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An analysis of the use of the therapist's 'vulnerable self' and the significance of the cross-fertilization of humanistic and Jungian theory in the development of the relational approach

Helena Hargaden*

Relational Psychotherapist and Supervisor, West Sussex, UK

In this article the author examines some of the similarities and differences between Martin Buber and Carl Jung. Both men suffered abandonment by their mothers at an early age. Buber's mother left the family home; Jung's mother became mentally unstable. The author suggests that these early developmental experiences in both of the analysts' lives influenced their theoretical and philosophical development. She introduces a case study as a method to examine both similarities and differences between Buber and Jung's approaches. The major distinction between the humanistic and Jungian approaches to therapy, she argues, is an understanding and use of the unconscious in the therapy relationship. She suggests that the relational approach in psychotherapy has benefited from a cross-fertilization of theoretical approaches, and in particular sees a fusion of Buber and Jung as offering the therapist ways of reflecting that increase the capacity for effective therapy.

Keywords: Buber; Jung; autobiographical; abandonment; unconscious; relational; cross-fertilization

Introduction: playing with the dialectic of difference between modalities

In this article I begin with a vignette in which a therapist receives a letter from her former client. I briefly outline autobiographical details of Martin Buber and Carl Jung, and I describe aspects of their philosophical and theoretical perspectives, where they have similarities and where they differ. I then offer an analysis of the vignette from a humanistic and Jungian perspective. In summary, I make some observations about theoretical cross-fertilization in the development of the relational approach.

'A soul is never sick alone' (Buber, 1999)

A therapist whom I shall call Sophie told me that about 17 years ago she began work with a young black boy aged 15. At the time she was a qualified counsellor and had just begun her training in transactional analysis psychotherapy. Her client lived in a very white area of the UK, and when she first began working with him he was depressed, and used bleach in an attempt to make himself white. The therapist is of mixed nationality, has deeply rooted ancestral influences from both Judaism and Islamic faiths, and although not religious herself has a spiritual quality that she

Email: helenahargaden27@hotmail.com

conveys in her way of communicating. She had suffered extreme trauma, fleeing a violently brutal system, and has spent most of her life in psychoanalysis, Jungian and humanistic analysis working through the effects of this disturbance.

She worked with the boy for two years. Some 15 years after the therapy ended she received a letter out of the blue from this boy, now a man, telling her that he thought about her and their work together every day of his life, and that he wanted to let her know how significant she had been for him. He was now living happily and wanted to let her know that he had become a General Practitioner. Why was this therapy successful? It is my belief it was because of Sophie's deep emotional integrity, exemplified by her willingness to examine her wounds. This meant that she was able to meet her client from the depths of her own sense of vulnerability. How to contextualize this therapy in humanistic and Jungian terms? I briefly describe below Buber and Jung's theories, and then return to the vignette to show how we can understand some of the therapeutic work from the perspective of a cross-fertilization of theoretical perspectives.

Martin Buber

Martin Buber was born in Vienna in 1878, and was sent to live in Poland with paternal grandparents in 1882. He studied literature, philosophy and psychology in Vienna, Berlin and Zurich.

Most theories are based on autobiography (Seeman, 2002). The central piece of Martin Buber's philosophical belief that healing comes through 'I–thou' contact is no exception to this. In an autobiographical fragment he describes the devastating effects of feeling abandoned by his mother when very small, and then being sent to Poland to stay with his grandmother (Schilpp, Friedman, & Buber, 1967, as cited in Orange, 2010). One day, at the age of four, when standing on the balcony with a friend who was a few years older than him, his friend tells him that his mother is never coming back. This meeting is the spur to Buber to begin the lifelong journey in which he examines the wounded source of his loss. His search to bring meaning to his devastating abandonment motivated him to develop his philosophical theories.

I and thou

Buber made a distinction between 'I–thou' and 'I–it' relations. According to Buber, in the 'I–thou' relationship we stand in our own experience of self, and meet the other person as they are in themselves. From such an encounter the other will speak to us in a direct way which alters something in us. In the 'I–it' relationship, the therapist will come from a position of superiority, treating the client or patient more like an object. Buber did acknowledge that there was an inevitability that the 'I–it' would invariably be part of relatedness. The main point Buber makes, though, is that relationship is primary, and that the longing for relationship can shape our lives in compelling ways, just as his was. After the encounter with his friend on the balcony, he later came to develop the idea of 'mis-meeting', something he ascribed to his relationship with his mother – the type of experience that he understood as a traumatic one, leaving him with longing and a sense of unrequitedness.

The 'I–thou' meeting is often misunderstood as a soft, empathic connection, whereas Buber thought just the opposite. For him, to stand in one's own shoes meant that you were necessarily going to be surprised by whatever the other person

said or did, just as he had been by his friend on the balcony. He saw it as a position of emotional and moral integrity, and he influenced Carl Rogers to include the idea of congruence as one of the core conditions necessary for change in person-centred psychotherapy.

Carl Jung

Carl Jung was born in 1875 in Switzerland. The main autobiographical aspect of his childhood is not entirely dissimilar to Buber's, in that he too suffered abandonment by his mother, only in his case it was even more confusing since his mother was there physically, but not mentally. The effects on Jung of this cumulative catastrophic experience of abandonment are reflected in his lifelong journey to delve into the complexity of the psyche. He explored many metaphorical ways to think about the psyche, moving into metaphysical realms of exploration and discovery. His use of symbolic language, rich with meaning, opens up the world of the unconscious, making it possible to explore the mysterious, the unknown, the unknowable. For instance, his imaginative reincarnation of the world of alchemical processes, the collective unconscious, the shared unconscious intersubjective world of inherited archetypes – all capture the mysterious and complex nature of unconscious relatedness and processes.

Jung and Buber had more in common than either did with Freud. They were less hidebound than Freud by science, seemingly more free to embrace the spiritual side of human nature. For instance, Jung refers to 'the sacred' and 'soul', without feeling the need to make a nod to science, and draws upon religious terms to expand on his metaphysical ideas. Buber, though, was a religious thinker, with his roots deep in the Judaic tradition, basing his philosophy of 'I–thou' on a religious philosophy of dialogue.

The major difference between Buber and Jung is their different views of spirituality and God. For Buber, God was real, whereas Jung thought of God as part of the psyche, as in *God-image*. This difference underlies their view of the unconscious. Whereas Jung offers rich, elaborate structures which open us up to a multi-layered world of the unconscious, Buber does not have a theory of the unconscious. For Buber, the unconscious is implicated in the 'I–thou' relatedness. It is this difference which underlies the fundamental distinction between Humanistic Psychology and Jungian theory. Buber's 'I–thou' philosophy underpins much of the theory of interpersonal dialogic relatedness in humanistic theory, although in the sphere of Gestalt, person-centred therapy and transactional analysis, the dialogic process becomes increasingly more secular.

In some ways, though, Buber straddles both the humanistic and psychoanalytic worlds. For example, the 'I–thou' philosophy also provides the original template for an understanding of intersubjectivity later evidenced by Stern (1985), and taken further by relational psychoanalysts such as Benjamin (2004). He is often seen as a major unifying figure in the emergence of the relational approach. This is because the relational concepts of mutuality and reciprocity, much discussed by relational psychoanalysts, have their roots in the humanistic field of theory. For Buber, I–thou is intimate, surprising, risky, and may well take us into the realms of the unconscious, but it is through dialogue that this will emerge. Buber says that taking the dialogic path is risky because it involves working in the dark, in worlds of traumatic devastation, uncertainty, loneliness and loss. This way of being described by Buber seems to me to take us into the world of the unconscious, but does not include a language that

would illuminate the journey into the metaphorical forest, or quite capture the bi-directionality of the unconscious.

Analysis of the vignette to show the difference between Buber and Jung

We do not know exactly why Sophie's work with her client was successful, but there are enough facts known about her, her client and the outcome to make it possible to hypothesize about the treatment. Sophie has been trained in the humanistic sector so we know that her way of working was dialogic, with a focus on the interpersonal, possibly even sharing some of her own experience. A deeply spiritual person, she no doubt conveyed a spiritual sensibility, such as described by Buber, and, we can assume, offered an experience of relatedness from a position of 'I–thou'. Indeed, when Sophie recounted this experience she did not mention theory at all. It is doubtful that she would have offered relatedness from the position of 'I–it' although naturally there is always an element of 'I–it' in every therapeutic encounter.

We know also that Sophie had been in analysis of different types over many years. She has explored, examined and brought multiple meanings to her traumatic experiences. How did this play out in the therapy? What unconscious processes were stimulated by this meeting between two 'souls' who had experienced the most severe type of rejection possible, that which is foisted upon people by society's hatred? I would think that almost certainly the archetype of the wounded healer was constellated in this relationship. In finding this particular therapist to work with, was the client unconsciously co-creating an act of synchronicity? Did the therapeutic couple embark upon a psychological journey that involved treachery, betrayal and profound despair? Probably. Did this process involve a movement from the 'negre' to the 'gold' of self for both therapist and client? Possibly.

We know the client went on to live a fulfilling life, and thought about the therapist every day of his life. And Sophie is still talking about him, and so am I, in this article. What does that mean or say about the collective unconscious (Jung, 1991) and the archetype of the shadow? Does the client represent the part of us all that remains unintegrated into our sense of 'wholeness', representing the shadow of the archetype? Even as I write now, a French man of colour tried to board a tube train in Paris, only to be repeatedly pushed away by a crowd of Chelsea football fans from Britain chanting, 'We are racist … and that's the way we like it'. This incident links in with the treatment above, for it tells us that we still need to talk about, think about and work through this particular manifestation of the shadow when it is revealed in racism. Curiously, in this incident, the internet has provided a 'powerful other' through which the abused man has found a voice, and the racists are being called upon to give an account of their actions.

In summary

The major question for this article, though, is what do these differences between the traditions tell us? How significant is theory? This client did not meet a therapist whose mind was embalmed by theoretical ideas – far from it; Sophie did not mention theory when she recounted the story. It is our personal relational abilities for emotional engagement, discernment, nuanced attunement and perhaps most of all our integrity that will inform how we work with people who are suffering. Thus, theory becomes secondary to the human exchange. It is this sensibility within us

that will also inform how we engage with theories of whatever ilk. Knowing Sophie, she will have drawn on her psychoanalysis, Jungian analysis and transactional analysis as she worked in the therapy with her client. (Perhaps 'patient' would be a better description of someone who was so wounded and hurt.) No doubt, too, Sophie was contained by the theoretical and relational context of her supervision.

In her famous philosophical essay, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir (1947) argues the case for existential freedom of choice, saying that when we project our power into systems, organizations, other people or theories, we end up being subjugated by them because they take on a format in which they claim to represent the 'natural order of things', becoming mysterious and oppressive. Instead, it behoves us, she thinks, to stay free and work out our own standpoint rather than relying on the 'other' to tell us what to think. The relational approach to psychotherapy has brought all modalities into a discourse, in this case humanistic and Jungian analysts, enabling a dialogue which has the potential to be truly productive.

In summary, I think that to become over-identified with one's theory suggests an intellectual and spiritual problem. Instead, I suggest that it is the cross-fertilization of different theoretical perspectives that provides a truly rich and containing context for our work with suffering people.

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Notes on contributor

Helena Hargaden, MSc, D.Psych, TSTA, is a psychotherapist, writer, consultant and supervisor. In collaboration with others she developed relational TA psychotherapy, and has been widely published. She is writing and editing a book on the art of relational supervision. She lives on the south coast of Britain, where she has her clinical practice.

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