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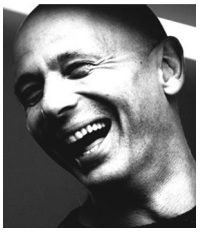
BOOK REVIEWS



Edited by Manu Bazzano, Book Reviews Editor

Instances of liberation

Therapy and the counter-tradition: the edge of philosophy, edited by Manu Bazzano and Julie Webb, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2016, 214 pp., £31.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1138905887

Reviewed by Marcia Gamsu, Existential psychotherapist

Although some schools of psychotherapy explicitly adopt a philosophical model, the editors of *Therapy and the Counter-tradition* suggest that other types of therapy are also based on philosophy, albeit only implicitly. In many cases these therapies adopt a philosophy associated with rationalism, a stream of philosophy that has dominated Western thinking since Aristotle. Our use of reason and a belief in the essential orderliness of the universe are some of the concerns of this philosophy. Therapy based on it is likely to appeal to the client's power of reason in order to help her gain mastery over her life. Such therapy is also likely to be normative, with the therapist guiding the client and subtly pointing out the error of her ways.

A different kind of underpinning of therapy is possible, however. This is the philosophy of the *counter-tradition*, a stream of philosophy beginning with Heraclitus rather than Plato or Aristotle, that embraces the contradictions, limitations and pathos of human existence, reminding us that the world is ungraspable. Therapy based on the counter-tradition is going to accept the client's contradictions and shortcomings, and rather than being normative, engage in an honest exploration of the client's experience.

In 17 chapters drawing on a wide range of philosophers, literary figures and other thinkers, this book calls for a dialogue between therapy and philosophy from the counter-tradition. Although at times the therapy side of the dialogue feature more prominently, on the whole the discussion is rich and creative. It makes important reading

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in a therapy world so dominated by outcomes and measurements that it is in danger of overlooking the contradictory, flawed human being at the heart of it.

Manu Bazzano opens Part 1 of the book, 'The Threshold Experience', with a subtle and enlightening reading of Nietzsche. In 'Changelings: The Self in Nietzsche's Psychology', Bazzano critiques attempts to make Nietzsche's philosophy into a systematic school of thought and interpretations of Nietzsche that either totally refute or embrace the notion of self. Nietzsche's middle works do talk about care of the self, but for Bazzano we need to guard against confusing the cultivation of tranquillity with cultivation of the ego, often the trap of spiritual seekers and those concerned with 'self-development'. If there is no fixed self, some of the central tenets of various schools of psychotherapy, in particular those from existential-phenomenological psychotherapy (for example free choice), fall away. In a novel interpretation drawing on Hegel, Bazzano argues that Nietzsche does have a version of selfhood, one in which selfhood is inherent in one's actions and deeds. As deeds always happen in a particular social and historical context, such context then becomes an important component of selfhood.

It was intriguing to read John Lippitt's interpretation of Kierkegaard as a philosopher who wants us to transcend, rather than embrace anxiety, in his 'What Can Therapists Learn from Kierkegaard?' Drawing on Kierkegaard's little-known but inspiring *Upbuilding Discourses*, Lippitt demonstrates the futility of getting caught up in comparisons with others and being influenced by the ways others see us. He juxtaposes this with genuine self-acceptance. This self-acceptance and tolerance of the situation in which we find ourselves has implications for the way we might understand clients 'faults' and their problematic histories. Using Kierkegaard's distinction between a problem (that requires a solution) and a burden (that we need to consider how to shoulder), Lippitt suggests that if clients begin to consider their difficulties as burdens rather than problems, then significant progress will have been made. I found the suggestion in this chapter that we free ourselves from a constant striving for self-improvement (and the nagging sense of dissatisfaction that accompanies this) inspiring.

In 'John Keats and Negative Capability: The Psychotherapist's X-factor?', Diana Voller discusses the notion of uncertainty in therapy, drawing on Keats' notion of negative capability (an ability to tolerate uncertainty) and his 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Voller's careful discussion is timely in our outcome- and technique-centred therapy environment. She argues that the therapist needs to be able to move between two modes of relating to uncertainty. In one mode, the therapist is experiencing uncertainty herself; in the other, the uncertainty is centred on the client (and the therapist tolerates and contains this, using her skills to explore its meaning). Too much of the latter can close down spontaneity but too much of the former can make the therapist feel inept and even be an excuse for laziness on her part. In my view, the capacity of the therapist to be open and spontaneous but also grounded enough to be able to articulate any new meanings that have emerged is at the heart of good therapy.

Literature also forms the basis for Nick Duffell's enjoyable chapter on D.H. Lawrence, 'That Piece of Supreme Art, a Man's Life'. Duffell provides an excellent introduction to Lawrence's thought and life, covering his critique of our emphasis on rational thought rather than experience and the life of the body, his horror of mechanization and war, and his call for sex and tenderness. These themes play out in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, where Sir Clifford's version of masculinity – where achievement is privileged and vulnerability denied – is still prevalent today. Duffell goes on to describe Lawrence's rejection of childhood sexuality and reframing of the Oedipal

complex. I've read very little of Lawrence and this chapter left me wanting to read more but I would have liked a little more help as to its relevance to therapy. Duffell briefly mentions using Lawrence's writing in his work with couples, so that the relationship is seen as mirror to self-knowledge. It would have been good to have learnt more about this.

Concluding this first part of the book, Subhaga Gaetano Failla imagines Pascal's night of enlightenment in 'Tears of Joy: Pascal's Night of Fire'. This is the night in which Pascal realized that God was immanent rather than transcendent. In a note sewn into the lining of his coat, he talks of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of 'ordinary' flawed human beings rather than the God of philosophers and scholars. In Failla's account of that night, Pascal encounters a faceless man, a projection of himself, who confronts him with his fear of what is formless and in flux. The man teaches him that uncertainty is the only true certainty and that he won't find God through reason or science but through the secrets of the heart. The dramatization of fear, uncertainty and transformation in this chapter mirrors many of the concerns of the book overall – its emphasis on experience rather than knowledge, the priority of placing becoming over being, and the vulnerability and uncertainty that this all brings in its wake.

Opening the book's next part on ethics and politics, Julie Webb covers Judith Butler's thinking in some breadth, including her notions of our need for recognition as subjects who also form others, the birth/death of identities, performance as an enactment of various social norms (including gender norms) and the dangers of identity categories. Webb argues that given that our identities are formed through the Other, it isn't surprising that the breakdown of a relationship (often the cause of clients coming to therapy) causes a major crisis. Like other contributors to this book, Webb emphasizes an ethic of becoming and not knowing. We don't know what our possibilities are but these are reliant on the Other. This requires trust and this places an ethical demand for openness on the therapist. Despite the many attempts to connect Butler's thinking with therapy, at times I found this chapter a little overly theoretical and would have welcomed more use of everyday language rather than the use of Butler's terminology.

In the most autobiographical chapter in the book, Richard Pearce draws on his own early experiences to demonstrate various aspects of Sartre's thinking. I enjoyed Pearce's focus on the later (sometimes overlooked) Sartre, including Sartre's discussion of the dialectical relationship between our subjectivity and the social and historical environment, and the notion of an existential ethic as a reciprocity of freedoms. In a point I wish he had developed further, Pearce suggests that the fault-line in therapy lies between those who believe behaviour is mechanistically determined, and thus able to be mechanically corrected, and those who believe in human agency. He argues that the aim of therapy is to get the client to accept her own and the other's subjectivity, and that because our engagement with the world changes it in some way, this is also a political act. Pearce's autobiographical examples are very sensitively drawn and the chapter is broad ranging but at times I found the chapter a little overly theoretical.

In a short, focused and informative chapter on Rousseau, 'Instances of Liberation in Rousseau', Federico Battistutta discusses Rousseau's thinking on the relationship between nature and culture and his belief in the instinctive life, relevant for many realms of life including education (education being about not interfering in and

promoting a natural tendency to development) and self-transformation. This belief in an essential human nature puts Rousseau at odds with other thinkers discussed in this book. I particularly enjoyed Battistutta's discussion of the development of Rousseau's ideas by subsequent thinkers (including Carl Rogers) and this chapter helped me to start thinking about other ways of thinking influenced by Rousseau, for example the implicit anti-intellectualism in many therapy/self-development groups.

I struggled more with the following chapter by James Belassie on Camus and psychotherapy, despite its sensitive and insightful analysis of Camus's work. I agree with the author that we need to bring philosophical thinking into aspects of existence, for example suicide, that would normally be interpreted as matters of pathology. This is an area about which Camus has a lot to say. I was also interested in Belassie's argument that metaphor eschews abstract rational thought and taps directly into emotional significance, making it more relevant for therapy than the dry logic of traditional philosophy. One of Camus's recurring metaphors is that of water, and Belassie draws on this to illustrate Camus's argument for a rebellion against the human condition and the whole of creation. I found this chapter difficult because I don't believe that encouraging clients to embrace despair as Camus would suggest is a good thing.

Manu Bazzano's exciting chapter 'Desire-Delirium: On Deleuze and Therapy' opens the third part of the book, loosely centred on the connections between self, other, world. Bazzano finds Deleuze a refreshing antidote to the colonization of once counter-cultural modes of thought (including psychoanalysis) by neo-positivism. For Deleuze, the unconscious has no underlying principles and rather than representing reality, creates it. Desire is not about lack but a constructive and creative part of life itself. The encouragement to immerse ourselves in the 'movement of becoming' is one of the central themes of this book. In an example that I find touching and genuinely respectful, Bazzano considers desire in relation to a client with an 'unrealistic' longing for a particular lover. Rather than considering her desire as about lack (of self-esteem and so on), he comes to value the longing in itself.

Paul Gordon's chapter 'A Poetry of Human Relations: Merleau-Ponty and Psychotherapy' contains much that is relevant for therapy and the therapeutic relationship, and I would have loved this to have been drawn out more. The chapter deepened my understanding of Merleau-Ponty's anti-Cartesian philosophy of embodiment. It covers language, sexuality, a critique of the notion of an inner world, our relationship to objects and the link between phenomenology and the work of artists and writers. I wonder whether the chapter, enjoyable and enlightening as it is, might have benefited from a narrower focus and more homing in on therapy. The links are there implicitly, but some examples from the author's therapeutic experience would have made the chapter richer.

In a dense but illuminating chapter on the culture of the 'selfie', Eugenia Lapteva questions whether the selfie culture is an attempt to rid ourselves of the part of ourselves that resists standardization. Lapteva quotes Dostoevsky's statement that we attempt to become some kind of generalized human beings out of a sense of shame of our uniqueness. She examines psychoanalytical notions of human subjectivity which lead her to conclude that we are bound up with the other from birth, and this prevents us from achieving complete knowledge of self and other. Drawing on Derrida's notion that secrecy is about an experience, associated with uniqueness, resisting knowledge, Lapteva suggests that by attempting to reveal everything, 'the selfie forecloses the singularity of the self whose essence shows itself only when it is

allowed to be what it is, namely withdrawn, hidden secret, *unknown*' (p. 134). I find this fascinating, and it left me thinking about the connections between the selfie culture and the confessional culture of therapy.

In 'Energy Ethics and the Thought of Difference in Luce Irigaray', Federico Battistutta explores Irigaray's critique of the phallocentric nature of traditional philosophy and its emphasis on reason rather than embodied experience. He particularly focuses on Irigaray's thoughts on Eastern philosophy, looking both at what it can teach us (for example, overcoming the mind/body split) and critiquing some of its concepts (for example, the notion that enlightenment involves overcoming duality). This chapter is an introduction to Irigaray's thinking but I would have liked it to narrow its focus and explain its concepts (which remain at quite a high abstract level) a little more. I would have also liked to read more about how we might draw on Irigaray's thinking in therapy.

Julie Webb opens the fourth and final part of the book, 'Therapy, Language, Metaphysics', with 'Under Arrest: Wittgenstein and Perspicuity', where she links Ludwig Wittgenstein with therapy as 'description therapy as opposed to prescription therapy' (p. 149). For Wittgenstein, philosophy is a process of clarification, and Webb argues that in therapy this is about describing and re-describing the client's experience until she experiences clarity. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Webb suggests that we need to pay careful attention to how words are used. Failing to do this, and using our own words rather than the client's, places us in a position of authority. This seems important, and I'm personally very aware of how far my own words can take the client from their own experience and beliefs. However, I wasn't convinced by Webb's interpretation of Wittgenstein's statement in the *Tractatus* that when something is inexpressible we should stay silent. Webb suggests that this is where a poetic, non-propositional form of expression comes into play. This may be so, but I don't think we can use the *Tractatus* to support this.

I found John Mackessy's chapter on Schopenhauer, 'A Penetrating Beam of Darkness', surprisingly accessible, balanced and relevant to therapy. The chapter provides a clear introduction to Schopenhauer's thought, linking his notion of the will with Kant's thing in itself, and showing how it pre-figures the central concepts of psychoanalysis. The most thought-provoking aspect of the chapter for me is the notion that a good outcome for therapy might not be a client learning how to get more of what she wants, but her engaging more fully with experience. This would come about through her examining her behaviour and realizing that constantly striving is egotistical and, ultimately, dissatisfying. I was also struck by the notion that being overly optimistic, while tempting for therapists, is a failure of compassion and a disregard of suffering. Mackessy does not claim to agree wholeheartedly with Schopenhauer about human nature, but he succeeds in showing that his philosophy might be used as counter-argument to ubiquitous solution-based therapy.

I struggled a little with the final two chapters in the book. Jeff Harrison's 'Wittgenstein, Buddhism and Psychotherapy' is presented as a series of thoughts, rather than a coherent and systematic examination of Wittgenstein's thinking. Harrison argues that this is faithful to Wittgenstein's presentation of his own philosophy, but I would have found it helpful if Harrison had explained some of the points he tries to convey more fully. That isn't to say that Harrison doesn't make some illuminating comparisons between Wittgenstein, Buddhism and therapy. For example, Wittgenstein believed that philosophical problems were caused by using language inaccurately, and Harrison

points out that the way people describe their issues to themselves is often bound up with the problem itself. Similarly, the way that we describe the issue in therapy can worsen the issue, diagnosis as opposed to description being an instance of this.

I was a little unclear on how Devang Vaidya's chapter 'Amor Fati: Suffering to Become the Person One Is' might be used to clarify the client's experience. Vaidya sets out to tie in Nietzsche's call for us to love our fate with the Rogerian notion of being congruent with our experience. There are some potentially very interesting ideas in the chapter, including the question of how self-acceptance (Nietzsche's notion of treating oneself as a fate) might be used in therapy. But many of these ideas remain unexamined. In an interesting section, Vaidya considers alternative responses to fate – for example, considering everything that happens to us as fate and therefore failing to think about the things we can change, and having an apathetic or fearful response towards life. Vaidya also notes that loving fate is bound up with accepting suffering, even though this suffering may be unjustified – an interesting point that would have benefited from further examination.

Sometimes I felt the authors in this book might have considered more carefully the relevance of what they were saying for therapy. Occasionally I disagreed with the philosophy or with authors' interpretations of this philosophy. But these are small criticisms of a book that I have found inspirational and which I have drawn on several times when I've been working with clients. In the struggle to maintain an open, reflective and respectful style of therapy rather than one which directs the client where she supposedly needs to go, this book is immensely valuable. We need far more of this kind of profound thinking.

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Attending to the soul

The snake in the clinic: psychotherapy's role in medicine and healing, by Guy Dargert, London, Karnac, 2016, 194 pp., £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1782203742

Reviewed by Claire Wirsig, Counsellor Trainee, Tariki Trust

The Snake in the Clinic is an engaging and captivating look into what role, if any, psychotherapy plays in Western medical science as well as health and well-being. The received definition of psychotherapy proclaimed by the UK National Health Service – as a set of techniques to treat mental health and emotional problems and some psychiatric disorders – contrasts starkly with Guy Dargert's definition of psychotherapy as a way of attending to the soul. An eloquent discussion of the etymology