The Limits of Freedom – Psychotherapy and Ontology, Part II

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A Scientific Psychology?

In the last issue (Mackessy, 2020), I offered a critique of Steven Pinker's claim in *The Blank Slate* (2002) that valid social and psychological theories should ultimately be 'groundable' in a physical picture of the world emerging from such natural sciences as evolutionary biology. For Pinker, evolutionary psychology provides *the* bridge between biology and any valid form of social or psychological theory. Implicit is the idea that a single, or at least unified, vision of the world is what knowledge is about. This article, on the other hand, will be a plea for diversity and the importance of 'ambivalence', our ability and the necessity to embody more than a single point of view. As in part I, I'll be drawing upon the philosophy of that old misanthrope and provocateur, Schopenhauer, to support my case.

I'll start by winding back the clock to Freud who, at least in his mid-1890s *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, also aspired to ground psychology in neurophysiology and neurobiology. These papers went initially unpublished, as was his wish. However, while engaged with the project, Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fleiss that

> The intention of this project is to furnish us with a psychology which shall be a natural science: its aim, that is, is to represent psychical processes as quantitatively determined states of specifiable material particles and so to make them plain and void of contradictions. (Freud & Bonaparte, 1954, p. 355)

Although he initially had high hopes for the *Project*, he vacillated markedly about its value. In early October 1895 he wrote to Fliess that 'The mechanical explanation is not coming off, and I am inclined to listen to the still, small voice which tells me that my explanation will not do' (quoted in Fanchner, 1973, p. 64).

A little later that month, however, we hear that

> One strenuous night last week [...] the barriers suddenly lifted, the veils dropped, and it was possible to see from the details of neurosis all the way to the very conditioning of consciousness. Everything fell into place, the cogs meshed, and the thing really seemed to be a machine which in a moment would run of itself. (Quoted in Sulloway, 1979, p. 118)

As with Pinker, the mechanistic imagery is marked. However, Freud's perspective undoubtedly became less reductive as he tried to account for organismic phenomena that did not seem to operate in a simple stimulus–response pattern. Even within the *Project* one can see an opening out to a more 'holistic' picture of a *biologically* adaptive organism, as opposed to a simple *physiological* mechanism.

Causes and Reasons

We should also note that one of the core principles of Freudian psychoanalysis is 'overdetermination'. As J.A.C. Brown observes, 'The Freudian concept of psychic determinism does not postulate a simple one-to-one relationship of cause and effect in all mental events, and it is recognized that a single event may be *overdetermined'* (1964, p. 4, original italics).

So, for example, although psychical life is causal, with reasons for our dreams etc., a dream itself is a *condensation* of many and various factors – any one of which would serve as a sufficient cause in itself, but which cannot alone be asserted as *the determining factor*. So here, we are a long way from the physics of billiard-balls bashing against one another, or simple stimulus–response reactions. We enter a realm where things have reasons to be so, but in which our conception of causality is multi-factorial and inherently non-reductive. 'The cause' is this, and this, and this. It is tempting to call this 'holistic', as overdetermination requires us to consider the psyche as interconnected and *able to*

come together in some manner to produce condensed and therefore potentially multivalent representations.

Perhaps Freud's struggle with the *Project* accounts for the tone of humility we encounter in 1938, the year before his death, when he writes that

> psychical phenomena are to a high degree dependent upon somatic influences and on their side have the most powerful effects upon somatic processes. If ever human thought found itself in an *impasse* it was here. To find a way out, the philosophers at least were obliged to assume that there were organic processes parallel to the conscious psychical ones, related to them in a manner that was hard to explain, which acted as intermediaries in the reciprocal relations between 'body and mind', and which served to re-insert the psychical into the texture of life. But this solution remained unsatisfactory. [....] The psychical, whatever its nature may be, is in itself unconscious and probably similar in kind to all the other natural processes of which we have obtained knowledge. (Freud, 1986, p. 186, original italics)

Freud is exceedingly careful in his wording here. He takes no definite position on the relationship between 'body' and 'mind', neatly handing the dualism problem over to the philosophers! What is clear, though, is that of necessity, Freud *conceptualised* soma and psyche separately because their 'relationship' had not been sufficiently clarified to do otherwise. He also clearly posits *two-way* causal interactions between these different types of phenomena. So there may not be a ghost in the machine, but the psychical is seen here to have causal force.

Though Freud denied it, it has been argued that he was much influenced by Schopenhauer in his view of human 'drives' and other dimensions of his theory (see Young & Brook, 1994; Mackessy, 2017). Schopenhauer portrays humanity as essentially like other sentient creatures. Tamed, more intelligent, with more complex motives and a proclivity for cruelty, perhaps, but basically driven by need and desire, instinctual forces beyond us and frequently outside our consciousness and control**.** On this view, we are not *primarily* the rational beings that many philosophers depict. Schopenhauer writes that 'the genitals are the real focus of the will, and are therefore the opposite pole to the brain, the representative of knowledge' (1969, Vol. 1, p. 329).

To be 'driven', however, is not necessarily to be strictly 'determined'. Freud's drives, throughout his career, were represented as having a certain plasticity, and he gives us the notion of 'sublimation', whereby humans can creatively channel and transform the energy of the libido. The drives, though, are fundamental, and as Peter Gay writes,

> though far freer than other animals in the adaptations he may construct and defences he may develop, man is not wholly without instinctual drives and these, malleable as they are, underscore [what we share with others of our species]. Among these drives, sexuality and aggression occupy center stage for the psychoanalyst. And these two drives, matured, combined, disguised, serve as the fuel for human action. They make history. (Gay, 1985, p. 89)

The limit of our agency is, thus, quite marked. In a sense it is 'to channel what we are', our nature – and indeed one can see in the conclusion of his penultimate book, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), that Freud questioned humanity's ability to forge a freer and less conflict-driven future for ourselves.

Turning again briefly to Schopenhauer, though he was an avowed materialist and held the phenomenal world to be entirely determinate, he also asserted the necessity of a broad, multi-dimensional view of causality; with each form of explanation having to match the nature of the phenomena themselves. I believe he would approve of Rollo May's assertion that 'Our problem is to open our vision to more of human experience, to develop and free our methods so that they will as far as possible do justice to the richness and breadth of man's experience' (1961, p. 35).

Crucially, in *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (2012), Schopenhauer differentiates between physical causes, conceptual grounds, mathematical knowledge and human motivations. The latter three types of explanation, offering rational grounds, he calls *reasons* rather than causes. All four forms of explanation, including physical causality, are examined as 'phenomena', as *representations* within our consciousness. They are the four possible ways in which things 'can become an object for us' (2012, p. 31). Schopenhauer's starting point, therefore, is the human being with our specific capacities for experience and understanding, rather than the world itself, which would typically be the starting point assumed by a 'realist'.

Schopenhauer's philosophy was extremely influential in the milieu in which Freud developed

his work. He died a year after Edmund Husserl was born, and hence while not a phenomenologist *per se*, his 'phenomenal' orientation is something we encounter much more in Humanistic and Existential Psychology, approaches which emphasise freedom and agency far more than does Freud.

Humanism, Existentialism and the Ontology of Human Being

Humanistic and Existential Psychology and psychotherapy (henceforth hum/ex) are both acknowledged heirs to the phenomenological/existential philosophical tradition. Consequently, hum/ex expresses a different ontology from that found in 'realist' / natural-science approaches that aim to describe the world '*as* it is', rather than '*as* experienced'. Phenomenological method itself is also a clear intrusion of philosophy into the 'scientific' territory of psychology, and is welcomed as such by Abe Maslow, Rollo May and others.

Pinker, and others of a 'realist' bent, would, I believe, understand ontology in the traditional manner, as examining being, its types and qualities, and how well our theories represent such 'things'. Being is an 'object' of some sort, to be studied and considered; and we can therefore understand why in some circumstances it might even be put under the microscope.

In hum/ex, though, the concept of *ontology* is most frequently used in a Heideggerian or existentialist sense. It refers to the discourse (logos) pertaining to those beings whose *self-awareness* compels them to consider their own being and their predicament of being-in-the-world. It relates to the responsibility for our own being with which we are endowed as conscious, active, choosing agents. 'Condemned to freedom', as Sartre might have it.

May identifies a key difference between an existential and a traditional ontology when he writes that existentialism portrays 'the human being not as a collection of static substances or mechanisms or patterns but rather as emerging and becoming' (1958, p. 12). To exist is not to be a fixed thing but to 'emerge'. May goes on to write a few years later that 'In this respect, "being" is to be defined as the *individual's unique pattern of potentialities*' (1961, p. 23, original italics).

It is worth noting that this hum/ex ontological 'shift' occurred partly in reaction to forms of explanation – behavioural and psychoanalytic – which some regarded as de-humanising. Bugental observed that Humanistic Psychology came to prominence because of 'a new appreciation for the fundamental inviolability of the human experience' (1963, p. 563). The hum/ex literature is vast, but there are shared ontological features in the different approaches, which I believe we find foreshadowed in Kurt Goldstein. It was Goldstein who originated the concept of 'self-actualisation' and who outlined a holistic conception of 'organismic functioning' – core ideas incorporated and taken forward by Rogers, Maslow, May, Perls and others. Goldstein thus writes:

> …the tendency to actualize itself as fully as possible is the basic drive, the only drive by which the […] organism is moved. (1940, p. 142)
>
> …the holistic approach, with man as the starting point, should furnish us with the basis for gaining an understanding of life phenomena. (1995, p. 362)
>
> One thing we know: the human being cannot be regarded as a creature in which something was only added to the animal. (1995, p. 362)
>
> If Man had drives of the animal kind, he would not have what we call reason.... If man had the sense of animals, he would not have reason. (Herder, in Goldstein, 1995, p. 363)
>
> Man is neither aggressive nor submissive by nature. He is driven to actualize himself and to come to terms with his environment. (1940, pp. 204–5)
>
> …there is nothing negative in nature. Nature is always positive. (1940, p. 210)
>
> …the highest capacity of man, the capacity for freedom. (1940, p. 238)

I present these as 'foundational statements' because they describe the essential features of a hum/ex ontology – its view of what it is to be. They capture how humanists generally conceive of the human *being* as opposed to an innate 'human nature'.

Curb Your Enthusiasm – a Failure of Potential

I'll tentatively summarise a hum/ex view as follows:

> The human organism is irreducibly human. It isn't like a machine or just an animal, but is a self-aware and creatively responsive being, oriented towards growth. Its 'drive' to become does not constrain or determine it, but rather expresses its potential. It can choose whether to heed or ignore this actualising tendency. In conducive circumstances, it will tend to positively actualise to its fullest potential.

Quite a statement – and Schopenhauer would disagree with almost every word. We don't *make* ourselves as humans, we *express* our human natures. For him, as for Freud, humans are to a large extent limited or determined by our 'nature' as creatures.

Schopenhauer writes of Man that 'his conduct proceeds from his inborn and inalterable character' (2004, p. 145). Though he acknowledges that one can alter or constrain *behaviour* through parenting, punishment, reward etc. – whereby we act upon each others' motives – fundamentally we are what we are. Let us remember, too, that Schopenhauer rejected in Hegel something that has also become a cornerstone of much hum/ex thinking – *dialectics*; or, more specifically, *teleological* dialectics that portray us as necessarily progressing towards some form of 'self-realisation' or the evolution of consciousness (for instance, see Rowan, 2001, p. 48). Schopenhauer, rather, saw us largely as driven forward by the blind, irrational striving of the Will, and with our individualied needs and desires bringing us into conflict with others who also seek their own satisfactions. 'What happens to positive actualisation in the context of human egocentrism, limited resources and opportunities?', he would ask.

Maslow famously wrote that 'A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we call self-actualization' (1943, p. 384, original italics). This seems a rather 'romantic', non-conflictual and tellingly gendered vision. The exclusively creative examples are significant. They tell that to be human, or at least to be a happy human, is to be creative, free and self-defining. Does anyone self-actualise to become a factory worker or day-time TV-watcher? And is 'society', then, solely to blame for our 'thwarted lives'; or might the fault lie, rather, within ourselves, within our nature?

This actualising vision is more an aspiration than a description of humanity as we are. Maslow himself, towards the end of his life, questioned why we don't actualise as fully as we might, once our basic needs are satisfied. We seem instead to settle for unadventurous, prosaic existences. This rather puts me in mind of a documentary which followed up the lives of several 'revolutionaries' from the late 1960s counter-culture in the US and Europe. A few 'hippies' did remain, but *homo corporatus* prevailed.

To critique the hum-ex emphasis on freedom and 'self-creation', one might say that it is an unfounded act of faith in human potential, a historical expression of Western liberal individualism, or simply a meaningless tautology. May writes:

> Consciousness, to use Kurt Goldstein's terms, is man's capacity to transcend the immediate concrete situation, to live in terms of the possible [...]. This capacity for consciousness underlies the wide range of possibility which man has in relating to his world, and it constitutes the foundation of psychological freedom. Thus, human freedom has its ontological base and I believe must be assumed in all psychotherapy. (1961, p. 79)

What are the grounds for believing this to be so? May offers none, but simply asserts that humans, *in so far as we are conscious*, are 'free'. Moreover, May does not adequately explore how this consciousness might also be shaped. *To be conscious, instead, is to be presented with freedom to choose; and to be free to choose is to be truly conscious*. Without some reason to assert this, it is simply a foundational axiom or, perhaps, a humanist dogma – a Western liberal act of faith. In this light, significantly, it is also radically *decontextualised*, with slaves and serfs evidently as ontologically free as monarchs and oligarchs. Perhaps, but it would seem less of a pipedream if we could see a little more meat on the bones of this thesis.

Icarus Falling

With regard to this humanistic act of faith in human freedom and creativity, what are we to make of the work of Gazzaniga and Nobel laureate Sperry, and their experiments with people whose left and right brain hemispheres were not connected? In one set of experiments, Gazzaniga gave written commands to subjects' right brain hemispheres via their left eyes. However, when then asked why they had performed the action, subjects consistently gave responses stating a choice to do so or offering some other narrative that omitted having acted upon an instruction. The left hemisphere was not aware of having received an instruction and, Gazzaniga concludes, constructs narratives of self-agency and choice to account for the behaviour. The separation

of the lobes allows us to notice this narrative-interpretative function of the left hemisphere more clearly (see Gazzaniga, 2000, p. 1319; and Pinker, 2002, p. 43).

Such evidence does raise significant questions regarding automatic assumptions of self-agency. Put simply, the fact that phenomenologically one experiences oneself as making free choices does not necessarily mean that one is actually doing so. This, I believe, requires us to examine the status of what we can conclude with any certainty from phenomenological analysis of our experience. In that regard, we could also look to Julian B. Rotter's work on factors that shape our sense of 'perceived control', our 'locus of control' (external or self-agency explanations) and our perhaps exaggerated experience of 'self-efficacy' (see also Reich & Infurna, 2017). I suspect that for many a humanistically trained therapist, like myself, even examining this evidence may feel like 'going over to the dark side'.

The work of Gazzaniga, Rotter and others certainly gives me pause in terms of assuming, as May asks us to do, that freedom is somehow existentially self-evident or a phenomenological 'given'. We need, rather, to look at wider evidence if we want a more nuanced picture of exactly how free we might be.

A Questionable Freedom

What *has* emerged from this exploration with some clarity, though, is the ubiquity and primacy of the question of freedom/determinacy. Whatever type of psychotherapist one may be, one's ontology relates to underlying positions regarding freedom and agency.

As regards the common type-physicalist 'scientific model' *à la* Pinker, its limitations are evident in its fetishisation of 'man as machine'. Its framework of determinate, material, causal relationships, acting as mechanistic 'laws', has as its necessary corollary the fact that it *cannot* depict us as free, or else is forced to wholly redefine freedom.

The machine 'metaphor' doesn't serve well, except in so far as we can be regarded as creatures who 'react' in a 'programmed' manner, rather than beings who 'respond' and adapt with some degree of meaningful agency. Pinker argues that the 'mechanisms' are *complex* and *adaptive*, but for a holist like Goldstein this is unlikely to adequately reflect the actual creative potential of the human organism or human consciousness.

On the other hand, the humanists/existentialists, I believe, are in danger of fetishising the 'human'; enshrining an exclusionary concept that denies continuities with other species. When, in 1961, Carl Rogers wrote that 'There is no beast in man. There is only man in man' (p. 105), he disregarded aspects of our nature inconsistent with his picture of the 'incorrigibly socialized' and 'exquisitely rational' human (p. 194). The evidence, and world history but 16 years earlier, suggests a more complex and sanguinary picture. In contrast, Schopenhauer felt that to liken us to animals is to do animals an injustice, as they do not have our capacity for exquisite cruelty. It has to be said, if not humanity, he *did* love his dog.

The question of the limits of our freedom is also difficult for humanists and existentialists. No, we're not just programmed machines, but nor are we simply creative self-actualisers: we cannot be adequately described solely in terms of a positive actualising tendency. It may be part of us, but cannot offer an adequately rounded account.

Goldstein was both a dialectical humanist and a biologist, and was not dismissive of the meat and bones of 'the organism'. He had no problem with thinking about us not just in terms of our potential but also of our pathologies and our biology. My sense is that although he is an acknowledged humanistic forefather, influential theorists of a more teleological bent, such as John Rowan, have moved away from viewing us as biological creatures towards an ontology that tends to prioritise the 'spiritual' aspect of our being, and to spiritualise dialectics and the concept of consciousness.

For Jacques Derrida, ontology – or as he frequently calls it, onto-theology – always involves an act of faith and a privileging of 'foundational' elements. Ontological thinking is, though, he holds, inescapable. To conceive the world at all, we end up treating our privileged concepts as realities and excluding that which does not fit into our picture.

In his critique of psychoanalysis, Goldstein calls this process 'hypostatisation', but seems less critical of the hypostatising tendency within holistic/humanistic thinking. Although holism seems inherently more process-oriented, even the concept of a 'whole' is itself an hypostatised and metaphysical construct; it is not a simple fact about

the world but a unity that is assumed and created *conceptually*.

Summation

My key point is that the human is complex, and that each theoretical approach adopts a perspective which is likely to miss *something* crucial about us. Even the non-reductionists have to reduce us to produce 'a conception of the human'.

This is not merely a philosophical quibble. As I said at the outset, our conception of the human shapes our practice and our interaction with our clients. We need to ask ourselves what our approach and our commitments prioritise, and what they may gloss over or miss altogether. For instance, how might our understanding of client agency bear upon a client's experience of addiction?

Exclusions and 'oversights', however, are not entirely a matter of chance but are built into ontological thinking. As I hope I have shown, a largely mechanistic model such as Pinker's *cannot* adequately encompass agency without contradicting its own mechanistic premises; nor is humanism's view of the human as *sui generis* entirely compatible with regarding us as animals.

Encountering, or rather producing, contradictions is, Derrida claims, an inescapable characteristic of foundational (ontological) thinking, because by nature it prioritises one set of meanings and marginalises others, creating inevitable tensions. The question then arises as to what we can do as practitioners to become aware of such systematic contradictions and exclusions. Are we willing to question our foundations, to admit of other voices and, hence, greater complexity; or do we dig in our heels and colonise/homogenise the experience of the client?

In this regard, Theodor Adorno, writing in the aftermath of Nazi authoritarianism, observes that 'if thinking is to be true – if it is to be true today, in any case – it must also be a thinking against itself' (1973, p. 365). If we are not to be therapeutic ideologues, we must be willing to think 'against the concept', to think against ourselves and our own framework of understanding. For Adorno this is dialectical thinking.

This may appear to be a negation and inherently 'destructive' – and in a sense it is; but as Walter Benjamin observes of the 'destructive' character, 'What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of rubble, but for the way leading through it' (in Jeffries, 2016, p. 170).

Surely, for a psychotherapist this willingness to question, to remain open to possibility, and to help our clients find their *own* way through the 'contradictions', dilemmas and complexities of life, must be among our core principles.

Schopenhauer, who was as fond of his theories as anyone, nonetheless held that our conceptual frameworks *always* miss something, *always* misrepresent, because they cannot capture the 'thing in itself'. We have but particular *human* forms of understanding: 'Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world' (1974, Vol. 2, p. 538)

There is, hopefully, a healing lack of hubris in allowing that the world is more complex, indefinable and nuanced than whatever theoretical frame of reference we bring to it. Moreover, such humility in the face of the other may hold the potential for a connection to be made in therapy that allows new meanings to thrive.

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SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

"The human dilemma is that which arises out of a man's capacity to experience himself as both subject and object at the same time."

Rollo May, 1909–1994