

OBITUARY



John Heaton (1925–2017) – A personal-philosophical recollection

I knew John for many years: as an impressive author popularizing the confluence between Wittgenstein and psychotherapy, as a fascinating conference speaker and latterly as an interlocutor in the debates about Wittgenstein interpretation (we saw nearly eye-to-eye about Wittgenstein's 'therapeutic' conception of philosophy). I shared platforms with John on a handful of occasions, and I reckon a good time was had by all.

A decade ago I was blindsided by a nasty sudden-onset episode of anxiety-depression. This included 'symptoms' of significant derealization and depersonalization. I suddenly thought of John in a new way, in this different context: because I thought that he would understand and take seriously the phenomenology, the pain and the felt meaning of such 'symptoms' better than virtually anyone else. I wanted a non-judgemental sympathetic voice that would take on board the qualitative nature of what I was going through without reducing it to a symptomatology of 'malfunction' (let alone trying to prescribe me drugs). So I decided to ask him if he would take me on as a patient for a while. He agreed.

We would meet fortnightly and discuss what I was experiencing. The sessions were a kind of wonderful three-way cross between traditional psychotherapy, a chat between friends and a live exploration of philosophy (Was the world being 'bracketed' for me? Which philosophers etc. might it be helpful for someone going through what I was going through to read, around the experience?). Sometimes he (or indeed I) would take a book down from the wall of his study where the sessions took place and try out a quote from it.

John was a living link between the present and the 'legendary' days of R.D. Laing and Tavistock. He was an important voice in connecting the worlds of psychotherapy, psychology, psychiatry and philosophy. He was also just a very decent person. I remember the end of my final therapy session with him, when I was confident enough that I'd broken the back of the depressive episode that I was ready to go on by myself. He asked how I might like to mark the moment. I suggested – tentatively, because I was unsure of the ethics or etiquette of the situation – that we might symbolically mark the moment by processing to the other side of his house and having tea together, along with his wife. I needn't have worried; he saw this as a perfectly sensible and indeed welcome suggestion. We went and had a cup of tea together, before I paid him for the last time and said my goodbyes. I remember that the mint tea he made me was really rather delicious. The derealization was well and truly gone.

Now that John's gone, he'll be *much* missed – for more than one reason.

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