Liberal Naturalism, Human Sciences, and Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

In this text I intend to show to what extent a certain epistemological understanding of psychoanalysis (fundamentally Freudian) finds parallels with the so-called liberalization process of epistemological naturalism. My thesis is that the sui generis epistemological modalities created by Freud not only coincide with this process, but to a significant degree were precursors of the methodological and ontological innovations that LN (liberal naturalism) proposes to defend and theorize. I begin by reviewing the process of liberalization of epistemic naturalism, from a predominantly physicalist model to a liberal version that takes into account other parameters and especially the progressive development of the human sciences. In the second part I aim to show that certain methodological modalities of psychoanalysis and the alternative epistemological conceptions that underlie it confirm this process of liberalization, contribute to it, and even, to some extent, were its precursors.

Keywords: Liberal naturalism, Scientific naturalism, Psychoanalysis.

"It is an illusion that there could be just one sort of language game which could be sufficient for the description of all of reality".
(Putnam 2004: 22)

"[The world] has many levels of form, including the level of morally significant human action, and the idea that all of these can be reduced to the level of physics is a fantasy".
(Putnam 2008: 5-6)[1]

1. The Liberalization Process of Epistemological Naturalism

According to the proposal with which Quine (1969) launched contemporary epistemological naturalism, because the only reliable scientific method is that of the natural sciences, any entity that does not figure in the explanations and

[1] Even though I have read and enjoyed both of these works by Putnam, I have taken these passages from Dell'Utri 2022.

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theorizations derived from it must be discarded. Nevertheless, from the very moment of defining the criterion of ontological commitment (Quine 1948), this definition immediately confronted him with the question of what to do with those entities—such as mathematical objects—that are not explained by the natural sciences but that nevertheless cannot be easily eliminated because they play a central role in our epistemic practices.

More recently, based on the observations and theses of Strawson, Putnam, and McDowell, a group of philosophers has emerged who, while adhering to certain basic theses of Quinean naturalism—especially what De Caro and Voltolini call "the constitutive claim of contemporary naturalism" (2010: 71)—nevertheless point out the need for and convenience of being more inclusive as regards both ontology and methodology. The aim would be to, allow the inclusion of entities that, although they are irreducible to scientific entities (and are even independent of them), are ineliminable from our understanding of knowledge and yet are clearly not supernatural. The entities that motivate them include, on the one hand, normative facts such as reasons, meanings and values, and, on the other, intentional attitudes such as consciousness and free will.

The constitutive claim is limited to asserting that no explanation or entity whose truth or existence contradicts the laws of nature recognized by current science should be accepted. In turn, to define a space of liberal naturalism, which retains its original matrix, the new strain of naturalists complement their acceptance of the aforementioned "constitutive affirmation of naturalism" with two additional conditions:

i. that such entities do not causally interfere with the processes investigated and described by the sciences, whether natural or human;
ii. that it be possible to rely on methods that, even though they are not the classical methods of the sciences (nor are completely explained by them), are not in conflict with the laws of the sciences—such as, for example, conceptual analysis, introspection, or imaginative speculation.

Accordingly, liberal naturalism (LN) accepts as natural not only the entities that are indicated to be such by our best causal theories about the world, but also entities that are involved (or assumed to be so) in other significant and obvious human and environmental activities and interactions. This ontological expansion allows us to consider entities, properties, and phenomena whose relationship with human beings is "essentially non-space-time" (De Caro & Voltolini 2010: 76). Remember that Quinean naturalism already had to call on a special argument in order to admit the abstract entities of mathematics, which its original criterion of ontological commitment did not in principle recognize. This range of entities and phenomena that are not strictly space-time does not involve a single type of phenomenon but rather phenomena of various kinds, each with their own dynamics and in complex interrelationships, that are themselves objects of various disciplines. These include subjective and intentional states, value patterns, and abstract entities and modal properties. We will now look at them one by one so as to appreciate their relationships and their philosophical implications.

1.1. Subjective States and Normative Facts

At least as far back as the birth of modern physics and its mathematization, subjective states or phenomena (secondary properties, self-awareness, intentional states, qualia, voluntary decision capacities) ceased to be part of the unified vision

of the world. With this shift, normative acts, moral phenomena, and the issue of freedom were also left out, because they are based on those subjective states even though they are not limited to subjective states but are instead oriented within a normative dimension that in some sense goes beyond the subjective. As clearly expressed by De Caro following P.F. Strawson (1985), "the 'subjective view' (according to which the mental is irreducible to the physical and intentional actions are categorically different from happenings) and the scientific view of the world (Strawson's 'objective view') started to be seen as constitutively heterogeneous" (De Caro 2022: 207). Kant felt this problem quite dramatically in the third antinomy: freedom, which is the basis of human morality, is not conceivable in a world governed by natural laws. As such, freedom seems both real and impossible at the same time. Kant devises a transcendental solution that is not widely accepted today (although it may contain a certain amount of truth). As De Caro also points out, what is important here is that the problem of freedom was nothing but a form of the divide between objective and subjective conceptions of the world.

It is based on this exclusion and on Quinean naturalism, which recognizes only the objects of the natural sciences, that the so-called *placement problem* arises—that is, where to locate subjective and intentional activities. De Caro (2022) revisits this process and shows that, starting from Dewey's pluralistic naturalism, the placement problem has been overcome, since entities irreducible to the terms of the natural sciences (but not incompatible with them) are admitted, and understandings other than those of the natural sciences (so long as they are not incompatible with them) are acceptable. The interesting thing is that LN found a way to recognize this specific and essential field while still maintaining a naturalistic criterion of ontological recognition. It postulates the requirement to recognize the normative facts presupposed in the structuring not only of our scientific knowledge but also of our manifest image of the world and our most basic exchanges. Appealing to the Quinean motto of naturalism as *"working from within*", we could say that though it is true that there is no cosmic exile, ignoring this specific field of values would leave us at a loss even in the modest terrestrial field in which we undertake our invariably provisional discoveries and disquisitions.

Instead, the problem that now comes to the fore is that of the *reconciliation* between the realm of natural laws and that of reasons. De Caro reviews three possible answers, even among those who adhere to LN. First, one (in the footsteps of Kant or Wittgenstein) that recognizes two essentially heterogeneous and unrelated domains that can be approached only from two fundamentally different perspectives on the human. This approach leaves the two domains to be understood separately and puts off integrating them into a single worldview. Second is emergentism, in which the level of reasons is inexplicable in light of the biological level, although the former depends on the latter as its basis. This conception is accused of being empty because it fails to explain "why in nature there are jumps that make it impossible to account for the higher-level features of the entities in terms of the lower-level ones that constitute them" (De Caro 2022: 212). Finally, there is the proposal of global supervenience (introduced by McDowell 2006 and Putnam 2008), in which the differences at the mental level presuppose differences at the brain level, but fall short of implying that the biological level accounts for the mental level. This thesis has been criticized above all for its limited explanatory power.

If the aim is to explain non-reductively phenomena such as voluntary decision-making, consciousness, or personal identity, it seems clear today that doing so cannot depend only on clarifying the relationship between the biological and the purely intentional-normative. Rather, the issue should be considered from a pluralistic liberal naturalistic perspective that should also take into account the field of the psycho-sociocultural, where the normative is first forged, then internalized, and finally shaped by the characteristics of its dynamics of development and exchange. It is important to realize that this inclusion of the sociocultural is in line with the idea that supports the Davidsonian thesis of semantic triangulation as an explanation for the emergence and intergenerational transmission of language and basic normative patterns. Responding to the Kripgensteinian dilemma about following a rule, Davidson postulates that normativity can arise only when there are two subjects who enter into communication about elements of the environment. It is precisely this type of process and normativity that defines the determinant realm of the sociocultural.[2]

Once the importance of this (intermediate and decisive) realm is recognized, the discussion with scientific naturalism changes in relation to the "argument of the burden of proof", in which scientific naturalism (SN) claims that in order to seal off an area not subject to natural laws, the irreducibility of the aforementioned phenomena must be proven. We say that the burden of proof shifts because it has already been shown that psychological, social, anthropological and historical phenomena cannot be explained without appealing to factors that are not empirical-biological but psycho-socio-symbolic entities, such as beliefs, projections, fears, resentments, desires, fantasies, ideologies, expectations, etc. And the dynamics of these factors, although not inscrutable, seems to be subject not to natural laws but to certain symbolic regularities of another sort—social, ideological, idiosyncratic, etc.—which find their place more among symbolic than among natural phenomena. I speak of the symbolic realm and not of the classical "space of reasons" (McDowell 1994), because I understand the space to be one determined not only by reasons but by a multiplicity of factors, where what is shared and in play would seem to be the force of the symbolic.

Specifically recognition of this dimension also leads to a recognition of an already demonstrated methodological plurality, since the disciplines that have explored these realms have already used, for example, conceptual analysis, phenomenological research, and introspection, as well as several other methods specific to those disciplines.

1.2 Modal Concepts

Convergently, Quinean naturalism is well known for refusing to accept modal properties as a result of the Quinean rejection of the logic of these categories, a rejection for strictly logical reasons that many logicians believe it is possible to overcome (for instance Hintikka 1969, 1975; Montague 1974). On the contrary,

[2] Before the triangulation thesis developed by Davidson, even Kripke's communitarian explanation was unable to explain such emergence insofar as normativity has to be provided by a community that already possesses it, because that leads us to an infinite regress to the extent to which novices' readings are themselves subject to patterns of interpretation. On the other hand, in Davidsonian triangulation, it is the shared appreciation of two subjects regarding a distal object that establishes the interpretation that no longer requires further interpretation, as the *Investigations* required.

LN will accept them (cf. especially De Caro & Voltolini 2010: 79-82), emphasizing their indispensable role for explaining the dynamics of reasons in play in human acts of free will and moral responsibility. At an even lower level, they are required by the involvement of subjunctives in the formulation of causal relations and in the methodology of thought experiments. Subsidiarily, LN has shown in this regard the difficulty of eliminating modal properties by employing the notion of possible worlds or other non-modal properties. Most of all, however, they have insisted on reversing the burden of proof and challenging those who wish to deny them to prove that it is possible to theorize about everything to be proven without using modal categories. They also add that such an admission does not signify a break with the causal closure of scientific explanations, nor any special cognitive access that goes beyond imaginative speculation, which is already used in the natural sciences.

As Macarthur (2010) has opportunely pointed out, the continued development of the human sciences during the twentieth century, especially in sociology, psychology, and economics, compelled a recognition of their legitimacy and their methodological specificities, as a simple movement of naturalistic self-consistency. This includes the recognition of a certain irreducible normativity. This necessary recognition of methodological alternatives also makes it evident that physicalist monism and nomological-deductive explanations leading to the exclusive recognition of physical entities imply a metaphysical position that in no way derives from the present state of the sciences (understood as such in the broad sense of rational explanation in some verifiable way), but only from a partial and outdated vision of them.

In his article, Macarthur shows very clearly how this process of methodological and ontological liberalization has developed, starting at the very core of the natural sciences, as biology itself has, since the nineteenth century, given rise to explanations that are not nomological-deductive but rather functional, statistical, or historical, and that emphasize the irreducibility of biological entities and phenomena to physical entities and phenomena. Even when the former are based on physical-chemical phenomena, the biological level implies a *sui generis* integration and regularity that makes them irreducible.

Even within physics itself, quantum mechanics admits explanations that break quite radically with the classical model of causality. This process of liberalization continues and is consolidated to the extent that the human sciences recognize "a realm of reason-governed, meaningful, and valuable human actions, artifacts, and institutions" (Macarthur 2010: 134), because of which naturalism must admit into its ontology irreducibly normative items that the earlier naturalism did not admit and regarded as destined only for elimination or reduction.

Although, as Macarthur himself clarifies, "there is no science of norms understood as abstract standards or ideals" (2010: 135), explorations of the human sciences not only presuppose them—as the natural sciences already did—but also involve them in their explanations since they work on intentional states related to reasons, values, and meanings. The philosophical recognition of this normative involvement in our scientific vision of the world, which had been shown both by the internal development of the human sciences and by its theorization within the philosophy of science, is then particularly asserted on a purely general philosophical level by Putnam's consistent attack on the fact-value dichotomy, first in the chapter "Facts and Values" in *Reason, Truth, and History*, and later in *The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy*. There, it begins to become evident that this intertwining and these

normative presuppositions, far from being imaginary, constitute a reality, denial of which has become an anachronistic metaphysical, antinaturalistic, and antiscientific prejudice.

Based on all these, the two basic theses of a non-narrow naturalism then become, in Macarthur's (2010: 136) synthesis:

- Normative ontological claim: One rationally ought to admit the actual existence of only those things that are recognized by the successful explanations of natural and human sciences.
- Normative methodological claim: One rationally ought to admit that the only genuine knowledge or understanding we have is that provided by the successful explanations of the natural and human sciences.

2. Psychoanalysis and Method

We all know that psychoanalysis is at once (i) a theory about psychic activity, especially with regard to its unconscious roots; (ii) a therapeutic clinical method of treating emotional disorders conceived in accordance with the aforementioned theory; and (iii) a research method to deepen and develop these first two aspects (Freud 1922: 235). As such, it has, at least in principle, a general aspect that is epistemologically quite similar to the scientific disciplines, especially given that psychoanalysis supposes a structured set of theories about the structure and development of sexuality and the psyche, the factors that in the complementary series influence that development, the levels of expression of the psyche and its symbolic manifestations, defense mechanisms and resistance, and particularly the etiology of neurosis—all subject to certain fairly specified regularities.

The technique, developed in accordance with the theory, is based, broadly speaking, on free association, free-floating attention, the rule of abstinence, certain rules for interpretation, a framework for applying the technique, the concepts of transference and countertransference, and clinical guidelines regarding the beginning, development, and conclusion of the analysis, based both on the theory of neurosis and on the concepts of transference and countertransference (the latter explicitly thematized later).

A particularly noteworthy aspect of Freudian psychoanalysis is the high general coherence of its various components with one another—both within the theory and between the different methodological criteria, between the theory and the components of the method, between the components of the therapeutic method and the therapeutic objectives, and even among the theory, the therapeutic technique, and the training requirements for new psychoanalysts. Let's look at just a few of these consistencies. Abandoning hypnosis and guided induction and discovering free association and free-floating attention were, in a way, the twin foundation stones of the psychoanalytic method. Consequently, analyzing resistance and managing transference became the two axes of analytic treatment, which was no longer directed at the symptoms but instead at modifying the psychic reality itself. For their part, the rule of abstinence and analytic neutrality laid the groundwork for the interpretation of transference, which, together with interpretation construction, came to constitute the central activity of the analytic process. In turn, the rules of free-floating attention and of abstinence led to an insistence that the psychoanalyst also undergoes analysis and develops self-analytical skills in order to be able to exercise the method.

Everything mentioned above is very similar to what happens in scientific disciplines, both in the techniques employed and in their investigative modalities. Not only is it similar, but it also seems to meet their basic requirements of a coherent and structured theoretical construction, practices consistent with the theory and legal provisions to be particularized in each specific situation that seem successfully to explain in a coherent manner many of the facts that they sought to explain.

Synthesizing the general epistemological profile of Freudian psychoanalysis in this condensed way, our interest here is in examining its particularities and methodological innovations, which, like the development of the human sciences and LN, compel us to recognize phenomena and dynamics that the natural sciences disregarded.

1. Like the natural sciences and the most recent human sciences, which seek to offer a theory about the systematic distortion of observational data inherent in the link between the investigator and his object of study, in psychoanalytic practice, observation and the entire psychoanalytic clinical relationship are managed in accordance with a theory of the particular and systematic perceptive distortion present in the transference and countertransference relationship, based on having a clinician educated and trained for it. It is noteworthy that Freud was a pioneer in this type of precaution and theorization, a crucial methodological step forward taken in the human sciences only several decades later.

2. Psychoanalytic research proposes a method for overcoming the essential privacy of the clinical relationship between the analyst and the patient. This relationship seems, in principle, to fail to meet the minimum requirements of the public and multi-observable nature of scientific data. However, I think we can consider it to be what we might call a "structurally public" process. That is, the personal data (names and real identification data) and the first-hand reception of the patient's communications are private, but their structure and significant content (even metaphors and fantasies), as well as those of the analyst's communications, can be made public to the research community through the presentation of the case. And, in that community, it can be subject to confirmation of coherence, relevance, and significance in accordance with the theory and process for that particular patient's analysis. Any possible structural alterations would be evidenced by inconsistencies with the rest of the account.

3. Psychoanalysis as a study of the psyche and human behavior transcends the dichotomy between external observation and introspection. Although it relies on both sources, it does so in the matrix context of a controlled clinical relationship. Here, both elements are subject to the semi-experimental context of the clinical setting in a controlled relationship with an analyzed analyst, which, with adequate theoretical support, makes it possible to overcome some of the limitations of the other two sources. Introspective testimony is now filtered through the trained analyst's interpretation, and intra- and extra-clinical behaviors are subject to the same filter. This filter, in turn, is shaped by the analytical attitude that the analyst develops through his own therapeutic process, his handling of transference and countertransference. It was this essentially clinical research—along with review and debate within the psychoanalytic community—that produced the initial theory and method as well as later additions and drastic reforms, achieving higher explanatory effectiveness regarding human behavior than other research.

4. The psychoanalytic method, fashioned on the old doctor-patient clinical relationship, manages to transcend the dichotomy between passive observation

and interventional experimentation, establishing a scenario that we have described as semi-experimental. In the clinical context of the psychoanalytic setting, a series of variables related to the clinical setting and the relationship are kept constant and controlled, so that the reactions produced by the interpretations that the analyst presents to the analysand can be meaningfully observed. This involves theorization not only about the fundamental conditions of the clinical setting (frequency, hours, duration, forms of treatment, physical setting, etc.) but also about the nature and forms of the relationship, through the theory of transference, the basic rule of free association, the rule of abstinence, etc. The entire method sets itself the difficult task of overcoming the limitations of excessively external observation and excessively interventional experimentation, which has been a classic problem in the human sciences. This effort is also closely analogous to the effort in the human sciences to find ways to overcome the limitations of the field-studies-against-laboratory-studies methodological binary.

5. Also following the old model of the clinical medical relationship, psychoanalysis combines the study of single cases with theoretical models of clinical general nosology, against the background of a general theory of psychosexual development (defense mechanisms, sublimation, etc.). And it manages to do so in rather more complex circumstances than those of the biology of somatic medicine, where symbolic, evaluative, and social elements also come into play, illuminating the particular intersection between the individual and the social, the biological and the mental, the real and the fantasized, causes and reasons.

6. In its manner of validating explanatory hypotheses, psychoanalysis also proposes a methodological form that is cutting-edge among the methodologies of the human sciences. For, it is not confined to the specific validation of a particular hypothesis in the face of an equally particular situation—as the approaches of Popper (1962) and Eysenck and Wilson (1980) sought to understand it—but rather proposes the holistic validation of a set of interpretations in the face of the general evolution of a clinical case. How is the correctness of psychoanalytic interpretations validated? Both in the narrower sense of validating a particular interpretation made during a single session and in the broader sense of validating a whole set of interpretations or a general way of understanding a clinical case. Freud answered both questions in writings that were foundational for psychoanalysis. For example, in *Constructions in Analysis* (1937) Freud tries to identify the kind of reactions or consequences a particular interpretation must generate in the patient so that we can consider it correct. Freud establishes the basic criteria for verifying the correctness of a communicated construction: (1) the subsequent emergence of forgotten memories; (2) the reaction type "I never thought that"; and (3) the aggravation of symptoms in patients with guilt. He is concerned to find criteria and methods to separate these reactions from the reactions produced by a patient's avoidance or by mere suggestion. In turn, the general correction has its own validation criteria, since, according to the theory, only such success can generate a deep and lasting psychic change—the well-known "tally argument", to use Grünbaum's (1984) term. Although this constitutes an entire topic for evaluation that we cannot address here, multiple independent investigations of the efficacy and comparative outcomes of psychoanalytic therapies have been conducted in recent decades, including meta-analyses that bring together and synthesize the results of these investigations (Lipsey & Wilson 1993; Robinson, Berman & Neimeyer 1990; Smith, Glass & Miller 1980). In them, the revealed efficacy is much higher than in earlier studies that used more nonspecific criteria and less

methodological rigor. Particularly illustrative and comprehensive is Shedler's 2010 article, which summarizes the results as follows:

> Empirical evidence supports the efficacy of psychodynamic therapy. Effect sizes for psychodynamic therapy are as large as those reported for other therapies that have been actively promoted as "empirically supported" and "evidence based". In addition, patients who receive psychodynamic therapy maintain therapeutic gains and appear to continue to improve after treatment ends. Finally, nonpsychodynamic therapies may be effective in part because the more skilled practitioners utilize techniques that have long been central to psychodynamic theory and practice (Shedler 2010: 98).

7. Freudian psychoanalysis broke fresh ground in proposing a model of the mind that is able, for the mental realm, to interweave explanations by reasons with explanations by causes. In this section, I follow the presentation of Carlos E. Caorsi (2021: 131-43). The best-known model of scientific explanation is the nomological-deductive Hempelian model. This model conceives the explanation as a logical structure in which, on the one hand, we have a general law that expresses a certain factual regularity and, on the other hand, particular events are identified that constitute a condition of possibility for the phenomenon-consequence foreseen in the general law to be verified. We use the term *explanandum* to refer to the statement (B) that expresses the fact to be explained, and *explanans* for the structure that links the general law ("if A then B") with the activating condition, where A is the cause of B. Many of Freud's explanations in his early work fit this model—for example, in the nervous etiology of neurosis (1896, *Further Remarks*). In these cases, typically mental notions such as intentions, desires, reasons, or motives are not involved. However, in abandoning the theory of seduction and replacing it with the theory of fantasies and infantile sexuality, Freud sets aside the determining incidence of external factors, and it is psychic reality itself that comes to the fore, as a result of which the involvement of mental events becomes inevitable. There has been widespread acceptance of the idea that causal relationships cannot be established between mental events (Davidson 1982, Fodor 1968), fundamentally because a person may have reasons to perform a certain action and yet not carry it out; that is, reasons cannot be considered causes. However, it can be postulated that "a cause consists of particular circumstances and that the reasons adduced constitute one of them" (Caorsi 2021), in which case such a group of circumstances is a sufficient condition for explaining the event. Therefore, mental events such as motives, desires, and reasons can be included as causes of actions and mental events.

However, it is well known that explanation by reasons is not typical in Freud's works, which generally dismiss them as "rationalizations". Rather, a typical Freudian explanation is based on mental facts that are causes without being reasons. Thus, for example, in the Rat Man case, Freud (1909) had to explain his patient's actions aimed at losing weight and also the suicidal temptation to throw himself down the hill. The suicidal impulse can still be explained by reasons, albeit an unconscious one: his desire to kill his beloved's English cousin. But the attempt to lose weight is understood by Freud as a way of killing the *Dick* (fat) in himself, which in turn represented the cousin. In this second case, mental events are identified as the cause of the action without being reasons for it. That is, postulating a divided psyche

allows Freud to combine two different types of explanation: one in terms of reasons and one in terms of mental causes that are not reasons.

3. Conclusions

To what extent do these methodological innovations represent a convergence with the liberalization of naturalism? We believe that this convergence comes about in several ways:

1. First, it occurs through the introduction of important methodological innovations, none of which contradict the basic principles of scientific methodology understood in a broad sense (rationality, testability, attention to systematic distortions in observation, etc.). On the contrary, those principles can be adapted to an absolutely new and specific object. Consequent on this, it is clearly shown that if we understand the "natural" to be that which intervenes in human affairs, without being limited to the physical, the verifiable realm of the natural will expand as our scientific methodologies expand.

2. These innovations introduce as recognized entities *sui generis* phenomena such as the unconscious and its influence on a range of conscious acts. Though this requires us to interpret the symbolic meaning of those acts, that symbolization is not arbitrary, but is explained by various theses of the theory of psychic functioning itself.

3. The theory is structured in such a way that it allows for establishing productive, testable ties in relation to research in other human sciences. For example, through the concept of the superego, it connects with sociology and anthropology, helping to explain how moral and aesthetic values, and so on, are introjected and transmitted. Similarly, the psychoanalytic theory on the development of the human psyche, despite being fundamentally structured around the development of sexuality and the affective realm, is perfectly apt to contribute to theories about the development of intellectual functions and their stimulating factors, delaying factors, and idiosyncratic or vocational factors (Fernández 2002). It is noteworthy that this interdisciplinary approach sometimes also acts to contradict and correct certain theses of psychoanalysis. A paradigmatic example of this was the discovery in anthropology that not all communities exhibit the Western family structure or typical sexual taboos and adolescent crisis (Malinowski 1927, Mead 1928). This led to modifications of some original psychoanalytic theses, but this process did not demolish the central theses but rather enriched them and made them more complex and charged with the necessary nuances.

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