

Figure and Ground: An Enquiry into What Analysis Is

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Abstract

An enquiry into “what analysis is” benefits from consideration of the phenomenology of analysis. Drawing on the experience of becoming and being an analyst, as well as using fictionalised case material, this enquiry reveals analysis phenomenologically as a process of living encounter with the unconscious. The unconscious manifests in many different ways each of which provides an opportunity for such encounter. By contrast, much of psychotherapy practice is a process that focuses on the client’s narrative and formulations of that narrative rather than on a process of the manifestation and encounter with the unconscious. In this article I argue that these processes shift back and forth in the manner of figure and ground and that analysis occurs when there is an equilibrium point between these two processes which itself moves more towards facilitating the manifestation of, and encounter with, the unconscious than towards narrative and formulation.

Waitara

He pakirehua i te “he aha te tātaritanga” ngā painga o te whakaarotanga ki te whakawā tātaritanga. Kia huri ake ki te wheako o te huringa hei kaitātari me te mahi kaitātari i tua atu i te whakamahinga rauemi paki, ka whakaatuhia e tēnei pakirehua he tātaritanga whakawā hei takinga tūtakitanga kaiao ki te mauri moe. He maha ngā momo āhua o te mauri moe, ā, ia āhua he whakaratonga tautauāmoa mō taua tūtakitanga. Hei whakatauritenga ake, he maha ngā mahi whakaora hinengaro, he takinga arotahi ki te paki a te kiritaki me ngā whakahiatonga o taua kōrero tē aro kē ki te takinga o te whakamāramtanga me te tūtakitanga ki te mauri moe. I roto i tēnei tuinga e whakapae ana au ka neke whakamua, whakamuri ēnei takinga pērā anō i te āhua me te papa ā, ka puea ake te tātaritanga inā tau te waikanaetanga ki ēnei takinga, ā, ka whakapiri atu ki te whakatau i te whakamāramtanga, me te tūtakitanga ki te mauri moe kua ki te paki me te whakahiatonga.

Keywords: becoming an analyst; unconscious; narrative; formulation; case material

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The Core Notion

The core notion in this article is something which I hope will extend our knowledge of analysis in some small way. This notion is that a state of analysis exists when the accent of the therapeutic interaction shifts towards the client's encounter with their unconscious. Furthermore, this accent forms a position between two different processes around which they shift as figure and ground.

To begin then what are these two processes? The first process occurs when a therapist listens to the client's story (or more correctly "narrative" because it is not told in a linear fashion). The therapist often responds to this by making an explanatory statement about the narrative. This explanatory statement is part of a "formulation". (A formulation is an attempt to give psychological meaning to the client's narrative.) This process only slightly articulates the client's actual unconscious although it may infer some unconscious elements.

The second process occurs when a therapist listens to the client and allows their own psychological responsiveness to become entrained to the client's productions (e.g. verbal, vocal and silent) and state of being. From the traditional psycho-analytic perspective the therapist then specifically notices the interruptions and gaps (i.e. resistances) and transference eruptions. On the basis of this the therapist can facilitate the emergence of the unconscious (e.g. by reflection or interpretation). A similar process occurs from the perspective of analytical psychology (i.e. Jungian analysis) but very often the manifestation of the unconscious is presence rather than absence. Kalsched (1996) tried to value the imaginal nature of the psyche and calls the manifestation of the unconscious "out-picturing". In trying to conduct analysis the therapist seeks to facilitate the client's encounter with the manifested unconscious material.

I see the first process as more a generic process of psychotherapy and the second process as more one of analysis. However, no client and therapist uses one process alone and so it seems useful to me to conceptualise what analysis is as an equilibrium point around which this figure and ground shifting occurs. I believe that analysis is thus formed by the location of that equilibrium point within the shifting figure and ground of the process of narrative/formulation (on the one side) and the process of manifestation of/encounter with the unconscious (on the other).

On Becoming an Analyst

The core notion that I try to articulate above arose from my lived experience of becoming and being an analyst. I became an analyst through the medium of the traditional tripartite training model, that is, analysis, supervision and academic study. I also became an analyst because I got to know, in deeply meaningful ways, people who were already analysts. Two in particular stand out for me: one a classical Freudian psycho-analyst, the other a Jungian analyst. Both had personally known significant historical analysts, namely Anna Freud and Donald Meltzer, both could tell stories of the analytic community, and both had an interested and easy comfort with confused and confusing material and emotional states. Both also communicated a capacity to be at home in a state of reverie; both were fascinated by the shifts, reversals and equations of dream states in analysis; and both

could encounter “the unconscious” (and by unconscious I mean the as yet unthematized aspects of a person’s psychological life).

I started my career as a clinical psychologist who was reasonably adept at practising psychotherapy. With some clients there was an ambience of mutual emotional attunement and the curious experience of instinct and image that shifted and reversed and resonated in a way not unlike that found in dream. Through supervision and discussion with some singular analysts I came to understand these experiences as states of analysis in which the unconscious was encountered. I have become more and more interested in just how these states of analysis are constellated and also what stands in the way of how they are constellated.

What follows is not a criticism of narrative and formulation as agents of therapeutic change; it is rather an essay on my suspicion that narrative and formulation are not analysis. What follows is also not an assertion of some sort of utopian view of analysis “proper”. In some therapy there may be a state of dynamic shifting back and forth between an accent on narrative and formulation and an accent on what I am going to describe as manifestation of and encounter with the unconscious. Whether or not it is a state of analysis depends on which of these dominantes.

I also need to say that I believe that there are different registers of engagement in analysis. What I am going to say takes for granted the interpersonal dimension. I will not say anything about either the condition — empathic enquiry and containment - necessary for the client’s unconscious to be manifested nor the client’s developmental capacity to encounter it.

I lead into further into discussion of my thesis by way of a piece of fictionalised case material. In order to preserve confidentiality the clinical vignette consists of a constructed *fictionalised* case in which I imaginatively present clinical experience that I have had at different times with different clients who, nonetheless, have similar history, psychodynamic functioning and ways of being-in-the-world. Whilst actual details are disguised the core elements of this analytic encounter have occurred with at least four clients.

Clinical Vignette

Tom was a 35-year-old lawyer who specialised in intellectual property law. He originally started analysis for feelings of inauthenticity to the extent that he felt he was an imposter. He gave a history of an over-involved narcissistically extractive mother, i.e. she would only really respond to him positively if it served to reflect well on her, whose valuing of him was highly conditional. He had difficulty maintaining relationships with women but had a girlfriend at the time of commencing analysis. He rapidly moved to using the couch and came for analysis three times per week on consecutive days. He was knowledgeable about psychoanalysis especially theorists such as Winnicott, Bowlby, and Kohut. He was inclined to spend about two thirds of the session narrating what had happened to him in the day or days before the session. The session that I present here was about one year into his analysis.

Tom started the first session of the week by giving an account, a narrative, of the

intervening period. He felt that there was something missing in his life. He spoke in some detail of a social gathering at which he had felt out of place and obliged to make small talk. He spoke about how his girlfriend had yet again failed to meet his need for being understood. He said he had re-read some Winnicott, and felt that he lacked a sense of true or authentic self. (Tracking this I wondered if he was making an unconscious communication about me: that I frustrated him, that he felt aggressive towards me because of this but then turned this attack against himself in a defensive way. I did not, however, make any interpretive comment.) He went on to say that everything he does is worked out consciously and that he felt inauthentic. I reminded us both how he had felt like this for years and that indeed this was why he had commenced analysis. (I think this was unanalytic of me and that I enacted a counter-transference.) He then spoke of the tension of the last week and said he had decided to break up with his girlfriend. (I wondered, in silence, if this was an unconscious communication that he wanted to end analysis with me.) He went on to say that his mother had had to move into a nursing home as she was no longer able to look after herself. He said that he was fighting his urge to be the one in the family who organised his mother's move but was instead leaving it to his older sister. He had the insight that his girlfriend was very dependent on him and that in a way he had been facilitating this by being over-supportive of her both emotionally and practically. He took a lot of time to describe how in the past he had done this in different ways. He then went on to narrate *how* he had decided to leave his girlfriend and that they had been arguing about who should be the one to leave the joint apartment and when this should happen. Much of the session was spent describing the details of this. (I found myself having fewer and fewer thoughts about the relevance of what he said as unconscious communications. It was tempting to repeat the formulatory understanding about his over-involvement with mother/woman and his feeling extractively used and the loss of his sense of what he authentically wanted. It was very tempting to sketch out an understanding of this in terms of his earlier experiences and patterns of behaviour with his mother. I restrained my inclination to make this formulation.) Then he fell silent and we were both silent for about three minutes. He asked me to say something and said that maybe I did not understand him. I said that I had nothing to say except that his narrative had stopped and we both faced a disturbing nothing. He was silent for about another three minutes and then reported a dream:

My girlfriend is going into hospital for some sort of operation. She is wearing a big green surgical garment that covers most of her body. In the theatre she and I are investigating the operating table and drip line. This becomes a broken car. There is a problem with it and we think that the oil level is wrong. I check the dipstick taking it out and pushing it in a few times. Then finally I take it out and it becomes a strange insect with long feelers. This insect is very frightening.

Associating to this Tom recalled that on waking he had not recalled the part of the dream about entering the operating theatre and checking the oil. This had only come back to him in the session when I said that we both faced a disturbing nothing when he was

silent. Instead, on waking his recollection had been of going directly from the image of his girlfriend in the green garment to the frightening but fragile insect. He associated further, recalling an occasion, when he was a child, of his mother going to hospital. I said I thought that the frightening but fragile insect was a missing thing, something taken from his mother, and maybe something he feared would be taken from him for some transgression. After a pause he said that he had been late in paying tax recently and had been penalised. He was quiet again after this and then said he had an image of entering his mother's bedroom to find her there with a lover. He did not think this had really happened but the image was very vivid and seemed like a memory. I said that perhaps his entering the room was frightening because it was forbidden but maybe it was also frightening because in some ways his mother laid a demand on him to fill something that was a lack in her. He said that he had never quite thought of such a thing. Then he recalled how when he was very little his mother would dress him up and show him off to friends and how embarrassed this made him feel.

At this point the session felt deeply analytic. I noticed that we both seemed in a state of reverie. We were also comfortable with the strange material and bi-logic of our thinking and utterances. Bi-logic is a word coined by Independent Group Psycho-analyst, Ignacio Matte-Blanco, to describe a mixture of symmetrical and asymmetrical logic. The unconscious is marked by logical processes based on symmetry and generalization (see Rayner, 1991). The empathy and reverie based in the intersubjective analytic third can be seen as states of bi-logic where the identities of the analyst and analysand are themselves somewhat reversible in a state of attunement: I am you and you are me; for instance, that an operating table could become a car; that a dip-stick could become a frightening insect with long feelers; that Tom could be frightened because something was both forbidden and required of him by the same person. Phenomenologically this was the state of working together that I have come to understand as analysis — but, more particularly, it is a state of living encounter with the unconscious. The unconscious was first present as lack, as disturbing nothing, then as strange dream images and shifts, then as associations and a possible screen memory. Before this encounter with the unconscious, however, there was a narrative.

Narrative

In psychotherapy clients commonly present the therapist with a narrative. This may be more remote historically, as in a biographical account, or it may be an account of more recent life events, as in the occurrences of the last week or days. In my experience narrative of this sort is very common. It is reasonably comfortable for the therapist to listen and quite natural for the client to recount. Very often it seems that just to narrate is useful for the client who, thereby, has a chance to feel that they have been received as they experience the therapist as a listening and hearing presence. I suspect that there is a fairly subtle analytic process occurring inside this narrative but will not explore that here. Rather, I am more interested in the sort of narrative that seems to be an activity which fills the time of the session. Commonly this narrative, which forms an account of something the analyst or analysand knows about the analysand, is generally somewhat

“experience-far” (Kohut, 1977) in that it lacks emotional immediacy, although at other times it may be emotional alive.

This sort of narrative often invites the therapist to understand and make some sort of formulation of the client’s material. That formulation may be fairly short, in which case it is often considered to be an “interpretation”. Strictly speaking it is not an interpretation in the psychoanalytic sense of the word, and certainly not a mutative interpretation which needs the “heat” of transference (Strachey, 1934). Conversely, that formulation may be fairly long in which case it is more often either an historical reconstruction or an explanatory account. In either event the formulation may refer to psychological or interpersonal process without itself being an interpersonal process. So what is this sort of formulation?

Formulation

This formulation is in a sense an explanation, construction, or reconstruction. Typically a formulation seems to have psychological depth but often does not. For instance, the formulation that a client keeps arriving late because they are self-sabotaging is a formulation not an interpretation of psychological depth.

The client may seize upon and confirm a formulation because it possesses novelty, elegance, and coherence. Especially in the case of a client who is seeking to grow both their personal and general knowledge about the psyche and psycho-analysis, it may be accepted because it *extends* the client’s knowledge base. These reasons for the acceptance of a formulation are all dominantly conscious or preconscious. At the same time there may also be an acceptance of a formulation because it serves as a type of screen memory that is, unconscious material, or delusion which contains truth but truth that is masked by exaggeration of less psychologically-relevant material. This exaggeration of truth then serves to mask and defend against the unconscious. Freud (1937/2001) described this process as follows:

These recollections have themselves led to nothing further and it has seemed plausible to regard them as the product of a compromise. The “upward drive” of the repressed, stirred into activity by the putting forward of the construction, has striven to carry the important memory-traces into consciousness; but a resistance has succeeded, not, it is true, in *stopping* that moment, but in *displacing* it onto adjacent objects of minor significance. (p. 266)

Therapists often accept that the conscious agreement by the client of the formulation validates it. This belief is held in spite of the reservations about such simple agreement that Freud listed in his paper on “Construction” (Freud, 1937/2001). Furthermore, the making of a formulation based on a narrative focuses on the *content* of the client’s material. Amongst the many functions that this can serve we need to include the provision of narrative as a form of resistance. In his 1910 paper on “Wild Analysis” Freud (1910/2001) noted that, from the perspective of the client: “The pathological factor is not his ignorance in itself [content], but the root of his ignorance in his *inner resistances*; it

was they that first called this ignorance into being, and they that still maintain it now [process] (p. 225).

What is Analysis?

Before proceeding with an exploration of a definition of analysis, in terms of the equilibrium point of the shifting of figure and ground between narrative/formulation on the one hand and manifestation of the unconscious/encounter with the unconscious on the other, I would like to turn to the root of the term. “Analysis” of the psyche does *not* refer to some cold and impersonal procedure, nor to a particularly cognitive, cerebral or verbal method. Rather it refers to a process which seeks to “loosen the knots” of the mind, loosen the tangles of psychological life, tangles which compromise our possibilities of being as humans. Etymologically the word “analysis”, from the Greek *analusis*, means to “set free” (Makins, 1991), or in another sense to loosen or to untie a knot (Todres, personal communication, 1990). Thus, if the psyche is tight, tied in a knot — if, in Jungian terms, the connection between ego and Self is compromised by a psychic knot — or, if one’s possibilities of being are tied up, then loosening or untying them leads to the freedom to be come who one is. This, in my opinion, is the role of analysis and thus practically how do we untie the knots. In order to respond to this question, I first turn to the originator of psycho-analysis, Sigmund Freud, and then move to a more Jungian perspective.

Recall that we have introduced the process of narrative followed by formulation. Contrary to popular understanding, narrative followed by formulation is probably not what Freud (and significant later psychoanalysts) regarded as psycho-analysis. Freud mostly understood analysis as a *process* and in fact he (Freud, 1914/2001) came to define it as: “Any line of investigation [a process] which recognizes these two facts [the phenomena of *transference* and *resistance*] and takes them as the starting point of its work has a right to call itself psycho-analysis” (p. 16).

Ogden (1999) has expanded this process definition of analysis as follows:

Perhaps psychoanalysis might be viewed as involving a recognition not only of transference and resistance, but also a recognition of the nature of the intersubjective field within which transference and resistance are generated ...[s]pecifically the creation of a third subject of analysis through which the phenomena of transference and resistance are given symbolic meaning on the analytic stage. (p. 111)

Bion put the analyst’s side of this focus on process in a very tight way when he argued that the analyst must focus neither on what has happened in the past nor on what might happen in the future but, instead, observe what is happening at the very moment that it happens in the session. Bion believed that the analyst would thereby intuit the psychological reality with which s/he needs to be at one. With respect to narrative Bion (1967/1988) said that “[w]hat is ‘known’ about the patient is of no further consequence: it is either false or irrelevant” and went on to underline this by saying that “[t]he only

point of importance in any session is the unknown” (p. 17).

What then practically does analysis comprise, at least from the psycho-analytic perspective? Classically this starts with what Freud (1913/2001) referred to as “the fundamental rule of psycho-analytic technique” (pp. 134-135), that is, for the analysand to say whatever comes to mind.

After a time the flow of this “saying” becomes obstructed by transference and resistance. Thus it proves impossible for the analysand to adhere strictly to the fundamental rule as there are various obstructions to it, such as: pauses, forgetting, and other slips or lapses (resistance), as well as emotional reactions to the analyst (transference) (Freud, 1904/2001; Lacan, 1973/1977). (Even transference may be seen to disclose the unconscious in the gap between an object of phantasy and an object of reality. It is a seminal insight of Freud’s that the prospect of filling the gap, of making the unconscious conscious generates terrible psychological discomfort be it dread, shame, anxiety, guilt, or some other unbearable emotion.)

At the point of obstruction the analyst may interpret (or preferably help the analysand interpret) the motives for that resistance, along with other elements of the object relationships, thus facilitating the analysand’s encounter with the unconscious. Thus, psycho-analysis becomes the facilitation of an encounter with the unconscious by a process of loosening (analysing, i.e. untying) the grip of psychological discomfort — e.g. anxiety, shame, guilt etc. Lest this sound too intrapsychic, it needs to be remembered that it is the interpersonal (the intersubjective analytic third) which provides the context, and it is through relationship that the unconscious Other is encountered.

These pauses, forgetting, slips, and transference reactions comprise some of the ways to give form to the contents of the unconscious. However, such manifestation of the unconscious means more than presenting as an absence or lack. Whilst Freud, to some extent at least, described the manifestation of the unconscious as a lack, Jung (except in his studies of the Word Association Experiment which also highlighted “lack”) tended to describe the unconscious as a presence. In fact he described his own process of self-analysis as a “confrontation with the unconscious” (a chapter name in Jung’s (1963/1983) book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*). Jung’s personal experience of the unconscious was present and manifested in images of dream and vision and in the active imagination process of writing and painting (Jung, 2009). Jung understood, however, that the unconscious was quite other to the conscious attitude, and that, in the encounter between consciousness and the unconscious, something unknown played a role. In short, he felt that the presence of the unconscious is ultimately not something which can be simply *translated* into a formulation of content. Rather the *process* of the encounter with the unconscious leads to a transformation of both the ego attitude and some unconscious material. He called this transforming function “the *transcendent function*” (Jung, 1916/1969, pp. 67-91) its functioning actualisation is a symbol which brings about transformation. In Jung’s thinking the ego resists the encounter with the unconscious because it threatens a change that brings discomfort to the ego. So, too, in Jungian thinking, analysis becomes the facilitation of an encounter with the unconscious by a process of permitting the emergence of unconscious material and, thereby, helping loosen the grip of psychological discomfort.

From the starting points of both Freud and Jung I derive a definition that analysis is a facilitated process of consciousness encountering the unconscious. Whilst this process may rest on a narrative, it is not a narrative, and whilst it may be draw on formulation, it is not formulation.

Somewhat distinct from this it is practically natural for a therapist to translate the client's narrative into formulation. There is also a satisfaction, even a containment, for both client and therapist, to share such formulations. The practice of the client providing a narrative and either or both client and therapist making a formulation, an understanding, seems to have its uses.

However, my own experience is that when narrative and formulation are dominant the process tends not to be one I recognise as analysis. It lacks what I can only describe as the *ambience* of analysis. I have also noticed that these formulations tend to be repetitive: the client brings a new narrative and continually interprets it in terms of the established formulation.

Furthermore, practically, narrative followed by formulation does not make the unconscious available to consciousness. In fact, the narrative may well mix with the resistance, and so obscure the fragments of the unconscious that present themselves. The formulation may also take on a function congruent with the client's psychodynamics. (Typically this is a function of internal judgment, where the therapist becomes identified with the client's punitive super ego. More specifically, when the formulations contains a self-critical (contra self-reflective) element, e.g. that they attribute the client's functioning to narcissistic, aggressive or self-sabotaging behaviour, then a collusion or conspiracy occurs between the analyst and the client's super ego. In this case, self-reflection is surrendered to gratifying self-criticism.)

Overall therefore I am proposing that analysis is practically formed when the equilibrium point (of the shifting figure and ground of the two process articulated) moves more from the process of narrative/formulation (on the one side) to the process of facilitated manifestation of/encounter with the unconscious (on the other).

Conclusion

I believe that, phenomenologically and theoretically, analysis, a process of untying the knots of the mind, is a professionally-facilitated encounter with "the unconscious". The unconscious is manifested in many different ways: by words, images, the body, and relationship (transference), each of which provides an opportunity for such encounter. By contrast, much of what has come to be practised as psychoanalytic therapy appears to me to substitute the client's narrative for the manifestation of the unconscious and to substitute formulation for encounter with it. In short, practically these processes shift back and forth in the manner of figure and ground and I believe that analysis occurs when there is an equilibrium point between them. This point needs to shift more towards facilitating the manifestation of, and encounter with, the unconscious than towards narrative and formulation to establish the activity as analytic.

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