

Grace and Danger

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Live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas!
(Nietzsche)

Sweet grace.../ Grace and danger...
(John Martyn)

Abstract Far from being manufactured by training and/or expertise, the moment of meeting in therapy is an accident, an event – akin perhaps to what theologians would call *grace*. It is collateral, i.e., a mere side effect to the existential therapist's main task of facilitating *organismic dividualation* in the client.

Far from providing a bandage to the injuries of living, existential/phenomenological therapy is an invitation to both client and therapist to leave behind the human for the overhuman, the atomistic self for 'no-self', unity for multiplicity: it is an incitement to *living dangerously*.

Key words: existential therapy, grace, dividualation, organism, overhuman

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The Cult of the Relationship

I once heard a colleague address a class of trainee counsellors on the subject of relatedness in therapy. The heart of his argument was that good therapy is all about establishing deep relational connections. Partly to demonstrate his point, he proceeded to read a poem a client had written to him to express how the sessions had benefited her. The participants nodded and sighed in expressive agreement and, during the more lyrical passages, I thought I could almost hear them hum and purr in unison. Part of me was eager to join the feel-good wave that, by this point, enveloped the room but found, to my disappointment, that I was beginning to feel suffocated. It may be that I had got out the wrong side of bed that morning, or that plain and simple disbelief had the best of me; I couldn't say at first. Then it began to dawn on me: the client's poem was punctuated by the frequent use of the pronoun 'you'; addressed to the therapist, the poem was above all else a glorification of the therapist himself. How great, how

skilful, how sensitive he had been in working with her and facilitating such depth of relating! As soon as I realized this, I wanted to throw up, cry out in disbelief or noisily and self-righteously disrupt what, to my cynical gaze, now looked like a deplorable charade. Mercifully, I did none of the above but managed to maintain a dignified bearing until the end. The afore-mentioned scenario is perplexing as well as disturbing. It would not merit consideration if not for the fact that the above stance, promoted and, to my mind, uncritically accepted from all and sundry, has become mainstream within psychotherapy trainings and practice. I am referring to what in the last few decades has been variously described as the intersubjective, the relational, and the dialogical stance. There are of course significant differences within what is a rather broad field but they all share the view that the therapeutic relationship is the overriding element in psychotherapy. The universality of this notion confirms to my suspicious mind that we are dealing with an insidious ideology masquerading under a progressive language of open meeting and dialogue. Accepted as the be all and end all of therapy, I named this view “the cult of the relationship” (Bazzano, 2015). Among other things, this perspective is problematic because almost entirely embedded (as in the above example) within a narcissistic frame. This charge seems unfounded and counter-intuitive at first. How could an all-too sensible emphasis on relating and dialogue be entrenched within the confines of narcissism? Surely, a shift of attention towards the dialogical or intersubjective domain must represent a welcome shift from the Cartesian self, from Freud’s psychic apparatus, from the individualistic notion of the human self that myopically disregarded basic patterns of early attachment and of human relating, let alone the truth of our being-in-the-world.

What’s more, the luminous examples of Buber, Levinas and others gave impetus to an ethics that centred on the fundamental notion of human encounter and provided inspiration to the

specificity of the therapeutic encounter. How can the Philosophy of the Meeting put forward by these thinkers be deemed narcissistic?

In Praise of Separation

And yet, the first thinker to articulate a similar argument – namely, that the I-Thou encounter is inscribed within a narcissistic frame – was Levinas, one of the leading lights of the philosophy of the meeting. He took great pains to distance himself from Buber's thought: and in the 1980s wondered whether clothing the naked and feeding the hungry would bring one closer to the other than the rarefied relatedness promoted by Buber (Levinas 1987/2008). This was long before Buber's *I-Thou* (Buber, 2004) morphed into the relate-while-u-wait sentimental doctrine whose recitation is now mandatory in humanistic and existential trainings. This once inspiring memento of the formidable challenges inherent in human encounter, poised as it was against its *functional* counterpart (*I-it*), has now become in my view an insipid formula, a given – a gimmick. It is assumed that I-Thou modes of being can be fabricated with a little effort, goodwill, and the mastering of a handful of skills; that behind its formulation lies the all-encompassing and comforting worldview of universal relatedness; and that various half-baked, duly measured and routinely if superficially researched formulas made in its wake are coherently aligned with it. But is it really so? Isn't Buber's 'I-Thou' instead a rare occurrence – an *accident*? My reading of it prompts me to say that if you were to dwell a minute longer in it, you'd get burned to smithereens.

Equally, the *I-it* is our necessary, usual mode of being with others. We are *functional* to one another. Personally, I don't mind being an *object*; this is what I am most of the time and when we meet, you and I usually meet in a functional role. I would not want to live in this functional dimension 24/7, but find it refreshing to recognize that this is where I live and

breathe most of the time. To me, it is more liberating (and perhaps more honest) than telling myself that my *usual* way of being is relating deeply to others.

What is often forgotten when we hurriedly summon a thinker such as Levinas to decorate an ideology of relatedness is that his is a philosophy of *separation* where great respect is found for the formal structures provided by Descartes. There are many good reasons for pointing the finger at Descartes as initiator of the body/mind divide, but the fashionable *tout court* dismissal of his thought neglects a crucial element, one that Levinas helps to clarify: the notion of separation is crucial in generating, in the third Cartesian meditation, a relation between the *res cogitans* (the mind, the “thinking thing”) and the infinity of God, thought beyond thought, thought as inextinguishable longing (Descartes, 1996). Levinas utilizes the formal categories of Descartes which alone allow the self to dare the thought of infinity through *desire*, which is the name Levinas gives to the thought that dares to think infinity. Not *need*, which speaks of hope of satisfaction; not *love*, which wants union. It is instead the desire of what the subject does not need – what the poet René Char has called (I paraphrase) *the realized love of desire which has remained desire* (Blanchot, 1993).

Partly drawing from Blanchot, I have highlighted elsewhere (e.g. Bazzano, 2009, 2013, 2016) how mainstream contemporary modalities tend either to gloss over or summarily bypass the fundamental separation or essential solitude of the human subject. All inscribed within a dialogical frame, these various modes do this in their own particular way, by appealing to either (presumed) objectivity, to intersubjectivity or (presumed) immediacy.

I have also proposed an alternative mode, one that is necessarily *non-dialogical*. Its starting point is the recognition of our existential aloneness and separation, which in turn calls forth a trans-valuation of the therapeutic principles now in vogue in favour of notions of *authorship* and *autonomy*.

From Poetry to Grace

What happens when no bridge is intentionally built, no ‘empathy skills’ consciously (or self-consciously) applied, nor deliberate attempts made at ‘building a relationship’?

What happens if the frames of early attachment theory and the familial domain, both legacies of very specific traditions (i.e. psychiatry and Bowlby’s psychoanalytic aetiology) are momentarily suspended, bracketed or decentred? What happens if the agenda of the relational/dialogical therapist is for a moment put to one side? Will the celebrated ‘meeting’ still happen? My own experience – and that of some of my colleagues – suggests that it does. The only difference here is that, when it does, it emerges as *accident*, as autonomous occurrence belonging to the extra-relational sphere of *affect*, i.e. a domain that is not inscribed within the subjective/intersubjective dimension or hatched by the therapist’s expertise as confirmation of the pre-existing notion of relatedness. Rather than the sum of two subjective experiences, the meeting here is the accidental side-effect of a stance of radical passivity. The most a therapist can do is aspire to *unconditional hospitality* (Bazzano, 2012, 2015). The important thing is that the celebrated therapeutic presence or expertise does not, strictly speaking, *belong* to the therapist but is neutral, akin to what Argentinean philosopher and therapist Claudio Rud (2015), inspired by Spinoza, says in relation to Carl Rogers’ celebrated notion of *presence*:

Like everything that happens, this presence is mutually constituted, it is not something that only the therapist offers; it is an event within this mutual involvement, within the expressive interconnection that is the therapeutic encounter. Therefore, we are not talking about two presences that add up, but *a single one that expresses itself* (p. 5, my emphasis).

While I am personally keen to debunk – somewhat perversely – the various theories and strategies that glamorize the moment of meeting in therapy, I am not denying its occurrence but reframing it in Kierkegaardian fashion, i.e., appealing to a stance of respectful awe that is inscribed within a frame of *immanent spirituality*. In short, the moment of meeting is a

moment of *grace*. In the past I have used the term *poetry* (Bazzano, 2012) instead of grace in order to describe this very same phenomenon in the attempt to chart a middle path between the totalizing imperatives inherent in both rationalist humanism and transcendentalism – between the hubris that says ‘This is my/our (co)-creation’ and the new-agey/transpersonal/religious attribution to angels/higher selves/God(s)/energies. I now think of the above stance as too timid and imprecise. It invites frail and fey associations normally attributed to poets, who have, sadly long ceased to be (with due exceptions) the legislators Shelley once thought them to be. It also leaves transcendental religion and spirituality off the hook, as it were, passively accepting that a phenomenon like grace – whether experienced in a dyadic encounter or in solitude, whilst doing therapy or making love, while sipping a double macchiato, travelling in a crowded commuter train in the evening or seeing a flight of swans and cygnets just after dawn – duly belongs to transcendentalism alone, and that to conceive of grace and mystery within an existential, spiritually immanent frame is out of the question. The experience of grace, in short, is undeniable. Here is Jacques Derrida in an interview given a year before his death in 2004:

On or about ‘grace given by God’, deconstruction, as such, has nothing to say or to do. If it’s given, let’s say, to someone in a way that is absolutely improbable, that is, exceeding any proof, in a unique experience, then deconstruction has no lever on this. And it should not have any lever. But once this grace, this given grace, is embodied in a discourse, in a community, in a church, in a religion, in a theology – that is why the word ‘theological’ is a real problem to me – then deconstruction, a deconstruction, may have something to say, something to do, but without questioning or suspecting the moment of grace. Of the discourses, the authorities, the law, the politics, all of which might be consequences of this grace, yes, deconstruction might have something to say or do, while respecting the possibility of this grace. The possibility of this grace is not publicly accessible. And from that point of view, I am really Kierkegaardian: the experience of faith is something that exceeds language in a certain way, it exceeds ethics, politics, and society. In relation to this experience of faith, deconstruction is totally ... useless and disarmed. And perhaps it is not simply a weakness of deconstruction. Perhaps it is because deconstruction starts from the possibility of, if not grace, then certainly a secret, an absolutely secret experience which I would compare with what you call grace (Derrida in Caputo et al, 2005, p. 39).

To reject the experience of grace because of its theological and religious appropriations and associations is to evade a *numinous* experience. Derrida's post-phenomenological, post-existentialist stance encourages me to say that the *numen* in question is immanent, that is, entirely *of this world* though habitually outside the narrow web of our spiderlike self-construct. Through grace – whether when meeting another or by ourselves – we are exposed to an immanent *outside*, to what is habitually out of our reach. The experience momentarily opens our perception to a world of *becoming*, of constant unfolding – the Heraclitean river where we cannot step even once. The surprise that comes with the experience of grace is neither revelation, nor *aletheia*; it is neither angelic visitation nor the unveiling of a 'Truth'. No Immaculate Conception or Impolite Strip-tease takes place here. We do not receive a message from the beyond, neither do we unwrap the gifts of 'truth' and 'being'.

Instead, while watching intently the clouds traversing the sky, we may get for a brief moment the full strangeness of being alive on this planet, of breathing and speaking and weeping and loving and moving this strange body that is us. We hear in rare moments of deep silence the murmur of blood in our veins; we are able to dream the faint shifts of the Earth's tectonic plates. The experience changes us: the set array of relations that establish our world is momentarily widened.

In Deleuzian terms: the *diagram* opens onto the *outside* (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002), an image that echoes indirectly the link between *self-concept* and *organism* made in humanistic psychology (Rogers, 1951) and that exposes the incurable positivism of the latter. While for Deleuze (2008) "the diagram stems from the outside but the outside does not merge with any diagram, and continues instead to draw new ones" (p. 89), Rogers, and most of humanistic therapists after him, believe that psychotherapy itself is "a process whereby man becomes his organism – without self deception, without distortion" (Rogers, 1961, p. 111). Lest we think of existential therapy as immune to the above positivist error, the similar mix of hubris and

naivety is found, I believe, in those among us who sternly believe in *aletheia*, the unveiling of a pre-existing 'Truth'.

Whatever happened to individuation?

The current one-sided emphasis on the relationship in therapy alongside the championing of universal relatedness as the underpinning rationale for practice has meant that *individuation* has now virtually vanished from the vocabulary of contemporary psychotherapy, slowly but inexorably superseded by *integration*. This has powerful political reverberations on a global scale. Migrants and refugees are routinely asked to integrate into a culture that (grudgingly) hosts them. They are asked to shed their originary identity in exchange for adopting another. In the personal sphere within which psychotherapy normally operates, the implicit and explicit message, as I read it, seems to be promoting social conformity and obeisance to the psychic norm dictated by the herd. This shift in psychotherapeutic discourse from individuation to integration is a setback, a catastrophic loss of those narratives of *agency*, *autonomy* and *emancipation* that it took us so long to establish, in favour of an abdication to an overall political project – namely, neoliberalism – that under its veneer of dialogue and relatedness betrays an attitude of compliance to *institutional power*, for it is always the latter that *decides the terms of the dialogue* in question.

Needless to say, the notion of individuation itself, particularly in the way it has been appropriated and monopolized by Jung, is itself in dire need of revision and reframing. The problem, however, is that contemporary psychotherapy's culture is now so far removed from individuation that a critique would be nearly incomprehensible without first a positive appraisal that in retracing the path of psychotherapy, makes use of individuation as a necessary stepping stone en route to greater freedom.

Individuation – this fundamental process of transformation through which one becomes an individual, a person with an internal rather than external locus of evaluation, someone who has gained independence from the group mind of her originary ‘tribe’ – has seemingly become a taboo. In a sense, this has always been the case. The history of science, philosophy and religion is full of examples of heretics, or *hairetikos*, those who are chastised because *able to choose* and refuse to buy wholesale into the latest ideology available in the marketplace.

What has dramatically changed in the last few decades is that narratives of belonging, once the chosen domain of reactionary and/or totalitarian thinking, are now actively endorsed by forces whose modes of expression are cloaked in progressive language.

This is not the place for an in-depth discussion and critique of individuation or for an overall assessment of this notion in relation to the contemporary cultural landscape, a topic I address more fully elsewhere (Bazzano, 2018). Here I can only give a more general example from philosophy and theology. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard (1843/2005) famously invites us to suspend the ordinary ethics of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* – the customary norms and introjected social convention that are a mark of belonging to our particular ‘tribe’ – in the name of a more severe and daring ethics. His position is *poetic* before being religious, theological and philosophical. On a theological level, it is only with God’s hair-raising call to Abraham to carry out the would-be sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac (and with Abraham’s readiness to carry out the murder) that social norms are for the first time ever superseded by a more severe form of ethics. Until that point, human affairs were the only criterion, in antiquity, for understanding ethics. The sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter Iphigenia, whose tragic chain of consequences are so vividly dramatized in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (Aeschylus, 458 BC/1977), makes this point dreadfully clear. The success of Agamemnon’s expedition to Troy was granted by that human sacrifice.

It would be a disservice to read Kierkegaard, a most refined religious poet, literally. The poetic reading I suggest speaks of something that is useful to our discussion. It provides us with a powerful *metaphor of individuation*, here understood in its wider sense of being prepared to momentarily *suspend* the moral norms of the tribe in order to follow an inner calling. Sacrificing one's son is equivalent to sacrificing what one cherishes the most, i.e. one's deepest love, tightly linked to one's own sense of social identity. Individuation is painful and Kierkegaard presents us with the most devastating, divisive and provocative example he could muster. To reject his difficult appeal is to align oneself with social conformity; a mode of psychotherapy thus conceived would not, properly speaking, be psychotherapy but a psychologised branch of morality.

Yet despite the dispersal of the authorial voice through a myriad of styles and pseudonyms, Kierkegaard God-driven 'individuation' does not disband the illusory unity and 'integrity' of the human self. Despite his adorable dandyism, Kierkegaard is still voluntarily caught *within* an ascetic disdain of life. To help us make our next step, we need the assistance of another thinker, one whose writings live and breathe *without* the trappings of transcendence and life denigration: Nietzsche.

The last humans

This next step is fraught with difficulty. I anticipate resistance and possible misunderstandings; for I am effectively presenting the case *against humanism*.

For all the variations and deviations, the keynote in all of Nietzsche's writings on the Greeks remains one and the same. It can be described as dissolution of the notion of 'humanity' and of the idealization of 'humankind' that is so dear to the humanist-classical tradition – from Erasmus to von Humboldt and Winkelmann down to the present day including, it must be said, large sections of psychology and psychotherapy.

For Nietzsche, that tradition is the very foundation of philistinism. A philistine may be coarse as well as cultured and it is the latter that cheerfully embodies a particular *Philisterdasein*, a stylishly idiotic way of being in the world, a ‘Socratized’ existence: optimistic, moralized and thoroughly rationalized – what gave birth, for Nietzsche, to the culture we still inhabit today. How do we redress the errors of humanism? First of all, by *naturalizing* the human, by thinking of the human in terms of *nature*:

If we speak of *humanity*, it is on the basic assumption that it should be that which *separates* it from nature and is its mark of distinction. But in reality there is no such separation: ‘natural’ characteristics and those called specifically ‘human’ have grown together inextricably. The human, in its highest, finest powers, is all nature and carries nature in itself. Those human capacities which are terrible and are viewed as inhuman are perhaps, indeed the fertile soil from which alone all humanity, in feelings, deeds and works, can grow (Nietzsche, 1872/2006, p. 95, translation modified).

The malaise, best addressed by a *naturalistic* understanding of psychotherapy, consists in the fact that we have severed the link with nature, giving birth, in the process, to the *last human*. This is Nietzsche’s term for the type of humans he saw slowly coming into being at the end of the nineteenth century. The last human only cares for his/her survival; this is someone whose main concerns are adaptation and conformity; someone whose only desire is to be happy.

Behold! I show to you *the last human*.

What is love? What is creation? What is yearning? What is a star?’ – thus asks the last human and then blinks.

For the earth has now become small, and upon it hops the last human, who makes everything small. Its race is as inexterminable as the ground-flea; the last human lives the longest.

‘We have contrived happiness’ – say the last humans and they blink (Nietzsche, 1883/2005, p 16)

Lest we think he was referring to some imaginary being: he was talking about *you* and *me*. *We* are the last humans, Socrates’ farthest children. You and me and he and she: we, the true nihilists, the last signposts of Platonism and Christianity. We are the ones who use psychotherapy not in order to explore the limits of human experience – its breadth and depth

– or to cultivate a vulnerability that opens us up to the intensity, horror and beauty of the world but so that, our hurts briefly wrapped, we can instead go gently into that good night via our desks and our TVs, our careful loves, our plotted routes.

For classical humanism and its various appendixes (on whose tenets much of the ethos and ideology of contemporary psychotherapy arguably relies), appreciation of the human is concurrent with an overcoming of conventional religion. For Eugen Fink (1960/2003), “the murder of God liberates man by uncovering the creative powers of human existence” (p 143). With many others, he sees Nietzsche’s radical critique of religion (as well as morality and philosophy) as an apologia of the human. But what is more difficult to accept is that this is only a first step; the next step Nietzsche invites us to take is accepting that *the human too must perish* alongside our God or gods. What also perish alongside the human are those particularities and subjective individualities that limit the scope and breadth of the individuation process to the limits inherent in individuation.

The next step in our enquiry, the overhuman (*Übermensch*), can only be made and understood only once the above point becomes clear to us.

The overhuman

Let me make it plain: you gotta make way for the *homo superior* (David Bowie)

The majority of Nietzsche’s vivid metaphors, from the eternal recurrence to will to power to *amor fati*, appear to signal a point of rupture where the human being gives way to the overhuman. What is lacking in his writings, however, is a conclusive description of the overhuman. This deliberate choice on Nietzsche’s part is both refreshing and inspiring. Because of it, the *Übermensch* cannot be turned into a humanist goal. A few decades later, reflecting on the harrowing experience of totalitarianism, de Beauvoir (1948) will write against ethical systems and in favour of ethical projects. Offering certainties, the former

invariably deliver exploitation whereas the latter are encouragingly ambiguous, opening the path to greater emancipation. The first task then is to work towards the dissolution of the self inherited from Christianity and bourgeois culture – that very self that normative psychology and psychotherapy is desperate to maintain and enhance. In this, Nietzsche's contribution is invaluable.

From individuation to dividuality

In 1887 Nietzsche asked: "What, strictly speaking, really defeated the Christian God?" (1887/1996, p 134), and the answer he gives is: Christian morality itself. Moral introspection, initially aimed at gaining moral hygiene, reveals a fragmented self, a *dividual* rather than an individual. It also exposes the lie of self-possession, the belief that we know who we are and what the meaning of our action might be. At this crucial point, psychotherapy can supersede morality and potentially take on a pivotal role by prompting us to set aside our cognitive and moral battles of subduing the passions in favour of an investigative study of the self, an activity whose originary meaning – *studium* – is closely linked to love: to study the self is to initiate care of the self. It must also mean to love and accept our inherent fragmentation and plurality: it can mean active involvement in a process of *dividuality*. The self in Nietzsche is grounded in the body; it *is* the body. Yet the body is not a unit but an intricate combination of competing forces. These are not so much *situated* in the body – they *are* the body. The 'organism' of humanistic psychology is then rewritten as inherently plural. Greater proximity of the self-concept with the organism does not result in either congruence or so-called authenticity. It creates forever-new versions of the self – in Nietzsche's parlance, new *masks*, that is, new creative ways to disport oneself joyfully in the labyrinth of *psyché* – forever elusive, forever ungraspable, aligned with the self-renewing tragic and ecstatic play of existence and becoming.

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