

Conservative, Liberal and Radical Psychotherapy

Jonathan Fay

Reflecting on our daily work as practitioners of the art and science of psychotherapy, our thoughts may occasionally turn towards the 'big picture' of psychotherapy and its prospects for a long-term future. We might wonder about the limitations of psychotherapy as it is practiced today and ask what psychotherapy might become. Our enemy in this reverie is polarized thinking: right and wrong, black and white, for and against, either/or. Our friend is dialectical thinking, a willingness to value opposite points of view, and to seek synthesis and integration. The success of a dialectical conversation is determined by our ability to clearly identify differences that make a difference. First we try to identify points of maximum tension and conflict, and then we work to mediate these conflicts. In this way, we extend and strengthen our self-understanding. To help think and feel our way through and beyond some of the familiar polarities of conventional psychotherapy, I'm going to describe the basic life positions of the conservative, the liberal and the radical, and then I'm going to apply each of these to psychotherapy.

Conservative, liberal and radical choices are differences that really make a difference. The conservative resists change, the liberal allows change, and the radical requires change. The conservative is a purist, a believer in tradition and hierarchy, not particularly tolerant of difference. The liberal is a pluralist, a believer in tolerance and diversity, comfortable with the status quo but open to gradual and progressive change; evolution but not revolution. The radical speaks truth to power, and challenges the hierarchy on the grounds that it enforces an oppressive status quo, which undermines our dignity and self-determination. The conservative tends towards hierarchy and authoritarian edict. He or she seeks order, fears chaos, and supports the rule of the benevolent elite. The liberal is democratic and majoritarian, and supports governance by representatives elected from amongst the membership. The radical values self-determination and sovereignty, and would offer us consensus and cooperation in place of elite rule or majority governance. The conservative is monocultural, the liberal is multicultural, and the radical is bicultural. It is one thing to tolerate the existence of a disenfranchised minority, and quite another thing to call for partnership and power-sharing with this minority. The conservative version of justice is earned privilege. Hierarchy is fair if privilege is earned: unfair is unearned privilege. The liberal version of justice is equality. Fair means equal, and it also means the same; the same standard for everyone, no double-standards. The radical version of justice is active

support for self-development and sovereignty. What is unfair to the radical is failed or unfulfilled potential.

We can immediately see that psychotherapy is a very interesting beast; a breed all of its own, a hybrid. Firstly, psychotherapy holds a conservative tradition of expert professional knowledge and practice that sharply defines role differences between therapist and client. Secondly, psychotherapy claims a philosophy of egalitarian social relations that stands in the best liberal tradition. Thirdly, psychotherapy embraces a genuinely radical ideal of justice. If every person deserves to realize their potential, an unfulfilled life is justice denied.

How shall we bring together and synthesise all of these trends and tendencies? Perhaps the 'Holy Trinity' of psychotherapy can be described as follows: God the Father is conservative, psychoanalytic therapy, God the Son is liberal, humanistic therapy, and God the Holy Spirit is radical, socio-political empowerment therapy. Most psychotherapy practitioners hold some personal preferences among these three positions, but are fully capable of offering a critique of each and of valuing all three very highly. In marked contrast to how we position ourselves professionally, and how we speak to each other in public, I suspect most psychotherapists practice privately in all three of these modes at different times, and creatively combine many aspects of each in their daily work with clients. My hope is that psychotherapy can learn to recognize and value itself in each of these three mirrors.

Conservative psychotherapy

Very briefly, then, God the Father is a psychoanalyst, envied and emulated, sitting atop the status hierarchy, looking down upon the world of psychotherapy and seeing that all is well, save for the danger of becoming too pluralistic and namby-pamby, which is to say, liberal. Conservative psychotherapy reveres its own heritage and tradition, a tradition of purists and true believers. Conservative ideology holds that there is a right way to practice, based on time-tested methods. Individual, insight-oriented, depth therapy is far superior to any new-fangled, try-hard, do-good, merely supportive psychotherapy. Psychoanalytic practitioners (and here I include myself) have difficulty imagining a non-analytic psychotherapy we would consider adequately skilful, powerful or self-aware. One hundred years of psychotherapy tradition has built an impressive knowledge and skill base, a strong and consistent therapeutic frame, which supports our work and holds us steady in it. We prefer the frame of therapy not to be bent or broken, and certainly not to be carelessly thrown away.

Conservative psychotherapy is highly sensitive to human differences of all sorts, but fundamentally it assumes a human psyche that shares qualities and characteristics with every other human psyche. Despite all the culturally mediated differences of age, sex, race, and social position, there are universal human experiences of self-oppression. Our job as therapists is to find and free the imprisoned self, no matter what its cultural background or baggage. We are proudly saving the planet one person at a time. Conservative psychotherapy believes that the human organism, the human psyche, and human development are determined by their biological and psychological organisation. As such, they reflect a human nature that underlies and underpins cultural differences. Conservative psychotherapy can become militantly monocultural in its quest for scientific status and scientific respectability. Psychoanalysis is well known for its cultural imperialism, selectively using cross-cultural data to support the existence of a universal, 'transcultural' psyche.

Conservative psychotherapists deny both the need and the right to impose their beliefs and values on their client, and they certainly don't want their client's beliefs and values imposed on them. They distrust the projective energy of evangelistic idealism and utopian social movements, and they are quick to notice that often when psychotherapy wears its values on its sleeve, the quality of the work goes down. Conservative psychotherapists consider that naive sincerity on the part of the therapist constrains and limits the spaciousness of the therapeutic environment. The client may be forced to adapt their beliefs and values to harmonize with their therapist's beliefs and values. Anonymity and silence protect the therapist but they also protect the client from the therapist. When the therapist remains reticent and opaque, the client's transparency is backlit. Plenty of space is preserved in which to explore and make sense of the client's experience.

Liberal psychotherapy

If God the father is a psychoanalyst, God the Son is a charmingly informal and warm liberal, humanist. The basic conviction of liberal, humanistic psychotherapy is a two-fold optimism: developmentally, babies are born good, and therapeutically, it's never too late to have a happy childhood, to make up for at least some of what one missed. This positions the liberal psychotherapist in the place of a good enough parent, a primary caregiver who makes provision for and creates a set of facilitative conditions in which growth and development can resume their natural course. Most psychotherapists today embrace this liberal view. Although we are sojourners in the shadowlands, often deeply immersed in the inhumanity that is the

lesser part of our humanity, we also witness enough positive transformations to keep our faith in the basic goodness of creation, to believe in the existence of human worth and dignity, and the ultimate triumph of love over hate.

There are some important dialectical differences between conservative and liberal. Here are three: Firstly, in contrast to the classical analytic orthodoxy that loss cannot be repaired but only grieved and resolved through the work of mourning; the liberal psychotherapist attunes to the client's inner child and works to retrieve developmental potential which is dormant but not dead. Secondly, the conservative psychotherapist holds that psychotherapy is akin to basic research: an investigation conducted by means of a method, carefully and consistently applied. The client is free to do as they please with the results of this investigation. The liberal psychotherapist regards psychotherapy as second-chance learning and second-chance growing up. Here the role of the therapist is at least as important as the method, and the therapist has role responsibilities similar to those of a parent and teacher. Good clinical outcomes depend upon the psychotherapist's ability to role model, facilitate, and teach, whatever is developmentally needed and will assist the client to grow. A diversity of methods can be employed to serve this single aim and liberal psychotherapy is often associated with an eclectic or integrative approach to practice. Thirdly, the liberal agenda represents a significant advance in the psychotherapist's sense of social responsibility. It demonstrates a commitment to include ourselves as part of the social fabric, to belong to and participate in the communities that we serve. It leads to a code of practice that aspires to be inclusive and non-discriminatory. Again we discover the dialectic between conservative and liberal psychotherapy in the tension between perfecting the art of serving those clients we serve best because they are already so familiar to us, versus risking incompetence as we learn to imagine the other in order to serve those clients who are less familiar to us and less known by us.

Radical Psychotherapy

Not surprisingly, psychotherapy appears shockingly different from a radical point of view than it does from either a conservative or a liberal perspective. From the far side of the dialectic, conventional psychotherapy has a lot to answer for. Private practice is a cozy niche market: white, urban, middleclass, Eurocentric, boutique, and bourgeois. We have had one hundred years of psychotherapy and the world is getting worse. Psychotherapy has huge potential but most of this is unrealized. To realize this potential, or even to begin to ask the right questions, we need to radically expand the frame

of psychotherapy to include all six billion people on the planet. The proper context for psychotherapy is not just our tribe, our culture, our civilization, but the fate of the earth and all its creatures. Five out of six people on the planet are not middleclass. The vast majority are not white. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, the majority of psychotherapists are tau iwi: English, North American and European immigrants. Many are Pākehā born here, few are non-white, and almost none are indigenous Tangata Whenua. If psychotherapy is ever to learn to serve a wider clientele, it must learn how to move beyond its cultural self-involvement and self-absorption. Longer-term, the future of psychotherapy will depend upon our ability to imagine the other beyond the orbit of our own assumptions, and to develop effective partnership relationships with the other, in their difference from, as well as in their similarity to us. We can defend the goodness of what we already do well, but we can also choose to develop understanding and enthusiasm for new possibilities.

Radical psychotherapy is values-driven, attracted to congruence with positive ego ideals that can be distinguished from the oughts and shoulds imposed by the superego. Radical psychotherapy is unashamedly partisan and pro client. It privileges the emancipatory agenda above the therapist's role or method. However, this investment in the client's liberation does not mean, as is so often supposed, that psychotherapy becomes social work or confines itself to being merely supportive. Psychotherapy continues to take place in a protected, private space, rather than in the world at large. It continues to value intimacy, acute self-observation, and in-depth exploration of past and present psychodynamics. But radical psychotherapy maintains an acute awareness of the effects of its social context and social positioning. It does not justify its working assumptions as inherent to the practice of psychotherapy, pre-determined, necessary, or necessarily beneficial. It may be steered and conducted differently from more conventional therapies, as the therapist relinquishes the comfort and safety of opaque practice and established method, in favour of genuine power sharing with the client. Sharing power is only possible when therapy is able to foreground twin subjectivities, when authenticity is required of the therapist as well as the client. In contrast to opaque conservative practice in which I wait until I can offer the right interpretation, or translucent liberal practice in which I turn profile and show my good side, radical therapy aims at, without ever reaching, full transparency.

Authenticity, being real, is the key to allowing two co-equal subjectivities to fully engage. This can be very uncomfortable. A process of two people

getting real with each other does not always work out. The preservation of the therapeutic space and the stability of the working alliance may be severely tested. But radical therapy is determined to narrow the gap between how we talk about clients, and how we talk to them. Some of my recent experiments in becoming more transparent have caused me insecurity. I fear being exposed and attacked for what I really think and feel, without the buffer of my familiar role and method. The interesting thing about this is that my clients tend to feel empowered, and more secure, at the very moment that I feel disempowered and less secure. Of course too much self-disclosure on the therapist's part is problematic, but so is defensive opacity and anonymity. Answering a question with a question is handy, often therapeutically productive, but it is also an avoidance of contact and a power play. Clients can learn to appreciate the benefits of allowing their therapist to remain anonymous, but so can therapists learn to appreciate fronting up when asked to do so by their clients. A partnership model of psychotherapy implies dual controls and the necessity of periodic negotiation with our co-pilot.

Radical developmental theory is also significantly different from the developmental assumptions of conventional psychotherapy. Again, very briefly, conservative psychotherapy holds that where id was, there ego shall be. The ideal is to develop good self-control and a strong sense of personal identity. Liberal psychotherapy holds that where superego was, there ego shall be. The guiding ideal here is self-love and self-acceptance. Radical psychotherapy holds that 'me' is also 'us' and 'I' can become 'we'. A mature alternative to individualism is the concept of 'intentional community', which is potentially a path to better functioning and greater satisfaction with life. In this way radical psychotherapy claims its pedigree as real psychotherapy and demands Trinitarian integration with its Holy Others.

Conservative psychotherapy has traditionally held its monoculturalism closely and defensively. We have something valuable to offer. Let them come to us if they want it. The problem with this assumption is that most people will never arrive in the first place and so never benefit. In place of this, liberal psychotherapy proposes an easy multiculturalism. Everyone is different, unique and special, no one group better or worse than another. We just need to come together and work through our differences and misunderstandings, retract our projections, learn respect and tolerance for each other. The problem of course is that the playing field on which this dialogue is meant to occur is desperately un-level. If 'fair' means socially sanctioned privilege or a single standard applied equally to everyone, justice is a fiction. The tyranny of the dominant culture is guaranteed by pre-existing structural inequality

and inequity, and the hegemony of dominant cultural assumptions that both consciously and unconsciously colonize us and them.

Both self-oppression and the oppression of the other, regularly follow certain structural fault lines. Psychotherapy has discovered an important fault line running through the heart of the family. Parents replicate their childhood and colonize their children despite their best efforts not to do so. Children colonize themselves out of love and loyalty to their families. As Freud taught us in *The Ego and the Id* and elsewhere, the child's ego, the individual 'I' self that we equate with personal identity is founded on a bedrock of self-oppression. However, acknowledging the truth of this does not require us to subscribe to tragic individualism and colonial melancholy. Rather, we need to appreciate that liberation from oppressive family dynamics, past and present, is only one category of freedom. Liberation from oppressive social and cultural dynamics, past and present, is another, and the ongoing reality of this oppression is highly relevant to the practice of psychotherapy. We do not need to limit our practice to clients from our own culture and background. Often it is extremely helpful, even liberating for clients to work with someone really different from themselves. But when the overwhelming majority of psychotherapy practitioners are white, cultural safety for non-white clients is a virtual impossibility. As long as psychotherapy continues to represent the perspectives and assumptions of the dominant, colonizing culture, good psychotherapy for indigenous people is unlikely. Nor will liberal guilt do much to remedy this. When we apologize, plead ignorance, and ask for forgiveness, we eventually feel victimized and resentful, which leads on to further aggressive assertions of our own cultural validity. A forward path out of this vicious cycle is active partnership, a commitment to acquaint ourselves with the culture and the cultural unconscious of the other and to draw closer, bring them to us, into our midst as fellow practitioners. Biculturalism is a deliberate choice for us. As members of the dominant culture, we receive plenty of encouragement to remain monocultural unless we actively choose otherwise. For *Tangata Whenua*, by contrast, biculturalism is normal and necessary, not even remotely a matter of choice.

Bicultural psychotherapy

The radical psychotherapist is passionately motivated by a pragmatic idealism, a powerful desire to live her or his psychotherapy values more fully in the real world and to generate better real-world outcomes for a wider range of clients. Biculturalism offers a radical critique of psychotherapy. It may threaten conventional ideas about psychotherapy, polarizing us into positions

of for and against. However, it can also offer us a valuable perspective on psychotherapy and may even help us develop new paradigms for our practice. We can predict that a new bicultural paradigm of psychotherapy will be spiritually awake and alert and will risk taking our own and our client's spiritual inventory. It will also take responsibility for its politics, its ecology, and its domain of social responsibility. Therefore, it will be critical of the profound and deleterious effects of globalism, capitalism and corporate domination, on individuals, families and communities. Bicultural psychotherapy will hold its radical ideal of justice with conviction and pride. It will commit itself to protect the wellbeing of those who cannot readily fend for themselves. It will advocate restorative rather than retributive justice. It will value and uphold what is local, native, indigenous and unique to our land, and our people. It will be an effective way of loving and honouring Aotearoa New Zealand.

These are all kaupapa Maori values, but they are kaupapa psychotherapy values as well. They assume a decentred, integrated, holographic universe in which energy flows through and binds all things, a universe in which we mutually regulate each other's physiology and psyche, a universe in which our breath is shared and our common fate and future intertwines. We can hold our values and beliefs spaciously enough to leave room for our clients to discover their own values and beliefs, but we cannot disown what we value and believe, without paying a price that is both unacceptable and unnecessary.

The challenge of radical psychotherapy offers a compelling reason to risk disquiet and discomfort. Psychotherapy fulfills itself in the moment that we find ourselves able to integrate and live our truth. The dream of psychotherapy is born in the hope that this integration is possible, and realized in the evidence that this integration is already occurring. We could not be content to embrace a lesser hope for our own profession.

References

- Freud, Sigmund (1923), *Das Ich und das Es*, Leipzig, Vienna, and Zurich: Internationaler Psycho-analytischer Verlag, English translation (1927), *The Ego and the Id*, Joan Riviere (trans.), London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis.