

BOOK REVIEW

THERAPY AND THE COUNTER-TRADITION: THE EDGE OF PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Manu Bazzano and Julie Webb

Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016. 199 pp.

In an age of “evidence-based treatments,” it is essential that we maintain the capacity to see the work of therapy within the framework of big ideas. In this timely volume authors challenge therapists to become aware of and reflect on the deep assumptions they bring to their practice. Those of us who are content with the superficiality of mainstream psychologising about the treatment of mental illness, an approach the editors label “superficial pragmatism,” may not be much impressed. Those of us who are uncomfortable with the triviality of an approach founded in a spurious rationality which reduces humans to machines will welcome this introduction to the “countertradition.”

The tradition to which the essays in this book are ostensibly “counter” is that of the European enlightenment and its evolution into scientific materialism. It is a tradition that places the individual human at the centre of the universe and at the centre of action. It is embedded in the grand assumption that the earth is an object over which we potentially have control through science and technology. It prioritises reason over emotion and imagination. It lives in a world of objects in which subjectivity is confined to humans. It is contemptuous of any notion of soul. It is a tradition which may well have reached its use-by date, as the fantasy of inevitable technology-boostered progress begins to fade. Nevertheless, it still holds sway in a psychotherapy profession which prioritises technique, skills, and empirical evidence. It still dominates even humanistic approaches to healing.

The philosophers whom the editors and authors have selected to represent the countertradition, ranging from existentialists (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche) hermeneutic philosophers (Heidegger), and phenomenologists (Merleau-Ponty) to Marxists (Sartre), poststructuralist feminists (Butler, Irigaray), constructivist empiricists (Deleuze) and poets (Keats, Lawrence) belong, for the most part, to the approach generally known as “continental philosophy” (a formerly condescending label which includes everything which is not British analytical philosophy). They do not all agree with each other, and some of them have been in violent disagreement, but they have enough in common to allow them to fit under the same umbrella.

Any attempt to produce a volume on the philosophical underpinnings of psychotherapy is bound to disappoint. It will certainly disappoint prospective readers who want to find in it technical assistance.

For myself, having been somewhat disappointed by Alex Howard's *Philosophy For Counselling and Psychotherapy: Pythagoras to Postmodernism*, mainly because he omitted some philosophers who have had a significant influence on the way I think about therapy, I opened *Therapy and the Counter-tradition* with some eagerness. However I was again somewhat disappointed. While I appreciated being introduced to, or reminded of, the insights of significant thinkers who can help me articulate my sense of what I am doing and why, I once again looked in vain for the key influences on my approach. One of them, Carl Rogers, gets several passing mentions. Devang Vaidja

links him with Nietzsche. Julie Webb finds a place for him in her essays on Butler and Wittgenstein. Federico Battistutta links him with Rousseau. These are excellent, insightful essays, yet the fact that there is no essay devoted specifically to Rogers's ideas indicates the reluctance of commentators, even those of a person-centred persuasion, to take him seriously as a philosopher. The same may be said of Jung, who merits only two passing references. The philosophies of Rogers and Jung may yet turn out to be more influential than their psychologies. A third philosopher who does not get a mention in the index or even in the list of thinkers who could be included in a second or third book is Alfred North Whitehead. A fourth who suffers the same neglect is Arne Naess. I suggest that the ideas of these four are central to a counter-tradition which challenges the philosophical and psychological establishment. They speak to an organic, ensouled universe as opposed to the mechanical universe of establishment philosophy and psychology, to a process conception of life rather than a static one, to an egalitarian conception of relationship rather than a hierarchical one, to an expanded sense of self and of kinship with all living beings.

Since the 1980s there has been significant historical analysis of the "radical enlightenment," a cultural movement which originated in the seventeenth century and took a different trajectory both from the mainstream "moderate enlightenment" and from Christian orthodoxy (cf. Jacob, 1981; Israel, 2001; Gare, 2005). Gare argues that the "moderate" enlightenment which we associate with Locke, Newton, and Descartes, represented the neutralisation of a much more radical movement which had evolved out of the Renaissance quest for liberty and democracy. The moderate enlightenment was grounded in belief in a clockwork universe supervised by a transcendent deity; in contrast, the radical enlightenment did not separate Creator from creation—Nature simply *is* and everything that exists is part of this greater All.

There is an arc of thought that runs from Ficino and Giordano Bruno, through Spinoza, Diderot, Vico, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, and the romantic poets, which speaks to us now in the contemporary authors represented in this collection, along with Whitehead, Naess, Jung, and Rogers and others who wait to be acknowledged in a subsequent volume. It finds new voice in the words of the process philosophers, the creation theologians, the ecophilosophers, the deep ecologists, and the "new scientists." Spinoza and other seventeenth-century proponents of the radical enlightenment were demonised as "freethinkers," harassed and imprisoned by both Church and State, and variously labelled as pantheists, deists, pagans, and atheists. Where the philosophers of the moderate enlightenment supported absolute political and religious authority, the radical philosophers sought to bring about democracy, tolerance, the liberation of women, and the abolition of slavery. Where the moderate enlightenment proclaimed its newly discovered ability to reach truth through propositional logic, the radical enlightenment embraced not only reason but myth, magic, and emotion. The proponents of radical enlightenment certainly did not agree about everything, but they shared an approach to reality which respected the imagination and acknowledged the presence of soul in the world.

We can argue with some justification that the postmodern loss of faith in progress represents the exhaustion and discrediting of the moderate enlightenment (see MacIntyre, 1984, 51ff.) We can argue at the same time that the authors discussed in this collection represent a revival of a parallel tradition that has been deemed heretical, in psychological and philosophical discourse, for the best part of a century. Not all of them have been passionate egalitarians or dedicated to the liberation of women; not all of them take a multiperspectival approach to reality; not all of them argue vehemently that the cosmos is organic and alive or find subjectivity to be an essential aspect of "that which is"; not all of them take mystical experience seriously. Yet they share a rejection of scientific materialism and its mechanical universe, a distaste for hierarchical structures of power, and outrage at conventional science's devaluation of nature.

Scientific materialism (what remained of the moderate enlightenment after the notion of a transcendent spirit was found to be surplus to requirements) still holds centre stage. Within this framework, therapy is perceived to be no more than a negotiation between two individuals, one of whom is a tad less anxious and more powerful than the other, rather than a process in which the species, the planet, the cosmos come alive.

The tradition of radical enlightenment is still marginal. I have observed that many humanistic academics reluctantly accept marginality as their lot. Nevertheless, we have no choice but to carry out both our scholarly and our therapeutic work, not in the modernist fantasy of inevitable progress, but in the realisation of the possibility of planetary catastrophe. Taking therapy out of the individualist obsession that psychology has inherited from the moderate enlightenment, as this collection does, is both significant and timely. It is in this context that I recommend it.

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