

Therapy as Unconditional Hospitality

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ABSTRACT *The paper examines ideas of morality and ethics and their implications for contemporary psychotherapy. Drawing on Arendt's definition of the citizen, as well as on post-structuralism and Zen, it promotes a theory and practice of therapy inspired by radical ethics and the notions of unconditional hospitality and not-knowing. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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MORALITY AND ETHICS

Adding my own Johnny-come-lately slant to a philosophical dispute spanning millennia and its infinite and intricate ramifications, a few years ago I drew a distinction between *morality* and *ethics* (Bazzano, 2012). Briefly put, I define morality as adherence to the introjected norms of social life, a notion closely linked to Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* (usually rendered as “ethical order” from *sittlich*, customary, from the stem *Sitte*, meaning custom or convention). In contrast, I understand ethics as the attempt to respond to the real presence of another, which may or may not coincide with contingent norms – a reading informed by, if not entirely loyal to, Levinas's vision of ethics. Some may see the differentiation as didactic and artificial, even preposterous; in fact the two dimensions – obeisance to custom and existential response – tend to overlap and are not antithetical. I have found the demarcation useful in understanding how one conceptualises the practice of psychotherapy today and where its commitment and allegiances may rest.

Whereas observance of morality turns a person into a *bourgeois*, one who sees himself as an autonomous “I”, identical to himself and not readily aware of his own internal divisions and contradictions, the practice of ethics turns a person into a *citizen*, one who is able to feel and express solidarity and civic responsibility. I take a closer look at each of these.

THE BOURGEOIS

The term “bourgeois” may sound curious, even antiquated, now that it has been widely replaced in the English-speaking world with the more anodyne “middle-class”, a term often denoting “lifestyle”, reasonable affluence and a generic sense of belonging. The link between the two expressions is nonetheless apparent, with “bourgeois” offering us, I

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suggest, wider genealogical context and even a hint of faintly sinister commotions just beneath the bourgeois comfort sealed by home ownership, fashion and consumer choice. *Comfort* is in itself a key elaborate ideological construct of the bourgeoisie as a class, the “zero degree” and “surface of inscription” (Jameson, 2014, p. 64) which may permit the self to manage the turbulent onslaught of life and contemplate in quiet recollection its gilded acquisitions diligently hoarded from colonial exploits, wars, violent suppression of strikes, anti-Semitism, and racism. Contemplating the bourgeoisie’s innate “realism”, Marx and Engels were appalled *and* enthralled by its hard-heartedness; its unbending, monotheistic devotion to money (now rationalised as “the market”). Nothing whatsoever appears to stand in the way of this money-worshipping, ruthless lot. The bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels (1848) wrote,

has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. (pp. 15–16)

Since then, some have suggested, the bourgeois may have well become the universal human prototype. Pasolini (1972) wrote of the peculiar and disturbing phenomenon he named *bourgeois entropy*; the implosion of sheltered gratification – both self-protection and self-incarceration – elevating *misanthropy* (hatred of the other) and *misology* (hatred of conversation) to a complete way of being. In his lyrical, caustic prose, he depicted this peculiar tendency as nothing less than an anthropological sea-change, bringing about the elevation of the bourgeois to a universal human type.

Pasolini was killed in 1975; he did not experience the turn for the worse that this phenomenon would take in decades to come with the accelerated and unprecedented development of technology and managerialism. Nor could he have ever envisaged, as a secularist obliquely devoted to a heretical brand of religiosity, the ascendancy “the market” was to wield on large sections of the humanities – psychology included – which until then had maintained a precarious degree of autonomy.

Rooted in property, identity and territorial boundaries; variously exported via war, tourism and the efficient work of corporations; purporting the insidious ideology that declares the end of all ideologies (as well as the end of history), the bourgeois ideal now appears to rule unchallenged, give or take, that is, the now customary financial disaster, the findings of colossal misbehaving from the banks, the media, the security services, the police, and those in government. This “ideal” is deeply rooted in isolationism and pseudo-autonomy, just as it updates its lingo by waxing lyrical about “interconnectedness”, its very *raison d’être* is the refusal to acknowledge otherness, let alone encounter it. In *De l’Evasion*, a text originally published in 1935, Levinas wrote:

This conception of the “I” as self-sufficient is one of the essential marks of the bourgeois spirit and its philosophy. ... The bourgeois [spirit] has the audacious dreams of restless and enterprising capitalism. This conception presides over capitalism’s work ethic, its cult of initiative and discovery which aims less at reconciling man with himself than at securing for the unknowns of time and things. The bourgeois is essentially conservative, but it is a worried conservatism. The bourgeois man is concerned with business matters and science as a defence against things and all that is unforeseeable in them. His

instinct for possession is an instinct for integration, and his imperialism is a search for security. (Levinas, 1935/2003, p. 50)

The advent of the bourgeois in human anthropology is truly fascinating: this enigmatic and ravenous creature (that perhaps we all are) is capable of being sentimental *and* ruthless, idealistic *and* worldly (Moretti, 2013). *His* (for the bourgeois prototype is essentially male) mellifluous appearance on the stage of history did not, however, fool Nietzsche (1997), who was the first to regale the bourgeois with the soubriquet “cultured philistine” (*bildungsphilister*), flawlessly describing the smugness of those who eulogize art and morality while pursuing war, financial supremacy and ruthless exploitation of people and resources. It did not fool Hegel either, who saw in the conscientious reading of the morning newspaper the authentic bourgeois prayer. Hegel labelled “prose of the world” the fundamentally prosaic nature of bourgeois daily existence (Clemens, 2013), which may prompt us to fathom an alternative to homogenised existence in terms of creating a “poetry of the world” (Bazzano, 2014), an implicit declaration of one’s willingness to dwell poetically on Earth. This would mean, as we shall see, to aspire to live one’s life as a *citizen* rather than a bourgeois.

THE CITIZEN

If the bourgeois is the personification of private interests elevated to phenomenal heights, at the opposite pole we find Hannah Arendt’s (1998) notion of the *citizen*, the embodiment of a life spent not as a private “individual” but as a person with others. Whereas the bourgeois favours *private* interests, the citizen is dedicated to *public* interest. The public domain is not the mere sum of private interests, or their highest common denominator. The dimension of citizenship is by definition situated *beyond* the self; it is outside the limited span of my finite existence. Acknowledgement of the tangible existence of the public sphere is in itself a form of transcendence but one that is emphatically devoid of angelic visitations.

This notion of citizenship is also placed outside the “I–Thou” dimension, as Levinas (2008) pointed out, tirelessly highlighting how his own thinking was different from Buber’s (to no avail, it appears, considering how the two are nonchalantly conflated in contemporary psychotherapy literature). The notion of citizenship provides sufficient ethical ground on which self and other, client and therapist, can meet with respect, dignity and in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation, without recourse to those heightened moments of encounter cherished by the *cult of the relationship* and the philosophy of the meeting currently predominant in psychotherapeutic literature across theoretical orientations. Levinas makes no bones about it: one may wonder whether clothing the naked and feeding the hungry do not bring us closer to the neighbour than the rarefied atmosphere in which Buber’s meeting sometimes take place (Levinas, 2008).

Crucially for our times of “audience democracy” (Müller, 2014), with many of us becoming accustomed to applaud and boo and drop a vote or two into the hat of an officious-looking chancer, citizenship is at variance with hazardous notions of warmth, intimacy and so-called “authenticity”, the latter manipulatively exploited by political leaders and populist movements everywhere on the rise. Instead, it favours the principles of

cooperation, friendship and civility. For Arendt (1998) the values of authenticity and warmth cannot *really* become political. At heart she saw these as *replacement* for a primary loss in the public sphere, and the danger in bringing these into the communal domain is loss of fairness and of civic responsibility. Arendt's embracing of the public sphere is a compelling articulation of the great value of community, and provides us with the inspiration necessary to wrench this notion from the clutches of populist politics. Community provides us with the third missing link to Freud's formula for a meaningful life, namely "love and work", something which had already been emphasised by Adler in Freud's own times with the notion of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* or "community-feeling" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964).

It is also true that the embracing of an active communal life as a vocation risks remaining at the level of an "idealized political community in which all the actors have equal standing" (Sennett, 2012, p. 273). The aim is to translate the vocation into a viable and meaningful model. Richard Sennett has provided valuable insight:

We want to imagine ... a community as a process of coming into the world, a process in which people work out both the value of face-to-face relations and the limits on those relations. For poor or marginalized people, the limits are political and economic; the value is social. Though community cannot fill up the whole of a life, it promises pleasures of a serious sort. (*ibid.*, p. 273)

QUESTIONS FOR THERAPY

Having asked the reader to entertain the notion of morality as the province of the bourgeois and ethics as the practice of a citizen, I would now like to explore some of the hypothetical repercussions for therapy. What does a bourgeois, "moral" form of therapy look like, and what would be the characteristics of an ethical form of therapy inspired by the notion of citizenship? I believe these questions may be useful in reimagining the very role of psychotherapy, a profession presently undecided between providing metaphorical or factual sedatives and helping human beings to become freer and lead more meaningful lives (Bazzano, 2011a).

I realise the above sounds like an either/or position. Real work with real clients often does not allow for such a principled stance. At the same time, I do feel that the ethical foundations on which we base our practice must be in place *before* we experiment with eclecticism and so-called "pluralism". For instance, diagnosis is not by definition evil, nor does it need to be the exclusive province of psychiatry (Bazzano, 2011c), but there is a world of difference between seeing a human being as process, mystery, a messenger of infinity – as the other who summons me to respond to her tangible presence – and to conceive of a person as a cluster of drives, an assemblage of pathologies which needs to be sorted and "integrated".

BOURGEOIS THERAPY

By "keeping the person [at] the center ... the psychotherapeutic process stagnates" (Moreira, 2012, p. 52). A bourgeois form of therapy will tend to focus on the individual (the person), attempting to restore psychic unity and foster integration through the "unpacking" and "teasing out" (as the clichés have it) the individual's distress and/or inner contradictions.

These are perceived conventionally (non-dialectically) as antagonisms and road-blocks on the path to a presumed unity. What is also presumed, along the lines of both ancient (Socratic) ontology and modern (Cartesian) logical structures, is that the individual – whether epitomised by a soul or a *cogito* – possesses a notion of herself that is unitary and self-consistent. Indeed, one of the psychological connotations of the bourgeois is that “he cannot admit to internal divisions, to the cracks and inconsistencies in his psyche” (Bazzano, 2012, p. 12) as these would “threaten the illusory solidity of *ipseity*, i.e. the superstitious belief in the self as an entity identical to itself” (ibid, p. 12).

The average bourgeois individual – stressed out by work, beleaguered by risible gratifications, frightened by illnesses which suddenly struck him or a loved one – turns to psychotherapy and meditation in search of relief and consolation, the promise of some happiness, or some kind of integration. He cannot accept the wound but pines away trying to outflank it and medicate it. In some spiritual path or other he will find a catechism, a method aimed at avoiding that sense of groundlessness sneaking into his life. He will accept bargain metaphysics, purchase any merchandise offering an outlet from anguish and an impending sense of futility. (ibid., p. 18)

Seamlessly slotted in between trips to the shopping mall and the latest Cameron Mackintosh production, bourgeois therapy promises to restore an individual to full *possession* of her/his self. The key word here is *possession*: “The bourgeois has always possessed. The thought of *not* possessing never occurred to him” (Pasolini, 1968, p. 83; my translation).

In spite of the ways in which psychoanalysis itself was canonised and sterilised, the luxuriant notion of the *unconscious* initially alerted (and alarmed) the Viennese bourgeoisie of the time to how deeply uncongenial to ourselves we humans can be and how prey to deeply antagonistic tendencies. A bourgeois therapy will most likely explain Freud’s famous aphorism *wo Es war soll Ich werden* (where it was I shall be) in a one-directional way, with the “I” placing its comforting banner of integrated and enervated reason – Socratic, Cartesian, Husserlian – on the newly conquered, and once bewilderingly magmatic soil of the *id*.

So far, so predictable. I imagine the majority of therapists and theorists would agree, if not with that particular angle, at least with this generalised critique of the “modern” Cartesian and post-Cartesian project as it has been conventionally applied to the psychological therapies. Descartes-bashing is after all one of the universally accepted pastimes in contemporary academia, as well as the obligatory password for gaining privileged access to its corporate pastures. One of the ways in which post-Husserlian philosophy and psychology has averted the Cartesian and neo-Cartesian impasse is by rejecting the notion of the subject altogether on the grounds that it is an abstraction (Bernasconi, 1988).

Within the psychological therapies, this propensity appears in different ways – from the spiritual bypass of subjectivity often found in some of the “transpersonal” psychotherapies, to a pluralistic, self-consciously “post-modern” stance, to a supposedly (and variously articulated) “dialogical” or relational position. The latter, which I call the cult of the relationship, is now unanimously embraced across the theoretical spectrum and is an absolute given in the training of practitioners, impervious to open discussion. It would appear this cult of the relationship is but a natural development from the cult of the autonomous individual.

It remains to be seen whether the operation of giving up (or at least destabilizing) the notion of the subject or *self* (I use the two as synonyms) still takes place within the bourgeois frame of therapy. My own sense is that this is mostly the case as shown in the following examples.

Levinas (2008) stressed how, by giving up the notion of the self, contemporary thought also bypassed the key notions of *separation* and *solitude* – not the solipsistic loneliness of the strong, self-existing individual on which dominant bourgeois ideology rests, but the painful existential aloneness and finitude of a limited self who alone can conceive of otherness and of infinity and who alone can feel empathy, solidarity and compassion.

Secondly, a “spiritualised” or spiritual self, enthralled by the rapturous contact with the numinous (be it God, energy, ultra-sensory dimensions, lucid dreaming, awareness of past incarnations, *Dasein*, “presence”, and so forth) inevitably ends up ascribing to itself the spiritual attributes it gained in the encounter. Self-confessed transpersonalists may well argue that the self emerges transformed from the mystical occurrence, having gained access to a higher level of consciousness. From that place of transcendence one will then be able to say, as John Rowan has done, without irony: “I certainly regard myself as authentic”, adding in the same sentence, as a way of substantiating the assertion (again without irony), “when I am attending to the world from a Centaur position” (Rowan, 2014, p. 32). This is a “higher level of consciousness” according to one of the models Rowan quoted, namely Wilber’s. *Transcendence* is the key word here, conventionally apprehended as “something *beyond* or *above* the range of normal or physical human experience” (Pearsall, 2011, p. 1522), the assumption being that we already *know* what “normal” or “physical” human experience is and that there is something beyond ordinary experience. A practitioner of this sort – authentic, in touch with the numinous – is effectively an ersatz priest who will probably (implicitly?) steer the therapeutic encounter towards what I have elsewhere named “immediacy”, the third of the dialectical modalities of encounter, a setup where “the therapist attempts to bridge the separation with the client” (Bazzano, 2013):

Intensity and a heightened sense of presence are key notions here, often highlighting a quasi-numinous incidence of peak experiences. Alterity may be lost in this bridging, and the solitude/autonomy of the other sacrificed at various altars: spirituality; a fascination with a neutral Being; magical readings of Rogers’ (1980) notion of “presence”. Deliberately or unknowingly, the philosophical matrix for this view is Platonism, a powerful nostalgia for lost harmony. (*ibid.*, p. 208)

Thirdly, the *inter-subjective* perspective and its concomitant, popular notion of interconnectedness similarly bypass the self by forgetting its autonomy and inalienable solitude. Here the client is perceived as another self, with whom one connects via some type of primary identity. Stolorow (Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1987), in turn, influenced by Gadamer, is the most articulate exponent of this style. What the advocates of inter-subjectivity often seem to neglect is that Gadamer’s stance imagines a situation of equality and unfettered communication between humans – one which, as Habermas rightly pointed out in his critique of Gadamer, is nowhere to be found (Downing, 2000). It is not just that equality is a fantasy; we have now effectively reached the “egalitarian plateau” (Dworkin, 1977), with egalitarianism becoming an empty concept, a *de rigueur* profession of faith in the rhetorical stock of politicians across the spectrum.

The presumption of equality is unhelpful in the therapy room as it forgets the disparity inherent in the therapeutic setting. As antidote, I suggest a notion of therapy as *unconditional hospitality* – one that is inspired by contemporary radical ethics.

THERAPY AND RADICAL ETHICS

Contemporary radical ethics is the crystallisation of several strands of critical thought developed over the last 50 years, which has culminated in post-structuralism, post-phenomenology, and contemporary empiricism. In some ways, radical ethics continued the deconstruction of morals already undertaken by Nietzsche in the nineteenth century (Nietzsche, 1996) and further developed in the twentieth century by Levinas (1961) and other key thinkers such as Derrida (Derrida, 2001; Derrida & Du Fourmantelle, 2000), Løgstrup (1997) and Jankélévitch (2005).

Radical ethics can provide us, as contemporary practitioners, with the philosophical inspiration necessary to widen the personal and relational spheres into the social and political dimensions. As psychotherapists, while we cannot afford to overlook the social and political context, we are also required to give a more detailed examination of the subtlety and inner mechanics of the encounter between self and other, and in the process rewrite ethics as the endeavour that dares to answer two fundamental questions: (a) who is the other? (b) how can I adequately respond to the other's presence?

NOT-KNOWING

Who is the other? One possible answer is “I don't know”. “Not-knowing” has become quite fashionable, but is this form of not knowing all-too-knowing? Taking my cue from Nietzsche, I would say that rational, Socratic not-knowing, on which fashionable not-knowing depends, is at heart a form of dialectical cunning (Nietzsche, 2009) – a way to pre-empt the interlocutor's critique and draw out, midwife-style, the knowledge/wisdom which supposedly pre-exists dialogue.

However, there is an altogether different form of not-knowing, at play in the following Zen encounter:

Dizang said, “Where are you going?”

Fayan said, “Around on pilgrimage.”

Dizang said, “What is the purpose of pilgrimage?”

Fayan said: “I don't know.”

Dizang said, “Not knowing is most intimate.” (Cleary & Cleary, 1992, p. 86)

This type of not knowing is really a kind of defeat, occurring only once we have truly and thoroughly seen through the futility of knowledge as ap-prehension, taking, or *capturing*. Commentaries to the “seventy-sixth case of the Blue Cliff Record” (Cleary & Cleary, 1992, p. 418) – one among 100 Zen enigmatic dialogues or *koans* – refer to this type of not-knowing as “blindness”, which is traditionally distinguished in five degrees.

First, there is *bonkatsu*, the ignorance of the person who sincerely believes that the next shiny object on display on the shelves of the universal shopping mall out there will deliver happiness. This is the ignorance of one for whom the prospect of venturing on a path of discovery is very remote. Next, there is *jakatsu*, the learned ignorance of those who have assembled quotes and ideas to the point that they have become a thick veil effectively obstructing perception. Third, there is *mikatsu*, the not-knowing of the person who is dedicated to spiritual practice but has yet to catch any significant glimpse of truth. Next is *shôkatsu* or genuine not-knowing: in encountering the world, we can see nothing because there is nothing to see; this is authentic blindness (Kôun, 2014). Finally, there is *shinkatsu* or complete not-knowing; at this point, questions of relative and absolute, delusion and enlightenment have become completely irrelevant. This form of utter ignorance and not-knowing is also called “The eye of the Buddhas of the Three Worlds” (Kôun, 2014). One becomes a fully fledged Zen idiot, one who has given up on the very idea of knowing.

What are the implications for therapy? In encountering the other, we need to surrender our need to know and understand him/her, and offer instead the gift of hospitality (Bazzano, 2011b). Opening the door to the client, we implicitly say “Here I am” as a witness to the infinite, a form of witnessing which does not thematise, represent or look for evidence.

Who is the other? The other is a mystery, and her presence opposite me in the therapy room and elsewhere is secondary to the general mystery of *incarnation*, which constituted, for Gabriel Marcel, the central given of metaphysics (Marcel, 1965). This given *precedes* encounter, dialogue, and language itself. The mystery of being is *connaissance aveuglée*, blind knowledge, the “blindfold knowledge of being ... implied in all particular knowledge” (Marcel, 1965, p. 28). It does not subscribe to the view of dialogue as the ultimate instance of communication but instead seeks to establish a concrete life at the heart of our being – a being that, incidentally, is not entirely ours (Marcel, 1965).

UNCONDITIONAL HOSPITALITY

How can I adequately respond to the other’s presence? An adequate response would be: by practising *unconditional hospitality*, which for Derrida meant an “interruption of the self” (Derrida, 1999, p. 51). Why “unconditional”? – because conditional hospitality (the only hospitality we know) has not really worked. Born in the Greek *polis* and the Roman *forum*, developed further via the Judaeo-Christian tradition and Kantian/Hegelian philosophy, this type of hospitality is juridical: it is handled by codes, norms and regulations, and it is inscribed within the metaphysics of violence. It is also transactional and reciprocal, engaged in an economy of exchange, even an economy of violence (Westmoreland, 2008). Unlike the cosmopolitan citizen discussed above, whose concerns and sensibilities well exceed those of backyard, tribe and nation, in order to include internationalist solidarity and cooperation, the inhabitant of the *polis* and of the modern nation-state can only build an identity *against* the foreigner. This is not an *ethical* position but, according to the distinction suggested at the beginning of this paper, merely a moral one. Hospitality is no less than the very foundation, “the whole and the principle of ethics” (Derrida, 1999, p. 50).

Ethics without hospitality is no ethics at all, and a therapeutic practice which does not feature hospitality at its core is not ethical, whether or not it formally abides by the written codes of this or that psychotherapy and counselling association or council. Paraphrasing

Kierkegaard (2012), one could say that unconditional hospitality presupposes the *suspension* of morality as we know it – it could mean being prepared to defer our obeisance to the dictates of law and custom in order to respond to the call of infinity.

If I respond to duty “only in terms of duty, I am not fulfilling my relation to God” (Derrida, 1996, p. 63). Unconditional hospitality is of course *impossible* – one could see it is a messianic principle (i.e., *always to come*, to be realised in the future) or an effective way to measure the various degrees of conditionality in all our moral stances. Holding the vision of unconditional hospitality may alert us to the inherent smugness present in the bourgeois moral stance of much contemporary psychotherapy and counselling. It may also help us redefine the autonomy of psychotherapy from the pressures and strictures of a solely juridical dimension – from notions of duty, transaction and debt.

The gift of hospitality offered to the client is a form of *potlatch*. The term, loosely translated as “gift”, refers to the primary economic system practised by indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest coast. Theirs was a *gift economy* rather than a bourgeois economy based on profit. It was banned in the late nineteenth century at the urging of missionaries and government agents who considered it a “worse than useless custom”; a real gift is not only rare, but quite difficult to match; it even creates a subtle (and not so subtle) obligation (Bazzano, 2011b).

The gift of therapy is most unusual; perhaps the client’s payment represents a way – our accepted way as modern Westerners – to respond to this extraordinary gift. Of course, this gift is remarkable only if the counsellor has practised the ways of hospitality (Bazzano, 2011b).

How can I be a good host? By remembering that I am, a first of all a guest – on Earth, but also in this particular dwelling, these walls will survive my death.

I am reminded of Rainer Maria Rilke, who, in his eighth *Duino Elegy* asked (I paraphrase): Who made us like this, that no matter what we do, we always look as someone who is about to leave?

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