A Non-Foundational Therapy

Understanding desire, wishing and love are central to therapeutic action. Freud tried to explain them. He imagined desire to be based on the initial helplessness of human beings. The hungry baby is in a state of tension, but is incapable of relieving it by itself, so needs outside help. When it gets it, the tension is relieved and it experiences satisfaction. After this, when it experiences tension, the image of the object that produced satisfaction, usually the breast, is hallucinated. So from henceforth, whenever a need arises there will be a psychical impulse that seeks to re-establish the situation of the original satisfaction. An impulse of this kind is a wish and the reappearance of the perception is its fulfilment. ‘Thus the aim of this first psychical activity was to produce a “perceptual identity” (i.e. something perceptually identical with the “experience of satisfaction”’ (Freud 1900, pp. 565–6).

There are… good reasons why a child sucking at his mother’s breast has become a prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it. (Freud 1905)

This is a story that Freud imagined would explain desire. It is a story of the relationship between wishes and their fulfilment which Freud calls satisfaction. It presumes there is a pre-linguistic self-consciousness, so pleasure is recognised as a desirable sensation and the infant can strive for it. ‘Just as the pleasure-ego can do nothing but wish, work for a yield of pleasure, and avoid unpleasure, so the reality-ego need do nothing but strive for what is useful and guard itself against damage’ (Freud 1911, p. 223).

According to this story we seek fulfilment of unconscious wishes through the restoration of signs which are bound to the experience of
satisfaction. Dreams and neurotic symptoms are all wish fulfilments, in which the basic wish for satisfaction is expressed in a disguised form.

Pleasure is assumed to be a sensation we desire. This is a narrow concept of pleasure; we can take pleasure in something which does not mean that this something produced a sensation in us (Z §502). Most of us know that the pursuit of pleasure is futile while acknowledging that pleasure is pleasant. Wishes are usually distinguished from desires. They are not pursued; we do not usually expect them to be fulfilled. ‘I wish you well’ or ‘I wish I was lying on a beach in the sun’ do not express that something particular must happen.

Freud assumes desire is founded on a lack; there is the desire and what fulfils it. He imagines desire is a psychical thing that is in the mind now and that is lacking something. What fulfils it is something else that comes along later and gives the experience of satisfaction. A desire, however, is individuated by the expression of desire, so there is no question of two things having to fit and so produce satisfaction. There is no some kind of identity between two items as Freud imagined where he argued that the subject seeks by hallucination or by action guided by thought an identity with the perception which was linked with the satisfaction of the need (Freud 1900, p. 566). The desire that X is the desire that is fulfilled by X. If A desires an apple and is given one, that is the fulfilment of his desire; but it may be rotten and so he would be dissatisfied. The relation of desire to its fulfilment is an internal relation, not an external one.

Wittgenstein discussed the nature of desire in many places. He wrote:

We meet again and again with this curious superstition, as one might be inclined to call it, that the mental act is capable of crossing a bridge before we’ve got to it. The trouble crops up whenever we try to think about the ideas of thinking, wishing, expecting, believing, knowing, trying to solve a mathematical problem, mathematical induction, and so forth. (BB p. 143)

A mental act such as a desire cannot cross a bridge before it gets to it. There is nothing that makes us fulfil a desire; there is no memory of satisfaction that lies in the unconscious that causes us to produce a perceptual identity with the experience of satisfaction. That is to confuse cause and reason. If someone is confused about reason, then they may feel they must cross a bridge before they get to it, so they imagine they are under the influence of a cause. This is characteristic of neurotic thought and much theorising in psychotherapy.