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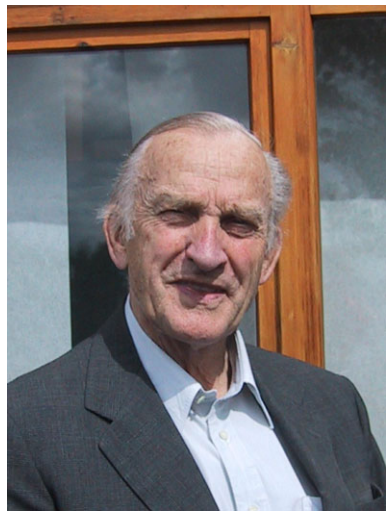
Obituary

Obituary for Helmut Thomä[1]



The German psychoanalyst Helmut Thomä was born on 6 May 1921 and died on 3 August 2013.

Above all, the significant thing about his life's work concerns what he accomplished in putting psychoanalysis on a scientific footing. His work spans more than 50 years, almost the whole of the second half of the last century down to our day.

In sketching Helmut Thomä's contribution to the development of psychoanalytical science in what follows, we want first to raise the question of how a German in Germany – a country which had virtually stamped out psychoanalysis as the embodiment of the invidious Jewish spirit – was even able to gain an internationally recognized position. To do so requires a glance at the beginning of his career as a doctor and scientist.

With a birth year of 1921, Helmut Thomä belonged to that generation of German men who were just the right age for military service at the beginning of the Second World War. Having been drafted as a future medical officer following his officially foreshortened years at school, he was commandeered to Berlin to study medicine and lived through the end of the war as a junior doctor in a Bavarian local reserve hospital.

From a modern point of view, Thomä's continued professional path was as difficult as college careers got during the post-war period: unpaid further education coupled with a full workload, first in internal medicine, then in 1949 in psychiatry in Freiburg, and finally in 1950 in a post at

[1]Translated by Tim Davies.

the University of Heidelberg. However unspectacular it all may sound, there is more to it than meets the eye; so when Helmut Thomä says he had no aspirations at all to a career and was simply just lucky along the way, there must have actually been more than a mere coincidental amount of serendipity in his life. As a young doctor he comes across patients who arouse his interest in psychotherapy and inspire him to think psychosomatically. He finds himself being tutored and mentored by senior consultants who encourage him to experiment with psychotherapeutic methods. And what's more, he succeeds in it. At the Bad Boll Protestant Academy outside Stuttgart he encounters a group of philosophically and theologically interested people who are particularly concerned with the question of German guilt, over which Thomä is himself agonizing.

Books by Viktor von Weizsäcker and Alexander Mitscherlich impress the young doctor. He performs a very short analysis on Felix Schottländer (Stuttgart) without knowing that he is dealing here with the only member of the International Psychoanalytical Association in West Germany – unwittingly, as it were, penetrating the circle of the acknowledged family tree and receiving an "atavistic tribal identity" – and with it an entrance ticket to the International Association too. In Heidelberg he enters not just any old clinic, but of all places the first university psychosomatic clinic in Germany, headed by no less than Alexander Mitscherlich and funded by American money under the patronage of Viktor von Weizsäcker, to which he was to belong until 1967, give or take some interruptions due to stays abroad. And finally, the happy coincidence of meeting his wife, a doctor with a shrewd intellect and many talents, who shares his professional interests, exercises him intellectually and is prepared to accompany him along his continued journey through life – and, incidentally, a Leipzig woman born and bred.

That only the good and the gifted have so much luck, as the Germans say, is one thing, but this is the last point at which to question what actually drove this person. By now, this someone had manned up to being German in a very personal way. Thomä himself said in an interview some years ago:

> … to this very day the thing for me is that I have the feeling – a very extreme one back then [after the war, ed.], of course – of being precluded from much that was essential – including possible knowledge. That is really the basic feeling of being precluded, and having to read … on a constant quest for spiritual fathers … And so, for that reason, … wherever I happened to be, I was in the library day and night ….

And he goes on to say:

> … The theme of guilt, the problem of being a German, … which intensified as I got more and more into psychoanalysis … and my view … that across the generations German psychoanalysts are unable to budge anything, because they are so

> hidebound in their creativity by what has been that they ... are unable to play any role ....

With every fibre of his being, every aptitude and every opportunity, Thomä seeks to connect with the intellectual-cultural tradition brutally severed during the Third Reich. When, at the start of the fifties, he ascertains that the German psychoanalytical scene is unable to offer him any real link, he seeks such interfaces in the more highly developed American and English psychoanalysis. When in 1955 he succeeds under the auspices of a Fulbright scholarship in getting to the US Yale Psychiatric Institute for a year, he becomes the representative there of a generation of German psychoanalysts who are confronting German guilt. Theodor Lidz and John Kafka, contacts made at that time, lay the foundation stone for a life-long exchange of ideas. As the first postdoctoral candidate under Mitscherlich with aspirations to qualify as a professor, he publishes a study in 1961 on anorexia nervosa, far and away transcending anything otherwise achieved by analytical psychosomatics at this point in time. The English version of this monograph (Thomä, 1967) becomes a standard work in the USA and for a long time remains the only thing coming out of Germany of which any note is taken in the USA.

In 1961 he is awarded the first *Venia Legendi* for Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychoanalysis, conferring upon him lifetime permission to lecture in the subject at university – something in which he took particular pride.

London is the next stop along the route in his quest for continuity, a mission made no less easy by his German origins. On entering Mansfield House – the home of the London Psychoanalytical Institute – for the first time in 1961, he is greeted by Eva Rosenfeld, a German-Jewish psychoanalyst forced to emigrate by the Nazis, with the words: "How ever is it possible to look so German?".

In 1962 an American scholarship enables him to make a one-year research stay in London, together with his wife and children. High-frequency analysis under Michael Balint and participation in the scientific and scholarly life of the London Psychoanalytical Institute, and of the Tavistock and Hampstead Clinics complement his education. Balint alters his view of the psychoanalytical process, which for Thomä is constituted by the actions of the individuals involved. This turn towards analytical two-person psychology finally spells a link with a line of tradition that does not conserve the Freudian legacy but regards it as a scientific challenge.

Henceforth he can exercise the attendant responsibility associated with it to develop scientific psychoanalysis in Germany offensively. Having returned to Heidelberg he begins with Antoon Houben to set about examining *Deutungsaktionen* [interpretative actions] for the validation of psychoanalytical theories. The perspective now adopted will determine Thomä's further scientific life down to the present day. The year 1967 sees the offer of a chair for psychotherapy at the University of Ulm, with an opportunity to systematize and expand this approach to research. In tandem with Adolf-Ernst Meyer, the Hamburg-based head of psychosomatics, he introduces the tape recorder as an indispensable tool in psychoanalytical process research. As president of the

German Psychoanalytical Association (DPV), he gives a report on his initial experiences at the 1968 workshop in Ulm – a service that cannot be valued highly enough. A breach of taboo for the psychoanalytical orthodoxy, for him documenting the process extraclinically forms the basis of his long-standing clinical and empirical research.

After the initial and still tentative approaches with members of the first Ulm team, he takes on a young scientist 21 years his junior – Horst Kächele – who becomes his junior partner. Since the early seventies Thomä and Kächele have formed a scientist pair whose productivity is without precedent. Many projects are inextricably linked with both names, and whenever activities of the Ulm Research Group are referred to below, Horst Kächele must be borne in mind.

The first international conference on the topic of "Psychoanalytic Process Research Strategies" in the mid-eighties of the last century is documentary proof that the Ulm Working Group on psychoanalytical process research is cooperating with the North American researcher groups on an equal footing (Dahl *et al*., 1988). By way of example we would mention the two projects with the greatest international resonance.

First, the Ulm Text Bank, an extensive collection of verbatim records of psychoanalytical and psychotherapeutic treatments in digitalized form, which in principle is accessible to all researchers – worldwide, the first example of a 'databank', as Luborsky and Spence (1971) have claimed for it.

And secondly, the standard textbook on psychoanalytical theory, now extending to three volumes, published by Thomä and Kächele since the mid-eighties, *Forschung und Praxis* [Research and Practice], since translated into many languages, which the authors regard as the result of penetrating clinical-psychoanalytical work using modern research methods (Thomä and Kächele 1985, 1988, 1994a,b, 2006).

Thomä was relentless when it came to questioning hand-me-down rituals and orthodox positions. He countered the hagiography of Freud (a convention not just in Germany) with empirical research and stalwart analysis based on scientific theory. Mention should also be made of examples of that which would have an enduring influence on psychoanalytical practice especially.

His scientific-theoretical position can be outlined as follows:

> Assuming all analysts think causally and seek explanations in order to be able to understand their patients, the dividing line is not between hermeneutical-humanistic and empirical-scientific psychoanalysis, but in the attitude towards causality: In practice only probabilities, inductive, statistical explanations are possible, but no deductive-nomological conclusions. Recognizing that (unconscious) motives function as causes, then enlightenment … (Hegelian) … "causality of destiny" is rightfully a core issue of psychoanalysis.
>
> (Thomä and Kächele, 2006)

And he appeals to his peers to draw practical and scientific consequences from the probabilistic nature of all psychodynamic observations beyond purely phenomenological descriptions.

A second example which we should like to touch upon notions of the way psychoanalysis works with a quote from Thomä: "The mutative force lies not in the interpretation of transference as repetition but in the corrective experience with a 'new object' (Loewald), which becomes effective as subject. Psychoanalysis is on the way to an intersubjective, a relational theory and practice ...." (Altmeyer and Thomä, 2006).

Thomä's provocative observations, with their specialized political bent, will serve as a final example, homing in on a particular psychoanalytical practice – thus, for example, through the so-called psychoanalytical identity, which he considers decidedly inhibiting to the scientific further development of psychoanalysis. He poses the question, and we quote:

> ... why educated and intelligent colleagues of both sexes allow themselves to be guided by theories that cannot stand the test of time therapeutically. My answer is: They are identities conveyed by group dynamics, which do not allow of better science. The future belongs to self-critical psychoanalysts who no longer whinge about their "impossible profession" and console themselves by having a special identity bestowed upon them by their respective group without any comprehensible, criteria-based reasoning.
>
> (Thomä, 2004)

And the tendency of German psychoanalysis towards orthodoxy he ascribes to a dilemma which, and we quote:

> ... – when thought through at the level of the unconscious – is tantamount to seeking to identify with the thinking of a man whose fellow sufferers were killed by Germans .... German psychoanalysts cannot find their own vocational identity in the conventional way by criticizing the theory and practice of the founder-cum-father, as this may touch on the unconscious identification with those who persecute Freud ... and the Jewish people. This results in fluctuating between slavish orthodoxy and reaction formations against it on the other hand.
>
> (Thomä, 1986)

He is suffering from a common attitude of socio- and career-political abstinence:

> Despite the also internationally acclaimed reconstruction of psychoanalysis since 1945, German analysts do not have an easy time of it with their professional identity compared with their colleagues from other countries. A puerile attitude with a tendency towards orthodoxy still prevails towards the representatives of the International Psychoanalytical Association, even if they have no reservations personally.
>
> (Thomä, 1986)

With his life and work, Thomä has given the German Psychoanalytical Association an example of the way such conflicts can be productively resolved. He himself viewed his most essential contribution during his term as president in 1968–1972 as the opening-up of the teaching-analyst function to younger colleagues, thereby fuelling a rapid spurt of growth in the seventies and eighties. He would ensure heated discussions in the decades to follow, when he was constantly slaving away passionately, resolute in his cause. His important work *Idee und Wirklichkeit der Lehranalyse* (1991) (Idea and Reality of Training Analysis, 1993) was one such plea for fundamental reforms, thereby exposing himself to fierce criticism.

Helmut Thomä published 40 exemplary clinical studies and pivotal theoretical works in the central mouthpiece of German psychoanalysis, the journal *Psyche,* in addition to penning a great many contributions to books and publishing additional books with his friend and colleague Neil Cheshire, including an omnibus volume on "Self, Symptoms and Psychotherapy" (1987), as well as important works on the intersubjective turning-point in psychoanalysis in German with Martin Altmeyer (2006).

He received numerous honours for his scientific oeuvre: the City of Ulm Science Prize in 1973, the Sigmund Freud Prize awarded by the City of Vienna in 2002 and the highly valued American Mary S. Sigourney Prize for his services to psychoanalysis in 2004.

With the death of Helmut Thomä, German and international psychoanalysis has lost an eminent representative of a critical-empirical perspective. It is not by chance alone that his last, unpublished work from the year 2011 provides a commentary on the first century of the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) and closes with a hopeful, if also utopian, vision.

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