THE TYRANNY OF OBJECT RELATIONS

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Object relations has been the success story of postwar psychotherapy, not least in the way in which it has influenced therapies outside the psychoanalytic ambit. For example, the Jungian movement has taken on board the 'developmental' ideas of Klein, Winnicott and Fairbairn, resulting in considerable tension and splits amongst various Jungian groups.

Many Jungian analysts such as Michael Fordham felt that the 'symbolic' approach of so-called 'classical' Jungian thought could not deal with the regressive transference and counter-transference aspects of psychotherapy, and they therefore attempted to marry the 'symbolic' and the 'developmental'. In a sense, therefore, the old split between Freud and Jung was being partly healed.

Humanistic Psychology has also been heavily influenced by object relations - in fact, humanistic training courses often give it central place in their study of non-humanistic approaches. It is possible that there are political considerations here: with the advent of a centralized body of therapeutic organizations (UKCP), humanistic psychology is very sensitive to possible criticisms of being too theoretically 'soft', so that a hefty dose of object relations seems to provide plenty of theoretical rigour.

My title speaks of the 'tyranny' of object relations. What do I mean? Simply that too much emphasis on this aspect of human development - the ability to form relations with others - neglects what Jung called the path of 'individuation'. To put it another way, object relations emphasizes the extraverted side of the human life but underrates the introverted side, that part of human beings which needs to be alone, which needs sometimes not to relate to others, and needs a deep relationship with itself. In this context, it worries me when I hear the word 'schizoid' - used extensively by object relations theorists such as Fairbairn and Guntrip to denote those people who are 'unable to become involved in any real relationship' (Guntrip) - being bandied about in a rather carefree manner, to include not just people who are cut off from human contact, but also people who are introverted. There is a difference!

Let me give some examples from inside and outside therapy. Thomas Merton, the famous Cistercian monk and writer, was so deeply involved in his own meditation that he found the collective atmosphere of the monastery oppressive and eventually sought and obtained permission to live as a hermit in isolation. Was he schizoid? In fact, Merton shows in his books how passionately involved he was in life, and just before he died, he embarked on a trip to the East, and met many of the great spiritual leaders of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism and so on.

He was also one of the outspoken critics of the Vietnam war: his own introversion in fact gave him a deeper connection with the world, indeed with the universe.

Here is an example from my own work. Joe was doing individual therapy with me, and was also part of a weekly therapy group. He began to feel an overwhelming urge to leave his job, to move out of London, and in the space of twoor threeyears his life changed radically, from one of gregarious extraversion, to one of deep solitude. He was a talented musician, and at this time he began to develop highly original ideas about composition, the use of technology, and so on.

The reactions of his therapy group were mostly negative. He was told he was 'cutting himself off', he was being 'selfish', he was 'running away'. Eventually he left the group, which prompted similar negative feedback.

My own reaction was ambivalent. Although at times I could see this cut-off quality in Joe, I also felt he was responding to a very deep need inside himself - the need to be with himself if you like. He spoke to me of 'being with God', 'being inside his own silence', 'being with nature', and so on. In other words, although frequently neither of us really understood what was going on with him, there seemed to be a fundamental gut-level rightness to the change in his life, although it took him away from people. He seemed to be breaking the eleventh commandment: thou shalt relate, and be seen to relate.

Of course humanistic psychology has always included spirituality within its remit, and there are therapies such as psychosynthesis which deal very definitely with the inner world. And the notions of self-realisation and self-actualisation have been very important to humanistic psychotherapists.

I should also point out that the concept of 'object relations' does not exclude the inner world, since it deals with the notion of 'internal objects', for which we often see and seek correspondences in the external world. The concept of 'internal objects' is extremely complex - for example, Klein claims that they are innate, Fairbairn that they are compensatory - but interestingly seems to offer a way of connecting psychoanalytic theory with Jungian ideas. The external and internal objects are also brought together in Kohut's notion of the selfobject.

None the less, I have a strong sense that particularly on its training courses humanistic psychology is focusing largely on the 'extrovert' significance of object relations theory. The danger here is that we will train therapists who are good at working with extraverted people, but are not so good with introverted people, who after all, present quite difficult problems in psychotherapy. For example, I have found that many introverted people prefer to lie on a couch than sit face to face; they may need to explore the possibility of 'being in their own world' without guilt; and in other ways, need to explore separateness as much as contact with the therapist.

One particular problem with such people is that they have often developed a 'false self', which can play the extraverted game very well, and which can go along with psychotherapy in a compliant state, and can appear to make progress. Yet something is missing; the relationship with them

feels rather hollow and unreal; their own inner space remains hidden from the therapist, as indeed it is from themselves. Such people need space and time in order to be with themselves, before they can be with another. Working with the transference with such people can therefore be premature and harmful. In fact, therapy with such people raises many complex and subtle questions, both of therapeutic technique and attitude.

Of course, we live in an extraverted society, which demands extraverted solutions, and extraverted therapies. Object relations fits in quite well with this world, whereas Jung's ideas about individuation seem more arcane, and perhaps threatening. But for some people, such as my client Joe, I feel they are literally matters of life and death. The process he went through was an agonising one for him, for it seemed to go against his family upbringing, as well as general social values. It was vital for him that he found a psychotherapy which could accept and contain his development, and which could also provide a map of the human psyche within which his new life made sense. His therapy group was disappointed and condemning when he began to undergo this massive change, and this seemed to bear out his fears that the new turn in his life was unacceptable.

My experience of Joe was that he could relate to me openly and intimately at times; but there were other times when he felt occluded and masked – or to put it more judgmentally, he cut off from me. But I grew to recognize that these were often his times of 'incubation', when relating to me was not what he needed, and indeed could be harmful and premature for him. Any attempt to compel him to relate, or to suggest that somehow something was 'wrong' because he was not relating, only confused him, and reinforced his strong guilt feelings. In fact, it took a long time before I got used to these rhythms in him, and recognized those times when he was 'not with me', and grew to accept that this was a necessary part of his growth. No doubt at times I unconsciously took on the role of a tyrannical mother, reluctant to let my charge escape my grip, and be separate from me and live his own life.

I am simply making a plea: human development cannot simply be summed up as the ability to relate to others. People also need themselves; and in my experience people often have a deep loneliness for themselves and feel quite starved of that contact. One of the problems with intensive transference work in the therapeutic relationship is that the client's own self-relationship can be neglected, and that relating to others becomes an obligation. This also reminds me of encounter groups, which I participated in extensively in the 70s - I remember how difficult it was to avoid the compulsion to relate, and how difficult it was to find one's own space amongst the noise and drama. I also remember how introverted people were bullied in such groups and hectored into 'making a contribution'.

I used to imagine that these differences could be partly explained in terms of generational change. Young people are more extraverted, while middle aged people begin to look inwards. This seems to fit in quite well with Jung's bias towards older people, and with notions of the mid-life crisis, the movement towards death in the second half of life, and so on. But I

also have met quite a number of people in their 20s and 30s who felt strangled by the constant drive to extraversion, at work, in their social life, and so on, and who yearned for deeper contact with their inner world.

Of course religion used to serve as the great container for such feelings and needs, and for some people, still does. Yet many others feel disappointed with the conventional churches, as they seem partly to have adopted the same kind of extraverted norms as the rest of society. For example, the 'happy-clappy' movements in the Christian churches are definitely not contemplative.

A similar criticism was made of psychoanalysis in the 60s and 70s, particularly in America - that it had settled for a kind of adaptationist psychology, helping people to fit in better with the norms of American society. humanistic psychology arose in part as a reaction and protest against such consumerist psychology, and celebrated the self-expression of the individual.

But we live in different times. Gone are those heady days. Today we are enmeshed in a vocabulary of 'professionalisation', 'accreditation', NVQs, and so on. I hope that humanistic psychology is not losing its radical cutting edge, as a result of these movements towards social control and conformism. One danger is that extraversion - or some version of it - will be accepted as some kind of de facto norm towards which therapy works.

This discussion is particularly applicable to creative people, who are notoriously bad at relating to others. And creative people are not easy to work with in therapy! Their need to connect with their own creative instinct can be so powerful, so apparently 'narcissistic', that conventional relationship-oriented psychotherapy may fail them. Instead, we may have to deal with very deep images, primitive states of creative 'pregnancy', gestation and birth, connections with the Self, and so on, that are not easily dealt with in terms of transference or object relations. In fact, as I have indicated, this is not strictly true, since object relations theory has a very insightful explanation of such phenomena in terms of our relations with inner objects, but that is a very different kind of object relations from the one that is usually being discussed.

I can now see that Joe would sometimes go through the motions of relating to me, when in fact his mind, and his soul, were elsewhere, immersed in some difficult and dark creative process. I also came to realize that Joe *could not talk about* this process when he was in the middle of it. In fact, it was downright dangerous for him to do so - the intrusion of the 'social' world into the more primitive subterranean realm of creation could produce feelings of despair and violence in him. Yet he also felt desperate when his creative side was neglected or unrecognized, either by himself or me.

But how many creative people are there? This is a question I shall leave hanging. One of my fears is that they go unrecognized, not only within the utilitarian bounds of bourgeois society, but also within the parameters of some therapies. After all, it is the task of psychotherapy not only to help people adapt to their circumstances, but also to help those who want to fight against them, and carve out their own path through life, against the odds and often against what others consider to be correct.

Another term that I find relevant here is 'transcendence'. I am arguing that human growth not only involves relations with others, but also a kind of transcendent experience of life, a shaping of life, an opening up and surrender to it. Should therapy ignore these areas of human experience? If it does, it is only half-relevant to human needs and aspirations.

Some may argue that I am fighting a straw man, that humanistic psychology has always dealt with spiritual issues, the drive towards transcendence, and so on. This is true: but we live in dangerous times, when a new utilitarian spirit has gripped British society, partly through the impetus of the Thatcherite and Blairite agendas. Value for money, working towards goals, social inclusion - these ideas are scattered around like confetti today. It strikes me that psychotherapy has always existed in a state of tension between such values - which cannot be simply decried, since they are necessary in any healthy society - and other, less immediate values, to do with human value, spiritual growth, being not doing.

One might argue that the split between Freud and Jung was in part a split between these opposing tendencies. Freud hated mysticism, whereas Jung had it at the core of his psychology. To put more flesh on that: Freud saw the unconscious as primitive, anarchic and dangerous; Jung saw it as supremely intelligent (and also potentially dangerous). One can also turn this round: Freud had a brilliant ability to get to the concrete instinctual (and infantile) roots of someone's predicament; Jung was less interested in this.

But this split has been echoed in the division between a socially based therapy, focusing on the client's relationships, and a 'symbolic' or inner world therapy, focusing on the dialogue with the unconscious. One can of course do both! Indeed, arguably a psychotherapy that does not explore both will fail its clients.

The interesting point about this is that humanistic psychology and the 'integrative' movement are in a good position to bring together these different strands in psychotherapy, not least because they do not have the same historical baggage. I mean that it is difficult for a Freudian training course to integrate Jungian ideas into its syllabus, although the reverse is probably not as difficult – but the humanistic world is in an ideal position of being able to accept (or reject) ideas from all quarters.

Further Reading

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