

BEYOND THE DYNAMIC UNCONSCIOUS

Franco De Masi



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About the author

Franco De Masi, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, is a full member of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society and a training analyst at the National Training Institute of the same society. Among his publications are *Karl Abraham: At the Roots of Analytic Theory* (2018), *Vulnerability to Psychosis: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Nature and Therapy of the Psychotic State* (2009), and *Herbert Rosenfeld at Work: The Italian Seminars* (2001), which he edited. Other publications include *The Sado-masochistic Perversion: The Entity and the Theories* (2003), *Making Death Thinkable* (2006), which was awarded the Gradiva prize for the best Italian book of psychoanalysis in 2003, and *Working with Difficult Patients: From Neurosis to Psychosis* (2015). His latest books include *Lessons in Psychoanalysis: Psychopathology and Clinical Psychoanalysis for Trainee Analysts* (2023), and *A Psychoanalytic Approach to Treating Psychosis: Genesis, Psychopathology and Case Study* (2020).

Introduction

Through this book I would like to contribute to psychoanalysis as a therapeutic discipline, broadening its indications to include psychic suffering hitherto considered unreachable.

When I was still training to be a psychoanalyst, I was taught to distinguish between patients who were suited to psychoanalytic therapy and those who were not. What was meant by “suited” were subjects who could dream and associate as well as understand and accept the analyst’s symbolic interpretations. Patients like this were considered “analysable”: others, however, were not; naturally, in this second group were patients who were either not receptive to treatment or were psychotic, for whom analysis was thought to be iatrogenic, or, rather, that it could worsen a situation which was already extremely compromised.

Although these indications now appear outdated, still today, in my opinion therapies for patients in which the analytic method comes up against difficulties of application are not studied as they ought to be. The question that remains unanswered is why some patients are not suited to analytic treatment. What is it that so-called non-analysable patients have, or do not have, in comparison to analysable patients?

Psychoanalysis, born from the discovery of the dynamic unconscious, developed a therapeutic technique based on the interpretation of repressed psychic conflicts, which are often clarified in dreams. The analytic approach therefore works with those patients whose dynamic unconscious remains active and indicates the analysand's beliefs and areas of psychic suffering outside awareness through dreams or associations.

In other patients (borderline and psychotic), the dynamic unconscious is not active; unconscious intuitive functions, which are able to represent psychic reality, have come to a standstill or been unable to develop in these individuals, hence the title of the book, *Beyond the Dynamic Unconscious*.

After working for many years with various kinds of patients, and having acquired sufficient clinical experience, I felt a need to broaden my therapeutic experience by investigating areas relatively unexplored by psychoanalysis, namely, patients who are difficult to analyse. Along this path, I understood only retrospectively that I had gone beyond the territory of the dynamic unconscious and towards territory where there are psychic processes outside awareness underlying our mental functioning which are extremely deficient in severely ill patients.

Part I, "Within the territory of the dynamic unconscious", is about certain aspects of therapeutic work with patients for whom psychoanalysis was devised, that is, patients with a mental apparatus that hinges on the dynamic unconscious. I shall mention here some topics that are developed in this first part of the book.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the relationship between psychoanalytic theories and models, and I advance the hypothesis that in psychoanalysis, rather than theories, it could be more useful to speak of models, which describe partial functions of the psyche and correspond to hypotheses that can be surpassed as psychoanalytic knowledge expands.

Another topic is how the analytic perspective of childhood life has changed over the past few decades. Freud had established an equivalence between the primitive and the pathological, and he argued that pathology derived from undeveloped primitive infantile structures in the psyche. If we consider the child as a competent being within the limits of his¹ psychic development, as we do today, then the view of

¹For ease of reading, masculine pronouns will be used throughout the book, generally applying to all subjects.

pathology changes, too. From this perspective, the causes of suffering derive not so much from the permanency of primitive drives, but distortions caused mainly by environmental factors that interfere with the child's development.

Yet another important topic dealt with in this first part of the book is the concept of psychic truth. Although the human mind is more inclined to believe in illusions or lies than the truth, it had to be acknowledged that some falsifications are necessary for development. It has been understood that for a child it is important to believe in illusions, that is, to believe that perceived reality has been created by him. This same belief, however, poses a danger if it is nurtured to erase essential relating with real experience.

A topic not widely discussed in psychoanalytic literature is the duration of therapy. This particularly concerns the analysis of difficult patients, whose treatment necessarily goes beyond expected time frames. To achieve stable transformations in these cases requires not only considerable trust in the analytic tool but also a considerable length of time.

Analytic therapy in old age is also dealt with, a topic I feel is worthy of further attention. Considering that human life in today's conditions of well-being has progressively lengthened, psychoanalysts will be called upon more frequently to help people live their old age as an integral part of life and remain creative even during this last part of life.

Present in the psychoanalyst's mind at all times in his profession should be the concept of the superego. Most suffering by those undergoing analysis stems from a superego that is no longer a structuring element of the psyche but a persecutory psychopathological organisation. In these cases, the superego uses guilt for perverse purposes, as occurs in dictatorial regimes.

Part II highlights the existence of mental states that are inaccessible to the traditional psychoanalytic method due to the mind having undergone transformation, thus preventing intuitive functions for understanding psychic reality from being used.

My hypothesis is that with these patients we are faced with minds that are employed not to know and develop one's identity but to create alternative, exciting worlds to live in. In these cases, reality distortion does not occur via repression, as in the neuroses, but through an alteration to

tools needed for our knowledge of subjective as well as objective reality. These patients lack a psychic apparatus capable of understanding the meaning of one's thoughts; we could say that they are unable to think their own thoughts.

Many observations in Part II are on the psychotic mind, the mysterious functioning of which I have dedicated many years of my psychoanalytic profession to. I believe that the field of what we know needs to be broadened to what is yet unknown to avert the danger of psychoanalysis becoming a prisoner of itself, as well as running short of its revolutionary task and ending up as standardised conventional wisdom. We only know part of the psyche, but we know too that the extension of the mind is potentially endless. For this development to take place, psychoanalysis needs spaces that are always open towards what is still unknown.

I love the city of Venice, where I grew up but then left to specialise in psychiatry in Milan. I enjoy exploring the lagoon by boat, losing myself in places that are almost deserted, to then go back to places I know well. So that I do not get lost in the lagoon, I need to sail along the canals, marked by "bricole", wooden posts bound together in the shape of a pyramid: they indicate the path of the canals so that you do not run aground in shallow water. I like to think that this text can have the same function as the "bricole", allowing boats to navigate, promoting communication, and preventing vessels from ending up in the shallows.