

AND THE PARASITE SAID: 'SAY WHATEVER COMES TO MIND'

Federico Leoni

The fundamental rule of psychoanalysis

The fundamental rule of psychoanalytic discourse goes something like this: 'Say whatever comes to mind' (Freud 1963 [1916-1917] SE XVI).

It is a rule that concerns how, not what. It does not tell the patient what they should or should not talk about in the session. On closer inspection, it does not even say that they should speak freely. It is true that the rule is known as the rule of free association. But the rule does not tell the patient: feel free, you must freely say whatever comes to mind. We know how ineffective such an invitation, indeed how disastrous its consequences would be. The fact is that those associations impose themselves on the patient, which is why the patient is invited to give voice to them. After all, it is those thoughts, that come to mind, spontaneously. They present themselves to their consciousness, coming from elsewhere and most likely going elsewhere.

More than freedom, what is at stake is something like another kind of necessity, or perhaps something that is neither necessity nor freedom. For now, however, let us limit ourselves to saying that the image of the freedom of free associations suggests with some effectiveness the idea that those thoughts are lifted from the yoke of a provenance and a destination. They have no premise behind them and no goal ahead of them. They are not destined for another, whether that other is another place to which an argument must lead and towards which it must arrange its pieces; or the analyst, or the person whom the analyst represents: father and mother, society and its customs, the desire to present oneself to the world as a respectable person, and so on. After all, there is always someone else involved, and proving something or showing something to someone are operations that are more similar than ever.

Communicating is like walking in a straight line

It is above all with regard to these categories that the rule of free association is free. It is free from premises, from placing something at the foundation of discourse; free from purposes, from assigning a goal to be achieved to the word. I would say in a general sense: free from the trajectory that makes the word come from some premise, free from the trajectory that pushes the word towards a predicted, anticipated, planned effect.

We immediately note that this idea of trajectory that we have variously evoked is anything but metaphorical. The whole theory of communication that we are familiar with from our textbooks uses it constantly. Communication goes from a sender to a receiver. My words want to inform someone about something. My words want to prove something, or obtain something from someone, by begging the other person, or ordering them to do something, or seducing them, or persuading them. There is a subject, there is an object, there is a linear movement that goes from one pole to the other, whether it is to reach some truth by moving from certain premises, or to achieve one goal and then another. The more linear the trajectory, the more successful and effective the communication will be judged to be.

Hypotaxis, parataxis, anacoluthon

We know that a straight line is the shortest line between two given points. Therefore, according to this standard theory of communication, which could find its exemplary representative in Claude Shannon (Shannon and Weaver 1949), good communication is communication that proceeds in a straight line, i.e. that does not multiply the points of passage. On the contrary. It reduces them to a minimum.

Here, then, is the formula for good communication: it will not consist of digressions, it will not open parentheses, it will not get lost in recalling secondary episodes. Put another way, it will distinguish the essential from the unessential, it will construct short, paratactically linked sentences, free of hypotaxis as much as possible. It will ensure that subordinate clauses close, bringing us back exactly to the point where they opened. Anacoluthon will be the number one enemy of this straightforward discourse. The disconnection of anacoluthon raises the threshold of background noise, and background noise is the opposite of the straight line that goes from point A to point B. Background noise is like a vast bubbling surface, which the straight line must cross with a minimum of digressions. So giving space to anacoluthon is like opening the straight line to the surrounding space, it is like suddenly making it communicate with the surrounding horizontality. Anacoluthon turns a line that should be un-extended into a kind of geometric monster: a line that spreads out beyond itself. A line that extends not only forward but also sideways, allowing areas, fragments of space, regions that it should only have skirted, sudden blocks of extension, to enter and integrate its incorporeal body. It is the worst thing that can happen to a line: to become less and less distinguishable from the space it should cross, articulate and orientate. To become surface.

The risk of delirium

I have said that parataxis is the ideal of good communication, and that hypotaxis is, on the other hand, eminently suspect. It tends towards digression, opening of parentheses, deviations and expansions. Therefore, it is only admissible at the price of promising immediate, rapid and precise closure. A flawless suture must bring the digression back to the exact point where it began, and put all communication back on track towards its destination.

But it could be pointed out that, according to standard communication theory, parataxis should also be considered a very suspicious ally, one whose performance does not deserve too much trust. Parataxis is, after all, somewhat parasitic, as its etymology suggests. This figure of 'para', 'beside' rather than in front or below, or above or behind, is extremely instructive, on the other hand. The fact is that, juxtaposition after juxtaposition, i.e. proceeding paratactically, one can easily lose sight of the subject being discussed, the substance of the argument, the ultimate substrate of the discourse.

Let us repeat: these are all figures – subject, substance, substratum – that allude to something that lies at the bottom, at the foundation. Something from which we move, in our speech, and to which we must return, if that speech is to be good speech, good discourse. As we can see, there is something vertical in this geometry, which has more to do with hypotaxis, but which is not unrelated to parataxis either. After all, it is the same thing to have something as a foundation, something underlying, such as a subject or a substance or a substrate of discourse, and to have something like an A that marks my discursive origin and a B that marks my discursive destination. Just as hypotaxis opens up to a subordinate clause, descends briefly to the lower level, and closes again, returning to the level considered fundamental, so parataxis juxtaposes segment after segment without losing sight of the point at which its series of segments aims, which, when added together, must draw as straight a line as possible.

We can imagine a delirious hypotaxis, which opens a subordinate clause, and then another, and then another, forgetting what we called the fundamental level, and suddenly assuming a level that seemed subordinate as the level to which the next steps should be subordinated. A grave sin of insubordination. All relationships will be redrawn, what seemed marginal will become central, what seemed negligible will begin to seem decisive. Isn't this how the patient's discourse works when he leaves the field to 'everything that crosses his mind'? We can also imagine a delusional parataxis, which takes the brevity of those traits of discourse to which it relies to the extreme, bringing fragmentation to a kind of limit. Once the limit is reached, those atoms of meaning no longer have an overall meaning, those hints of trajectory no longer make a direction. Here too, there is a serious sin, if not of insubordination, then of a lack of teleology. But we have just said that what is below and in front, what is behind and above, still draws a geometry of command. Is not 'saying everything that comes to mind' ultimately a small experiment with delirium, a brief episode of psychosis induced and controlled in vitro?

Genealogy of optimisation

Claude Shannon was not just a scholar. He worked in an industrial context, and his research stemmed from a business need. The company he worked for was Bell Telephone Company. There, the main objective was to optimise network performance, to ensure that messages arrived at their destination as cleanly as possible, without unnecessary detours, without losing pieces along the way, without drowning in background noise (Ronchi 2008).

This, then, is the economic genesis of the geometric model we were discussing. That linear, rectilinear geometry is, in other words, an economy. And a particular kind of economy, not just any economy. The straight line, the line that must not dissolve into the plane, the subordinate clauses that must close again at the point where they opened, the parataxis that must not fragment its underlying direction too much: these are all translations, in terms of a theoretical paradigm in the field of linguistics and communication, of what a certain economic and engineering requirement made desirable and sought to achieve in terms of technological functioning, which was also a good economic return for the company. If Bell Telephone Company's phone calls had been cleaner, less noisy, with shorter intervals between the caller's words and the respondent's words, Bell Telephone Company would have gained market share. And its competitors would have lost it.

Years later, with the economic and engineering origins of that geometric model forgotten, the model began to circulate in university classrooms and communication circles as if it were an objective image of what human communication is in itself. As if our fellow human beings had always spoken and were destined to speak as if they were on the telephone or as if they were a telephone. As if the purpose of any communication, were that of the lover calling his beloved, or the friend chatting nonsense with his friend for the pure pleasure of chatting together, or that of the mother scolding her daughter and repeating the same thing over and over, were truly explainable in terms of that straight line. This oblivion, this exchange of the abstract for the concrete, this assumption of a certain kind of economy in place of chatter or invective, let us not forget. We will return to this.

Dissemination of optimisation

Optimisation, in other words, becomes the reference paradigm of communication theory. In the meanwhile, every human action was interpreted retroactively as essentially communicative, eminently devoted to communicating something to someone (Habermas 1984; Drucker 1973).

In short, we began to think that every human action is a kind of line, a path that connects a subject to an object, or an initial state to a final state. And we begin to think that even in the case of action, of everyday behaviour or specialised behaviour, the optimum is always the same, namely the straight line. If we have to go from A to B, is it not obvious that the sooner we get there, the better? Is it not clear that the less we look around, the less we get lost along the way, and the sooner we reach our destination?

Looking for dead branches and cutting off dead branches is the imperative of optimisation. And as we all know, as soon as you start looking for something, that something magically appears everywhere, where it is, and where it is not. Everywhere the cheerful optimiser begins to see dead branches to cut off. Of course, the optimiser we are talking about may be someone who optimises the phenomenon of communication, like Shannon. Or someone who restructures a company, or someone who administers a neighbourhood or a city, someone who wants to improve the functioning of a hospital or a school.

From one case to another, from one example to another, only one thing remains constant. That is, as we saw briefly a moment ago, optimising means, deep down, wanting to already be at point B. Because A is just a premise, an inevitable waste of time, a necessary nuisance, but ultimately a nuisance. Let us not talk about the intermediate points.

The spectre of death and the spectre of life

This means that the optimal would be for A to already contain B, and for B not to introduce anything truly new with respect to A. At most, it would make A explicit, it would realise A with the utmost fidelity, detail, devotion. The optimal would be for A to already be B, for movement to be finally immobile, for movement to be eliminated from the face of the earth.

In other words, the ideal situation is that there are no unexpected events along the way, that nothing new happens, that the journey is as uncreative and unproductive as possible, that nothing comes to life along the way. In other terms, that no parasite (Serres 1982) should unfortunately intervene to corrode the perfect linearity of the journey, eating away at its compactness, causing its clean profile to swarm, inflating its straight course, impregnating it with the new.

In short, the terror of the cheerful optimiser is fecundation, generation, more or less hysterical pregnancy. The terror not of Shannon, who did the job he was paid to do, and who knows how he lived his life, but of those who blindly believe in Shannon and his grandchildren nestled everywhere, is the smooth, linear body of the straight line that swells because it is fertilised by a parasitic microorganism, and is in turn parasitised by an unexpected yet autonomous creature. In the history of science, this spectre is known as the hypothesis of the spontaneous generation, and it is no coincidence that the debated raged in prudish Victorian England (Strick 2000). On the other hand, it is in death, it is in the corpse, that A and B coincide without waste and without uncertainty. It is in death that the straight line is saved, and that it is saved in the form of a point.

Spontaneous generation and its enemies

In communication, this is the terror that meaning generates itself, that it is not the product of a sovereign subject. It is the terror that the message is not in the hands of a prudent manager who is aware of the effects that message will produce. It is the terror that the straight line will be parasitised by deviation, by the curve, by the coming and going, by the return to itself, by tortuosity, by involution, by labyrinthitis. It is the terror of direction parasitised by the absence

of direction, by internal motion. It is the terror of people talking to themselves and by themselves, 'saying whatever comes into their heads', instead of being spoken to by the media.

But is not this 'talking to oneself' and 'by oneself', this spontaneous generation of speech, this saying without knowing what we are saying and without being masters of the meaning of the signifiers that will be emitted, ultimately the terror of the patient in front of his analyst, at least until the patient has acquired a taste for the game of analysis or has experienced some liberating effect on his anxieties? 'Say whatever comes to mind' means that there is no need to go from A to B, to keep the premise and the consequence together, to recount an episode or an entire life in a linear fashion. There is no need to know right away what will come of it. There is no need to make B a delayed realisation of A, or A an exhaustive anticipation of B. He must abandon the obsession and obsessiveness of the optimiser. He must abandon the extreme harshness of optimisation procedures, which is also the extreme fragility of the optimised system.

The interesting thing is that this extreme hardness and fragility of the optimised system can be found wherever there is what we can now, metaphorically or literally, call an optimised system, be it a single subject or a collective subject, a single individual or a school optimised from a pedagogical point of view, or a hospital optimised in terms of its business performance, or a company whose organisational waste has been optimised. Or an entire culture, as our entire culture is a place of incessant and widespread optimisation (hence the extreme hardness and fragility of the culture that we can broadly call our own, i.e. the culture of the so-called globalised West).

A Darwinian incursion

The natural sciences are rich in teachings about optimisation, or rather against the illusions of optimisation.

First of all, they suggest a rather counterintuitive thesis, accustomed as we are to a century and a half of misinterpretations of evolutionism. We are convinced that Charles Darwin noticed and theorised the survival of the fittest, and it is clear that this thesis seems to perfectly support the idea of optimisation. The individual whose performance is optimal in relation to the environmental niche survives, and this can easily be translated into terms that are now familiar to us. If A is the individual and B is the environment, then A survives when he is, point by point the negative of the positive that is the B of its environment. For example, it is hungry for what the surrounding nature offers. It has effective means to counteract the predators that threaten it within the niche. It is covered with fur thick enough to protect it from the cold if there is cold, or thin enough not to suffer from the heat if there is heat.

This is all true, Darwin says roughly this (Darwin 2004 [1871], chap. V). But this way of recounting Darwin forgets something that is not secondary. Namely, that evolutionism is precisely that: evolutionism. Darwin's intuition concerns a dynamic and not a static. It concerns a continuous and reciprocal adjustment, and not an equilibrium resolved in a kind of eternal freeze-frame. After all, it is no coincidence that an early version of Darwinism was interpreted as an eminently conservative economic theory, an economy of savings and equilibrium, and that an entire utilitarian economic school of thought drew on Darwinism to reinforce its conservatism and its drive for optimisation. But a second reading of Darwin's text is enough to verify that everything in his vision is in motion, that nowhere does an immobile species exist and nowhere does an unchanging environment exist.

Species are in fact constantly changing, and interact with an environment that is itself variable. These variations are partly due to the spontaneous instability of both genetic transmission from generation to generation and the environmental niche, whose evolution is obviously linked to the evolution of many other larger and smaller niches and systems. But these variations should also be interpreted as co-evolutions, whereby the environmental niche is continuously and actively reshaped and modified by the changing perceptual and operational behaviours of the species that inhabit it, just as the variation of species is continuously and actively rewarded, sanctioned and transformed by the evolution of the habitat. A certain adaptive moment, a certain snapshot characterised by the perfect balance of a certain species and a certain environment, as the result of millions of years of trial and error. It follows that the evolutionary process is by no means guided by the principle of optimisation. If anything, what is optimal is a specific moment that can be isolated for study purposes. This moment is therefore essentially abstract with respect to the concreteness of the entire journey, absolutely inexplicable except in the light of the enormous and indispensable waste of energy, and of the spontaneous generation of totally or partially inadequate solutions. Which nevertheless constitute the truth, not of the static, but of the dynamic of evolution.

The survival of the un-fittest

If it is not the moment of perfect adaptation that is concrete, but the overall process of evolution, then the most fit to survival is never the individual or species that is most adapted at a given moment. It is the individual or species that at a certain moment are most endowed with 'adaptive' reserves that are still unexpressed and at that moment strictly unusable. It is in that burden, which is far from optimal, indeed decidedly uneconomical and, to be honest, vaguely monstrous, that we must recognise the secret resource that evolution draws on in its actual dynamics.

In other words, the fittest is the un-fittest. Waste is something essential in the evolutionary dynamic. The long way round is often the shortest, or at least the most creative and promising. It is from this reserve teeming with unusable solutions that, according to the contemporary interpretation of Darwinism, that key phenomenon called not adaptation but exaptation, draws (Gould & Vrba 1982). It is the logic of proliferation that we have already encountered, it is the mechanism of parasitism that disturbed the dreams of the optimiser as much as the sleep of the obsessive neurotic. But now we encounter these things as if they were turned upside down, changed in meaning.

Proliferation is not corrosive at all, it does not threaten the compactness of living beings in any way, it does not cripple with its useless interference in the otherwise perfect performance of a certain system. Parasitism is not at all a crazy multiplication of deviations, a tortuous and ultimately delusional tendency of the line to branch out, to run out of the groove that should be its own. On the contrary. The higher the diffraction coefficient between A and B, the higher the novelty index of a certain process, the probability that something transformative will happen along its course, the hope that its elasticity will make it more capable of coping with the unexpected and of making the unexpected a factor of creation rather than suffering.

The logic of proliferation

In the field of language and communication, this means that background noise is not an obstacle to good communication, but is the very substance of the communicative phenomenon. It is in the living, mobile body of that background noise that the optimiser, looking at the immediate and believing with a more than suspicious faith in the snapshot rather than the overall film, cuts

out the shape that satisfies him, the still image that seems to give credence to his version of events.

And it is precisely this optimising dynamic that the psychoanalytic rule of free association aims to overturn. The *Grundregeln* 'Say whatever comes to mind' pushes the discourse that a subject has carefully optimised by calibrating it to the other's question to go back upstream, to recover that state of spontaneous generativity that the signifier contains within itself. It is this almost ungovernable and largely asubjective freedom of the signifier that the logic of free association attempts to achieve. Perhaps this is why psychoanalysis has always enjoyed bad press, and why it has been accused of being a Jewish science: that is, a knowledge invented by parasites and devoted to the parasitism of the otherwise clean consciences of our good workers?

But before dwelling on what will be the last task of these notes, namely the interpretation of what we have called the more than suspicious faith that the optimiser has in the snapshot rather than in the overall film, allow us to outline one last example in which we see the great struggle between the logic of proliferation and the logic of optimisation at work. It is the example of school.

The school that verifies and the school that deludes

The life of a primary school teacher, or a middle or high school teacher, and in some way of a university teacher, is now devoted much more to testing what pupils have learned from lessons than to teaching.

The outcome of this trend is paradoxical: teaching time decreases, test time increases. In past decades, the teaching process was continuous, occasionally interrupted by moments of assessment. Today, it is almost the opposite: the assessment process is continuous, while moments of pure teaching are becoming increasingly discontinuous, even rare.

Here we can already glimpse the work of the optimiser, with his preference for the instant rather than the process, for the frame that aims to verify the perfect adaptation between what is taught and what is learned, rather than for the complete film and the complicated and continuous adjustment that it would testify to between teaching and learning: an adjustment made up of infinite unforeseen variations, mysterious mutations of the subject matter taught in its passage from the teacher's mouth to the learner's ear, and unexpected inventions on both sides of the game.

We are not far from the pattern that is now familiar to us. The optimiser will want the pupil to have learnt A if the teacher has taught A, and not a variation of A, or worse still, B. As we said at the time, the optimal is for B to coincide with A, i.e. for communication to be free of deviations, so that no monstrous phenomena of spontaneous generation occur along the channel leading from the teacher's mouth to the learner's ear. The more unproductive the channel, the better. The more sterile the teaching, the better the ideal of this kind of pedagogy (Wiggins 1998) will be verified.

From school to the world of work

Better for whom? First of all, better for the teacher, who will be able to verify more easily whether B coincides with A, or how much it deviates from it. In short, it is the moment of verification that shapes the moment of teaching, and not the moment of teaching that shapes the moment of verification. Mechanising verification will be all the easier the more teaching is

mechanised in advance. A multiple-choice test will produce multiple-choice teaching even before multiple-choice learning.

But we have not yet touched on the bottom line. We must repeat the question we asked a moment ago a second time. Better for whom? Better for the so-called world of work, which is for some reason considered the obvious interlocutor of the school, the client who asks for a certain pedagogical product and who, like any client, must be satisfied. Does the world of work want skills x, y, z? Then the school will provide the client with young people who possess skills x, y, z, exactly those, and only those. To impart any other skill, or anything other than a skill, i.e. a letter B, would be culpable. A waste of time, a useless digression. The opposite of optimised pedagogy, a dangerous phenomenon of parasitism.

It is at this point that we encounter one of the many examples of that perfect fusion between bad Darwinism and bad economics we already mentioned. The optimiser, with his more than suspicious trust in the snapshot rather than the process, in the perfectly achieved conformity between A and B rather than in the happy diffraction between A and the unimaginable letter that the process will have produced, will thus have organised a pedagogy that manufactures tin soldiers, perfect for performing the day's work task. And when the client decides that it is time to give them another task?

Because, as we know, markets change as often as the environmental niches in which the bizarre creatures whose fossils Darwin studied lived. This incessant change is even praised, which would not be a bad thing if the flip side of the coin were not so disastrous. When that day comes, the tin soldiers will be abandoned to the desert of unemployment. There will be nothing for them to do, in fact. They will be, to use a fortunate expression of Zygmunt Bauman (2005), discarded lives. After all, new toy soldiers are already being moulded with new skills, and for a couple of years they will find work instantly, once they leave the ramshackle gates of their proudly 'technical' schools. Training today's workers means training individuals who are perfectly adapted to today and programmatically fragile for tomorrow. Training the citizen of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow means training an individual who is programmatically deformed and maladjusted to today and tomorrow, and therefore intrinsically creative of both today and tomorrow.

The politics and poetics of maladjustment

One last question remains, an explicitly political one. Why prefer adaptation, with its rigidity and fragility, to the unfit, the maladjustment, with its limping reserve of unrealised virtuality, available for realisation under skies that are currently unpredictable, prompted by needs we cannot imagine but which we know, if nothing else, that we cannot imagine?

It is quite clear. A school that is not overly concerned with matching the student's B with the teacher's A is destined to waste a great deal of time, to ask its teachers not to believe too much in their knowledge, to send out on graduation day young people whose abilities are difficult to certify. Therefore, it is a school that is destined to be unattractive to clients, who will in fact invest elsewhere, in other schools that are more optimised than this one. After all, those clients are the same ones who suggested that the state starve state schools, so that those schools would then turn to the clients for funding. At that point, the clients could do their job, that is to commission to those schools workers rather than citizens, suited to the tasks that are currently most urgent for them.

Optimising, preferring adaptation, promoting the rigid correspondence of B to A, celebrating the fragile but perfect coincidence of the life we live with a single given purpose, means on the one hand saving money. Because it is certain that the process leading to this outcome is a rapid, simple, manageable, verifiable, replicable and standardisable process. The school of optimisation requires a pedagogy that costs little and produces disposable individuals. On the other hand, this means shifting the costs of the veritable massacre that will overwhelm them as soon as the environment changes, as soon as the labour market takes other paths, as soon as the nature of our work tasks evolves, perhaps imperceptibly but always unpredictably, onto individuals.

The alternative is a huge investment by the community in the community. A huge investment, such as that required by this unfit and unfitting teaching method, which, on the other hand, on graduation day, would put into circulation not workers but citizens, not individuals but members of a community, not normalised subjects but subjects endowed with that share of folly that is characteristic of the tortuous and digressive line, of the parasitic proliferation of meaning, of the spontaneous and vaguely monstrous generation of discourse, of life that invents new forms rather than merely celebrating, under the benevolent gaze of the great other, the survival of those who know how to take on the form most fitted to his brief benevolence.

References

Bauman, Z. (2005). *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Darwin, C. (2004). *The Descent of Man*, vol. I, chapter V (orig. ed. 1871). London: Penguin.

Drucker, P. F. (1973). *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. New York: Harper and Row.

Freud, S. (1963) [1916-1917]. *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol. XVI (ed & trans) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Gould, S. J. and Vrba, E. S. (1982). Exaptation - A Missing Term in the Science of Form *Paleobiology* 8 (1): 4–15.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The Theory of Communicative Action* (trans) Th. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

Ronchi, R. (2008). *Teoria critica della comunicazione*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori.

Serres, M. (1982). *The Parasite* (trans) L. R. Schehr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Shannon, C. E., and Weaver, W. (1949). *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Strick, J. E. (2000). *Sparks of Life: Darwinism and the Victorian Debates over Spontaneous Generation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wiggins, G. (1998). *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Improve Student Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.