

**EXILE ON MAIN STREET –
TOWARDS A COUNTER-EXISTENTIAL THERAPY**

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To the memory of Jo Cox MP (1974-2016)

Abstract

Brexit saw the rise of nationalism, an idea founded on tribal violence against the other. But for Nietzsche the ‘good European’ transcends parochialism, whilst Said saw modern western culture as the work of exiles. Existentialism embraced the modern ontological condition of exile, endeavouring to describe existence in the absence of a subject whose nature is groundless. It promised to confront the philosophical tradition and its false hopes in order to account for displacement, absence, otherness, openness to radical ethics and socio-political transformation. Does the philosophy of existence (and existential psychotherapy) still answer for the above? Or do we need to formulate a counter-existential perspective?

Key Words

Exile, otherness, existential psychotherapy, logocentrism, differentialism

‘Where are you from?’

Towards the end of therapy, my client Ahmed made plans to leave the UK. Brexit had been the last straw. A bright thirty-something from Algeria, he had built a career in the creative area of banking, one that allows him to employ his natural talent for mathematics. To a degree, our weekly meetings helped him, I think, steer a difficult balance that brought him

some respite and the clarity needed to act. The turning point came after the EU referendum, the culmination of a long process: he'd been aware for a while of uncomfortable feelings and emotions that had come up since the move to London, brought about by his affluent neighbours' gracious indifference after years of him living there, by the courteous interrogations he felt subjected to at the school parents' meetings, by the probing question: 'Where are you from?' – reserved for anyone whose accent or complexion is different. Add, twice a day, the swarming assault at train carriages, the aggressiveness of commuters shoving their way in, fighting for that corner where they can enter their monadic being in the cultural delights of the *Evening Standard*, and it was no surprise that Ahmed had had enough. 'Let's move to France': His wife agrees. The kids are excited. Not that he harbours illusions about France's *fraternité*, with all the brouhaha about *burkini* and the mounting secularist intolerance. For another thing that annoys Ahmed is being routinely asked to come up with assertions about Islam, the religion of his upbringing he feels connected to, but not as badge of tribal identity.

This last point became central. His reluctance to view identity in these terms raised two questions: a) Why do we view identity solely in terms of *membership*? b) What happened to identity as radical uniqueness, something one finds ('finding one's voice') – something that demands temporary exile from one's tribe of origin?

Good Europeans

Other clients too voiced their dismay after Brexit. Europeans among them felt the ugly xenophobic undertones. My British clients were discomfited by what they saw as the narrowing of the horizon, the claustrophobic nausea they felt of being aboard a ship of little islanders captained by Livid Nigels in Mr Kipling blazer and Dyed-blond Chancers waving the Union Jack on a City bike. Before it gained currency, the term 'Brexit' sounded jarring to

me. There is no exit in Brexit but closure, vainglorious enclosure, self-confinement within a brittle notion of identity that believes itself encircled by swarming migrants at its borders, and contaminated by multi-culturalism in its midst. These sentiments belong to a brutal legacy that sees “a homogenous country [as] more peaceful and stable” (Robinson, 2012, p 25), a legacy that plays on a misguided metaphor borrowed from genealogy: a homogenous stone is more solid than a heterogeneous one.

I am no fan of the EU, especially after what they did to Greece. The ‘good European’ of today supports austerity and casts a suspicious glance on outsiders. But there is another meaning to the phrase ‘good European’, if one thinks of Europe as the font of modern western culture – understood, with Said (2001), to be “the work of exiles, émigré, refugees” (p. 173). This is a vision of Europe built on Hellenism, in turn influenced by Asia – a Europe whose *borders are porous*. In modern times, this is a vision of Europe as cradle of inspired scepticism, deconstructive force and critical thought; of writers who fled wars and holocausts, or left voluntarily: Joyce, Beckett, the latter preferring France at war to Ireland at peace; a Europe that gave us existentialism and phenomenology.

The lunacy of nationality

The writer who best articulated this notion was Nietzsche, whose hopes were inextricably linked to his despair about the German Reich of Bismarck and the subsequent Wilhelmine period, presciently seen by him as a danger for the rest of Europe. Nietzsche considered attachments to any so-called fatherland, with their “lapse and regression into old loves and narrow views” (Nietzsche, 1978, p. 152) as a form of “lunacy” (ibid p. 169).

His initial pan-Europeanism eventually morphed into trans-Europeanism: a good European, it turns out, is one who gazes at Europe from the viewpoint of exile and statelessness, one who,

like himself, has *no homeland*. Believing that Europe found itself at a time of difficult transition, in the mid-1880s he wrote words that are resonant today:

How can those of us who are children of the future be at home in this house of today? We are averse to all the ideals in which anyone today, in this brittle and broken time of transition, might feel at home; but as far as the ‘realities’ of our times are concerned, we do not believe that they will last. The ice that barely continues to bear our weight has become very thin: thawing winds are blowing, and we ourselves, we who have no homeland, are something that breaks up ice and all those ‘realities’ that have become too thin (cited in Krell & Bates, 1997, p. 2, translation modified, last emphasis added).

Exile, Existence, Existential

Those among us who have no homeland can make a significant contribution: we can help rupture ‘realities’ that have become superfluous and open a route to the future. Those among us who recognized the death of God, i.e. our condition of *groundlessness* – “the destruction of the centuries-old horizon of meaning and ontological stability” (Viriasova, 2016, p. 225) – are up to the task of clearing the view for new horizons. For that reason, “a good European must ... leave home” (Bazzano, 2006, p. 195). Home leaving can be factual: Nietzsche was a nomad without a state, a home, and a citizenship. Exile can be tragically factual, as in the current plight of thousands upon thousands of refugees fleeing war zones. It can denote, as in the *tokudo* or ‘homeless vows’ of one receiving Zen ordination, a rethinking of values, an aspiration to leave the false security of home and received identity. Greg Madison (2009) has written positively on *existential migration*:

Unlike economic migration, simple wanderlust, exile, or variations of forced migration, ‘existential migration’ is conceived as a *chosen* attempt to *express* something fundamental about personal existence by leaving one’s homeland and becoming a foreigner (Madison, Internet file).

Madison stresses the clear preference in voluntary migrants for “the unfamiliar and the foreign over the familiar conventional routines of the homeworld” (ibid).

The ‘philosophy of existence’ seemingly embraced our ontological condition of exile announced by Nietzsche. The very word existentialism, beginning with the prefix *ex* (‘out’ or

‘out of’) aligns it with *existence exile, exodus, exit, exteriority*; these words “bear a meaning that is not negative” (Blanchot, 1993, p. 127), a meaning that challenges the sedentary predilection of the philosophical tradition for home, identity, and self-sameness. It questions the centrality of the established *polis* in favour of a cosmopolitan community; it challenges a paradigm of homesickness that places the refugee and the exile in the “inferior position of the supplicant” (Viriasova, 2016, p. 222).

Existentialism resisted the Platonism of the philosophical tradition and confronted its false hopes – self-identity, centrality of *logos*, denial of the body, enclosure within the borders of the city and the state – in order to account for difference, displacement, nomadism and social and political solidarity. Does the philosophy of existence (and existential psychotherapy) still stand for any of the above? To investigate, I will examine the question in the three key areas: 1) self; 2) self and other(s); 3) self, other(s) and the world.

1) Self

Incarnate subjectivity

As a rule, subjectivity is either unduly substantiated or summarily circumvented. We either get bogged down in it, or we shun it in favour of loftier concepts. Among phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty’s position is unusual; he walks an ambiguous middle path. He does not accept the Cartesian paradigm nor can he fully agree with Husserl’s rationalism. At the same time, he remains loyal to Husserl by never entirely abandoning subjectivity. Referring to Heidegger, he writes:

The thought of subjectivity is one of these solids that philosophy will have to digest. Or let us say that *once ‘infected’ by certain ways of thinking, philosophy can no longer annul them but must cure itself of them by inventing better ones*. The same philosopher who now regrets Parmenides and would like to give us back our relationship with Being such as they were prior to self-consciousness *owes his idea of and taste for primordial ontology to just this self-consciousness*. There are some ideas which make it impossible

for us to return to a time prior to their existence, even and especially if we have moved beyond them, and subjectivity is one of them (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 154, emphasis added)

It is not possible to dream up a mode of thought *before* the birth of modern subjectivity, to think and act as if the encrusted layers of two millennia of post-Socratic philosophy have little bearing on how we live. The task is to work *with* subjectivity and find a way forward – in Merleau-Ponty’s case, through the fertile notion of the *body-subject*. This also provides us with a doorway to an emancipatory way of conceiving our being in the world, of constructing an “irregular cosmology...of our finitude and imperfection” (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 661). In this sense, incarnate subjectivity is none other than “the finite mortal individual, democratic citizen, equal to and among others, who contains the world within himself by virtue of his resourceful imagination and his sympathetic love” (ibid, pp 656-67).

Dead Ringer

It is my impression that the body-subject, a sensible way out of the philosophical impasse of subjectivity, is only a minor item within large sections of the ‘British school’ of existential therapy. I also believe that there is an inconsistency in the latter derived in turn from Heidegger’s own inconsistency on the matter. A case in point is Heidegger’s notion of ‘fore-structure’, already approximated by Husserl (Magliola, 1984, p. 201n) in his *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 2013), in the section titled “The Ego as substrate of habitualities” (pp. 66-67), where he puts forward the intriguing notion of *habitus*. After the moment when a particular decision I have taken has passed, Husserl says, and regardless as to whether I am of the same conviction, “I am abidingly the Ego who is thus and so decided” (p. 66). This is not simply because “I remember the act or can remember it later”. I can remember the act even if “I have ‘given up’ my conviction”. Even if I have given up my conviction, my particular decision has helped construct “this abiding *habitus*, or state” (p. 67), by which “the persisting

Ego is determined” (ibid). It is not possible to uncouple *habitus* from Aristotle’s thought and from the thirteenth century’s theology of Thomas Aquinas and Dante. This is not surprising – there are evident if overlooked affinities between Husserl and Descartes, and Descartes and Christian theology. This notion was useful to Husserl in his attempt to disentangle phenomenology from the clutches of a ‘philosophy of consciousness’ that has it in its tight grip to this day. It will prove useful to Bourdieu (1990) who re-appropriated *habitus* to great effect “as a way of escaping from the choice between structuralism without subject and the philosophy of the subject” (p. 10). And it was useful to Hegel in moving philosophical enquiry past Kantian dualism.

What we have in Heidegger’s case is something else entirely. His own version of *habitus*, the fore-structure (*Vor-struktur*), mentioned briefly in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962) is crucial as it will provide an opening for Gadamer’s own version of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2004). Heidegger (1962) sees fore-structure as comprised of three aspects: a) fore-having; b) fore-sight and fore-conception: “[w]henver something is interpreted as something – he writes – the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, foresight and fore-conception” (p. 191). This state of affairs he calls the “hermeneutical Situation” (ibid, p. 275), something which “needs to be clarified and made secure *beforehand*, both in a basic experience of the ‘object’ to be disclosed, and in terms of such an experience” (ibid, emphasis added). This ‘imprint’ ends up *substantiating* subjectivity at the same time as it lures us into believing that it has been surpassed. This is even more in evidence in relation to interpretation: for Heidegger, interpretation is making explicit something we have *in advance*, something *already* understood. This formulation not only fails to add anything new to Husserl’s ‘*habitus*’. It also falls back to Kant, who in the *Critique of Pure Reason* wrote:

Experience is itself a species of knowledge which involves understanding; and understanding has rules which I must presuppose as being in me prior to objects being given to me, and therefore as being *a priori*. (Kant, 1933, p. 22)

Heidegger's 'existential analytic' retains "the formal traits of every transcendental analytic" (Derrida & Nancy, 1991, p. 98). Dasein itself is but "a dead ringer for the Cartesian cogito" (Rapaport, 2003, p. 104), coming to occupy "the place of the subject, the cogito" (Derrida & Nancy, 1991, p. 98). In psychotherapy too, despite our enthusiasm of organismic, socio-constructionist, and transpersonal detours, we unfailingly go back to the Ithaca of the *cogito* (Bazzano, 2016d).

It is not so easy to do away with the subject, but admitting defeat or owning doubt may be preferable to the fantasy of believing the riddle is solved once and for all. At the very least the first stance is recognition of the strangeness and ultimate unknowability of what we are:

Singularity and Uniqueness

In *Democratic Vistas*, Walt Whitman wrote:

There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity – yours for you, whoever you are, as mine of me. Miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth's dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts (Robinson, 2012, p. xii-xiii)

Despite its eternalist leanings, Whitman's evocation of identity implies vital distinctiveness, a locus of singularity as well as of essential solitude. In existential language, this could be read as the place of *irreplaceability* within the configuration of Dasein. It is also the necessary locus of personal ethical response to the presence of the other. At the same time, this singularity *cannot be made universal*. This is the fundamental mistake of *subjectivism* found in wide sections of humanistic and existential therapy. To universalize subjective experience has often meant intoning a self-congratulatory paean to our 'beautiful soul', a concept already tackled by Hegel (1977):

The 'beautiful soul', lacking an actual existence, entangled in the contradiction between its pure self and the necessity of that self to externalize itself and change itself into actual existence, and dwelling in the immediacy of this firmly held antithesis ... this

‘beautiful soul’ then, being conscious of this contradiction in its unreconciled immediacy, is dissolved to the point of madness, wastes itself in yearning, and pines away in consumption (p 406).

Intentionality and Expression

Did existential therapy exhume the beautiful soul via its own notion of the ‘authentic self’? Despite avowed protestations in favour of fluidity and relationality, the notion of a self-existing entity called ‘I’ who, with the valiant help of the existential therapist, will tackle the challenges inherent in his being-towards-death, is still going strong.

Both the beautiful soul and the authentic self are gripped by a *static* notion of subjectivity that regards itself in greater light than the fluid world they inhabit. The first is mesmerised by purity, the second is gripped by conscience, albeit ‘existential’ conscience (Van Deurzen, 2007). At closer scrutiny, both stances are *pre-phenomenological*, harking back to Kant and even Descartes. The antidote here comes from the first phenomenologist, Hegel. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he holds this difficult balance admirably:

An individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action. However, this seems to imply that he cannot determine the *end* of his action until he has carried it out; but at the same time, since he is a *conscious* individual, he must have the action in front of him beforehand as entirely his own, i.e. as an *end* (Hegel, 1977, p 240).

The individual has consciously prefigured a particular action, yet it is only *after* the deed that both the nature of her deed and her own self imprinted in it are more fully clarified. The deed is social and historical. Here the emphasis is no longer on *intentionality* but on *expression*. The emphasis is no longer on the soul or the self (however beautiful, however authentic) but on their concrete actions in the world which alone will convey who this person is. One of the tragedies of the philosophy of existence has been its inability to consider the parallel developments of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, a mode of thought which in its best manifestations (Adorno, Benjamin) took to heart and transformed the Hegelian legacy without

falling into the trappings of a ‘philosophy of consciousness’. A recalcitrant heir to the existentialist legacy, Foucault (1983) acknowledged that many theoretical blunders could have been avoided by paying closer attention to the *ontology of actuality* that run through the ‘Frankfurt School’ (Dews, 1986). Interestingly, contemporary expressions of social change and direct action such as the *Occupy Wall Street* movement did not turn to existentialism for inspiration, but to Critical Theory (Jeffries, 2016).

Of Thanatologists

One way in which strands of existential therapy buttress Cartesian subjectivity is through attitudes towards death. Loosely inspired by Epicurus, one of Yalom’s books is boldly titled *Staring at the Sun* (Yalom, 2008). The title *reverses* La Rochefoucauld’s celebrated maxim according to which we *cannot* stare directly into the face of the sun or death. By overturning the aphorism and inviting us to confront our own eventual demise squarely by taking “a full unwavering look at death” (p. 275), Yalom misses the subtlety of the aphorism. His stance is common among thanatologists (death specialists, from *Thanatos*, death), but when our zeal to ‘confront death’ is prominent, we overlook two essential things: a) staring at death is an act of *arrogance*; b) like the sun, death is also *benevolent*, “a counterpart to the great source of life, the sun” (Ricks, 1993, p. 20): we will benefit from both *as long as* we don’t eyeball them with our hyper-rationalist stare.

Thanatologists are well-intentioned: they long to inject a little depth in the ailing body of humanistic psychology, an orientation all too keen to be out with the transpersonal fairies. They redirect the focus from the obvious narcissism of ‘self-actualization’ to the nuanced narcissism of contemplating being-towards-death. In the process, the self is crowned; his grave, worthy exercises in ‘confronting death’ are applauded, despite being thoroughly self-absorbed. Having indelicately scrutinized death, the therapist will now subject her own

existence to the self-punishing enterprise of 'living authentically'. Emboldened by the new-found 'truth', she will then go out 'guiding' her clients. We could do worse here than being reminded of Levinas' powerful critique of 'being-towards-death' (Levinas 2001). In his view,

[it]converts the irremissibility of an unappeasable and implacable death, the existence of the corpse, into something that can be mediated, comprehended, and hence taken over by human subjectivity in ontological terms" (Rapaport, 2003, p. 110).

Speaking, a.k.a. Chanting my own Dirge

Contemplating being-towards-death gives us the comforting illusion that death can be understood and assimilated in our experience: a rationalist act of hubris if there ever was one.

Focus on death-as-finality distracts us from the fact that death, or more accurately *lifedeath/deathlife* (Bazzano, 2016b) is vividly present in our everyday, in the language we speak. Speaking itself is linked to our *absence* from being:

My language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined by death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is (Blanchot, 1995, p. 323).

I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge: I separate myself from myself, I am no longer either my presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence, the presence of my name, which goes beyond me and whose stone-like immobility performs exactly the same function for me as a tombstone weighing on the void (Blanchot, 1995, p. 324).

Our language estranges us. It reaffirms exile as our ontological condition. Affirmation of exile announces the beginning of the end of anthropocentrism (Nancy & Lacoue-Labarthe, 1991): the end of the assumption that the human individual constitutes the basis for a notion of political community. It is the beginning of the end of a political anthropocentrism founded on national and ethnic identification (Rapaport, 2003).

2 Self and Others

Concrete Relations

A milestone of relationality is chapter 3, part III of *Being and Nothingness*, where Sartre (2003) initiates an important discussion on “concrete relations with others” (pp 383-452), a text which has been rewritten by Levinas, Derrida, and Lacan. Echoing Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, Sartre emphasizes conflict in human interactions, something we ignore at our peril: doing away with conflict is doing away with *agon*, the Greek word for struggle and contest and a fundamental human instinct towards amelioration. He writes of the crucial role *Anerkennung* (recognition/acknowledgement) plays in human interactions. I want what only the other can give me, her recognition: the recognition of a mirror. The other can give me what I want only inasmuch as she is free but her freedom is a threat to me. I want her to be free and at the same time I want to control her freedom. In this contradictory, seemingly impossible task we spend our “useless passion” (Sartre, 2003, p. 636). Despite his austere vision, Sartre was extraordinarily generous in his political commitment in favour of the wretched of the earth and unflinching in his condemnation of injustice and discrimination, a stance that makes current ‘intersubjective therapy’ stances look feeble in comparison. As one astute Sartrean commentators writes:

[Sartre’s] analysis of the roots of prejudice and his understanding of how the process of persecution arises make a valuable and insightful contribution to understanding a contemporary Western world that is currently living in the wake of the near collapse of finance capitalism. A world characterized by constant subjection to the fear of the stranger, epitomized by rising anti-immigrant fervour; by an increasing persecution internationally of minorities such as gays and bisexuals; and by the rolling back of female emancipation (Pearce, 2016, p. 84).

Yet only a faint echo of Sartrean concrete relations remains in contemporary notions of relational existential therapy which are instead largely derivative of relational psychoanalysis (Stolorow et al, 1987; Orange et al, 1997). One will certainly not find in them even a trace of the notion of “psychotherapy as a political act” (Pearce, 2016, p. 87).

What I find appealing in Sartre’s perspective is its lack of sentimentality and a contemplation of human inter-relational struggle that is free of “familialism”, of the “framework of the most

traditional psychiatry” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 235). There *is* mutuality here, but it’s the gritty mutuality of entanglement, power struggle as well as love, a struggle forever tinged by ontological disparity. None of the lyrical flights of reciprocity are to be found that characterize the ‘philosophy of the meeting’ on which much therapeutic orthodoxy relies. The symmetry found here is the springboard for Levinas’s work, who reframes concrete relations in terms of *separation* and of an ethical relation that is essentially *non-reciprocal* as well as *non-transactional* (Bazzano, 2016c). My own interpretations of Levinas, applied to philosophy (Bazzano, 2012) and psychotherapy (Bazzano, 2016c) reframe concrete relations to the political domain of *host* and *guest*, of citizen and migrant. In receiving the guest, the host is herself received by her own dwelling. Only a host who knows her existential condition of guest on Earth can become a good host. By remembering “our essential condition as *guests* on this earth”, we may become “good *hosts* and true citizens” (ibid, p. 129).

Togetherness

It is to Levinas that Maurice Blanchot (1993) turns to weave his own account of the relational dimension, one that I have adapted to the psychotherapy domain with my formulation of *togetherness* (Bazzano, 2013). The term, of Germanic origin, means *to gather*, indicating the gathering into proximity, companionship, and sharing of individual components, without relegating aloneness and uniqueness to the background. This is because there is no discrepancy between ‘individual’ and relatedness. The dichotomy arises only if one adopts the view of the *inherent existence* of the self – one of the dominant views in western philosophy and theology. Togetherness comprises of aloneness and autonomy *alongside* relatedness. More importantly, the lesson I draw from Blanchot (1993; 1997) is that *meeting* takes place not in the ‘I-Thou’ dialogical domain but in the non-dialectical, *impersonal* dimension of *il y a* (‘there is’), the phrase used by Rimbaud in part 3 of his poem *Childhood*

(Rimbaud, 1986, pp. 237-38). The meeting between self and other, therapist and client is an unexpected opening into the domain of poetry.

There are dialectical and non-dialectical modes of encounter. The dialectical mode is in turn divided into three: (1a) objective; (1b) inter-subjective; (1c) immediate.

(1a) In the *objective* mode, the self (therapist) perceives the client (other) as the object of study and observation (whether as a bundle of drives, carrier of symptoms to be alleviated or problems to be solved, or as a 'case' to be cognitively and behaviorally re-programmed). This is a normative approach, a Procrustean perspective forcing a human being to fit into a frame – an approach invariably in tune with the dictates of the market, the dominant ideology and fundamentally indifferent to the needs of the real person.

(1b) In the *inter-subjective* perspective, championed by large sections of existential therapy, the client is perceived as another self, perhaps very different, but linked to the self through a form of primary identity. By universalizing Gadamer's stance in the transition from hermeneutics to psychotherapy, the inter-subjective perspective omits the *inherent disparity* present in any relationship and the fundamental otherness of the other.

(1c) The *immediate* view attempts to bridge the separation between self and other. Intensity and a heightened sense of presence are key notions here, often highlighting a quasi-numinous incidence of peak experiences. Alterity may be lost in this bridging, and the solitude/autonomy of the other sacrificed at various altars: spirituality, the transpersonal, quasi-magical readings of the notion of 'therapeutic presence'. What is implicit in this view is Platonist nostalgia for lost union.

Dissimilar on the surface, all three dialectical approaches share a propensity towards bridging the unbridgeable. The objective analyst, the inter-subjective existentialist and the empathic spiritualist all unwittingly reduce the uneasiness inherent in the unknowability of the other; in the process, they risk neglecting her very real otherness.

The *non-dialectical* mode is definable by what is *not*. It is not something the therapist does nor does it rely on the conditions he allegedly ‘offers’. All one does here is making the room ready for a guest who may or may not appear. Genuine encounter is an *occurrence* rather than direct result of the therapist’s doing.

Blanchot’s own emphasis is on *authorship*, on the work of the artist/writer. This can legitimately be extended to the notion of authorship of one’s life. There would then be a fundamental difference between a psychotherapeutic practice which emphasizes hermeneutics and one that focuses on authorship. The first is based on description/interpretation; the second on ethical respect for the autonomy of the client and the decentering of the therapist’s role. The question then is no longer how to describe/interpret but how to create space for authorship to emerge.

3) Self, Others, World

Horses for Courses

One of the assumptions implicitly disputed so far is the foundational relatedness of human experience. I want to state my claim more explicitly, by linking ‘foundational relatedness’ to its philosophical roots. I will then put forward a different view, one with its own history. In doing so, I do not claim access to a *truer* perspective, but simply to one that better appeals to me.

The Rhetoric of Boundaries

In a section on “Heideggerian resonances” within a recent article, Spinelli (2016) writes of “being-in-the-world [as] a *unitary phenomenon*” in which “there is no divide between subject and object, nor between internal and external” (p. 316, emphasis added). For Heidegger, the

author says, the ‘I’ itself “expresses *the wholeness of being*” (p. 317 emphasis added) and must be read “as a general term rather than ... that which designates a specific and singular entity or agent” (ibid). The ‘Heideggerian resonances’ in question are one of a series of parallel examples presented by Spinelli (alongside spiritual traditions, physics, social sciences, consciousness studies and ‘Husserlian resonances’) that would demonstrate the validity of what the author calls “the Third Grand Theory” (universal relatedness) upon which “the ‘radical turn’ proposed by existential phenomenology is ... dependent upon” (p. 310). The first two ‘Grand Theories’ described by Spinelli, are: a) “individual subjectivities” (p. 305) and b) “subjectivity/intersubjectivity (or bi-subjectivity)” (p. 306), both seen as exerting a diverting influence on existential phenomenology. These two roughly correspond to ‘Cartesian subjectivity’ and ‘inter-subjectivity’ in the way I’ve discussed them here. At a crucial point, the author writes:

The third ‘Grand Theory’ *deviates significantly* from the previous two by proposing a foundational grounding of universal *relatedness* from which all individual subjectivities emerge. Each distinct subjectivity is therefore viewed as *an outcome expression or manifestation* arising from an *a priori* ‘ground’ of relatedness (Spinelli, 2016, p. 308, first emphasis added).

In my view, *universal relatedness is wholly in accord with Cartesian subjectivity and with inter-subjectivity*. Self-identity first encounters inter-subjectivity then discovers universal relatedness. These are stages in a trajectory that widens the ground. However, there is no ground to begin with. It is not true that the theory of universal relatedness “*challenges* dominant Western assumptions regarding a distinct and internalised self” (Spinelli, 2016, p. 308); it merely tickles them. Furthermore, universal relatedness (a.k.a. *holism*) has always been present in both western and eastern philosophical/spiritual traditions *alongside* differentialist, counter-traditional views.

Logocentrism

Spinelli is right in seeing universal relatedness as more consistent with existential therapy than either crude subjectivity or dialogical inter-subjectivity. This is also where the problem lies, for then existential phenomenology *ceases to account for difference, fragmentation, and the modern ontological condition of exile* and becomes instead another variation on the metaphysics promulgated within the Citadel of Logos – a metaphysics whose name is *logocentrism*. The logocentric view assumes *unity* between language and reality. It compresses difference into an all-encompassing whole sometimes built on reason, other times on mystical union: logocentrism can be *rational* as well as *mystical*. For Derrida, one of Heidegger’s most gifted interpreters, Heidegger’s notion of *Sein* belongs to a particular kind of mysticism that recognizes the unity of opposites (Brooks, 2015; Magliola, 1984), to an onto-theology inscribed within “metaphysical determinations of truth” (Derrida, 1998, p. 10). In *The Question of Being* (Heidegger, 1958), we read:

Only because the question ‘What is metaphysics?’ thinks from the beginning of the climbing above, the transcendence, the *Being* of being, can it think of the negative of being, of that nothingness which just as originally is identical with Being (p. 101).

Identity of ‘being’ with *Being* replicates a theme found in the tradition, the *self-identity principle*. Finely attuned to Heidegger’s critical practice and drawing on Heidegger’s late work *Identity and Difference* (Heidegger, 2002), Derrida deconstructs – *Dekonstruktion* was after all Heidegger’s term — the mystical notion of unity of opposites, opening phenomenological inquiry to a *multiplicity* of interpretations (Derrida, 1998).

Differentialism

Logocentrism is almost inescapable because linked to what we see as undisputable: the principle of self-identity. But there is an alternative, namely the *differentialist* thought of the kind espoused by Nagarjuna (150-250 AD), the Buddhist sage-philosopher, and, in the modern era, by Derrida and the work of what came to be known as ‘post-structuralism’. All

of these are concerted assaults on what we hold most dear: the notion that ‘I am I’; the notion that whatever is, is. If invited to forego for a moment categories such as *identity*, *unity*, *being*, and entertain a line of enquiry unburdened by these metaphysical crutches, many may come to experience unease. This is because our way of thinking is steeped in the above concepts. With globalization exporting ‘our way of life’ all over the world, this increasingly applies to other cultures as well. Within some traditions we nevertheless find threads of differentialism. Zen Buddhism is a case in point: alongside logocentric views and the tendency to refer back to unity and the ‘ground of being’, one finds in Zen the invitation to consider that a being is not a unitary entity but a product of *co-arising*, of “simultaneous happening of different elements that together construct what we call a self” (Park, 2006, p. xii). A being is at all times *already* “in the web of movement without ... possibility of creating a ‘presence’ of ‘entity’” (Park, *ibid*, p. xiii). This is an example of what Nāgārjuna called *śūnyatā*, often translated as ‘emptiness’. To a conventional way of thinking, the above description sounds like annihilation. Similarly, the notion of *identity of non-identity* (*anattā*) – namely that *all things in the world are devoid of self* – will be understood as a “violation of the Aristotelian logic” (Park, *ibid*, p. xiv). When faced with the differentialist perspective, the customary response is twofold: a) rejection of this philosophical and religious practice because deemed to be ‘nihilistic’; b) assimilation of its otherness within customary metaphysical categories. Yet the differentialist perspective plays an important role in our era, *the era of difference*. Difference is crucial when applied to metaphysics, religion and transformative practices such as psychotherapy. This is because a thought that recognizes difference is not reducible to onto-theology; *it does not reduce phenomena to ‘Being’*.

Indra’s Net and the Panopticon

Echoing de Beauvoir and Dostoyevsky, Spinelli (2016) draws a powerful ethical inference at the heart of universal relatedness: “*Each of us is responsible for everything and to every being*” (p. 325, italics in the original). This phrase reminded me of the Vedic image of *Indra’s net* found in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. The god Indra hung a wondrous vast net, a spider’s web stretching to infinity. At each crossing point there is a glittering jewel. Each jewel reflects all others – a haunting metaphor for the inter-dependence of all things. Everything affects everything else. But there is a twist: we are all interconnected *within* Indra’s net. There is a powerful rhetoric of *inside/outside* and *of boundaries* at work here. Poetic beauty notwithstanding, this vision of universal relatedness is thoroughly logocentric: it points at *closure*; it marks space; it creates *borders*. In short, it has all the “hallmarks of holism” (Magliola, 2006, p. 247).

What’s more, the universal responsibility implied by universal relatedness engenders *universal guilt*: a weak point in Levinasian thought, echoed unintentionally by Spinelli. Luckily, there is a way out. The first ethical vow taken up by a Zen practitioner states: ‘Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them’. One reading of the vow is: ‘I vow to save them *from me*’. To be ‘responsible’ for others has to mean, on one level, *to let others be*, to refrain from bothering them with my greed and aggression and equally from flooding them with my moral effulgence.

Another image of universal relatedness is Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon*, an institutional building where everyone can be observed by a single watchman – enclosure, imprisonment, and the entanglement of our globalized world where relatedness means *entrapment*. At this juncture, exile is a legitimate act of resistance reinstating a primary, non-subjectival freedom. Affirmation of exile then becomes affirmation of existence: the right to *exit*, to escape the prison of logos, where otherness is kept out of our violent borders.

Were we able to affirm our modern ontological condition of exile, we'd see the myriad manifestations of existence as stemming from *emptiness* rather than reduce them to 'oneness'. We'd be free to move about leisurely. We'd become a person who, as Huineng (638-713 AD) says, "does not abide either inside or outside ... [and] is free to come and go" (Yampolsky, 1967, p. 150)

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