

THE BODY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

What is Psychotherapy? Day, January 10, 2004

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I want to divide the morning into three parts: 1) I want to discuss our language about the body. This will move us into some reflections about the psychoanalytic theories and indeed some criticisms of them. 2) I want to put us into a session, face to face therapy of the kind we do. I want to explore the bodily engagement intrinsic to that. 3) I want to discuss the 'body therapies' especially those that have a place in our school (authentic movement in particular). I would also like to include psychodrama as it occurs in groups.

In our training, in our reading, our lectures and seminars, and even in our sessions we are subject to a deluge of words. So we often feel the need to draw back and reflect on the place of the body and of bodily experience in psychotherapy. In a collection of essays *Le corps en psychanalyse*, J. Robert Leroux remarks that it is perilous to talk about the body in general. If you don't speak of the body of someone in particular, he says, you risk speaking of the body that is no one's. He went on to talk about 'Marie', who had many bodily disturbances throughout the therapy. He also considered his countertransference at a bodily level. One event was amazing. He suddenly fell asleep. She turned and thought he was dead. It was quite an event in the therapy, as you can imagine.

I can't exactly follow Leroux's recommendation, but I will try to speak in a way that keeps to the fore that the body we are talking about is alive with a human life, that every body is a particular person and is the body of that person.

St. Thomas Aquinas in an early little book called *De ente et essentia (On Being and Essence)* remarks that we sometimes use a word restrictively and sometimes use the same word holding it open to all its differences and rich inclusions. He uses the example of the word 'body.' Sometimes we use it to refer restrictively to a 3 dimensional object in space, abstracted from matter and from all the variations of particular bodies. However, sometimes we use it and hold it open to its differences and specifications, none of which are excluded. A usage like 'all the bodies in the world' includes implicitly all the riches of description that we can imagine. We do this with all generic words. We do it, for example, with the word 'animal'. When Aristotle calls the human being a rational or speaking animal, 'animal' is held open to include the difference 'rational,' so it's not a contradiction. Sometimes people are a little uneasy or even shocked to hear someone say 'after all, we are all animals.' The shock comes because the hearer suspects that the speaker is using the word 'animal' restrictively, as if to reduce us. When we say, for example, of a predatory criminal 'he's an animal,' we are implying that he is less than human. When we say 'after all, we are all animals,' we are holding the word open to include the riches of thinking, feeling and all human experience. So we need to be at ease in thinking of ourselves as 'bodies' and as 'animals,' even though there is a slightly different usage with the word 'body.' For example, we also say 'I have a body' and never say 'I have an animal.' We 'have a body' because we can, through touch and

sight, objectify, observe and touch our body in ways not unlike the ways we observe the body of another. When we say ‘I have a body,’ we are not saying the I is separate from the body. I am an experiencing bodily being, a thinking, speaking, loving animal.

We poor psychotherapists are under pressure from two sides. On the one hand is an aggressive, scientific materialism that treats human beings as bodies in an exclusive or reductive sense. On the other hand is a philosophical tradition that starts from the side of consciousness and easily slips into ignoring the body altogether.

Let us consider the pressure from the first. Our culture proudly relies on empirical science, so that even ordinary journalistic reports portray mental disturbance as really or only a deficiency in chemistry. This way of speaking gradually presses us psychodynamic psychotherapists to the intellectual margins. Every day we deal with the overwhelming reality of psychic experience, and explore the rich system of systems in this psychic reality. This is less and less understood or acknowledged in the mainstream of our culture. We can easily be forced into a defensive posture. The danger is that we concede the body to them: ‘You’re talking about the body—we’re talking about the psyche. You’re talking as if the psyche is just the smoke over the factory. But no, it’s real!’ And then, in insisting on the reality of the psyche, we can start to reify it, make the psyche a thing, a substance. So we have ‘the ego,’ ‘the superego,’ ‘the id.’ These are parts of ‘the psyche.’ We speak of ‘the self’ which develops and comes into being as a developmental achievement. This language emphasizes the substantial reality and the

strength of that reality. But by going over the top, by reifying the psyche, we lose sight that what we are talking about is *the person*.

Is ‘the psyche’ this real thing that is not the body? We fall into conceding to the scientist and to some scientific psychiatry that what we are talking about is not what they are talking about.

You remember that when Kohut is pressed about the meaning of ‘the self,’ he says that what he’s really talking about are the psychic representations of the self. There is this person sitting in the room, but what we’re dealing with are the psychic processes going on inside that person. These include *representations* of the self as bodily, as continuous in time, as spatially stable. This engenders the paradox that the body in the room is forgotten, while intricate study is made of representations of the body. Furthermore, when not pressed to precision of thought, Kohut (and all of us) talk about the self as the whole person.

Actually, with these remarks, we’re already into describing the pressure coming from the other side, namely, from the dilemma that Western philosophy got itself into in responding to the scientific revolution. This revolution took a machete to the traditional range of knowledge: only what can be observed and measured is real. The rest is poetry. Recently I gave a talk in Amsterdam on psychotherapy, and the psychiatrist commenting on my talk said, ‘As to Mr. McKenna’s talk, it was poetry. I am interested in data.’ (I think Data might have been his brother). A second commentator, even though he gave a

talk on ‘the bad brain’ of the psychopath, was offended by the comment and prefaced his own remarks by quoting a poem!

What I will discuss next may seem confusing, because most of us don’t study much philosophy. But philosophy makes its way into the theories we study, at times, in fact, as their very starting point. Yet most of those same theorists don’t know much philosophy either; they haven’t the time to think through the positions they’re shaped by. Kohut and Jung read Immanuel Kant as adolescents, with profound consequences. Modern philosophy, and Kant is one of its great originators, felt pushed way back by the ‘scientific’ hacking at the complexity of human knowledge. Their only recourse was to defend philosophy from the side of consciousness itself. Consciousness seemed to have foundational status in much the same way as empirical evidence had for the scientists. Rene Descartes, in search of the grounding certitude, decided to doubt everything he could. So he set himself near a furnace and began his meditation. ‘The thing I cannot doubt is that I am a thinking being.’ “*Cogito ergo sum* —I think, therefore I am.” He didn’t say ‘I am a thinking body.’ There’s the problem!

There is a certain spirit in psychoanalytic literature of deferring to this mode of starting from the side of consciousness and elaborating the whole of psychic reality as a form of consciousness. There have been philosophical attempts to break away from this starting point. Phenomenology is one, especially in the form practiced by Martin Heidegger.

Phenomenology of itself also begins with human consciousness, but Heidegger manages

to escape the constraints of subjectivity by making his foundation, being in the world with others.

Freud, in practice, quite confidently moves with great ease in the world with others. His psychology is always that of living bodily beings. There is no language of avoidance of the body. Of course, he began as a medical doctor, and those who came with 'nervous complaints' expected bodily treatment. He writes of being forced to adopt an independent psychological stance in his thinking because he had to respond to what was expressed by subjects about their experiences. And he had to learn from studying his own dreams and emotions. He could not reduce everything to the kind of observational knowledge required by the physical sciences, with the possibility of observable experiments, repetition and falsification.

This is another way, a psychological way, of knowing things. Kohut, for example, describes this psychological path as introspection and empathy. 'Introspection' is an unfortunate choice of word because it implies a looking at other things, looking at a pain, looking at a thinking or a dream. What it misses is the peculiar aspect of psychological knowledge: that the first level of psychological knowledge occurs without observing anything. For example, I see the blackboard. I experience it. I know my I, my seeing, not by observing my action but in the experience itself. I know my I and my seeing by being the one seeing. This is true knowledge and the basis of all psychological knowledge.

This distinction of knowledge by observation and knowledge without observation was beautifully made by Elizabeth Anscombe in her book *Intention*.

So what we know through psychological knowledge cannot be treated the way objects in the world are treated. Empathy doesn't have the same immediacy as this first level of psychological knowledge. It's not as if there isn't a use of intelligence and imagination in that first level, but empathy requires a much more complex use of these. Getting to or with the mind of the other is different from my directly feeling pain, for example.

When Freud works, he is right there with the person in their bodily life. But when he theorizes, particularly metapsychologically, he feels the pressure of Kant. Kant said that we never know the thing-in-itself. The forms of sensation, space and time are in the mind and not in the world. They are on the side of the psyche. They are a way of receiving phenomena not independently describable: we give them three dimensions and we give them time. All those things we think of as belonging to the body belong to the mind as forms and categories. The body in itself and the thing-in-itself are inaccessible. We construct our world. Now Freud sometimes speaks like this with regard to psychic reality. He says that consciousness is the sense organ of what goes on in the psyche in the way that our senses are the sense organs of what goes on in the world. And that just as we never get at bodies in themselves through sensation, we never get to the psyche in itself either. We get to its manifestations, and consciousness is the sense organ by which we do so. It was not a good day when he wrote this!

This sort of spirit can enter in to psychoanalytic theorizing. We are vulnerable as psychotherapists to theories that everything is constructed from the side of the psyche.

Postmodern philosophy has mounted an assault on science itself, saying that it is only one way, and that arbitrary, of understanding the world. They see this choice as driven by unlovely motives and ideologies. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who began this analysis, deflating our noble opinions of ourselves in *The Genealogy of Morals*. He found the source of our highest morality in ignoble emotions of envy and lust and self-deceit. It might be thought that this extreme postmodern critique of science might help the status of psychological knowledge. It does undercut the confident scientific critique of psychoanalysis, but it turns on us too. All psychological theory, it says, is arbitrary and driven by similarly strange and unlovely emotions. Consider, for example, the continued oppression of women and the devaluation of the body that have coloured so much clinical theory..

We need the sturdiness of a common and steady attitude if we're to do our work. And we need to be alert to the assumptions that press on us intellectually from both sides. There is a philosophic defence against both the extreme positions of reductive materialism and of a disembodied psyche. What I will do here is state as carefully as I can in three sentences what I think is sound philosophical ground for our work and thinking.

1. *In coming aware of and contacting others like ourselves and a shared physical world, we are simultaneously alive to ourselves as experiencing bodily beings, to others like us, and to a shared world.*

2. *For us to be in touch with what actually exists now or is the case now, we must be in actual sensory connection with our world.*
3. *Whenever I say “I . . . ,” I necessarily include reference to my body in a place and time*

In the three sentences you’ll notice that we are refusing the ruptures between the I and the body, between me and the world, me and the other.

In our psychoanalytic theory, we should consistently talk of whole persons. We should always emphasize that we are dealing with the emotional life of a living, breathing, thinking, feeling, bodily human being. We will avoid talking as if the person has no self, no ego, is shattered, is a mass of defences. We will speak adjectivally and with verbal forms about a person whose bodily and personal unity is a given.

Of course we will explore *their* phantasies of the utter separation of their psyche and their body

Christopher Bollas writes about the man who told him “I have no self.” He surely meant something, and it had a powerful effect on Bollas. Yet it was a developed, communicating person who said those words. So Bollas writes that he had to say to the man, “I see a self.” In therapy people use extreme language: ‘I was out of my body.’ ‘I have no feeling.’ ‘I am two people.’ These ways of speaking are our bread and butter. The danger is that we tend to write our theories in terms of them. ‘Some people have no self’; ‘this person is split’; ‘this self is fragmented.’ We start to exaggerate to capture the

intensity and importance of these things. It's okay in the living hour. It's the way poetry works. We surrender to a poetic movement; we hear and speak poetically.

One of you says to me at this point, how in speaking you're trying to tell about your experience. But your experience is much more. You cannot speak it fully. All the words are words of the world. My reply is that we must not get caught in thinking that all speech is an attempt to say something about something. Speech is also a doing, an engaging. If I make a promise to you, are the words adequate? In some sense, not. If I promised something to you, Anna, a third party might wonder about all the contexts within you or me, or the weight of that promise to me and to you. The third party is only partially able to access your and my experiences of the promise made and received. You have your experience and partial access to mine, and so on.

We must think of language as actually grasping the thing, especially if we talk of particulars. If I say 'I see Nancy,' using the proper name, I reach Nancy. I'm not talking about something that has a set of descriptions. The proper name Nancy is used to reach her, the existent one, and in that the name transcends all descriptions. I'm talking here about the transparency of language or its ability to transcend, which is as important as its inadequacy.