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# The Braided River of the Soul

Grant Gillett

## Abstract

This paper pursues the fluidity of the psyche and relationships in the metaphor of a river rather than that of the ebb and flow of tides. In particular its focus is on the braided rivers which are a feature of the South Island landscape. A braided river has the characteristic of forming and reforming its channels as a shifting and reciprocal function between the water flow and the shingles of the river bed. The braided river can be travelled on by a jet-boat but only reveals its overall pattern from an elevated viewpoint; at ground level the ride is unpredictable and contains many unexpected twists and turns causing alarm or exhilaration largely depending on the company in which one is taking the journey. The metaphor is highly evocative for psychology and reminiscent of the more or less settled but somewhat modifiable channels or inscriptions on the psyche that some of the major theoreticians of the psyche have discussed.

I was inspired in my approach to this paper by a remark made by Ludwig Wittgenstein:

The river bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movements of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other (1969:97).

Wittgenstein's remark concerns thought and knowledge and our conception of the truth which, in traditional epistemology, tends to be regarded as something fixed and eternal to which human knowledge with its fallibility and contingencies must strive to approximate. The argument of *On Certainty* was that, in reality, human knowledge is to some extent fluid, a production of the human community based on the combined effects of our biology, our interactions with each other, and our engagement with the world in which we live. I will argue that the human psyche is very much the same, a joint production negotiated between a human being, the society and relationships in which the person is formed, and the world around us.

I will argue for three fairly simple points each of which is compatible with scientific understandings of human psychology and which concerns the whole idea of the dynamic unconscious at a point where philosophical analysis has genuine relevance.

*First:* Freud was a neurologist before he was a psychotherapist and there is an ongoing debate about whether whatever lies beneath consciousness should be thought about in neurological or psychological terms (Searle:1994; Gillett:1999; Dennett:1991). I believe that a failure to realise the true nature of the system that mind emerges from led Freud to misinterpret the neurological nature of the unconscious.

*Second:* Language does not merely express the contents of the mind but has a formative role in the production of mind. This insight is becoming widely accepted in cognitive psychology but for the present purposes is best approached in the context of psychotherapy through the work of Jacques Lacan.

*Third:* Lacan's debt to existentialism and post-structuralism is evident in his work and tends to undercut a deterministic thesis about the unconscious and human behaviour in a way that provides a viable rationale for psychotherapy.

If I can make out a case for these three points then I will take myself to have done a worthwhile philosophical job in the present context of counselling psychology and psychotherapy.

### **Language and the mind**

If we begin with the thesis that a human being is an adapted system in which the nervous system has given rise to what we can usefully call a psyche, then we can get straight into the current argument. Human beings have mastered an evolutionary trick that is radical in its simplicity and pervasive in its effects. They have developed an adaptation in which the experiences of some can form part of the learning of all through communication and interpersonal transactions. Language is central in this adaptation and forms a series of signs which can be used to mark moments and features of significance in the shared life of a human group. When the interpersonal activity surrounding language can be used to inscribe a nervous system that has relegated much of its processing to assemblies that take shape during extra-uterine rather than intra-uterine life then the potential exists for extensive intergenerational learning which literally inscribes on the brain the folk-ways and whanau-ways of those who care for and nurture the young human being concerned.

The relevant learning integrates a child into the human group that has sussed out environmental conditions around here. Given that no human child can survive without nurture, membership of that group is also the first priority for the developing child. Thus there is a dual reason why the attitudes of members of its primary social group are of vital importance for a human being:

- a. Those people are the source of nurture and the key to biological survival; and
- b. Their acceptance and approval is the principal means of discerning good changes in oneself and their disapproval the opposite.

The first of these reasons for valuing relationships with others means that animal things like warmth, protection, and nourishment are closely linked to the presence of one's human companions on one's journey through the world. The second reason provides the key to the direction that one's life path will take in that its effect is to inculcate in one a fundamental distinction between what is 'good' around here and what is 'bad'. Freud discusses the factors inherited from one's parents and culture as belonging to the super-ego and tends to think of them in moralistic terms but one could equally say that the inscriptions resulting from the effects of one's parents on the psyche provide a framework of value and groundedness for one's self as a relational being.

When we think of Freud's super-ego we are inclined to invoke repressive imagery suggesting that thoughts and attitudes are being closeted or pushed under the surface of the mind whereas contemporary work on language emphasizes production. Production is a concept that expresses the fact that the mind or subjectivity of the individual responds to things that happen in ways that are understandable if we follow Freud's emphasis on association. In fact the associations of words are several and indicated by Luria's remark that a word is not an image of an object but a 'complex multidirectional matrix of different cues and connections' (acoustic, morphological, lexical and semantic) and we know that in different states of excitation in the brain different of these connections may be predominant (1973:306). The same thought is evident when, according to Freud, the word is conceptualized as a means by which the current experience is linked to 'mnemic residues' evoked by association based on its acoustic form as a sign in a natural language. This, I think, is a central insight in charting the braided river that is the psyche.

Two further ingredients need to be added to this rich brew of ideas.

First, a Freudian ingredient: the idea of the primary process whereby there is a fluid and shifting set of associative connections between different elements in the psyche so that emotional accompaniments of experiences and the meanings attached to words can shift and slide between different foci of psychic activity. If this sounds messy and vague it is meant to and it is also more sensitive to incidental resemblances and features of word use than can be revealed by any principled or rational semantic or psychological analysis.

Second, a socio-cultural ingredient: Foucault talks of inscriptions on the surface of the body as being the effect of immersion in discourse in which subjectivities are exposed to the speech, attitudes, and actions of others. In fact the deconstructive approach to psychology and the historicism evident in Foucault's work allows us to explore the idea of the psychically real, the culturally real, and the objectively real in a way that fully exploits the role of language in psychoanalytic and post-psychoanalytic thinking.

### **Language and the unconscious**

The role of language in the psyche, while of great interest to Freud, has been thrust into the limelight in the philosophy of psychoanalysis by Jacques Lacan. He argues that the human unconscious is a field in which language plays a pervasive and powerful role. For Lacan, the unconscious comprises a network of signifiers and is structured like a language (1981:45). The implications of such a view for the understanding of the human psyche are profound and throw an interesting light on psychic reality and psychotherapy. 'The word is the bearer of the residue of imperatives and evocations, its role is not primarily descriptive' (Lacan:1977:86).

Lacan rejects the somewhat simplistic claim (also rejected by Luria) that words function merely as arbitrary signs of the presence of this or that object or feature of the environment (1977:83). He encourages us to think of the network of signification in the unconscious as bearing a residue of imperative and evocative remarks directed at the individual subject by others. As such, words inevitably resonate with expectations and values psychically attached to the self and the values attached to the self by the reactions of others (1977:86). If the unconscious is primarily a domain whose contents are prone to move us rather than inform us, then we should not look there for an objective map of the world but for a conative map of the ways in which the world and those around us have evoked reactions and responses in us. This recalls Freud's 'mnemic

residues' but gives the relevant effects a more powerful role in shaping the individual in that words do not merely stand for descriptions of states of affairs but rather coalesce the active resonances of past situations so that 'What we teach the subject to recognise as his unconscious is his history' (1977:52). Significantly for a socialized creature such as a human being this is a history or 'herstory' of dealings with others.

*A word has a signification* which, for Lacan and the structuralist school he draws on, is a matter of the selective resonance with certain conditions historically and interpersonally related to its use. The signifier, as Lacan sees it, is part of 'the world of meaning of a particular language in which the world of things will come to be arranged' (1977:65). Language comprises the signs we use to mark the way that the world is ordered for us by our culture. The units of language are words and every word is a combination of signifier and signified. Signification results from a selection of some set of privileged associations linked first to structural relationships between different elements in a language, secondly to selected conditions in the world, and thirdly to a cumulative history of interpersonal transactions. What is more these links are holistically interconnected with each other.

*A word has an acoustic shape as signifier.* The acoustic shape of the word resonates (to a greater or lesser extent) with acoustically related words (as in alliteration, assonance, or homonymy). Thus the unconscious, released from the constraints of rational connectivity might, at times, follow the lead of the signifier merely considered as an acoustic event registered by brain cell assemblies. One could plausibly claim that the secret of poetry is its ability to play harmonics on the strings of this resonant harp of acoustic similarities simultaneously with the harmonics of signification.

*The word evokes the tuche and l'autre.* The world touches me at certain points. This encounter is the *tuche* and it cannot be fully digested by the signifier. Here we can usefully recall Sartre's concept of 'Nausea' which indicates the fact that the world as signified is a selection from the world as it impinges on me. The signifier is selective in that it is related to certain (after Frege) 'canonical' conditions of warranted use and therefore does not capture (but may be subliminally associated with) the totality of any situation in which it is used. However the total situation causally impacts upon the subject. Thus there is a causal effect on any subject not exhausted by the words that are used to recall or reconstruct the experience and to give it narrative form. The causal traces of this 'touch' resonate within the psyche of the subject whenever the word is used

to the extent that they have been registered at the time that the subject's response to the signifier is being elaborated.

An example helps to make the point. Let us say that the signifier 'mother' for a given subject engenders severe psychic conflicts which result in self-hating or condemnation and tend to move the subject concerned to exhibit self-harm behaviours. We might link the phenomenon of self-harm in that person to the fact that there has been a mix of associations in which the legitimate signification associated with 'mother' - to do with nurture, support, unconditional acceptance, warmth and so on - is criss-crossed and combined in the life of the subject concerned with some more destructive resonances which have accumulated in the soul of the person concerned. These may be, as Freud notes, produced by fantasy rather than real cruelty by the mother but the important thing is that they causally affect the reactions of the subject to the signifier 'mother' and undermine the role of that signifier in grounding many of the emotional responses of the person concerned. In this way we might attempt to reinstate the Freudian thesis that the psychic force of an Idea in the unconscious may not be paralleled by and may even contradict the meaning of the signifier associated with it. If this interpretation of Lacan's *l'autre* holds any value, then the two aspects of content associated with a signifier might only be connected through events in the psychic history of the subject and might tend to operate on the psyche with opposite conative forces. The relevant psychic mismatch can, as is obvious, only occur in a creature who creates meaning out of encounters with the world by using a cultural resource with certain legitimated associations but under diverse influences which reflect associations in the individual life-story or life events of that subjective creature.

The disparity between the content of signification and the causal effect on the subject is, I believe, what Lacan is getting at in discussing the *objet petit à* which implicates both subject and object in a way that 'remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier'. The *objet petit à* is a way of indicating the function of those objects the child uses to try and understand the complex position of others *vis à vis* themselves by symbolising those others in terms of some object that can be manipulated in games of infancy. These games in which something is lost and then returned, or even thrown away so that it can be returned, localise a set of (perhaps inchoate) thoughts expressing the relation between the child and some significant person (or aspect of the child's life) in a manipulable object which can stand for that subject-object complex. To understand the loss and return and to have a concrete framework to attach the more elusive ideas to is to make digestible or comprehensible those self-affecting things that tend to happen in

an indigestible, complex, and often incomprehensible world where my growing discursive and narrative abilities need many aids to cope with what they have to 'swallow'. Sartre talks about Nausea as the subjective result of the indigestibility of the immanent or meaningless reality that impinges on us and his term resonates closely with Lacan's phrase 'stuck in the gullet of the signifier'. This implies, in the light of the selectivity of signification, that the subject accumulates an unconscious domain (comprising the residues of his history) which has a psychic reality quite other than that produced from within the network of signifiers but resonating with the network at every point of signification.

*The word locks me into* Languge. The last point we will touch on is the relation between the psyche and the world of Language. *Languge* (or Language with a big L) is the language spoken and governed by the rules of the linguistic community of which I am part. I am inducted into the system that structures my Language but it is more immense and all encompassing than my psyche can ever be. I am locked into *Languge* as one operated on by language through speech and not merely as one who can use words (or their cognitive correlates) to form an objective picture of the world. It is in the world as a domain of Language that I act and am impelled to act. It is in this big 'objective' world that I find myself, driven, drawn, and subject to certain demands just as a river is subject to elemental forces which are part of the same world of nature but not part of the internal reality of the river.

### **Signification and the real**

We live in a milieu of signification and interpersonal relationships. Our mind and the microprocessing structure of the brain are both formed as these things come together with their intersection played out against the backdrop of reality and Language. All four elements – signification, the individual subjectivity, Language (big L), and the actual world (or 'reality') are required to appreciate the braided rivers of the soul. We are accustomed to recognising psychic reality and external reality but this dichotomy which justifies an uncritical attitude to material is based in a lingering Cartesian picture in which the mind and the world are seen as distinct and separable from each other. The more contemporary view that mind and world are inextricably linked as part of the same reality offers us a slightly different picture.

On that view we must take seriously the fact that the human being has a psychic world jointly dependent on goings on in the brain, the impact of the

actual world and the social and interpersonal milieu surrounding him or her. If Freud and most contemporary cognitive scientists are right, then we are each equipped with a neural network exquisitely sensitive to environmental influences in the light of multiple interacting constraints from the four sources I have listed. Signification reflects both the meaning of signs as they are generally and legitimately used in the public world but also the individual associations with those signs as they have appeared in the life history of the individual. The individual who encounters a situation in the world around him therefore assimilates that experience to something familiar from his own past and to the ways in which an experience of that kind would be talked about in his socio-cultural group even though the individual impact of that situation may be quite singular to him as a subject. Thus, if I see my father coming and, initially, only see him as a small thin man, I might think 'Who is this small thin man who looks burdened by the cares of the world?' and then with a start realise that it is my father I am seeing. Now what is real in this experience? Is it meeting my father with all the conflicting personal and stereotypical connotations associated with him or is it a small thin man looking somewhat overburdened? And when I think of my father do I think of him as the world does or do I think of him as I do? The impasse is revealed at the end of *Road to Perdition* when the narrator is asked whether his father, the Mafia hit man, was a good man or the bad man that he was often portrayed to be. He can only say 'I tell them "He was my father".' Psychic effects, the categorizing influence of language, the vaguely apprehended responses of others to my father as a person, and the resonances with my own individual relationship with him over the years, are all going to create a complex reality, some elements of which are quite inarticulate for me. Therefore the situation is not so clearcut as to fall neatly into an intrapsychic package and an objective package. However in Freudian terms this is conceptualized as a bottom-up determination of conscious thought and reasons for action which is under intrapsychic influence largely at the behest of unconscious forces. The result is an implicit reinforcement of the Cartesian view that the mind has its own reality somewhat independent of the ego-based responses to the world that conform to the reality principle. The mind/brain, on this neo-Cartesian materialistic picture, is seen as a domain of self-contained forces in tenuous contact with reality through the ego structures which produce consciousness. But the mind-world interaction shaped by life story that emerges from the current orientation disturbs this picture.

Lacan's reformulation of key aspects of the Freudian orientation makes room for a certain existential openness in addition to the biological facticity (or givenness) which Freud assumed prevailed in the human neural system and linked us



quite closely to the psycho-biological forces governing the lives of animals. The Lacanian subject participates in discourse and the world as responded to by him- or her-self contributes to the meanings of signifiers as they appear in her autobiography. This thesis implies that the influences operating in the human brain are not all driven from bottom-up such that more primitive biological tendencies drive the 'upper' reaches of conscious and interpersonal experience and response. The current view is that forces arising at a conscious, self-narrative, and interpersonal level may cause shifts in more deeply ingrained levels of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

Notice that the view that I am suggesting is not naively or romantically existential and does not imply that one can change oneself at will (or by a stroke of insight) even though it does imply that conscious self-knowledge and intentions can be more powerful than traditional psychoanalysis allowed. Any realistic view informed by clinical reality must acknowledge that there is an important role in conscious experience for emotional and relational factors which have to do with the his/herstory of a person and that person's relation to a primary nurturing socio-cultural group. Just as these influences show up in accents and dialects, so they show up in basic emotional, attitudinal and behavioural tendencies learned or imbibed (as it were) with our mothers' milk. To address these tendencies where they are dysfunctional is therefore a matter of mobilising the kind of relational and emotive engagements with the subjectivity before us in ways which are going to affect that subjectivity as deeply as he or she was affected when the initial inscriptions in the psyche were made. The role of transference is obvious in such a conceptualization and fundamental in the idea of psychotherapy even where it is not recognised.

### **Changing the story and working with the flow**

Freud's bottom up theory of the mind/brain is based on the kind of neurophysiological reductionism that many proponents of brain science and biological psychiatry openly espouse. But the metaphor of braided rivers alerts us to the fact that the psyche is fluid, perhaps flowing in lines which are more or less configured by some very basic (hard) channels, but affected by more transient alignments of more mobile elements in the river bed (shingle and sand or clay), and ultimately also dependent to some extent on the currents and eddies of the water comprising the river itself.

In a similar way we can see some more or less rock-hard effects of biology and an historically extended culture on any individual. Some of the resulting effects

are more transient and shifting than others, either because of cultural change or bodily changes within the individual, and yet other effects are almost evanescent and may be as fluid as the moments of consciousness. These all holistically interact within a lived life story so that a young person who is disgruntled and at odds with their context, feeling unloved, unattached, uncommitted and without roots to grow from may find themselves unable to fashion a liveable story to dwell in and be sustained by. But a shift in cultural atmosphere, in the individual's immediate social group, perhaps even triggered by a single valuable relationship or discovery (in a book or classroom) or more likely by both acting together, or the realisation that some medication is needed, may transform that individual's experience in unexpected ways.

This kind of possibility is exactly what we would expect of the holism that pervades our being as human souls. Our brain is a multilayered feed-forward and feed-back system and we are attuned not only to a stable environment in which we benefit from certain adaptations but also to a stabilizing group who transform the environment to make it human friendly in expanding and ever-changing ways. We are formed as a result of this dynamic interaction and our psyche is a shorthand way of gesturing at the fact that our form uses these changes to construct cognitive, behavioural, and emotional repertoires by means of which we relate to others.

The result is a lived narrative comprising moments of experience and relationship. I have sought to picture it by using the metaphor, used by Wittgenstein in a related but different psychological connection, of the river, the riverbed and the currents and eddies of the river's flow. The metaphor of the braided river recalls the shifting flow of excitation patterns in the human neural network which reflect the associations that have been formed in a life of experience and relationships. It also reflects the play of language with its layers of meaning and its intrinsic aesthetic qualities. Lastly it allows us to see that life does not run in fixed grooves but that the very flow of psychic life in part forms the channels in which our lives run. The soul with its variously accessible, inaccessible, malleable, intransigent, fascinating and gloriously infuriating streams is a named, quasi-stable, and ever changing reality in which the world and subjectivity interpenetrate and in so doing draw others into the complex dance or tapestry of one's life with diverse and sometimes unpredictable consequences.

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