

Carlo Strenger: Embracing Internal Contradictions

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Carlo Strenger, PhD, was a person of mysteries, riddles, and contradictions. He lived in Israel, but his heart and mind were really global. Born and raised in Switzerland, he spoke freely all dialects of the European language and culture. Having treated many American patients and having strong professional and personal relationships with people in the USA and Canada, he was intimately familiar with North American culture, science, and psychology. Although not all of those who knew Carlo took a liking to his flamboyant style, his intellectual powers and his contribution to bridging (existential) philosophy, (scientific) psychology, and psychoanalysis were widely acknowledged. In this special section, we honor Strenger's diverse contribution to psychoanalysis. This introduction includes a brief exposition of Carlo's work, followed by a description of six contributions to this special section by authors addressing Strenger's writing.

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Carlo Strenger's contribution to psychoanalysis can roughly be divided into three elements: The first is his analysis of the epistemology of psychoanalysis, a project he began with his influential book *Between Hermeneutics and Science* (1991), and followed up on in a series of contributions, including *The Quest for Voice in Contemporary Psychoanalysis* (2002) and his article, "Why Psychoanalysis Must Not Discard Science and Human Nature" (2013). Strenger's second systematic contribution was his integration of existential thought and psychoanalysis, which is represented in *Individuality, the Impossible Project* (1998) and a number of articles such as "Sosein: Active Self-Acceptance in Midlife" (2009). His third ongoing contribution was his investigation of identity formation in the era of globalization. He published a series of articles on the topic, and systematized his views in two books, *The Designed Self* (2004) and *The Fear of Insignificance* (2011).

One common thread connecting these broad elements is his call to embrace, and even celebrate, internal tensions in scholarship, in clinical work, and in life itself. Strenger embodied this philosophy in his constant movement between imbibing great traditions and rebelling against them, between religious adherence and secular doubt, between a deterministic view of human nature and his deep devotion to the human quest for freedom. Rather than resolving the complexity of the psyche and of human existence, Strenger saw these assumed contradictions as a space for action. As he wrote in *Freud's Legacy in the Global Era* (2015b), "The self's complexity, far from being an impediment to leading a good life, is one of the most important sources of meaning" (p. 248).

This is evident in his analysis of the epistemology of psychoanalysis, in which he criticizes the tendency of traditional psychoanalysis to see the discipline as purely interpretive (i.e., hermeneutic) and clinical work as the empirical foundation of developmental and etiological claims. Instead, he suggested an integrative and interdisciplinary approach, which acknowledges the irreducibly interpretive and creative aspects of psychoanalytic interpretation, while calling for the grounding of causal claims about the etiology of psychopathology and the therapeutic effectiveness of psychoanalytic therapy in controlled empirical research.

Strenger similarly called for embracing internal complexity in his integration of psychoanalysis with existential philosophy. Here, he argued that true freedom entails the acknowledgement of the limitations of the self, or the givens of one's "existential equation." For Strenger, the existential dynamics of human life are the struggles to shape the basic givens of one's life (parents, gender, race, religion, etc.) into a life that one experiences as one's own creation. Therefore, according to Strenger, freedom is predicated upon knowledge of one's limitation, and such knowledge is (paradoxically) a precondition for self-creation.

In one of his recent books (*Adventure of Freedom*, 2017), Strenger expanded this thesis by pointing toward the myth that has evolved since the time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and became part of Western popular culture beginning in the 1950s, namely, that we are born free, but live in shackles; that human beings have a basic right to happiness, and that unhappiness and lack of freedom are always the fault of society and/or parents. The result is a spoiled mentality of entitlement and the misconception that freedom is reduced to unlimited consumer options; bitter unhappiness and the sense of being cheated of the life we deserve, a sentiment that is flooding the Western world in waves of rage. In opposition to this view, Strenger advanced the view that began to evolve in classical Greek philosophy and was developed in modernity by thinkers such as Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Freud. Strenger showed that conflicts, pain, and failure are essential to human nature. Both individual and political freedom are the result of the hard work of self-knowledge, discipline, and active involvement in life and politics. But Strenger's conclusion was by no means

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pessimistic: He called upon the members of the free world to realize that true freedom is a lifelong adventure: Risky, requiring effort, worth fighting for and much more interesting than our mass culture of entitlement portrays.

In recent years, Strenger took this complex idea of freedom one step further, applying it to what he labeled the “crisis of the liberal order.” At the heart of his recent books (Strenger, 2015a, 2015b, 2017, 2019) lays the conviction that the Western ideal of personal freedom and a political order designed to protect it must be defended rather than buried. But to do so, he claimed, we need to have a clear look at some of the ailments involved in the decline of liberalism. This idea is rooted in Western thought from Aristotle, through Montaigne and Spinoza, to Freud and Isaiah Berlin in assuming that a liberal polis requires human beings who take upon themselves the work of freedom. These thinkers believed that they must take responsibility for their minds by working out their worldviews and values in a process of lifelong critical thought based education, take responsibility for their lives in trying to shape themselves individually rather than conforming to fads and fashions, and take civic engagement seriously by making up their minds about the common good independently and not following any leadership blindly.

Strenger’s call for embracing internal tensions is evident in his clinical and cultural investigation of identity formation in the age of globalization. Here, he has made a strong case that the major psychoanalytic categories are no longer applicable for contemporary culture, which disavows historical depth, and in which younger generations are under constant pressure to live spectacular lives. Embracing the complexity of the quest for meaning in the twenty-first century, Strenger avoided two pitfalls that threaten the diagnosis of such cultural breaks. The first is an idealization of the present and the unfounded hope that a new paradise is about to emerge; the second is a wholesale condemnation of the emerging new culture and a nostalgic idealization of the past.

Strenger’s breadth of interdisciplinary integration characterizes his theoretical and clinical legacy. He combined his knowledge of psychoanalysis, academic psychology, and philosophy with wide reading in political theory, economics, sociology, and history. Without sacrificing conceptual precision, he was capable of addressing a wide range of phenomena. As a result, he has helped psychoanalytic clinicians to understand the wider context of their patients’ lives, while, at the same time, making use of clinical material to elucidate social and cultural phenomena.

Although Strenger dealt with topics that are not much covered in psychoanalytic journals, psychoanalysis was one of his intellectual and spiritual homes (the other was his reading of phenomenology and existentialism). For Strenger, psychoanalysis constituted a secure base from which he could explore important aspects of the inner and outer worlds. Although there is a great deal of convergence, each of the contributors focuses on different aspects of Strenger’s work. Luyten et al. (2022) focus on a much-neglected topic in psychoanalysis: The role of culture—including the effects of globalism and technology—on psychoanalytic theory and practice. Among other things, they call for the broadening of psychoanalytic training to include greater emphasis on social interventions.

As a product of Strenger’s attempt to integrate psychoanalysis, existentialism, and phenomenology, his concerns included the finitude and groundlessness of existence and the reality of death. Although this theme is in the background of all the contributions, it is an explicit focus in the articles by Stolorow, Shahar, and Summers. For Strenger,

the finitude of existence, which of course confronts everyone, is intimately linked to fear of insignificance, and is dealt with by each person in their own way. A focus on this theme is seen in the contributions by Luyten et al. (2022), Shahar, and Stolorow.

One way to transcend the fear of insignificance is through the drive for self-creation, a theme addressed by Knafo, Shahar, and Summers. In perhaps the most personal contribution, Knafo links Strenger’s individual struggle with freedom and self-creation to his intellectual concerns with these issues. Along with Summers, Knafo discusses the constraints on self-creation and self-reinvention. As much as we might want to reinvent ourselves, Knafo observes, we are limited by certain ineluctable realities: Our genetic makeup, our past, and the world in which we live, which for some, adds up to our fate. According to Strenger, a central characteristic of the classic vision of psychoanalysis (in contrast to the romantic vision) is the importance of maintaining one’s dignity in the face of fate. In his contribution, Eagle picks up on the theme of the two visions of psychoanalysis, but reconceptualizes Strenger’s two visions in terms of a contrast between an emphasis on unconscious forces versus according primacy to consciousness and subjective experience.

Specific Contributions of This Special Section

Opening this special section is Golan Shahar’s article titled “Yalom, Strenger, and the Psychodynamics of Inner Freedom: A Contribution to Existential Psychoanalysis.” In it, Shahar compares Irvin Yalom’s pioneering theoretical work on the four existential concerns—death, freedom, isolation, and meaning—with Strenger’s subsequent work on freedom. Shahar argues that freedom is an existential concern that is more fundamental than the other three, and thus offers a “Strengerian” reformulation of Yalom’s work. Central to this “Strengerian” vision is the understanding that “fear of life,” particularly taking responsibility for one’s own creation, precedes fear of death. Interweaving personal recollections of Shahar’s close relationship with Carlo and his own theoretical work on the reformulation of object relations theory, Shahar demonstrates how the issue of freedom is central to the makeup of mental representations of self and others and, by extension, to the understanding of the role of object relations in suicidal depression, particularly during young adulthood.

Succeeding Shahar’s article is Danielle Knafo’s (2022) work, titled “Bromberg’s Self-Creation and the Good Life: Carlo’s Strenger’s Existential Psychoanalysis for Our Time.” Knafo begins with a schematic biography of Carlo, highlighting the three major intellectual sources of influence on his thinking: Judaism, psychoanalysis, and existentialism. She then examines Strenger’s view of “the good life” in the context of psychoanalytic contributions to this notion, starting from Freud’s love and work, continuing with Winnicott’s emphasis on play, Loewald’s postulate that the good life entails a free exchange between conscious and unconscious material, the humanistic psychologists’ focus on self-actualization of talents and abilities, relational psychoanalysis’ elevation of the presence of intersubjectivity in close relationships, Bollas’ depiction of the willingness to engage in personal transformations, Melanie Klein’s emphasis of the predominance of love over hate, Bion’s ability to suffer one’s pain, Eigen’s description of the ability to come to terms with one’s monsters, and Phillips’ enigmatic postulate that the good life is the life we did not choose. She then places Strenger in this rich context and states that, for him, the good life meant living actively rather than reactively. Knafo illustrates Strenger’s position on the

good life via one of her clinical cases, and culminates with an examination of this position in the context of globalization.

Next, Luyten et al. (2022) examine Strenger's work in relation to their own, which focuses on developmental psychopathology. In their article, "The Fear of Insignificance from a Socio-Communicative Perspective: Reflections on the Role of Cultural Changes in Carlo Strenger's Thinking," they relate Strenger's fear of insignificance with psychological research on self, identity, and agency. Fonagy's notion of mentalization—the ability to recognize individuals as subjects with inner lives—is evoked in order to argue that psychopathological disorders are actually disorders of social communications: Adaptation to sociocultural environments is attained at the expense of an appreciation of one's inner life and needs. According to the authors, only mentalization—propagated by early family relationships as well as by education and teaching—can enable individuals to "think together," that is, to be aware of each other's minds. Without it, the subject cannot know who they are, and this is likely to lead to the fear of insignificance. Such fear, in turn, pushes forward both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Based on this psychosociological view, the authors call for an almost radical revision of the focus on clinical psychoanalysis. Namely, they recommend pushing the envelope beyond individual treatment of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic individuals) and making treatment, both individual and community based, available to all segments of society, particularly those who are disadvantaged.

Eagle's (2022) contribution picks up on Strenger's (1989) article on the classic and romantic visions of psychoanalysis. Eagle's focus is on that aspect of the classical vision in which Strenger refers to Paul Ricœur's (1970) "hermeneutics of suspicion," a perspective in which consciousness is viewed as dissimulating; and on that aspect of the romantic vision of psychoanalysis that accords primacy to subjective experience. Each of these visions offers a different conception of treatment. From the perspective of the classical vision, a primary goal of treatment is the enhancement of self-knowledge, whereas a primary goal of treatment from the romantic perspective is the enhancement and enrichment of subjective experience. In the spirit of Strenger's dialectical and integrative perspective, Eagle aims to show that Freud's treatment goal of "where id was, there shall ego be" can be understood as entailing an integration of the classic and romantic visions of psychoanalysis.

Summers' (2022) piece comments on various aspects of Strenger's work, including his discussion of the nature of rationality in different disciplines, as well as the epistemological basis not only of psychoanalysis, but also of the social sciences. As Summers notes, much of Strenger's work can be understood in terms of an attempt to integrate phenomenological and psychoanalytic perspectives, or at least to bring to bear on psychoanalytic theory and practice insights derived from phenomenological and existential perspectives. Like other contributors, Summers notes the dialectic in Strenger's work between fate and realization and the recognition that acceptance of limitation is a necessary condition for self-creation. Here, Strenger echoes Spinoza's insight that freedom is possible only when one recognizes the forces that exert an influence on us. Finally, Summers comments on Strenger's appreciation—rare for most psychoanalytic writers—of the importance of the wider culture and the need to take account of its influence on how the individual lives their life.

Concluding this special section is an article by Stolorow which was previously published as an article entitled "Heidegger's Nietzsche"

(Stolorow, 2010). The focus of Stolorow's article is on Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return. One of the main themes in Stolorow's article is that in view of the "reiterated circulation of all things" and the "nullity and groundlessness of existence," the individual "must seize the moment," "to take a stand on existence." In taking this position, Stolorow recognizes the constraints of reality, in particular, the reality of temporality, finitude, and trauma. Stolorow's contribution addresses an aspect of life that one may think of as the tragic nature of fate: Not only one's own death but the severe trauma of the death of a loved one.

A theme that runs through the various contributions, is the emphasis on self-creation in the form of enhanced agency and existential choices. However, as Summers and others note, an accompanying theme that also runs through Strenger's work is the recognition of constraints in the form of one's history and the world in which one lives. All the contributors recognize the presence in Strenger's work of a master dialectician, in the constant balancing of apparent incompatibilities: Hermeneutics and science; self-creation and constraints; and fate and possibility.

Conclusion

In his commentary on the special section in honor of Sidney Blatt, published at the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, Emanuel Berman (2017) deems Blatt "an inclusive psychoanalyst." According to Berman, an inclusive psychoanalyst is one that is not perturbed by the said boundaries of psychoanalysis (e.g., Blass, 2010), but rather seeks to venture outside of psychoanalysis, master other fields of inquiry, and then enforce a fruitful, if complex, dialog between psychoanalysis and these other fields of inquiry. Blatt did this with personality and psychopathology research, and Strenger, with philosophy and political science. Both endeavors take tremendous courage, which neither Blatt nor Strenger lacked. The end result, we submit, is always zestful. We hope that readers of this special section will experience this zest gleaned from Strenger's work, and by that will also get a glimpse of the vitality of his character.

摘要

Carlo Strenger博士, 是一个充满神秘、谜题和矛盾的人。他生活在以色列, 但他的心和精神真的是世界性的。他生长于瑞士, 可以自由地讲欧洲语言和文化的的所有方言。他治疗过许多美国患者, 与美国和加拿大的人们有很强的专业的和个人的关系, 他非常熟悉北美的文化、科学和心理学。尽管不是所有认识Carlo的人都喜欢他的耀眼的风格、他的知识力量, 他对于连接(存在主义)哲学、(科学)心理学和精神分析的贡献还是被一致认可的。在本期刊中, 我们缅怀Strenger对于精神分析的多样性的贡献。本介绍包括Carlo著作的简要阐述, 随后是对六篇特邀稿件的一个说明, 这些稿件是关于Strenger的作品及其与作者自身的工作的关系。

关键词: 精神分析, 存在主义, 自由, Carlo Strenger

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