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PSYCHOTHERAPY AND POSTMODERNISM: AGENCY, AUTHENTICITY AND ALIENATION IN CONTEMPORARY THERAPEUTIC DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT Since the advent of postmodernism, terms like agency, authenticity and alienation have fallen into disuse in psychotherapeutic discourse. The causes and consequences of this profound semantic shift are examined. While postmodernism has contributed considerably to our understanding of the impact of language and of power relations on society, it has little or nothing to say on the subject of human needs, which provided the original impetus for 'critical theory', historically, and is still vital to fostering our patients' welfare.

Key words: agency; authenticity; alienation; encounter groups; multiple selves; singularity; ethics

When I was a child, two Jewish comics, Wayne and Shuster, performed a memorable parody of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde on CBC television. In the opening scene, Dr Jekyll is surrounded by a crowd of eminent doctors, propounding his thesis that, at bottom, we are all really two people: one angelic and/or conventional, the other demonic and anti-social. In the ensuing discussion, Dr Jekyll's medical colleagues heap scorn on him and, after exchanging insults, leave in a huff. But his friendly solicitor – who narrates Dr Jekyll's tragic downfall – stays behind, and warmly confides that he thoroughly agrees with Dr Jekyll's assessment of our condition. 'Good', says Jekyll, 'that makes four of us.'

Here in North America, debates in the mental health field – including, but not limited to, the practice of psychotherapy – are often couched in terms of the (real or alleged) tensions between modernism and postmodernism. But what exactly is postmodernism? Strictly speaking, postmodernism is merely one of many trends in Continental philosophy that migrated to our shores in the late 1970s and 1980s, including structuralism and poststructuralism, deconstructionism and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

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On arrival here, these new schools of thought intermingled with indigenous philosophical orientations such as pragmatism and constructivism to spawn new hybrid forms, many of which now possess a distinctly American inflection.

Nevertheless, rightly or wrongly, in the United States, *all* of these theoretical approaches are often subsumed under the label of 'postmodernism', or alternatively, of 'theory' in casual conversation. And, although different, in many ways these approaches do share some common characteristics. Unlike modernism, with its characteristic emphasis on selfhood, singularity, authenticity and agency, postmodern theory emphasizes the social construction and social embeddedness of all personal identities, and the role of *difference* and/or 'otherization', which render the experience of the other(s) opaque, inaccessible or in a word, incommunicable to those who do not share their (culturally constructed) window on reality. Whereas modernism is usually committed to some notion of 'objective' truth, adherents of the 'postmodern' perspective usually question or deconstruct all 'grand' or 'master narratives' that attempt to impart a sense of coherence to the world, to personal experience, or even to literary texts by stressing the ambiguities of language, and the elements of radical contingency, heterogeneity and discontinuity that characterize human existence.

While extremely popular, in some circles, many theories of this kind are also extremely problematic and fraught with polemics that generate more heat and smoke than actual light. Moreover, many of the ideas featured in postmodern approaches to psychotherapy were actually anticipated by European psychoanalysts and psychiatrists who identified with existentialism and phenomenology several decades before. For example, the later Heidegger laid the foundation for much postmodern thinking through his emphasis on the disclosing and constitutive roles of language, and his evident mistrust of human agency (Burston, 2000). Similarly, Sartre's critique of Husserl's transcendental ego anticipates the postmodern attack on the Cartesian ego (Sartre, 1996). Despite his critique of Husserl, in the final analysis, Sartre held all of us ultimately responsible for *all* of our choices, regardless of how often or ingeniously we avoid confronting them in 'bad faith' (Sartre, 1956). In a slightly different vein, Martin Buber always emphasized the concrete and irreducible reality of the 'Other' – although, unlike most postmodern theorists, he believed that genuine dialog and 'meeting' between self and other can (and must) take place across cultural and linguistic boundaries (Avnon, 1998; Buber, 2002).

So, to sum up, despite some significant differences in emphasis, theorists working in the existential-phenomenological tradition retained a concept of an experiencing self that is capable of agency and choice, and of meeting the 'Other' humanly, without reducing him or her to a bundle of preconceived categories. By their account, we are not 'externally' determined, purely self-determined or even 'overdetermined' by a confluence of unconscious (or 'instinctual') forces. We are codetermined and codetermining, shaping the environments that shape us in turn. And though we are fundamentally relational beings, we are never *wholly* determined by the contexts in which we exist. Agency remains a vital part of the dialectic that shapes (and deforms) human subjectivity.

By contrast, postmodern theorists and therapists mistrust talk of personal agency as evidence of a lingering Cartesian rationalism, and emphasize the constitutive (or determining) power of language, ideology, power structures, and so on. Sadly, the fractured, discontinuous and radically decentered universe that postmodernism describes,

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where truth is elusive or irrelevant, and our collective definitions of reality hinge on power relations, cunning simulations and the ruses of language, eerily reflects the contours of contemporary social realities. In this sense, of course, postmodernism rings 'true', even if characterizing it in this way has little real meaning in a discourse in which the notion of truth itself is moot.

Having said that, the fact remains that in order to be effective psychotherapists, we must step back a bit from postmodern theory to recapture a sense, if not of 'wholeness', then perhaps of human *possibility* in a less alienated and socially fragmented world than the one in which we live (Laing, 1967). This desideratum dawns on us when we ponder the intrinsic incompatibility between postmodernism's epistemic attack on the subject, which informs so much postmodernist and poststructuralist philosophy, and the actual practice of psychotherapy, which presupposes the existence of an experiential subject. Why? Because when all is said and done, the ability to organize experience and pursue a course of action is dependent on the existence of a person for whom that experience takes place, and for whom choice has (actual and potential) consequences. Without the existence of a person who changes, develops, learns and decides, the therapeutic process loses its intelligibility and fundamental *raison d'être*, and threatens to dissolve into endless talk about language, ideology and impersonal social forces that function as automatisms outside the person's awareness or control. Indeed, if we do not factor personal agency and responsibility for one's choices into the therapeutic dialogue, the person becomes reduced to the plaything of impersonal social forces like language, ideology, power and so on, and we run the risk of accentuating the patient's or client's sense of powerlessness, irrelevance and hopelessness.

AGENCY, AUTHENTICITY AND MULTIPLE SELVES

Despite the efforts and ideas of their existential forbears, postmodern theorists and therapists often construe ongoing concern with personal agency as antithetical to an approach that invites exploration of unconscious motivations, and/or our embeddedness in social, political, and linguistic contexts beyond our control or outside of our awareness. According to this stereotype, the very notion of agency or individuality implies an ideology – *individualism* – which denigrates or downgrades the social and cultural dimensions of human existence.

The problem with this argument is that it confounds the ideology of individualism with the deeply rooted experience and expression of individuality. The two are not co-extensive, and in fact, may be starkly opposed. As Erich Fromm noted long ago, in *Escape From Freedom*, America's overt emphasis on individualism as a rationale for many of its prevalent policies and practices is flatly at odds with a coercive culture of conformity that blunts and erodes the experience and expression of genuine individuality in our midst. By Fromm's reckoning, real individuality flourished more in pre-industrial Europe than it did in the twentieth century in the US (Fromm, 1941).

On a slightly different note, Stephen Mitchell objected that the concept of agency is suspect because it is connected with the dubious notion of an integral and continuous self (Mitchell, 1993). Mitchell cited Thomas Ogden, an influential analyst who notes that 'the very sense of being an agent who does things may be missing in more disturbed patients (living in the paranoid-schizoid position); they experience feelings and thoughts as happening to them rather than as generated by them' (Mitchell, 1993, 109). Nevertheless, says Mitchell, while some

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sense of personal agency may be a hallmark of mental health 'it seems strained to assume that the self (agent) that is experienced after analysis has facilitated the integration of experiences was there, although disclaimed, all along' (Mitchell, 1993, 110).

Interestingly, Mitchell also questioned the idea of authenticity. In this he took a cue from Fromm's erstwhile friend, Harry Stack Sullivan, who said that 'the overweening conviction of authentic individual selfhood . . . amounts to a delusion of unique individuality' (Sullivan, 1950), adding elsewhere that '. . .no such thing as the durable, unique, individual personality is ever clearly justified. For all I know, every human being has as many personalities as he has interpersonal relations' (Sullivan, 1950, 16 and 221). Echoing Sullivan's remarks, Mitchell (1993, 131) wrote that: 'the sense of authenticity is always a construction, and as a construction, is always relative to other possible self-constructions at any particular time.'

What was Mitchell up to here? If I read him rightly, Mitchell's aim was to free the notion of authenticity from any explicit connection with a single core of selfhood. This expedient frees us from the problem of locating a core of selfhood – which is inherently quite difficult because self-experience is always and inevitably in flux – while still leaving the concept of authenticity with some tentative or residual validity, as one possible 'construct' among many. But on reflection, this is no solution at all. If we harbor (or consist in) multiple selves, who is to say which – if any – is more 'authentic' than the others? Perhaps they are all equally authentic – or inauthentic, as the case may be – rendering efforts to discriminate between authentic or inauthentic attitudes, expressions or insights irrelevant or otiose.

Sullivan's contention that we have as many selves as we have roles or relationships, which was quite radical in the 1930s, vividly anticipated postmodernism (Gergen, 1994). But it was also quite consistent with the ideas of Sullivan's celebrated contemporary, Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello. An intuitive psychologist on a par with Nietzsche, Pirandello's plays are highly recommended to anyone interested in these issues. But though his works were the product of genius, Pirandello was no clinician, and therefore not obliged to theorize about his craft in a reasonably cogent and systematic fashion. Moreover, his plays, while riveting, were not intended to ameliorate mental suffering, diminish self-deception, or enhance a person's prospects for achieving lasting intimacy or self-acceptance.

Clinicians, by contrast, always keep these goals in mind, and to be credible, must explain themselves and their work to others. If pressed, I think, most clinicians will admit that devising a working theory along these lines is a very daunting prospect. After all, the customary treatment for severe dissociative disorders labeled 'multiple personality disorder' is reduce the number of 'selves' the patient has to a minimum – preferably, to one – and the emergence of each auxiliary 'self' historically is usually explained retroactively as a response to severe trauma or stress. But even in instances where the internal multiplicity is deemed natural or normal, rather than a pathogenic adaptation to an oppressive environment, situational or 'fractal selves' (Gergen) must be endowed with 'personality' – distinctive attitudes, values, memories and modes of relatedness to their surroundings that endure over time. And if we harbor multiple selves or 'self-states', as Bromberg (1997), for example, suggests, we have to take a cue from the field of dissociative disorders, and devise a theory that accounts for the ways in which our various subselves coexist – how they compete with, inhibit or promote one another, how they avoid, contain or deflect friction when

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they harbor conflicting agendas, and so forth. If so, we must prepare for a radical shift in perspective, since the intersubjective field in 'one-on-one' therapy could no longer consist of anything as quaint or old fashioned as a simple dyad. Instead, we would need a model that would describe the interactions of internal coalitions and 'outgroups' among the various situational 'selves' that supposedly comprise each of us.

For example, consider a 'dialog' between a therapist who, for sake of clarity and convenience, we will call Jack 1, Jack 2 and Jack 3, and a patient – Jill 1, Jill 2, Jill 3, Jill 4 and 5. In a theoretical framework that encompassed and explained the (inner and interpersonal) transactions of multiple selves, a therapeutic alliance would be construed as a kind of coalition or 'social contract' between Jack 1 and 2, and the one hand, and Jill 2, 4 and 5, on the other. As a result 'inner conflicts', transference, resistance and so on, or indeed any discomfort or turbulence in the flow of conversation could be now attributed, for example, to conflicts between Jack 3, (who really wants to be an artist, not a therapist), and Jill 1, whose attitude toward therapy is essentially non-cooperative. (Jill 3 is not actually *against* therapy, merely non-committal for the time being.) Qualitative changes in the experience and the tone of the therapeutic relations, positive or negative, could then be expressed as the result of internal mediation and negotiation, as for example, when Jill 3 resolves her issues with Jack 3, and joins Jill, 2, 3, 4 and 5 in the working alliance with Jack's several selves, with Jill 1 effectively overruled, occasionally stirring up a mild fuss or delivering an angry 'minority report'.

Similarly, discrepant communications and mixed messages from patients could be now reframed in terms of fractal selves that are working at cross-purposes. So, for example, while Jill 1 said something revealing and potentially quite illuminating about an intimate interlude with Jim, her significant other, to Jack 1, Jill 3 may have signaled Jack 2 nonverbally – by her bored or hostile expression, her furtive eye movements or restless hands – that *she* took a very different view of Jim during this significant exchange. After all, once we admit of the existence of multiple selves, there is no longer any need – or indeed, any justification – to invoke old-fashioned ideas like deception or self-deception anymore. Similarly, concepts like 'ambivalence' and 'transference', that entail conflicts and/or projections between more or less durable selves, become obsolete. So if Jill 1 is annoyed when Jack 1 notes the apparent discrepancies between 'her' verbal statements and 'her' non-verbal behavior, she is presumably entitled to be angry, having intended 'her' non-verbal communications for Jack 3, the frustrated artist, not Jack 1. And so on.

Obviously, if this is direction we are going in, the possibilities for confusion, mystification and misunderstanding that inhere in *any* dyadic situation suddenly increase exponentially. That being so, the onus is now on those who believe in multiple selves to develop a theory of dizzying complexity to render these transactions – 'inner' and 'interpersonal' – intelligible. Is such a theory even possible? If we look to precedent, we discover that something similar was implied in the 'transactional analysis' of Eric Berne, which was immensely popular during the 1960s and 1970s (Berne, 1960). But Berne limited his analysis of 'ego states' that obtain in the therapeutic dyad to three per person. Can a newer, better theory accommodate more? Perhaps, if we have recourse to algebra and set theory. But if we go that route, we are violating Ockham's rule, which states: 'Do not multiply hypothetical entities unnecessarily'. For as Pirandello aptly said: 'I am not one; I am millions', which means

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that, in principle, we must prepare for a potentially indefinite proliferation of new 'selves', depending on what changing circumstances demand or evoke in us. But are these truly new selves, or instances of what Hegel (1967) termed the 'alienated reduplication of consciousness' that besets a 'divided self'? If these are indeed new selves, rather than aspects or attributes of a divided self, we have to dispense with the hope of privileging any of them as being more authentic that the others, regardless of what patients themselves may feel.

Some critics will object that my objections are completely misplaced, because the therapeutic dyad is likely to remain fairly stable and simple, since the traits and attitudes associated with a therapist's role-bound self and those that pertain to the patient's role-bound self will presumably persist as long the therapy itself did. By this account, the patient's (or client's) other selves would merely 'show up' in therapy anecdotally, as it were. This objection entails the idea that selves are always context-dependent and relationship specific – that they lack any enduring or invariant characteristics that persist across social contexts and relationships. But this claim, while cogent enough, as far as it goes, ultimately fails to persuade, because it begs the fundamental question of how positive changes that occur in therapy can have a lasting impact on the all the patient's *other* role- and context-dependent selves – unless, of course, there really is some relatively cohesive superordinate entity that is capable of animating and altering the other context-dependent selves. In other words, even if we accept the notion of multiple constructed self-states, this self-system relies on an underlying strand of continuity – or perhaps, of co-inherence – that stands in the way of psychic disintegration and allows for greater self-knowledge and self-command over time. Otherwise, how is change even possible? So, on reflection, if we drop the idea of a relatively coherent or singular self, it is not just transference and ambivalence that go by the board. Older, more basic philosophic concepts like self-knowledge and self-deception become moot, if not completely untenable. So do ideas like self-possession and self-control, and with them the notion of individual responsibility (Martin, 2000).

So at the end of day, a theory of multiple selves that could accommodate and explain all these contingencies in the therapeutic dialog is likely to generate more problems than it solves. In the long run, it is more prudent, more parsimonious and above all more cogent to posit the existence of a single self – however multivalent, paradoxical, ambivalent, or ambiguous it may be. And needless to say, the notion that selfhood really does exist does not compel the conclusion that the self is ever completely known, or even knowable in its entirety – whether by oneself or by others. There are regions of the soul that, for one reason or another, seldom surface for inspection, and others that are forever shrouded in mystery, at least as far as consciousness is concerned – unless or until some novel stimulus or exigency rouses it to action.

There is another problem with the theory of multiple selves, which is clearly foreshadowed in H. S. Sullivan's declaration that 'the overweening conviction of authentic individual selfhood . . . amounts to a delusion of unique individuality'. Just like Sullivan, many contemporary theorists run the risk of reducing the subject (and subjectivity in general) to the by-products of relationships, social contexts or linguistic constructs. But much as we esteem and explore the enduring impact of the patient's enveloping social context on his or her thoughts, feelings and behavior, a lucid appreciation of human singularity should be a matter of ultimate concern for any psychotherapist. And many seasoned thera-

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pists will attest that a deepened or renewed awareness of our singularity can be a potent and potentially transformative therapeutic experience, especially in those for whom it was absent or relatively weak beforehand. Realizing that I have but one life to live, that no one experiences or acts in the world in precisely the same way I do, and that no one else is responsible for the choices I make imparts a much greater sense of urgency, clarity and resolve to the lives of people who are simply 'muddling through', or wallowing in fear, indecision and self-pity.

Admittedly, like many movements that preceded it – yoga, Christianity, psychoanalysis, Marxism and so on – postmodernism is a big tent that contains many antithetical trends and ideas. So while some postmodernists emphasize the nullity of the human subject, others, following Levinas, now wax poetic about the irreducible Otherness of the other, and the ethical imperatives that flow inexorably from it (Levinas, 1974). But on whom are these ethical injunctions binding, if not on another *self* – an intrinsically necessary other to the 'Other', whose inherent singularity is as much a given as the irreducibility of the other Other? You cannot have it both ways. You cannot reduce the self entirely to a fluid multiplicity or a passive residuum that crystallizes in a linguistically or culturally constituted medium and still affirm the existence of human singularity. To affirm these principles simultaneously is simply incoherent. And though not intended in that spirit, perhaps, it is an affront to logic, and to human dignity.

WHITHER AUTHENTICITY? (WITHERED AUTHENTICITY . . .)

This brings us, willy-nilly, to the issue of authenticity. In the present climate of discussion, the notion of authenticity is often disparaged, or deemed synonymous with a theory of self-contained individuality, and consequently dismissed. Alternatively, authenticity is interpreted as a variant of the idea that we are coherent and continuous selves, rather than a series of discontinuous 'self-states' that are exquisitely context or state dependent (Bromberg, 1997). As a result, the concept of authenticity is seldom addressed in terms of *embodied insight*. How did we arrive at this juncture?

One factor may be the scathing critique of Martin Heidegger and 'the jargon of authenticity' found in the work of Theodor Adorno (Jay, 1984). Besides, fans of the later Heidegger, whose ideas on language provide so much inspiration for postmodernism, disparage or dismiss his earlier remarks on authenticity because of their linkage with his Nazi past (Jay, 1973; Wolin, 1993). But these caveats apply in the realm of philosophy and social theory, and have more relevance to the European context where these debates started. Here in the US, there are additional reasons for the deep-seated tendency to disparage or dismiss all talk of authenticity. Though this may not be evident to people under 50, who have no memory of such things, another reason for the mistrust of the concept of authenticity in the 1980s was the growing disenchantment with the human potential movement, and for the 'group encounter' and 'sensitivity sessions' that were in vogue during the 1960s and 1970s. While the notion of authenticity was seldom dignified with anything as pedestrian as a straightforward definition then, many people who led or participated in these groups used this word freely, and implied that authenticity was a precious but elusive commodity that had long since been banished from the numbing routine and shabby compromises of daily life and of organized religion, but was conveniently manufactured and rendered available on site in these group settings. Though comparatively rare, nowadays, these groups were once immensely

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popular, and penetrated every aspect of life – business, theater, education, worship – and promised much, much more than they could actually deliver (Milton, 2002). One astute critic, the inimitable Sigmund Koch, lashed out bitterly against the human potential movement (Koch, 1971), saying that it

> . . .is adept at the image-making maneuver of evading human reality in the very process of seeking to discover and enhance it. It seeks to court spontaneity and authenticity by artifice; to combat instrumentalism instrumentally; to provide access to experience by reducing it to a packaged commodity; to liberate individuality by group shaping. Within the lexicon of its concepts and methods, openness becomes transparency; love, caring and sharing become a barter of 'reinforcements' or perhaps mutual ego-titillation; aesthetic receptivity or immediacy becomes 'sensory awareness'. It can provide only a grotesque simulacrum of every noble quality it courts. (Koch, 1971, 315–16)

While many people cringe at the severity of this sweeping dismissal, and recognize that many facilitators in these groups were well intended, and occasionally quite insightful, I freely confess that most of my experiences in groups like these are effectively summed up in Koch's characterization. As a result of these 'happenings', the word 'authenticity' was on everyone's lips, and could mean almost anything – from a vicious attack of ill temper to an indiscriminate faith in the inherent goodness of total strangers. No wonder it became a focus for skepticism and derision in the decades that followed! This kind of authenticity is obviously quite contrived and short-lived, and needs to be differentiated from the more meaningful kind of authenticity that deepens with genuine insight.

ALIENATION

So far I have addressed the themes of agency and authenticity, selfhood and singularity – terms that have all but vanished from the postmodern lexicon. Another word that was once in vogue, but lost clarity and credibility as it gained increasing currency during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, is 'alienation.' During the Cold War era, alienation was a subject of lively philosophical reflection among Hegelian-Marxists like Jean Hyppolite and Herbert Marcuse, who sought a kind of Freud-Marx synthesis as a basis for critical philosophy. During this same period, the concept of alienation was introduced to psychotherapists by Erich Fromm and RD Laing, who conjoined their ideas about alienation with illuminating reflections on Western spirituality and mysticism, and on Asian philosophy and spiritual practices.

Given how central it was to therapeutic discourse a half-century ago, the paucity of reflection on alienation in the therapeutic literature today is simply breathtaking. It is especially noteworthy because the concept of alienation served as a conceptual bridge that facilitated lively commerce between psychology and psychiatry, on the one hand, and the social sciences on the other. Nowadays, when many psychotherapists have discovered – or merely rediscovered – the importance of spirituality and of social context, the traffic between these various disciplines is almost always routed through different discursive pathways pertaining to gender, power and difference. Why?

One reason is that the many of the most profound and prolific writers in this genre where associated with 'Marxist humanism', a movement that has dwindled in cultural importance since the fall of the Soviet Union (Fromm, 1965). After all, Hippolyte, Marcuse and Fromm all spoke with great clarity and conviction, indicting Soviet Marxism as a vulgar and reductionistic distortion of Marx's thought. Their forthright condemnation of Soviet Marxism (and its derivative offshoots) was a tonic to progressive people of all stripes who sought to

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understand the relationship between psyche and society. But those days are long gone. Was Marx right or wrong, prescient or off the mark in this respect – or that? Were his self-appointed followers faithful to his message or did they distort his message and ideas? Nowadays, when Marxism in *any* form is neither a tangible threat nor a credible alternative to capitalism, the most common response to questions like this is – who cares?

In addition to being perceived as irrelevant, the word 'alienation' has become positively anathema to the many who embrace a 'postmodern' sensibility. For like the word authenticity, it appears to imply to existence of an essential human nature or a core of personal selfhood from which one becomes estranged, perhaps as a prelude to a return or recovery of one's original ground. It is also associated with the idea of 'humanism', which many theorists deem antiquated and parochial. But once again, we are in danger of losing the baby with the bath water. As was the case with the agency and authenticity, recent trends have blinded us to the enduring importance of this idea for psychotherapy.

Marx's concept of alienation was based on insights on the role of labor in human ontology gleaned from Hegel's master/slave dialectic, and applied to the political economy of Adam Smith and David Ricardo (Avineri, 1996; O'Neil, 1996). Like Hegel's Bondsman, said Marx, all workers spontaneously seek to 'objectify' their unique combination of mental and physical powers in the products of their labor. Moreover, the effort to 'objectify' oneself in this way is a form of self-affirmation or self-expression that is highly prized, unless the labor process itself becomes fragmented and degraded. Workers only become estranged from work, from others, from their own bodies and from nature itself, when work is reduced to a mere commodity, and they become mere 'labor power', or entities that are treated as being utterly expendable and virtually interchangeable with any number of their competitors in the labor market. Reduced to this level, their humanity is diminished, their individual contributions are not recognized, and the products of their labor are appropriated through violence, or through social practices that render them powerless to influence the process of production, the way their products are used or applied, and their own share in the rewards.

Though the burden of class divisions falls far more heavily on the poor, said Marx, capitalism constrains rich and poor alike to address their material needs in ways that violate or run contrary to their basic human needs. The main difference between the rich and the poor, apart from the possession of wealth, is that the wealthy usually place their own class interests ahead of their real human interests, while the poor, having nothing to lose, are capable of advancing the cause of general human emancipation. One of their tasks for the future, said Marx, will be to abolish the division between mental and physical labor that has reinforced class divisions since ancient times. If endowed with dignity and respect, physical labor need not be slavish, and mental labor need not be the province of the educated, the rich and the powerful alone.

Of course, Marx theorized while capitalism was still in its infancy. Psychotherapy was not yet invented, and even when it was, proletarians never sought psychotherapy in large numbers. Though they often come from working-class roots, today's dwindling, embattled middle class usually pursues some form of 'mental labor' for a living, so it is frequently forgotten that Marx was implicitly attacking the social practices that inscribe and perpetuate the Cartesian mind/body split, both in theory an in practice. In

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this, he anticipated many existential, phenomenological and postmodern theorists – a fact that is frequently forgotten nowadays. And while chartered accountants, software designers and academics tend to avoid the back-breaking physical work that their grandparents did, as a rule, they can be just as profoundly alienated from nature and their own bodies. And like their proletarian forebears, they often find that their work lacks meaning, or violates their conscience, or requires so much time that their families and communities are acutely frustrated by their frequent neglect.

So today's workers – poor and middle class – are just as likely to be alienated as their proletarian predecessors. But when we say that for many, if not most of our patients, their conditions of work tend to estrange them from their families, from their communities, from their bodies, or from their conscience, we are implying or inferring the existence of basic human needs that the patients in question must frustrate or forgo to fulfill his (or her) material needs. These basic human needs would presumably include needs for intimacy, for community involvement, for calm reflection and authentic self-disclosure, and so on. Or alternatively, if the patient's material needs are already well provided for but they continue to work incessantly, we can say that their work is now a *symptom* (rather than a cause) of their galloping self-estrangement.

HUMAN NEEDS AND HUMAN RIGHTS: THEORY AND THE SLEEP OF REASON

Postmodern therapists often balk at the mention of generic human needs, arguing that this way of framing things is essentialist – that it posits the existence of an immutable 'human nature' that is the same in everyone, everywhere; that it is a leveling concept that denies difference and multiplicity. But this is nonsense. Absent some fundamental bedrock of common needs and interests, it is difficult to imagine how humans could experience or cultivate empathy, solidarity or even communicate with one another. And where would that leave psychotherapy? Psychotherapy is both possible and necessary because we are profoundly alike in some ways, and yet profoundly different in others. There is no paradox, nor any hint of contradiction in this statement. Indeed, there is nothing in the attempt to elucidate the impact of unmet needs that negates human singularity, or compels the conclusion that we are somehow *more* alike than different. That criticism is simply a *non sequitur.* And no matter how frequently it is repeated with passionate conviction, in public or in print, it is *still* untrue.

This brings us to another complex issue: the role of freedom and human rights in the discourse of the mental health professions. Any analysis of fundamental freedoms or human rights must ultimately refer back to universal human needs to be coherent, or even truly persuasive. Human rights do not exist in a vacuum. Universal rights – like our rights to freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention, and so forth – are asserted on the basis of human needs and interests that we all presumably share.

Postmodernism has given us some illuminating reflections on the diverse expressions and intricacies of power and desire. But so far, it has had nothing illuminating to say about basic human needs. This situation would not be quite so odd if critical theory had not originally taken root in a frank appraisal of the tensions or disparities between (real or alleged) human needs and the prevailing cultural and economic constraints that obstruct or preclude their fulfillment (Jay, 1973). In social change, as in psychotherapy, theory was intended to shape

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and inform praxis, to foster the change and humanization of the social order. Now that theory's most advanced and influential practitioners have forgotten or discarded the original impetus – the engine that *drives* critical theory, historically – one wonders how long theory can coast along posing as an end in itself, or just as a means to academic advancement.

How did we arrive at this curious state of affairs? Marx and Freud were followers of the Enlightenment, and thought that the task of reason was to analyze and expose the ways in which society frustrates human needs and deforms human subjectivity in the interests of promoting greater freedom and creativity. But postmodernism picks up on the irrationalist impulse in Nietzsche, and concludes that reason is the enemy. According to Nietzsche – and by implication, Heidegger and Foucault – reason, or perhaps instrumental reason, is the expression of a latent will to power, and therefore an instrument or accomplice of power, not the enemy of ancient prejudices or arbitrary authority. And that much is true. Reason that is bereft of imagination and compassion, a sense of justice and of basic human decency, is indeed our enemy. It breeds obedience and conformity, builds engines of war and destruction, treats nature as so much raw material and has no respect for human life. But conversely, as Goya said, 'The sleep of reason breeds monsters' often in the form of irrational hatred and intolerance, a propensity to violence and deceit. In recent years, we have witnessed the impact that the loss or atrophy of reason (and the corresponding rise of religious fanaticism) has had on political life in America and around the world. Reason that is not divorced from the body or emotions, which is informed and infused with a lucid appreciation of human needs and interests, is something we should always cherish and support in our patients, especially when they are learning to understand and assert their own legitimate needs and interests. Indeed, it is a necessary ingredient in any meaningful and effective psychotherapy.

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