In this paper I discuss Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas on knowledge, truth and reality with an emphasis on his concept of ‘necessary illusions’ or ‘necessary fictions.’ First, I briefly outline the relevant similarities between Nietzsche’s philosophy and relational psychoanalytic principles. Then, I suggest that psychoanalytic narratives can be recognized as the necessary illusions about which Nietzsche wrote (1886, Sections 11, 14, and 22). I hope to illustrate how Nietzsche’s ‘necessary fictions’ translate into the temporary, constructed ‘truths’ of relational psychoanalysis.

Philosophers articulate a proposition and then go about the task of proving whether it is true or false. They approach their data with the query “Is this true? Is the philosophical argument proven?” In contrast, Nietzsche was interested in experience. His questions included “What kind of person would write this?” “What are the concerns of someone who would believe this?” “What did the person who wrote this suffer from?” Nietzsche believed that the only ‘real’ world we can be certain of is the one we experience. He was deeply disturbed by human suffering and profoundly troubled by human cruelty. An extension of these apprehensions was his interest in how to embrace this physical life and live it to the fullest without denying the pain and uncertainty inherent in the human condition.

Nietzsche used two methods of philosophizing: 1) the psychological, wherein he searched for hidden motivation, and 2) the historical, through which he studied the development of concepts. He wanted to know how a concept evolved and came to be accepted as a truth. In short, Nietzsche was interested in motivation, both conscious and unconscious.

NIETZSCHE’S PHILOSOPHY IN BRIEF

Nietzsche said “God Is Dead” (1882; Sections 108, 125, 343; Zarathustra, Part 1: Section 2). His intention was to acknowledge, or contend, that loss of belief in received metaphysical
‘truths’ carried with it the death of faith in the absolute correctness of any single belief system. It reflects Nietzsche’s contention that morality and other putative ‘truths’ lack any foundation in nature, divinity, or reason (1887; 1883-5). In Genealogy of Morals, he proposed that the Enlightenment had destroyed belief in Judaic-Christian morality, but even that had been informed by human needs and not, as had been believed, handed down by a metaphysical being. Nietzsche also believed that we cannot live without beliefs and values. Hence we have a moral imperative to generate new ones, fictional though they will be.

WHAT ARE NIETZSCHE’S NECESSARY FICTIONS?

They are beliefs that cannot be proven to be true and sometimes can be proven false, but are, nonetheless, necessary to sustain life. They are convictions that satisfy the need for stability. Nietzsche contends that all belief systems are ‘necessary fictions.’ They are fictions because they cannot be proven. They are necessary because without them we would be rudderless in a world of chaos.

For the psychoanalyst, a necessary fiction is, I propose, a narrative that helps the patient understand their feelings, choices and behaviors. These fictions are necessary because people need some sense of certainty in a world of constant change. Necessary fictions create meaning out of the chaos of lived experiences. They are formulations about what feelings and behaviors mean at a given time. One’s experiences can be organized into a coherent and inclusive story, but that story cannot be proven. Hence it is illusory and temporary.

NIETZSCHE ON TRUTH

“Truth is error…” Nietzsche wrote, “There is no truth, only perspectives and interpretations” (1886, Section 4). Nietzsche maintains that we create ‘truths’ to satisfy needs. What we term ‘real’ or ‘true’ is simply a projection of our desires and fears. Truth for Nietzsche involves a conditional relationship to an object. This relationship presupposes specific individual goals, interests and values. In short, ‘truth’ for any given individual, is a prejudicial, partial point of view, a necessary fiction. We are free to believe that our judgments truly reflect the structure of
our world, but we can never know with certainty. The only ‘real world’ about which we can be certain is the one we experience via our senses and organize into ‘necessary illusions’ via our intellect (Nietzsche, 1882, 1904, 1910).

On knowledge: Nietzsche does not deny knowledge, but relocates it in perspective. He defined what is ‘known’ as a group of phenomena, organized via an interpretation, a perspective. Perspectivism implies that to engage in any activity or belief, we focus on a small part of the available material and exclude the rest from our consideration. What we can know at any given time depends upon contemporary needs. Those wishes and desires will inform whatever perspective we take, and that perspective will determine what we see as true.

The above ideas forecast the relational belief that there are no absolute and abiding narratives. We accept that one formulation fits for now, while knowing that it may change later. Also consistent with the relational attitude is Nietzsche’s belief that our needs, conflicts and social matrix create the possibilities for what may emerge in any given situation. This resonates with the relational belief that the analyst is present in, and contributing to, the construction of the relationship. In short, it is impossible to stand outside of the dyad and, without prejudice, observe the patient’s dynamics.

Nietzsche described life as constant movement, as becoming. The physical world, and our bodies and minds, are in chronic flux. These moving worlds cannot be known with certainty because we are trapped in, and limited by, language consisting of static concepts. And static concepts only capture part of a stream. Trying to apprehend any specific part of the flux necessarily distorts it. Think of a waterfall. Even the drop of water isolated by a high powered camera fails to capture the movement, the waterfall. We capture a static image, but not the waterfall. This does not mean we ‘know’ or have identified the flux. It means we have schematized it into assumptions of truth that become the foundation for navigating our lives.

Hence, language contributes to the falsification of our experience by taking part of the fluctuation and rigidifying it into fixed concepts. Our felt ‘truths’ are formulated into words which bring our experience into manageable focus. But, since a becoming world cannot be
known, we only know our limited creations which are necessary for stability. Nietzsche cautions that we undermine ourselves when we forget that language only captures part of our ‘truth’, for part of the time. We can see how Nietzsche’s ‘necessary fictions’ adumbrated the relational analysts belief in constructed, provisional narratives.

In sum, Nietzsche proposed that knowledge/truth is relational and that acquiring knowledge does not mean we have identified the flux. It means that we have organized and named discrete parts of it in the service of piloting our world. In short, truth is an imposition of meaning on movement (Nietzsche, 1878, 1904). We can see the resonance with the relational perspective of tentative, constructed narratives and embedded truths (Hoffman, 1998).

For Nietzsche, the self as a fixed entity is also a fiction. Rather, what we call ‘self’ is a hierarchy of drives, a complex of urges in conflict. So each of us is many people, or in relational parlance, we are multiple (Nietzsche, 1887). The manner in which we organize our multiplicity shapes our character, what we call ‘self’. In other words, the ‘self’ is a set of moving parts, with the movement being informed by one’s need at any given time. In one situation we experience our ‘self’ in this way. In another situation we experience our ‘self’ differently. Here we see the foreshadowing of relational belief in multiple selves (Bromberg, 1998; Stern, 2010; Hoffman, 1998).

The destruction of a metaphysical subject or self is replaced with re-interpretation of the self as process, as a verb, as a fluid dynamic system. Hence the manifold urges comprising the self are understood by Nietzsche as a collection of multiple perspectives, based on various desires. These perspectives, like ‘truth’ are informed by the question, “What do I need now?” What Nietzsche hopes we will attain is a wealth of perspectives organized in a manner allowing for comprehensiveness of outlook in a joyful existence.

To review, life is a flux of relations. Knowledge is never final. It is relational and perspectival. Knowledge and truth are provisional. The self is multiple. Nietzsche focused on truth values vs. life values. He asked, “How does our ‘truth’, our fictions, serve our needs and enhance our life?” Nietzsche thought in terms of people with specific needs at specific times. He mistrusted
abstractions and understood that we think with concepts that cannot capture reality, but are necessary for moving through life. Importantly, Nietzsche contended that there are many truths and that what he writes are his truths implying that his reader has no right to claim them. To wit, each person has to find his or her own truth, provisional as it may be. This, too, is familiar to the contemporary analyst.

RELATIONAL PSYCHOANALYTIC PRINCIPLES

Before I present relational analytic principles, I note that the relational approach is not a single system with specific rules. It is distinguished by the attitude with which the analyst approaches questions like; what can I know; how do I know it; what are the limits of my knowing? It is a difference in epistemology (Hoffman, 1998).

Relational analysts and therapists believe in the unconscious as a driver of behavior. As we have seen, Nietzsche believes that propellers beyond the reach of our consciousness account for most of our behavior; that ‘reason’ or consciousness has a low profile in arriving at decisions (Stern, 2010).

Regarding who knows what: relational practitioners believe that both the patient and the analyst can ‘know.’ They do not envision the analytic dyad as comprised of a ‘healthy’ analyst enjoying an unbiased view of a ‘sick’ patient. In contrast to the classical approach, the relational analyst understands that the patient might see some of the analyst’s dynamics, of which the analyst her- or himself is unaware (Hoffman, 1998; Aron, 1996).

Regarding what we can know; relational analysts believe that knowing is provisional and perspectival. At one point in the analytic process, the patient and analyst agree that a given chronicle makes sense in accounting for past and present dynamics. At some time in the future, that storyline may surrender to a different narrative. We have seen that this is consistent with Nietzsche’s beliefs about knowing (Hoffman, 1998).
The relational analyst does not assume the she/ he has an unconditioned perception and, thereby, privileged access to the patient’s unconscious. Nor does the relational analyst assume that the patient has neither (Hoffman, 1998).

Relational theory reflects Nietzsche’s belief that there are no absolute enduring truths; rather truth is created, personal and temporal. Nietzsche said, “This is my truth. It may not be yours”. He would have counseled a patient to work with, but not depend upon, the analyst to create the ‘truth’ of how to live. Nietzsche would have said, ‘You are morally obligated to assume responsibility for your own creations.’ In Zarathustra, Nietzsche said, “One repays a teacher badly if one always remains a pupil” (1883, Part 1:Section 3).

Regarding the self, relational analysis perceive the self as constructed and embedded within the social/environmental fabric. Any shared situation both creates opportunities for, and establishes limits on, which aspects of the self can be expressed. There are no Cartesian insulated thinking machines or Freudian isolated selves in the relational world. The self cannot be separated from the social/environmental texture. It follows that the self is not fixed or rigid and has no enduring essence. One aspect of a person may be expressed within certain horizons and another, seemingly contradictory aspect, may find expression in a different circumstance (Stern, 2010; Hoffman, 1998). I note that relational analysts do not claim lack of consistency, only an absence of fixedness. In today’s parlance, the self is multiple. We can see Nietzsche’s work on the self as a prefiguring of the above.

The goals of relational analysis include facilitating the patient’s understanding of how she or he creates meaning within the therapeutic dyad, and by extension, in her or his outside relationships. Interconnecting goals include expansion of the patient’s sense of agency and relational skills, understanding how patients generate meaning in their lives, and a deepening understanding of unconscious components and how they inform meaning.

These are all consonant with Nietzsche’s objectives of self-enhancement and ‘human excellence’ via facing the truth about our human condition, including our aggressive/violent urges and the potentially tragic uncertainty of life. Nietzsche would also exhort the patient to
strive for wisdom by accepting that, though life is without inherent meaning, it offers both joy and pain and any attempt to deny any one aspect amounts to a denial of life.

Regarding the unconscious again, relational analysts believe that the exploration of motives, wishes and fears outside of awareness are an integral part of the work. Hence unconscious motivations are explored via sharing ideas and speculations with the patient vs. offering interpretations about the patient’s drives. Remember that Nietzsche, believing ‘reason’ or conscious process to be the less dominant factor in our behavior, presses us to look at our unconscious urges in order to write a more comprehensive narrative.

On the question of whether ‘truth’ is discovered or created relational analysts believe that psychological truths are constructed. In short most relational analysts believe some variation of a constructionist view of truth, which is not to say that they don’t leave room for some basic or essential truths. Irwin Hoffman addresses this point in his book *Ritual and Spontaneity* (1998). We have seen that Nietzsche’s beliefs are similar except that he was more adamant about focusing on this physical life because he felt that the prevailing morality degraded our natural, physical humanity (Nietzsche, 1887).

In summary, for relational therapists and consistent with Nietzschean theory, truth is provisional, the unconscious is a dynamic to be addressed, there is no possibility of objectivity, knowing is perspectival, the patient can know the analyst in ways that the analyst may not know her/himself, whatever is discussed in any given session both expands and limits what can be created. I propose that psychoanalytic narratives fit the definition of Nietzsche’s ‘necessary fictions.’

**SUMMARY OF SIMILARITIES**

In summary, for relational therapists and consistent with Nietzschean theory, truth is provisional, the unconscious is a dynamic to be addressed, there is no possibility of objectivity, knowing is perspectival, the patient can know the analyst in ways that the analyst may not know her/himself, whatever is discussed in any given session both expands and limits what can be created. I
propose that psychoanalytic narratives fit the definition of Nietzsche’s ‘necessary fictions.’ (1886, Sections 11, 14, and 22).

Both Nietzsche and relational analysts subscribe to the following:

1 –Multiple selves vs. single selves. Stated differently, both envision contextual selves vs. Descartes’ isolated thinking self, to which Freud also subscribed.

2 – Constructed truth vs. discovered truth.

3 – Provisional truth vs. absolute or eternal truth.

4 – Perspectival knowing.

5 – Perspective is informed by needs both conscious and unconscious.

6 – Unconscious process informs a lot, if not most, of our behavior.

7 – Humans are socially embedded, including our sense of self.

8 – Self is a reified concept that we use because we need it, but it does not reflect the ongoing experience of what we refer to as the self.

9 – Any given social matrix both opens and restricts which aspects of our ‘self’ and consciousness can be available to us at any given time.

10- Nietzsche pointed out the illusion of free will, and relational analysts focus on how the social situation restricts which aspects of our freedom can be actualized.

11 – Trust in our feelings and instincts vs. placing reason and theory as top priority. For Nietzsche, feelings are an integral part of any belief system. Relational analysis brought the
feeling component back into psychoanalysis and Nietzsche brought instincts back into philosophy.

12 – Neither Nietzsche nor relational analysts tell patients what the patient is thinking or what they should do. Relational analysts do not usually render interpretations. Rather they speculate with the patient, puzzling out together what might be transpiring. Nietzsche wrote about his own truth, with the proviso that others have to find theirs. Indeed, one complaint about Nietzsche’s work is that he analyzes what he perceives as the problem with cultural values and the resultant lifestyle, but he refuses to prescribe what any individual ‘should’ do.

CLINICAL MATERIAL

In closing I offer some clinical material, emphasizing the themes/narratives/necessary fictions with which Ian came into analysis, and how they changed as we moved through our work.

In the initial phase of analysis, Ian lived under the illusion/narrative that he was unworthy because his wife was leaving him. He believed that he was unattractive because his four older brothers were, in his words, ‘gorgeous and extraordinarily competent’ in a variety of endeavors. Ian idolized them. Ian’s narrative/fiction about his parents was as follows: his father was a competent businessman, but pigheaded and uncaring with regard to Ian, and stupidly conservative as well as consistently passive aggressive with his mother. He described his mother as intrusive, infantilizing, hysterical and undermining. Finally, Ian did not experience himself as angry.

Nine to ten months into our work, Ian maintained his narrative about being unworthy and unattractive. Now, however, he was aware of some inkling of anger, just a small glow which got stirred up as he went through the process of his wife returning to her home country. Also during this period, Ian’s growing awareness of his social anxiety made him feel hopeless. In addition, guilt was beginning to show itself as a prominent component in his necessary illusion of himself. This emerged as Ian became dissatisfied with his job. The process of applying for other jobs stirred up feelings of guilt about leaving his old boss. His new narrative included the felt belief
that if he found a better job, someone would be hurt. It was a zero sum game and either he or the boss would lose.

Additionally Ian was always on the edge of anger with me – an emerging element of his narrative was that women only want men for the satisfaction for their own needs, including providing babies, marital status and being needed.

Perhaps eighteen months into our work, Ian’s dissatisfaction with his parents changed to anger; his idealization of his brothers grew; and his social anxiety fueled a watershed event allowing the realization of Ian’s problematic drinking. His necessary narratives were changing, including his illusion that he drank only socially.

Still later, Ian began dating women and his experiences evolved into the narrative that women were so dangerous he could not protect himself against them.

Six months after that, Ian dated a woman with whom he fell in love, but his narrative about women being dangerous was so entrenched that it informed his breaking off the relationship several times over the next two years. Also Ian became absolutely infuriated every time his lover mentioned a friend’s marriage or new baby. Additionally, on occasion Ian’s lover babysat for the children of her friends. At these times, Ian was so anxious he had to leave the house. He had no imagery, just blind terror.

At this point, Ian’s narrative about not being angry was completely dropped – he realized that, in fact, he was an extremely angry man.

Within the next few months, Ian’s anger and guilt crashed head on, when Ian was able to talk about a childhood event, creating in him the horrifying belief/fiction that he was guilty for his mother’s childhood molestation. Ian’s necessary illusion now included himself as hopelessly guilty. However, his fiction of being unattractive and unlovable was now written in very faint ink. He was still angry and mistrustful of women, but his narrative of his parents was softening.
Ian’s narrative was that his father was a jerk, Ian himself was guilty but he couldn’t figure out what for, women were not to be trusted. This latter was reinforced when, the day before a planned vacation, Ian presented in all black attire and a sullen attitude. I wondered if he had feelings about my being gone the next week. His broad brush painted me with no redeeming features – ‘just another woman who wants me to need her.’

Three and a half years into our work, Ian had changed his narrative about being unattractive and women not being trustworthy except for me on occasion. He had changed jobs and was becoming aware of himself as desirable and attractive. Ian was still guilt ridden, though his anxiety had diminished as had his alcohol consumption. He had developed some compassion for both parents and experienced increasing flashes of love for them.

For the next two years we worked on his sense of guilt. He became engaged to be married, found a new job, and developed friends with whom he could socialize without drinking.

After five years of work, Ian’s narrative included respect, deep compassion, genuine love and appreciation for his parents; his right to hold a high paying job that he loved; his ability to socialize without becoming inebriated; trust in women and no fear of hurting the baby when he and his partner cared for a friend’s child. His world view also included a more realistic image of his brothers and women in general. He no longer felt generalized guilt or any specific guilt for his mother’s childhood trauma. We terminated our work.

Eighteen months later, I received a panicky call from Ian. He needed to see me. I could hear the terror in his voice. His first baby would arrive in two months. At this point, Ian’s narrative fiction was that he would somehow harm his baby just because of who he was. He was riddled with the fiction that his inherent ‘badness’, would destroy his soon to be born child. Recall Ian’s anger when his now-wife mentioned babies, or his need to leave the apartment when she babysat.

After two months of twice weekly work, Ian left therapy, happily anticipating the birth. I next heard from Ian six months later, when he wanted to introduce me to his son. In another year, he called to share the birth of his second son.
The therapeutic themes described above were necessary, temporary ‘fictions’/’illusions’. I propose that they fit the definition for Nietzsche’s ‘necessary illusions or fictions’. If Ian had not been able to create some explanations, painful as some were, he would have been overwhelmed and immobilized by his feelings about himself and his world. His various and changing narratives were necessary for him to feel settled, to stabilize the whirling chaos within his mind, and the flux of his external world. Even terrifying narratives/illusions help us feel steady in a changing world. These narratives were temporary, contingent narratives. They were ‘fictions’ because we could not prove them. They were necessary, because without them, Ian had no framework for moving through his world.

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