Thinking Aloud: Belief and Counselling.

Benedikte Uttenthal

A couple of years ago, the professional organisation for counselling and psychotherapy in Scotland, COSCA, cancelled its annual two-day conference. I was disappointed on two counts, firstly, that too few of my colleagues had signed up for it to run when I had been immediately engaged by the topic and secondly that the topic, belief, is of profound importance and overdue for examination. It was with great interest then that I read Chris Scott's article in *Self and Society* 'The Doctrines of Psychology' (Vol. 33, No. 5) in the spring of last year. I offer the following thoughts as a continuation of the conversation.

There is more than enough happening in the world outside our profession even as I write to prompt thinking and discussion about belief – and there always have been wars, murders and other atrocities committed under the justification of belief. But there is, alas, plenty that we are doing within our field that could do with examination. Yes, I am accusing ourselves of committing minor atrocities (though with long term damaging effects) under a justification of belief, and what is worse, of doing so, often without being aware of it.

Let me plunge in and ask you to consider a very common way in which we conduct counselling or psychotherapeutic training. If we go to an institute of higher education to study, say, philosophy or history, we spend several years studying the whole field and latest findings and commentaries. Only at post qualification stage or in the final year of study do we specialise in the form of a narrowly focused thesis – and we would be in trouble if the thesis did not make informed reference to the wider field. How is it we can permit ourselves in most cases of

counselling/psychotherapeutic trainings to behave so differently by generally concentrating on single approaches or on uneasy combinations of just two or three? If we step back and consider what trainings are currently available in Scotland, I, for one, have a sense of something analogous to religious trainings. We have denominations within counselling. And with the denominations we have some tragically sectarian behaviour – we, who are meant to be emotionally literate.

This phenomenon is not discussed. Furthermore, masked intolerance of differing approaches is often the attitude of the course providers. We are up against something powerful and something that must be examined: the nature and purpose of belief. Its destructive dimension lends urgency to the need to understand it. Let me turn to some greater authorities.

In Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) he argues that science and rationalism are part of a great movement away from seeing man as the centre of the universe – a movement away from an emotionally early narcissistic phase. We are developing and growing up as a species. He saw religion as a way of controlling the anxiety generated by our helplessness in the face of external dangers, internal impulses and death. Religious rituals are akin to obsessional rituals, which protect against the emergence of anxiety-provoking fantasies, desires and impulses. He offered the insight that the origin of religion was in the inevitable desire and movement of sons to displace their fathers, but then, as an expiation of the sin of patricide, they would be ritually sacrificed and eaten – a theme found in many religious myths including Christianity. Presumably, by the relieving mechanism of projection, ordinary mortals' desire to get on with their lives and replace their parents would be expiated by the believed drama of the god(s) and through a palatable participation in ritual. (For a startling comparison with the Judaeo-Christian myths, I refer to the myths of the founding of the Olympian dynastic gods, especially that of Cronus and Zeus.)

If we look to other writers from the past, we see that already David Hume saw belief as an emotional condition, i.e. not part of rationality, while Descartes saw belief as a matter of will. Later on I will share with you some wonderful aperçus of Nietzsche but with the Descartian insight we are already moving into the realm of power and control – and not a realm where reason has much sway. The underlying factor is again the powerful feeling of anxiety that we are always impelled to dissipate. Belief's lack of connection to our reasoning can be seen in its wordless state: a dog, for example, can believe that there is food in his bowl. Dictionary definitions offer us: ' an opinion or conviction'; 'confidence in a truth or existence of something *not immediately susceptible to rigorous proof*'; 'confidence, faith, trust' – the latter words conjuring up something essential in human relationships. This brings us to another aspect of

belief. The new developments in neuroscience lead me to speculate that belief is largely a phenomenon of the limbic brain, a deeply ingrained activity or feeling, as Hume supposed, and one that stems from our earliest experiences and needs.

Maybe we are all familiar with the look of adoration that young babies can give their mothers. It sometimes occurs in the therapy room. A child needs to believe in its parents, both for safety and for identification. Without this formative belief we are lost souls.

Erik Erikson wrote beautifully about this whole process in *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968) 'The Life Cycle: Epigenesis of Identity' (p.136) and included insights into its negative aspects: an understanding of the destructive behaviour of fanaticism. The extract below gives an outline of the possible creative development of belief in the maturational process as well as an indication of how an arresting of that process can lead to the many terrible tragedies that we are surrounded with every day:

> The counter part of intimacy is *distantiation*: the readiness to repudiate, isolate, and, if necessary, destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one's own. Thus, the lasting consequence of the need for distantiation is the readiness to fortify one's territory of intimacy and solidarity and to view all outsiders with a fanatic 'overvaluation of small differences' between the familiar and the foreign. Such prejudices can be utilised and exploited in politics and in war and secure the loyal self-sacrifice and the readiness to kill from the strongest and the best. A remnant of adolescent danger is to be found where intimate, competitive, and combative relations are experienced with and against the self same people. But as areas of adult responsibility are gradually delineated, as the competitive encounter, the erotic bond, and merciless enmity are differentiated from each other, they eventually become subject to that *ethical sense* which is the mark of the adult and which takes over from the ideological conviction of adolescence and the moralism of childhood.

Belief begins to be recognisable as developmentally necessary, a foundation of identity and the ability to relate in a loving way - and firm beliefs as something appropriate to childhood. What happens to it in adulthood? We commonly seek refuge in religion because of external (societal) stressors and because of internal stressors (incestuous desires, patricidal urges - being only two, and the most Freudian) and the burden of guilt that they bring. We seek solace in religion for our existential terrors – illness, suffering, competitiveness and death. And for religion we can substitute any belief that serves these purposes for us as individuals. We seek solace and purpose in science, which as we shall see has always been riddled with beliefs: we fight internecine wars in science or what ever subject we heavily identify with; we seek solace in

Benedikte Uttenthal

psychotherapeutic belief systems and here too we fight internecine wars.

This wordless state is more than being illogical or irrational. It is a feeling, a need and perhaps even, intrinsic to our nervous system and developmentally necessary. But we are endangered when we are unable to be flexible and move away from this support when we should be functioning more independently emotionally and when it is no longer used appropriately as a support but as a defence – as a means of repelling the other, the new and the different. An ideology can be seen as a substitute family or parent figure who provides safety, meaning, purpose and identity for the believer.

Here is a chilling quotation that illustrates this point from the wonderful Hungarian author, Sandor Marai, who is known in Britain for his translated novel *Embers* which was recently made into a film. This comes from his *Memoirs of Hungary 1944-1948* (pub. 1996). He is describing (p.26) an incident at a family party in Budapest, March 1944:

> When I stated that we must accept responsibility for the consequences and break with the Germans, most of the guests agreed, though rather diffidently – but not the relative who had befriended the Nazis. He now flared up. Tipsy, he pounded the table and repeated the preachments of ' holding out' and ' loyalty to the alliance' appearing in editorials. When I took issue with him, he gave a surprising reply 'I am a National Socialist,' he shouted, 'You' he pointed to me – ' can't understand this because you are talented. But I am not, and that is why I need National Socialism.'...'Now it's about us, the untalented,' he said, with strange self-confession, like the hero of Russian novel. 'Our time has come!'

More has been written about belief in relation to politics and war, and even in relation to science than in relation to counselling beliefs and divisions within our professional field. It might be revealing to look at a few examples from those areas as analogous to our own position. One of the clearest and most sympathetic exponents is Karl Popper. Here are some of his ideas from the very approachable *All Life is Problem Solving* (1999).

Knowledge, he says, consists of conjectures or hypotheses that should be subject to constant revision. This is the best we

have. Science is a quest for truth, but not certain truth. But some people want certain knowledge – they lack the courage to live without assurances, without certainty, without authority, without a leader. 'Perhaps one could say that such people are still trapped in childhood.' The history of science is full of examples of scientists fighting not to recognise new discoveries. Our fear and longing for certainty and direction are the epistemological, biological and linguistic roots to our dangerous susceptibility to dogmas and ideologies. One of its roots is cowardice. We need to be brave not to believe. There is a failure of modesty in intellectuals (and politicians and most proponents of counselling theory!) in their certainty, the certainty that causes factions, conflicts and wars. It is also a fundamental error in relation to what we know about 'truth', i.e. its non-absolute nature. The need for knowledge, belief and mutual suggestion, he says, is 'hidden in our evolutionary biology'. We are, it seems, all too often unable to hold the uncertainty of the dialogue between our emotional needs and our rational understanding.

The role of belief in political argument is clearly exposed by Michael Oakshott in his revelatory political essays, *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (1991). The Marxist argument, he says, or more or less any political argument, or political speech in particular, rests on a premise *which is a belief,* not a truth, then on a proposed response with *guessed at* consequences. Yet it is presented as if it were a truth. It is of course a closed system, which requires belief and loyalty to enact. (Remember the speeches justifying the invasion of Iraq as a clear recent example where the reason, weapons of mass destruction, was no more than a belief.) Those who believe in these closed systems need the certainty and enjoy the control. The spirit of enquiry is lost; individual integrity is lost, and more sinisterly, if individual searches and opinions are not valued and even feared, the very physical integrity of the individual is lost. The group of believers do not care if the non-believer or apostate suffers. Individual feelings cease to count; the group activity and survival of the group dominates. As well as an overview of almost any government, this could also be an overview of the behaviour of Freud and his circle in relation to proponents of new psychological theories, and of some of us in relation to our colleagues or to the theories that we choose not to teach.

In considering belief, I am struck by how we are looking at a fundamental aspect of our existence. We move constantly between our need to be separate individuals, with a sense of the significance of our separate mental and emotional and sensory experiences and between our need to belong to a group in which to learn, share and express ourselves. There is always a potential of being stuck at one end of that spectrum. The need to hang on to a belief in adulthood can be seen as an expression of an incomplete ability to be integral individuals. Some of us need too much the

safety of a group and the childlike position of giving too much responsibility and directive powers to a leader, dead or alive. It seems to me that adult mental health is very much about the ability to move with graceful appropriateness between these two positions of individuality and group belonging – and survive or even thrive in the group without a fixed leadership.

Nietzsche defines and describes belief's characteristics in his brilliant aphorisms (*Human, All Too Human,* pub. Penguin Classics 1994). I offer them as a summary of the above reportage and as a warning about believing in anything too much – including in what I have written.

> *1. Belief is a strength, a power, not a truth.*
>
> *2. Logical arguments always rest on beliefs.* (This is quite a wake-up call.)
>
> *3. Individual beliefs rest on a feeling of pleasure or pain in relation to the feeling subject.(*That could be translated as: we believe in something because we like it. And I would go further, we believe in something because of our lust for power and control.)
>
> *4. Belief thrives on self-deception (*i.e. on loss of individual integrity*.) It is enough for others to believe for a man to believe it to be true.*
>
> *5. Beliefs have blackmailing quality in that others have died for them in the past.*
>
> *6. We inherit beliefs. They can be given, like e.g. nationality.*

And this wonderful image*:*

> *7. The overthrow of beliefs is not immediately followed by the overthrow of institutions; rather, the new beliefs live for a long time in the now desolate and eerie house of their predecessors, which they themselves preserve, because of the housing shortage.* (That makes me think of counselling trainings and of how they relate to their origins!)

And lastly:

> 8. *A man of convictions is not a man of scientific thinking; he stands before us as a child, however grown up he might be otherwise.*

(This echoes Carl Popper's view of the child-like state of the firm believer.)

I hope the relevance and analogies to counselling are clear. With what despair, and then, I hope, protest, must we greet statements such as ' all that is necessary and sufficient' in relation to a counselling theory or practise? With what despair do we greet, for one example, Freud's treatment of his innovative colleagues, whether Jung, Adler or Ferenczi? With what despair and protest do we greet the separate, competing institutions and counselling diplomas and the lack of debate on integration? How many integrative diplomas are there in Scotland? When will we be mature enough to integrate what is best from all our theory and experience in the service of our clients, rather that using our profession to serve our

own anxieties? As counsellors we need to respect beliefs as a necessary defense, but as with all defenses, the purpose of therapy is to bring them into awareness, then to increase flexibility with regard to their use, and in some cases, to support their abandonment. One would think this is stating the obvious, but this obvious can be readily lost in the facile political correctness of 'respecting beliefs' or in the anxiety provoked by ideological bullies. Ideally, should we not visit beliefs as bees do flowers, moving from hypothesis to hypothesis, examining them and matching them to wider experiences, incorporating the best of the new and discarding the worst of the old? In such a process we really are valuing the individual, both the founder of the hypothesis and the digester of it. This seems to me to be the essential foundation of democracy and of the conditions necessary for the dethroning of tyrants, whether alive, dead or mythical.

Benedikte Uttenthal is a psychotherapist, trainer and supervisor who lives and works mainly in Scotland but has homes in Hungary and Spain. Other journeys of the mind and spirit include tending a vineyard and trying to draw and sculpt.