that our freedom is limited, leads to the inevitable conclusion that our responsibility also needs to be limited, which in turn paves the way for an ethics of toleration. On the other hand, it can be said that those ethical theories that are built without consideration for the conditions of human existence are little more than wishful fantasies. Moral responsibility needs freedom but, in turn, freedom needs the truth.

Truth is the foundation of psychoanalytic ethics. Truth about oneself, first and foremost. The answer to the “Who am I” question becomes the foundation of ethics. Writes John Cottingham:

We did not spring into the world fully armed with the faultless weapons of unsullied rationality. The child, as wordsworth knew, is father of the man; the project of knowing who we are cannot avoid the struggle to understand what made us so.¹⁴

“Who am I” as a species but also, and very importantly, who am I as an individual. What is my history, from the days of infancy (or even from inside the womb as it is from the womb when interaction with the mother and environment begins)? What have I gone through to become who I am? To help his analysands answer these questions, Freud paid attention to their each word and tried to find a meaning in the tiniest of details they mentioned to him, from random thoughts till puzzling dreams. No doubt a lot of what he heard was of little

¹⁴ Cottingham, J., *Philosophy and the good life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 152.

significance but among all this barrage of information, he hoped the unconscious would surface and then be appropriated by the conscious to end psychic fragmentation and inner conflict.

Freud saw the truth about oneself as a permanent protection against immorality. This reminds us of the Socratic belief that knowledge is virtue. One however needs to note that Freud thought the moral standards of the person educated in the truth of herself may differ from the moral standards of the civilization in which it exists.

10. A Proposal

To assure ourselves of reliability in our judgements about how to live, we need to be able to discover the meaning of our emotions – and this can be achieved through psychoanalysis. However in no way Philosophy and Psychoanalysis antagonize each other; rather they are in a synergetic relationship.

Integrating our conscious goals with our unconscious motives increases our sense of well-being but is a challenging task. Realizing how difficult this task is, is already a first step towards self-knowledge. At any rate, Psychoanalysis seems to be the only serious enterprise of Self-knowledge for the modern person. Psychoanalysis helps to go beyond purely rational self-reflection, as this is commonly understood, to a deeper process of self-enquiry that can reveal the unconscious elements of our emotional life and therefore forecast our future reactions. In order to access this deeper knowledge of the meanings of one's emotions and choices, one has to undertake changes as a person. The change that is required cannot be performed by either intellectual insight or strength of will, traditionally the two powers at reason's disposal. Instead, the transformation requires:

a) recovering and accepting, as parts of oneself, those aspects of one's personality that have been rejected. Our self is to be understood as not only our capacity to reason but also whatever can be known about us. What is at issue is to be able to capture all the emotional profoundness of the self.

b) accepting one's vulnerability – both one's vulnerability in childhood and one's present vulnerability which finds its sources in childhood; this involves a form of relinquishing control, not just initially, but permanently, and accepting the risks involved in that operation. Because vulnerability is always potentially painful, as it involves reclaiming old painful experiences that were repressed precisely because of the pain they caused and still threaten to cause. Accepting one's vulnerability involves the courage to accept and endure pain;

c) Undoing one's defence mechanisms. The sense of vulnerability deepens in the realization that it is inescapable, a realization that comes with the understanding of one's emotions, and their roots in our childhood. Our past is always present. The influence of our past never ceases. Though we can analyse, appreciate, and moderate it, we cannot eradicate it. Openness to one's emotional life, a willingness to at least tolerate and admit into thought whatever it is one feels, is necessary for self-knowledge to emerge. This form of emotional openness is always potentially painful. After all, defence mechanisms are means by which we control emotions that threaten psychological pain. This pain is unavoidable in the process of our healing. Facing up to pain needs our courage. Courage is often understood as steeling one's will. But it is paradoxical to think of someone steeling themselves to be vulnerable, to tolerate whatever emotional experience arises. But it is another kind of courage that we are talking about here. The courage of vulnerability is the courage of letting go, of allowing oneself to feel that which is painful. This contrasts with courage in the face of physical pain, which does involve steeling oneself; what the two forms have in common is that both enable one to continue functioning despite the pain. In the case of deepening self-knowledge, this is

to not give up on letting go of attempts to control one's experience of one's emotion. Furthermore, defence mechanisms are not within the remit of the will, and so an act of will is not enough to undo them. Defence mechanisms progressively build up in order to reduce psychic pain, but do not involve choices. They are part of the nature of the mind, and they interact with the will, but they are not within or directly under the control of the will. Rather, they may be described as the psychic equivalent to the reflex mechanism of withdrawing one's body from a painful stimulus. The psychic pain, or threat of pain, is sufficient to redirect the attention away from the passion without the intervention of the will. Defence mechanisms are usually reinforced by an idealized sense of oneself; the parts of oneself defended against, even after their existence is acknowledged, are not yet one's own in the same way in which one identifies with other traits with which one is content. The pain caused lies not, or not only, in the painful part of the self; it lies also in the gap between that part and one's previous self-image. On the one hand, our emotions need to be expressed; on the other hand, we can aspire to ambitious ideals.

d) compassion for oneself: compassion has to be understood here as the ability to tolerate and bear feelings such as anxiety, guilt, shame and anguish – being able to feel more and better. Of course, we normally think of compassion as directed towards others, but here it is about the emotions involved when we experience inner conflict. Compassion for oneself is an attitude towards one's emotions that allows them to exist, to be felt, because it reveals to us what we really feel, without the obstacles that society, and often our reason puts.

e) Psychoanalysis to attain self-knowledge: From its inception psychoanalysis claimed not merely to be an effective therapy for psychological suffering, but to shed light on the human condition, or so thought Freud when he was founding the discipline. Psychoanalysis has its place in the western philosophical tradition, providing not only theoretical wisdom about human nature, but also practical wisdom. The human mind, through its plasticity and self-

conscious understanding can be immediately and directly efficient in shaping its own world view. Literature – a cousin of psychoanalysis to the point that in many academic departments they are taught together – can also be of great help. Novelists help us re-imagine and re-think how our inner psyche can be connected with the values inherent to a good life. We need to be able to link the details of our lives with our most significant overarching concerns. Our humanity partially consists with wrestling to apply these values and often fail, because of our inner defaults. In effect, Freud's legacy is to bind psychoanalysis to the western humanistic tradition by offering a remarkable determination of what we might mean by self-consciousness. In this way, psychoanalysts ought to join the ranks of poets, playwrights, novelists and philosophers who help us to understand the most basic values of human life.

Is the laborious psychoanalytic process always necessary? Certainly not. Psychoanalyst Victor Frankl described how once was visited by an American diplomat who was complaining to him about being unhappy to serve U.S. Foreign policy and of general unhappiness regarding his workplace. The diplomat mentioned to Frankl that before coming to him he had visited Freud who diagnosed his problem as being his difficult relationship with his father. Frankl advised him to change jobs which he did and found happiness. As not all problems have deep roots, one needs to exercise discretion to decide on the more appropriate angle of attack. Two clarifications are necessary at this point. First, according to Freud psychoanalysis is always a good idea as it is seen as a way of life, a way of understanding at a deeper level our concerns and experiences of daily life. It is not only for people who suffer or for the neurotics. So, Freud would recommend to the diplomat of our story to carry on with psychoanalytic consultations. Second, Freud would be sceptical that the change of job would provide sustainable solution to the concerns of our diplomat. It is not unusual for deep rooted problems to resurface after a period of time following some temporary fix. Rajchman who wrote that "Events occur too early, or their effects come to

late, for us to be able to “assimilate” them in the portion of living that is governed by prohairesis (rational choice).”¹⁵ When we think about our lives we tend to focus on recent events and assign lesser importance to events from childhood or older events more generally. This can be practical for relatively simple problems but is a mistake for many others. To understand an issue we need to look for its causal genesis which in many cases takes us straight to the person’s childhood. Exactly because typically many years have lapsed between the time the problem was caused and the time the problem became apparent, it is very easy (in fact the most likely scenario) to blame a secondary or even irrelevant cause from a more recent time. A bit like in politics when the voting public can very easily be misled to blame a current government when the problem that became obvious during their reign was caused from the decisions of another government 20 years before. Aristotle realized this problem when he wrote “It is not easy to right the effects of early damage”.¹⁶

11. Conclusion

An ethics that does not provide a credible account of human nature cannot provide answers to the mystery of the weakness of will because it does not take into account the influence of emotions. No doubt rationality is the distinguishing characteristic of the human being, our greatest gift perhaps, but the human being is more than that. We are not just the rational animal. We are, first and foremost, an animal and this seems to me to be a basic truth and starting point. When we refuse to acknowledge our animal nature, we pay the heavy price of not understanding our own selves and betray philosophy’s starting point: Socrates’ “know thyself”.

¹⁵ Rajchman, J., *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan, and the question of ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 39.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by T. Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1114a15ff.

Whilst psychoanalysis is already a part of the curriculum of continental philosophy, it has not gained much acceptance by analytic philosophers. The foundational concept of the unconscious part of the mind has been dismissed as a contradiction in terms – mind is what we are aware of when we introspect. The idea that part of our mind is hidden from ourselves is unfathomable to many philosophers. However the unconscious succeeds in explaining a wide range of instances of weakness of will which hitherto were seen as a mystery: “Why did she do this to harm her own interests? It doesn’t make any sense!”.

On the other side of the divide, Freud famously distrusted philosophers and saw psychoanalysis as an empirical science of the mind. However Freud, in his less medical moments, produced work of philosophical significance and gave us concepts that can help all of us to understand ourselves better and can shed light on philosophical puzzles. In any event, when one looks beyond intellectual turf wars, it becomes apparent that philosophy as conceived by Socrates and psychoanalysis as conceived by Freud share the purpose: to help us live better lives through a deeper understanding of ourselves. There is therefore scope for a fruitful dialogue between the two disciplines.

This is not a call to abandon the palaces of philosophical rationality for the dark alleys of psychoanalytic irrationality. To the contrary, Freud, ultimately always the rationalist, saw psychoanalysis as a method to expand the dominion of rationality by claiming back parts of ourselves left abandoned and forgotten, but very much active, in the unconscious. One can therefore see psychoanalysis as an evolution and enrichment of the Socratic method. In fact psychoanalysis does not come to challenge any of the established ethical theories but merely to offer its services to the parts of ethical thought that are relevant to the suffering individual struggling for a better life (as opposed to a public policy ethics where one inevitably descends to utilitarian calculus without much consideration to individual dramas). Freud does not deny

the spirituality of the human being, but supplements this understanding with a theory of instinctual drives.

To the man or woman who struggle to realize a better life for themselves psychoanalysis says that it is not enough to engage in static self-reflection of the here and now. This may be enough in few cases and for some time, but one will be better served by trying to understand how they arrived to here and now. As John Cottingham writes:

True ethical value grows from the inside outwards. Its core is the structure of passionate commitment and personal love that gives ultimate meaning to what we do. Unless we are sure of who we are, unless we understand the sources of ourselves in our childhood, then all our solemn pronouncements on the good life will be hollow and unstable. For it is as children, like it or not, that we all learned to love and life without love, and a true understanding of its psychic roots cannot be fully human. There is no shortcut here , no way that reason can productively forge ahead without first securing the ground of true self-awareness.¹⁷

¹⁷ Cottingham, J., *Philosophy and the good life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 166.

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