THEORY AND PRACTICE

Revisiting a contrasting thought between Descartes and Spinoza in the light of psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to revisit one contrasting thought on the notion of cause and effect between Descartes and Spinoza. This debate will be re-examined in the light of clients' knowledge of the cause and effect of their psychological distress, prior to seeking psychotherapy and in the process of receiving treatments. The treatment approach chosen for this paper is psychodynamic. This paper also aims to demonstrate how psychotherapeutic ideas can contribute to philosophical debates.

Introduction

While the influence of philosophical thoughts and debates upon psychology has been well recognized (Valentine, 1992; MacDonald & MacDonald, 1995; Robinson, 1995; O'Donohue & Kitchener, 1996), such influence is also evident in psychotherapy, e.g. psychoanalysis and existential psychotherapy (Frankl, 1967; Yalom, 1980; May, 1983; Deurzen-Smith, 1988; Cavell, 1993; Farrell, 1994; Erwin, 1996). However, one must not overlook the contribution that psychotherapeutic ideas can make to some longstanding philosophical debates.

The debate that has been chosen for the present paper is shared between Rene Descartes (1596–1650/1978) and Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza (1632–1677/1993). The former was born at La Haye, France in 1596 and the latter was born in Amsterdam, Holland in 1632. Although neither described themselves as 'rationalists', they were commonly regarded to be the dominant thinkers who led the movement of rationalism in the 17th century. Despite the fact that their debate has been chosen for the present paper, this does not mean that these two great thinkers had actually met and discussed philosophical issues. In fact, when Descartes died, Spinoza was only 17 years old and had never read any of Descartes's works (Corningham, 1988). However, as Spinoza developed his philosophy, it became...
evident that his works were significantly influenced by that of Descartes. It also became evident that during the development of his philosophy, Spinoza refuted many aspects of Descartes’s philosophy. The word ‘debate’ indeed reflects their contrasting views.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to point out all of their contrasting views. Deleuze (1990) has recently summarized some of their debates, one of which has been chosen to be the basis of our present discussion. It focuses on the notion of cause and effect. Simplistically put, Descartes believed that we have a clear and distinct knowledge of an effect before we have a clear and distinct knowledge of its cause. He demonstrated this by referring to his famous proposition, ‘I think, therefore I am’. That is, I know that I exist as a thinking being (the effect), before I know the cause of my existence. In other words, a clear and distinct knowledge of an effect presumes the knowledge of its cause. Descartes then went on to say that the knowledge of the cause is a confusing one. Thus, a clear and distinct knowledge of an effect presumes a confusing knowledge of its cause and never depends on a perfect knowledge of the cause.

Spinoza, on the other hand, viewed this notion of cause and effect quite the opposite from Descartes. He said that although a clear and distinct knowledge of an effect presumes the knowledge of its cause, we will not know anything about the cause beyond what we consider in the effect. Thus, he suggested that we need to obtain what he called ‘adequate knowledge’ of universal causes. To describe in detail his theory on adequate knowledge is beyond the scope of this paper, but it can be briefly summarized as follows.

Adequate knowledge refers to the knowledge of the determined causal laws in Nature or Substance or God (these three terms mean more or less the same thing, i.e. the word God does not mean that which we know in Christianity). In other words, this knowledge conveys the necessary truth which necessarily and logically constitutes Nature. It is a universally true knowledge by which we discriminate genuine knowledge from confused and uncertain judgement. It is worth noting that according to Spinoza, acquisition of this adequate knowledge does not mean a complete knowledge or understanding of all possible universal laws.

Such adequate knowledge proceeds from universal causal laws to the effect. The idea is that an effect cannot be known except when its universally determined causes are already and better known. In other words, Spinoza believed that it is not enough to show how the effect depends on the cause (Descartes); rather we need to show how the knowledge of an effect depends on the universally agreed knowledge of its cause.

**Descartes: prior to psychotherapy**

While the above debate has been discussed by professional philosophers, many of whom take an analytical approach (e.g. Bennett, 1984; Hampshire, 1988; Parkinson, 1993; Curley, 1994), I wish to examine it from the following two perspectives, that is, focusing on clients’ knowledge of the cause and effect of their psychological
distress prior to seeking psychotherapy, and whilst in the process of receiving treatments, respectively.

Although it is difficult to generalize, it is usually the case, with some exceptions, that people seek psychotherapy because they are experiencing psychological distress. In other words, prior to receiving psychotherapy, some clients (type one) are aware of the fact that they are suffering from psychological pain, i.e. the effect, though they might not be aware of the exact symptoms which constitute this distress, or of its cause.

As an example, a lady who attended therapy for about one year said, in a preliminary meeting (before the first therapy session), that she did not know why she had come but she felt that she needed to come. She had been feeling 'distressed' and 'fed up'. However, the intensity of these feelings varied and was not consistent enough to be identified as 'clinical symptoms'. That is, she did not know what constituted her distress. Neither did she know what caused it. At this stage, seemingly, Descartes's claim is partially right in that this client has a clear and distinct knowledge that she is experiencing psychological distress, i.e. the effect; however, she finds the essence of it confusing. Likewise, as Descartes rightly pointed out, she also finds the cause of her distress confusing.

However, a closer look at the above type one clients' experiences of psychological distress actually reveals a weakness in Descartes's claim. It is noteworthy that when these clients claim that they have a clear and distinct knowledge that they are experiencing psychological distress, they are reporting an 'empirical' knowledge. That is, this knowledge is based on their immediate sensory experiences rather than intellectual and logical reasoning. In other words, these clients have a clear and distinct 'empirical knowledge' of their distress (effect) which is, however, not the kind of knowledge to which Descartes would refer as clear and distinct. This is due to the fact that he was essentially a rationalist who had based much of his thinking on logical reasoning, as opposed to empirical knowledge. That is, for clients to say that they have a clear and distinct knowledge that they are suffering from psychological distress, they have to have gone through a stage of intellectual or logical inquiry. However, type one clients have not done so. In that sense, one can argue that they still have not obtained the Cartesian sense of clear and distinct knowledge of the effect. Hence, the effect is still confusing to them in the same way as the cause.

To expand the argument further, prior to therapy, some clients have an 'empirical knowledge' of their distress, like the type one clients, and also have 'some ideas' about the symptoms of the distress (the effect). Let's call them the type two clients. They now wish to understand the 'exact symptoms' that constitute it, i.e. understand the exact nature of the effect. For instance, another lady, prior to therapy, said that she knew that she was suffering from psychological distress. She also knew that in her distress, she regularly experienced tearfulness, as well as anger and rage. However, in addition to these symptoms, she did not know if there were others accompanying them, and whether or not these other symptoms would make her commit suicide or harm others. Neither did she know if they would eventually drive her to 'madness'. Seemingly, this lady, a type two client, now wants to pursue the Cartesian sense of clear and distinct knowledge of her distress by investigating
the essence of it, implying an intellectual or logical inquiry rather than simply relying on her empirical knowledge of the distress. Again, at this stage, she did not know what caused her distress.

There are some other clients (type three) who believe that they have the Cartesian sense of clear and distinct knowledge of their distress (the effect), and now want to seek psychotherapy mainly in order to find out the causes and treatment of it. They have a clear and distinct knowledge that their distress is composed of, for example, depression, panic attack and severe anxiety. They also know that they have been experiencing these for a certain period of time and know what they could make them do. In fact, they are so familiar with these symptoms that they can articulate them to their therapists at great length. To a large extent, these clients' experiences echo Descartes's claim more fully, in that they might have gone through a kind of intellectual inquiry and subsequently obtained a clear and distinct knowledge of their distress. However, the cause remains confusing to them.

There is a further type of client (type four), which comprises those who have the Cartesian sense of clear and distinct knowledge of their distress, like the type three clients. However, contrary to Descartes's claim, they also have a clear and distinct knowledge that the symptoms of their distress are due to certain causes. That is, they have a clear and distinct knowledge of both the effect and the cause. They seek psychotherapy mainly to find out how to reduce the intensity of their distress. For instance, a man, in a preliminary meeting prior to therapy, said that he suffered from panic disorder and could manifest all the typical symptoms, whenever he found himself in crowds. He also knew that this was due to the fact that he had been involved in a fire in a very crowded underground station some months before. It is possible that this man has gone through an intellectual inquiry of his psychological and physical reactions to different crowded situations, which consequently led him to obtain this clear and distinct knowledge of both the cause and effect of his psychological distress. Seemingly, this case casts doubt on Descartes's claim.

**Descartes in the light of one principle of psychodynamic psychotherapy**

Let's now examine Descartes's claim from the second perspective, which focuses on clients' knowledge of the cause and effect of their distress, whilst they are in the process of receiving psychotherapy. For the sake of discussion, psychodynamic psychotherapy has been chosen. Many principles of psychodynamic psychotherapy have been described and explained in detail (Brown & Pedder, 1991; Patton & Meara, 1992; Malan, 1993) and are too numerous to be included in the present discussion. However, there is one principle that is of interest to this discussion. In psychodynamic psychotherapy, there is an intimate or interdependent relationship between clients talking about their distress, exploring its causes and receiving treatments. That is, when clients describe their distress with the therapists, they are already in the process of exploring the causes, which in turn means that they are already in the process of receiving treatment. All three processes happen together, affect each other simultaneously, and do not exist independently of each other. In other words, they are essentially different expressions of the same thing, in that the
more clients have talked about their distress, the more they would have explored the causes, and in turn, the more they would have received treatment.

In the light of the above principle, psychodynamic psychotherapists might ask how it is possible that clients, according to Descartes, can have a clear and distinct knowledge of their psychological distress (effect) and yet not know the cause during treatments. They argue that during treatments, if clients truly claim that they have a clear and distinct knowledge of their distress, they would have adequately described their distressing symptoms, and adequately explored the causes. In other words, there is no way that during treatments, clients can truly claim to have a clear and distinct knowledge of their distress without having had a clear and distinct knowledge of its cause. In that sense, Descartes’s argument seems to be problematic. Of course, it is not uncommon that clients ‘delude’ themselves by claiming that they have a clear and distinct knowledge of their distress so that they can terminate the painful exploration of causes, hence, treatments.

**Spinoza: prior to psychotherapy**

Turning to the examination of Spinoza’s argument from the perspective of clients’ knowledge of the cause and effect of their psychological distress prior to seeking psychotherapy, it seems that Spinoza is mistaken in thinking that the adequate knowledge of universal causal laws is what people, in this case, clients, should have. The types of clients mentioned previously have clearly demonstrated their confusion in finding clear and distinct causes, with the exception of the last type of clients (type four).

However, to be fair to Spinoza, in his philosophy, he does not deny that people can be confused about things. In fact, quite the opposite, he is too aware of the confusion of cause and effect that people often experience. His explanation for that rests upon the fact that people pursue ‘sensory knowledge’ which is on the one hand a knowledge of common sense, and on the other hand the lowest form of knowledge that people can obtain. According to Spinoza, this kind of knowledge is derived from one’s imagination, ignorance, testimony, memory, habits or from the previous ideas pressing upon oneself rather than any systematic and logical investigations. That is, this is a vague form of knowledge implying a lack of order of logical necessity. It does not represent the true causal laws of Nature but represents our common-sense knowledge or sense perception, which is passive, i.e. not genuine, subjective and uncertain. Many of us, including the types of clients mentioned above, operate with such knowledge. Thus, it is not surprising for Spinoza to know that these clients do not have a clear and distinct knowledge of the cause and effect of their distress.

Due to his awareness of the above confusion in humans, Spinoza’s aim, then, is to help people to avoid this confusion by focusing on discovering the adequate knowledge of universal causal laws. That is why he thinks that clients should obtain the adequate knowledge in the first place. The successful acquisition of this knowledge helps people to improve or mend their intellect so that they can think ‘clearly’ and ‘distinctly’ about the causes of their own actions. Thus, it might appear that Spinoza’s claim is mistaken but in fact what he is proposing is a form of ‘therapy’
(Bennett, 1984; Neu, 1977) in which, if people can obtain the adequate knowledge by knowing the true causal laws of Nature, they can then know their own nature (i.e. mind and behaviour) within these universal laws of Nature. This means that they can begin to live according to these causal laws of Nature, not to their own passive emotions or sensory knowledge. Hence, they can then reduce the likelihood of falling into confusion and error. In other words, they should try to achieve an intellectual understanding where their thoughts, energy and activities are directed to act according to the logical laws and causes of Nature.

**Spinoza in the light of one principle of psychodynamic psychotherapy**

Keeping this Spinozistic therapy in mind, it is then more appropriate to examine Spinoza’s argument by turning to the second perspective of clients’ knowledge of the cause and effect of their distress, namely, whilst receiving treatment. To an extent, there is a similarity between the Spinozistic therapy and the principle of psychodynamic psychotherapy. Spinoza echoes the latter by saying that the knowledge of clients’ distress (effect) and of the cause should be intimately interrelated in treatment. That is, people should obtain adequate knowledge of the universal causal laws, as a form of Spinozistic treatment of one’s intellect, which then leads to an adequate understanding of the effect. Indeed, the notions of cause, effect and treatment in Spinozistic therapy affect each other in the same way as that of psychodynamic psychotherapy. Clients’ failure to explore the universal causes of Nature meant the failure in understanding the effect. This in turn meant a failure in treatment or the emendation of their intellect.

However, obviously Spinoza’s therapy is a lot broader than that of psychodynamic psychotherapists. While the latter are interested in discovering the causes of clients’ neurosis within their dynamic experiences (e.g. with significant others within families) or with significant experiences (e.g. sexual abuse), the former wants to search for the adequate knowledge, a clear and distinct knowledge of the determined causal laws of Nature, i.e. the laws of Nature to which our minds and behaviours are subject. In other words, as Hampshire (1972) pointed out, Spinoza is not looking for specific causes within one’s specific dynamic experiences. To do so in fact leads one to fall into error. We often isolate one cause and think of it as something that makes the difference. This is indeed a failure to realize the infinite complexity of the connections between things in the temporal order. The error is that we often love or hate the particular thing which we isolate in our minds from the infinitely complex network in the common order of nature. Indeed, we should not detach ourselves or be sceptical about the infinite complexity of causes.

**Final thoughts**

In closing this paper, I wish to make three final remarks. First, Spinozistic psychotherapy might appear to be too abstract for many of our contemporary psychologists and psychotherapists. The idea that one can use a ‘therapeutic tool’, which is based on searching for something universal and on working out where one is in
relation to Nature, is probably beyond the thoughts of many contemporary psychotherapists. It is therefore easy for us to be sceptical of the fact that Spinoza, being an intellectual philosopher in the 17th century, can offer some useful insights to the field of contemporary psychotherapy. However, to see if Spinozistic psychotherapy is a realistic or an effective therapeutic tool, one needs to carry out empirical testings. Whether or not therapists and clients can ever obtain this adequate knowledge remains to be seen. That is, we should not allow our own personal bias to dismiss an opportunity in which a new therapeutic approach might come into being.

Secondly, prior to these testings, one needs to have a good understanding of Spinozistic therapy. What has been described in terms of Spinoza’s claim by no means represents the entirety of his philosophy. It only provides an opening description of where Spinoza stands in relation to other thinkers. More explorations and clarifications of his philosophical thinking are needed. In particular, one needs to point out that Spinozistic therapy is not a technique but a set of principles that can possibly be incorporated into other forms of contemporary psychotherapy.

Finally, while philosophical ideas can be applied to understand and explain the theory or practice of psychotherapy and psychology (Spitzer & Maher, 1990; Griffiths, 1994; Erwin, 1996), this paper has demonstrated an attempt to understand or examine philosophical ideas through psychological or psychotherapeutic ideas. Philosophy and psychotherapy should no longer stand by themselves. Perhaps, one of the main aims of contemporary psychotherapy research is to continue to show how philosophical ideas can be applied to psychotherapy and how psychotherapeutic ideas can contribute to philosophical debates.

References


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