

SEVEN DEGREES OF SEPARATION

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The Pain and Dignity of Separation

Some readers might be familiar with the idea - from the fields of anthropology and sociology - of the “six degrees of separation”. According to this idea, if a person is one step away from each person they know, and two steps away from each person who is known by one of the people they know, then everyone is an average of six “steps” away from each person on Earth.

Whether or not there is factual validity in the idea, what I do find intriguing is the underlying assumption that “after all” we are not alone on the planet’s poor crust. The idea is appealing, cheerful and edifying. It also fits perfectly with the current trend in psychotherapy – no matter what the orientation - that sees “the relationship” as the alpha and the omega of therapeutic work. Without wishing to dispute the crucial importance of the relationship in therapy – and indeed in life outside the consulting room – I would like to raise here the following question: are we running the risk of overlooking one crucial aspect within relatedness, i.e., *existential aloneness* and *separation*? Is our natural longing for union overshadowing the equally powerful yearning for space and autonomy? There may be an unbridgeable seventh degree of separation, one that preserves the autonomy and dignity of the other, her right to self-determination, and – though this might be a painful realisation for some therapists – her intrinsic ability for self-healing. Such a metaphorical seventh degree

would also ensure that the other remains forever a mystery rather than a “case study”, i.e. a potentially knowable, classifiable “object” described in thousands of dissertations and clinical notes.

But let us go back to the beginning: separation is painful, and it starts at birth. Then there is leaving home for school; leaving school for work; leaving hometown to work abroad; the end of friendships, and, for some, divorce. And then there is death, the final separation. It seems that separation is an integral part of life, and that, though painful, it is necessary and, at times, even liberating. Better break up than remain stuck: *Relate*, an agency that offers counselling for couples with relationship problems, should change its name to *Separate*, according to the novelist Fay Weldon (as cited in van Deurzen, 1998, p. 115).

There is another meaning to the word “separation”: autonomy, individuality and *otherness* (Levinas, 1969). Not John Wayne’s “individuality” – the allegedly self-sufficient, defensive personality – but instead otherness, the sheer unfamiliarity of another, who can never be truly known, who will always remain a mystery.

Relationship has become the key word in therapy, and some maintain that psychotherapy “[has] moved from the father principle, through the maternal, to the era of the siblings, in which ... there is a fundamental symmetry between patient and therapist” (Holmes, 1995, p. 9). How genuine is this hypothetical symmetry in the existing therapy scenario? To what extent does the therapeutic relationship succeed in bridging the gap between therapist and client? Is it *ever* possible to bridge the gap between *any* two individuals? Is it desirable?

Relational depth, inter-subjectivity, co-creation: current therapeutic discourse conveys aspirations of equality, empathy and the dismantling of the expert's authority (Mearns & Cooper, 2005; Hycner, 1991; Spinelli, 2007). However, could this attempt of "crossing over" be misleading –and offer false consolations? Could such emphasis on the relationship derive its impetus from our utopian nostalgia for lost unity? Could we therapists run the risk - by sidestepping separation - of denying precisely what we claim to support and cherish, i.e., difference and otherness? And finally: is separation a curse or a blessing?

Capitalism has manufactured a view of human beings as separate units in competition: a journey in the London Underground during rush hour will convince anyone that many people still fervently hold to that very idea. One of the reasons for capitalism's unchallenged supremacy, however, is its ability to assimilate new ideas, including antagonistic views. Autonomy, separateness and self-reliance, though some of the ways in which free-market ideology still thrives, arguably belong on the whole to the era of coercive capitalism. Post-modern capitalism is much more flexible, cunning and fluid. The new masters engage in "constructive dialogue" with the aim of subjugating the interlocutor. A democracy – unlike a dictatorship– needs refined means for manipulating consent, and such manipulation happens smoothly while you and I enjoy our double *macchiato* at Starbucks.

Dialogue in our day and age is *dialectical*, and its purpose is to influence, rather than meet the other. For anything resembling a meeting to take place, a non-dialectical approach is needed. I'll attempt to sketch the basis of such mode of encounter.

Emphasis on the relational was groundbreaking when Carl Rogers started client-centred therapy. Now that it has become the commonplace, diluted staple of ‘basic counselling skills’, we run the risk of bypassing the invigorating ache and profound dignity of separation.

Meetings in Curved Air

It is crucial to differentiate between *relational* (inter-subjective, dialogical, etc) *and relatedness*. The first is an attitude, a methodology. The second is an existential given, as illustrated by Spinelli (2007) who elaborates the idea creatively on the basis of the best existential tradition. Relatedness is part and parcel of our being-in-the-world, akin to what in Buddhism we call *interdependence*. Within psychological theory and practice, the best response to such existential given is Adler’s *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* or social interest (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964: 136), a prominent aspect of which is one’s ability for friendship and love (*ibid*). We are facets of the great diamond, waves in the vast ocean: “non-relatedness” is not an option. We are embedded in relatedness, even in isolation, and to awake to such belonging automatically deflates what twelve-step programmes aptly call His Majesty the Ego. Another essential aspect of relatedness is our irreducible aloneness and separation. The client’s otherness is forever un-bridgeable, and this constitutes her uniqueness. Trying to implement a well-intentioned restorative “strategy” whilst overlooking the fundamental tenet of her otherness is bound to fail miserably in a therapeutic sense, but may of course succeed in “re-framing” the client, in “sending her back to the traffic jam”, where, as Leonard Cohen (2001) would say, they are “saving [her] a seat”.

Taking on board this crucial aspect of relatedness, i.e., existential separation, is, I believe, one of the challenges for

humanistic, existential-and person-centred therapy today: to take one more step along the courageous declaration of the client's self-determination, which is typical of these egalitarian approaches, by embracing the fundamental *asymmetry* (Lévinas, 1961) of the therapeutic encounter.

Relatedness is neither *symmetrical*, nor horizontal. There is no such thing as a horizontal encounter or an equal dialogue: neither literally – for according to physics the universe is curved (and dialogue belongs to plane geometry) - nor metaphorically, since equality has yet to materialise in the world. Just as there is no such thing as an equal encounter, and to suggest that there is means colluding with injustice. Horizontality is like democracy: a wonderful idea used by populists and exploiters since the dawn of recorded history to lull the underprivileged. It has been, however, rarely applied, least of all in the field of therapy, with some remarkable exceptions, first of all by Adler who was to exert a pervasive yet scarcely acknowledged influence (Bazzano, 2008: 125) It would be a shame if therapy were to become, as Gillian Proctor (2006) rightly argues, the new “opium for the masses”.

The Unbearable Heaviness of Duality

Why do we engage in dialogue? According to Blanchot (1993), a close friend of phenomenological philosopher Lévinas, we do so in order to ease the burden of duality, the strain of contradicting thoughts in our mind.

Blanchot places the origins of duality to a conversation between the god Apollo and Admetus. Apollo says to Admetus:

*Men must breed twin minds;
Consider tomorrow's sun your last –*

*And think you'll live out fifty years,
Each one steeped in wealth.
But strike your stand in piety:
There all the gain and gladness lies.*
(Bacchilides, 1961, p 10).

The above is a praise of empathy as the greatest good in human affairs, as well as an affirmation of the duality inborn in our thinking. Apollo is saying, “Since you are mortal, your mind must contain two thoughts at once, and for the same reason you must be kind to your fellow humans who are in the same predicament”. Dualistic thinking is a given; we think of one thing, and the opposite thought is right underneath. We think “life”, and death is just around the corner. This can breed considerable anxiety, as we learn from clients and from our own experience.

We might try to alleviate the burden by taking the intra-psychic or the inter-psychic route. Some choose the first, some the second, and some choose both.

In the first case, I might come to believe that psyche is made up of “parts” – drives, sub-personalities, introjects, voices, or – latest kid on the block - configurations of self (Mearns & Cooper, 2005). Unable to bear the pressure of a dual – even multiple – psyche, a person might seek counselling in the attempt to “integrate” these conflicting “parts”. Whether or not integration were possible (and its promise at all justifiable, given that it arises from a normative rather than exploratory stance); whether seeing psyche as made of parts might revert psychotherapy to its mechanistic roots, the question remains, “Why is it so hard for us to tolerate contradiction and duality?”

Dialectical Dialogue and the Compulsion to Unity

The other way of placating the anxiety of duality is through dialogue, through the desire for a genuine encounter with another. In speaking, however, it is also too easy to patronise, seduce, argue, through attraction, revulsion, indifference, in order to reassure ourselves that the other is *similar* to us. To “pontificate” literally means “to create a bridge” (from the latin *pons*= bridge and *facere*= to make) and the bridge in this context is a tool for recruiting allies to one’s dogmatic discourse rather than creating a possibility of genuine encounter

Blanchot argued that there are essentially two modes of dialogue. The first one is dialectical, and it ramifies into three essential approaches (Blanchot, 1993):

- 1) The *objective* view: the other is perceived as an object of study, of “scientific” observation, whether as a bundle of drives, a carrier of symptoms and problems to be solved, a subject to be re-programmed, etc. This is essentially a normative intervention, invariably in tune with the dictates of the market, the ruling ideology of the time and wholly indifferent to the real needs of the person.
- 2) The *inter-subjective* view: the other is perceived as another self, perhaps very different, but with whom I am able to connect via some form of primary identity. A key exponent of this view is Stolorow (Stolorow, Atwood, Orange 2002 & Stolorow, Atwood, Brandchaft 1994)), who is greatly influenced by Gadamer (2004), a thinker who left the ethical as well as the political dimension out of the dialogical domain, and who ignored the manipulative influence of ideology. Dialogical “unconstrained communication” is for Habermas (as cited in Downing, 2000) a naïve fantasy, and he sees Gadamer’s method on which much of the inter-subjective view is founded as “traditionalist and conservative” (*ibid* pp. 93-9).

3) The *immediacy* view: here the self tries to achieve an immediate relation in which self and other lose themselves, and forget distance. Intensity, “authenticity”, and loss of self become key elements. The otherness of the other is lost in this merging, which becomes effectively a form of spiritual or existential bypass. The uniqueness of the other is sacrificed at various altars: the mystique of new age spirituality, the lure of old-age institutionalised religion, the fascination with Heidegger’s *neutral* “Being”.

All three dialectical approaches, different on the surface, have in common a tendency towards *unity*. The objective analyst, the inter-subjective practitioner and the empathic spiritualist all aim at reducing the unease that comes with facing the otherness of the client. All three neglect difference and overlook the fundamental element of any encounter: *separation*.

Is this compulsion to achieve unity a good thing? Synonyms of unity include: agreement, accord, unison, harmony and conformity. Unity is harmony, but unity is also agreement, as well as conformity. Is this desirable? How do we inscribe the role of therapy within the current cultural debate about immigration and the need for non-Western cultures to “integrate”? Is therapy culture going to join the chorus that sings the hymn of obedience to the white man’s law? (Eagleton, 2007).

Of all delusions, thinking that I have “understood” another is perhaps the most insidious. One of the many ways in which person-centred therapy has been misconstrued by its detractors is through the allegation that it relies “a little too heavily on subception” (Downing, 2000), **a critique which misunderstands the crucial notion described by Rogers as**

“edge of awareness” (cited in Thorne, 1992, p 103)) as mere “intuition”.

The above criticism reduces the complexity and rigour of the approach to a psychology of subjectivity, and I can only hope that my practice does not resemble that, for there is something positively creepy in believing that I can attune myself to see the world through the eyes of my client. My motivation might be empathic, but the implication belies a new form of expertise and authority, a subtle form of hubris coated in humility. The client’s world is unknowable, and perhaps it should remain that way. Wanting to “know the other” belongs to the art of war, politics and diplomacy. Wanting to “become one with the other” belongs to the Platonic nostalgia of unity and to the flight of transcendence. In order to provide therapeutic support, the space between self and other needs to be maintained and even cultivated.

If anything, it’s my enemy I need to understand in order to defeat him. But I have to renounce my need to understand the client if I am to be of any assistance to her. By recognising the otherness of the other, I can begin to be with her *outside* the sphere of power and politics. The fascination with unity belongs to the sphere of *totality*, rather than the ethical sphere of therapy where, one hopes, acceptance of inalienable difference is the essential pre-requisite.

Non-dialectical dialogue

The other modality [that may be inferred from Blanchot](#) would then be a modality-without-a-mode, a non-dialectical modality, with no attempts whatsoever at unity but with the essential recognition of the foreignness of the other. Within this mode, our speech imitates poetry; it becomes “a speech without reference to unity” (Blanchot, 1993, p. 81) The sphere to which this kind of interaction belongs is not totality but

infinity. The abyss between the two shores, “you” and “I”, is not filled, explained, or concealed. It is felt, it is acknowledged, but never grasped, never fully understood.

It might well be then that the (imaginary, metaphorical) seventh degree of separation – this forever unbridgeable space that separates *me* from *you* – might constitute the basis for contemporary ethics (Bazzano, 2007). For it would grant, in spite of the primary interdependence of all things and all beings, that the autonomy and self-determination of the individual is honoured and respected.

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