

Einstein, Time and The Unconscious*

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Abstract: This article, which was presented at the 2017 Conference of the International Forum for Psychoanalytic education, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, discusses how we interpret and experience time and how such experiences affect our understanding of both the topographical as well as the structural models. Following the thought of both ancient Hindu teachings (the Upanishads) as well as contemporary findings from quantum mechanics, the article frames the discussion within a unitary experience of both mind and everyday experience. The functions of clinical interpretations are also discussed. Following the tradition articulated in Roy Schaffer's action language model as well as insights from existentialism, the article offers a deeper appreciation of individual agency and its role in self-understanding and personal growth.

It is reported that when writing to the wife of a friend who had recently died, Einstein wrote, "of course, you know that time does not exist" which I simply read as saying *stay in the ever-present-now of your love*. What I would like to discuss today, in light of his remark, focuses on the idea that the categories of past, present and future are ultimately illusory. (Technically what Einstein established was that there is no universal time; that is, time is related to location and velocity, i.e., the

speed of light). What I am speaking about this morning is opening¹ our personal experience to the awareness of timelessness. Freud, (1922) in his descriptions of what he characterizes as unconscious, contra Kant, states... *We have found by experience that unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless'* (p.32). Along with the notion of a timeless unconscious, we can also sense what many of the cases, particularly in *Studies in Hysteria* imply, that is, that at the end of treatment a patient, at some level, knew it all along; a conclusion that I have confirmed in my own practice as well.

I believe that patients know it all along but need to know it within a holding environment, to know it along with someone else who knows it with them. To know it all along means that psychoanalysis does not excavate from the past but rather makes the present more available. What Freud uncovered is that we all need to tell our story to someone so we can hear and know it as our own. Knowledge is not time bound – that certainly was Plato's conviction.

We do not repress the past, there is no past to repress; for a while we turn our gaze from a computer screen, to use an everyday comparison, and look out a window. We distract ourselves, we split off, we dissociate, frequently with good reasons...but we do the acting...everything is as it was...we have just turned our gaze away. Is that why many existentialists referred to repression as *bad faith*? We

¹ I am particularly indebted to Julian Barbour's text: "The End of Time"...a book that was foundational in my understanding and interest in quantum mechanics.

know what we are doing, even if there are few alternatives. That is also why I have suggested that Freud's archeological metaphors are somewhat misleading. Interpretations, either from the analyst or the patient, are creations, not excavations. Interpretations, in general and of "unconscious material" create something new. Perhaps that is why Paul Ricoeur (1970) notes that psychoanalysis can give patients a new history. Operationally, past, present and future allows us the experience of progressive self-understanding and self-creation. But paradoxically the lens I am looking through, at this moment, sees them as one.

Interpretations are analogous, I believe, to the measurement of the position or the momentum of a subatomic particle; the observation/measurement is an act of creation, not a passive and objective measurement from a nonparticipating observer of a reality that is already in existence prior to the measurement. The proton exists while it is observed; before observation it is a haze of probability. There are only participant/observers at the quantum level; and it is particularly important to remember that observation, in this context, means interacting with, not passively looking at. How one sets up the observation determines the reality one finds – the reality is not out there waiting, waiting independently, to be discovered. John Wheeler, the noted physicist, characterized it this way: the questions we ask determine the answers we get. Basically, the quantum world of probability waves is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in

particular; it exists within our time/space continuum, but it has no more specificity than that. (Einstein regarded quantum mechanics as incomplete for many reasons; an observer/dependent world and a world of probability rather than predictability were models he could not accept.)

We are participant/observers with everyone we interact with, singularly with our patients. Perhaps that is why different schools of therapy frequently get different responses, particularly as seen in dreams, from their patients.

I am making a comparison here, an analogy when I say that consciousness is like a probability wave; it is everywhere and nowhere, so to speak. Our supposed past is always on...just like our computer...with all its information...but for a while we are looking someplace else.

Past, present, and future along with subject-object categories are ultimately abstractions... or perhaps better termed... dimensions of experience. They do not exist in themselves. (I am not addressing entropy in this discussion) Abstractions that have, unfortunately, become confining concepts - all in the shadow of Descartes's bifurcation of mind and matter. We are not isolated monads. Human consciousness is communal, not exclusively individual. That is, meaning comes to be in community and, in the deepest sense, we are somehow one with all that surrounds us. (Cavell,1988; Gargiulo, 2004, 2016) Alfred North

Whitehead (1957) codified this in his “process philosophy” – he understood that every atom in the cosmos is related to every other atom in the cosmos. I am indebted to my colleague Dr. Jared Russell for reminding me that the kind of oneness I am talking about was well articulated by Spinoza, (1996) particularly in his *Ethics* and, of course, before him, evidenced in *The Upanishads* (2015). Likewise, David Bohm, (1980) the noted quantum physicist, speaks of what he classifies as the *Implicate Order*; a sub quantum level where everything is interconnected, where everything is, so to speak, one. Winnicott (1971) speaks to the two overlapping areas of play between patient and therapist; that is, a getting beyond the subject/object categories that inform most of our thinking. What does this mean? Perhaps what it means is that the cosmos is primarily and simply a locus of information ... a holograph might be a good analogy (?) – where all the parts contain all the other parts.

What I am suggesting, with this analogy, is an intellectual model that might help us understand both ourselves and our patients from a new perspective.

What might this mean clinically? Perhaps the following sentence can capture some of what I am hinting at...*as a patient is relating his or her history, the analyst is also writing his or her autobiography.* Patients’ stories necessarily stimulate our own reflections. As they are telling theirs, we are building a bridge to them; yet not only to them but to the

wider world as well. More to the point, as patients are telling their histories they are, in fact, creating them. Human beings are not recording cameras - remembering is a present-day experience – memory is a creative act, not an excavation from a past. What I am trying to suggest is that an analyst's operational frame, so to speak, should be open to everything as present. When a patient is crying over the loss of a loved parent or child, for example, they are not remembering a past, so to speak. They are grieving for a present loss - a loss which has meaning precisely because it is communal, precisely because it transcends our everyday divisions of time.

An analyst helps create by what he or she says or sometimes leaves unsaid what is already there waiting to be created - just as the act of observing a proton creates its existence. Notwithstanding that after an observation it no longer exists - as an observable phenomenon; but it always exists, de facto. I believe that this is a useful analogy for what I am trying to convey. What we think of, as the past is the present under observation...so to speak. The therapist's interventions are, most frequently, the observing instrument for creating what is there - waiting to be created. Waiting, so to speak, to turn our eyes back to the computer screen – to see what's happening. We are participant/observers when studying the micro world; we are also participant/observers as we create the world of patient and analyst.

I do not mean to reduce what is “unconscious” simply to images, memories or phantasies; if anything, split off desire is more present than memories, thoughts or images. Unacknowledged or unrecognized desire is present, not absent, just like the ever-present wave function. That is why it can be created by interpretation, why it can come forth in the clinical setting, through observation – either the patient’s or the analyst’s. I have said to a patient, on occasion, and with sensitivity to timing, I hope, *...you know everything that you have to know, let yourself know it.*

We are mindful creatures and by mind I don’t just mean images or thoughts. I mean something close to what we refer to as consciousness. I am not sure if consciousness is inside us, so to speak, or outside us... like the air we breathe. I personally think that what we refer to as consciousness is one and consequently that we experience it by way of participation. An observer/participatory world elevates observation to a normative role – consciousness, in this context, transcends our individual experience of it. Consequently, as personal consciousness expands we are progressively more open to appreciating our participatory experiences with others as well as the world around us. If we can experience that past, present and future are abstract dimensions then we are more likely to appreciate that consciousness, if anything, is most likely communal. It is not singular. If this is so and if our tripartite division of past, present and future is just how we are able to interpret

the world, then, we can note, that the topographical model of Conscious, Preconscious and Unconscious ...is, like time itself, a theoretical abstraction.

Consciousness is one ... we are limited individuals...we divide to better understand...but the division is not the reality. The division is not the understanding. Given the shortness of this presentation, I recognize that I am close to begging the question. I am, however, offering thoughts for your further exploration and thought.

Let me repeat what I alluded to above. That is, there is no unconscious without what we call consciousness; furthermore, *the clinical unconscious*, in contradistinction to the normal forgetfulness, is always present, waiting to be created – think of a probability wave – waiting to be observed – that is, actualized. We create what we name as unconscious by interpretation. What we call pre-conscious and/or the unconscious are not nouns, as it were; they are dimensions of awareness. They are not categories of being but theoretical constructs ...supposedly to help our understanding.

Einstein greatly admired Freud's writings and repeatedly told him so in their mutual correspondence. But he could not accept Freud's theories. Although Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, speaks of timelessness in his understanding of the unconscious, his description of such an unconscious clouds the point. It misses the dynamic of the ever-present that only comes to awareness through interpretation, that is,

observation. I recognize that I am working within a quantum mechanical framework - a perspective that was not available to Freud when he wrote this text. We create the past, so to speak, as much as we create the present. At its deepest level, we live in a timeless world and yet of practical everyday necessity divide this world into past/present/future. If our patients, as well as we, can hold the paradox, all will be the better for it. To be in touch, in whatever way possible, with a sense of the timeless offers a sense of ownership over one's life that is basic, I believe, for creating who we are.

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