How should we understand the psychoanalytic unconscious?[[1]](#footnote-1)

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Abstract

I review the debate between ‘realist’ and ‘constructivist’ understandings of the psychoanalytic unconscious. To oversimplify, realists hold that unconscious mental states exist in the analysand’s mind fully formed and with determinate intentional content, independent of consciousness, and these are discovered in analysis. Constructivists (including relationalists and intersubjectivists) hold that the unconscious meaning of clinical material does not exist ‘pre-organised’ in the analysand’s mind, but is constructed, not discovered, through the analytic relationship. I argue that the debate is multiply confused. For example, different meanings of ‘psychoanalysis’ and ‘constructivism’ are at play, and a number of central arguments rest on misunderstandings of complex philosophical positions concerning the status of science and the nature of human knowledge. Once these confusions are removed, an understanding of the psychoanalytic unconscious that retains the strengths of both realism and constructivism presents itself.

Key words: unconscious, realism, constructivism, relationalism, science, hermeneutics, Stephen Mitchell

Introduction: psychoanalysis and theory

Psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious have changed greatly since Freud. I shall review a debate that has taken place over the last 40 years, predominantly in the USA, between two families of theories I shall term ‘realist’ and ‘constructivist’. An oversimple first characterisation of the two positions is this: Realists hold that unconscious mental states exist fully formed and with determinate intentional content, independent of consciousness, and are part of the analysand’s mind, playing a determinate role in their thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and this is what is discovered in analysis. By contrast, constructivists – by which I mean to include not only those who self-identify as ‘constructivists’, but also many relationalists and intersubjectivists – claim that the unconscious meaning of clinical material is constructed, not discovered, and this is of central importance to understanding psychoanalytic knowledge and the nature of the unconscious. They hold that not only are psychological structures *built* from patterns of interpersonal interaction (ontology), individuals can only be *understood* within an ‘interactional field’ (epistemology). It is only through interacting that people can come to understand one another (in analysis as elsewhere), and to this interaction, both bring their individual subjectivity. And so, says Stephen Mitchell (1998: 18), one of the originators of relationalism, we must reject the claims of classical Freudian practice ‘that the central dynamics relevant to the analytic process are pre-organised in the patient’s mind and that the analyst is in a privileged position to gain access to them’.

I shall argue that the debate is multiply confused, with detractors on both sides misunderstanding not only the claims and arguments of their opponents, but their own positions and commitments as well. Once we untangle the many threads of thought that have fed into the debate, this becomes less surprising. Part of my purpose is to explore the extent to which constructivism and realism may be compatible once the debate is made clearer.

One element of the debate – more often implicit than explicit – has concerned just what is meant by ‘psychoanalysis’. As most commonly understood, psychoanalysis is a form of psychotherapy, the relationship between analyst and analysand in the clinical setting. We should grant that the heart of psychoanalysis is the clinical practice, including the observations, interpretations and inferences about one individual’s psychological experience within the unique relationship between this analysand and this analyst. But it is a mistake to restrict the meaning of ‘psychoanalysis’ to this practice. Psychoanalysis is equally a *theory* about the nature, development and functioning of the human mind, especially in relation to motives (see also Eagle, this volume). There are a number of features of this theory, particularly concerning the role and nature of unconscious mental states and processes, that makes it recognizably distinct and a competitor with other psychological theories deriving, for instance, from cognitive psychology or neuroscience. As we shall see, some of the confusion in the debate has derived from not clarifying whether claims being advanced concern the therapeutic practice, the psychological theory, or both.

To complicate matters further, the theoretical functioning of psychoanalysis takes place at many levels, or again in many contexts, and these are also not always clearly differentiated in the debate:

1. At the clinical level, we may observe that psychoanalysts generalise over individual cases to make more general claims about the nature and function of particular psychological processes or structures manifest in clinical interaction, such as the meaningfulness of dreams, the occurrence of psychological defence, or the phenomenon of transference. We can call this ‘low-level’ or **‘experience-near’ theorising**. Such claims are so central to psychoanalysis they are very often not recognised as forming part of an explanatory psychological theory, yet they are taken to characterise human psychology universally (or at least widely within a culture), and so should be distinguished from claims made about individual experience and functioning.
2. Psychoanalysts frequently state or argue for claims about more abstract processes or structures, often without (apparently) inferring them from clinical data, although clinical data are frequently presented as supporting or illustrating such claims. Call this ‘high-level’ or **‘abstract’ theorising**. One example would be Freud’s (1923) theory of the superego or again general theories of the origin, structure and influence of object relations, such as we find in Fairbairn (1952) or Kohut (1971).
3. They also range into more speculative discussion about human psychology, and in some cases, take up or begin from philosophical arguments and theories, e.g. Fromm (1979), Stern (1997), or Stolorow & Atwood (2016). Call this **‘applied philosophising’**. We will see that a good part of the debate over how to understand the unconscious has been informed by such theorising.
4. On other occasions, for any of 1-3 above, psychoanalysts appeal to theories or empirical findings in other disciplines, from other branches of psychology to anthropology and linguistics to biology, from Freud’s (1895) ‘economic’ theory to Mitchell’s (1988) account of object relations. Call this **‘interdisciplinary’ theorising** at the relevant level.
5. Finally, psychoanalysts apply psychoanalytic theory to wider issues, e.g. the nature of social and cultural practices, religion, group psychology, etc. Call this **‘social’ theorising**.

In what follows, I shall occasionally refer back to these distinctions to diagnose a confusion or line of thought. But let us get on. What is the debate about, and how did it begin?

The critique of Freud

In the debate, Freud is presented as holding a strongly realist position on the unconscious. Whether Freud was a realist in the sense described above is not my concern here. But we can note that, at different points in his career, Freud claims that hypnosis recovers memories; that the meaning(s) of a dream lie(s) in specific, determinate latent thoughts and wishes; that psychoanalytic interpretation identifies specific defences that have distorted intentional content in specific ways (e.g. through reversal, projection, etc.); that interpretation uncovers repressed wishes, which exist as such prior to lifting the repression; and so on. Importantly, these mental states are representations with determinate intentional content, to be understood in their nature and ontology along the lines of conscious mental states, though allowing for the differences imposed by primary process in the system *Ucs*. Of course, Freud also holds that there is great complexity in the unconscious, and so discovering exactly which unconscious mental states are expressed in a dream or operating in a defence can be very challenging, but this is a result of myriad associations and primary process substitutions, rather than the result of any indeterminacy in the unconscious mental states themselves.

Freud is understood, then, as thinking of the unconscious as ‘a storehouse of fully formed mental contents that, when uncovered, appear in consciousness, unchanged in their original form’ (Eagle 2011: 112). But this model, Eagle continues, ‘has been rejected in much of the contemporary psychoanalytic, cognitive psychology, and philosophical literature’. This rejection – at least within psychoanalysis – went hand-in-hand with a broader critique of Freud’s metapsychology, and this broader critique was itself part of a reconsideration of whether psychoanalysis could properly be considered a science, and this question was in turn situated within yet broader philosophical concerns about the nature of human knowledge as such.

One result of this breadth and complexity in the debate has been that, in a great many of the most influential contributions over how to think of the unconscious, these issues have not been adequately separated. And a result of this, I believe, has been the imposition of an unhelpful dualistic, either-or framework – one *either* thinks

1) that psychoanalysis is and aspires to be a science (which is *the* paradigm of human epistemic achievement), *and*

2) that metapsychology (of some kind) is central to this, *and*

3) that realism about unconscious mental states is correct

*or* one thinks

1') that psychoanalysis is not a science (which, in any case, is at best one form of knowing among others), *and*

2') that metapsychology has little place, *and*

3') that realism about the unconscious is false.

But why accept the alignment of these theoretical commitments? Very few writers have recognised even the possibility of holding, say, that psychoanalysis is some kind of science (which is one form of knowledge among others) but realism about the unconscious is false, or again that realism is true, but Freud’s metapsychological and scientific aspirations were misplaced, or any of a number of other possible combinations. One purpose of this chapter is to free us from the straitjacket of thought that has been voluntarily but unwittingly donned by many contributors to the debate.

The rejection of Freud’s model of the unconscious gained force and momentum in the 1960s, through critiques both internal and external to psychoanalysis. Such critique had always been around, but additional impetus – certainly in the USA – was sparked by a symposium arranged by Sydney Hook in 1958 in New York, at which Hook and Ernest Nagel, among others, presented forceful criticisms of psychoanalysis as science which Heinz Hartmann’s reply did little to quash (see Hook 1959). Critics outside psychoanalysis engaged with issues of the truth of its claims in general and the reliability of its method, both in generating and in drawing inferences from the clinical data. At the same time, the internal critique questioned both the validity and the usefulness of Freud’s metapsychology and his drive theory in particular.

It was, in part, the theory of drives that supported Freud’s claims of realism. Freud had argued that biologically-based drives provide the most fundamental sources of psychological motivation. Each drive introduces energy into the psychological system that presses for action. It generates motivation that aims at the satisfaction of the drive, attaching to an object that can supply this, which helps determine the intentional content of the corresponding mental state. The development of the drives in childhood, in particular of the multifaceted libido, he argued, contributes materially to the development of the subject’s mind and mental health or psychopathology.

This theory, together with a number of implications that Freud drew concerning clinical practice and the interpretation of clinical material, had drawn fire ever since its formulation and development around the turn of the 20th century. It was hotly disputed not only by the scientific community, but also by a number of Freud’s early collaborators and supporters, including Adler, Jung, Stekel, Forel, and Bleuler (see Borch-Jacobsen & Shamdasani 2012, Ch. 1). It was disputed by Fairbairn and a number of later ‘Independents’ in the UK and by neo-Freudians (Sullivan, Horney, Fromm) in the USA in the 1930s and 40s. However, these internal critics had offered rival accounts of the structure and development of the mind. One novel response to the Hook symposium, not only by psychoanalysts but also by sympathetically minded philosophers, such as Ricoeur (1970) and Habermas (1972), was to question of the truth and usefulness of *any* such theory within psychology.

Under pressure from these criticisms, by 1976, the first steps toward restricting psychoanalysis to clinical phenomena had been taken (Klein 1976; Rubinstein 1976; Schafer 1976; Holt 1976). It was argued that the metapsychology and associated etiological claims, e.g. the theory of libido and its development or of the superego and its origin in Oedipal conflict, should be jettisoned, as these parts of psychoanalytic theory are most difficult to derive from the clinical data and are tangential to the therapeutic relationship. From this point onwards, the scope of the term ‘psychoanalysis’ within the debate became unclear – was the writer concerning themselves with just the clinical relationship and the understanding of unique individuals, or a general theory of psychological functioning, and if the latter, was that theory experience-near or abstract?

Rejecting metapsychological and etiological claims was widely thought to have implications for thinking that psychoanalysis is a science. If psychoanalysis were to be a natural science, it would be so in virtue of something like Freud’s economic and drive theories, for it is here that psychoanalytic theory touches most closely upon the established natural sciences of biology and neurology (see also Hopkins, this volume). Hence, a rejection of the metapsychology was also widely understood as a rejection of the idea of psychoanalysis as a science in favour of an alternative model of psychoanalytic knowledge. Making this move, it was thought, means that the critique of psychoanalysis as unscientific now misses its mark (Ricoeur 1970). For psychoanalysis to fail to meet the evidential standards of (natural) science is no failing at all if psychoanalysis is not, and does not aspire to be, a science.

The alternative that was taken up came, in the first instance, from ‘hermeneutics’ - the interpretative understanding of meaning. For instance, according to Habermas (1972), psychoanalytic psychotherapy is a process of (assisted) self-reflection, self-interpretation and self-formation. This process can be transformative by opening up new ways of understanding ourselves and the meanings of our behaviour, providing insights into previously unrecognized motives. The theoretical framework of psychoanalysis – insofar as it is retained at all – must therefore be an interpretation of this process in general terms. Many in the debate assimilated ‘science’ to ‘natural science’, and assumed that science deals in objective causal processes. Hence psychoanalysis is not science, as it deals in meanings, not causes, and these meanings are subjective, not objective.

By the 1980s, this line of thought raised questions about the ‘truth’ of interpretations and the corresponding ontology of the mind (Spence 1982, Mitchell 1988). Arguments appeared claiming that the study of subjectivity – which psychoanalysis undoubtedly is – could only be a subjective study. But it is unfortunate that such associations were made so quickly and widely, as claiming that psychoanalysis is a hermeneutic discipline does not require one to accept that it is not a science. To arrive at this conclusion, one must first argue that meanings cannot be studied using a scientific method, and to defend that claim, one must have some idea both of the nature of meanings and the range of methods that count as ‘scientific’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The analytic relationship

Central to the development of the debate in the 1980s and ’90s was a revised understanding of the relationship between analyst and analysand. Freud’s scientific understanding of psychoanalysis was mirrored, it was claimed, in the tenets and practices of classical Freudian analysis (e.g. Mitchell 1998). The analyst is akin to the scientific psychologist, in that psychoanalysis seeks to discover ‘the truth’ about the analysand’s unconscious mind, and the same truth – being part of the individual analysand’s mind – ought to emerge irrespective of the particular identity of the analyst. The analyst retains ‘neutrality’, in part so as not to influence the clinical data produced by the analysand in ways that are tantamount to suggestion. The discovery of the analysand’s unconscious states, in the right conditions – ‘insight’ – will materially contribute to the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis.

All this came under close scrutiny, and a new recognition arose of the importance and contribution of the individual subjectivity of the analyst to the analytic relationship (Hoffman 1983, Gill 1983, 1984). It became widely accepted that the analyst is not a ‘blank screen’ onto which the analysand projects in the transference, as Freud thought. But Gill and Hoffman went further to argue for a new understanding of transference, a ‘social conception’ of transference. First, transference is, in part, a response by the analysand to the actual analyst, not only the projected one. Second, ‘interpersonal reality’ has different interpretations that may be valid – it can no longer be assumed that the analysand’s perspective on the analytic relationship is distorted by transference while the successfully analysed analyst’s perspective is not (in theory at least). There can be no simple division of interpersonal experience into veridical (how things really are) and distorted. The analyst has biases and a subjective history that influence his or her experience of the analytic relationship and the resulting interpretations are unavoidably ‘subjective’, in the sense of being a reflection of the subjectivity of the analyst. And so, third, objective neutrality is impossible and, it was argued, clinically unhelpful.

This new conceptualisation of the analytic relationship led simultaneously in two directions – towards both a new epistemology and a new ontology of the unconscious. Unfortunately, as we will see, the issues of epistemology and ontology weren’t always kept clear. Nor was the scope of ‘the unconscious’ that was being reconceptualised, e.g. was the debate about unconscious experience in the clinical setting, or did it extend to include particular historically-formed behavioural dispositions and other psychological ‘structures’ of particular analysands identified in the clinical setting, or did it extend still further to include such dispositions and structures as discussed in general and abstract theorising?

We will turn to these developments since the 1990s in just a moment, but to make sense of them, we must first note that the developments were mediated by another theoretical ‘innovation’. Having re-discovered countertransference, American analysts re-discovered object relations (from the perspective of many British psychoanalysts, for whom such claims were already entrenched by the 1950s, this was all at least 30 years behind, but better late than never). One of the leading thinkers in this development, whose work shall form the primary focus of our discussion, was Stephen Mitchell, who stated (1988: 17) ‘*Mind has been redefined from a set of predetermined structures emerging from inside an individual organism to transactional patterns and internal structures derived from an interactive, interpersonal field*’. Rather than mental states – or at least unconscious mental states – being expressions of endogenous forces (drives), they are *essentially* interpersonal. ‘[T]he interpersonal and intrapsychic realms create, interpenetrate, and transform each other’ (Mitchell 1988: 9). The psychoanalytic school of ‘relationalism’ began.

On its own, this adoption of object relations theory is independent of Gill and Hoffman’s claims concerning transference and the analyst’s knowledge, let alone the developments that followed – as evidenced by the history of object relations theory and transference in Britain (Hughes, this volume). It is perfectly possible for an object relations theorist (e.g. Rustin 1997, Eagle 2011) to hold that there are facts about an analysand’s object relations and that one task of the analyst is to discover, with the analysand, what these are (a second, intertwined task being to transform them). Given that the analysand formed these object relations via their experience prior to beginning the analytic relationship, it is even possible that the same discoveries would be made independent of who the analyst is: ‘that it may be impossible to develop any mental states… without social interaction, does not alter the fact that, once formed, they do exist independently of us and of our “interpretive construction”’(Eagle, Wolitzky, and Wakefield, 2001).

But with this last phrase – ‘interpretive construction’ – we are getting ahead of ourselves. Suffice to say that the development of object relations theory from the 1980s in the USA *was* informed by the revisionary understanding of the analytic relationship presented by Gill and Hoffman, and further developed by Mitchell (1988), Renik (1993), Stolorow & Atwood (1992), Orange (1995), Aron (1996), Ogden (1997), Hoffman (1998), and others. These authors developed and defended the ontological and epistemological claims of constructivism described in the opening paragraph of this chapter, that psychological structures are built from patterns of interpersonal interaction and that individuals can only be understood within an ‘interactional field’.

The confusion over ‘constructivism’

A first obvious epistemological implication of these developments, rightly drawn and widely granted, is fallibilism. In classical Freudian practice, it was said, analysts had been too confident in their declarations and authoritarian in their relations with patients. Greater caution and modesty was called for.

But debate was sparked by the defence of ‘constructivist’ readings of psychoanalytic knowledge. In the first instance, what is ‘constructed’, on these readings, is the *understanding* of the analysand’s material that is reached by analyst and analysand together through their interpretations of their experiences of the interpersonal relationship. Reaching this understanding is not simply a matter of inferring, from the evidence, the analysand’s unconscious mental states as they are already and in any case. Rather, that this understanding is *constructed* should be understood to mean that the meaning of this material is not ‘there’ in the mind of the analysand in the form of unconscious mental states with determinate intentional content waiting to be discovered. Compare: The realist holds that there is some definite truth about someone’s mental states, some ‘real’ meaning to what they do, think, and feel, but to discover this, we will often need to infer those mental states from the behavioural data. The fallibilist realist accepts, further, that the evidence often supports more than one inference, and that different interpretations of others’ behaviour may legitimately emphasise different mental states. But these concessions on the indeterminacy of evidence are compatible with the thought that the meaning of one’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviour is given prior to and independently of the interactive relationship with another person, and thus can be said to be discovered. The constructivist rejects this model.

Beyond this, the further commitments of constructivism, its exact meaning and scope, became a matter of considerable confusion, and early, more radical statements of the position were later modified and moderated. (As noted at the outset of this chapter, I use the term ‘constructivism’ *not* to identify just the views of those who self-identify as constructivists (e.g. Hoffman, Stern), but much more broadly, including other relationalists and intersubjectivists.)

One cause of confusion was the failure to distinguish different strengths of the epistemological claim, while a second was disagreement over the ontological implications of this claim. The starting point was, as above, that

1. There can be no singular, canonical interpretation of the analysand’s material, as what emerges in the analytic relationship is inevitably equally a product of the analyst’s subjectivity.

This claim was thought to support the further claim that

1. There can be no objective interpretation of the analysand’s material (e.g. Renik 1993).

However, whether this is so depends on one’s understanding of objectivity and its requirements (Cavell 1998). If objective knowledge requires the knower to have no subjectivity – to occupy a ‘view from nowhere’ – then there is no such thing as objectivity for human beings. But in that case, there is no contrast to be drawn between, say, psychoanalysis and physics. Clearly, though, claims concerning the involvement of the analyst’s subjectivity are intended to draw a *contrast* with how a physicist’s subjectivity impacts on physics. We will return to this in ‘Beyond objectivism and subjectivism?’.

(1) and (2) were taken together to support the stronger claims that

1. analysts cannot approach the ‘real’ meaning of the patient’s experiences (Mitchell 1998), nor should they seek to do so, as
2. the very idea of an ‘objective psychological reality’ that is independent of a particular perspective on it threatens a return to the ‘epistemological authoritarianism’ that characterised classical Freudianism (Hoffman 1999).

From such claims concerning epistemology and clinical methodology, many authors drew a further conclusion (while some did not, and many others were simply silent on the issue):

1. There *is* no correspondence in the patient’s material to a single interpretation.

It is not simply that no one interpretation is better justified than others; there is no ‘real’ meaning, in that neither the patient’s material nor their mental states are structured in a way that *could* correspond to one interpretation. Interpretations cannot be ‘true’ or ‘false’ in the sense of corresponding to something that exists independently of the interpretation (Mitchell 1998).

In accounting for why this is so, constructivists crossed from epistemology to ontology. On Freud’s realist view, interpretation describes – accurately or not – the unconscious mental states of the analysand, which exist and have their determinate intentional content independent of the interpretation. The function of language here is descriptive. By contrast, on constructivist views, what is unconscious does not pre-exist interpretation in a determinate way. The function of language in interpretation is creative – it brings into being determinate mental states where none existed. Thus Stern (1997: 5) talks of the analysand’s *experience* itself being constructed through interpretation, and not merely the understanding of that experience. At least in part, the psychological reality of the analysand is constituted in and through the interaction with the analyst and the language they both use.

I say ‘at least in part’ as the debate quickly focused on the scope of the claim. There were disagreements, as well as changes of mind, among those who self-consciously rejected the ‘realism’ label, as well as misunderstandings by those who adopted it. Is all of human psychology, or just that which is relevant to psychoanalysis, to be understood thus – as a construction out of interaction? And is it a construction of present interaction or past interaction, or an interaction of present and past interaction? Is the claim restricted to manifest clinical phenomena or does it cover the objects of psychoanalytic theory as well?

In developing and defending the five constructivist claims and their ontological implications, psychoanalysts appealed to innovations in philosophy and culture concerning the status of science and the nature of human knowledge. Thus the question of realism v. constructivism concerning the unconscious developed into a debate about objectivism in human knowledge, the influence of Kuhn and Feyerabend in the philosophy of science, whether constructivism ‘descends’ into post-modernist relativism, and the proper interpretation of Gadamer, among other matters. This did nothing to clarify the debate (Mills 2005), which by the late 1990s becomes marked by repeated accusations of oversimplifications, misinterpretations (wilful as well as unwitting), obfuscation, and increasing ill humour.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Narrowing the gap

I have detailed the development of constructivism. But I also noted Eagle’s comment that *Freud’s* realism has largely been left behind; just as constructivists have modified their views over time, so too have realists. As object relations are central to the family of constructivist theories discussed so far, it is worth briefly outlining an understanding of object relations theory in contemporary realist terms that eschew Freud’s metapsychology.

We can understand ‘object relations’ as ‘the cognitive, affective and motivational processes mediating interpersonal functioning, and … the enduring patterns of interpersonal behavior that draw upon these intrapsychic structures and processes’ (Westen 1990: 686). Internalized ‘objects’, in this sense, include ‘schemas’ or ‘models’ of oneself, other persons, particular relationships, and relationship structures. These schemas are set up in childhood, derived from repeated experiences of interpersonal relating. Current interpersonal relationships are impacted upon by these enduring patterns, assimilating our present to our past: when some element of the schema is ‘activated’, e.g. experiencing a particular interpersonal situation in a certain way, other elements of the schema come into play to interpret experience further in accordance with the schema and to influence behaviour. Hence, unconscious models of ourselves and significant others, deriving from the past, affect our perception, cognition, motivation and affective states in myriad, patterned ways. For example, psychological defences are, to some significant extent, the result of patterns of experiencing or relating to others that derive from one’s individual history of psychological development. As the result of both developmental factors (the deficit model of psychopathology) and the motivation to avoid psychological pain (the defence model), these models may inaccurately reflect social and intrapsychic reality. Or again, this process underpins the processes involved in transference. A minimal resemblance of the analyst to an analysand’s ‘significant object’ leads to a set of responses, attitudes and behaviours deriving from the patient’s object relation (Andersen & Thorpe 2009).

On a realist reading, object relations are understood as psychological structures that, through interaction with real-time interpersonal situations, causally explain a subject’s occurrent conscious and unconscious psychological processes and states. Object relations are understood as mediating the causal effects of past experience in which they originate on both present dispositions and, through these, on present experience. In this sense, it is indeed true to say that the intersubjective psychological reality of the consulting room is a construction from the subjectivity of both analysand and analyst.[[4]](#footnote-4)

How do constructivists respond to this picture? Some critics of constructivism (e.g. Meissner 1998: 422) have understood constructivists to claim that all mental states of an analysand are ‘constructed’ in the interpersonal relationship with the analyst, such that the analysand does not bring with him or her any dispositions – most importantly, object relations – that existed prior to encountering the analytic situation. But this is a misunderstanding. Stolorow and Atwood (1992: 24) clarify:

Some may see a contradiction between the concept of developmentally preestablished principles that organize subsequent experiences and our repeated contention that experience is always embedded in a constitutive intersubjective context. This contradiction is more apparent than real. A person enters any situation with an established set of ordering principles (the subject’s contribution to the intersubjective system), but it is the context that determines which among the array of these principles will be called on to organize the experience. Experience becomes organized by a particular invariant principle only when there is a situation that lends itself to being so organized. The organization of experience can therefore be seen as codetermined *both* by preexisting principles *and* by an ongoing context that favors one or another of them over the others.

Similarly, Stern (1997: 42) acknowledges ‘character, schemata, transference… internal object representations… unconscious fantasies… the plethora of processes in any one person’s psychic life that keep reproducing experience in meaningfully similar shapes’, and says that childhood experiences ‘structure… the possibility of knowing – the potential for what we can say and think and what we cannot’ (1998: 31). And Mitchell (2000: 155) comments that ‘There is no place in any of my writings in which I argue against the idea that the patient has a mind with preexisting properties before ever encountering the analyst or that there are no continuities among the versions of ourselves that emerge with different people. This would, of course, be preposterous.’[[5]](#footnote-5) Finally, Benjamin (1999: 886) notes the shift that has occurred in Hoffman’s constructivism. While in the 1980s Hoffman spoke of ‘social’ constructivism to emphasise the interpersonal nature of the process, by the late 1990s, he talks of ‘dialectical’ constructivism, in which the constructive process is in dialectical exchange with what is already ‘given’ for the individual. Like Mitchell, Hoffman gives explicit recognition to the history that the individual brings to any interpersonal relationship.

What, then, is the disagreement between revised realism and revised constructivism? Benjamin (1999: 887) suggests that ‘the issue that divides us is not the existence of individual history but the question of how we come to know and interact with the patient’s history, fantasies, and conflicts—via our own subjective experience or through objective knowledge—and whether these are seen as ambiguous but not absolutely malleable or amorphous.’ Here again we see both the epistemological claim and the ontological claim concerning determinacy. A *kind* of realism has been granted, in the form of psychological structures – of whatever kind – that carry an individual’s psychological history into the present. But because constructivists’ primary target has been *Freud’s* realism, with its claim that analysis discovers the analysand’s unconscious mental states as they exist independently of interaction with the analyst, constructivists have often felt that properly recognising the influence of the situation, esp. the analyst’s subjectivity, on the experience of the analysand and its interpretation is inconsistent with realism. Thus Mitchell (2000:155) continues, ‘a problem with preconstructivist thinking is the assumption that there is a static organization to mind that manifests itself whole cloth across experiences’. He goes on to approve of Ogden’s (1997: 190) description of the interaction between object relations and situations:

The internal object relationship… is not a fixed entity; it is a fluid set of thoughts, feelings, and sensations that is continually in movement and is always susceptible to being shaped and restructured as it is newly experienced in the context of each new unconscious intersubjective relationship. In every instance it will be a different facet of the complex movement of feeling constituting an internal object relationship that will be most alive in the new unconscious intersubjective context.

This last sentence repeats Stolorow and Atwood’s claim that which element of an object relation – which ‘principle’, which ‘facet’ – is activated in a given situation, and the consequent effects on experience and behaviour, are importantly a function of the situation.

But while this interactive understanding may conflict with some, especially early, object relations theories, it is perfectly compatible with more recent theories as they are outlined above. To some extent, so too is Ogden’s claim that an object relation is ‘always susceptible to being shaped and restructured as it is newly experienced in the context of each new unconscious intersubjective relationship’. While realist object relations theories typically understand object relations as stable, enduring structures, this is compatible with the thought that they are *susceptible* to change through new experiences. Realists in the debate, then, have quickly conceded that Freud’s realism, with its thought that what emerges in analysis are the unconscious states as they pre-existed in the analysand’s mind, is untenable. They accept that a much more dynamic, interactive understanding of the unconscious is necessary. But, they argue, this needn’t lead us to abandon realism per se (Eagle, Wolitzky & Wakefield 2001: 477).

The remaining debate

Is that it, then? Is the debate now resolved? Unfortunately not. Questions remain concerning how determinate object relations are and whether there is any meaningful sense in which a psychoanalyst’s knowledge may be said to be ‘objective’. I suggest, oversimplifying somewhat, that the debates over both questions are fed by the two sides focusing on different aspects of ‘psychoanalysis’, identified in the Introduction. The constructivists are primarily concerned with individual analysts’ *knowledge of individual analysands*, and tend to reject or remain silent on the possibility of a general empirical theory of the mind. The realists, while also concerned with the clinical encounter, are equally concerned with the development of more *abstract theoretical knowledge*. Let me explain.

In ‘The critique of Freud’, I noted that constructivism has its origins in a rejection of Freudian metapsychology and the restriction of psychoanalysis to clinical phenomena. The clinical encounter provides the experience that defines the object of psychoanalytic investigation. Thus, the primary concern of constructivists, and the primary term in which to think about the ontology of mind, is experience. And experience is what is said to be constructed within an interpersonal interaction. Experience, of course, is *occurrent*, not dispositional, and the construction of experience is a complex *process* – hence ‘mind’ is conceptualised as unfolding in the present. But experience is not determinate. Psychoanalysis makes sense of experience through identifying some patterns among others that may justly be found in the occurrent psychological phenomena, past and present.

The unconscious in psychoanalysis, on this approach, is to be defined in terms of the experience of the clinical encounter – it is what is unconscious in this unique experience of relationship. Thus, the unconscious is first and foremost defined in terms of what is outside the awareness of the subject yet informs and shapes their intersubjective experience. In formulations that are reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty (see Phillips, this volume, and Fuchs, this volume), Stern (1997) conceives of this as part of the subject’s experience, but left ‘unformulated’ rather than brought to consciousness, while Stolorow (2001: xii) conceives of it as falling ‘outside the horizons of a person’s experiential world’. Insofar as there can be a general account of the mind, it is hermeneutic and phenomenological rather than taking the form of a ‘scientific theory’. Furthermore, what is unconscious for a subject is a function not of the individual subject, as realist object relations theory is sometimes still prone to theorising it, but of the unique relationship between two subjects, the analysand and analyst. Thus, we arrive at the claim that the concept of the ‘intersubjective system’ (Orange, Atwood & Stolorow 1997: 76), the ‘analytic third’ (Ogden 1994), or the ‘interpersonal field’ (variously conceptualised) is primary in clinical work.[[6]](#footnote-6)

From the constructivist perspective, the way realists are prone to understand object relations, even after acknowledging their indeterminacy, is a misleading theoretical hypostatization. Psychoanalysis, constructivists claim, is not seeking to identify what realists think of as existing mental states as they are already (as though ‘fixed’ or ‘static’). Hence the claim that there is no one ‘correct’ interpretation of experience, no ‘given’ meaning.[[7]](#footnote-7) Rather, *what* is known is indeterminate and *how* it is known is through co-construction. ‘Psychoanalysis’ refers to the clinical encounter and ‘psychoanalytic knowledge’ is the knowledge individual analysts have of individual analysands.

Realists are happy to grant that psychoanalytic knowledge begins in the clinical encounter, but do not limit it to this. We have seen that realists insist on the importance of object relations as ways in which the mind of an analysand is ‘pre-organised’ in advance of the clinical relationship. They appeal to clinical experiences of ‘discovery’ and of how an interpretation can seem to ‘fit’ what is ‘already’ part of the analysand’s unconscious. But constructivism will claim to explain such experiences equally well. First, such experiences take place within the co-constructed clinical encounter. And within this unique clinical relationship, discoveries may be made and interpretations may well ‘fit’. But this does not demonstrate realism, since the phenomenology is (partly) a product of the relationship. Second, with revised constructivism, the claim is not that there is no psychic reality to be encountered, but that such reality is indeterminate and that knowledge of it cannot be objective for the reasons rehearsed above.

However, realists hold that psychoanalysis is not only about understanding individuals within a unique relationship. It is also the construction of a general psychological theory, based on information about the *generic* processes and obstacles present in such interpersonal experiences. Claims about transference, the many patterns of psychic defence, resistance, conflict and compromise, the understanding of dreams, unconscious emotions, the symbolic content of motives, and the influence of the past are part of this psychological theory. This theoretical apparatus, and the concepts it employs, enables us to understand, explain and in some cases predict human behaviour. This conceptual and theoretical structuring and organisation of our ever-changing conscious and unconscious experience is what gives realism its motivation and grip in seeking to understand and explain why experience takes the structure it does.

Clinical practice, says the realist, requires such a more general theoretical backdrop, and so *any* psychoanalytic approach to understanding ourselves, including constructivism, must take some stance on these theoretical claims. Indeed, these general claims concerning the clinical process are inescapable. Their general and theoretical status are hidden in constructivism either because they are silently assumed or because they are thought to be a matter of phenomenological hermeneutics and thus not ‘theoretical’. But they nevertheless inform the process of making sense of experience. Constructivists continue to approach the task of interpreting the individual within the framework of a psychoanalytic *model* of the mind. But, realists point out, this model has been disputed by other psychological theories, and can therefore legitimately be understood to comprise an alternative theory which can, in an important sense, be thought to be true or false.[[8]](#footnote-8)

These differences in what is meant by ‘psychoanalytic knowledge’ feed the debate over its possible objectivity. And thus we see the influence of restricting the meaning of ‘psychoanalysis’ to the clinical encounter or extending it to include a psychological theory, creating a tendency for those on each side of the debate to misunderstand the scope and approach of the opposition.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Continuing the realist line of thought a moment longer, it may seem that if it is true that our experience is inflected by transference, defence and the like, then what makes this true are determinate mental operations on determinate mental contents. If there really are such processes, and there really are such contents, then this secures a particular description of a person as, say, projecting their fear, as objectively true. But does this follow? It is claims like these that constructivists want to challenge most strongly. Is talk of ‘objectivity’ or even ‘truth’ appropriate here? Would some other *telos*, such as understanding, usefulness, or praxis, provide a better model? These are concerns that constructivism presses, appealing to the reconsideration of objectivity and truth in philosophical debates concerning the status of science, within both ‘analytic’ philosophy of science following Kuhn (1970) and hermeneutic theories, perhaps most especially that of Gadamer (1975).

Beyond objectivism and subjectivism?

At this point, we must leave the general debate to continue with a single point of focus. I shall consider the issue through the lens of Mitchell (2000). He says that ‘the major point’ of his substantial (1998) article was to show that the oppositional categories of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are no longer helpful. Instead, he claims, recent debates in psychoanalysis and philosophy point to a third category that is neither objective nor subjective, as exemplified in Bernstein’s (1983) *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. I am fundamentally in agreement with Bernstein, but I shall argue that Mitchell has misunderstood him.

Bernstein (1983: 74) argues that the upshot of debates in philosophy of science is ‘an appreciation of the practical character of rationality in science’. This practical character includes ‘the role of choice, deliberation, conflicting variable opinions, and the judgmental quality of rationality’. As a result, we can no longer think of ‘the’ scientific method (is there just one?) as ‘a set of permanent, unambiguous rules’ nor can we assimilate scientific argument to ‘models of deductive proof or inductive generalization’. Instead, to understand ‘the rationality of scientific inquiry we must focus on the conflict of theories, paradigms, research programs, and research traditions in their *historical development*’ (see Lakatos 1978) and ‘the nature, function, and dynamics of *communities of inquirers*’ (77).

This phrase – community of enquiry – comes from American pragmatist Charles Peirce. He argues that ‘the conception of reality… essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge’ (1931-35: 5.311, 186-87). While Bernstein and Peirce are primarily concerned with science, we can extend the point to all rational enquiry. Our account of the nature, function and dynamics of such communities of enquiry must include the recognition of the *practical* *norms* which they take as constitutive of their enquiry and intersubjective communication, i.e. the norms that govern what counts as giving a reason, when evidence is sufficient, how claims are to be defended or critiqued, and so on.

Thus, says Bernstein, we must give up ‘objectivism’ *understood as* the claim that ‘there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness’ (1983: 8). Instead, rationality is dialogic, intersubjective and historically situated – these are all ways in which reasoning, even scientific reasoning, is practical. However, this does not yield relativism or subjectivism. Giving up objectivism as understood, Bernstein argues, is perfectly compatible with recognising that ‘in the course of scientific development the cumulative weight of evidence, data, reasons and arguments can be rationally decisive for scientific communities’ (74). Kuhn, Lakatos and Peirce all acknowledge that science progresses and that this is an achievement of rationality. Recognising the practical grounding of rationality and the failure of *objectivism* is no attack on *objectivity* understood thus (92).

Bernstein (1983: 154) goes on to argue that Gadamer similarly understands truth as ‘what can be argumentatively validated by the community of interpreters who open themselves to what tradition “says to us”’. Fundamental to Gadamer’s epistemology is the concept of ‘dialogue’, ‘a process of two people understanding each other’ (Gadamer 1975: 347). This requires an openness to the other and to new experience (1975: 319), which can never be completed. While this makes claims to truth fallible and open to criticism, Bernstein argues, it doesn’t remove the need for ‘validation that can be realized only through offering the best reasons and arguments that can be given in support of them – reasons and arguments that are themselves embedded in the practices that have been developed in the course of history’ (1983: 168). Bernstein furthermore points out that Gadamer fails to recognise the *general* application of these ideas, frequently – but misleadingly – speaking of hermeneutical understanding as ‘an “entirely different type of knowledge and truth” from that which is yielded by…science’ (1983: 168). We should correct this in light of the conclusions concerning science and rationality above. Within science, the scientific method provides a recognised form of validation, a manifestation of the demand for intersubjective criteria of truth within a community of enquirers.[[10]](#footnote-10)

How is this revised understanding of science, rationality and truth supposed to be helpful to the constructivist defence of psychoanalytic knowledge? Silverman (2000: 148) suggests that Mitchell (1998) should be understood as defending ‘relative objectivity’. In light of the outline of Bernstein’s argument, and Mitchell’s apparent endorsement of it, this looks like a reasonable suggestion. However, Mitchell (2000) explicitly rejects this, arguing that not only are the old dichotomies of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ unhelpful, but that combining them as Silverman suggests is ‘obfuscating’. To justify his rejection of Silverman’s suggestion, Mitchell says

psychoanalytic knowledge is not usefully considered objective in any traditional sense of that word. The analyst can never be confident that he or she can, through self-reflection, filter out his or her own subjectivity, through which he or she has brought to life and come to understand the patient. But it is also not helpful to consider psychoanalytic knowledge relativistic. Good analysts do not simply make things up. Good analysis is highly disciplined, careful, thoughtful, continually self-reflective, and responsive to subsequent experience… [B]ecause neither objectivism nor relativism seems an adequate descriptions of psychoanalytic knowledge, combining them oxymoronically just compounds the problem…. It does not help to imply that we can come close, or sort of, or almost, to separating out the analyst’s involvement. (2000: 157-8)

However, these grounds for rejecting ‘objectivity’ have almost nothing at all to do with Bernstein’s understanding of knowledge, truth and reason in terms of a third category ‘beyond objectivism and relativism’. Mitchell’s appeal to Bernstein misses its mark for two reasons.

First, Mitchell confuses objectivism and objectivity. Bernstein’s arguments apply equally to physics, chemistry, and biology, to palaeontology, economics, and history. Thus, his arguments against objectivism leave completely open whether psychoanalytic knowledge has the same structure and grounding as the natural sciences. If Bernstein’s reading of the debate in the philosophy of science is correct (and I think that, on the whole, it is), other appeals to post-Kuhnian conceptions of science and rationality in support of attacks on objectivity in psychoanalytic knowledge are equally misguided. Awareness of general developments in epistemology and the philosophy of science are helpful to ward off ‘objectivism’ as Bernstein uses the term and any resulting simplistic scientism. As long as one rejects objectivism – the idea of a permanent ahistorical set of principles for determining rationality and truth – as do the realists Cavell (1998) and Silverman (2000), there is no conflict between Bernstein’s position and practice-specific conceptions of realism and objectivity.

Second, as the above quotation from Mitchell indicates, his primary concern is with the *individual* analyst’s knowledge of the individual analysand. By contrast, Bernstein’s arguments are not primarily concerned with the individual subjectivity or involvement of the enquirer, but operate at the level of *communities* with accepted norms of reasoning and evidence. He is primarily concerned with the general or theoretical knowledge held by a discipline. The concern is with the norms around method and communication, rather than the construction of the interpersonal field within each unique analyst-analysand dyad. Once again, there has been confusion concerning what is at issue in talk of ‘psychoanalytic knowledge’. It is perfectly reasonable – and I think, correct – to hold that an individual analyst’s knowledge of an individual analysand cannot be ‘objective’ in the same sense as psychoanalytic knowledge at the level of general theory. Specific interpretations concerning the meaning of an individual’s thoughts, feelings and behaviour may not have the same epistemological status as widely accepted general claims about psychological functioning, as they are closely tied to – and influenced by – individual situations and individual enquirers. This is true not just in psychoanalysis, but in psychology as a whole (Wilson & Brekke, 1994: 121). This understanding of the relationship between individual and general knowledge supports the realist reading of psychoanalytic knowledge. Once corroboration by the community of enquirers has established a general claim, e.g. concerning the occurrence of transference or a typical pattern of defence, then it can be made use of when seeking to understand meanings on any given occasion (see Lacewing, 2013). It is a realist defence of objective knowledge, rather than a constructivist attack on it, that coheres best with Bernstein’s analysis of the philosophy of science.

Unconscious meaning

We are left with the remaining question of the ontology of the unconscious, and in particular, the determinacy of object relations: those unconscious structures, states or processes that are acknowledged by both sides of the debate to be an individual’s contribution to an interpersonal situation.

I begin by acknowledging again the constructivist point, made in ‘The remaining debate’, that what is unconscious for an individual is not best understood in terms of their mind taken on its own. First, what they are unconscious of in themselves is itself a product of interpersonal situations. Second, what is unconscious at any one time is a function of the intersubjective situation they are in, and thus may alter from one situation to another. Third, there will be features of the other and the situation, as well as of themselves, of which they will be unconscious.

Yet even if we grant that the unconscious in psychoanalysis is more about patterns of interpersonal experience than the Freudian conception of ‘hidden depths’ in the individual mind, are there nevertheless determinate truths about a subject’s object relations – about what they do and do not, or can and cannot, experience in their relationships with others? In particular, can unconscious psychological phenomena have determinate intentional content and meaning while unconscious, or do they only acquire it upon being brought to consciousness through interpretation? My focus for this last, brief discussion will be Stern (1997).

In ‘The critique of Freud’ we saw that Freud’s realism holds that unconscious mental states and their intentional content exist prior to and independent of their interpretation in consciousness. According to constructivism, this is not so. Starting from this thought, Stern understands the unconscious as ‘unformulated experience’:

if language is not merely a set of tags or labels for experience, but actually plays a role in constituting it, we are challenged to change our conception of what it means for experience to be unconscious. Unconscious experience… is no longer merely hidden, awaiting only language to bring it out of the shadows. Instead, the form it will eventually take in words is not predetermined by its own structure…. unconscious experience *exists*; but it does not exist in forms in which we can grasp it in words. It remains to be interpreted. Unconscious experience and meaning is what I call unformulated experience. (1998: p. xi)

Although Stern talks here of unconscious *experience*, it is clear from later discussions in the book that he intends these claims to apply to unconscious phenomena generally, including, for example, object relations – which he himself identifies as dispositional structures rather than experiences. Thus, he holds that unconscious contents are indeterminate and non-verbal (‘unformulated’), and indeed, that they are indeterminate in some sense *because* they are non-verbal. They only acquire greater determinacy as their meaning is ‘formulated’, i.e. interpreted in consciousness.

But these remarks, even if true, are not sufficient to account for the contents being unconscious. There is no easy equation between what is unconscious and unformulated experience as described. There are conscious but indeterminate or unformulated experiences and states. And there are semantic unconscious experiences and states.

1. The indeterminate conscious: much, if not all, intentional content is indeterminate to some extent (Mackie 1975). Suppose I want a cup of tea, and I take my tea with milk and sugar. If someone makes me black tea, I didn’t want *that*. My desire is more determinate that wanting just anything that can be described as ‘a cup of tea’. But it is not so determinate that I can be said to want it with 17% milk and 78 grains of sugar. Yet any particular cup of tea will have a determinate percentage of milk and number of grains of sugar. Many cups of tea that satisfy my desire differ in these determinate respects. So the content of my desire is indeterminate, yet perfectly conscious.
2. The unformulated conscious: Nonverbal, and more generally nonconceptual, experience is unformulated but can be conscious. I look at an abstract work of art. I see the shapes and the colours. I do not (and probably cannot) put into words much about those shapes and colours. But there is nothing unconscious about my visual experience of seeing them.
3. The semantic unconscious: While controversial, there is evidence of semantic priming, i.e. subliminal processing of the meanings of words, presented either visually or aurally (e.g. Naccache & Dehaene 2001). Given that Stern understands putting something into words as making it (more) determinate, I take the occurrence of unconscious states and processes with semantic content to demonstrate that some unconscious psychological phenomena are (at least somewhat) determinate.

A first step towards a more complete account of the relation between what is unconscious and what is unformulated involves recognising that the psychoanalytic unconscious does not exhaust the psychological unconscious. The psychoanalytic unconscious as unformulated experience concerns particular forms of experience – experience of the self, others, and interpersonal relations. So how are we to account for both the unconscious and the indeterminate status of these?[[11]](#footnote-11)

Stern assimilates unformulated experience to implicit know-how. The ‘felt meaning’ that is unformulated cannot be verbal or semantic meaning, nor even a condensation of these. The difficulty of finding the right words is not the result of a complexity of unconscious associations and primary processes that are in themselves each determinate (1997: 49). Rather, the meaning derives from a ‘semiotics’ of practice: ‘Reflect on the difficulty of describing in words the details of how you ride a bicycle… The difficulty is due to the fact that these activities are not represented in words at all, but in the semiotic of practice. The same is true for the difficulty of describing how one deals with one’s mother…’ (18).

But again, this is not quite sufficient. Stern’s model here is missing a psychodynamic element. The way in which – or again, the reasons why – implicit know-how is unconscious can be entirely distinct from anything that psychoanalysis is interested in, entirely a matter of non-verbal procedural knowledge. And even when one turns from how to ride a bicycle to interpersonal relations, the same can hold, e.g. my unconscious knowledge of how to engage in conversation with others is implicit but not for psychodynamic reasons. And as Leite (this volume) points out, even the ‘implicit relational knowing’ (Lyons-Ruth et al 1998) involved in intimate relationships does not yet provide a full account of the unconscious that is of interest to psychoanalysis.

However, we may provide the beginnings of an integrative model using the ‘schema’-based understanding of object relations delineated above in ‘Narrowing the gap’. On this view, the form that what is interpreted takes while unconscious may well be indeterminate, requiring or inviting a ‘completion’ or specification in meaning as it is brought into consciousness. *What is unconscious, at root, is a psychodynamically charged and incompletely specified procedural model* – a model that may be one among others – *for how to relate self and others, including within that how to be oneself and how to understand significant others,* which model is in constant interaction with one’s current situation*.* What one is unconscious of may become more determinate through the process of formulation, as new associations, conceptualisations, or precise feelings are formed and other possibilities are or are not taken up. But equally, as Stern (1997: 28-9) notes, this process is ‘constrained by’ or answerable to what is unconscious before the process of its interpretation and specification as it becomes conscious.

This proposal, I believe, is coherent with Stern’s constructivism, and yet it is a development of a contemporary realist understanding of object relations. Should we say ‘unconscious contents (meanings) are not fully determinate, and only become so through interaction with an intersubjective situation, and so constructivism is true’? Or should we say ‘unconscious contents are partially (though not linguistically) determinate, and contribute to intersubjective situations, and so realism is true’? Mightn’t we say both?

Perhaps some may struggle with the notion that what is indeterminate can be ‘real’. Of course, if our touchstone for what is real is our everyday experience of physical objects, this can seem puzzling. But this just shows that we shouldn’t expect psychological reality to resemble physical reality in this respect. As already noted, there is a sense in which all intentional content is indeterminate, while non-conceptual content and procedural knowledge is linguistically indeterminate. Everyone in the debate grants that the historical inheritance of an individual shapes their present experience – that this, at least, is not itself constructed through conscious interpretation alone. Everyone also grants that such an inheritance may – and in the course of a successful analysis, will – be changed for the future by precisely such conscious interpretations (though not only these). Whether we wish to emphasise, with Ogden, the fluidity and responsiveness of object relations to new relationships or, with Eagle, the stability of object relations and the difficulty of achieving lasting change, is now a matter less for the theorist than for the practitioner.

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2. That psychiatry could be both hermeneutic and a science was, of course (though rarely noted), Jaspers’ (1913/1963) view, which he further articulated in terms of phenomenological investigation, and some contemporary phenomenological engagements with psychoanalysis continue to defend this scientific understanding (Fuchs, this volume). Also frequently overlooked was the possibility that psychoanalysis is a social science, and social sciences are genuine forms of science, though with appropriately different methodologies and concerns from natural sciences, given their hermeneutic nature (see Lacewing 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, see Stolorow’s (1998) response to Frank’s (1998) review; Renik’s (1999) response to Cavell’s (1998) review; Mitchell’s (2000) response to Silverman’s (2000) review; Stern’s (2003) response to Richards’ (2003) review; Altman and Davies’ (2003) response to Eagle, Wakefield & Wolitzky’s (2001) review and Eagle, Wakefield & Wolitzky’s (2003) reply in turn; Stolorow, Atwood & Orange’s (2006) response to Mill’s (2005) review. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As discussed further in ‘The remaining debate’, it is typically important to realists that this account is consilient with other theories in psychology. Psychology and psychoanalysis have the same object of study, and therefore should aim at coherence, even if they have legitimately distinct methodologies and emphases. And so we may note that this model of interpersonal mental functioning has received considerable empirical support. See, for example, the ‘internal working model’ of attachment theory (Cassidy & Shaver 1999), Stern’s (1985) concept, in developmental psychology, of RIGs (Representations of Interactions that have been Generalised), and Andersen and colleagues’ theory of the relational self in personality psychology (Andersen & Chen 2002; Andersen & Thorpe 2009). See also Narvaez, this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mitchell and Aron (1999, p. xv) state that ‘relational analysts, in speaking of a two-person psychology, have never intended to deny that there are two distinct individuals with their own minds, histories and inner worlds, but rather have meant simply to emphasize the emergence of what Ogden calls the intersubjective analytic third’. Mitchell (2000b: 57) expresses the emergence the other way around: ‘individual minds do arise out of and through the internalisation of interpersonal fields, and that having emerged in that fashion, individual minds develop what systems theorists call emergent properties and motives of their own’. The two are compatible, as he then explains: ‘Interpersonal relational processes generate intrapsychic relational processes which reshape interpersonal relational processes…’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eagle, Wolitsky & Wakefield (2001: 477) compare the debate about the priority of object relations as structures and experience to that in personality psychology between trait theorists and situationists. That debate is largely resolved in favour of interactionism, in which behaviour is a product of both trait and situation (see, e.g., Fleeson and Noftle 2009). But constructivists can complain that this analysis, in terms of how the individual interacts with the situation, is the wrong way around, at least in psychoanalysis, given that the interpersonal situation is primary. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A connected thought here may be that psychoanalysis provides not so much a *causal explanation* of occurrent psychological phenomena as a *descriptive identification* of a pattern that may be found in them. On this view, talk of object relations is best understood not as describing ‘real structures’ but as an abstraction. On the importance of the distinction between description and explanation in psychiatry and psychology, see Jaspers (1914), Murphy (2007, Ch. 5), Gipps (this volume), Gipps (2018). It is notable that a considerable portion of the strength of the original argument for the hermeneutic interpretation rested on a distinction between motives and causes (e.g. Ricoeur 1970: 358-63, Taylor 1964): If motives are not causes, then explanations in terms of motives, such as those given in psychoanalysis, are not causal explanations. Not only is the explanatory form different, to think of motives as causes is to reify them, and so to postulate metaphysically dubious entities. I briefly discuss the success of this argument in Lacewing (2013) and (forthcoming b). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a dissenting view, see Gipps (this volume). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A different reading of the debate may take the disagreement as primarily about clinical technique, dressed up as a debate about knowledge and objectivity. Given the origins of the debate as discussed in the sections ‘The analytic relationship’ and ‘The confusion over ‘constructivism’’, this interpretation has considerable justification, but it requires one not to take the later arguments of the proponents at face value. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bernstein does not seek to *replace* truth as the telos of enquiry with something more ‘practical’, but argues that we must understand truth in terms of the practical character of all reason. Following Peirce, one pragmatist conception of truth is asymptotic. A claim is true if it would survive critical reflection under future improvements in our knowledge, or again if it remains a coherent part of our epistemic practices (Putnam (1981), Wright (1991), Chang (2017)).

    Such a conception of truth is compatible with many of the central claims of constructivism, as illustrated by the fact that it is held by the intersubjectivists Stolorow et al (2006: 387), who say that there are ‘no God’s-eye views of anything or anyone. But it does not mean that we abandon the search for truth, for lived experience, for subjective reality. We hold that closer and closer approximations of such truth are gradually achieved through an analytic dialogue in which the domain of reflective self-awareness is enlarged for both participants.’

    However, in light of the revised conception of rationality, we needn’t suppose that we will or could ever reach such an asymptotic point – the point is ‘ideal’, something that regulates our language and practices. Nor need we conceive convergence of all true claims on a *single* point. We can recognise that we have multiple practices and so there is no single true description of reality (Putnam 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stern sometimes situates his constructivist claims about experience, language and unformulated experience in psychoanalysis within the broader claim that *all* experience is constructed by language. This suffers the same drawbacks as Mitchell’s reference to Bernstein’s third category. If all experience is constructed by language, realism v. constructivism about the unconscious is on a par with realism v. constructivism about plants. The important point for constructivism in psychoanalysis is that language is not only the medium of knowledge (as it is universally), but constitutes the object of investigation. The role of language in interpersonally making sense of one’s self in interpersonal experience is importantly constitutive in a way over and above the way it is constitutive (if it is) of all experience. Reasons of space prevent further exploration of this claim, but see Taylor (1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)