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### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## The Uncertainty Principle in the Psychoanalytic Process

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In his paper "The analyst's self-revelation", Bromberg says:

Change "... takes place not through thinking, 'If I do this correctly, then that will happen' but, rather, through an ineffable coming together of two minds in an unpredictable way". (Bromberg, 2006, p.147)

I have referred to this as Bromberg's uncertainty principle; in this paper, I will try to deconstruct this principle and also extend it in some ways.

### The Concept of 'Ineffable'

At a conference in Rome in July, 2007, on Psychoanalytic Theories of Unconscious Mental Functioning and Multiple Code Theory,<sup>1</sup> two of the speakers, Giuseppe Moccia (2007), and Giuseppe Martini (2007), both members of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society, surveyed the domain of implicit or unconscious processes from psychoanalytic and philosophical perspectives, starting with Freud's original insight concerning the nonrepressible part of the unconscious:

“Everything that is repressed must remain unconscious; but let us state at the very outset that the repressed does not cover everything that is unconscious. The unconscious has the wider compass: the repressed is a part of the unconscious”.

(Freud, 1915, p.166).

Since Freud's time, the fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics have “more deeply studied and valorized that wider compass”, as Martini and Moccia pointed out, giving it many labels and emphasizing many different aspects. Thus Martini (2007) characterized this domain as the unrepresentable; the perturbing and ineffable sphere that escapes the clarifying ambition of interpretation. Heidegger (1959) referred to the reality that escapes the word; Gadamer (1989) referred to the enigmatic question; Ricoeur (1970) to the untranslatable. Jaspers (1963) discussed this domain as the incomprehensible, both on a psychopathological level as referring to delirium, but also in

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<sup>1</sup> Conference of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society and the International Psychoanalytical Association, Rome, 2007.

more general philosophical terms, as referring to bodily experience. Bion (1962) referred to the unthinkable, the unknown, unknowable, infinite without form; Bollas (1987) from a somewhat different perspective referred to the unthought known. There are also related concepts in the writings of Ferenczi, Winnicott, Piera Aulagnier, Loch, Matte Blanco, Ferrari, and many others.

I believe that all of these writers, philosophers and psychoanalysts are attempting to characterize the same epistemological domain, but their characterizations are divergent and to some extent contradictory. The known that is unthought of Bollas is different from the unknown, the unknowable of Bion. And both are different from the incomprehensible of Jaspers, and the unrepresentable of Martini. The untranslatable of Ricoeur, and Heidegger's concept of the reality that escapes the word are similar to one another, but different from the rest.

I suggest that the conceptual struggle that we see here arises because all these writers are still trapped in the implicit contradictions of the classical psychoanalytic metapsychology, while explicitly they may reject this framework. Freud's formulation of two distinct systems of thought within the psychical apparatus, including a system of thought outside the verbal categorical domain, was certainly one of his most profound insights. But in characterizing this system, Freud was caught in the inconsistencies of the energy theory that he himself formulated, as well as in his implicit valuing of language over nonverbal forms. On the one hand, he characterized the primary process as a

systematic mode of thought, organized according to a set of principles that he specified as the laws of the dream work. On the other hand, he also characterized this system as the mode of thought associated with unbound energy, the forces of the Id, chaotic, driven by wish fulfillment and divorced from reality. This inconsistency can be seen throughout psychoanalytic theory, as in the comments of the writers I have mentioned here. We need to work through some of these implicit assumptions so as to develop a more veridical understanding of emotional meaning and emotional communication.

In the context of the cognitive psychology and neuroscience of today, in the theoretical framework of multiple code theory, I have pointed to a world of complex thought that is nonverbal and even nonsymbolic; that occurs in its own systematic and organized format, primarily continuous and analogic; that is rooted in our bodies and sensory systems; and that can be consciously known and comprehended; but that is not directly representable in words. Such nonsymbolic, or what I call subsymbolic processes occur in perception and as imagery, in motoric, visceral, and sensory forms, in all sensory modalities. Subsymbolic processing is required for a vast array of functions from skiing to musical performance and creative cooking - and for the interactions of ballroom dancing, especially Argentine tango, of which more later. Subsymbolic processing in visual and other modalities is central in creative scientific and mathematical work; research mathematicians and physicists understand this very well. Einstein (1949)

referred to sensory and bodily, particularly muscular, experiences as the basic elements of his thought.

Of greatest interest to psychoanalysis, subsymbolic processing is dominant in emotional information processing and emotional communication - reading facial and bodily expressions of others; experiencing one's own feelings and emotions. All of these functions call for processing that is analogic and continuous, not discrete, and that occurs in specific sensory modalities, not in abstract form. We know this processing as intuition, the wisdom of the body and in other related ways. The crucial information concerning our bodily states comes to us primarily in subsymbolic form, and emotional communication between people occurs primarily in this mode. Reik's (1948) concept of "listening with the third ear" relies largely on subsymbolic communication, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Bucci, 2001).

In the context of the cognitive science of today, subsymbolic processes are understood as organized, systematic, rational forms of thought that continue to develop in complexity and scope throughout life. They are modeled by connectionist or parallel distributed processing (PDP) systems (McClelland et al., 1989), with the features of dynamical systems.

All processing, including symbolic as well as subsymbolic processing, may operate either within or outside of awareness. Subsymbolic processing often operates within awareness, but we cannot capture it. Most of us have not developed the skills of

focusing attention on this processing mode, although one can perhaps begin to learn to do this in meditation and using certain feedback mechanisms, as in the devices used for self-regulation of blood pressure, where people learn to listen to their bodies. We are not accustomed to thinking of processes, including sensory, motoric and visceral processes that cannot be verbalized or symbolized, as systematic and organized thought; the new understanding of subsymbolic processing opens the door to this reformulation. It changes our entire perspective of pathology and treatment when we are able to make this shift.

This formulation cuts the theoretical pie in a new way. Subsymbolic processes are lawful and systematic, not chaotic. They are not driven by wish fulfillment; they can be both thought and known, in the senses of Bion and Bollas. But the specific psychical terrain that we are trying to explore can be mapped only partially onto words; if we try to place the signposts prematurely – apply general mappings that have been used in other terrains - we will find ourselves blocked or lost. The subsymbolic processes constitute the untranslatable, in the sense of Ricoeur; the reality that escapes the word, in the terms of Heidegger. They are not unrepresentable; but do exist in what Martini (2007) referred to as the “perturbing and ineffable sphere that escapes the clarifying ambition of interpretation.”

### **The Concept of ‘Minds’; The Emotion Schemas**

Returning to Bromberg's uncertainty principle, I have formulated the concept of 'ineffable coming together' as emotional communication, which is largely subsymbolic. For 'minds', I refer to a more complex structure, the emotion schema, that includes components of all three processing systems: subsymbolic processes, symbolic imagery, and later language.

Emotion schemas are types of memory structures that constitute the organization of the self in the interpersonal world. They are formed on the basis of repeated interactions with caretakers and others from the beginning of life. The subsymbolic sensory, somatic and motoric representations and processes constitute the affective core of the emotion schema - the source of the varieties of arousal and pleasure and pain that constitute emotional experience. In each event of life, the processes of the affective core will be activated in relation to the people, places and activities that figure in that event; thus we build memories of people and events that give us pleasure or pain, that activate happiness, or dread, or a wish to attack. Autobiographical memory is built out of such events; this is the basis for the organization of the self in the interpersonal world.

The emotion schemas develop in an interpersonal context; the baby who laughs and smiles and has feelings of joy can see and hear the other person also smiling and laughing and making the corresponding sounds; the expressions of the other becomes incorporated in the schema of joy. If the child who cries hears sympathetic sounds and sees a particular facial expression, along with feeling a soothing touch, the child's

schemas of pain or fear will develop to incorporate responses of turning to others and expectations that others can help. If the caretaker typically responds to the child's cries with annoyance or withdrawal, schemas of negative expectations and associated responses will develop.

### **Dissociation within the Emotion Schemas**

Every person has multiple emotion schemas, including schemas of self and schemas of others, integrated to varying degrees. Dissociations may occur within the schemas, and among them. Some degree of dissociation is normative and necessary to allow us to function smoothly in our lives; not every desire or expectation or response will be formulated in symbolic form (Bucci, 2007 a,b). In some cases, however, dissociations occur in response to events that are extremely painful, experienced as threats to life or to the organization of the self. With such dissociation, it is not only that we haven't made a connection to symbolic forms, not only that the schema may never have been formulated, but that we avoid such integration. If the parent is herself or himself the source of the negative affect, acting in such a way as to elicit pain or rage or terror in the child, this type of avoidant dissociation will occur and will be crystallized and reinforced. We must avoid knowing who or what is the source of the extreme pain in order to go on with life, to retain the connection to the caretaker that is emotionally and physically essential for survival, and to maintain a sense of self. The initial dissociation is a life saving event; if the dissociation is crystallized so that new emotional information

cannot be taken in, it becomes the problem that interferes with life and brings patients to treatment.

### **The Concept of the Unpredictable in the Analytic Interaction**

Analyst and patient each come to the session with a set of emotion schemas, developed in the course of their lives, affected by events of life outside the session as well as by events within. The interaction is inherently unpredictable, as Bromberg has said. The meeting of the emotion schemas that have been activated is new and unique; this particular interaction with activation of these particular emotion schemas in each participant has never existed prior to the moment. The schemas that are activated are dominated by the affective core and in some cases will be dissociated, certainly for the patient, and also to a certain degree for the analyst. In such cases, the affective core of sensory and somatic experience is not connected to the source of the activation and the connection is avoided; thus both participants may be aroused in particular ways and may not know why. This interactive arousal, which is largely unsymbolized - feelings of rage or humiliation or despair, whose meaning is not known or is wrongly known - is the potential source and content of the therapeutic work; it is also the potential threat.

In a more general sense, the interaction is also unpredictable in that therapists today must negotiate this terrain largely without the explicit traditional guides of theory and technique. The analyst can no longer assume that there is a particular repressed scenario that is guiding the patient's experience that he or she is avoiding, and that can

be uncovered. The analyst can also not assume a set of rules and parameters that define the correct way to work. These changes bring freedom from theories and techniques that do not fit; they bring the uncertainty of freedom as well.

Subsymbolic experience is the guide to the uncharted terrain of the analytic interchange. Both participants must learn to follow this, to receive and send signals that are outside of the symbolic domain.

### **The Uncertainty Principle of Tango**

In tango, the leader and follower generally do not follow a specified sequence of steps; tango differs from other ballroom dances in that respect. Bodily communication is crucial; the leader needs to feel the follower's position at every moment to enable him to signal the next moves; the follower needs to be poised to receive and respond to the leader's signals. This involves a type of normative dissociation for both partners; the interaction occurs primarily in the subsymbolic bodily zone; verbal guidance is too slow, too limited, violates the flow of the dance. At every moment both participants need to be in an activated and open state that the tango dancer and teacher Dardo Galletto<sup>2</sup> calls 'maybe'. The leader tries to signal a move, maybe it will work, maybe it will not, each partner needs to continuously receive bodily information from the other and continuously test and shift the signals to produce a response. This is Dardo's uncertainty principle in tango, a true dynamical system in a technical sense, dependent on

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<sup>2</sup> Artistic Director and Choreographer, New Generation Dance Company

transmission of sufficient information to override uncertainty and exceed the response threshold. The state of 'maybe' involves the capacity to rely on analogic information without symbolic guideposts; to remain suspended – sometimes on one foot – in the zone of subsymbolic processing, without the usual support of symbolic images or words. Some people cannot bear the uncertainty; they want to repeat fixed routines; the fear of losing one's balance, and the humiliation of miscommunication feel too great; they do not get far in learning tango.

The subsymbolic communication, the state of maybe, the capacity to endure a stare of uncertainty, are necessary for tango, but it is also true that they are not sufficient. Tango dancers also need to bring at least two additional psychic supports to the milonga, the dance: one is basic knowledge of steps and techniques, the other is attitude. It is all very well to be open and suspended on one foot, but without some movement vocabulary, some knowledge of the positions, the communication cannot work. Here is one place where the symbol system must enter tango, as for any dance and sport. Teachers try to break down the sequences into their elements, to analyze the steps and techniques, to teach the names of the steps. They also analyze the ways to use the body and the feet: relax the hips, feel the upper and lower body separately, keep the upper body facing the partner. To a large extent, teachers work by showing their own movements as images. Dardo demonstrates a specific way of holding the body and of moving; the students watch and translate the moves to their own bodily systems. Dardo

also emphasizes metaphor to characterize the movements, and then goes beyond that to characterize attitude and attunement as well. We do not only relax our hips and turn our upper bodies, we walk like Argentine woman (or Argentine man, which is quite different). We must delight in our partner as in a delicious meal of grilled meat; we must feel our partner, not just love and delight but a far more complex range of feelings including aspects of dominance and submission and their consequences.

### **The Choreography of the Analytic Interchange**

In psychoanalysis as in tango, the subsymbolic exploration and the connection to the symbolic domain, within the relationship, as well as within each participant's autobiographical memory, are necessary for both participants. The patient is struggling to talk, or is not talking, or talking about not wanting to talk, or talking about how the analyst looks, or how the room smells, or whether the room is too cold or too hot. We can see the patient as beginning to enact a dissociated schema that represents a particular expectation about another person.

The analyst will be having his own struggles, determined, as the patient's are, by the emotion schemas that are activated. There is a flow of subsymbolic experience going on within the analyst, linked to symbolic representation to varying degrees.

With the synergy of the moment, an interaction will occur that is both old and new: old in that it is based on the emotion schemas with which each participant habitually interacts with the interpersonal world, and with which each has entered the

session; new in that each is confronting a particular person, at a particular time and place, in a particular role, for the first time.

For both participants, it is necessary not only to be open to subsymbolic experience and to respond to it, but also to be willing to endure some degree of painful activation; the willingness to endure the activation in turn requires some capacity to contain it. As the arousal and the interaction proceed, both participants will be searching and exploring in their associations and responses, in their past lives, and in their present interactions; both will be examining their experience, to construct formulations that will enable them to explore together. The connections from the subsymbolic to the symbolic mode are necessary to enable sharing of experience, to put down signposts in the shared terrain, and to open new exploration.

The view of treatment proposed here, in which both participants enter with dissociated schemas, both engage in exploration of subsymbolic domains, both make new connections to symbolic experience, is very different from a model in which a patient is viewed as coming in with unconscious experience that has been previously formulated and then repressed, the analyst has a neutral affective stance, and the analyst interprets the patient's associations with the goal of insight and uncovering the repressed contents.

To work in the mode of uncertainty, the analyst, like the patient needs to develop the skills of operating in the implicit interactive domain. By virtue of experience and

training and perhaps other factors, the analyst may develop this to a relatively high degree and may have a somewhat greater sense of safety in negotiating the troubled waters.

What does the analyst bring, what does the analyst need, to support work in this mode? Here are a few possibilities:

- In tango, the teacher or the experienced dancer has an advantage in symbolic vocabulary, not necessarily verbal. He knows a set of sequences and how to direct his moves. Similarly, the analyst has more symbolized emotional categories with which to identify what is occurring – not necessarily more categories with diagnostic names, not even more verbal categories, but more schemas, more meanings: this patient is like others I have seen, or others I have known or read about; this tangle is like others I have been caught in.
- There are obvious differences in feeling states between therapist and patient on many levels, differences in degree of fear, of risk, and of pain with which they enter the therapeutic relationship. The modulation of affective intensity supports the analyst's capability to seek new zones of interaction, rather than to repeat past protective sequences.
- There is also a general difference in attitude that is not so obvious. As I have suggested elsewhere (Bucci, 2007a,b), analysts have developed, implicitly, a capacity for flexible shifting in self states, a capacity to find different parts of themselves that are

genuine but context determined. This involves a particular analytic attitude that I characterize as a normative and adaptive dissociated mode, not unlike the mode of the actor who is immersed in a role, but with more uncertainty, without a script. The state that is activated in the therapist in the session, the love or hate or fear or shame, is fully genuine at the moment, necessarily open to some degree of risk, but in the context of a background knowledge that it is only one way of being, that there are other ways of being that will be activated in different contexts, and that they are all held within one overall autobiographical frame. It is that background knowledge, which is likely to be implicit, that allows the immersion in the moment that is necessary for analytic exploration.

- Beyond all this, to support the freedom of emotional exploration, I suggest that analysts also require a systematic general psychological theory that specifically accounts for the unique and unpredictable interactions of the analytic interchange – that makes the interactions, in fact, more predictable in certain respects. If clinicians do not have an explicit theoretical framework to guide them in a situation of uncertainty and risk, they will draw on an implicit one. The problem with implicit theories is that they may tend to lead clinicians in ways that are unrecognized, and unexamined, down the slippery slope of assumptions concerning specific repressed scenarios to be uncovered, or techniques involving interpretation of resistance, or from another perspective, recourse to projective identification defined in terms of the patient's

intolerable affects somehow being placed in the therapist. In place of such implicit assumptions, we need a systematic theory that provides an understanding of affect emerging in a complex way from the therapist's and patient's own emotional schemas in the context of their relationship - how each connects dissociated states within him/herself; how each person connects to the other on several levels; how each connects the events of the present to memories of the past; and how all these connecting processes can be used to bring about change.

Beginning with uncertainty and risk, we can try to increase the zone of the symbolic and the predictable, without losing the richness of the treatment situation. We need to address this goal both in the specific interactions of the treatment situation and in the development of the guiding principles of theory, and we need to build this knowledge from both clinical and research sources.

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