

## **PURPOSE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY - Michael Bennett ([www.michaelbennett.org.uk](http://www.michaelbennett.org.uk))**

The purpose of psychotherapy is not a psychological question but a philosophical one. Any approach that is purely psychological will expose its proponent to being obliged (often covertly) to import any justifications for the goals chosen from a theoretical framework that is external to psychology and associated disciplines. This leaves counselling and psychotherapy in the dangerous position of being dependent upon an external discourse that is often neither acknowledged nor understood. I have therefore felt it necessary to venture into the realms of philosophy, developmental psychology, sociology and politics and consider counselling and psychotherapy from these viewpoints.

Observed from the outside counselling and psychotherapy appear to be fragmented. This state of affairs enables the contradictory trends of single schools or traditions claiming a certain level of uniqueness for their methodology, whilst at the same time individual practitioners create their own methodological cocktails from competing traditions. What is absent is a general theoretical framework. I am too circumspect to rise to this particular challenge, but I do believe that I present a reasonable case for proposing that there is a viable framework for considering the purpose of all counselling and psychotherapy.

The approach that I take is one of critique. By putting many of the received values of counselling and psychotherapy to a radical critical analysis I am not seeking to undermine or destroy these most valuable practices. Rather I seek to make transparent (much like a therapist) many of the hidden or unconsciously adopted values and presuppositions which have become embedded in them and subject them to a critical investigation from the perspective of an articulated value base that is philosophically grounded and therefore open to rational discourse. In so doing I firmly believe that counselling and psychotherapy will be much more beneficial to their clients and will fulfil their historical and political potential. Many counsellors and psychotherapists are frustrated with the ethical paucity and moral ambivalence that flavours these practices. We are at a cultural crossroads. For Samuels 'the characteristic of late modernity to try to make use of knowledge about itself can be recast as a struggle within our culture to become self-conscious; our culture struggle to become psychological.' Once practitioners understand that this struggle is inherently moral, ethical

and political they may well come to see that their work is at the cutting edge of creating a new social order.

My first concern in this work is with trying to find a rational basis for considering the purpose of counselling and psychotherapy. In a post-traditional world where neither God or the sheer weight of tradition can provide an objective vantage point from which to define the good how can we find a philosophical basis from which to judge anything? Under attack from postmodernism the attempt to move out of the position of complete relativism seems hopelessly forlorn. However not to do this leaves us in a significantly worse position. It is at this point that the radical philosophy and social theory of Habermas proves to be extremely useful. In his long term critique of postmodernism he has developed a theory of rationality that, on the one hand, moves out of the infinite circularity of relativism without, on the other hand, falling back on any metaphysical transcendentalism or religious absolute.

Whilst Habermas is not the easiest of philosophers to understand the interesting ideas that he generates are well worth the effort. With his concept of communicative rationality I follow his investigation of what it means to reach an understanding through communication. Communicative rationality is not a limited form of reason like logic, rather, through a detailed understanding of how communication works, it represents those features of communication that are both immanent and invariable regardless of individual or cultural context. Through this analysis it becomes clear that to adequately understand our psychic and social worlds the paradigm of the human subject as an isolated, atomized individual consciousness is inadequate and needs to be replaced by a conception of the human subject that is intersubjectively constituted to his or her inner core.

When communicating to reach an understanding we find that there are a small number of features of communication that we cannot dispense with. These are what Habermas calls validity claims. That is, in order to secure sense and understanding our communications must act in accord with four principles or validity claims. In the first place our utterances must be comprehensible, for example, we must as a minimum requirement use a language that all participants can understand. Secondly, what we say must make some claim to be true otherwise we will fail to understand each other. Thirdly, I need to know that what you say is an authentic and sincere representation of your true interest and identity otherwise I may have to conclude that your failure to communicate is based on some kind of deception. And finally

we have to share some minimal moral values. From this seemingly unlikely foundation it is possible to develop the argument that these validity claims are truly universal features of all communication aimed at reaching an understanding and through their codification into what Habermas calls discourse ethics we have arrived at a position that claims to provide a philosophical basis for my investigation into the purpose of counselling and psychotherapy. Just as important is the fact that this process of reasoning is open to disputation.

To make any sense at all morality, which is essentially concerned with justice and equality, must be based on norms that claim to be universal. In the absence of transcendental guarantees, communicative rationality secures this deontologically through processes guaranteed by argumentation and discourse ethics. Morals are concerned with issues that are applicable to everyone and hold to a symmetry between rights and obligations which distinguishes it from the law which privileges rights. Morality is also a higher value than happiness or well-being. This understanding enables us to take a more reflective and critical perspective on counselling's flirtation with consumer, contractual and human rights. Simultaneously it connects a concern with well-being to the danger of limiting therapeutic interventions to symptom relief and reality adjustment at the expense of the moral and ethical development of the client.

Ethics and morality can be differentiated because the former does not generate universal norms whereas the latter does. We find that ethical issues lack universality because they are intrinsically related to questions of self-identity. We judge someone ethically in terms of the degree to which their expressions and actions authentically represent their inner self or identity. A person's competence to be authentic is dependent on their level of self-transparency. To the extent to which they are subject to systematically distorted communication (unconscious processes) their level of authenticity will be compromised as will, by extension, their potential to act ethically. In this context the role of counselling becomes quite clear - by helping the client to reduce the level of unconscious motivation and increase self-transparency the counsellor is making a direct ethical intervention in the client's life. Counselling is also defined by another validity claim that is inherent in all communication - *autonomy*. The concept of autonomy is not new to the therapeutic community but I feel that it has been poorly defined and is often indistinguishable from individualism and consumer choice. Autonomy is I believe the most fundamental value associated with counselling and psychotherapy and the enabling of autonomy in individuals

and society is their ultimate purpose. This sense of autonomy draws on recent debates in sociology which make clear that autonomy cannot be achieved by an individual on his or her own - to achieve autonomy I need everybody else to be autonomous within a social framework that is conducive to autonomous action. In this context the concept of autonomy cannot be encapsulated simply by notions of liberty, instead it involves the deeper notion of freely binding the will to moral obligations.

Traditionally we have been expected to behave morally and ethically by the internalization of external absolute norms which become inner imperatives guiding our action. This is no longer a successful format and our sense of autonomy is incompatible with such inner compulsion. We have to learn moral character. The already expressed interest in language and communication enables me to consider those theories of personality development which are dialogical and intersubjective. The development of self through a process of individuation is only really understandable when seen as a dialectical process of mutual recognition whereby my identity only becomes real when others recognize it as such and vice versa. Indeed much of the therapeutic interaction can be understood in these terms and becomes appropriate when this process fails in real life. The intersubjective theory of personality development enables us to see psychological development as a process that works through evolutionary stages. This process culminates, in the ideal case, with the creation of a decentred and flexible self that is able to act morally and autonomously. In helping people to achieve these goals counselling is not drawing on a fixed moral code which it bestows on the client, it is more a case of enabling the client to generate a competence to act ethically and morally. One aspect of this competence relates to our ability to respond appropriately to a range of moral emotions ranging from guilt to love. They act like antennae supporting us in our relationships with others and we would not be able to act morally or ethically without them. However we should not see them as somehow raw or natural. They are constituted by our understanding of the world and contain a cognitive content which links them very closely to our sense of self. In this sense they are reflexive and congruent with the validity claims of communicative rationality. Their influence also changes historically with shame becoming more important to us than guilt.

At the end of the developmental process of individuation we will need a certain kind of self-identity that will enable us to act autonomously. What is the nature of this self? From Copernicus to the postmoderns mankind has been moved from the centre to the fringes of the

universe. This process has gone too far and the decentred type of selfhood that I identify does not lack a core identity albeit that it is flexible and multi-layered. Many postmodern definitions of the self as completely fragmented and centre-less are unacceptable and unhelpful - they also disrespect the real difficulties that people face when their self-identity feels like it is disintegrating. Whilst definitely avoiding fallacies concerning the self as an individual, isolated and self-mastering identity it is possible to have a plurality of selves that are nevertheless connected and able to maintain a coherent identity over space and time. With my understanding of the decentred self I believe it is possible to see how such a person could act with true autonomy. This understanding of personality development and the process of individuation leading to an autonomous decentred subject provides counselling and psychotherapy with the fundamental purpose of enabling people (inside and outside the counselling room) to achieve this objective when other socialization processes have failed them.

The role of insight cannot be divorced from enabling the subject to understand that many pathologies experienced are the result of domination at both the individual and social level. Insight and self-awareness are necessarily critical and counselling provides the individual with her own personal critique. In a society dominated by instrumental or strategic rationality it is easily forgotten that there are different forms of rationality. Moreover when this specific form of rationality is, with some justification, deemed to be 'masculine' we can see how the usage of the concept of rationality in counselling and psychotherapy becomes problematic. This is unfortunate and has the undesirable side-effect of inflating the importance of emotions and feelings. The theory of communicative rationality allows us to redress this imbalance by providing counselling with a framework with which to understand how the ethical and moral actions of clients can be seen to be rational or irrational. It is not the duty of counsellors and psychotherapists to pronounce a 'judgment' on their clients on the basis of this framework, but they must internally hold this moral and ethical frame on behalf of their clients until their clients can hold it for themselves. All these issues, together with an understanding of the increasing extent to which the individual psyche is socially constituted, point to the benefits that accrue from the introduction of a theoretical framework concerning the purpose of counselling and psychotherapy.

Any concern with therapeutic purpose must eventually bring us face-to-face with the issues of value-free and nonjudgmental therapeutic interventions. Both these positions are simply

untenable. Whilst the obvious point that practitioners should withhold their personal prejudices is true it is also trivial and serves to mask the deeper argument which claims that the process of communication itself inevitably involves the usage of the validity claims already outlined, which necessarily hold moral and ethical positions. I am similarly sceptical about the adoption of consumerist language and freedom of choice jargon. Some commentators think it possible for practitioners to facilitate the autonomy of their client whilst maintaining their own nonjudgmentalism. In this fantasy the client is then left to choose their own values as if they were available on a supermarket shelf. If this was simply a matter of the client exercising taste in her choice of various cultural artefacts then this position holds some truth, but our understanding of what makes an action authentic, ethical or moral is not a matter of taste and therefore cannot be a matter of choosing from a range of values. This lazy sense of autonomy as consumption has no place in counselling and psychotherapy.

Whilst practitioners understand that personal prejudices must be excluded from the counselling room I believe that they often have an insufficient understanding of the social constitution of self and therefore often fail to be aware of the values that operate at an unconscious level. This can result in failing to see that 'individual' problems are the result of social conflict. The one value that practitioners should bring in to the counselling room is to remain faithful to the client's evolutionary development towards autonomy – whether or not the client has consciously chosen this.

Rather than seeing transference and countertransference as negative aspects of therapy I, like some others, believe that these phenomena are essential attributes of the therapeutic relationship – they represent an *erotic connection*. This *movement of love* is the same as that involved in the dialectic of mutual recognition already outlined in the process of identity formation. It is the source of energy that provides the motive for people to grow, work through their psychological difficulties and attain autonomous moral action. Psyche needs eros. It is difficult to see how counsellors could achieve the purpose of their work if they did not engage in the erotic process of transference and countertransference.

There are four other issues in counselling and psychotherapy that are cause for concern – brief counselling, outcome measurement, professionalism and professional codes of ethics. Whilst brief counselling may have some merit in specific situations there seems to be a

significant and worrying trend whereby case lengths are becoming shorter. The briefer the case the greater the level of counsellor intervention with the result that the interaction is more likely to be skills or technique based and more in the control of the counsellor. This in turn tends to result in the reduction of the therapeutic goal to that of *symptom reduction* which leaves psychotherapy firmly locked into the medical model or metaphor whereby the client is to be returned to some fictional state of equilibrium, health or stasis rather than developed towards a future state of authenticity and autonomy. Instead of a decentred self this approach is more likely to create a 'managed self' that has been fixed by the counsellor-cum-mechanic ready to return to full performance in the same social context that caused the original symptoms. This brief approach is also all too easily able to accommodate the compulsive drive towards the measurement of outcomes. Massive pressure from government agencies, funders (including trusts), insurance companies and corporate clients is forcing counselling and psychotherapy to adopt an increasingly positivistic (as if the well developed critique of positivism didn't exist) value system that is extrinsic to their true purpose. This forces counselling down the road of brief interventions and, for those working in the voluntary sector, it erodes their independence and, by extension, civil society itself.

I am similarly unsure about the benefits that the clients and society gain from the professionalization of psychotherapy and counselling. Clearly the practitioners understandably seek the benefits that professionalization offers – better pay, more status and better conditions as well as the promise of maintaining higher standards for clients. However counselling and psychotherapy are in danger of becoming a lifestyle option. This aspect of professional aspirations inhibits the more radical and vocational function of counselling being a subversive critic of the dominant culture – a culture which creates so much of the psychological distress that walks into the counselling rooms. Why criticize a society that provides you with your livelihood? Counselling has moved from being a social movement to being a form of service delivery. As a consequence the discussion of values and ethics has been reduced to a concern with a professional code of ethics that rarely lifts its gaze above issues of confidentiality.

I have an interest in one of the most neglected aspects of psychotherapy and counselling – their relationship to social and political issues. Given the greater interpenetration between individual and society in late modernity this neglect is no longer tenable. Counselling has failed to keep pace with the rapid social changes we experience. Globalization, the free

movement of capital, ecological crises, changing work patterns and a host of other factors all have an enormous impact on self-identity. In late modernity governments face the contradiction of having to interfere as little as possible in the economy in order to attract capital, yet they must also limit the social damage caused by capital. Capitalism and democracy are uncomfortable bedfellows and the state, in order to legitimate itself, attempts to displace the citizen's interest in substantive democracy onto lifestyle and consumer activity. At the same time it proclaims the 'end of ideology and history' which enables the reduction of political issues to technical and managerial processes. Despite these sources of obfuscation it is always possible for the individual to see through them with, if necessary, the aid of counselling and psychotherapy. However, because of their poor understanding of the connection between the individual and society, these counselling processes generally fail to help the private individual become a public citizen.

Western societies in late modernity are complex. A substantial feature of this complexity is the role of abstract systems in making these societies function. The most obvious of such systems is that of money. Our everyday lives are touched by money in a variety of ways. What is in essence a transaction between a purchaser and a vendor has become so complex that even the experts fail to understand it. The movement of money infiltrates most aspects of our life - from credit cards to pensions; from complex tax systems to international stock exchanges; from the free movement of capital to junk bonds. Other abstract systems include state bureaucracies, international corporations, the Internet, communication systems, etc. What they all have in common is that they seem to be: out of our control; hard to understand; not easily held to account; vital for our existence and yet prone to unpredictable failure and collapse. At the other end of the social spectrum are those small-scale social processes in the lifeworld such as the family, friendships, culture activity and socialization processes. The abstract systems create a form of system integration that enables complex societies to cohere through our indirect social relations with each other. The social processes of the lifeworld create social integration which enable our direct and everyday interactions to function effectively. The problem under consideration is that in late modernity abstract systems colonize the lifeworld with the result that the social penetration of the individual identity is greatly increased. One only has to think of the impact that the introduction of the TV set has made on domestic arrangements. With a TV set in several rooms in the home we have introduced the processes of marketing and branding not only into hearth and home but into the socialization of our children from the earliest of ages.

This colonization has serious deleterious psychological effects. Our understanding of the world around us becomes fragmented whilst the pervasiveness of money commodifies our relationships. The constant need to monitor ourselves and the limited horizon provided by this instrumental culture instil a depressive loss of meaning. Our reliance on experts to explain the complexities that surround us, coupled with the high risks involved in depending on complex systems, creates a permanent level of anxiety and insecurity. These issues, plus many more, illustrate the extent to which our individual identity is increasingly socially constituted. The extent to which counselling and psychotherapy fail to understand this is the measure of the inadequacy of their ability to fulfil their purpose.

This does not have to be the case. The very processes that have caused this colonization have also generated new forms of selfhood which have the potential to achieve the autonomy that we seek. At the same time these processes have created forms of social interaction that can significantly assist in the generation of autonomous people - namely counselling and psychotherapy. Giddens (1992) illustrates how, as a counterpart to abstract systems and globalization, there has been a 'transformation of intimacy'. As intimate relationships have become less defined by traditional roles, a new form of 'pure relationship' based on reflexivity, openness and trust has become a sanctuary for a self seeking meaning. This form of relationship, based on self-reflexive individuals, is only possible now. Such relationships also require the support of a culture that is broadly therapeutic in outlook, and in particular the support of counselling and psychotherapy. Rarely understood by the latter is the fact that by helping their clients they are also sustaining a hugely significant social and cultural transformation. Not only is the self of late modernity redesigning its intimate relationships, but also its successful development towards autonomy is dependent upon other issues of self-identity. For example, by understanding its own social constitution the self can generate a moral outlook. Furthermore, it needs to be reflexive and maintain a narrative structure. And, as previously mentioned, it is a decentred form of identity.

Giddens helps us to understand that not only does a democratic society need the kind of autonomous self that counselling is enabling, but the 'pure' type of relationships that the autonomous self requires (of which counselling is in some ways representative) are themselves open and democratic. The stage upon which counselling and psychotherapy can enact their purpose is therefore truly historic. They have an important role in social and

political struggle for control over the tectonic social changes that are erupting out of late modernity. These changes are primarily operating at the psychological level. Are counselling and psychotherapy up to this challenge?

**References**

Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

See *The Secular Sacred* – M. Bennett (2014) Kindle Edition.

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