What Social Constructivism Ought to Tell Us About Psychoanalysis (And What This Would Reveal About Itself)

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1. Introduction

In recent controversies about psychoanalysis, which for their enduring vehemence became known as the ‘Freud Wars’, issues relating to no less controversial Social Constructivist (SC) approaches to science were looming on both sides of the debate. The relationship between psychoanalysis and SC, as we will show in this paper, is intricate and fascinating. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that a close analysis of well known epistemic deficiencies, methodological complications and conceptual confusions that characterize psychoanalysis, reveals that social constructivist theories provide an accurate description of the scientific or hermeneutic status of psychoanalysis.

We will argue that the case of psychoanalysis illustrates what science would look like if it were to function as social constructivism claims it does, and we will thus in an indirect way expose the respective shortcomings of both controversial theories.

We will show that constructivism offers an accurate description specifically of psychoanalysis, and that the peculiar methodological and epistemological defects central to the theory, which precisely make it amenable to a constructivist description, in turn make a indirect case for the inadequacy of constructivism as a theory of bona fide science.

To turn our analysis into an new and independent argument against SC about science, we will have to consider not only whether the presence of epistemic, conceptual and methodological defects in psychoanalysis jointly form a sufficient condition for a successful description within the SC framework, but what would constitute a necessary condition for the success of such a description. Our approach follows earlier work of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic as involved in the unintended construction and maintenance of Searlean institutional facts (Buekens 2006; Buekens & Boudry 2008).

2. Social Constructivism

2.1. Two types of constructivism

‘Constructivism’ covers a broad variety of interrelated theories. Its claims range from commonsense conceptions about how artefacts and social institutions are ‘constructed’ by human agents to controversial and radical claims about the possibility of knowledge, science and the nature of reality. Philosopher of science Noreutta Koertge holds that terms like ‘social construction’ or ‘constructivism’, “while they signal a certain sympathy towards nouveau ideas, have no precise referent.” (Koertge 1996:269; Haslanger 2003)2

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1 This article will be submitted to *Philosophy of Science* or *Philosophical Psychology*, and will there be co-authored by Filip Buekens. (11/08/08)

2 Haslanger (2003:301) remarks that “the variety of different uses of the term has made it increasingly difficult to determine what claim authors are using it to assert or deny”
No one seriously denies that at least some objects and states – money, parking places, world records, property – are socially constructed in a straightforward sense. Talk about social construction becomes interesting only if it claims of entities common sense and most scientists would consider to be ‘brute’ or ‘natural’ facts that they should be ‘exposed’ as being constructed by us, and hence not ‘inevitable’. According to Ian Hacking (1999), social constructivists tend to hold that if X is a social construction,

1) “X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.

2) X is quite bad as it is.

3) We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed.” (Hacking 1999:6)

Hacking is right that talk about social construction often has normative and evaluative connotations, but we will put them aside here as they will not be relevant for our purely descriptive analysis of the key methodological features of psychoanalysis. Claims that gender, unsafety or ADHD, to name but a few examples, are socially constructed, can indeed have a liberating or ‘debunking’ effect: taking gender stereotypes to be contingent facts may bring along the hope of changing or even getting rid of deplorable practices. In this article, however, we will not so much be concerned with specific claims about the social construction of this or that idea of object, but with more general doctrines that go under the banner of social constructivism. One can hold, for instance, that ADHD is a socially constructed illness, but that does not make one a social constructivist in the sense under discussion here. SC as a doctrine is supposed to make claims about the constructive nature of whole classes of ideas or objects, and is involved in revising central epistemic and ontological concepts, which Hacking coined “elevator terms” (Hacking 1999:21): knowledge, truth and reality.

A conceptual distinction between two types of constructivisms will be useful for our later discussion. Ontological constructivists hold that reality is not discovered or investigated, but constructed by the activity of scientists. A good working definition of what we call ontological constructivism is given by Paul Watzlawick, who endorses this version of constructivism:

“Any so-called reality is—in the most immediate and concrete sense—the construction of those who believe they have discovered and investigated it. In other words, what is found is an invention whose inventor is unaware of his act of invention, who considers it something that exists independently of him; the invention then becomes the basis of his world view and actions.” (Watzlawick 1984:10)

Ontological constructivism leaves us with two options: strong ontological constructivists hold that the constructed ‘reality’ is no outside reality at all, but a non-existing illusion. What we refer to as an independent reality has no referent at all. Weak ontological constructivism holds that what we refer to as being real has, once socially constructed, ‘out-there-ness’ for everyone. Although socially constructed instead of independently discovered, their reality is not an illusion.

Being compatible with accepting the notion of an objective and independent reality, epistemological constructivism does not require the strong or weak ontological commitments just mentioned, but in practice the doctrine is often accompanied with some version of strong or
weak ontological constructivism. An epistemological constructivist maintains, as H.M. Collins holds, that “the natural world in no way constrains what is believed to be” (Collins 1981:54). Applied to scientific practices, this means that reality by itself is not able to force scientists to modify a hypothesis or abandon a theory in favour of an alternative. Reality may or may not exist ‘out there’, but no amount of evidential considerations stemming from it can ever explain the commitment of scientists to a particular theory. If we want to explain the beliefs of scientists, we should therefore always look for non-evidential considerations, and that is where social and non-epistemic explanations enter the picture. The radical epistemological constructivist holds that scientific theories merely reflect the contingent social dispositions of the scientists, and as systems of knowledge they are self-confirming. It is this kind of constructivism which is embodied in David Bloor’s famous methodological precepts of the Strong Programme for the sociology of scientific knowledge, more precisely in his symmetry postulate for the explanation of scientific beliefs:

“[The sociology of scientific knowledge] would be symmetrical in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain say, true and false beliefs.” (Bloor 1991:7) “The symmetry postulate […] enjoins us to seek the same kind of causes for both true and false, [and] rational and irrational, beliefs […].”(Bloor 1991:175)

However, as Paul Boghossian (2006:114-115) rightly notes, there is a huge difference between a symmetry principle concerning truth and falsity, and one concerning rationality. Whereas a semi-plausible case can be made for the former, applying the symmetry postulate to rationality is quite controversial and requires full-blown epistemological constructivism. An interesting consequence of this form of constructivism was pointed out by Jan Golinski in Constructing Reality, who wrote, discussing the question of paradigm shifts in science, that “given sufficient creativity and resourcefulness on behalf of its defenders, the existing paradigm could be maintained indefinitely.” (Golinski 2005:25) Psychoanalysis, we argue, is the perfect illustration of Golinski’s observation.

2.2. Classical problems with constructivism

The standard problems associated with both strong and weak ontological reductionism and epistemological constructivism are well known and can be briefly rehearsed. The traditional objection against radical ontological constructivism is that it is a self-undoing doctrine, in the following sense: how can we avoid presupposing some sort of independent reality, even when trying to describe its constructed nature? Isn’t a statement like “X is a social construction” a shorthand for the factual statement “X is in fact a social construction” or “X is really a social

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1 Strictly speaking, the symmetry postulate does not logically entail epistemological constructivism, since a purely methodological precept for the sociology of scientific knowledge doesn’t say anything about the nature of scientific knowledge. Golinski (2005) for example argued that the symmetry postulate does not entail any commitment to epistemological constructivism, and Kukla (2000) claims that the two are conceptually independent. Although we admit that epistemological constructivism is not logically entailed by the symmetry postulate about rationality, we think that it makes no sense without it: if epistemological constructivism does not hold, the symmetry postulate is a very bad methodological precept indeed. As Boghossian writes: “the only way to ensure that both rational and irrational beliefs are explained through the same kind of cause is to explain both of them non-evidentially.” (Boghossian 2006:114-115) But what is the use of a methodological precept that requires you to explain every scientific belief non-evidentially if there is no guarantee that scientific beliefs can only be explained non-evidentially? If some scientific beliefs are only explicable in evidential terms after all, a methodological precept like the symmetry postulate would lead the sociologist seriously astray.
construction”, thereby presupposing the very distinction strong or weak ontological constructivists are trying to discard? Isn’t the ontological constructivist committed to a factual claim about the way the world really is, in contrast to what we generally take it to be? Either the presumed constructed nature of what we conceive as an independent reality constitutes itself an objective reality, which invalidates the ontological constructivists’ claim that no such reality exists (more precisely: which renders the claim incoherent), or the apparent ‘higher-order reality’ of a statement like “reality is a social construction” is itself merely a social construction, which undermines the very thing constructivists are trying to say (in the two aforementioned interpretations).

In his incisive critique of social constructivist accounts of science, Kukla (2000) showed that ontological constructivism entails relativism, and that relativism in turn is plagued with damaging logical problems. Kukla framed the problem of self-reference for radical ontological constructivism in terms of an infinite regress of constructions: the statement that X is a construction, must itself be merely a social construction, and the statement that “X is a social construction” is a social construction, is itself a social construction, etc. Kukla discussed the intriguing question what is supposed to happen when two different societies construct incompatible facts, and demonstrate how temporal incongruities arise from a constructivist conception of reality.

In contrast to the constructivist denial of an independent reality, the Classical Picture of Knowledge as Paul Boghossian calls it, maintains that “the world which we seek to understand and know about is what it is largely independent of us and our beliefs about it” (Boghossian 2006:22). As the constructivist Watzlawick himself admits, this is a commonsensical assumption to which all of us adhere in everyday life: “Constructivism in its pure, radical sense is incompatible with traditional thinking.”

Apart from objectivism about facts, Boghossian distinguishes a second and a third crucial thesis in the Classical Picture of Knowledge. The second, constructivism about justification, is the claim that “facts of the form – information E justifies belief B – are society-independent facts. In particular, whether or not some item of information justifies a given belief does not depend on the contingent needs and interests of any community.” (Boghossian 2006:22) According to Boghossian, a denial of this thesis is already entailed by constructivism about facts in general, which maintains, in contrast to the Classical Picture, that all facts – including information that justifies beliefs -- are socially constructed.

The third component in the Classical Picture of Knowledge is objectivism about rational explanations: “Under the appropriate circumstances, our exposure to the evidence alone is capable of explaining why we believe what we believe.” (Boghossian 2006:22). This is precisely what epistemological constructivism denies: no amount of evidential considerations is able to explain what we believe, so we can never explain our beliefs “solely on the basis of our exposure to the relevant evidence” (Boghossian 2006:23).

4 In itself this is not a problem, since many scientific theories are counterintuitive and do not square with a commonsense view of reality.
Another traditional objection against epistemological constructivism is that it is unable to explain the ‘problem’ of scientific success. If the so-called reality which scientists are trying to grasp with their theories can in no way influence the course of scientific development, how can we explain the successful applications of scientific knowledge? This point will be particularly relevant in our analysis of psychoanalytic theories: the unconscious ‘reality’ they presuppose does not in any interesting sense put epistemic constraints on its theoretical claims or psychoanalytic interpretations.

Finally, it is quite evident that epistemological constructivism too is haunted by the spectre of Epimenedes, the ancient Cretan. If no amount of evidential considerations can explain the belief in a particular theory, what are we to say about the epistemic warrant for epistemological constructivism itself? The conclusion that epistemological constructivism is itself merely a reflection of contingent social and cultural dispositions of its proponents seems inevitable.

2.3. A new argument against Social Constructivism

Thus far we presented some well-known standard problems with SC. In this paper we propose a rather different and indirect strategy to question social constructivism as a viable account of science. We show that, in order for a theory or theoretical framework to be accurately analysable within a constructivist framework, specific and systematic defects in the epistemological foundations of the theory, as well as in its methodology and conceptual apparatus, will have to be detected. By showing that psychoanalysis is accurately described within a constructivist framework in virtue of its inherent epistemological defects we provide an indirect argument for the thesis that constructivism cannot be taken to provide an accurate theory of science (or scientific practice) in general.

This argument relies on a claim to the effect that the aforementioned defects are inherent to psychoanalysis. Furthermore, it rests on the assumption, which will only be indirectly touched upon in this paper, that the epistemic and methodological characteristics of psychoanalysis which make it eminently plausible to describe it within a SC framework, generally do not occur – at least not in equal measure – in bona fide scientific practices, although we immediately acknowledge that this is not a matter of absolute difference, but rather a matter of degree. Imre Lakatos (Lakatos & Musgrave 1970) for example maintained that every scientific theory builds a “protective belt” of auxiliary hypotheses around its “hard core” claims, and that this is not necessarily a bad thing. More specifically, epistemological constructivism about science can be considered as resting on an implausible generalisation and exaggeration of two standard features of genuine or bona fide scientific practice:

\[\text{5 However, it is a controversial issue in the philosophy of science whether realism is, as Hilary Putnam once claimed, “the only philosophy that doesn’t make the success of science a miracle.” (Putnam 1979:73; Putnam 1979:73) In any case, the epistemological constructivist could retreat to a radical ontological constructivism about facts, according to which the fact that science is successful, is itself socially constructed. But then, constructivism once again runs into the same conceptual problems mentioned above. According to Kukla, even if the success of science is accepted as an independent fact, constructivists can still come up with a rivalising non-realist explanation. Although we think Kukla overestimates the plausibility of such alternative explanations, he and many other philosophers of science may be right in asserting that the argument from success by itself does not constitute the final blow to for epistemological constructivism.}\]
First, epistemological constructivism proposes a dubious generalization of specific but restricted epistemic problems like the theory-ladenness of observation and the Duhemian underdetermination of a theory by evidence, which are already widely acknowledged by philosophers of science. Not every observation is contaminated by the observer’s theory to the same extent: sometimes the effect is negligible; in other situations its influence is strong enough to have significant impact on the development of theories and paradigms. A uniform application of the theory-ladenness of observation to all scientific observations in equal measure, erodes a useful and valuable concept in philosophy of science. And once again, the danger of a vicious self-reference lurks, as Hacking observed:

“To see all observations as equally loaded with theory is in itself to practice theory-laden observation, that is, observation loaded with a theory derived from Hanson the philosopher.” (Hacking 1999:200)

In any case, if even these features do not decide between competing theories, scientists do not always have to decide in favour of one theory, but can also – and often do – suspend judgement and await further empirical or conceptual developments. As Peter Slezak points out, “a non sequitur from this thesis [of underdetermination] has become one of the foundational tenets of the social constructivist enterprise.”(Slezak 1994:281)

Secondly, epistemological constructivism exaggerates factors of individual epistemic distortions in scientific practice: confirmation bias, prejudice, selective use of evidence, ideological bias… (Holt 2002)

The first central claim of this article is that the general characteristics SC – both in its ontological and its epistemological form – ascribes to bona fide science in fact correctly but perhaps unintentionally characterize a good deal of what is going on in the psychoanalytic framework (both in its ‘scientific’ and its ‘hermeneutic’ version). What makes our argument challenging will depend on one’s philosophical position: the opponent of constructivist accounts of science will have to recognize that SC is applicable to certain practices, whereas the friends of constructivism will have to show that the remarkable aptness of SC in characterizing a flawed epistemic practice (psychoanalysis) is in fact not due to the core epistemic and methodological flaws of psychoanalysis but to general features of science that are also manifest in psychoanalysis. Our analysis will also show that the latter claim is hard to defend.

Even while we assume that the epistemological, methodological and conceptual pitfalls which plague psychoanalysis generally do not occur in other scientific disciplines, and believe that these considerations explain the shortcomings of psychoanalysis as a theory of human nature, one may still ask whether every so-called pseudo-science is affected by the same kind of epistemic flaws, or whether we can use the constructivist framework as a general touchstone for distinguishing science from pseudoscience in general. Although we will not pursue this question here, especially because it touches upon the delicate question of the demarcation criterion between bona fide science and pseudo-science, if any such criterion exists, we certainly do not think that a constructivist analysis can likewise be applied to all disciplines traditionally characterized as pseudoscience. As we will see, the accuracy of SC for describing a given theory hinges on the

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6 We understand ‘restricted’ in the sense that they do not apply uniformly and with equal force to every kind of situation in scientific practice.
fulfilment of specific preconditions which are not generally met by all theories that are widely regarded as pseudoscience. It will nevertheless be clear that the discussion of theoretical pitfalls has a greater relevance than for psychoanalysis alone, and that it is in virtue of its epistemic flaws that psychoanalysis shows remarkable affinities with, for example, conspiracy theories.

In the next section we discuss a number of major conceptual and methodological flaws in psychoanalysis. In section 4 we show how SC accounts of science provide an excellent account of psychoanalysis in virtue of these flaws. Although we will try to demonstrate that the success of a SC account of psychoanalysis is crucially related to the presence of these flaws, we should note that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between the defects on the one side and the features which SC ascribes to scientific theories on the other side. Instead, the inflicted damage is mainly cumulative and overall.

3. Major Defects in Psychoanalysis

3.1. Psychoanalysis as a system of institutional facts

In Buekens (2006) and Buekens & Boudry (2008) we developed an account of psychoanalytic phenomena in terms of institutional facts along the lines of John Searle's theory of social institutions (Searle 1995, Lagerspetz 2006), proposed as an inference to the best explanation of what really happens in the hermeneutic practice of psychoanalysis. The core structure of a psychoanalytic interpretation is a statement of the form 'X is/counts as Y', where the Y-position is occupied by a psychoanalytic concept, and the X-position by observational source material. In Searle's theory, a statement of the form 'X is Y' can be understood either as an empirical proposition or as a declarative statement. In the second case, the statement introduces, in virtue of being a declarative speech act, a constitutional rule that phenomena of type X count as phenomena of type Y. Freud's theoretical framework turns out to be a tightly woven pattern of declarative statements, which, once introduced and accepted by the psychoanalytic community, create institutional facts. In contrast to an empirical, descriptive statement, a declarative statement creates itself the state of affairs that fulfils the truth-conditions of the statement. As long as the statement is accepted by others, the continued existence of the institutional fact thus created is guaranteed. An obvious non-psychoanalytic example of an institutional fact is money: we have declared that a piece of paper, printed by the National Bank, is worth 100 euro. This declaration creates a new object in the world for those who are willing to accept it, and it continues to exist as long we continue to accept it.

Buekens' central claim is that psychoanalysis can be most adequately explained as a complex social institution – just like the monetary institution of the euro – built around a system of institutional facts which the psychoanalytic community – quite mistakenly – takes to be empirically verifiable natural facts concerning the vicissitudes of the human mind. Exploiting a possibility explicitly left open in Searle's theory of institutional facts, the upshot of Buekens' analysis is that psychoanalysis is based on an unintended confusion between natural facts and institutional facts: what Freud thinks of as descriptions of natural facts are to a large extent declaratives that create new institutional facts. We will return to Buekens' analysis later on, but first we need to know what makes it possible that psychoanalytic theories and interpretations, although presented as
empirically testable propositions, are de facto creating their own institutional facts. And, returning to the central claim of this article: why should SC, both in its epistemological and ontological guise offer an accurate analysis of the actual hermeneutic working of psychoanalysis? These two questions are closely related.

3.2. **Descriptive and declarative statements: a formal equivalence**

The *conditio sine qua non* of the confusion between institutional facts and natural facts is the formal correspondence of typical psychoanalytic interpretations and declarative statements: both relate two terms X and Y in a statement of the form “X is/counts as Y”, where X is an empirically observable entity to which a psychoanalytic property designated by the term in the Y-positions is assigned. Typical psychoanalytic interpretations claim that “your compulsive behaviour *really* is an enactment of perverse childhood fantasies” or “the analyst *represents/stands for* the figure of the father”.

The second important property of institutional facts created by such declarative statements, is that the property or feature that figures in the Y-position can never be directly derived from observable properties of the object designated by the term in the X-position. For instance, we cannot deduce the monetary value of a 100 euro bank note from an inspection of its physical properties alone. The fact that we can use it to buy all kinds of things in European countries, or the institutional fact that a certain configuration of white lines on the side of a road count as a parking place, is not observable and depends on the beliefs of its users. The formal equivalent of this general property of institutional facts is the psychoanalytic postulate of an imperceptible realm of the mind, the ingredients of which the Y-term in an interpretation “X is/counts as Y” is supposed to refer to, at least under an empirical reading of the interpretations. Under a more hermeneutical reading, a psychoanalytic concept Y is assigned to some observable entity X, and is supposed to reveal its real, underlying *meaning*. This formal similarity is of course not by itself sufficient to show that psychoanalytic interpretations really function like institutional facts, or that the theory can be accurately described with SC concepts. However, given this parallelism, the accumulating epistemic and methodological defects of psychoanalysis damage the theoretical structure so drastically, that the result is an epistemic vacuousness which *does* bring about this equivalence with institutional facts, and which *does* illustrate those features which SC ascribes to genuine scientific practice.

3.3. **Inseparability of theory, methodology and individual practices**

An important issue in the critical assessment of psychoanalysis, which continues to divide its critics, is the question whether the epistemic features internal to the theory can be clearly separated from dubious methodological manoeuvres put forward in defence of the theory. Given that such a theoretical or conceptual distinction is useful and even necessary if one is criticizing a theory, drawing it in the case of psychoanalysis is extremely complicated, which is *precisely* what makes psychoanalysis so interesting from an epistemological point of view. Not only is it difficult to separate individual psychoanalysts’ dubious methodological practices from the canonical methodology of psychoanalysis, we will also see that these central methodological pitfalls *directly*

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7 According to Smith (2001), institutional facts create “a huge invisible ontology”. See Buekens & Boudry (2008) for further analogies between psychoanalytic facts and bona fide institutional facts.
follow from the properties of the psychoanalytic entities referred to in the Y-position. More specifically: the notorious abundance of possibilities for drawing inferences from the source material to arrive at psychoanalytic conclusions, and the numerous possibilities to evade seemingly falsifying material, are direct consequences of the structure of the postulated unobservable realm of the human mind.

On this point, critics of psychoanalysis are divided. Grünbaum (1984) and Erwin (1996) have insisted on a clear separation between the theory as such and the tendency of its advocates to use immunizing gambits and other methodological tricks in the face of falsifying material:

“the (revocable) falsifiability of the theory-as-such in the context of its semantic anchorage is a logical property of the theory itself, whereas the tenacious unwillingness of the majority of its defenders to accept adverse evidence as refuting is an all too human property of those advocates.” (quoted in Cioffi 1998:218)

Psychologist Morris Eagle too reminds us of the difference between “the methodological practices and attitudes of individual analysts (including Freud)” and “the independent logical structure of psychoanalytic theory.” (Eagle 1988) Edward Erwin, finally, has stated that it is simply “a matter of logic” that escape manoeuvres “[do] not change the meaning of the original hypothesis” (Erwin 2002:431). Critics like Grünbaum and Erwin implicitly consider psychoanalysis as a clearly delineated structure of empirical propositions, irrevocable in the light of adverse evidence and completely independent of the individual methodological practices of their practitioners.

On the other side of the debate, critics like Frank Cioffi, Frederick Crews and Malcolm Macmillan have argued that this distinction cannot be pushed further than the epistemic structures of psychoanalysis themselves allow. Following Cioffi (1998), we think many dubious methodological practices in psychoanalysis arise more or less directly from its theory-internal epistemic properties. More precisely: it is practically impossible to indicate a point where the theory proper ends and where the immunizing strategies and methodological obfuscations of its defenders begin. As Cioffi wrote:

“(W)e have no canonical statement of the theory: no agreement on what constitutes modifications of the theory rather than post hoc elucidations of it. […] What we have in Freudian theory is a combination of epistemically ambiguous utterances with methodologically suspect practices.”(Cioffi 1998:300)

Consider the classical heads-I-win-tails-you-lose objection against the practice of psychoanalysts: if a patient refuses to accept the interpretation of the analyst, this counts as evidence in favour of the interpretation, in virtue of the concept of Verneinung: his denials count as psychoanalytic denials (Y). It is not easy to attribute this dubious argument to flaws of individual analysts, because a good case can be made that the argument is effectively supported by fundamental properties of the postulated Freudian Unconscious. It is not even a flaw within the theory: if the human mind were to function as psychoanalysis describes it, we would indeed have to classify counter-arguments and criticisms as manifestations of unconscious resistance to the psychoanalytic ‘truths’. Pretending to make an empirical observation, the psychoanalyst unintentionally declares criticism (X) to be the disguised working of the postulated Unconscious (Y). Even our objection that the analyst creates facts might be declared a product of the Unconscious.
For two reasons we insist on the inseparability of theory, methodology and the defensive moves in psychoanalysis. First, in order for our argument about psychoanalysis and the applicability of SC to hold, we have to show that the methodological deficiencies and defensive moves are inherent to the theory, and cannot be so easily disentangled from it. Secondly, it is important to note that the inextricability of all these elements provides itself a tempting defensive strategy for the proponent of psychoanalysis. After all, the critic can no longer argue that these methodological devices were only brought in on an ad hoc basis to rescue the theory from falsifications or plausible counter-arguments, because the psychoanalyst himself will, consistent with his account of the Unconscious, maintain that the methodology was already embedded in the theory to begin with. The critic who is unwilling to accept these methodological gambits, is then just found to be unwilling to go along with the theory in the first place.

3.4. Hidden Realities: the epistemic core of psychoanalysis

The epistemic core of classical Freudian psychoanalysis is a complex web of theoretical claims about an object which deliberately tries to conceal its own existence and manifests itself only in disguise: the Freudian Unconscious (Gellner 2003). Although in itself not an a priori implausible or incoherent hypothesis, the central postulate of the hidden Unconscious generates a number of methodological devices which are potentially quite damaging to the theoretical structure. In this respect, the epistemic core of psychoanalysis bears a striking resemblance to conspiracy theories: an unobservable entity – the conspiracy; or the group of conspirators – is intentionally trying to hide its own existence, which can only be inferred indirectly, through its disguised appearance. The interesting epistemic consequences of the idea of an object that intentionally hides its existence for us, gives a twist to what will and will not count as evidence in favour of the hypothesis. On the one hand we have Gap Evidence, which we define as the set of perceived anomalies, gaps and inconsistencies in existing explanations of certain events, which are supposed to indicate the existence of a hidden or invisible factor or set of factors at work. Conspiracy theorists typically believe that the explanatory gaps in ‘the official story’ betrays that something must have been deliberately but partially unsuccessfully covered up by the presumed conspirators. In the case of psychoanalysis, the Gap Evidence is constituted by the slips of the tongue, the suspicious dream elements and the strange symptoms of the patient which, following a chain of associations, are supposed to lead to a hidden and unconscious meaning.

However; conspiracy theorists and psychoanalysts are not only looking for the gaps and flaws which betray the existence of the Invisible Entity, they are also receptive to what they see as indications of the successfulness of a disguise or cover-up. We will coin this Inverse Evidence. In the case of conspiracy theories, Inverse Evidence consists of observations which even after careful inspection turn out to be in accordance with the official story, and are thus supposed to prove the existence of a cunning cover-up operation of the conspirators. Inverse Evidence typically includes those observations which the sceptic regards as direct and obvious falsifications of the conspiracy hypothesis, for instance clear visual evidence or testimony against the conspiracy from hitherto unsuspected sources. Within the conspiracy theorist’s frame of thought, these apparent falsifications prove that the conspirators are even more numerous, influential and/or better organised than was initially suspected.
Inverse Evidence in psychoanalysis consists of any relevant behaviour or symptom which is apparently not meaningful or psychoanalytically relevant, and specifically – just as in the case of conspiracy theorizing – of those observations which seem to falsify the interpretations of the analyst. After all, within the psychoanalyst’s frame of thought, these bear witness to the disguising skills and the cunning of the psychoanalytic Unconscious. The more seemingly recalcitrant the material encountered, the more it counts in favour of the theory. After all, the Unconscious, just as the presumed conspirators in a conspiracy theory, may be expected to deliberately lay out forged evidence to lead us astray.

Although Freud often conceived of the Unconscious as irrational and without any internal logic – in order to account for the bizarre and sometimes contradictory interpretations generated by his theory – the epistemologically most important feature of the Unconscious is that it strategically tries to deceive us in the most unexpected and far-fetched ways. This central postulate explains the notorious psychoanalytic vision as one of fundamental suspicion, as so brilliantly articulated by Thomas Mann in 1929:

“With it [psychoanalysis], a blithe scepticism has come into the world, a mistrust which unMASKS all the schemes and subterfuges of our own souls!”

Freud’s hypothesis that his patients harboured the secret and unconscious wish to falsify his theories and interpretations, rather than just being a dubious immunizing gambit for which only Freud should be held responsible, followed quite naturally from the central postulate of the psychoanalytic Unconscious. One of Freud’s patients dreamed that she had to spend her holidays with her despised mother-in-law. Surely this was a falsification of his claim that every dream is ‘really’ an unconscious wish-fulfilment? Not so for Freud:

“According to this dream, I was in the wrong. It was thus her wish that I should be in the wrong, and this wish the dream showed her as fulfilled.” “I can with a great degree of certainty count on evoking such a dream [which seems flatly to contradict my theory] once I have explained to the patient my theory that the dream is a wish-fulfilment.

Indeed, I have reason to expect that many of my readers will have such dreams, merely to fulfil the wish that I may prove to be wrong.”

It is hard to resist the conclusion that this is a perfectly legitimate justificatory move within the psychoanalytic framework, and we instantly recognize it as a genuine psychoanalytic interpretation. So although Richard Webster writes that “The notion that many of his patients were perverse and obstinate, harbouring a secret desire to prove him wrong, provided an excellent way of dealing with a great deal of recalcitrant material” (Webster 1995:266), it is important to note that as soon as one was willing to accept Freud’s central hypotheses, one was no longer supposed to have conceptual or epistemic problems with these types of justifications.

The twofold and complementary notion of evidence – Gap Evidence and Inverse Evidence –, directly ensuing from psychoanalysis’ epistemic core, is the foremost reason for the ability of

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8 Or more precisely: in both simple and far-fetched ways: the degree of complexity in psychoanalytic interpretations varies enormously, from childishly simple symbols for genitals on the basis of superficial visual similarities to intricate, multi-layered and polyglot analyses.

9 From a speech Mann held in Vienna on the 8th of May 1936, honouring Freud’s 80th birthday.

10 In Buekens and Boudry (2008) we explain the confusion between justifications and explanations that underlie the confidence of ‘having understood’ a phenomenon X when it is being given a psychoanalytic status Y.
psychoanalysts to mould any observation into an interpretation consistent with the theory. In the next section we will see that the elaboration of this central idea into a structure of theoretical concepts and resulting methodological licenses further enhances the inferential power of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic and weakens the ‘recalcitrance of reality’, a concept which is crucial in the discussion between rationalist and constructivist accounts of science.

3.5. Conceptual joker cards

Freud developed his core-idea of an unobservable entity and unobservable forces which conceal and disguise their existence into an elaborate system of theoretical concepts licensing inferential practices. The development of these concepts extended almost endlessly the means of drawing analytical inferences from the source material to reach a certain conclusion, and proved remarkably effective in coping with recalcitrant material: *Verneinung*, wishes/counterwishes, substitution, repression, inversion, cathexis, hyperinterpretation, linguistic association and symbolic association, multiple layers of meaning (in Freud’s case also: phylogenetic memory), the use of double-entendres and homonyms of all sorts, etc. Once again, we are confronted with the inseparability of the methodology and the conceptual structure of the theory, for especially in classical Freudian psychoanalysis, any apparent methodological extravagance is foisted upon the object of inquiry: it is after all the Unconscious, struggling with the psychological mechanism of censorship, which seeks the most ingenious and divergent ways to give outlet to the amassed psychic energy; in such circumstances, who can blame the analyst for far-fetched interpretations and the gratuitous use of *methodological wildcards*?

Many of Freud’s theoretical concepts functioned in practice as conceptual joker cards to forestall possible falsifications. A classical example in this respect is Freud’s notion of *Verneinung*. When Freud was unable to find the requested pathological complex or unconscious desire, he treated this as Inverse Evidence for the presence of these complexes, because the patient must have repressed them. In a way analogous to conspiracy theorizing, Freud considered the patient’s vehement denial of these hypotheses – for example in his use of the concept of penis envy – as yet further confirmation of his claims, because it clearly demonstrated the patient’s Unconscious ‘resisting’ the interpretation. Of course, Freud did not count as a refutation of his theory those cases where a patient readily accepted the psychoanalytic interpretation, for this only meant that the Unconscious was in this case unable to resist strongly enough. For example, Freud was able to account for a little boy’s affectionate behaviour towards the mother as a manifestation of the Oedipus complex; on the other hand, however, if the boy showed affection towards the father and despised his mother, as in the case of Little Hans, Freud explained the behaviour towards the father as a “reaction formation” against the actual murderous desires (Van Rillaer 1980:141-155).

So, although the patient’s refusal to acknowledge the interpretations of the analyst was ‘predicted’ by the theory, the immediate or belated acceptance by the patient was not considered as refuting the interpretation, because unobservable differences in the strength of the unconscious resistance could well account for both situations. In general, the concept of an unobservable ‘quantitative factor’ in the patients’ mental economy proved to be a very useful joker card to forestall the falsification of what initially looked like testable predictions; it could always be invoked post factum to account for the absence of a symptom in case its occurrence was expected, or in the case of a symptom which appeared without any apparent cause. Through Freud’s psychoanalytic lens, the
logic and explanatory value of these quantitative differences in the mental economy seemed so natural that he was quite explicit about the way the concept actually functions in psychoanalytic practice, i.e. that it comes out of the closet only afterwards:

“We cannot measure the amount of libido essential to produce pathological effects. We can only postulate it after the effects of the illness have manifested themselves.”(Freud 1924:119)

Or consider Freud’s use of the concept of “inversion”. Frank Cioffi convincingly argued that Freud, although he theorized that neurosis develops when perverse desires remain unsatisfied, did not recognize that patients who overtly indulged in their perverse desires but were nevertheless neurotic, constituted a refutation of his theory (Cioffi 1998:119-121). In the case of the neurotics without overtly perverse behaviour, Freud considered the symptoms as an outlet for the libidinal energy amassed in response to the repressed perversities; in case of overtly perverse neurotics, Freud maintained that the symptoms expressed a repressed aversion against the indulging in perversities, and constituted a case of “inversion”.

In classical Freudian theory, these astounding juggles with inversions and displacements are the result of the division of the Unconscious into personalized and antagonistic substructures, which make it possible – without the need of further methodological extravaganza – to turn any symptom or behaviour into the apparently symptomatic outcome of a hidden psychodynamic conflict. Frederick Crews, following Wittgenstein’s criticism of this homunculus-like mental structures, wrote:

“Each posited subset of “the unconscious” permits another strand of contrary motivation to be added to the already tangled explanatory skein, leaving us, if we are sufficiently gullible, so impressed by the psychoanalytic interpreter’s diagnostic acumen that we think we are witnessing elegant and validated feats of deduction instead of being told a self-serving detective story in which the mystery itself – which of the elves checkmated which others to generate the symptom or dream or error? – is an artefact of question-begging manoeuvres.”(Crews 2006:56)

Thus, the versatility and multidirectionality of psychoanalytic methodology, observed by many authors (Timpanaro 1976; Macmillan 1997; Cioffi 1998), creates an abundance of inferential possibilities in the hermeneutical practice which, together with other conceptual and epistemic complications, deprives the psychodynamic Unconscious – if any such entity exists – gradually of any possibility of putting epistemic constraints on theoretical claims or psychoanalytic interpretations. The ‘recalcitrance of reality’ is thus ever more diminished, as the social constructivist would have it.

3.6. Epistemic double lives

Another important objection against psychoanalytic theory is that many concepts lead what may be called an ‘epistemic double life’ (Cioffi 1998:118): they seem to have a semantically rich and clearly delineated definition as long as they are used in the normal interpretive and clinical work, but as soon as they are critically examined or occur in propositions that are threatened by falsifications they suddenly take on a nebulous and indefinite meaning. Within psychoanalytic circles, no consensus is forthcoming about the precise meaning of its central concepts, perhaps
not incidentally, because precisely this constant possibility of moving between a well-defined meaning and a semantic ‘moving target’ helps to immunize them against criticism. As in astrological practice, psychoanalytic interpretations manage “to seem to say and yet to refrain from saying” (Cioffi 1998:131). The non-falsifiability of psychoanalytic claims is therefore not its most important characteristic; it is the fact that, despite their being unfalsifiable, they are so construed as to give a convincing impression of containing well defined terms and hence being perfectly amenable to empirical investigation. As Esterson noted about the concepts in Freud’s ego-psychology (Ich, Über-Ich, Es)

“Not only are they speculations of a kind not amenable to empirical validation, their functions are so imprecisely delineated that they can be employed in almost arbitrary fashion to provide support for virtually any theoretical formulation.” (Esterson 1993:230)

Cioffi mentions Freud’s “disingenuous alternation” and “tergiversation” in the scope of the libido-concept. After they had become dissidents, Freud criticized Adler and Jung for their being unable to admit the carnal nature of the libido-concept, and he derided their “need to free human society from the yoke of sexuality.” (cited in Cioffi 1998:15) On later occasions, however, Freud resorts to precisely this milder interpretation, widening the scope of the libido concept so that it encompassed “what Plato meant by ‘Eros’ and St. Paul by ‘love’” (Cioffi 1998:16). This semantic double life of the concept ‘libido’ fulfilled two functions: only the narrow, carnal interpretation could explain why fathers threatened their sons precisely with penile amputation and why the libidinal drives were so inadmissible for our moral sensibilities as to be repressed; while the wider interpretation allowed the maintenance of the central contention that the libidinal factor is lurking beneath the surface of each and every symptom or dream.

Psychoanalytic concepts like ‘libido’ have arguably lead an epistemic double life ever since they were theorized by Freud, which explains what Richard Webster called their “world-revealing elasticity” (Webster 1995:294). Other conceptual equivocations however developed only later on in the history of psychoanalysis. Whereas in Freud’s original theory, for example, the meaning of the Oedipus complex was relatively well-defined, nowadays the way in which it is often used in psychoanalytic literature – notably since Lacan’s linguistic and symbolic reconfiguration of the concept – renders it completely vacuous. Psychoanalysts wanted to maintain the Oedipus complex as the universal cornerstone of human psychology discovered by Freud – the “shibboleth” of psychoanalysis – , but in the absence of any convincing observational or epidemiological evidence for the complex and its pathogenic effects, they had to resort to a broader and ill-defined version of the concept. The astounding discovery that had once, according to Freud himself, “evoked such embittered contradiction, such furious opposition, and also such entertaining acrobatics of criticism” (Freud 1953), is nowadays often diminished to a vague platitude11 about human psychology, as in this recent definition by Lester Luborsky and Marna Barrett:

“Most dynamic theorists today accept a broader interpretation of the Oedipus complex encompassing the idea that there is an active competition between two people for the affection of a third person.” (Luborsky & Barrett 2006:2)

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The original Oedipus complex as theorised by Freud, describing the incestuous desire of the infant to have *sex* with his mother and to *kill* his father, is thereby completely eroded. The proclaimed universality of the complex is nevertheless ‘saved’, allowing it to maintain its function as a theoretical watchword in the psychoanalytic community. The conceptual equivocations of this restyled Oedipus complex border on what we will call an ‘empty term’ or ‘container term’ in the next section.

3.7. Container terms and the reciprocity of the defining relations

In Buekens (2006) it is pointed out that the declarative statements in which they occur not only partially fix the extension of the terms, the extensions are further partially fixed by applying them in interpretations, which partially explains their ‘open character’. In this context it is important to remind us of the fact that many central psychoanalytical terms are often neologisms, or extensions of the folk psychology meaning of “personal-level” concepts (Dennett 1969) like desire, memory, fear, wish… The meaning of the psychoanalytic concept of ‘wish-fulfilment’ for instance is partly determined by our tacit notions about the dispositions of wishing, but is also modified by the distinctively psychoanalytic interpretations in which the concept occurs.

When Freud reconstructs a young girl’s dream about arranging flowers as the fulfilment of both her wish to preserve her valuable virginity and her sadistic wish to be violated, we learn something about the concept of wish-fulfilment *in psychoanalysis*. By exploiting its modified character, again Freud lets the central concept of a wish lead an epistemic double life, alternately referring to supposed wishes as somehow the patient’s own folk psychological interpretation, or as stemming from an entity outside him/her (the distinctly psychoanalytic interpretation). Nevertheless, in spite of our reservations as to the possibility of coherently extending a “personal-level” concept like wish in a psychoanalytic fashion, we still know what sort of mental state a ‘wish’ initially was, and we can hence more or less get a picture of an entity like the Unconscious *wishing* something.

The meaning of other psychoanalytic concepts, however, is so dependent on the context or interpretations in which they occur that they may be considered empty ‘container terms’. This phenomenon is especially ubiquitous in the currently popular Lacanian psychoanalysis, where concepts like the Other, *jouissance*, the Phallus, the *objet petit a*, the Symbolic and the Real, although they have no precise referent and are notoriously difficult to delineate, are constantly appealed to in psychoanalytic interpretations (Nobus 1998). In spite of the illusion of a meaningful conceptual unity between disparate phenomena, these concepts ultimately tend to function as purely syntactic ‘markers’ signalling adherence to the Lacanian hermeneutic. The concept of ‘the Other’ for example is a quasi-metaphysical ‘position’ in the psychic structure of the subject that can be occupied by almost any entity, ranging from particular other persons, to society, the Law, the figure of the mother, the psychoanalyst, the other sex, the own body, Language, images, or even – according to Slavoj Zizek – *The Matrix* in the eponymous movie. In a recent article about Lacan’s concept of the Other, Derek Hook writes about “the Other as vanishing-point of intersubjectivity”, “the Other as simultaneously ‘inside’ and “outside’” and “the Other as both embodiment of the social substance and yet also the site of the unconscious” (Hook 2008). In short, the obscure and deeply contradictory nature of this ‘position’ in the human psyche makes ‘the Other’ ultimately an empty ‘signifier’ – for once, speaking Lacanese turns out to be useful –
which can be assigned to virtually anything. In the Lacanian hermeneutic, the concept in the Y-position in a psychoanalytic declarative is supposed to illuminate the object in the X-position, but the meaning of this concept is *itself* only determined by the set of objects that occur in the X-positions of the declaratives in which the concept occurs.

Buekens (2006) uses a second and broader definition of the term ‘empty’: one could dismiss a concept as being empty as soon as it turns out that one can always construct confirmations for its applications. While this does not preclude the concept having a well-defined and coherent meaning, we would like to reserve the term ‘empty’ here specifically to the phenomena of conceptual vacuousness described above, where the concept was already “empty to begin with”.

What we find problematic about the Oedipus complex within classical psychoanalysis, for example, is not that it is unintelligible or ill-defined. We can easily understand what it would mean for someone to entertain oedipal wishes (at least, if we ignore the problems pertaining to the notion of unconscious wishes in Freud’s sense). The problem is that Freud saw the Oedipus complex ‘confirmed’ everywhere. This conceptual deficiency only comes to light when we consider the concept in relation to other psychoanalytic concepts with which it is connected and the methodological practices that govern its use in hermeneutical practice. The effect of these conceptual and epistemological deficiencies of psychoanalysis – epistemic double lives, conceptual joker cards, container terms – on the epistemology of the theory can be summarized in the following way: if psychoanalytic concepts are the ‘joints’ in the hermeneutic machine, these defects render them extremely loose and versatile, which further enhances the inferential possibilities in the hermeneutic practice and thus further diminishes the epistemic constraints of the psychodynamic reality on “what is believed to be” (see the next section).

4. A Constructivist Description of Psychoanalysis

4.1. Psychoanalysis and institutional facts

Before we have a closer look at the specific elements of SC in relation to psychoanalysis, we will show how the consequences of the epistemic, methodological and conceptual defects described above justifies the description of psychoanalysis in terms of institutional facts (this general argument will apply as well for the justification of a description in a SC framework). Although in the previous section we hinted several times at the consequences of *individual* defects, we should keep in mind that – as we already noted – their epistemic effect is cumulative and collectively.

12 The therapeutic methods of free association and transference analysis, although demonstrably unavailing for probing another person’s mind (Grünbaum 1984), are not discussed here as one of the central methodological pitfalls of psychoanalysis because, as Buekens rightly noted, these methods are entirely absent in psychoanalytic interpretation of human phenomena like works of art, literary texts or social phenomena, against which the same charge of epistemic vacuousness can nevertheless still be made. Even without the method of free association, the epistemic and methodological structures of psychoanalysis are sufficiently open-ended to guarantee that everything can be given a psychoanalytic interpretation. The practice of free association not so much enlarges the inferential possibilities from X to Y (these are already overabundant), but is there first and foremost to create a pool of evidence, often presented as objective and uncontaminated observation. By means of the question-begging postulate of internal psychic determinism, which states that it is impossible for the analyst to influence a chain of associations, the interpretation is for the main part foisted upon the patient.
We argue that the aforementioned defects relax the application of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic, the formal scheme of which – “X is/counts as Y” – was already formally equivalent to that of declarative statements, and that it does this on two levels:

- the scope of the X term is extended to ever more entities
- the conditions under which the relation “counts as” is applicable for a given X, are gradually relaxed/extended

The eventual, cumulative effect of these various defects and complications can hence be stated in two directions, roughly in the following way:

- for any X, its assigned meaning Y is arbitrary
- for any Y, Y can be assigned to any X

In practice, of course, this is a slight exaggeration, for not literally “anything” can appear in the Y-position for any given X. What we mean here is that any guarantee for the congruency of the Y’s for any given X is frustrated by the methodological laxity and the conceptual deficiencies inherent within the theory. For any X within the domain of analyisable entities, if not any Y then at least many different and mutually excluding Y’s can be assigned to it; and for many different Y’s, it is so that Y can be assigned to virtually anything within the domain of analyisable entities. The qualification “virtually” is added to the modal “can” because connecting X’s with a given Y – i.e. the hermeneutical practice of the psychoanalyst – sometimes involves a considerable degree of ingenuity and creativity, which makes the exact ‘inferential power’ of the methodology difficult to be estimated. The extent to which a given interpretation is convincing and/or accepted by the analytical community as plausible or substantiated, is because of the methodological equivocations partially imponderable, and arguably to a large extent a matter of personal authority and reputation.

The first formulation corresponds to Malcolm Macmillan’s verdict in *Freud Evaluated*, to the effect that

> “the so-called discoveries are dependent upon methods of enquiry and interpretation so defective that even practitioners trained in their use are unable to reach vaguely congruent conclusions about such things as the interpretation of a dream or symptom […]” (Macmillan 1997:505)

The second formulation corresponds to the fact, already observed in 1962 by the psychoanalyst Judd Marmor – with understandable disquietude – , that by means of the psychoanalytic method, ‘confirmations’ can be found as easily for Freud’s Oedipus complex, as for Adler’s inferiority complex, or for Lacan’s symbolic Father, or for Jung’s anima and persona:

> “dependent on the view of the analysts the patients of each school generate precisely those data that support the theories and interpretations of their analysts” (Marmor 1962:289)

In this perspective, rather than being a proper scientific theory, Freud’s brainchild can be considered an elaborate epistemic recipe for generating self-confirming theories about the human mind. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Sonu Shamdasani wrote in *Le Dossier Freud*, psychoanalysis is an “empty” theory (“une théorie zero”), in the broader definition also used by Buekens: whatever we put into the Unconscious, the hermeneutic will generate confirmations *ad libidum.*
Although we agree that psychoanalysis, because of its ultimate arbitrariness and the formal properties of psychoanalytic interpretations, can be meaningfully described as declarative statements generating institutional facts, as Buekens has proposed, we wanted to extend his analysis along the lines of SC. The advantage of this further extension is that the delusional dimension of psychoanalysis – presenting institutional, constructed facts as natural facts -- is already encompassed in the very notion of SC (at least, in the two types of doctrinal constructivism considered earlier). Paul Boghossian’s apt observation confirms this:

“A social construction claim is interesting only insofar as it purports to expose construction where none had been suspected, where something constitutively social had come to masquerade as natural.” (Boghossian 2006:18)

In spite of its hermeneutical (Habermas, Ricoeur) and postmodern restyling, psychoanalysis, if it is to be a meaningful and coherent theory, necessarily presupposes a more or less independent mental reality, but because what it takes to ‘discover’ and ‘find’ are basically self-created institutional facts, both psychoanalytic reality and psychoanalytic knowledge are thoroughly constructed in the way SC ‘reveals’. Thus, the combination of what psychoanalysis pretends to be, and the way the theory really functions, renders it amenable to a constructivist description.

Apart from this advantage, we also opted for a constructivist framework because, as was already mentioned in the introduction, we think such a reconstruction provides a new line of argument against Social Constructivism as an account of what rationalists consider as ‘genuine’ science. This argument will be spelled out at the end of this article.

4.2. No constraints on evidence: the Symmetry Postulate and psychoanalysis

Let us see how this further relates to SC. Restating our findings in the words of H. M. Collins, we can indeed say that, on account of these deficiencies within the theory, “what is believed to be” in psychoanalytic hermeneutics is “in no way constrained” by the nature of the dynamic Unconscious (if any such object exists at all), which illustrates the general constructivist point that evidential considerations play almost no role in the development of the discipline. Consequently, for someone writing the history of psychoanalysis, David Bloor’s “symmetry postulate” is quite apt as a methodological tenet, for psychoanalytic practice can be described without either the truth/falsity distinction or even the rational/irrational distinction: since both the psychoanalyst’s theoretical choice for the Oedipus complex, breast envy, inferiority complex or birth trauma, and his preference for this or that particular interpretation in hermeneutical practice, does not depend on rational and evidential considerations, the invocation of non-evidential considerations will indeed be necessary in explaining theoretical disputes, developments, controversies and schisms in the history of psychoanalysis (Borch-Jacobsen & Shamdasani 2006; Buekens & Boudry 2008). The demise of the concept of penis envy, for example, rather than being caused by a sudden lack of ‘evidence’, was likely the result of changing social and cultural sensibilities, which viewed the concept as patriarchal and misogynistic. Likewise, the genesis of this concept in psychoanalysis must probably be attributed precisely to these prejudices about female submissiveness and inferiority, rather than originating from convincing empirical evidence or observations.

The fact that the source material in psychoanalytic hermeneutic is handled in such a lax and arbitrary fashion that it can be construed as lending support to any preconceived idea whatsoever,
illustrates another feature constructivism stresses: *the ability always to maintain the theory in the face of recalcitrant material, or constantly to find persuasive 'confirmations' for it*. Of course, sometimes this requires interpretive ingenuity and creativity, as was recognized by Golinski in the context of epistemological constructivism: if we take the rivalising psychoanalytic schools – Freudism, Adlerism, Lacanism – as competing ‘paradigms’, we can indeed say that “given sufficient creativity and resourcefulness on behalf of its defenders, the existing paradigm could be maintained indefinitely.” (Golinski 2005:25)

What then to say about the ontological status of the psychoanalytic unconscious, this imperceptible realm of the human mind, full of repressed wishes and memories, and constantly forming its own intentions and motivations? As far as we can see, there is no credible scientific evidence for the independent existence of a distinctly psychodynamic Unconscious – in contrast to the well-established notion of unconscious (“sub-personal”) mental activity for the performance of cognitive tasks (Dennett 1969; Kihlstrom, Barnhardt et al. 1992; O’Brien & Jureidini 2002).

But now Watzlawick’s definition of ontological constructivism quoted above seems very apt indeed: *we can say that the purported independent reality of the psychoanalytic unconscious turns out to be “the construction of those who believe they have discovered and investigated it”*. The psychodynamic Unconscious is “an invention whose inventor is unaware of his act of invention, who considers it something that exists independently of him; the invention then becomes the basis of his world view and actions.” (Watzlawick 1984:10) It is an illusion which continues to exist as long as its reality is accepted by (a part of) the analytical community. This corresponds with the observations, made by several critics of psychoanalysis 1) that the precise content of the Unconscious is arbitrary; 2) that this is because psychoanalytic entities are artefacts of the theory; 3) that only those who were already convinced of the theory ‘see’ the described psychoanalytic phenomena (e.g. the child’s ‘erotic’ pleasure in thumb sucking); 4) that the theory is so versatile that it adapts itself each time to the local cultural and social environment.

### 4.3. The creation of truth

Recall our distinction between strong and weak ontological constructivism. **Strong ontological constructivism** held that the constructed ‘reality’ is no outside reality at all, but a non-existing illusion. What we refer to as an independent reality has no referent at all. The **weak version** holds that what we refer to as reality has, once it is socially constructed, ‘out-there-ness’ for everyone. Although socially constructed instead of independently discovered, the concept of reality is no illusion.

As far as we can see, there is no reason to believe that psychoanalysis *literally* – in the sense of Strong ontological constructivism – creates its own reality (a notable complication will be mentioned in the next section) or that interpretations *literally* create their own truth. Correspondingly, few proponents of SC about science are willing to endorse Strong ontological constructivism (although many of them remain unclear on the subject. (Kukla 2000:96) Still,

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13 “Far from being a subterranean system replete with sophisticated, personal-level mental abilities, therefore, the unconscious is broken up and distributed across a set of specialized subsystems, each of which is restricted to the computational manipulation of subpersonal representational information.” (O’Brien & Jureidini 2002:146)
many constructivists claim that science somehow “creates its own truth”, a truth that continues to exist as long as it is accepted by the scientific community. Declarative statements, too, are said to create itself the state of affairs that fulfils their own truth-conditions. How can we resolve this matter?

Buekens (2006) gives the example of a discussion between two persons about the Allied landings in Normandy. One of the participants says “let this [points to a book] be France and this [points to a cup of coffee] be England”. For the purpose of the discussion, these two physical objects will count as the respective countries, allowing further illustrative discussions about the Channel and the direction of the Allied forces.

The shortcut expression “This book is France”, which is in fact a declarative statement, creates its own truth in the geographical discussion, albeit within an explicitly introduced institutional framework: the book ‘is’ France as long as the discussion goes on, but no-one believes that 70 million Frenchmen are living in it. Qua participant in the discussion, we don’t have to substantiate our identification of the book ‘as France’, because all participants are at least tacitly aware of the institutional and conventional character of the facts created.

The psychoanalyst, however, does not conceive of a statement like “this dream element symbolizes the phallus” as an institutional fact but as an empirical proposition requiring further substantiation, for example by means of a symbolic or linguistic association, or generally by some inference thought to be licensed by the psychoanalytic methodology. The point is that if the statement has an intended empirical status, it entails the need for some justification. The interpretations are not intended as institutional facts; Buekens’ claim is that upon closer inspection they turn out to function accordingly.

Although statements issued with declarative force can be said to create the state of affairs that makes them true (Searle 1995), this institutional character of psychoanalytic facts created by the declarative use of propositions of the form ‘X is/counts as Y’, is necessarily never recognized by the Freudian community. On the contrary: they are taken to be empirical statements and so according to Freud’s own standards they are false: dreams are not fulfilsments of repressed wishes, paranoia is no manifestation of repressed homosexuality, etc. Because of the differences between the beliefs and attitudes of the persons performing the declarative statements, the way in which a lapsus “counts as” a manifestation of the Oedipus complex is different from that in which the book in our discussion “counts as” France\textsuperscript{14}. The problem is of course that if one holds, like ontological SC does, that all facts are ‘created’ and ‘constructed’, this feature of psychoanalysis will be taken to confirm a claim SC makes about science in general. But this completely misunderstands the criticism based on institutional facts: the latter is a theory that accepts an important distinction between brute facts and institutional facts and does not reduce the former to the latter.

\textsuperscript{14} Maybe the difference between our respective positions is better spelled out when we consider Buekens’ claim that we can never prove the existence of psychoanalytic phenomena on the basis of data (indications, evidence) themselves not created by the psychoanalytic institution. At this point we disagree: on account of the empirical pretentions of psychoanalysis, he think it is possible in principle that, for example, objective neurological evidence shows up for this or that psychoanalytic concept (although the epistemic deficiencies would severely complicate this kind of research). Buekens admits that in principle this remains an option, but it would be a ‘lucky coincidence’ given the central institutional character of the theory.
4.4. Suggestion and self-fulfilling prophecies

Two related phenomena complicate our claim that the ‘reality’ constructed by psychoanalysis has no ‘out-there-ness’ (Weak ontological constructivism) and hence deserve some attention: the issue of suggestion in psychoanalytic therapy, famously discussed in Adolf Grünbaum’s *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis* (1984), and the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecies, which Popper coined the “Oedipus effect” (Popper 1957).

One way to state the problem of suggestion is that the theory contaminates the phenomena which it purports to describe objectively. A patient under analysis who has fallen victim to this contaminating effect of the psychoanalytic method not only comes to believe for instance in the existence of certain forbidden fantasies, but actually starts to entertain them and to behave as having them. In this particular case psychoanalysis – like countless other forms of suggestive therapies – can directly ‘create’ the phenomena he intends to describe. We do not suggest here that the mechanism of suggestion is able to create the full-blown psychodynamic structures postulated by psychoanalysis, nor for that matter that a genuinely Freudian – i.e. psychoanalytically unconscious – desire can ever be literally constructed in the patient’s mind. The suggestive methods of psychoanalysis can nevertheless create conscious mental phenomena the patient gradually becomes convinced of as being manifestations of his unconscious beliefs or desires.

The confusion in the psychoanalytic setting between the (social) construction of phenomena and the discovery of something that is really ‘out there’, is made possible by the fact that, as even Freud acknowledged, the interpretive work of the analyst closely resembles the practice of (re)construction. About his analysis of the Wolf Man, Freud wrote:

“All I mean to say is this: scenes, like this one in my present patient’s case, which date from such an early period and exhibit such a content, and which further lay claim to such an extraordinary significance for the history of the case, are as a rule not reproduced as recollections, but have to be divined – constructed – gradually and laboriously from an aggregate of indications.” (cited in Moore 1999:29)

Although Freud also often used the archaeological metaphor to characterize his method, whereby the analyst is described as slowly excavating the buried remnants of the past in the patient’s mind, the actual psychoanalytic method does not resemble at all the immediate accessibility of archaeological objects. Richard Moore writes that Freud, as he could only infer the existence of the presumed unconscious phenomena on the basis of certain cues (dreams, associations, patterns of behaviour),

“it is more as if [he] had found a method analogous to sonar to locate and provide a rough outline of buried memories and then help the patient (or he himself) make a facsimile that seemed sufficiently familiar and could be worked with as though it were the original.” (Moore 1999:33)

Whereas the similarity between the activity of construction and the hermeneutical practice of psychoanalysis paves the way for a misidentification of social constructions with natural, empirically detectable facts, the confusion is also facilitated by – once again – the central epistemic structures of the theory. The constructive activity itself is hidden from view precisely by the idea that all these things were present all along in the Unconscious, only to ‘come to the surface’ now. If the patient does not acknowledge or even flatly denies the existence of these
thoughts and memories before he or she comes to analysis, this is because they were until then ‘repressed’, and because the psychological ‘resistances’ were not yet overcome. Thus, the hypothesis of an imperceptible mental reservoir for forbidden wishes and desires that can be exposed with the help of the analyst, together with the ensuing concepts of repression and denial, creates very favourable psychological conditions for suggestibility. In Buekens & Boudry (2008) we briefly explore further analogies between suggestibility in psychoanalysis and certain primitive healing practices.

5. Conclusion

The central claim of this article was that SC, both in its epistemological and ontological variant, offers an accurate description of the hermeneutic practice and the epistemic structure of psychoanalysis. This will come as no surprise for the constructivist himself, for whom precisely the counterpart of this claim – that it is a bad description of how bona fide science works – will appear most problematic. The critic of SC may for his part concur with the proponent of SC that if SC holds for bona fide science, it holds – a forteriori – for psychoanalysis.

The crux of our first argument was then to show that the features SC ascribes to science in general correctly characterize psychoanalysis in virtue of specific epistemic, methodological and conceptual deficiencies. However, we think that this first argument can also be informative as to the question whether SC offers an accurate description of those theoretical disciplines accepted by rationalist or non-constructivist philosophers as bona fide science. Thus, the crux of our second argument is to show that the case of psychoanalysis provides us with a good reason not to accept SC as a good account of science or scientific practice in general. How is this possible? Although we hope to have demonstrated that the discussed deficiencies within psychoanalysis collectively form a sufficient condition for a SC description, we think it would be impossible to prove that these are also necessary conditions: at this point it might seem a further, open question whether other theoretical disciplines have the key characteristics SC thinks characterize scientific practice (or indeed any theoretical discipline). Suppose we now want to construct a new argument against SC as an account of science in general. Insofar as we have demonstrated that psychoanalysis can be accurately described by SC in virtue of the aforementioned deficiencies, all we have to do is demonstrate that the case of what we call bona fide science is different. Is this possible without entering into the complex discussion about the possibility of a demarcation criterion between science and pseudoscience?

If the constructivist now wants to escape the conclusion that the case of bona fide science is different from that of psychoanalysis, two strategies are available: the first option would be to deny that the aforementioned deficiencies are peculiar to psychoanalysis and that they are generally absent from bona fide science. This does not seem a promising tack, as many of these deficiencies are well known, were so even in Freud’s own time, and for many scientists and philosophers served as the basis to question the theory’s scientific credentials. Whether or not these critics were justified in doing so on that basis, we can still hold that these properties are widely recognized as distinctly psychoanalytic (Crews 1986; Esterson 1993; Cioffi 1998). The second option, which seems more promising, is to admit that these specific deficiencies indeed are peculiar to psychoanalysis, but to maintain that they are superfluous to a SC argument. This
means that even for a theory that is *free* from these deficiencies, or at least for one in which they occur to a significantly lesser degree, a similar argument could still be made to the effect that the knowledge of the theory is in fact “socially constructed”. This would mean, however, that all the ingenious deficiencies and complications within psychoanalysis would be *epistemically gratuitous* and thus irrelevant for the social constructivist’s argument. The constructivist will then have to deny that it is precisely the presence of all these defects and complications within psychoanalysis which brings about the effect of epistemic laxity and vacuousness. That is quite implausible. Not only is it simply incoherent to claim that the conceptual and methodological flaws have no such epistemic effects (they are obvious for anyone familiar with the theory), there is good reason to suppose that in other respects they *hindered* the success of the theory, as they undeniably compromised its credibility in the eyes of many scientists and philosophers. It is thus safe to conclude that these epistemic, methodological and conceptual deficiencies are present in psychoanalysis to achieve this rather difficult feat, namely for a theory to create its own illusory object (and at the same to distract attention from this very process\(^\text{15}\)). Now we have turned the case of psychoanalysis into an *independent* argument against SC as an account of science in general. Nevertheless, because SC still provides insight in the epistemic workings of an intriguing theoretical discipline, we may conclude that it has some merit after all, even if it is a bad account of science.

Now someone might object the following to our argument: “You claim that psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience because it contains the features described by SC, but also that SC is a bad account of science because it correctly describes a pseudo-science (i.e. psychoanalysis). But doesn’t that render the whole argument circular?” Do we already *presuppose* either that psychoanalysis is a pseudo-science or that SC is a bad account of science, even before we start to relate the two theories to each other? We don’t think this is the case, but the circularity objection does allow us to clarify the structure of our main argument. We don’t *presuppose* that psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience, we just focus on the presence of certain epistemic, methodological and conceptual peculiarities of the theory. It may well be true that some of these properties have been considered by some philosophers as the hallmarks of pseudoscience or that they figure in some philosophical attempts to find a demarcation criterion (Derksen 1993), but that alone does not entail that we *endorse* that demarcation criterion, nor that our argument is dependent on the condemnation of psychoanalysis as pseudoscience *under that demarcation criterion*. The only two necessary premises in our argument are 1) the *presence* of these characteristics or defects\(^\text{16}\) in psychoanalysis, 2) their *relevance* for the success of a description in a SC framework, i.e. the fact that it is *in virtue of these properties* that the SC description of psychoanalysis is accurate. It may well be possible – although this is not the argument we intend to make – to turn the case of psychoanalysis against SC on the *presupposition* of the correctness of some demarcation criterion, according to which psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience. However, this will not impress the proponent of SC very much, as the possibility of a meaningful dividing line between science and pseudoscience is precisely what becomes problematic from a social constructivist point of view.

\(^{15}\) See for example Freud’s explicitly empiricist and objectivist rhetoric (Buekens & Boudry 2008).

\(^{16}\) The fact that we talk about ‘defects’ may seem tendentious, but our argument does not depend on that terminology and stands by its own right. In any case, with this choice of terms we are not suggesting that we endorse some demarcation criterion on the basis of these characteristics.
In this article we attempted to give an independent argument against SC, in any case not one that simply presupposes the very things SC objects to.

Finally, it is interesting to note that some contemporary psychoanalysts have themselves embraced some version of SC (Gillett 1998; Moore 1999; Eagle 2003). In this light, further research questions may include: how do these constructivist developments within a segment of the psychoanalytic community affect the discussed deficiencies? To what extent would these theorists concur with the analysis presented here, and why don’t they draw the same conclusions from it? Do they have a more accurate insight than their empiricist colleagues in what is really going on in the hermeneutic practice of psychoanalysis? Or is their adherence to SC a perverse immunization strategy which, by extrapolating their internal theoretical problems to all of science, neutralizes the objection that the psychoanalytic object is just an artefact of the theory?
Bibliography


What Social Constructivism Ought to Tell Us About Psychoanalysis (And What This Would Reveal About Itself)

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Dissertation for Postgraduate Studies in Logic, History and Philosophy of Science
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1. Introduction

In recent controversies about psychoanalysis, which for their enduring vehemence became known as the ‘Freud Wars’, issues relating to no less controversial Social Constructivist (SC) approaches to science were looming on both sides of the debate. The relationship between psychoanalysis and SC, as we will show in this paper, is intricate and fascinating. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that a close analysis of well known epistemic deficiencies, methodological complications and conceptual confusions that characterize psychoanalysis, reveals that social constructivist theories provide an accurate description of the scientific or hermeneutic status of psychoanalysis.

We will argue that the case of psychoanalysis illustrates what science would look like if it were to function as social constructivism claims it does, and we will thus in an indirect way expose the respective shortcomings of both controversial theories.

We will show that constructivism offers an accurate description specifically of psychoanalysis, and that the peculiar methodological and epistemological defects central to the theory, which precisely make it amenable to a constructivist description, in turn make a indirect case for the inadequacy of constructivism as a theory of bona fide science.

To turn our analysis into an new and independent argument against SC about science, we will have to consider not only whether the presence of epistemic, conceptual and methodological defects in psychoanalysis jointly form a sufficient condition for a successful description within the SC framework, but what would constitute a necessary condition for the success of such a description. Our approach follows earlier work of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic as involved in the unintended construction and maintenance of Searlean institutional facts (Buekens 2006; Buekens & Boudry 2008).

2. Social Constructivism

2.1. Two types of constructivism

‘Constructivism’ covers a broad variety of interrelated theories. Its claims range from commonsense conceptions about how artefacts and social institutions are ‘constructed’ by human agents to controversial and radical claims about the possibility of knowledge, science and the nature of reality. Philosopher of science Noretta Koertge holds that terms like ‘social construction’ or ‘constructivism’, “while they signal a certain sympathy towards nouveau ideas, have no precise referent.” (Koertge 1996:269; Haslanger 2003)²

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¹ This article will be submitted to Philosophy of Science or Philosophical Psychology, and will there be co-authored by Filip Buekens. (11/08/08)
² Haslanger (2003:301) remarks that “the variety of different uses of the term has made it increasingly difficult to determine what claim authors are using it to assert or deny”
No one seriously denies that at least some objects and states – money, parking places, world records, property – are socially constructed in a straightforward sense. Talk about social construction becomes interesting only if it claims of entities common sense and most scientists would consider to be ‘brute’ or ‘natural’ facts that they should be ‘exposed’ as being constructed by us, and hence not ‘inevitable’. According to Ian Hacking (1999), social constructivists tend to hold that if X is a social construction,

1) “X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.

2) X is quite bad as it is.

3) We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed.” (Hacking 1999:6)

Hacking is right that talk about social construction often has normative and evaluative connotations, but we will put them aside here as they will not be relevant for our purely descriptive analysis of the key methodological features of psychoanalysis. Claims that gender, unsafety or ADHD, to name but a few examples, are socially constructed, can indeed have a liberating or ‘debunking’ effect: taking gender stereotypes to be contingent facts may bring along the hope of changing or even getting rid of deplorable practices. In this article, however, we will not so much be concerned with specific claims about the social construction of this or that idea of object, but with more general doctrines that go under the banner of social constructivism. One can hold, for instance, that ADHD is a socially constructed illness, but that does not make one a social constructivist in the sense under discussion here. SC as a doctrine is supposed to make claims about the constructive nature of whole classes of ideas or objects, and is involved in revising central epistemic and ontological concepts, which Hacking coined “elevator terms” (Hacking 1999:21): knowledge, truth and reality.

A conceptual distinction between two types of constructivisms will be useful for our later discussion. Ontological constructivists hold that reality is not discovered or investigated, but constructed by the activity of scientists. A good working definition of what we call ontological constructivism is given by Paul Watzlawick, who endorses this version of constructivism:

“Any so-called reality is—in the most immediate and concrete sense—the construction of those who believe they have discovered and investigated it. In other words, what is found is an invention whose inventor is unaware of his act of invention, who considers it something that exists independently of him; the invention then becomes the basis of his world view and actions.” (Watzlawick 1984:10)

Ontological constructivism leaves us with two options: strong ontological constructivists hold that the constructed ‘reality’ is no outside reality at all, but a non-existing illusion. What we refer to as an independent reality has no referent at all. Weak ontological constructivism holds that what we refer to as being real has, once socially constructed, ‘out-there-ness’ for everyone. Although socially constructed instead of independently discovered, their reality is not an illusion.

Being compatible with accepting the notion of an objective and independent reality, epistemological constructivism does not require the strong or weak ontological commitments just mentioned, but in practice the doctrine is often accompanied with some version of strong or
weak ontological constructivism. An **epistemological constructivist** maintains, as H.M. Collins holds, that “the natural world in no way constrains what is believed to be” (Collins 1981:54). Applied to scientific practices, this means that reality *by itself* is not able to force scientists to modify a hypothesis or abandon a theory in favour of an alternative. Reality may or may not exist ‘out there’, but no amount of evidential considerations stemming from it can ever explain the commitment of scientists to a particular theory. If we want to explain the beliefs of scientists, we should therefore always look for non-evidential considerations, and that is where social and non-epistemic explanations enter the picture. The radical epistemological constructivist holds that scientific theories merely reflect the contingent social dispositions of the scientists, and as systems of knowledge they are self-confirming. It is this kind of constructivism which is embodied in David Bloor’s famous methodological precepts of the Strong Programme for the sociology of scientific knowledge, more precisely in his **symmetry postulate** for the explanation of scientific beliefs:

“[The sociology of scientific knowledge] would be symmetrical in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain say, true and false beliefs.” (Bloor 1991:7) “The symmetry postulate […] enjoins us to seek the same kind of causes for both true and false, [and] rational and irrational, beliefs […].”(Bloor 1991:175)

However, as Paul Boghossian (2006:114-115) rightly notes, there is a huge difference between a symmetry principle concerning truth and falsity, and one concerning rationality. Whereas a semi-plausible case can be made for the former, applying the symmetry postulate to rationality is quite controversial and requires full-blown epistemological constructivism. An interesting consequence of this form of constructivism was pointed out by Jan Golinski in *Constructing Reality*, who wrote, discussing the question of paradigm shifts in science, that “given sufficient creativity and resourcefulness on behalf of its defenders, the existing paradigm could be maintained indefinitely.” (Golinski 2005:25) Psychoanalysis, we argue, is the perfect illustration of Golinski’s observation.

### 2.2. Classical problems with constructivism

The standard problems associated with both strong and weak ontological reductionism and epistemological constructivism are well known and can be briefly rehearsed. The traditional objection against radical ontological constructivism is that it is a self-undemining doctrine, in the following sense: how can we avoid presupposing some sort of independent reality, even when trying to describe its constructed nature? Isn’t a statement like “X is a social construction” a shorthand for the factual statement “X is *in fact* a social construction” or “X is *really* a social

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1 Strictly speaking, the symmetry postulate does not logically entail epistemological constructivism, since a purely methodological precept for the sociology of scientific knowledge doesn’t say anything about the *nature* of scientific knowledge. Golinski (2005) for example argued that the symmetry postulate does not entail any commitment to epistemological constructivism, and Kukla (2000) claims that the two are conceptually independent. Although we admit that epistemological constructivism is not logically entailed by the symmetry postulate about rationality, we think that it makes no sense without it: if epistemological constructivism does *not* hold, the symmetry postulate is a very bad methodological precept indeed. As Boghossian writes: “the only way to ensure that both rational and irrational beliefs are explained through the same kind of cause is to explain both of them non-evidentially.” (Boghossian 2006:114-115) But what is the use of a methodological precept that requires you to explain every scientific belief non-evidentially if there is no guarantee that scientific beliefs *can only* be explained non-evidentially? If some scientific beliefs are only explicable in evidential terms after all, a methodological precept like the symmetry postulate would lead the sociologist seriously astray.
construction”, thereby presupposing the very distinction strong or weak ontological constructivists are trying to discard? Isn’t the ontological constructivist committed to a factual claim about the way the world really is, in contrast to what we generally take it to be? Either the presumed constructed nature of what we conceive as an independent reality constitutes itself an objective reality, which invalidates the ontological constructivists’ claim that no such reality exists (more precisely: which renders the claim incoherent), or the apparent ‘higher-order reality’ of a statement like “reality is a social construction” is itself merely a social construction, which undermines the very thing constructivists are trying to say (in the two aforementioned interpretations).

In his incisive critique of social constructivist accounts of science, Kukla (2000) showed that ontological constructivism entails relativism, and that relativism in turn is plagued with damaging logical problems. Kukla framed the problem of self-reference for radical ontological constructivism in terms of an infinite regress of constructions: the statement that X is a construction, must itself be merely a social construction, and the statement that “X is a social construction” is a social construction, is itself a social construction, etc. Kukla discussed the intriguing question what is supposed to happen when two different societies construct incompatible facts, and demonstrate how temporal incongruities arise from a constructivist conception of reality.

In contrast to the constructivist denial of an independent reality, the Classical Picture of Knowledge as Paul Boghossian calls it, maintains that “the world which we seek to understand and know about is what it is largely independent of us and our beliefs about it” (Boghossian 2006:22). As the constructivist Watzlawick himself admits, this is a commonsensical assumption to which all of us adhere in everyday life: “Constructivism in its pure, radical sense is incompatible with traditional thinking.” (Watzlawick 1984:15)

Apart from objectivism about facts, Boghossian distinguishes a second and a third crucial thesis in the Classical Picture of Knowledge. The second, constructivism about justification, is the claim that “facts of the form – information E justifies belief B – are society-independent facts. In particular, whether or not some item of information justifies a given belief does not depend on the contingent needs and interests of any community.” (Boghossian 2006:22) According to Boghossian, a denial of this thesis is already entailed by constructivism about facts in general, which maintains, in contrast to the Classical Picture, that all facts – including information that justifies beliefs -- are socially constructed.

The third component in the Classical Picture of Knowledge is objectivism about rational explanations: “Under the appropriate circumstances, our exposure to the evidence alone is capable of explaining why we believe what we believe.” (Boghossian 2006:22). This is precisely what epistemological constructivism denies: no amount of evidential considerations is able to explain what we believe, so we can never explain our beliefs “solely on the basis of our exposure to the relevant evidence” (Boghossian 2006:23).

4 In itself this is not a problem, since many scientific theories are counterintuitive and do not square with a commonsense view of reality.
Another traditional objection against epistemological constructivism is that it is unable to explain the ‘problem’ of scientific success. If the so-called reality which scientists are trying to grasp with their theories can in no way influence the course of scientific development, how can we explain the successful applications of scientific knowledge? This point will be particularly relevant in our analysis of psychoanalytic theories: the unconscious ‘reality’ they presuppose does not in any interesting sense put epistemic constraints on its theoretical claims or psychoanalytic interpretations.

Finally, it is quite evident that epistemological constructivism too is haunted by the spectre of Epimenedes, the ancient Cretan. If no amount of evidential considerations can explain the belief in a particular theory, what are we to say about the epistemic warrant for epistemological constructivism itself? The conclusion that epistemological constructivism is itself merely a reflection of contingent social and cultural dispositions of its proponents seems inevitable.

2.3. A new argument against Social Constructivism

Thus far we presented some well-known standard problems with SC. In this paper we propose a rather different and indirect strategy to question social constructivism as a viable account of science. We show that, in order for a theory or theoretical framework to be accurately analysable within a constructivist framework, specific and systematic defects in the epistemological foundations of the theory, as well as in its methodology and conceptual apparatus, will have to be detected. By showing that psychoanalysis is accurately described within a constructivist framework in virtue of its inherent epistemological defects we provide an indirect argument for the thesis that constructivism cannot be taken to provide an accurate theory of science (or scientific practice) in general.

This argument relies on a claim to the effect that the aforementioned defects are inherent to psychoanalysis. Furthermore, it rests on the assumption, which will only be indirectly touched upon in this paper, that the epistemic and methodological characteristics of psychoanalysis which make it eminently plausible to describe it within a SC framework, generally do not occur – at least not in equal measure – in bona fide scientific practices, although we immediately acknowledge that this is not a matter of absolute difference, but rather a matter of degree. Imre Lakatos (Lakatos & Musgrave 1970) for example maintained that every scientific theory builds a “protective belt” of auxiliary hypotheses around its “hard core” claims, and that this is not necessarily a bad thing. More specifically, epistemological constructivism about science can be considered as resting on an implausible generalisation and exaggeration of two standard features of genuine or bona fide scientific practice:

5 However, it is a controversial issue in the philosophy of science whether realism is, as Hilary Putnam once claimed, “the only philosophy that doesn't make the success of science a miracle.” (Putnam 1979:73; Putnam 1979:73) In any case, the epistemological constructivist could retreat to a radical ontological constructivism about facts, according to which the fact that science is successful, is itself socially constructed. But then, constructivism once again runs into the same conceptual problems mentioned above. According to Kukla, even if the success of science is accepted as an independent fact, constructivists can still come up with a rivalising non-realist explanation. Although we think Kukla overestimates the plausibility of such alternative explanations, he and many other philosophers of science may be right in asserting that the argument from success by itself does not constitute the final blow to for epistemological constructivism.
First, epistemological constructivism proposes a dubious generalization of specific but restricted\textsuperscript{6} epistemic problems like the theory-ladenness of observation and the Duhemian underdetermination of a theory by evidence, which are already widely acknowledged by philosophers of science. Not every observation is contaminated by the observer’s theory to the same extent: sometimes the effect is negligible; in other situations its influence is strong enough to have significant impact on the development of theories and paradigms. A uniform application of the theory-ladenness of observation to all scientific observations in equal measure, erodes a useful and valuable concept in philosophy of science. And once again, the danger of a vicious self-reference lurks, as Hacking observed:

“To see all observations as equally loaded with theory is in itself to practice theory-laden observation, that is, observation loaded with a theory derived from Hanson the philosopher.” (Hacking 1999:200)

In any case, if even these features do not decide between competing theories, scientists do not always have to decide in favour of one theory, but can also – and often do – suspend judgement and await further empirical or conceptual developments. As Peter Slezak points out, “a non sequitur from this thesis [of underdetermination] has become one of the foundational tenets of the social constructivist enterprise.”(Slezak 1994:281)

Secondly, epistemological constructivism exaggerates factors of individual epistemic distortions in scientific practice: confirmation bias, prejudice, selective use of evidence, ideological bias… (Holt 2002)

The first central claim of this article is that the general characteristics SC – both in its ontological and its epistemological form – ascribes to bona fide science in fact correctly but perhaps unintentionally characterize a good deal of what is going on in the psychoanalytic framework (both in its ‘scientific’ and its ‘hermeneutic’ version). What makes our argument challenging will depend on one’s philosophical position: the opponent of constructivist accounts of science will have to recognize that SC is applicable to certain practices, whereas the friends of constructivism will have to show that the remarkable aptness of SC in characterizing a flawed epistemic practice (psychoanalysis) is in fact not due to the core epistemic and methodological flaws of psychoanalysis but to general features of science that are also manifest in psychoanalysis. Our analysis will also show that the latter claim is hard to defend.

Even while we assume that the epistemological, methodological and conceptual pitfalls which plague psychoanalysis generally do not occur in other scientific disciplines, and believe that these considerations explain the shortcomings of psychoanalysis as a theory of human nature, one may still ask whether every so-called pseudo-science is affected by the same kind of epistemic flaws, or whether we can use the constructivist framework as a general touchstone for distinguishing science from pseudoscience in general. Although we will not pursue this question here, especially because it touches upon the delicate question of the demarcation criterion between bona fide science and pseudo-science, if any such criterion exists, we certainly do not think that a constructivist analysis can likewise be applied to all disciplines traditionally characterized as pseudoscience. As we will see, the accuracy of SC for describing a given theory hinges on the

\textsuperscript{6} We understand ‘restricted’ in the sense that they do not apply uniformly and with equal force to every kind of situation in scientific practice.
fulfilment of specific preconditions which are not generally met by all theories that are widely regarded as pseudoscience. It will nevertheless be clear that the discussion of theoretical pitfalls has a greater relevance than for psychoanalysis alone, and that it is in virtue of its epistemic flaws that psychoanalysis shows remarkable affinities with, for example, conspiracy theories.

In the next section we discuss a number of major conceptual and methodological flaws in psychoanalysis. In section 4 we show how SC accounts of science provide an excellent account of psychoanalysis in virtue of these flaws. Although we will try to demonstrate that the success of a SC account of psychoanalysis is crucially related to the presence of these flaws, we should note that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between the defects on the one side and the features which SC ascribes to scientific theories on the other side. Instead, the inflicted damage is mainly cumulative and overall.

3. Major Defects in Psychoanalysis

3.1. Psychoanalysis as a system of institutional facts

In Buekens (2006) and Buekens & Boudry (2008) we developed an account of psychoanalytic phenomena in terms of institutional facts along the lines of John Searle’s theory of social institutions (Searle 1995, Lagerspetz 2006), proposed as an inference to the best explanation of what really happens in the hermeneutic practice of psychoanalysis. The core structure of a psychoanalytic interpretation is a statement of the form ‘X is/counts as Y’, where the Y-position is occupied by a psychoanalytic concept, and the X-position by observational source material. In Searle’s theory, a statement of the form ‘X is Y’ can be understood either as an empirical proposition or as a declarative statement. In the second case, the statement introduces, in virtue of being a declarative speech act, a constitutional rule that phenomena of type X count as phenomena of type Y. Freud’s theoretical framework turns out to be a tightly woven pattern of declarative statements, which, once introduced and accepted by the psychoanalytic community, create institutional facts. In contrast to an empirical, descriptive statement, a declarative statement creates itself the state of affairs that fulfils the truth-conditions of the statement. As long as the statement is accepted by others, the continued existence of the institutional fact thus created is guaranteed. An obvious non-psychoanalytic example of an institutional fact is money: we have declared that a piece of paper, printed by the National Bank, is worth 100 euro. This declaration creates a new object in the world for those who are willing to accept it, and it continues to exist as long we continue to accept it.

Buekens’ central claim is that psychoanalysis can be most adequately explained as a complex social institution – just like the monetary institution of the euro – built around a system of institutional facts which the psychoanalytic community – quite mistakenly – takes to be empirically verifiable natural facts concerning the vicissitudes of the human mind. Exploiting a possibility explicitly left open in Searle’s theory of institutional facts, the upshot of Buekens’ analysis is that psychoanalysis is based on an unintended confusion between natural facts and institutional facts: what Freud thinks of as descriptions of natural facts are to a large extent declaratives that create new institutional facts. We will return to Buekens’ analysis later on, but first we need to know what makes it possible that psychoanalytic theories and interpretations, although presented as
empirically testable propositions, are de facto creating their own institutional facts. And, returning to the central claim of this article: why should SC, both in its epistemological and ontological guise offer an accurate analysis of the actual hermeneutic working of psychoanalysis? These two questions are closely related.

3.2. Descriptive and declarative statements: a formal equivalence

The *conditio sine qua non* of the confusion between institutional facts and natural facts is the formal correspondence of typical psychoanalytic interpretations and descriptive statements: both relate two terms X and Y in a statement of the form “X *is/counts as* Y”, where X is an empirically observable entity to which a psychoanalytic property designated by the term in the Y-positions is assigned. Typical psychoanalytic interpretations claim that “your compulsive behaviour *really* is an enactment of perverse childhood fantasies” or “the analyst *represents/stands for* the figure of the father”.

The second important property of institutional facts created by such declarative statements, is that the property or feature that figures in the Y-position can never be directly derived from observable properties of the object designated by the term in the X-position. For instance, we cannot deduce the monetary value of a 100 euro bank note from an inspection of its physical properties alone. The fact that we can use it to buy all kinds of things in European countries, or the institutional fact that a certain configuration of white lines on the side of a road count as a parking place, is not observable and depends on the beliefs of its users. The formal equivalent of this general property of institutional facts is the psychoanalytic postulate of an imperceptible realm of the mind, the ingredients of which the Y-term in an interpretation “X *is/counts as* Y” is supposed to refer to, at least under an empirical reading of the interpretations. Under a more hermeneutical reading, a psychoanalytic concept Y is assigned to some observable entity X, and is supposed to reveal its real, underlying meaning. This formal similarity is of course not by itself sufficient to show that psychoanalytic interpretations really function like institutional facts, or that the theory can be accurately described with SC concepts. However, given this parallelism, the accumulating epistemic and methodological defects of psychoanalysis damage the theoretical structure so drastically, that the result is an epistemic vacuousness which does bring about this equivalence with institutional facts, and which does illustrate those features which SC ascribes to genuine scientific practice.

3.3. Inseparability of theory, methodology and individual practices

An important issue in the critical assessment of psychoanalysis, which continues to divide its critics, is the question whether the epistemic features internal to the theory can be clearly separated from dubious methodological manoeuvres put forward in defence of the theory. Given that such a theoretical or conceptual distinction is useful and even necessary if one is criticizing a theory, drawing it in the case of psychoanalysis is extremely complicated, which is precisely what makes psychoanalysis so interesting from an epistemological point of view. Not only is it difficult to separate individual psychoanalysts’ dubious methodological practices from the canonical methodology of psychoanalysis, we will also see that these central methodological pitfalls directly

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7 According to Smith (2001), institutional facts create “a huge invisible ontology”. See Buckens & Boudry (2008) for further analogies between psychoanalytic facts and bona fide institutional facts.
follow from the properties of the psychoanalytic entities referred to in the Y-position. More specifically: the notorious abundance of possibilities for drawing inferences from the source material to arrive at psychoanalytic conclusions, and the numerous possibilities to evade seemingly falsifying material, are direct consequences of the structure of the postulated unobservable realm of the human mind.

On this point, critics of psychoanalysis are divided. Grünbaum (1984) and Erwin (1996) have insisted on a clear separation between the theory as such and the tendency of its advocates to use immunizing gambits and other methodological tricks in the face of falsifying material:

“the (revocable) falsifiability of the theory-as-such in the context of its semantic anchorage is a logical property of the theory itself, whereas the tenacious unwillingness of the majority of its defenders to accept adverse evidence as refuting is an all too human property of those advocates.” (quoted in Cioffi 1998:218)

Psychologist Morris Eagle too reminds us of the difference between “the methodological practices and attitudes of individual analysts (including Freud)” and “the independent logical structure of psychoanalytic theory.” (Eagle 1988) Edward Erwin, finally, has stated that it is simply “a matter of logic” that escape manoeuvres “[do] not change the meaning of the original hypothesis” (Erwin 2002:431). Critics like Grünbaum and Erwin implicitly consider psychoanalysis as a clearly delineated structure of empirical propositions, irrevocable in the light of adverse evidence and completely independent of the individual methodological practices of their practitioners.

On the other side of the debate, critics like Frank Cioffi, Frederick Crews and Malcolm Macmillan have argued that this distinction cannot be pushed further than the epistemic structures of psychoanalysis themselves allow. Following Cioffi (1998), we think many dubious methodological practices in psychoanalysis arise more or less directly from its theory-internal epistemic properties. More precisely: it is practically impossible to indicate a point where the theory proper ends and where the immunizing strategies and methodological obfuscations of its defenders begin. As Cioffi wrote:

“(W)e have no canonical statement of the theory: no agreement on what constitutes modifications of the theory rather than post hoc elucidations of it. […] What we have in Freudian theory is a combination of epistemically ambiguous utterances with methodologically suspect practices.”(Cioffi 1998:300)

Consider the classical heads-I-win-tails-you-lose objection against the practice of psychoanalysts: if a patient refuses to accept the interpretation of the analyst, this counts as evidence in favour of the interpretation, in virtue of the concept of Verneinung: his denials count as psychoanalytic denials (Y). It is not easy to attribute this dubious argument to flaws of individual analysts, because a good case can be made that the argument is effectively supported by fundamental properties of the postulated Freudian Unconscious. It is not even a flaw within the theory: if the human mind were to function as psychoanalysis describes it, we would indeed have to classify counter-arguments and criticisms as manifestations of unconscious resistance to the psychoanalytic ‘truths’. Pretending to make an empirical observation, the psychoanalyst unintentionally declares criticism (X) to be the disguised working of the postulated Unconscious (Y). Even our objection that the analyst creates facts might be declared a product of the Unconscious.
For two reasons we insist on the *inseparability* of theory, methodology and the defensive moves in psychoanalysis. First, in order for our argument about psychoanalysis and the applicability of SC to hold, we have to show that the methodological deficiencies and defensive moves are inherent to the theory, and cannot be so easily disentangled from it. Secondly, it is important to note that the inextricability of all these elements provides itself a tempting defensive strategy for the proponent of psychoanalysis. After all, the critic can no longer argue that these methodological devices were only brought in on an *ad hoc* basis to rescue the theory from falsifications or plausible counter-arguments, because the psychoanalyst himself will, consistent with his account of the Unconscious, maintain that the methodology was *already* embedded in the theory to begin with. The critic who is unwilling to accept these methodological gambits, is then just found to be unwilling to go along with the theory in the first place.

### 3.4. Hidden Realities: the epistemic core of psychoanalysis

The epistemic core of classical Freudian psychoanalysis is a complex web of theoretical claims about an object which deliberately tries to conceal its own existence and manifests itself only in disguise: the Freudian Unconscious (Gellner 2003). Although in itself not an *a priori* implausible or incoherent hypothesis, the central postulate of the hidden Unconscious generates a number of methodological devices which are potentially quite damaging to the theoretical structure. In this respect, the epistemic core of psychoanalysis bears a striking resemblance to conspiracy theories: an unobservable entity – the conspiracy; or the group of conspirators – is intentionally trying to hide its own existence, which can only be inferred indirectly, through its disguised appearance.

The interesting epistemic consequences of the idea of an object that intentionally hides its existence for us, gives a twist to what will and will not count as evidence in favour of the hypothesis. On the one hand we have **Gap Evidence**, which we define as the set of perceived anomalies, gaps and inconsistencies in existing explanations of certain events, which are supposed to indicate the existence of a hidden or invisible factor or set of factors at work. Conspiracy theorists typically believe that the explanatory gaps in ‘the official story’ betrays that something must have been deliberately but partially *unsuccessfully* covered up by the presumed conspirators. In the case of psychoanalysis, the Gap Evidence is constituted by the slips of the tongue, the suspicious dream elements and the strange symptoms of the patient which, following a chain of associations, are supposed to lead to a hidden and unconscious meaning.

However; conspiracy theorists and psychoanalysts are not only looking for the *gaps and flaws* which betray the existence of the Invisible Entity, they are also receptive to what they see as indications of the *successfulness* of a disguise or cover-up. We will coin this **Inverse Evidence**. In the case of conspiracy theories, Inverse Evidence consists of observations which even after careful inspection turn out to be in *accordance* with the official story, and are thus supposed to prove the existence of a cunning cover-up operation of the conspirators. Inverse Evidence typically includes those observations which the sceptic regards as direct and obvious falsifications of the conspiracy hypothesis, for instance clear visual evidence or testimony against the conspiracy from hitherto unsuspected sources. Within the conspiracy theorist's frame of thought, these apparent falsifications prove that the conspirators are even more numerous, influential and/or better organised than was initially suspected.
Inverse Evidence in psychoanalysis consists of any relevant behaviour or symptom which is apparently not meaningful or psychoanalytically relevant, and specifically – just as in the case of conspiracy theorizing – of those observations which seem to falsify the interpretations of the analyst. After all, within the psychoanalyst’s frame of thought, these bear witness to the disguising skills and the cunning of the psychoanalytic Unconscious. The more seemingly recalcitrant the material encountered, the more it counts in favour of the theory. After all, the Unconscious, just as the presumed conspirators in a conspiracy theory, may be expected to deliberately lay out forged evidence to lead us astray.

Although Freud often conceived of the Unconscious as irrational and without any internal logic – in order to account for the bizarre and sometimes contradictory interpretations generated by his theory – the epistemologically most important feature of the Unconscious is that it strategically tries to deceive us in the most unexpected and far-fetched ways. This central postulate explains the notorious psychoanalytic vision as one of fundamental suspicion, as so brilliantly articulated by Thomas Mann in 1929:

“With it [psychoanalysis], a blithe scepticism has come into the world, a mistrust which unmasks all the schemes and subterfuges of our own souls.”

Freud’s hypothesis that his patients harboured the secret and unconscious wish to falsify his theories and interpretations, rather than just being a dubious immunizing gambit for which only Freud should be held responsible, followed quite naturally from the central postulate of the psychoanalytic Unconscious. One of Freud’s patients dreamed that she had to spend her holidays with her despised mother-in-law. Surely this was a falsification of his claim that every dream is ‘really’ an unconscious wish-fulfilment? Not so for Freud:

“According to this dream, I was in the wrong. It was thus her wish that I should be in the wrong, and this wish the dream showed her as fulfilled.” “I can with a great degree of certainty count on evoking such a dream [which seems flatly to contradict my theory] once I have explained to the patient my theory that the dream is a wish-fulfilment. Indeed, I have reason to expect that many of my readers will have such dreams, merely to fulfil the wish that I may prove to be wrong.”

It is hard to resist the conclusion that this is a perfectly legitimate justificatory move within the psychoanalytic framework, and we instantly recognize it as a genuine psychoanalytic interpretation. So although Richard Webster writes that “The notion that many of his patients were perverse and obstinate, harbouring a secret desire to prove him wrong, provided an excellent way of dealing with a great deal of recalcitrant material” (Webster 1995:266), it is important to note that as soon as one was willing to accept Freud’s central hypotheses, one was no longer supposed to have conceptual or epistemic problems with these types of justifications.

The twofold and complementary notion of evidence – Gap Evidence and Inverse Evidence –, directly ensuing from psychoanalysis’ epistemic core, is the foremost reason for the ability of

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8 Or more precisely: in both simple and far-fetched ways: the degree of complexity in psychoanalytic interpretations varies enormously, from childishly simple symbols for genitals on the basis of superficial visual similarities to intricate, multi-layered and polyglot analyses.

9 From a speech Mann held in Vienna on the 8th of May 1936, honouring Freud’s 80th birthday.

10 In Buekens and Boudry (2008) we explain the confusion between justifications and explanations that underlie the confidence of ‘having understood’ a phenomenon X when it is being given a psychoanalytic status Y.
psycioanalysts to mould any observation into an interpretation consistent with the theory. In the next section we will see that the elaboration of this central idea into a structure of theoretical concepts and resulting methodological licenses further enhances the inferential power of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic and weakens the ‘recalcitrance of reality’, a concept which is crucial in the discussion between rationalist and constructivist accounts of science.

3.5. **Conceptual joker cards**

Freud developed his core-idea of an unobservable entity and unobservable forces which conceal and disguise their existence into an elaborate system of theoretical concepts licensing inferential practices. The development of these concepts extended almost endlessly the means of drawing analytical inferences from the source material to reach a certain conclusion, and proved remarkably effective in coping with recalcitrant material: Verneinung, wishes/counterwishes, substitution, repression, inversion, cathexis, hyperinterpretation, linguistic association and symbolic association, multiple layers of meaning (in Freud’s case also: phylogenetic memory), the use of *double-entendres* and homonyms of all sorts, etc. Once again, we are confronted with the inseparability of the methodology and the conceptual structure of the theory, for especially in classical Freudian psychoanalysis, any apparent methodological extravagance is foisted upon the object of inquiry: it is after all the Unconscious, struggling with the psychological mechanism of censorship, which seeks the most ingenious and divergent ways to give outlet to the amassed psychic energy; in such circumstances, who can blame the analyst for far-fetched interpretations and the gratuitous use of *methodological wildcards*?

Many of Freud’s theoretical concepts functioned in practice as conceptual joker cards to forestall possible falsifications. A classical example in this respect is Freud’s notion of Verneinung. When Freud was unable to find the requested pathological complex or unconscious desire, he treated this as Inverse Evidence for the *presence* of these complexes, because the patient must have repressed them. In a way analogous to conspiracy theorizing, Freud considered the patient’s vehement denial of these hypotheses – for example in his use of the concept of penis envy – as yet further confirmation of his claims, because it clearly demonstrated the patient’s Unconscious ‘resisting’ the interpretation. Of course, Freud did not count as a refutation of his theory those cases where a patient readily *accepted* the psychoanalytic interpretation, for this only meant that the Unconscious was in this case unable to resist strongly enough. For example, Freud was able to account for a little boy’s affectionate behaviour towards the mother as a manifestation of the Oedipus complex; on the other hand, however, if the boy showed affection towards the father and despised his mother, as in the case of Little Hans, Freud explained the behaviour towards the father as a “reaction formation” against the actual murderous desires (Van Rillaer 1980:141-155).

So, although the patient’s refusal to acknowledge the interpretations of the analyst was ‘predicted’ by the theory, the immediate or belated *acceptance* by the patient was not considered as refuting the interpretation, because unobservable differences in the strength of the unconscious resistance could well account for both situations. In general, the concept of an unobservable ‘quantitative factor’ in the patients’ mental economy proved to be a very useful joker card to forestall the falsification of what initially looked like testable predictions; it could always be invoked post factum to account for the absence of a symptom in case its occurrence was expected, or in the case of a symptom which appeared without any apparent cause. Through Freud’s psychoanalytic lens, the
logic and explanatory value of these quantitative differences in the mental economy seemed so 
natural that he was quite explicit about the way the concept actually functions in psychoanalytic 
practice, i.e. that it comes out of the closet only afterwards:

“We cannot measure the amount of libido essential to produce pathological effects. We can only postulate it 
after the effects of the illness have manifested themselves.”(Freud 1924:119)

Or consider Freud’s use of the concept of “inversion”. Frank Cioffi convincingly argued that 
Freud, although he theorized that neurosis develops when perverse desires remain unsatisfied, 
did not recognize that patients who overtly indulged in their perverse desires but were 
nevertheless neurotic, constituted a refutation of his theory (Cioffi 1998:119-121). In the case of 
the neurotics without overtly perverse behaviour, Freud considered the symptoms as an outlet 
for the libidinal energy amassed in response to the repressed perversities; in case of overtly 
perverse neurotics, Freud maintained that the symptoms expressed a repressed aversion against the 
indulging in perversities, and constituted a case of “inversion”.

In classical Freudian theory, these astounding juggles with inversions and displacements are the 
result of the division of the Unconscious into personalized and antagonistic substructures, which 
make it possible – without the need of further methodological extravaganza – to turn any 
symptom or behaviour into the apparently symptomatic outcome of a hidden psychodynamic 
conflict. Frederick Crews, following Wittgenstein’s criticism of this homunculus-like mental 
structures, wrote:

“Each posited subset of “the unconscious” permits another strand of contrary motivation to be added to the 
already tangled explanatory skein, leaving us, if we are sufficiently gullible, so impressed by the psychoanalytic 
interpreter’s diagnostic acumen that we think we are witnessing elegant and validated feats of deduction instead 
of being told a self-serving detective story in which the mystery itself – which of the elves checkmated which 
others to generate the symptom or dream or error? – is an artefact of question-begging manoeuvres.”(Crews 
2006:56)

Thus, the versatility and multidirectionality of psychoanalytic methodology, observed by many 
authors (Timpanaro 1976; Macmillan 1997; Cioffi 1998), creates an abundance of inferential 
possibilities in the hermeneutical practice which, together with other conceptual and epistemic 
complications, deprives the psychodynamic Unconscious – if any such entity exists – gradually of 
y any possibility of putting epistemic constraints on theoretical claims or psychoanalytic 
interpretations. The ‘recalcitrance of reality’ is thus ever more diminished, as the social 
constructivist would have it.

3.6. **Epistemic double lives**

Another important objection against psychoanalytic theory is that many concepts lead what may 
be called an ‘epistemic double life’ (Cioffi 1998:118): they seem to have a semantically rich and 
clearly delineated definition as long as they are used in the normal interpretive and clinical work, 
but as soon as they are critically examined or occur in propositions that are threatened by 
falsifications they suddenly take on a nebulous and indefinite meaning. Within psychoanalytic 
circles, no consensus is forthcoming about the precise meaning of its central concepts, perhaps
not incidentally, because precisely this constant possibility of moving between a well-defined meaning and a semantic ‘moving target’ helps to immunize them against criticism. As in astrological practice, psychoanalytic interpretations manage “to seem to say and yet to refrain from saying” (Cioffi 1998:131). The non-falsifiability of psychoanalytic claims is therefore not its most important characteristic; it is the fact that, despite their being unfalsifiable, they are so construed as to give a convincing impression of containing well defined terms and hence being perfectly amenable to empirical investigation. As Esterson noted about the concepts in Freud’s ego-psychology (Ich, Über-Ich, Es)

“No not only are they speculations of a kind not amenable to empirical validation, their functions are so imprecisely delineated that they can be employed in almost arbitrary fashion to provide support for virtually any theoretical formulation.” (Esterson 1993:230)

Cioffi mentions Freud’s “disingenuous alternation” and “tergiversation” in the scope of the libido-concept. After they had become dissidents, Freud criticized Adler and Jung for their being unable to admit the carnal nature of the libido-concept, and he derided their “need to free human society from the yoke of sexuality.” (cited in Cioffi 1998:15) On later occasions, however, Freud resorts to precisely this milder interpretation, widening the scope of the libido concept so that it encompassed “what Plato meant by ‘Eros’ and St. Paul by ‘love’” (Cioffi 1998:16). This semantic double life of the concept ‘libido’ fulfilled two functions: only the narrow, carnal interpretation could explain why fathers threatened their sons precisely with penile amputation and why the libidinal drives were so inadmissible for our moral sensibilities as to be repressed, while the wider interpretation allowed the maintenance of the central contention that the libidinal factor is lurking beneath the surface of each and every symptom or dream.

Psychoanalytic concepts like ‘libido’ have arguably lead an epistemic double life ever since they were theorized by Freud, which explains what Richard Webster called their “world-revealing elasticity” (Webster 1995:294). Other conceptual equivocations however developed only later on in the history of psychoanalysis. Whereas in Freud’s original theory, for example, the meaning of the Oedipus complex was relatively well-defined, nowadays the way in which it is often used in psychoanalytic literature – notably since Lacan’s linguistic and symbolic reconfiguration of the concept – renders it completely vacuous. Psychoanalysts wanted to maintain the Oedipus complex as the universal cornerstone of human psychology discovered by Freud – the “shibboleth” of psychoanalysis – , but in the absence of any convincing observational or epidemiological evidence for the complex and its pathogenic effects, they had to resort to a broader and ill-defined version of the concept. The astounding discovery that had once, according to Freud himself, “evoked such embittered contradiction, such furious opposition, and also such entertaining acrobatics of criticism”(Freud 1953), is nowadays often diminished to a vague platitude about human psychology, as in this recent definition by Lester Luborsky and Marna Barrett:

“Most dynamic theorists today accept a broader interpretation of the Oedipus complex encompassing the idea that there is an active competition between two people for the affection of a third person.”(Luborsky & Barrett 2006:2)

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The original Oedipus complex as theorised by Freud, describing the incestuous desire of the infant to have sex with his mother and to kill his father, is thereby completely eroded. The proclaimed universality of the complex is nevertheless ‘saved’, allowing it to maintain its function as a theoretical watchword in the psychoanalytic community. The conceptual equivocations of this restyled Oedipus complex border on what we will call an ‘empty term’ or ‘container term’ in the next section.

3.7. Container terms and the reciprocity of the defining relations

In Buekens (2006) it is pointed out that the declarative statements in which they occur not only partially fix the extension of the terms, the extensions are further partially fixed by applying them in interpretations, which partially explains their ‘open character’. In this context it is important to remind us of the fact that many central psychoanalytical terms are often neologisms, or extensions of the folk psychology meaning of “personal-level” concepts (Dennett 1969) like desire, memory, fear, wish… The meaning of the psychoanalytic concept of ‘wish-fulfilment’ for instance is partly determined by our tacit notions about the dispositions of wishing, but is also modified by the distinctively psychoanalytic interpretations in which the concept occurs.

When Freud reconstructs a young girl’s dream about arranging flowers as the fulfilment of both her wish to preserve her valuable virginity and her sadistic wish to be violated, we learn something about the concept of wish-fulfilment in psychoanalysis. By exploiting its modified character, again Freud lets the central concept of a wish lead an epistemic double life, alternately referring to supposed wishes as somehow the patient’s own folk psychological interpretation, or as stemming from an entity outside him/her (the distinctly psychoanalytic interpretation). Nevertheless, in spite of our reservations as to the possibility of coherently extending a “personal-level” concept like wish in a psychoanalytic fashion, we still know what sort of mental state a ‘wish’ initially was, and we can hence more or less get a picture of an entity like the Unconscious wishing something.

The meaning of other psychoanalytic concepts, however, is so dependent on the context or interpretations in which they occur that they may be considered empty ‘container terms’. This phenomenon is especially ubiquitous in the currently popular Lacanian psychoanalysis, where concepts like the Other, jouissance, the Phallus, the objet petit a, the Symbolic and the Real, although they have no precise referent and are notoriously difficult to delineate, are constantly appealed to in psychoanalytic interpretations (Nobus 1998). In spite of the illusion of a meaningful conceptual unity between disparate phenomena, these concepts ultimately tend to function as purely syntactic ‘markers’ signalling adherence to the Lacanian hermeneutic. The concept of ‘the Other’ for example is a quasi-metaphysical ‘position’ in the psychic structure of the subject that can be occupied by almost any entity, ranging from particular other persons, to society, the Law, the figure of the mother, the psychoanalyst, the other sex, the own body, Language, images, or even – according to Slavoj Zizek – The Matrix in the eponymous movie. In a recent article about Lacan’s concept of the Other, Derek Hook writes about “the Other as vanishing-point of intersubjectivity”, “the Other as simultaneously “inside” and “outside”’ and “the Other as both embodiment of the social substance and yet also the site of the unconscious” (Hook 2008). In short, the obscure and deeply contradictory nature of this ‘position’ in the human psyche makes ‘the Other’ ultimately an empty ‘signifier’ – for once, speaking Lacanese turns out to be useful –
which can be assigned to virtually anything. In the Lacanian hermeneutic, the concept in the Y-position in a psychoanalytic declarative is supposed to illuminate the object in the X-position, but the meaning of this concept is *itself* only determined by the set of objects that occur in the X-positions of the declaratives in which the concept occurs.

Buekens (2006) uses a second and broader definition of the term ‘empty’: one could dismiss a concept as being empty as soon as it turns out that one can always construct confirmations for its applications. While this does not preclude the concept having a well-defined and coherent meaning, we would like to reserve the term ‘empty’ here specifically to the phenomena of conceptual vacuousness described above, where the concept was already ‘empty to begin with’.

What we find problematic about the Oedipus complex within classical psychoanalysis, for example, is not that it is unintelligible or ill-defined. We can easily understand what it would mean for someone to entertain oedipal wishes (at least, if we ignore the problems pertaining to the notion of unconscious wishes in Freud’s sense). The problem is that Freud saw the Oedipus complex ‘confirmed’ everywhere. This conceptual deficiency only comes to light when we consider the concept in relation to other psychoanalytic concepts with which it is connected and the methodological practices that govern its use in hermeneutical practice.  

The effect of these conceptual and epistemological deficiencies of psychoanalysis – epistemic double lives, conceptual joker cards, container terms – on the epistemology of the theory can be summarized in the following way: if psychoanalytic concepts are the ‘joints’ in the hermeneutic machine, these defects render them extremely loose and versatile, which further enhances the inferential possibilities in the hermeneutic practice and thus further diminishes the epistemic constraints of the psychodynamic reality on ‘what is believed to be’ (see the next section).

4. A Constructivist Description of Psychoanalysis

4.1. Psychoanalysis and institutional facts

Before we have a closer look at the specific elements of SC in relation to psychoanalysis, we will show how the consequences of the epistemic, methodological and conceptual defects described above justifies the description of psychoanalysis in terms of institutional facts (this general argument will apply as well for the justification of a description in a SC framework). Although in the previous section we hinted several times at the consequences of individual defects, we should keep in mind that – as we already noted – their epistemic effect is cumulative and collectively.

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12 The therapeutic methods of free association and transference analysis, although demonstrably unavailing for probing another person’s mind (Grünbaum 1984), are not discussed here as one of the central methodological pitfalls of psychoanalysis because, as Buekens rightly noted, these methods are entirely absent in psychoanalytic interpretation of human phenomena like works of art, literary texts or social phenomena, against which the same charge of epistemic vacuousness can nevertheless still be made. Even without the method of free association, the epistemic and methodological structures of psychoanalysis are sufficiently open-ended to guarantee that everything can be given a psychoanalytic interpretation. The practice of free association not so much enlarges the inferential possibilities from X to Y (these are already overabundant), but is there first and foremost to create a pool of evidence, often presented as objective and uncontaminated observation. By means of the question-begging postulate of internal psychic determinism, which states that it is impossible for the analyst to influence a chain of associations, the interpretation is for the main part foisted upon the patient.
We argue that the aforementioned defects relax the application of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic, the formal scheme of which – “X is/counts as Y” – was already formally equivalent to that of declarative statements, and that it does this on two levels:

- the scope of the X term is extended to ever more entities
- the conditions under which the relation “counts as” is applicable for a given X, are gradually relaxed/extended

The eventual, cumulative effect of these various defects and complications can hence be stated in two directions, roughly in the following way:

- for any X, its assigned meaning Y is arbitrary
- for any Y, Y can be assigned to any X

In practice, of course, this is a slight exaggeration, for not literally “anything” can appear in the Y-position for any given X. What we mean here is that any guarantee for the congruency of the Y’s for any given X is frustrated by the methodological laxity and the conceptual deficiencies inherent within the theory. For any X within the domain of analysable entities, if not any Y then at least many different and mutually excluding Y’s can be assigned to it; and for many different Y’s, it is so that Y can be assigned to virtually anything within the domain of analysable entities. The qualification “virtually” is added to the modal “can” because connecting X’s with a given Y – i.e. the hermeneutical practice of the psychoanalyst – sometimes involves a considerable degree of ingenuity and creativity, which makes the exact ‘inferential power’ of the methodology difficult to be estimated. The extent to which a given interpretation is convincing and/or accepted by the analytical community as plausible or substantiated, is because of the methodological equivocations partially imponderable, and arguably to a large extent a matter of personal authority and reputation.

The first formulation corresponds to Malcolm Macmillan’s verdict in *Freud Evaluated*, to the effect that

> “the so-called discoveries are dependent upon methods of enquiry and interpretation so defective that even practitioners trained in their use are unable to reach vaguely congruent conclusions about such things as the interpretation of a dream or symptom […]” (Macmillan 1997:505)

The second formulation corresponds to the fact, already observed in 1962 by the psychoanalyst Judd Marmor – with understandable disquietude –, that by means of the psychoanalytic method, ‘confirmations’ can be found as easily for Freud’s Oedipus complex, as for Adler’s inferiority complex, or for Lacan’s symbolic Father, or for Jung’s anima and persona:

> “dependent on the view of the analysts the patients of each school generate precisely those data that support the theories and interpretations of their analysts” (Marmor 1962:289)

In this perspective, rather than being a proper scientific theory, Freud’s brainchild can be considered an elaborate epistemic recipe for generating self-confirming theories about the human mind. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Sonu Shamdasani wrote in *Le Dossier Freud*, psychoanalysis is an “empty” theory (“une théorie zero”), in the broader definition also used by Buekens: whatever we put into the Unconscious, the hermeneutic will generate confirmations *ad libidum*. 
Although we agree that psychoanalysis, because of its ultimate arbitrariness and the formal properties of psychoanalytic interpretations, can be meaningfully described as declarative statements generating institutional facts, as Buekens has proposed, we wanted to extend his analysis along the lines of SC. The advantage of this further extension is that the delusional dimension of psychoanalysis — presenting institutional, constructed facts as natural facts — is already encompassed in the very notion of SC (at least, in the two types of doctrinal constructivism considered earlier). Paul Boghossian’s apt observation confirms this:

“A social construction claim is interesting only insofar as it purports to expose construction where none had been suspected, where something constitutively social had come to masquerade as natural.” (Boghossian 2006:18)

In spite of its hermeneutical (Habermas, Ricoeur) and postmodern restyling, psychoanalysis, if it is to be a meaningful and coherent theory, necessarily presupposes a more or less independent mental reality, but because what it takes to ‘discover’ and ‘find’ are basically self-created institutional facts, both psychoanalytic reality and psychoanalytic knowledge are thoroughly constructed in the way SC ‘reveals’. Thus, the combination of what psychoanalysis pretends to be, and the way the theory really functions, renders it amenable to a constructivist description.

Apart from this advantage, we also opted for a constructivist framework because, as was already mentioned in the introduction, we think such a reconstruction provides a new line of argument against Social Constructivism as an account of what rationalists consider as ‘genuine’ science. This argument will be spelled out at the end of this article.

4.2. No constraints on evidence: the Symmetry Postulate and psychoanalysis

Let us see how this further relates to SC. Restating our findings in the words of H. M. Collins, we can indeed say that, on account of these deficiencies within the theory, “what is believed to be” in psychoanalytic hermeneutics is “in no way constrained” by the nature of the dynamic Unconscious (if any such object exists at all), which illustrates the general constructivist point that evidential considerations play almost no role in the development of the discipline. Consequently, for someone writing the history of psychoanalysis, David Bloor’s “symmetry postulate” is quite apt as a methodological tenet, for psychoanalytic practice can be described without either the truth/falsity distinction or even the rational/irrational distinction: since both the psychoanalyst’s theoretical choice for the Oedipus complex, breast envy, inferiority complex or birth trauma, and his preference for this or that particular interpretation in hermeneutical practice, does not depend on rational and evidential considerations, the invocation of non-evidential considerations will indeed be necessary in explaining theoretical disputes, developments, controversies and schisms in the history of psychoanalysis (Borch-Jacobsen & Shamdasani 2006; Buekens & Boudry 2008). The demise of the concept of penis envy, for example, rather than being caused by a sudden lack of ‘evidence’, was likely the result of changing social and cultural sensibilities, which perceived the concept as patriarchal and misogynistic. Likewise, the genesis of this concept in psychoanalysis must probably be attributed precisely to these prejudices about female submissiveness and inferiority, rather than originating from convincing empirical evidence or observations.

The fact that the source material in psychoanalytic hermeneutic is handled in such a lax and arbitrary fashion that it can be construed as lending support to any preconceived idea whatsoever,
illustrates another feature constructivism stresses: the ability always to maintain the theory in the face of recalcitrant material, or constantly to find persuasive 'confirmations' for it. Of course, sometimes this requires interpretive ingenuity and creativity, as was recognized by Golinski in the context of epistemological constructivism: if we take the rivalising psychoanalytic schools – Freudism, Adlerism, Lacanism – as competing ‘paradigms’, we can indeed say that “given sufficient creativity and resourcefulness on behalf of its defenders, the existing paradigm could be maintained indefinitely.” (Golinski 2005:25)

What then to say about the ontological status of the psychoanalytic unconscious, this imperceptible realm of the human mind, full of repressed wishes and memories, and constantly forming its own intentions and motivations? As far as we can see, there is no credible scientific evidence for the independent existence of a distinctly psychodynamic Unconscious – in contrast to the well-established notion of unconscious (“sub-personal”) mental activity for the performance of cognitive tasks (Dennett 1969; Kihlstrom, Barnhardt et al. 1992; O’Brien & Jureidini 2002).

But now Watzlawick’s definition of ontological constructivism quoted above seems very apt indeed: we can say that the purported independent reality of the psychoanalytic unconscious turns out to be “the construction of those who believe they have discovered and investigated it”. The psychodynamic Unconscious is “an invention whose inventor is unaware of his act of invention, who considers it something that exists independently of him; the invention then becomes the basis of his world view and actions.” (Watzlawick 1984:10) It is an illusion which continues to exist as long as its reality is accepted by (a part of) the analytical community. This corresponds with the observations, made by several critics of psychoanalysis 1) that the precise content of the Unconscious is arbitrary; 2) that this is because psychoanalytic entities are artefacts of the theory; 3) that only those who were already convinced of the theory ‘see’ the described psychoanalytic phenomena (e.g. the child’s ‘erotic’ pleasure in thumb sucking); 4) that the theory is so versatile that it adapts itself each time to the local cultural and social environment.

4.3. The creation of truth

Recall our distinction between strong and weak ontological constructivism. Strong ontological constructivism held that the constructed ‘reality’ is no outside reality at all, but a non-existing illusion. What we refer to as an independent reality has no referent at all. The weak version holds that what we refer to as reality has, once it is socially constructed, ‘out-there-ness’ for everyone. Although socially constructed instead of independently discovered, the concept of reality is no illusion.

As far as we can see, there is no reason to believe that psychoanalysis literally – in the sense of Strong ontological constructivism – creates its own reality (a notable complication will be mentioned in the next section) or that interpretations literally create their own truth. Correspondingly, few proponents of SC about science are willing to endorse Strong ontological constructivism (although many of them remain unclear on the subject. (Kukla 2000:96) Still,

13 “Far from being a subterranean system replete with sophisticated, personal-level mental abilities, therefore, the unconscious is broken up and distributed across a set of specialized subsystems, each of which is restricted to the computational manipulation of subpersonal representational information.” (O’Brien & Jureidini 2002:146)
many constructivists claim that science somehow “creates its own truth”, a truth that continues to exist as long as it is accepted by the scientific community. Declarative statements, too, are said to create itself the state of affairs that fulfils their own truth-conditions. How can we resolve this matter?

Buekens (2006) gives the example of a discussion between two persons about the Allied landings in Normandy. One of the participants says “let this [points to a book] be France and this [points to a cup of coffee] be England”. For the purpose of the discussion, these two physical objects will count as the respective countries, allowing further illustrative discussions about the Channel and the direction of the Allied forces.

The shortcut expression “This book is France”, which is in fact a declarative statement, creates its own truth in the geographical discussion, albeit within an explicitly introduced institutional framework: the book ‘is’ France as long as the discussion goes on, but no-one believes that 70 million Frenchmen are living in it. Qua participant in the discussion, we don’t have to substantiate our identification of the book ‘as France’, because all participants are at least tacitly aware of the institutional and conventional character of the facts created.

The psychoanalyst, however, does not conceive of a statement like “this dream element symbolizes the phallus” as an institutional fact but as an empirical proposition requiring further substantiation, for example by means of a symbolic or linguistic association, or generally by some inference thought to be licensed by the psychoanalytic methodology. The point is that if the statement has an intended empirical status, it entails the need for some justification. The interpretations are not intended as institutional facts; Buekens’ claim is that upon closer inspection they turn out to function accordingly.

Although statements issued with declarative force can be said to create the state of affairs that makes them true (Searle 1995), this institutional character of psychoanalytic facts created by the declarative use of propositions of the form ‘X is/counts as Y’, is necessarily never recognized by the Freudian community. On the contrary: they are taken to be empirical statements and so according to Freud’s own standards they are false: dreams are not fulfilments of repressed wishes, paranoia is no manifestation of repressed homosexuality, etc. Because of the differences between the beliefs and attitudes of the persons performing the declarative statements, the way in which a lapsus “counts as” a manifestation of the Oedipus complex is different from that in which the book in our discussion “counts as” France\(^\text{14}\). The problem is of course that if one holds, like ontological SC does, that all facts are ‘created’ and ‘constructed’, this feature of psychoanalysis will be taken to confirm a claim SC makes about science in general. But this completely misunderstands the criticism based on institutional facts: the latter is a theory that accepts an important distinction between brute facts and institutional facts and does not reduce the former to the latter.

\(^{14}\) Maybe the difference between our respective positions is better spelled out when we consider Buekens’ claim that we can never prove the existence of psychoanalytic phenomena on the basis of data (indications, evidence) themselves not created by the psychoanalytic institution. At this point we disagree: on account of the empirical pretensions of psychoanalysis, he think it is possible in principle that, for example, objective neurological evidence shows up for this or that psychoanalytic concept (although the epistemic deficiencies would severely complicate this kind of research), Buekens admits that in principle this remains an option, but it would be a ‘lucky coincidence’ given the central institutional character of the theory.
4.4. Suggestion and self-fulfilling prophecies

Two related phenomena complicate our claim that the ‘reality’ constructed by psychoanalysis has no ‘out-there-ness’ (Weak ontological constructivism) and hence deserve some attention: the issue of suggestion in psychoanalytic therapy, famously discussed in Adolf Grünbaum’s The Foundations of Psychoanalysis (1984), and the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecies, which Popper coined the “Oedipus effect” (Popper 1957).

One way to state the problem of suggestion is that the theory contaminates the phenomena which it purports to describe objectively. A patient under analysis who has fallen victim to this contaminating effect of the psychoanalytic method not only comes to believe for instance in the existence of certain forbidden fantasies, but actually starts to entertain them and to behave as having them. In this particular case psychoanalysis – like countless other forms of suggestive therapies – can directly ‘create’ the phenomena he intends to describe. We do not suggest here that the mechanism of suggestion is able to create the full-blown psychodynamic structures postulated by psychoanalysis, nor for that matter that a genuinely Freudian – i.e. psychoanalytically unconscious – desire can ever be literally constructed in the patient’s mind. The suggestive methods of psychoanalysis can nevertheless create conscious mental phenomena the patient gradually becomes convinced of as being manifestations of his unconscious beliefs or desires.

The confusion in the psychoanalytic setting between the (social) construction of phenomena and the discovery of something that is really ‘out there’, is made possible by the fact that, as even Freud acknowledged, the interpretive work of the analyst closely resembles the practice of (re)construction. About his analysis of the Wolf Man, Freud wrote:

“All I mean to say is this: scenes, like this one in my present patient’s case, which date from such an early period and exhibit such a content, and which further lay claim to such an extraordinary significance for the history of the case, are as a rule not reproduced as recollections, but have to be divined – constructed – gradually and laboriously from an aggregate of indications.” (cited in Moore 1999:29)

Although Freud also often used the archaeological metaphor to characterize his method, whereby the analyst is described as slowly excavating the buried remnants of the past in the patient’s mind, the actual psychoanalytic method does not resemble at all the immediate accessibility of archaeological objects. Richard Moore writes that Freud, as he could only infer the existence of the presumed unconscious phenomena on the basis of certain cues (dreams, associations, patterns of behaviour),

“it is more as if [he] had found a method analogous to sonar to locate and provide a rough outline of buried memories and then help the patient (or he himself) make a facsimile that seemed sufficiently familiar and could be worked with as though it were the original.” (Moore 1999:33)

Whereas the similarity between the activity of construction and the hermeneutical practice of psychoanalysis paves the way for a misidentification of social constructions with natural, empirically detectable facts, the confusion is also facilitated by – once again – the central epistemic structures of the theory. The constructive activity itself is hidden from view precisely by the idea that all these things were present all along in the Unconscious, only to ‘come to the surface’ now. If the patient does not acknowledge or even flatly denies the existence of these
thoughts and memories before he or she comes to analysis, this is because they were until then ‘repressed’, and because the psychological ‘resistances’ were not yet overcome. Thus, the hypothesis of an imperceptible mental reservoir for forbidden wishes and desires that can be exposed with the help of the analyst, together with the ensuing concepts of repression and denial, creates very favourable psychological conditions for suggestibility. In Buekens & Boudry (2008) we briefly explore further analogies between suggestibility in psychoanalysis and certain primitive healing practices.

5. Conclusion

The central claim of this article was that SC, both in its epistemological and ontological variant, offers an accurate description of the hermeneutic practice and the epistemic structure of psychoanalysis. This will come as no surprise for the constructivist himself, for whom precisely the counterpart of this claim – that it is a bad description of how bona fide science works – will appear most problematic. The critic of SC may for his part concur with the proponent of SC that if SC holds for bona fide science, it holds – a fortiori – for psychoanalysis.

The crux of our first argument was then to show that the features SC ascribes to science in general correctly characterize psychoanalysis in virtue of specific epistemic, methodological and conceptual deficiencies. However, we think that this first argument can also be informative as to the question whether SC offers an accurate description of those theoretical disciplines accepted by rationalist or non-constructivist philosophers as bona fide science. Thus, the crux of our second argument is to show that the case of psychoanalysis provides us with a good reason not to accept SC as a good account of science or scientific practice in general. How is this possible? Although we hope to have demonstrated that the discussed deficiencies within psychoanalysis collectively form a sufficient condition for a SC description, we think it would be impossible to prove that these are also necessary conditions: at this point it might seem a further, open question whether other theoretical disciplines have the key characteristics SC thinks characterize scientific practice (or indeed any theoretical discipline). Suppose we now want to construct a new argument against SC as an account of science in general. Insofar as we have demonstrated that psychoanalysis can be accurately described by SC in virtue of the aforementioned deficiencies, all we have to do is demonstrate that the case of what we call bona fide science is different. Is this possible without entering into the complex discussion about the possibility of a demarcation criterion between science and pseudoscience?

If the constructivist now wants to escape the conclusion that the case of bona fide science is different from that of psychoanalysis, two strategies are available: the first option would be to deny that the aforementioned deficiencies are peculiar to psychoanalysis and that they are generally absent from bona fide science. This does not seem a promising tack, as many of these deficiencies are well known, were so even in Freud’s own time, and for many scientists and philosophers served as the basis to question the theory’s scientific credentials. Whether or not these critics were justified in doing so on that basis, we can still hold that these properties are widely recognized as distinctly psychoanalytic (Crews 1986; Esterson 1993; Cioffi 1998). The second option, which seems more promising, is to admit that these specific deficiencies indeed are peculiar to psychoanalysis, but to maintain that they are superfluous to a SC argument. This
means that even for a theory that is free from these deficiencies, or at least for one in which they occur to a significantly lesser degree, a similar argument could still be made to the effect that the knowledge of the theory is in fact “socially constructed”. This would mean, however, that all the ingenious deficiencies and complications within psychoanalysis would be epistemically gratuitous and thus irrelevant for the social constructivist’s argument. The constructivist will then have to deny that it is precisely the presence of all these defects and complications within psychoanalysis which brings about the effect of epistemic laxity and vacuousness. That is quite implausible. Not only is it simply incoherent to claim that the conceptual and methodological flaws have no such epistemic effects (they are obvious for anyone familiar with the theory), there is good reason to suppose that in other respects they hindered the success of the theory, as they undeniably compromised its credibility in the eyes of many scientists and philosophers. It is thus safe to conclude that these epistemic, methodological and conceptual deficiencies are present in psychoanalysis to achieve this rather difficult feat, namely for a theory to create its own illusory object (and at the same to distract attention from this very process). Now we have turned the case of psychoanalysis into an independent argument against SC as an account of science in general. Nevertheless, because SC still provides insight in the epistemic workings of an intriguing theoretical discipline, we may conclude that it has some merit after all, even if it is a bad account of science.

Now someone might object the following to our argument: “You claim that psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience because it contains the features described by SC, but also that SC is a bad account of science because it correctly describes a pseudo-science (i.e. psychoanalysis). But doesn’t that render the whole argument circular?” Do we already presuppose either that psychoanalysis is a pseudo-science or that SC is a bad account of science, even before we start to relate the two theories to each other? We don’t think this is the case, but the circularity objection does allow us to clarify the structure of our main argument. We don’t presuppose that psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience, we just focus on the presence of certain epistemic, methodological and conceptual peculiarities of the theory. It may well be true that some of these properties have been considered by some philosophers as the hallmarks of pseudoscience or that they figure in some philosophical attempts to find a demarcation criterion (Derksen 1993), but that alone does not entail that we endorse that demarcation criterion, nor that our argument is dependent on the condemnation of psychoanalysis as pseudoscience under that demarcation criterion. The only two necessary premises in our argument are 1) the presence of these characteristics or defects in psychoanalysis, 2) their relevance for the success of a description in a SC framework, i.e. the fact that it is in virtue of these properties that the SC description of psychoanalysis is accurate. It may well be possible – although this is not the argument we intend to make – to turn the case of psychoanalysis against SC on the presupposition of the correctness of some demarcation criterion, according to which psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience. However, this will not impress the proponent of SC very much, as the possibility of a meaningful dividing line between science and pseudoscience is precisely what becomes problematic from a social constructivist point of view.

15 See for example Freud’s explicitly empiricist and objectivist rhetoric (Buekens & Boudry 2008).
16 The fact that we talk about ‘defects’ may seem tendentious, but our argument does not depend on that terminology and stands by its own right. In any case, with this choice of terms we are not suggesting that we endorse some demarcation criterion on the basis of these characteristics.
In this article we attempted to give an independent argument against SC, in any case not one that simply presupposes the very things SC objects to.

Finally, it is interesting to note that some contemporary psychoanalysts have themselves embraced some version of SC (Gillett 1998; Moore 1999; Eagle 2003). In this light, further research questions may include: how do these constructivist developments within a segment of the psychoanalytic community affect the discussed deficiencies? To what extent would these theorists concur with the analysis presented here, and why don’t they draw the same conclusions from it? Do they have a more accurate insight than their empiricist colleagues in what is really going on in the hermeneutic practice of psychoanalysis? Or is their adherence to SC a perverse immunization strategy which, by extrapolating their internal theoretical problems to all of science, neutralizes the objection that the psychoanalytic object is just an artefact of the theory?
Bibliography


