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## CHALLENGING RELATIONAL PSYCHOANALYSIS: A REPLY TO MY CRITICS

JON MILLS, PsyD, PhD, ABPP

*I reply to my critics' countercritique of my lectures delivered at the 2015 Israeli symposium, Challenging the Relational Approach: A Conference with Dr. Jon Mills, held at Bar-Ilan University. Points of consilience are advanced in this important dialogue between my critique of relational psychoanalysis and contemporary perspectives that are advancing the value and future identity of the relational movement. I advocate for the need to develop a more robust philosophical foundation to relational theory that can be engaged through the investigation of truth and ontology.*

**Keywords:** critique, postmodernism, relational psychoanalysis, self-disclosure, truth.

There is nothing more exciting than a clash of ideas, except for, perhaps, sex. But as psychoanalysis shows, libidinal activity suffuses the very fabric of intellectual passion. I am honored that the Israeli contingent of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy and Bar-Ilan University invited me for an international conference to challenge my critique of relational psychoanalysis. Even as I walked into the Lion's Den, I made many new friends despite the erudite, intellectually sophisticated, and philosophically shrewd arguments leveled against me by these kindred academics and clinicians. This event was truly in the spirit of what relationality practically and symbolically embodies, namely, a reaching out through the genuine desire to engage, hence an auspicious harbinger for the future of psychoanalytic dialogue.

I am sincerely grateful to my hosts and the editors of *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* for their support in publishing these conference proceedings, because it speaks to the openness of constructive discourse in advancing the field, whereas other groups and venues in this community are often closed to critique, the anathema of any intellectual discipline. And after all, is this not what psychoanalysis amounts to—an intellectual discipline capable of self-critique? Tribal or guild mentality is the death of any specialty (also see Barsness, 2018, p. 321). I am very pleased that the relational school has moved beyond its earlier insular, albeit

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revolutionary coalition (Govrin, 2017), to now stand as the world's most innovative contemporary psychoanalytic movement.

Due to space restrictions, I offer a brief reply to several of the panelists' criticism and then address the substance of the editors' analysis of my essay. As the then-president of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, it is predictable that Chana Ullman would be less than flattering. But to characterize the detailed arguments in my paper (Mills, 2017) as merely being informal fallacies of logic, that is, "divisive rhetoric pushing differences to their extreme, and on creating straw men that are then vehemently destroyed" (Ullman, 2017, p. 337), is unfair. She did not respond to the essence of my arguments, and hence offered only non sequiturs and biased misinterpretations. Speaking of extreme differences and straw men, let us take this one example:

Postmodernism is indispensable in freeing us from the simplistic assumption that there is only one person in our office who can see reality in an objective, rational way and that there is one truth waiting to be revealed, uncovered by the analyst's knowledge. (p. 337)

Here Ullman creates an extreme view of differences, a manufactured theoretical straw man, only to burn it. Neither Freud nor classical psychoanalysis ever espoused such a view, because it would be preposterous. In fact, it was Freud (1900, pp. 613, 615), following Kant, who believed that we could never know reality in itself—the *Ding-an-sich* is occluded. Ullman's assessment contrasts sharply with the thoughtful work of Shlomit Yadlin-Gadot (2016), whose analysis of the complexities and epistemologies of truth are robust, nonbinary, and nuanced. As a complex topic, Yadlin-Gadot's (2017) novel introduction of a truth axis in psychoanalysis deserves our serious engagement, although we may wish to differentiate "our basic psychological needs" from our "epistemologies" (p. 343), not to mention the ontological parameters that make truth and epistemology possible.

Boaz Shalgi (2017) also engages the themes of truth, objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity in a most coherent and sensible manner and reminds us that we inhabit these domains all at once. We are simpatico when it comes to viewing the psychic world and the clinical encounter as process, especially in relation to his appreciation of Hegel's philosophy, although we interpret him differently (see Mills, 2002). The one problem Shalgi faces, however, is making the claim that within these dimensions, "no one of them [has] precedence over the other" (p. 346). Not only does this open us up to the specter of relativism and the sanitization of Being, it suggests that there is no ontological ground (even as a process of becoming) that conditions the coming into being of truth, objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. The question becomes not whether all spheres

of reality are operative at once, but rather, are they derived from earlier ontological conditions?

This brings us to the question of metaphysics, what Liran Razinsky (2017) is railing against when he attempts to champion postmodern thinking by chiding me for not critiquing the “original postmodern ideas themselves” rather than relational authors “who use them” (p. 357), as if this would have been remotely possible given the time limitations, let alone relevant, given that the conference venue was on relational psychoanalysis. To suggest I should have critiqued the key figures in 20th-century continental philosophy instead of relational theorists who have adopted many postmodern ideas and their philosophical implications seems rather supercilious, if not ridiculous. But Razinsky is correct that I take objection to the arbitrarily culled and undisciplined use of concepts that are void of theoretical coherence and systematic articulation. Although I have no objection to philosophy in general, it is the logic, scope, quality, and sophistication of arguments that matter. Razinsky is mistaken in saying that I believe postmodernism “should be kept out of psychoanalysis” (p. 361); rather I would advocate for a more developed, systematic, and theoretically cohesive body of ideas that may contribute to an overall relational philosophy. This is conceptual work that lies ahead for the relational community to undertake.

I agree with Razinsky that psychoanalysis should embrace the humanities, as there is much fertile ground for a mutual *simpatico*; but I must once again correct his wholesale mischaracterization of me as “rejecting the relational school” (p. 362), when I have only critiqued certain theoretical aspects negatively while highlighting its positive dimensions, particularly in terms of clinical praxis. And given that I have openly referred to myself as a “relational practitioner” for decades (Mills, 2005a, 2005b, 2012), this misperception needs to be rectified for the record. But the one thing Razinsky does not address in his criticism of me is the historical contrast between the Western tradition of metaphysics and the relatively new postmodern analysis in the history of ideas. The essence of my critique of *pomocentrism* is that it does not sufficiently offer its own ontology, and depending upon which theorist one consults, it may even negate the notion of a science or logic of Being. To illustrate this problem in postmodern negation, I would like to draw attention to Razinsky’s own confessed motives behind theorization: We should “be careful when criticizing psychoanalytic stances for their affinity to postmodernism—it really might play into the hands of the resistance to psychoanalysis” (p. 362). In other words, don’t reject postmodernism because it could lead to political suicide. Hardly an argument interested in the greater metaphysical principles governing the ground, scope, and meaning of ontology, truth, and the philosophy of culture.

The one main theme that emerges from the panelists’ critique of my critique is the implication for the relational perspective’s notion of and critique of truth. But what do we mean by truth? It is a word—a semiotic—that cannot be taken for

granted, which is the very thing under debate. With the exception of Yadlin-Gadot's thoughtful analysis, the term "truth" being used here seems to imply an objectivist epistemology tied to scientific realism based on empirical facts, when this is the very thing in question that postmodern theories wish to challenge and denounce. By setting up a false binary between subject and object, self and world, truth and falsity, the concept loses its original signification and connection to archaic ontology. It was the preSocratics who alerted us to this most important concept, what they called *aletheia* (ἀλήθεια), where truth is defined as a process of disclosedness or unconcealedness. Here the notion of truth as disclosure or unconcealment cannot be properly discussed outside of a conceptual discourse on the presencing of Being, what I have addressed elsewhere as a distinct psychoanalytic contribution to truth conditioned on unconscious processes reappropriated from Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology (Mills, 2014). Here the notions of truth and being are inseparably connected, and hence any significance to the postmodern emphasis on language, culture, the socio-symbolic order, identity politics, the displacement of metaphysics, and so forth, must reconcile the ontological parameters in which consciousness and society arise. It is on this account that I have offered my own dialectical metaphysics based on unconscious process that conditions the coming into being of subjectivity and intersubjectivity within the objective energetic world of matter and our physical embodiment (Mills, 2010).

Steve Kuchuck and Rachel Sopher (2017) provide a very thorough and detailed review essay of my critique, of which I can only address certain portions due to page constraints. I find their distinction between "small r" and "big R" relational models useful, as it shows the differentiation and progression of the movement since Mitchell and Greenberg's inaugural work, but it also problematizes the issues when there may be a cross-fertilization and confluence of small and big R models, especially when they claim "there is no singular 'school' of big R Relational psychoanalysis" (p. 365). So here those identified with the movement are either relegated to factions or identified as independents within a coterie. Even more problematic is the claim that "each Relational analyst defines and practices the perspective in his or her own particular way" (p. 365), which on one level may be said to generically apply to any practitioner based on the nature of their training and group identifications, but this also highlights the individuality, even possible radical subjectivity, employed by the analyst, which opens us up to potential charges of relativism. If we cannot define, let alone agree upon, a common classification system and its differential elements, the very thing that is most contestable, then we have difficulty finding any shared common ground among those identified with the movement other than professed plurality and personal preference for particular theories and clinical attitudes. So even if I am "conflating" fine distinctions established by the movement's founders, if they cannot agree upon what sets their differences apart from the historical specificity

of terminology they employ, then this appears to be begging the question of what constitutes relationality in the first place. I think these self-definitional propositions need to be set out more clearly so I and others are not confused by the presupposed meaning of terms, which are always under hermeneutic mediation.

There are many accusations that I equivocate, distort, collapse distinctions, and oversimplify what relational authors actually say in vast bodies of works, including revisionist extensions and emendations to earlier, previously published positions that are out of date. Fair enough. It is hard to be aware of, let alone read, everyone in the field. I have certainly offered more extended engagement and arguments in my book *Conundrums* (2012) than I could have addressed in such precision at a symposium, including a more detailed critique of the concepts of intersubjectivity and drive theory. My criticisms of Benjamin and Stolorow that Kuchuck and Sopher draw attention to are more about scholarly accuracy than in applying various philosophical concepts toward advancing relational perspectives, as well as with Mitchell, who later acknowledged the locus of the drives and embodiment within relational processes. But you can't claim that everything is relational (Greenberg, 1991, pp. vii, 69–70; Mitchell, 1988, pp. 2, 4, 54) and then backtrack and retract such earlier theoretical commitments without suffering some philosophical embarrassment. These overarching absolute statements are equally problematic with some of the great metaphysical systems in Western thought, so I suppose the relational founders are in good company.

The one criticism I must insist on against relational propaganda is the fabricated difference of a one-person versus two-person psychology. When Relationalists claim that “we no longer believe that patients and analysts have isolated minds” (Kuchuck & Sopher, 2017, p. 371), they have to know that this is an invented binary designed to create an appearance of incredulity in order to depart from (and disparage) classical psychoanalysis, when Freud never said any such thing in all of his *Gesammelte Werke*. I would invite anyone to point me out any direct quote where Freud says we have an isolated (solipsistic-monadic) mind; and I would be humbled to stand corrected. As I have argued at length (Mills, 2012, pp. 90–96), the one-person isolated mind allegation is a *myth* designed to exaggerate differences that philosophically do not exist between traditional and contemporary adherents. In fact, it would be impossible in Freud's system to espouse such a view, as I have shown (Mills, 2012, pp. 75–90), because this would negate the object-seeking activity of the ego-drives (*Ichtriebe*), the nature of attachment and identification, Freud's relational theory of mind, the social dimension to classical theory, and the interpersonal nature of therapeutic technique. Even in his notion of primacy narcissism, before the differentiation and developmental growth of the ego occurs, Freud (1914, pp. 75–77, 100) is clear that the infant and mother are one and the same, an undifferentiated matrix where self and world are a unity. In his later works, he echoes this earlier sentiment when he declares that “originally the ego includes everything, later it

separates off an external world from itself” (Freud, 1930, p. 68). So here in its original psychic form, symbiosis “includes everything.” There is nothing solipsistic, let alone isolated, about the mind when the external objective world of reality is already incorporated in the infant’s interiority as an ontic (hence, relational) encounter with its ontological thrownness, whether this be conceived of as biological, environmental, cultural, or due to the brute materiality of nature that imposes itself on us, or otherwise.

Of course my views on the admonition of excessive self-disclosure are not new to relational critiques (Loewenthal & Samuels, 2014; Maroda, 2010; Roth, 2017), and I am pleased to see that Kuchuck and Sopher are in agreement with the need to be vigilant in this regard, despite appearing overly qualifying (if not apologetic) for other analysts’ behavior. But I am also in agreement with their overall concern that we should not judge others without knowing the full context of what actually transpires in the session. And for the record, despite my unease, as we have all been there, I do not place any prescriptive approach on how one *ought* to navigate clinical praxis, let alone malign or “attack” someone’s character for acting on their most well-intentioned clinical judgments. It is for this reason that I believe the relational approach cuts across many therapeutic landscapes and is attractive as a general therapeutic sensibility that can apply to many different mental health therapists working in a variety of diverse clinical environments. Traditional psychoanalysis cannot claim to boast such efficacy.

The overall tenor of many of the criticisms leveled against me is in reaction to a false dichotomy between objective and subjective epistemologies that are believed to be operative. It appears that because I adopt the belief in an objective world, this discounts a subjective world full of rich content, minutia, context, and continuity and that only an objective view of reality is the correct one. This is not the case. These are divisions invented by rival disciplines, such as observational, experimental, and computational science, mathematics, and deductive logic, which uphold reason and evidence as the gold standards of “truth,” whereas subjectivity, phenomenology, and psychological experience of all types—from affect, intuition, perception, the idiosyncrasy of thought, and the life of feeling—are inferior models that explain and interpret reality. This makes it seem like there is a metaphysical battle taking place between subjectivist and objectivist camps (Kuchuck & Sopher’s statements such as what “an objectivist might believe” [p. 367] and “Most contemporary analysts do challenge a positivist notion of objectivity” [p. 370] do not help); when in actuality, both domains are always operative and dialectically, mutually implicative for either phenomenon to exist. What is important here is finding theoretical rehabilitation where such bifurcations are contextualized and unified within an overarching relational philosophy that does not negate the natural sciences, propositional logic, or the phenomenology of the lived experience, even though we may conclude that we emphasize and value some aspects over others.

I wish to end on a note of conciliatory optimism. The one corrective I am most appreciative of in reading the panelists' and editors' comments is the reassurance that small r and big R Relational psychoanalysis has not abandoned the primacy of the unconscious and has instead proclaimed to have embraced it and have incorporated its significance in both theory and practice. This is very reassuring, as my earlier readings of relational authors seemed to have neglected its importance and value, as my book details. This equanimity reaffirms the one thing that unifies psychoanalytic theory throughout every school by reinstating the omnipresence of unconscious process. The overall appreciation I have is that there is acknowledgment that the unconscious is still very much alive in relational discourse and that bringing the unconscious back to the foreground deepens relational theory. As a sidebar, Merton Gill was my supervisor, and his then interpersonal approach to here-and-now transference monitoring and interpretation was not merely focused on conscious transactions; rather it was deeply attuned to unconscious communications within the here-and-now relational dynamics of the treatment.

I also stand corrected on my misperception that the concept of "essence" and the notion of the "self" have not been anesthetized in relational theory but rather have been rejuvenated as the movement takes on theoretical augmentation and refinement. I am encouraged by seeing this willingness to engage in self-critique, because it means that the relational movement will only move forward, especially given that it has attained international prominence. I also encourage healthy internal debate, as this tends to spur on novel developments in theory and praxis that often take unexpected new directions. In the end, we all want a vibrant professional and intellectual discipline that contributes to the human sciences, society, and the humanities.

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