

## **CBT and Pascal's Wager**

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I have four things to say that will converge quite well with what has already been said.

First, I'd like to transmit a little story from a South American psychoanalyst and friend, who practiced in Australia for a while and who, when asked what practicing psychoanalysis in Australia was like, said: where in Europe they have an unconscious, in Australia they have a Mercedes Benz.

This raises the question of whether there are different cultures with different therapeutic needs. This is a serious question. Should the Freudian unconscious be thought of as a cultural universal or will there be more advanced cultures where they have a Mercedes rather than an unconscious? Though I wondered what we would want to say about the European unconscious and the image that came to mind, was the lighthouse in Virginia Woolf's 'The Lighthouse', that's the unconscious, particularly in light of what Virginia Woolf says in her notes and letters: "In my book, The Lighthouse doesn't mean anything". That's the European unconscious and so I wondered if there are different therapies for different cultures.

Regarding the contrast we are trying to think about, CBT versus psychoanalysis, versus desire, we could say that it is a straight forward contrast between two ideals: one is the ideal of control, the other is the ideal of freedom. One is the ideal of manipulation and suppression and the other is the notion of release and some kind of freedom. You could translate this around the context of the symptom, very straightforwardly, the aim of CBT is freedom *from* symptoms and the aim of psychoanalysis is the freedom *to express* one's symptoms, to become the symptom, you might say if one is feeling particularly Nietzschean. In the psychoanalytic vision, there is a notion of 'you cannot eliminate your symptoms because your symptoms are part of you'. Freud's vision is certainly that they are an integral part of you. You might say this goes against the empiricist notion of pure environmentalism, with the notion of constitution, of character, of instinctuality, which is fundamental in Freud. So you become your symptom, you rearrange the economy, as Freud would put it, so that your symptom becomes the freely expressed representation of your specific, subjective singularity. And that is in contrast with the notion of the elimination of symptoms, as if symptoms were the fever that accompanies cholera, to be eliminated in the way that one attempts to eliminate the bacterial core from the system, which is one of the basic medical models. I just want to point out the inherent contradiction for CBT practitioners, that often CBT is linked to a more biologically oriented vision of mental illness in which most mental illnesses are long term affairs, perhaps even genetic affairs. These are symptoms you are going to be with for the rest of your life, and so there is no question of eliminating symptoms in that biological model. Schizophrenia does not go away once you have a version of penicillin to make it go away. The idea of eliminating symptoms is in tension with some of the theoretical elements associated with CBT.

That brings me to the third point, the idea that CBT and psychopharmacology have formed an interesting alliance as principal methods of treatment for a wide panoply of conditions often called mental illnesses. We are told that 35% of drugs dispensed by the National Health Service are psychopharmacological agents, and so forth, that is the prominence of psychopharmacology alongside the widespread dissemination of CBT or its affiliates. This alliance is often intentional. Both of these practices are often in opposition, explicitly and ideologically and often extremely abusively, in relation to psychoanalysis, but don't mistake that for the notion that there is a unified field of alliance between CBT and psychopharmacology, quite the opposite. I recommend going to websites or look at text books to see the hostility that can be generated between the CBTists and psychopharmacology, partly because its at this point the biological basis of mental illness, so called, emerges as a problem for both!

I think CBT has to be taken more seriously as a set of practices. The way I recommend you think about it is by referring back to Pascal's wager in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which is his extremely famous argument about whether I should believe in god or not: you have the existence of god and the possible non-existence of god and you have belief in god and non-belief in god, so you have a box of four possibilities and you look at the possibility of 'if I don't believe in god but in fact he exists, that's very bad news because I lose my immortal soul for eternity'. The logic of Pascal's wager is that you should believe in god because it is in your best interest, whether or not god exists. On top of that, Pascal adds in the fact that, if

you don't believe in god to start of with, you can come to believe in him easily by going to church, reciting your prayers, reading the bible often enough and hanging out with people who are believers. This way you will come to believe in god. So we have in Pascal's wager a combination of the beginnings of rational choice theory and an argument about how to come to a cognitive state through behaviour, and how you can manipulate your inner world on something as important as whether to believe in god or not, and arrive at a state in which you can save your immortal soul. Now the terms of Pascal's wager have been thought to be deeply offensive to some. Voltaire found it offensive because he realised that Pascal's wager made the business of fighting against the Theists a rather dirty business. This would have been met with contempt, this form of argument. But we may see forms of the Pascalian wager behaviour, as you might say, as extremely appropriate to a rational, economy driven society, like the one we live in, with regard to its affinities with the forms of argument CBT has put together: the cognitive, the behavioural, the wager passion aspect, the rational decision aspect of Pascal and the 'just go to church and you will come to believe whatever nonsense you are meant to believe', that aspect of Pascal, one should not take too lightly. I've also managed to link that with the particular landscape of ideology at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is a landscape in which the peculiar position of religion should never be underestimated, and I think at that point I should stop.

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