

The practising therapist

Terrors and Experts

by Adam Phillips

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David Papineau

EVER since its beginnings over a century ago, psychoanalysis has been pulled in two opposite directions. On one side, Sigmund Freud's insights promised a new science, a rational key that would unlock the human psyche in the way that Newton had unlocked the secrets of the solar system. But at the same time, the very tools of psychoanalysis seem quite antithetical to scientific rationality. How can an objective science be built on dreams, symbols, word-play and concealment?

Freud himself believed in the scientific potential of his new theory, and compared the channelling of repressed desire to the behaviour of a hydraulic fluid in a system of pipes. But since Freud's time, the shining image of science has been much tarnished, and few of his modern followers would be happy to present themselves as hydraulic engineers of the mind.

In his latest collection of psychoanalytic essays, Adam Phillips distinguishes an "Enlightenment



Adam Phillips: shrink unwrapped

Freud", who pursues objective knowledge, from a "post-Freudian Freud", who hopes for nothing more than fables that will enable us to live better. Phillips's sympathies are emphatically with the Freud who comes *after* Freud. But because of this, he discerns a paradox at the heart of psychoanalytic thought.

The real lesson of Freud's teaching, for Phillips, is that there is no fixed core within the human psyche. There are only stories, including the stories that people use to make sense of themselves, and the stories that analysts help their patients construct when the patients' own stories go wrong. So psychoanalysis offers no expert answers. But of course, the denial of a plumbable psyche is itself an expert answer, and one which psychoanalysis claims for its own.

What is more, argues Phillips, this paradox of theory is mirrored within the practical contract between patient and analyst. Someone who turns to a psychoanalyst for help is looking for an authority who can supply definitive answers to troubling questions. Yet psychoanalysis aims to dissolve this yearning for authoritative answers

by identifying its roots in the child's dependence on its parents. Once more, the institution of psychoanalysis seems to cut away the ground on which it rests.

Adam Phillips is a practising therapist as well as a distinguished writer. This is his third collection of psychoanalytically inspired essays (following *On Kissing, Tickling And Being Bored* and *On Flirtation*) and he has written and edited a variety of other works. Here he pursues the paradoxical consequences of his post-Freudian Freudianism through a range of topics.

Phillips's essays have been widely admired for their literary virtues as well their theoretical merits, but they are not easy to digest. His prose is dense and allusive and his line of thought often erratic. He is fond of dropping phrases out of context from other writers, sometimes two or three to a page, and he has an irritating habit of starting sentences with "that is to say" or "in other words", even when what follows bears little obvious relation to what went before. It is as if he feels his writing ought to mirror his subject matter, and trace the disjointed path of a mind which is continually reworking its idea of where it is going.

There is one passage in the book where Phillips breaks free from his agenda and the writing comes alive. He describes a patient, a young boy with awful eczema, living in a tiny room with a confused mother, and both hating and missing his absent father. Here we see the kind of misery that Phillips must regularly meet in his practice. And we see how Phillips rightly refuses to offer solutions, but gently suggests ways in which his patients can unravel their tangled minds.

If Phillips's strength is his experience of the human mind *in extremis*, his weakness is to overestimate the depth of the paradoxes he identifies. There are indeed many reasons, both inside psychoanalysis and without, for rejecting the traditional picture of an essential Cartesian subject which the mental doctor must cure, and replacing it with an alternative model of our selves as shifting palimpsests of wishes, fears and remembered episodes.

But it does not follow, just because we cannot speak clearly about Cartesian minds, that we cannot speak clearly about anything. Phillips is probably right to hold that the rejection of Cartesianism creates a tension in psychoanalytic practice, which can be resolved only by the adoption of creative new kinds of therapy. But it confuses therapy with theory to conclude, as Phillips seems to, that any theorising, including his own theorising *about* psychoanalytic practice, should restrict itself to allusions, hints and suggestions.

Early in the volume, Phillips says that "one must affirm invention at the expense of argument". I have no doubt that his patients benefit from his invention as a therapist. But his readers would gain if, as a writer, he had more time for argument.