Abstract

This book deals with the problem why it is so difficult to understand what happens in psychotherapeutic processes. The answer that I propose is that many psychotherapeutic events have a certain self-reference. Not only many of the therapeutic conversations pertain to the ways in which they are performed, but also many of the exploration processes are self-referential. It is this self-reference that impedes a straightforward empirical access and that compels us to use other techniques, some of which are in fact common practice in supervision. The book investigates how a detached attitude, common in regular scientific research, does not advance the desired clarity of understanding.

Chapter 1 gives a general introduction. It presents some underlying ideas and it summarizes the various chapters of the book.

In chapter 2 I introduce some concepts from Maturana’s theory of autopoietic systems. Of interest is here the notion of autopoiesis, the ‘organizational closure’ of living beings. This is a concept at the edge of metaphysics, in that it is defined in a way that disables immediate empirical confirmation. One cannot see the closure closed; one has to force an opening in order to see anything. I pay attention to the idea that autopoietic systems are capable of making distinctions as a necessary effect of their organizations. Thus, according to Maturana, making distinctions is essential to the process of staying alive. The concept of distinction is a major issue throughout this book.

Maturana’s ideas on how it is possible that objects are perceived by language users is taken here as a point of departure for the elaboration in chapter 3 of some concepts beyond the theory of Maturana. In particular, I relate Maturana’s concept of distinction to what Merleau-Ponty wrote on the ‘flesh’, which is a kind of ontological substratum for both subject and object; it is that from which both object and subject develop. Furthermore, I relate Maturana’s ideas on the perception of objects to the ideas of Giambattista Vico on the poetic language of the earliest peoples. The objects thus perceived arise as a common construct, a social artifact for the coordination of diverging experiences between persons. They serve as an elementary mode of avoiding conflict. I call these objects ‘naive’: they do not distinguish between that which is perceived and how it is perceived.

This latter distinction is put into the focus in chapter 4. I call the usage of language that has this distinction ‘critical’. I specify two critical discourses: both are used to temper conflict and find agreement between persons by constructing some stable ground, to which diverging qualities can be attributed. In the first discourse, which I call realist, the stable ground is some abstract essence, to which concrete, but diverging, appearances are attributed; in the second discourse, which I call nominalist, the stable ground is a concrete symbol, to which abstract, but diverging meanings are assigned.

Both discourses can be used, in radically different ways, to speak about mental entities (called ‘internal objects’), both in other persons and in oneself. This is the subject matter of chapter 5. These radically different ways are elaborated further in chapter 7.

But both discourses, when applied to the world outside oneself, could become integrated into what I call ‘classical science’ (chapter 6). However, this was possible only as long as the issue of self-reference did not receive the attention of scientists. I argue also in that chapter that, with self-reference having become an issue of interest (first in mathematics and physics), the integration between the two critical discourses did no longer hold.

In chapter 7, then, I elaborate how, with respect to self-reference, the two critical discourses take entirely different positions, from which self-reference also looks entirely different. Nevertheless, each discourse shows a serious lacuna; neither can fully express the concept of self-reference, and I argue that both lacunae in fact converge upon one single domain. In that chapter I introduce my concept of ‘one-sided
boundary’, which is to be understood as a boundary to the domain of its own definition: beyond that domain the boundary does not exist! This is precisely the matter with the ‘vagueness’ of psychotherapy: it brings the external observer (and also the internal one, the therapist) into a position of not (or no longer) understanding. Hence, I maintain that we may appreciate our failures to understand as properties of that which we are trying to grasp. This is the negative way, and I propose to apply it here in the tradition of Cusanus and of Merleau-Ponty, whose concept of ‘flesh’ returns here in terms of a ‘true negative’: existing as an absence to what we can perceive, not as some transcendental entity that is positively present elsewhere. At this place in the book we are at the vertex of my argument. The chapters that follow are meant to utilize the ideas built up thus far.

First, chapter 8 is to illustrate how in the field of psychiatric diagnosis the opposition between realist and nominalist discourses has led to different conceptions of mental disorder, one more interested in explanations and past developments, and one more interested in future developments and treatment policy. It is maintained how incompatible these conceptions are if the observer’s (diagnostician’s) own personal commitment is not involved. It is through making naive objects that the diagnostician is capable to integrate the two critical discourses. Nevertheless, naive objects are not always sufficiently powerful. In particular, they fail when the practitioner’s very capacity to think is affected. When this happens, we are in the realm of projective identification, which is the stuff of chapter 11. The chapters that follow are to prepare that.

Next, in chapter 9, I present the construction of naive objects in terms of self-referential exploration processes. It is maintained that the task of exploration in psychotherapeutic sessions cannot be performed as a technological procedure. This is argued by means of Gadamer’s concept of ‘phronesis’ (prudent action), which is to be seen as a kind of intermediary between general rules, or general knowledge, and unique individual situations; and by means of Gadamer’s ideas on ‘playing’. According to Gadamer, in the performance of a piece of art (e.g. theatre, music) there is a particular collapse of (what I called) critical discourse; the observer becomes naive, and can no longer distinguish the piece of art from the way in which it is performed, nor from the way the artist had meant it to be. Gadamer calls this the aesthetic non-distinction. Transposing this idea to the field of psychotherapy, we find that the processes of exploration are qualified by a similar kind of aesthetic non-distinction. Exploration goes by means of naive objects, and is self-referential. This cannot be replaced by a procedure, applied by a ‘behavior technologist’ or ‘behavior engineer’. It would eliminate the very aspect of exploration.

In chapter 10, then, I proceed by giving some case material from my own experiences with psychotherapy research that attempts to do justice to the self-referential and closed qualities of therapeutic systems. This chapter is meant to clarify and illustrate some of the phenomena of getting trapped in a closed system, as well how the observer’s or researcher’s absence of understanding and its exploration can be made useful.

In chapter 11 I discuss the concept of ‘projective identification’. Unlike the self-reference discussed in chapter 9, here we encounter situations in which a decrease of the therapist’s (as well as the external observer’s) capacity to clearly think is a property of the thing to be observed! Whereas in processes of exploration critical perception was impossible, in favor of naive perception that could flourish in the therapist and the patient, matters are different here. In processes of projective identification naive perception and, with it, exploration are halted and can be resumed only to the extent the therapist (or observer) is capable of enduring (‘containing’) some of the negative experiences that the patient is incapable to endure. These negative experiences are of an ‘undigested’ quality, they are ‘raw experiences’, like radical atoms ungraspable without changing and binding them. It is here that the negative way, the exploration of one’s incapacity to fully understand, shows to be most fertile.

Chapter 12 gives some final considerations on the self-reference of psychotherapeutic processes and on the impossibility to catch it in positive terms.