

WEEK 2 ANSWER TO QUESTION 3
STEP 3.3 ASK MARK

Here it is, Question 3: “I'm interested in the relationship of subjectivity and objectivity. I've heard that psychoanalysis is the theory that's able to combine both. What are a few important concepts, and what would research look like in this field?”

Now, I'm not sure that I agree with the questioner when they say that they've heard that psychoanalysis is a theory that's able to combine both. That is to say, to combine subjectivity and objectivity.

I think psychoanalysis, perhaps more than any other approach to psychology, is the science of subjectivity. Psychoanalysis is that branch of psychology which takes the subjective nature of the mind seriously. The fact is that part of nature includes things like feelings. Part of nature is occupied by subjective things.

We therefore do need to have a science of subjectivity. We can't leave subjective things out of our account of nature, out of our account of the universe, for the simple fact that they do exist. All of us know from our own immediate experience that subjective things do exist. They must therefore interact with the other things in nature. They must have causal consequences. And if we leave them out of account, we are going to make egregious errors.

Think, for example, of the horrible fact of suicide. Some people kill themselves because they can't bear the feelings. They can't stand how it feels any longer, and they therefore decide to end it all. Here you have an example of a feeling having massive physical consequences, massive biological consequences. Literally, the termination of life itself.

How are you to explain the fact that a person in such desperate straits decides to kill themselves, and then actually does it, without taking account of the fact that a feeling caused them to do it? This is why we have to include feelings and other subjective phenomena in our account of nature and, in particular, in our account of biological nature and the mental aspect of biology.

Now psychoanalysis, as I've said, is the branch of psychology which takes that starting point for its explorations, for its attempts to establish a science of the mind. Psychoanalysis, for more than 100 years, has used methods which are entirely subjective. Getting the patient, the analysand, to report freely everything that occurs to them as they lie on a couch, allowing their minds to wander. This is the famous free association method, remembering the other thing. This is the data upon which the psychoanalytical model of the mind is built. But you'll notice it's entirely subjective data. Now, I've nothing against that. In fact, I think that psychoanalysis should be

proud of the fact that it has taken seriously the fact that subjective phenomena do exist.

But it's also true that it's very difficult to do a science on the basis of purely subjective data. This is where psychoanalysis has run into trouble for so long. Many people are not willing to accord the status of a science to psychoanalysis precisely because there are no objective data. So where I would disagree with the questioner is in their assertion that psychoanalysis is the discipline that combines the objective with the subjective.

I think it's because psychoanalysis does not combine the objective with the subjective that we need this hybrid interdisciplinary that I and a few close colleagues have been pioneering over the last two decades, which we're calling neuropsychanalysis. The aim of linking the “neuro” with psychoanalysis is in order to introduce an objective perspective, to couple objective observations about the mind with the subjective data obtained by the psychoanalytical method.

This is because there have been advances in the neurological sciences in recent decades which enable us to make objective observations in real-time about the state of the brain. That is to say, the mind when looked at objectively, the mind when objectified, the external perspective on the mind. And by correlating those objective data with the subjective experiences that are the traditional subject matter of psychoanalytical theorising, we are in this way tethering the subjective to the objective aspects, and in this way grounding them in a more normal scientific approach.

It's very important that you understand that this doesn't explain away the subjective data. It doesn't reduce the subjective data to the objective or the biological or neurological ones. As I've said already, there are subjective empirical facts. There are things like feelings, which do exist and which do have causal effects. You can't reduce them or remove them or exclude them.

And the aim of the neuropsychanalytical approach is to link those subjective data with objective data so that we can more readily do science in respect of subjective things. I hope that that clarifies this third point raised by that very interesting and important question.



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