

## Book Review

JOCELYN CHAPLIN, Serpent Institute, London, UK

*Spectre of the Stranger: Towards a Phenomenology of the Stranger*. By Manu Bazzano. (2012). Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press. 144 pp.

Alain de Botton, the atheist philosopher, criticises those who think that psychotherapy has taken the place of religion. But his concern is with its branding “being depressive in its outward appearance. The priests had far better clothes, and infinitely better architecture” (2013, p. 23)! By contrast, Manu Bazzano, a psychotherapist, an ordained Zen Buddhist monk and lecturer, in his latest book, goes to the heart of the potential for a humanistic psychology/philosophy to fill the gap left by the decline of religion. He writes more of a way of being, in the flow. As he puts it, by “deconstructing the self we gain access to a disquieting and exhilarating fluidity. We enter the stream, an image shared by both the Buddha and Heraclitus.” (p. 11) This requires “a natural trust in the incessant renewal of life.” (p. 22) Bazzano refers to a radical ethics inspired by Emanuel Lévinas and the idea of locating ethics in phenomena themselves and in the face of the stranger. There is an obligation to the reality of the stranger in experience – which contrasts with dogmatic morality imposed from above; but is this enough ethical guidance for non-believers? Can we really live so lightly and poetically upon this Earth? In this erudite book Bazzano explores and plays with this possibility through the worlds of postmodern philosophy, person-centred therapy and Buddhism without the religious trappings.

This is a poetic book that in many ways defies definition and, as such, is impossible to summarise. Nevertheless, I pick out what I feel is the essence of the work, at least as seen through my particular spectacles. Bazzano presents a new radical ethics that goes beyond good and evil and the natural self as espoused by Carl Rogers. He describes a belief that the person’s tendency towards actualisation, becoming their real selves, combined with an internal locus of evaluation (trusting their own intuition/deepest judgements) leads naturally to social co-operation. This faith in humanity’s core provides a more spontaneous ethics than one based on ideological or tribal dictates. He notes that what people sometimes call modern ethics is actually still based on bourgeois ideology. The power of the patriarchal family lives on in many people’s unconscious minds. Being modern can also involve a multitude of aspirational desires and individual drives to climb ever higher in society. Indeed, capitalism itself is a paradigm for creating more and more exchange value out of everything. This idea, like other abstract ideas of “good”, dictates our everyday behaviour: we must buy the latest

\*Correspondence to: Jocelyn Chaplin, Serpent Institute, London, UK.  
E-mail: jochaplin@yahoo.com

version of the iPhone. The morality of giving to charity or being generous to a neighbour is but a superficial compensation for the underlying belief system of endless growth. Living from the core involves relating to the neighbour in an immediate, groundless space where identity no longer matters: in that place we *are* the other.

My only concern with this view is that most of us cover up this ideal or even real core with defences and thought patterns that interfere with the wild wisdom we all have underneath. Person-centred and other therapies aim to dissolve these blockages, but few people are deeply free enough to use radical ethics spontaneously. This has always been the stumbling block of Anarchist philosophy. It would work brilliantly if only everyone were psychologically free! We could trust our deepest intuition and be spontaneous in our compassion for others, our empathy, our fighting for justice, our support of the underdog, striving for balance inside and outside, etc.

This kind of ethics that comes from within is likened in the book to the creative process of the artist as she loses herself in her work, a process which Bazzano describes as living poetically. This aesthetic response and stance is not only about experiencing beauty but also about rebalancing where there is injustice. In this sense, there can be a critique from “below”, a personal response not motivated by ideology or liberal guilt and far removed from the laws of utilitarianism. Bazzano believes in questioning all power hierarchies. Somewhere at our core we may even have what I call an equalising instinct that responds spontaneously to extreme inequality.

It is from this place that our response to the stranger most genuinely comes. There is a natural responsibility to the other who, indeed, soon becomes no longer other. Fluid identities are a vital part of radical ethics as well as a sense of endless becoming. The difference between this kind of ethics and some anarchist approaches is that here there is more emphasis on solidarity with others and less on the autonomy of self, especially as there is no fixed self to be promoting. The self is so often defined in opposition to the other, usually as superior or inferior. This kind of inner hierarchy seems to disappear when we are in “flow”. When psychotherapy or counselling is working well we experience this state of being that I call deep equality (Chaplin, 2008). Something is happening beyond or below our separate identities. A trust in this process feels vital for our work, yet we are constantly being forced into identity boxes. What kind of therapist are you? How successful are you? By contrast, Bazzano writes of the permanent creativity in encounter with others: We are created by our response to the other.

In the wider perspective of global politics, Bazzano suggests that the same approach applies. Instead of Marx’s proletariat we have the marginalised, asylum seekers, economic migrants, the strangers of today. A religious or modern morality sees them in identity blocks of oppressed people; and, yes, of course it is vital to help from whatever perspective, but what this author and other postmodernists are saying is that we need to be in a space where we refuse rigid identities and respond from our core. It is not about “them” and “us”. We can co-create a groundless solidarity rather than provide help from above. New movements like Occupy (see Keys, 2012) and the transnational and various national Social Forums understand this instinctively and organisationally. They are profoundly suspicious of hierarchical attitudes such as the vanguard revolutionary parties of the old Left; at the same time, it is vital not to substitute the old vertical ways of organising with a false, horizontal unity. Bazzano describes the compulsion for unity as a desire to return to the womb, used by religions to provide comfort and safety. If a powerful person or group says we are all

one or all the same, can this be an appropriation of the other? On an everyday level is it simply being patronising? Truly to encounter the other in our separateness in the moment is the starting point for a new radical ethics and for psychotherapy.

This very scary trust in the stream of life and dissolution of identities may be the way forward, but for now perhaps we need belief systems to help us. Buddhism is one of these used by many atheists such as Bazzano; Taoism is another. Engels called it the dialectics of nature, the spirit within matter. However, we could also honour the stream itself as the flow of life between opposites, or the emergence of the unconscious opposite which Jung, borrowing from ancient Greek philosophy, called enantiodromia. These equalising rhythms are everywhere, from the breathing in and out of the universe and the wiggling of subatomic strings, to the flow of breath in and out of our human nostrils. We experience this rhythm every day of our lives. It is one very simple link to the ever-changing, ever-balancing dance that is life.

## REFERENCES

- Chaplin, J. (2008). *Deep equality: Living in the flow of natural rhythms*. O-books. Available from: <http://www.o-books.com/books/deep-equality>
- de Botton, A. (2013, 22 March). We have too often secularised badly. *New Statesman*, p. 26.
- Keys, S. (2012). Occupy London Stock Exchange Camp at St Paul's Cathedral, London, UK. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 10(1), 76–78.



**Jocelyn Chaplin** is an anarchist, feminist, psychotherapist and artist. She is the author of many books including *Deep Equality* (O-books, 2008). Her blog on Spirituality and Progressive Politics may be found at <http://jocelynchaplin.wordpress.com>. E-mail: [jochaplin@yahoo.com](mailto:jochaplin@yahoo.com)