Contemporary Controversial Discussions, Intersubjectivity and the Future of Psychoanalysis

Contribution to the panel „Developments and Controversies in Psychoanalysis: Past, Present and Future“ at the IPA-Congress 2007 in Berlin to be held on Wednesday July 25 from 2-4pm

Dear colleagues and friends,

As you may read on page 3 in the attached paper, I distinguish between personal confessions and self-disclosures as an essential part of the analyst’s professional role. To colleagues and friends I confess tongue-in-cheek that this short paper is the most difficult and the “longest” that I have ever had to write. It took many months to draw up various drafts in German. The process involved was marked by a retrospective evaluation of my competence after 60 years of professional experience, so, in a way, the making of this paper lasted several decades. Eventually, I arrived at a condensed summary which could be read in the allotted time of 20 minutes when all the rather long quotations were skipped.

Cordially,
Helmut Thomä

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1 Recently, an article published in the newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (July 6, 2007, Nr. 154, p. 35) was entitled „Dümmer auf English“ (Even more stupid in English) The author Stefan Klein discussed English as the lingua franca of our time. Why does a German analyst not write and read this paper in Freud’s mother tongue? I had written a very long draft in German. While translating the major points, the abridged version became quite different from the original German essay. Now I would have to translate this English paper back into German, which would be somehow absurd. I thank family members, colleagues and friends who contributed to make this version coherent and readable.

2 Chair: Daniel Widlöcher. Participants: Madeleine Baranger, Martin Bergmann, Antonio Ferro, Helmut Thomä.
1. During the early 1940’s, the historical „controversial discussions“ (King und Steiner 1991) in London were mainly based on an ideological fundament. Anna Freud and Melanie Klein and their adherents claimed to represent the true heirs of Freud’s work. Fortunately, the arguments led to a compromise that did not result in the exclusion of persons or groups from the IPA. For the first time in the history of psychoanalysis, quite different models were accepted in the same training institute. It took some decades until the loss of common ground was officially recognized (Wallerstein 1988, 1990). Casement’s publication „Who Owns Psychoanalysis?“ (2004) sheds light on the fact that psychoanalysis does not belong to the IPA only. The ideas of Freud are part and parcel of cultural history. The present crisis, in its nature different from previous ones, does not only have its bleak side. Sooner or later all schools of psychotherapy will discover anew various psychoanalytic findings, although this might happen without public acknowledgement. As we all know, crises potentially hold new possibilities. I hope my contribution will substantiate this point.

2. Although pluralism is widely accepted nowadays, old controversies continue in contemporary controversial discussions. Simultaneously, we witness how “true controversies” – a title introduced by Bernardi (2002) and Eizirik (2006) – develop. They grow on the psychoanalytic soil as a human science. Our method exposes itself to adequate empirical validation of its foundation and investigation into its therapeutic efficacy and efficiency. I hope that our efforts will lead to a comparative psychoanalysis, i. e. to a comparison of psychoanalytic processes of different schools in respect to their outcome. In a nutshell, we have two quite different controversies. On the one hand a scientific discourse, which will modernize psychoanalysis and potentially turn the current crisis into a productive direction. The other line of arguments can be characterized as dogmatic and anti-scientific, as the historical
controversial discussions were. They disregard a very basic responsibility we all have. I agree with Renik’s statements: “... many analysts do not consider clinical analysis primarily a therapy, as I do, and do not use therapeutic outcome as the primary dependent variable to be followed when testing psychoanalytic hypotheses. They conceptualize ‘analytic’ goals, distinct from ‘therapeutic’ ones.” (Renik 1998, p. 495). The clinical process and outcome research that has been at the centre of my work for 45 years is confronted with the same arguments put forward in the discussion between Wallerstein and Green, Kernberg and Perron, Fonagy and Perron. Often, empirical research is falsely identified with the natural science model of the so-called unity of science and with theory-free empiricism and outdated behaviorism. Many analysts are in opposition to any research and decline scientific reasoning of any kind. Green (2004), for instance, states that science of psychoanalysis does not exist, but only “psychoanalytic thinking”. Is it not an empty truism that all analysts think analytically? The section “Psychoanalysts at work” in the International Journal proves it. I regularly read it. Sometimes, I understand the thinking behind the descriptions of the vignettes. Usually, I am at a loss. Without additional information about categories and criteria the field is open for the readers’ fantasy about the countertransference fantasies of the treating analyst. Often one reads more about the analyst’s countertransference than about the patient’s associations. Analytic thinking cannot remain in an abstract space, so to say free-floating in mid-air, but must be anchored in tentative concepts related to psychological phenomena.

3. Many psychoanalytic schools participate in on a long-standing development that focuses on the reciprocal relationship of the intrapsychic to the intersubjective. Intersubjectivity was Freud’s latent paradigm (Altmeyer und Thomä 2006). This is definitely the turning point from a monadic point of view towards the perspective of a network of intersubjective relations: The permanent exchange between the inner world
of thoughts and feelings and reality of our human environment leads to the formation
of individual psychic structures. Although this is very old psychoanalytic knowledge,
the consequences implied by this for the psychoanalytic situation is of a new quality.
The rigid understanding of neutrality, for instance, resulted in a very impersonal
attitude. Isn’t it characteristic that P. Heimann (1978) only at the end of her life
entitled a paper “On the necessity for the analyst to be natural with his patient”? A
self-disclosure within an intersubjective model has nothing to do with personal
confessions. The therapeutic relationship remains asymmetrical. But the patient, of
course, knows that his analyst is a human being and therefore emotionally involved. It
was an essential step in my professional development towards a relational
psychoanalysis when I discovered the therapeutic quality of a mitigated self-disclosure
introduced by Winnicott (1949). In my experience, all patients are relieved and
satisfied when I admit my affective reactions. Patients understand that my professional
role and my knowledge bring about a kind of distance, which softens my emotional
reactions. Generally, our professional role and knowledge diminish emotional
extremes. Otherwise, psychoanalysis would indeed be an “impossible profession”
(Freud 1937 c).

4. A major part of our present problems is due to the fact that Freud invented a method
that serves two masters: the intersubjective quality of the exchange and objectivity. He
was well aware of the fact that there is no observation free of theory (Freud 1915 c). It
was quite natural for him to rely upon the natural sciences of his time in describing
psychological phenomena. Originally an experimental researcher, he tried to transform
the intersubjective analytic situation into a quasi-experimental “social null situation”,
as de Swaan (1980 p. 405) called it almost a century later. A set of rules and
regulations, often expressed in impressive metaphors, served this aim. He expressed
his concern that “the therapy will … destroy the science” (1927 p. 254). Freud
believed that with the help of a set of strict and non-tendentious treatment rules he
would be able to secure the best possible prerequisites for etiological reconstructions.
Furthermore, he thought that he had created the best possible therapeutic conditions
for uncovering repressed early memories. This conjunction is expressed in his famous
“junktim”-assertion translated by Strachey as the “inseparable bond” between Heilen
and Forschen. I quote this at first in German, because the most important words are
usually omitted: „… die Erkenntnis brachte den Erfolg, man konnte nicht behandeln,
ohne etwas Neues zu erfahren, man gewann keine Aufklärung, ohne ihre wohltätige
Wirkung zu erleben. Unser analytisches Verfahren ist das einzige, bei dem dies
kostbare Zusammentreffen gewahrt bleibt.“ (Freud 1927 a, p. 293 f.; emphasis added).
In English: “In psychoanalysis, there has existed from the very first an inseparable
bond between cure and research. Knowledge brought therapeutic success. It was
impossible to treat a patient without learning something new: it was impossible to gain
fresh insight without perceiving its beneficent results (wohltätige Wirkung). Our
analytic procedure is the only one in which this precious conjunction is assured. This
prospect of scientific gain has been the proudest and happiest feature of analytic
work”. (Freud 1927 a, p. 256, emphasis added). I repeat: The inseparable bond
depends on the validation of the beneficent result. The proof, therefore, of all further
questions regarding the validity of the reconstruction completely depends on the
beneficent result. The philosopher and analyst Hanly has recently studied this issue
(Hanly 2006). But I pose the question: to what extent does the alleged aimlessness and
non-tendentiousness comply with the beneficent results brought about by the influence
of the analyst by his personified method. There is a deep paradox in Freud’s work.

5. The negative effects of this unresolved paradox are huge. Analysts, who identify with
the aimless method deceive themselves and subsequently their patients bona fide.
Many analysts have overlooked this destructive self-deception for many decades. Just
analyzing was at the core of professional identity. It took the courage of former IPA president Joseph Sandler and his co-author Anna U. Dreher to boldly state: “… is analysis a therapy or is it a scientific procedure which has as its aim simply to analyze, but which may incidentally be therapeutic? The answer to this question has profound implications for the future of psychoanalysis. Our own view, about which we came to be increasingly convinced during the course of writing this book, is that those who believe that the aim of the psychoanalytic method is no more and no less than to analyze are deceiving themselves, and that all analysts are affected in their work by therapeutic aims, whether they know it or not. It will be seen that we regard as naïve the frequently heard view that as analysts we do not have any other aim in our work with our patients than that of analyzing. This view implies that the analyst is able to free himself completely of all therapeutic aims for the patient, keeping only to the goal of pursuing an ‘uncontaminated’ analysis.” (Sandler und Dreher 1996, p. 1-2) When we disclaim that we influence our patients by interpretations and other means, we deny the obvious. More so, if we try to avoid suggestions they reenter through the backdoor. We can even safely say with Strenger: „Instead of eliminating manipulations it opens the door to hidden manipulations“ (Strenger 1995, p. 106).

This is why Strenger argues to lay to rest the myth of purity of our interpretations and why he supports the notion that we have to fully recognize the intersubjective contamination’ of clinical phenomena. The psychoanalytic interaction research starts with clinical discussions that distinguish between various forms of suggestions, i. e. by a kind of decontamination.

6. The motto “just analyzing” implies the myth of aimlessness. According to Bott Spillius’ (1997) investigations, almost all contemporary Kleinians (with the exception of Steiner) pursue no objective. This is an anti-movement directed against a psychoanalysis that maintains its enlightening function in modern times. This function
is propelling the scientific advancement in a critical and interdisciplinary dialogue. At
the same time, there is a growing insecurity and a deep concern about the loss of
precious wisdom accumulated by creative practitioners in a century. There is a strong,
very conservative tendency called psychoanalytic fundamentalism that is directed
against intersubjectivity. We witness a revival of the practice to banish new
developments as deviations from “true” psychoanalysis. Hanna Segal (2006), for
instance, even accuses the British Middle Group, now called The Independents, of
having given up to search for psychoanalytic truth. "In further developments, the
Middle Group, which changed its name to the Independents, also established a new
model of the mind, deriving from Ferenczi and developed by Balint, Winnicott, and,
later in the United States, by Kohut. The fundamental difference between this model
and those of Freud, Klein, and their followers lay not in the fact that it took into
account new clinical evidence, but rather in the kinds of uses that it made of clinical
evidence. A new concern emerged that focused on various notions of cure and change
that did not rest on attaining truth and that considered the personal influences of the
analyst - e.g., his support, advice, and comfort - to be integral to the analytic process.
Here the changes in technique were of a kind that made them essentially nonanalytic.
They went against the psychoanalytic effort to bring about change through the search
for truth. For when the analyst actively takes upon himself the parental role, he invites
the patient to live in a lie. This in turn promotes concrete functioning rather than a
symbolization and psychic growth." (Segal 2006, S. 288-289). Hanna Segal calls those
changes in technique “essentially nonanalytic” that derive from the intersubjective
nature of the analytic encounter and take into account the analyst’s subjectivity. It is
implied that the aimless Kleinian “just analyzing” – a self deception according to
Sandler and Dreher – does not only serve the search for truth but fulfills Freud’s
junktim assertion. This is only an apodictic statement without any proof.
7. The therapeutic process depends mainly on the contribution of the analyst. Michael Balint emphasized this widely accepted point of view. I transformed his idea into a case-reporting schema. In this process, I was greatly influenced by Susan Isaacs’ (1939) paper “Criteria for Interpretation” and by discussions with the Kleinian trained philosopher John Wisdom (1956, 1967). Between 1963 and 1967, the case-report schema was used for the description of psychoanalytic processes at the Heidelberg-Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute (Thomä / Houben 1967, Thomä 1967). During those years I grew into an intersubjective psychoanalysis. Since 1976, supervisions by Merton Gill contributed to the development of my psychoanalytic thinking (Gill, Rotmann und Thomä 1999). The development of my psychoanalytic attitude and thinking is outlined in 18 treatment reports that eventually met Spence’s requirements (1986) for such papers. A. E. Meyer (1994) preferred to call such papers not “treatment reports”, but “interaction reports”. In the English version of the Ulm textbook volume 3 on psychoanalytic therapy (Kächele/Schachter/Thomä 2007) we demonstrate criteria for a comparative psychoanalysis.

8. Isaacs’ contribution went much further than just stating criteria for interpretation. According to her, all psychoanalysts think in causal connections even when interpreting. They come up with tentative diagnostic considerations that subsequently lead to prognostic assumptions within the framework of statistical probabilities. Fonagy shares this position (2001) in the Open Door Review. The disregard of Isaacs’ paper by the Kleinians speaks volumes toward their scientific attitude. It is neither included in Hinshelwood’s “Dictionary of Kleinian Thought” nor in Bott Spillius’ two-volume publication “Melanie Klein Today”. Hanna Segal’s completely unfounded apodictic statement follows the style of the historical controversial discussions. It does not only exclude the English Independents but also thousands of analysts as

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3 I do not count Riesenberg Malcolms reference because it is deceptive.
“essentially nonanalytic”. It is remarkable that most contemporary Freudians liberated themselves from the past. I take the liberty to interpret what true controversies are by referring to Freud: He reaches an encouraging conclusion in his reflection on the transience of beauty, art and intellectual achievement. Freud states that mourning is at some point exhausted and the loss is accepted. Young people then “replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious” (Freud 1916 a, p. 307). Most of the contemporary Freudians recognize that their therapeutic function depends on being a new object in the sense of Hans Loewald’s milestone paper (1960). The therapeutic function of the new object lies in the fact that it differs from the old object, which of course was a subject. Similarity and difference are essential categories in human life. Repetitions appear only contextualized and thus in a partial form. This is the reason for Merton Gill emphasizing the plausibility of the patient’s perception in the transference against its distortion. On the way towards an intersubjective psychoanalysis Merton Gill rehabilitated the recognition of the patient’s perceptions in the transference.

9. As a mystic, Bion is the most influential Kleinian of our time. There is something tragic to it because he himself described the difference between a true mystic and his adherents. He remained a student of Melanie Klein and recommended his technique only to those analysts “whose own analysis has been carried at least far enough for the recognition of paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions“ (Bion 1970 S. 47). On the other hand, his mysticism is serious business and contrary to many opinions his words have to be taken literally and not only figuratively. I quote his famous statements: “The first point is for the analyst to impose on himself a positive discipline of eschewing memory and desire. I do not mean that ‘forgetting’ is enough: what is required is a positive act of refraining from memory and desire. It may be wondered what state of mind is welcome if desires and memories are not. A term that would
express approximately what I need to express is „faith“ – faith that there is an ultimate reality and truth – the unknown, unknowable, „formless infinite“ (Bion 1970, p. 31). And from his book „Attention and Interpretation“: „What is to be sought is an activity that is both the restoration of god (the Mother) and the evolution of god (the formless, infinite, ineffable, non-existstent), which can be found only in the state in which there is NO memory, desire, understanding“. (Bion, 1970, p.129). Bion seems to be proud of admitting not to know about his famous concepts. For instance, he says about Alpha and Beta-elements the following: „... I think there is a lot to be said for considering what I have previously called beta-and alpha-elements, but those are not psychological, because I keep them for something I don’t know and never will know; I am assuming some kind of physical counterpart. But when it does become conscious, then I think it becomes a somewhat fanciful, theoretical construct – speculative imagination, speculative reason.” (Bion 2005, 21). Bions very elusive metaphors are responsible for the theoretical chaos. Curiously enough, their elusiveness has a secret quality and mediates the feeling of being a true analyst. To belong to a group that has access to the deepest unconscious provides a firm security. In addition, the infinite space is open for all kinds of subjective interpretations. Still, we all want to be well contained. Bion created many of the leading metaphors for our profession.

10. The contemporary new edition of the historical controversial discussions follows the traditional struggles for a strict psychoanalysis identity. Instead of an endless repetition of our ideologically based struggle for psychoanalytic "truth" or a new "Schibboleth" I plead for a modern psychoanalysis that strives to resolve its controversies at a scientific level. Indeed, hope is more than justified: since some decades, reforms centering on competence that imply a critical attitude are on their way. I regard the IPA congress in Berlin as an historical moment for what seems to be just a minor reason. However, the program is somehow different. It is expected that
“the method of discussion involves a degree of formality and focus … the group will try to look at each “intervention” the presenter made in depth, to try to decide what it seems to have been intended to achieve and what implicit and explicit ideas about psychoanalytic work lie behind it … the aim is to consider different elements of the analyst’s approach and to create an overall picture of how an analyst works based on these components”. This is the format, which makes comparative psychoanalysis and true controversies possible.
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