



INTERVIEW

Existentialism and Therapy, Bazzano Style

Manu Bazzano with Richard House

The former *Self & Society* book reviews editor, prolific editor and radically sacred-cow-free zone that is **Manu Bazzano** is interviewed by Richard House

Richard House [RH]: Manu, can I begin this interview with what is perhaps a rather mischievous question. I've been a great admirer of your writings for many years – perhaps the main reason being that I love being challenged, and having any unthought-through complacency and 'regimes of truth' that I might be guilty of thoroughly rustled up and de-stabilised – and your writings and thinking invariably do that; so thank you for that! I think we're both pretty implacably 'against' labels and labelling; yet I do wonder about what (modality) label(s) you might choose for yourself and your practice as a therapist, if you were forced to choose one or several. Or alternatively, perhaps just a 'form of words' to describe the work you do as a therapist and as a writer would make a good, orientating start for our readers.

Manu Bazzano [MB]: Richard, the generous encouragement I've had from you over the years is rare indeed and I'm ever so thankful. I am used to being tolerated, especially by those who invest a great deal in a particular brand/school of therapy, and who perceive me (rightly, I think) as a threat to the received wisdom they dutifully recycle.

What is my label? Good question. A label is useful for a product on a supermarket shelf. Given that therapy is now by and large another product on the shelf, having a label is paramount to paying the bills. What brand of therapy do I sell? Let's see: I became a therapist relatively late, long after having studied philosophy (my dissertation was on Georges Bataille) and studied/practised Zen. Both disciplines – at once rigorous and playful – taught me to take with a large pinch of salt any system of knowledge or methodology that claims to hold a tighter grip on reality. They also taught me that the task of any apprentice is – eventually, respectfully – to *surpass* teachers/figureheads: to remain under their wing for too long, turning them into gurus, means thwarting one's own maturity. But then, what *are* current therapy trainings if not faith schools built around a particular figurehead?

My initial acquaintance with the therapy world was through my Adlerian therapist, the late, great Tony Williams. During the course of seven years I have learned *viva voce*, through his humour, common sense and deep compassion, some fundamental lessons about

Adlerian therapy and about *belonging*. You could say Adler was my first love. The key question about belonging is the same for me now as the one I had all those years back: ‘Do I want to belong out of a desire to contribute or out of a need to conform?’ I’m keener on the former, and often suspicious of the latter.

My first formal training was in person-centred therapy. So, I *am* a person-centred therapist and I have taught person-centred therapy for many years. ‘Are you truly person-centred?’, is the question I am routinely asked by colleagues and students. To which I’m inclined to reply: ‘I am *not* a person-centred therapist’. Are you a true bearer of the true faith? Do you believe in the holy trinity of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard? Well I don’t, but am more than happy to use them as working hypotheses.

My philosophy training was based on Nietzsche, existential phenomenology, post-structuralism, deconstruction and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Which ‘naturally’ draws me to existential therapy: I could say I *am* an existential therapist. But when I then look closely at the existential therapy ‘schools’, I find a neatly packaged product made up of sub-Heideggerianism, plus a sprinkle of dried-up Husserlesque flavouring and social constructivism. So, I am *not* an existential therapist – even though, as parishes go, I found it to be the most accepting of my idiosyncrasies.

Plus, I am learning a great deal from people like Judith Butler, Jean Laplanche and Christopher Bollas. They all draw from psychoanalysis, but are miles away from the orthodoxies and platitudes of Attachment Theory, from the delusions of ‘making the unconscious conscious’, from the pieties of intersubjectivity and relatedness.

What is my label? I played around with some ‘form of words’, as you say: *negative psychology* is one. Another one: *subversion therapy*, the working title for a book I’m putting together. And – *counter-traditional*. The list could go on.

RH: At least part of my admiration of your work, Manu, is that one quality I think I do possess is to recognise (and if possible, then to encourage) those

people I meet whom I know to be doing really important work – and to be doing it far better than I have the capability of doing myself (a bit like you so rightly said about ‘apprentices surpassing their teachers’). That’s very much how I perceive and experience you and your work.

Let me put my cards on the table straight away. My only worry about interviewing you, Manu, was that your answers would be so rich and deliciously variegated that I’d be left wanting to go off in a hundred different directions at once – and not know how to decide which path(s) to pursue in my response. Your first answer confirms that concern – errr... – thank you! It’s good to be challenged by you! Let’s see where this goes....

Re your role as an irritant (my term) to mainstream therapy: I hope I don’t upset anyone by making public the fact that in the AHP’s series of six Humanistic Psychology café events held in London last year, your workshop on ‘Against dialogue’ received by far the largest number of attendees (getting on for 30). Perhaps that says something really important about not only the person you are, but about the deep questions you’re bringing to a therapy world that’s crying out for out-of-the-schoolist-box ways of thinking about, and engaging with, what therapy as a healing and cultural practice consists in. That’s meant to be a compliment – I hope it lands!

You interestingly write, ‘...I have learned *viva voce*, through [my therapist’s] humour, common sense and deep compassion, some fundamental lessons about Adlerian therapy and about *belonging*. You could say Adler was my first love.’ This raises a question about therapy that has exercised me for several decades – viz.: In your view, is *the person of the therapist*, and who they deeply (and/or widely) *are*, more important in terms of ‘efficacy’ than is the specific modality-label under which they labour? (not that those two ‘variables’ – awful term – are necessarily independent of each other, of course). Another way of thinking about this question might be – would you prefer to be working with a brilliant CBT therapist (whatever that might mean!) or an average Adlerian therapist? And if my question is non-sensical (which I have a hunch it might be), do please tell me so, and why!

There are at least another 98 themes I want to pick up on from your first answer, but maybe later!... I'm desperately trying to keep this as an interview where you do more of the talking! :) – and also not to make it into an unctuous mutual-congratulation exercise.

MB: What makes a therapist effective – whatever their theoretical orientation – is that they are *absent*. Another way of saying this, *à la* James Hillman, is that both client (patient) and therapist are patients of *psyche*, i.e. both receptive to and ready to learn from the mysterious ways of *psyche*. For that, absence is crucial. A considerable amount of schlock has been written on Carl Rogers's notion of *presence*, and I am myself guilty of having added my own platitudes to the bulky sentimental literature on the topic. What is often forgotten is that presence emerges on account of 'absence'. Something becomes present to experience because linked to its previous absence. This can also mean, simply, not getting in the way of process.

A main obstacle is that all therapeutic orientations without exception are built on a metaphysics of presence and its subsidiaries: identity, essence, origin. All of these engage client and therapist on a wild goose chase in order to find true identity or true self, the essence of a person, the origin of a particular predicament, trauma or entanglement. While we engage in these trivial pursuits, we miss what's right under our therapeutic nose – what Merleau-Ponty would call the *emergent phenomenon*, which give us the first visible clue and 'evidence'.

Is the person of the therapist important? Certainly, but even more important than the person is the *mask*, positively understood as artistry and self-creation. The task of the absent therapist is to disguise herself as a clinician, e.g. of one who is nominally in the business of restoring 'mental health' while effectively working in favour of what I call 'active forces', i.e. forces of subversion, and transformation – the very opposite of genteel psychological change. To that purpose, grand theoretical distinctions matter a lot less. What matters is whether the therapeutic endeavour works in favour of *active* or *reactive* forces. Right now, all therapeutic orientations are mere variations and

gradation on a neoliberal theme. Despite the difference in lingo, they all work in favour of compliance, social conformity and adaptation. They all want by and large to measure, assess, classify and convince policy-makers of the substantiality of their findings. As we speak, some humanistic journals publish reams of ludicrous papers on the authenticity scale, the empathy scale and related absurdities. All orientations are in the grip of *obsessive measurement disorder*, which is only one of the many facets of the neoliberal takeover of the humanities.

I think it is time to reconstruct therapy around *axiological* lines, i.e. to turn it into an art/science of *evaluation*: when assessing a situation, a dilemma, a personal predicament, the main question could then be, for instance: 'What is the balance of forces at work? Can it be moved in the direction of active forces and transformation?' This doesn't have to be as directive as it sounds, but the question could constitute a backdrop, as it were – a point of reference for the therapeutic endeavour.

RH: Phew! – where do I start, Manu? My number has soared to 1,000 avenues that I want to pursue with you. First, linking to both your first and second responses, I'm reminded of what an old friend of *Self & Society*, Brian Thorne, wrote many years ago – that therapy at its best is an inherently '*subversive activity*' – and the late psychologist David Smail used to say similar things about mainstream therapy/psychology being about conforming to the status quo. From what you say here, I'm beginning to understand more fully just what Brian meant in his characteristically provocative comment.

I'm also reminded of Louis Althusser's brilliant formulation of the 'ideological state apparatus' (Althusser, 1971) – and that because of therapy as a cultural practice's unavoidable location within that apparatus, unless it *explicitly* takes a position of being a revolutionary practice, it cannot be anything other than a practice that is conservative and reinforcing of the status quo – or what David Harvey (1973), if he were a therapist, would no doubt have called 'status quo therapy'. This is so because, as Althusser pointed out, all social formations will *necessarily* have strong mechanisms that reproduce their own 'conditions

of existence'; so unless therapy takes an avowedly counter-position to the status quo, it will inevitably be marshalled to reproduce and reinforce it. This also brings a new way of thinking about that great old feminist slogan from the 1970s... that *not* to take a political position is – paradoxically and necessarily – to take a political position.

But I'm hijacking your interview again, Manu – slap me! Here's another question (or three) for you! Can you describe your own process/journey of reaching where you are in terms of your counter-traditional perspectives? Would you say that it was immanent in who you were right from the outset (James Hillman's 'Daimon'), or have you reached where you are through an unfolding dialectical process of engagement and disillusion etc. Or, indeed, both – or something else?....

If I were still practising as a therapist, I'd be looking to quite explicitly 'market' (agghhh) what I offer as being avowedly counter-traditional, subversive of the status quo ('modernity'), etc. – and so hopefully attract clients who are on a similar-enough journey to mine (but here again, is the latter a wise intention? – I'm not at all sure it is – too controlling and cosy?...). And I'd also want to say on my practice leaflet: '...But I also want you to either ignore and/or question everything I've said here about my therapy work'. Is that something that counter-tradition therapists could perhaps play around with, I'm wondering? But there again, making such a move, would I have just created yet another infernal 'modality (which *pretends* not-to-be-one)' – and so end up in the same status-quo 'regime of truth' that I'm claiming/wanting to disown?

Lots of bones for you to pick over here – or, better, shoots to tend here – Manu.

MB: The 'subversion' that was integral to person-centred therapy (PCT), an approach that Brian Thorne helped develop and expand, morphed into the pieties and clichés of an orientation that relies heavily on the more narcotic, consolatory values of Christianity (rather than its more radical aspect, found, for instance, in John Howard Yoder (e.g. Yoder, 1994)). Choosing to ignore the *daimonic*, i.e. the very ground from which transformation may happen, has effectively turned PCT into the

caring voice of neoliberal psychology. The seed, however, was already present in Thorne, whose utterances have become scriptures to the faithful.

It was also present in Rogers: the inexcusable naivety of his *pax Americana*. In Rogers at least there is one way out of the psychological and ethical impasse of piety: the notion of the *organism*, which opens the investigation to a field outside the strictures of bourgeois morality, metaphysics, and the traps of subjectivism, theology and teleology. It opens the field, for instance, to what Artaud (1976), and later Deleuze & Guattari (1972/1982), call the *body-without-organs*. But how many contemporary person-centred theorists are willing to go there? I can think of maybe three in the entire world, and most of them outside the Anglosphere and its Protestant grip on psyche. The majority have either become bedfellows with malodorous brands such as Positive Psychology, or are busy measuring authenticity on an authenticity scale – something Alfred Jarry sadly never lived to see, for he may have given King Ubu a language that mimics growth and actualisation, and all things 'deep' and 'relational'. Measuring authenticity also brings to mind, by the way, Adorno's quip about the spiritualists of his time: 'they inveigh against materialism, but want to weigh the astral body'.

The example of David Smail fits like a glove, for he was a writer and a psychologist who, among other things, saw 'distress aris[ing] from the subjection of the embodied person to social forces over which s/he has very little control' (Smail, 1997, p. viii). When you then quote Louis Althusser, it's as if you are reading my mind, Richard. Althusser is painfully relevant here, both because of his idea of the ideological apparatus you mention, but more specifically for his brilliant notion of *interpellation* (Althusser, 2014). While in therapy we are still stuck searching for subjectivity and the phantom of our precious 'inner life', effectively setting the clock back to the Romantics and the Idealist philosophers, Althusser reminds us that to be a *subject* is to be *subjected* to the law of the State established by a dominant class and its ideology. 'Interpellation' is the policeman shouting our name in the street. I am a 'subject' as a consequence of being hailed. I am called upon to be a subject by direct intervention (repression), by

the policeman, a preacher, a guru, a parent, a psychiatrist or through indirect intervention (ideology, including the perfidious ‘end of ideology’ ideology, i.e. the ideology of the market). Althusser (and Judith Butler after him – Butler, 2004) are highly relevant here because they remind us that as subjects, we are *assembled* by both repression and ideology, and that we are not the pre-existing entities that most narratives within the tradition like us to believe.

‘How did I get here?’, you ask. Not by some innate ‘daimon’. This is where I part ways with Hillman’s (and Jung’s) incurable Platonism and most trailing clouds of glory, alluring as they may be. Nor can I commit to the idea of simply having got here dialectically through trial, error, and disillusion. I understand this more in terms of, if I can put it grandly, *ontology of actuality*. My reading of this notion, present in Adorno and Horkheimer, and sorely missing from all psychotherapies, is that first of all, there is *no doer behind the deed*. And secondly, the doer recognises her ‘imprint’ in the deed. For Borges, it is only when Judas kisses Jesus that he realises whom he truly is. Hegel put it differently, but it amounts to the same thing: I cannot know who I am until I make myself a reality through action while, at the same time, I have the action in front of me before I perform it.

History – its blood, sweat and tears – helps me understand who I am. Death will then perform the final editing to the various takes, snapshots and sequences of ‘my’ life. Another way of saying this is that I’m groping in the dark, suspicious of the light. I had a discussion with my supervisor yesterday about a client who described his current situation as being a child laying in the dark in the foetal position, with a faint beam of light in the distance. ‘Did you ask him what the light was?’, my supervisor said. ‘No’, I replied – ‘I encouraged him to get more of a sense of the child in the dark...’.

I am not really bothered if what I do is (inevitably) creating yet another modality, another product in the market. I am far from being ‘pure’ in every sense of the word. By drawing on the counter-tradition rather than the tradition (Heraclitus instead of Plato, Becoming instead of Being, transformation instead of genteel adaptation,

naturalism instead of closeted theology – and yes, existence instead of essence), my/our task is akin to the task of smugglers. We smuggle in a few seeds of subversion that may hopefully turn psychotherapy from a reactive enterprise fixated on ‘consciousness’ into an active force in the service of transformation. We leave behind our obsession with consciousness, which is merely a *symptom*, and start from the body. Not the body of biology, mind you, but the body-without-organs Antonin Artaud wrote about.

RH: Pheeww – again, where to start, Manu? (don’t answer that! – *I know, I know...*). I have to say straight away that I love this image – ‘...We smuggle in a few seeds of subversion that may hopefully turn psychotherapy from a reactive enterprise fixated on “consciousness” into an active force in the service of transformation’. In reading what you’ve written here, it confirms my own self-perceived status as a bit of a ‘dabbler’ (albeit maybe not a bad one) and yours as a really serious thinker (alas, a great rarity these days) who’s really gone into *all* of the key philosophical streams that have relevance to ‘the human condition’ (a term I have a hunch you might not like) and which are serious ‘contenders’ in the History of Ideas. (This is also where I sorely wish I’d read philosophy at uni rather than geography, by the way.) I say this because I’ve always been strongly drawn to ‘Consciousness Studies’ and anything that has the phrase ‘the evolution of (human) consciousness’ in the title (Steiner, Crook, Jung, Neumann...); and yet after reading what you say about ‘consciousness’ being ‘merely a symptom’, I’m now wondering whether my erstwhile interests were just a wild goose chase. But there again, perhaps our journeys are all about spotting, and then gracefully and compassionately withdrawing from, our chosen wild goose chases.

Confirming my ‘dabbler’ status again, I’ve not heard of Antonin Artaud; but what you say about *the body* does remind me of the review that my dear former colleague Julia Cayne wrote about ‘the flesh’ in Merleau-Ponty’s book *The Visible and the Invisible* in the theme-issue on the great man that you brilliantly guest-edited for *Self & Society* (Cayne, 2014; *Self & Society*, 2014). Again, I know intuitively how important Merleau-Ponty is in all this (e.g. Felder & Robbins, 2011), but without

remotely having done the depth-reading that I would have needed to have done to be able to articulate that view – and which I know you have.

Perhaps surprisingly, I'd like to say something about 'past lives' at this point. Yesterday I was in conversation with a friend who asked me what my view is on past lives. I'm rather ashamed to say that what immediately came up for me – and I told her this – was that the spiritual master (*I know, I know!...*) in whom I place the greatest trust is Rudolf Steiner; and counter to the Western Christian tradition, Steiner did emphatically believe in past lives and in successive incarnations – and indeed wrote and spoke at great length about this issue, with massive amounts of 'empirical' information about well-known people's previous incarnations (e.g. Karl Marx) based on his own spiritual research. And here's the shameful bit – '...That's good enough for me', I said to my friend. (Interestingly, she was relieved, I think, as she also has utter conviction in the past-lives phenomenon; and incidentally, it's widely regarded in anthroposophical circles that in his own previous incarnations, Steiner 'was' Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas).

From what you said in your last answer (e.g. '... Not by some innate "daimon". This is where I part ways with Hillman's (and Jung's) incurable Platonism...'; 'there is *no doer behind the deed*'; and 'existence rather than essence' – etc.), it sounds like the possibility of past lives isn't something you'd countenance in your cosmology, Manu. Yet, I wonder... – are you open to the possibility that past lives *might* be in some sense be 'true'? – and if it were, I wonder what re-imagining your cosmology might look like? A rather mischievous 'thought-experiment' to lob your way, perhaps! – or for you to clinically deconstruct, as I know you will.

I also have something to say about 'regimes of truth' (Foucault) – in terms of the 'truth regime of Western metaphysics' to which we're all subject to varying degrees; and also the 'truth regime' of the current coronavirus psychodrama, which I really want to ask you about – but perhaps I'll leave the latter till later.

MB: I lived in India for a few years in my 20s and early 30s, and I remember attending two 'past lives' sessions in the ashram. In the first one, I experienced myself as a Paris Commune who, arrested and languishing in prison, dies of malnutrition looking at the faint light from a tiny window knowing that my soul is free. The second time, three years later, I was a woman from Eastern Europe trapped in an unhappy marriage who committed suicide. After this last session, I resolved never again to listen to Lou Reed's album *Berlin* because I had to become from then on a 'positive person', whatever that means. (Mercifully, a few years later I recanted on that solemn promise, and I'm still listening to this wonderful album. It's one of Uncle Lou's very best – recorded, of all places, in Willesden with a host of Brit musos.)

I was later on asked to be a translator for a group of Italians during a weekend workshop on 'past lives' in the Indian ashram. Partly because I was at a slight remove from the proceedings, I found the whole thing hilarious. Most of the women going through their 'past lives regression' (akin to a rebirthing session) became witches burned at the stake, or squaws. Most of the men were pirates on a ship or, you've guessed it right, first-nation American warriors or shamans from the Amazon. A handful of them were famous historical personages. All very groovy and fashionable: not a single one of them was a porter in Victorian London, a poor fisherman in Sicily, or a peasant woman mother of five children in Prussia.

The final blow to any unselective affinity I might have harboured for this sort of spiritual mumbo-jumbo came with my Zen training. Zen is *agnostic* in the true sense of the word, *not-knowing*. 'We don't know where you are', I once heard my then Zen teacher saying during a ceremony in honour of a departed fellow practitioner. Undoubtedly, to the impressionable 20 year-old I was then, my two 'past lives' sessions carried some meaning. And they still do, in a sense. I know nothing of Steiner, but the key question is whether a *belief* in reincarnation becomes, as with notions of the soul, the afterlife etc., narcotic consolation that takes off the existential edge from the profound uncertainty of life and death.

I wrote to Irvin Yalom years ago after the publication of his book *Staring at the Sun* (Yalom, 2008) where he presents the opposite, rationalist, Epicurean view: when death is, I am not, so why worry about it? A view that says, and stoically, serenely accepts, that there is ‘nothing’. Paradoxically, this is also a *belief*, and equally consolatory, I respectfully suggested. I don’t disdain consolation. I’m as anxious and afraid as the next person, and I’m suspicious of ‘spiritual teachers’ who claim to have gone beyond fear once and for all, and promise to bestow fearlessness on their adepts during an expensive weekend workshop. But constructing a palliative system of beliefs based on that fear and anxiety is something a practitioner should resist.

To sum up, both the spiritualist and the materialist views are found missing. Given the choice, I’d go for the latter, bearing in mind, with that best of all phenomenologists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that our perception of ‘matter’ is limited. We elevate ‘spirit’ and ‘consciousness’ because we think of matter as inert, imperfect, or as something to be disdained. This is where hatred of the body stems from – an evil which, one hopes, therapy may help cure. It is now fashionable to critique ‘Cartesian dualism’ while still sitting complacently within Descartes’ edifice where the *cogito* is still the only ‘real’ thing. Hippiedom, with its superficial appreciation of the body, didn’t help either: ‘It’s all in the *Mind*, man!’ No it isn’t. It is the body that thinks, and through the body, the flesh of the world. *It* thinks therefore I am. Contemporary thinkers like Jane Bennett and Brian Massumi (e.g. Bennett, 2010; Massumi, 2002) prefer to speak of *materiality*, envisioned as dynamic, productive and self-creating or even ‘self-actualising’, i.e. actualising autonomously, without a separate spirit or demiurge in the driving-seat.

We *don’t know* what matter is. We don’t know what the ‘body’ is. This makes room for a kind of spirituality that is thoroughly *immanent* (*within* this world) and does not resort to transcendental (*climbing over* the world) notions borrowed from life-denying religiosity.

Which takes us to Artaud’s body-without-organs (BWO). Not only is it the case that we don’t know what the body is. *We also don’t know what it can*

do, Spinoza would say. We are back to Althusser’s interpellation. This subject, this body-subject, is subjected to the classifications, explanations and injunctions of medicine, the police, the State, and the dominant ideology of an oligarchy that mimics democracy. It is also subjected to the functionality of procreation, the limitations imposed by the psych apparatus that serves coercion, and sees sexuality, for instance, as functional to procreation.

What would it be like to experiment with what this body can do? In Taoist sex, for instance, orgasm is no longer relevant, let alone procreation. In stretching what the body can do – *away from instinct and in the direction of desire* – we have a glimpse of the body-without-organs. Similarly with mind-expanding substances. I have personally stopped doing any of those since June 2003, but I do appreciate their value in some cases. What happens in meditation and for some of us when running or swimming or walking? We may come to a threshold of a more expansive dimension that is entirely immanent and *within* materiality and ‘nature’.

RH: Well that’s great, Manu – and, as always, you limitlessly open up multiple possibilities for questioning and beyond-the-box conversation; thank you. I opened up the past-lives issue, at least in part, because I knew you’d have much of interest to say about it – and somewhat selfishly, I wanted to know your thinking out of my own interest. If I can respond briefly to what you’ve said here: I’m first reminded of C.G. Jung’s famous ‘*I know...*’ comment in one of his final interviews. Of course, sometimes such ‘knowing’ will be delusional, and sometimes not – so the *empirical* question (if you will) is to be able to tell the difference (both in ourselves, and in our assessment of others who might be making such a claim to ‘knowing’).

The obvious response to your point about past-lives preoccupations is that both can be true – i.e. that doubtless, past-lives preoccupations are (in many/most cases?) a defence against death and non-being – and yet even though this is the case, past lives and reincarnation could also be true! Again, it’s an empirical question. I’m not in any position to say ‘I know’, or that ‘I know it’s delusional baloney’. But I am able to stay open-

minded about the phenomenon; and my inclination is towards living lightly with the notion that reincarnation (whatever that might mean, of course!) is eminently plausible.

And re matter, materialism and materiality, I just wanted to lob in Rudolf Steiner's telling statement about materialism, which I think at least coheres with what you're saying here: viz. 'The worst thing about materialism is that it understands nothing of matter!... By means of present-day scientific methods nothing is learned of the spirit working actively in the human organs.' Maybe that one will tickle your fancy to go into Rudolf Steiner a bit more – a good starting point being Steiner, 1987; and on the issue of true and false spiritual paths (of which the past-lives 'industry' is certainly an exemplar), Steiner, 1969.

To your Zen teacher's statement, 'We don't know where you are', I found myself wanting to add, '... and *that's* not where you are, either'.

I feel sad that we're already over our word count for this interview, as it feels like we've only just started... – but I can take 'editor's privilege', and ask you one final question – and please take as much space as you wish to answer this! I know you have another book coming out, *Manu*, which I've been lucky enough to have a peek at. Can you tell us about your new collection *Re-visioning Existential Therapy: Counter-traditional Perspectives* – from the moment when it first became a seed-idea for you, through to publication; and what (much-needed?) job you think the book can do in late-modern therapy culture? And I'm (possibly mischievously) wondering what a book by you on the theme of 'beyond "tradition" discourse' might look like.

And possibly a bit dubiously, and definitely rather boringly predictably, I'd be fascinated to hear anything you'd like to say about the current C-virus 'conjuncture' (if I can call it that), and how far you might have got in making, or not making, any sense of it all and what we're caught up in – and creating.

MB: With regards to the 'past-lives' hypotheses and similar 'spiritual' matters: the tiny understanding I have in this kind of stuff borrows

copiously from the sayings of the historical Buddha. At the heart of Dharma teachings are *impermanence* and *insubstantiality* – aka, respectively – (a) nothing lasts for long; and (b) there is no intrinsic 'self' or 'soul' to any living entity.

My job as a writer is to *complicate* things. I leave simplification to 'the expensively educated hacks in the pay of multinational corporations who reassure their bored readers that there is no need to rouse themselves from their interpassive stupor' (Fisher, 2018, p. 103). In the name of complication, and in response to your 'both stances on past lives are true' stance, I'd say – (a) both are true; (b) neither is true; (c) they are both true and untrue; (d) they are neither true or untrue. This is an admittedly poor example of the great Buddhist sage Nāgārjuna's *tetralemma* or four-corner logic (Bazzano, 2016). Nāgārjuna inspired Zen, and at the heart of Zen practice is not knowledge, but awakening to *deep perplexity*.

As for the book on existential therapy I've just finished editing (Bazzano, 2020), the original impulse came from a desire to retrieve the glowing aura and the radical edge of existentialism, a body of texts/practices that is dead in the water in current 'schools' of *traditional* existential therapy thanks to various factors, including:

- (1) the predominance in mind-numbing curricula of the reactionary, sibylline closeted theology of Heidegger. His writings constitute the unquestioned staple of most current existential therapy training, particularly in the UK. Excessive attention has been given within existential therapy to Heidegger at the expense of more progressive expressions of existential phenomenology found in de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Laing. This has arguably resulted in a widespread if understated culture of denial that has defensively ignored Heidegger's nativism, his metaphysical anti-Semitism and his own disavowal of both existentialism and phenomenology. Heidegger's influence is highly contentious, yet the relevance of Heideggerianism for existential therapy is rarely discussed, let alone questioned;
- (2) A dogged compulsion in practitioners to align themselves (especially within the UK

- Existential School) with either Mum or Dad, two figureheads who, long intellectually divorced, vainly attempt to rekindle an existential fire that has long died out;
- (3) the enthusiastic embracing (weirdly, for an approach that draws on thinkers such as de Beauvoir, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) of *business ontology* through the banal conformism and the cretinous ‘evidence-based’ approach dictated by the functionaries of late capitalism;
 - (4) dominant notions within existential therapy, e.g. universal relatedness, Dasein, authenticity, being-towards-death, thrownness, *epoché*, horizontalisation have become objects of faith rather than hypotheses to be tested.

The other motivation for wanting the existence of this book was to infuse existential therapy with streams of radical thought with which traditional existential therapy never caught up, from post-structuralism to deconstruction to Critical Theory to feminism.

The response has been wonderful from practitioners around the globe: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Italy, Greece, Israel, Latvia, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine and the UK. I have been very fortunate: there are some real gems in here from inspiring writers that we don’t hear about in the provincial Anglosphere of existential therapy: Tatiana Karyagina, Yana Gololob, Noam Israeli, Virginia Moreira, Pavlos Zarogiannis and in the UK innovative writers such as Rebecca Greenslade, Andrew Seed, John Mackessy, Deborah Lee, Niklas Serning, Glenn Nichols and others, alongside household names such as Del Loewenthal and Greg Madison.

There are seeds of new ideas in the book which, if pursued further, may open new avenues for existential therapy and beyond.

As for Covid-19, I can only offer random thoughts. The first is that a virus travels scot-free through borders and walls that bigots and flag-wavers have worked so hard to build over the last few years. We are told (understandably) to stay at home. Family is portrayed as a place of shelter – idyllic, if you are well off and own a house with a garden. But for many people, home and family are far from being the safe haven of bourgeois fantasy: domestic

violence has risen in many places during lockdowns, and many of us therapists working online are listening to clients who tell you in a whisper how they are holed up in the far corner of their family home with the very same people who, as Philip Larkin had it, ‘fuck[ed] you up’ in the first place.

The failure of many states and governments to prepare adequately for the pandemic is well documented, as is the fear-stricken, spoken and unspoken, xenophobia. The (very real) terror of contamination reminded me of the notion of ‘matter out of place’ in the pioneering work of British social anthropologist Mary Douglas, especially in *Purity and Danger* (1966).

Then there is the very real sense of the fragility of human existence and, on a more cheery note, of the fragility of capitalism. To Fredric Jameson is often attributed the quip that it’s easier to fathom the end of the world through eco-disaster than to imagine the end of capitalism. The global pandemic has evidenced the profound inadequacy of an economic system based on greed and on creating profit for the few, as well as its ability for opportunistic and callous entrepreneurship. Conversely, the need to see health treatment, e.g. access to a vaccine, as a basic human right for all, has also come to the fore, particularly in societies such as the current USA. All of a sudden, communism makes sense: co-ordination and distribution outside the profit-driven organisation of the market.

I also feel that the compulsion to give metaphysical explanations to the pandemic must be resisted. Covid-19 is not a punishment from God, nor is it Gaia’s way to warn us that we must from now on only eat tofu and organic chocolate bars. Metaphysics, whether religious or secular, implies ascribing grand designs to contingency. And the hardest thing here is to recognise the dangerous *contingency* of coronavirus. Shit happens; but then *shift* can happen too.

There is the old story of the captain of the ship who, during quarantine, learns a whole new set of habits and practices which change him inside out. ‘Staying at home’ in this sense can also mean more time for meditation. Part of this practice is also

cultivating a longing for what matters and is out of reach.

I learned through client work of loves blossoming just before lockdown. I hope someone somewhere is writing a good-enough novel or non-fiction book titled *Love in the Time of Coronavirus* that echoes Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

RH: I whole-heartedly love your complicating of things, Manu.

The rest is, fittingly, silence.

A heart-felt 'thank you'. And please don't start taking the mainstream tablets, ever.

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About the contributors

Manu Bazzano is a writer, therapist and supervisor with a background in philosophy, Zen and rock music. He is an internationally recognised facilitator and visiting tutor at various institutions, including Cambridge University. His latest book is *Nietzsche and Psychotherapy*. He edited the forthcoming *Re-Visioning Existential Therapy*, a collection of essays by existential therapists around the globe.

Richard House is a former therapist and former university lecturer in psychology, psychotherapy and education, who now works as a full-time left-green activist in Stroud, Gloucestershire. He still enjoys editing *Self & Society* journal as it approaches its 50th year. His latest book, *Pushing Back to Ofsted*, was published last month (InterActions, April 2020).

A Response to Manu Bazzano

By Kirk Schneider

I deeply appreciated this lively and meandering ‘stew’ that Richard and Manu have cooked up here. Further, I’ve long valued Manu’s voice in *Self & Society* for its stout iconoclasm and evocative depth. We are on the same page at many turns in this interview and I found myself cheering in synchrony. For example, I resonate with, and have written intensively myself about, the socio-economic model for living today; the emphasis on speed, instant results and appearances. I would guess that Manu and I would be in accord that post-industrial, digitalised society needs to pull back and urgently (perhaps something of what the coronavirus has forced); that we need to catch our collective breaths; and that we need to seriously reawaken humility and wonder and the sense of adventure towards living at every major level of our lives. I think we’d further agree that one of the chief prices for overlooking these steps is the headlong leap toward what, in *The Spirituality of Awe*, I call ‘roboticism’ – which is not just our enchantment with but our actual mergence into machines.

I also relished Manu’s embrace of the body-subject *à la* Merleau-Ponty, and his stress on what I’d call the ‘whole-bodied’ experience of life. This is an approach that I believe we agree stands in stark contrast to the stale routinisation and intellectualisation of life that has so afflicted our profession, as well as some areas within our own sub-disciplines of existential and transpersonal psychology. I resonate to Manu’s suspicion of metaphysical absolutes and the presumption of truths, whether secular or theological. I sympathise with his scepticism over the idealisation of Heidegger and philosophical abstraction, to the comparative neglect of the more earthy, personalistic existential thinkers such as Buber, Levinas, May, Rogers and Laing, who emphasised the concrete meeting of persons along with ontological investigation. I share Manu’s suspicion towards extremes of any kind – material or spiritual, personalistic or communalistic – and his

acknowledgment of ambiguities as well as the *liveliness* of ambiguities. Manu strikes me as a searcher, or even better, grappler, and his approach to therapy as well as life dwells in the tensions, the vital grappling between embodiment and mystery.

In short, the existential/humanistic/integrative traditions within which I myself have dwelled share many of Manu’s Nietzschean sensibilities: the stress on struggle, the quest to become more fully who one is, the aspiration to enlivening community which supports such becoming, the creativity of thriving ‘in spite and in light of’ tragic frailty, and the interchange with diverse lives, views and possibilities.

My only quibble, which is really more of a question, is to what extent Manu is aware of this contemporary overlap between us, and where, if at all, it plays a role in his own inquiries. For example, I noticed that in his interview with Richard, all the contributors to his forthcoming book – *Re-Visioning Existential Therapy* – appear not to be from the USA. I don’t have a personal concern with this but it makes me wonder if there was something purposeful about it, perhaps due to a sense that the radical existentialism about which Manu et al. speak is not flowering in the USA at this time. Yet as I have pointed out above, I do think that there are a number of such flowerings – it’s just that we don’t know enough about each other to sense them. I want to be clear that I am not blaming here, as I see this as a mutual problem. We in the United States don’t know nearly enough about our European and indeed global counterparts either, and hence the prospective wisdom in these dialogues. They are the opening signals that a fresher, more abundant existentialism is astir.

Kirk Schneider is the current president of the Existential-Humanistic Institute (EHI), Council Member of the American Psychological Association (APA), past president (2015–2016) of the Society for Humanistic Psychology (Division 32) of the APA, recent past editor of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (2005–2012), and adjunct faculty member at Saybrook University and Teachers College, Columbia University. See Kirk’s interview elsewhere in this issue of the magazine. For more information visit <https://kirkjschneider.com>.