

The autonomy of psychotherapy—Why psychotherapy can be subordinate neither to psychology nor psychiatry

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Abstract *This paper is designed as a marker to re-emphasise the character of the field of psychotherapy as understood by the European Association of Psychotherapy, with respect to (1) the autonomy of the field of psychotherapy, especially in its non-subordinate relation to psychology and psychiatry, (2) its pluralism, and (3) its scientific character. The paper is organized around a discussion of the latter, and it is argued that psychotherapy is scientific in a broad, but not a narrow ('hard', scientific) sense of science, in terms of a model of 'science' which includes its wisdom component, its pluralism, and multiplicity, and its inherent relations to values. The question is put, in terms of a discussion of Rational–Emotive Behaviour Therapy, a form of cognitive–behavioural psychotherapy, whether this most apparently 'scientific' of branches of therapy is basically normative, and so does share the universal characteristic of psychotherapy as an emotional–evaluative activity and method. Psychotherapy, therefore, in the plurality of its methods, and broad model of 'science', embraces all aspects of human life and will do so more and more.*

Introduction

Why are psychotherapists normally so certain that psychotherapy is its own discipline? Why is the European Association for Psychotherapy so centrally founded on the claim of the Strasbourg Declaration that psychotherapy is an 'autonomous scientific discipline'? Why does the practice of psychotherapy, in the process of that practice, appear to need to make so little reference to other disciplines, except to the extent that they are part of the general reservoir of knowledge? Or does that only apply to certain forms of psychotherapy?

The aim of this brief paper is to suggest that psychotherapy, in a broad sense of science, is its own scientific discipline, and why it is. Aspects of the work of psychotherapy may be institutionally located in psychology and psychiatry, but it cannot be theoretically founded on them; they cannot be its presupposition. In the process of this discussion we shall also explore the sense in which psychotherapy is a science. And we shall explore the limits of the statement that psychotherapy is a science, and whether there is a tension between this statement, and the European Association for Psychotherapy commitment to pluralism in psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy as part of general psychology but not clinical psychology

Let us get a basic misunderstanding out of the way to begin with. Psychotherapy and also psychiatry, as well as educational theory, and clinical psychology, are branches of general psychology, as Freud recognized regarding psychoanalysis. But the general psychology meant in this conception is also one which overlaps with both philosophy and anthropology. Husserlian phenomenology is a branch of general psychology in this sense! (I shall hereafter refer to psychology in this sense as psychology (G).)

All we need to show, in this paper, is that psychotherapy is not a branch, a subsection of, or subordinated to, *clinical or empirical psychology*, nor a branch of that supposed subsection of medicine called psychiatry. (I shall hereafter refer to psychology in this sense of clinical psychology as psychology (C).)

In this paper I mainly concentrate on the most plausible arguments for the subordination of psychotherapy to clinical or empirical psychology. As psychiatry, with its primarily biological paradigm, is even further away from psychotherapy than empirical psychology, then, if the arguments for the subordination of psychotherapy to empirical psychology, psychology (C), fall, it will be easy to show that those for the arguments for the subordination of psychotherapy to biological medicine, in the form of psychiatry, do likewise.

Shifting sands of argument and a multiplicity of models show inconclusiveness of the debate

There are further complexities. In the first place, the fields of discourse in question are shifting sands; it is indeed *part of the argument* that there is no neat boundary to be had, in any of the relevant areas. It is in the nature of psychotherapy to seize the useful substance of other disciplines, and pragmatically transform and digest them into modes which are of service to its own processes. This is something which, as we shall also see, is connected with the pluralistic basis of psychotherapy, which is so important in the organisations and national bodies which are members of, or congruent with the vision of, the European Association for Psychotherapy, the most significant pluralistically based umbrella body for psychotherapy in the world.

Thus, again, I might, for example, even wish to urge, in common with an increasing number of writers, that psychotherapy is, in certain respects, a branch of practical philosophy. It would also be possible to urge its being within the framework of anthropology. These are highly debateable matters, but illustrate the degree of uncertainty and unresolvedness which reigns here. We shall later offer a perspective in which all this naturally falls into place.

The overlap between cognitive psychotherapy and clinical psychology the exception which proves the rule

This leads on to the second point, which indeed illustrates it. This is that there is indeed, on the face of it, one place where clinical and empirical psychology do overlap with psychotherapy, in a certain way, and that is in the area of cognitive and behavioural psychotherapy. This is a particular kind of reason, I believe, why this raises the question of the basis of psychology and psychotherapy in a special way.

I propose the following provisional hypothesis, with corollary:

Hypothesis: The temptation to construe psychotherapy as grounded in psychology (C) is a *metaphysical* decision, which is grounded in a preference for the model of thinking, which we can, for the present, label objective linear thinking, and which is identified with positive science (Naturwissenschaft).

(The same point applies by extension to psychiatry, only with less plausibility, as we shall see).

Corollary: If we seek to construe psychotherapy as a science, in the positive science sense (Naturwissenschaft), then we are at risk of conceding the priority of psychology (C); psychotherapy must be based upon a broad pluralistic understanding of science, inclusive of both positive science (Naturwissenschaft), and hermeneutic–humanistic relational science (Geisteswissenschaft), if it is to be able to establish its autonomy on a sound footing.

This, I believe, raises a pragmatic and theoretical dilemma for the European Association for Psychotherapy position, based on the *Strasbourg Declaration of Psychotherapy*, to which we shall return.

The first article of the *Strasbourg Declaration of Psychotherapy* says (1990):

Psychotherapy is an independent scientific discipline, the practice of which represents an independent and free profession.

The dilemma is as follows: On the one hand, on the above hypothesis, the first article of the Strasbourg Declaration on Psychotherapy, if it is to be a basis for an autonomous profession for psychotherapy, must be construed in a sense inclusive of hermeneutic–humanistic relational science (Geisteswissenschaft) not merely of positive science (Naturwissenschaft).

On the other hand, if it is not construed in the sense of positive science, how can it take its place as a ‘serious’ discipline, one with clear boundaries? How can it compete in the market place in the days of ‘evidence-based’, outcome measure based, cost-effectiveness focused, methodologies with apparently ‘harder-headed’ methodologies, such as medicine and clinical psychology? The combination of these demands places psychotherapy in a most serious dilemma in the culture of our time.

Issues of learning theory and Rational–Emotive Behaviour Therapy

Windy Dryden’s excellent book, *Fundamentals of Rational–Emotive Behaviour Therapy: A Training Handbook* (Dryden, 2002), offers us an opportunity to get straight to the heart of the issues which arise in respect of the scientific status of psychotherapy and its bearing on psychotherapy as an autonomous profession. This is a thorough and lucid, but not oversimplifying, account of the elements of the practice of Rational–Emotive Behaviour Therapy. Windy Dryden’s work is about as state-of-the-art as one can get in the field of the cognitive–behavioural psychotherapies. Rational–Emotive Behaviour Therapy has—which Dryden takes as not needing argument—a great deal of overlap with cognitive–behavioural psychotherapy, differing mainly in the relative priority Rational–Emotive Behaviour Therapy gives to *beliefs* in the analysis of problems, and the therapeutic practice, of Rational–Emotive Behaviour Therapy (Dryden, *op. cit.* p. 5). But it has in common with cognitive–behavioural psychotherapy a congruence with learning theory, which is understood to be a fully scientific, in the sense of positive science, theory of motivation, and which regards man as a fully animal creature, whose motivation, and the causal basis of whose actions, is a systematically probabilistic orthodox causal subject of enquiry.

One element in such an enquiry, however, is that it is assumed to be *value-free*. Now we know that the value-freedom of ‘science’ has come under increasing scrutiny, for instance by Kuhn (1970), and Polanyi (1958), and it may be that I am critiquing a straw man here. But, if that is so, then the whole model of science as objective causal value-free analysis of one system and another has collapsed anyway, and what we would have as ‘science’ is a *continuum*, which

perhaps would have Newtonian physics at one end, and the novels of Proust and Kafka and the paintings of Picasso at the other. And then psychotherapy would effortlessly take its place with all its *horizontal* (Samuels, 2002) multiplicity as a rich and various discipline in its own right; there would be no purchase in the argument for its being founded *vertically*, hierarchically, on some basic prior discipline, for there could be no system of priorities on which to base any such thing.

Once again, the very pluralism for which psychotherapy is often taken to task would precisely be its merit! It would fundamentally be defined horizontally, relationally and contextually, in terms of its function and process, and its effortless capacity to turn virtually any form of human intellectual discipline and activity to good account, in one way and another, one form of psychotherapy and another, would fall into place *as the basis* of its pluralism. This would also account for its tendency to rapidly ‘fill up’ the entire ecology of the field over the hundred years or so it has been functionally nameable as such (for psychotherapy under different names has existed for thousands of years).

An inclusive general psychology

It would indeed lead us on to a new kind of general psychology and a new model of human science. This would be an account of human nature which would be inclusive, comprehensive, descriptive, non-single-discipline based, non-reductive, inclusive of the value dimension, drawing from artistic and philosophic resources, as well as from ‘hard science’ resources, ecumenical and non-prescriptive, non-hierarchical and non-imperializing, in its trend, based upon dialogue and qualitative resources, as well as ‘factual’ and quantitative materials, which would be valued servants not masters of the process of enquiry, yet equally not rendered redundant either. Here and there today, unsystematically, there are signs of the emergence of such a general psychology and model of human science. William James’ catholic and ecumenical conception of psychology is in this mould, as is the phenomenological psychology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Something of it is to be found in the work of Francisco Varela (e.g. Varela *et al.*, 1991), and is envisaged by Robert Pirsig’s ‘metaphysics of quality’ (Pirsig, 1991). Something similar was also envisaged by David Boadella in his ground-breaking paper *Essence and Ground* (1998), where he makes the crucial distinction between science and scientism.

Of course, from the point of view of the human yearning for certainty, for knowledge which is *founded*, this would seem just like a huge and undisciplined realm of discourse, a kind of gigantic and unchartable Brazilian tropical swampland. How could anyone claim that such a tapestry is *knowledge*? Yet, if all things are interconnected, as Herakleitos, Buddhism, Leibniz, Whitehead, and gestalt psychology all claim, how could it possibly be other than this? We have to start with where we are, and not somewhere else. We cannot follow the advice of the well-known old Irishman who, on being asked by tourists the route to a certain out of the way village, replied, ‘Well, if I were you I wouldn’t start from here!’

In such a general psychology the intensive methods of psychotherapy, with their potential for pluralistic open-endedness, and their multiplicity of methodologies and working assumptions, would be a principal mode of enquiry. Even if particular approaches, taken by themselves, were reductive and single-model based, they would transcend themselves in the context of the whole spectrum, which would embody the set of alternative specific approaches excluded.

However, in the light of such a model of interconnectedness, many people will consider this has gone too far, and that, if that is the consequence, we must go back to hard science models, and that this was too easy a detour, and far too ‘New Agey’, and globalistic in the sense of excesses of spiritual imperialisms. Let us then return to the question of hard science models, but in the light, now, of recognising a bit better what the alternative might now be. So let us

return to Windy Dryden's account of Rational–Emotive Behaviour Therapy. The question is whether this offers a 'hard science' model, at least in the sense that it is a value-free analysis and method. For if it is not we are back in what we shall argue later is *the intrinsically value-laden territory*, the value-permeated dimension, of all the other forms of psychotherapy.

I begin with an extended quotation from Dryden, which, with the clarity which is characteristic of this book, contains the heart of the system:

As humans we often express our rigid evaluations in the form of musts, absolute shoulds, have tos, got tos, etc. According to REBT, our dogmatic musts or demands are at the core of psychological disturbance. Taking the example that I introduced above, the demand is expressed thus:

I must do well in my forthcoming test.

Dogmatic demands are often based on asserted preferences—it is difficult for human beings to think only rationally when their desires are strong. Thus, in our example, if the person's asserted preference is strong, it is easy for him to change it into a must: 'Because I really want to do well in my forthcoming test, therefore I absolutely have to do so.' As you can see, the belief has two components: an 'asserted preference' component (i.e. 'I really want to do well in my forthcoming test') and an 'asserted demand' component ('—therefore I absolutely have to do so'). This demand is irrational for the following reasons:

- It is rigid, in that the person does not allow for the fact that he might not do well.
- It is inconsistent with reality, in that if there was a law of the universe that decreed that the person must do well in his forthcoming test, then there could be no possibility that he would not perform well in it.
- It is illogical, in that there is no logical connection between his 'asserted preference' component, which is not rigid, and his 'asserted demand' component, which is rigid. In logic, something rigid cannot logically follow from something that is not rigid.
- It will interfere with him doing well in the sense that the belief will motivate him to focus on how well he is doing rather than on what he is doing.

According to Albert Ellis, a demand is the primary irrational belief and three other irrational beliefs are derived from it. These beliefs are awfulising beliefs, low frustration tolerance (LFT) beliefs and self-, other- and life-depreciation beliefs. (Dryden, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–10)

Dryden's implicit value assumptions

The clue we need to follow is contained in the words 'only rationally' when Dryden says that it is difficult for human beings to think *only rationally* when their desires are strong. Now, what is apparent in the first place is that 'only rationally' does *not* mean a value-free system of action. It seems to mean something like 'a system in which desire, and sought for fulfilment, are *proportionate*, and observe measure, are not 'inordinate', and where, consequently, disappointment, also, is not extreme, impossible, 'out of proportion'. Now, this is a modern version of something between ancient Roman Stoicism and ancient Roman Epicureanism! And we shall find it oscillate between whether its rationale is that this would be *sensible*, in a pragmatic sense of sensible, a good idea for how to live one's life, or whether this kind of proportionateness is right *because it is in the nature of things*.

When Dryden says:

It is inconsistent with reality, in that if there was a law of the universe that decreed that the person must do well in his forthcoming test, then there could be no possibility that he would not perform well in it. (Dryden, *op. cit.*, p. 10)

is the question at issue in this whether it is simply, so to say, *commonsense* not to treat it as inevitable in this way, or whether there is, rather, a law of the universe which decrees that ‘disappointment is always possible’, and therefore that there is a law of the universe which decrees ‘let your desires obey the limitations of the laws of the universe, let them be *proportionate*’?

Is Dryden tacitly opposing one law of the universe to another—or is he saying there just aren’t laws in that sense?

If it is the second, if all the pragmatic elements in Rational–Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) are to be given the foreground, then the position would be a sceptical–nihilistic one that there would be *nothing* in the nature of the universe which prescribes one course of action rather than another, one mode of belief about action rather than another, and therefore, subject to our being truthful about the nature of things, we can simply pursue *what works*. REBT would then in effect be a methodology based in pragmatic *commonsense*; it would be a commonsense psychotherapy. We would be in the Sartrean position (Sartre, 1958) of operating with an absolute disjunction between ‘fact’ and ‘value’, and the consequence of this is that the universe neither prescribes anything to us, nor does it forbid it. So we are absolutely free to adopt whatever autonomous value system of preferences we like.

All our psychotherapeutic approaches can then go forward on a basis of choice, with no dictation from any system of science as to what they can be. In other words, a genuinely value-free human science could neither dictate anything to us as psychotherapists, nor provide any foundation for anything for us. Whilst the first option, that Dryden is opposing one law of the universe to another, is a value-laden position anyway.

This comes out I think in the view of *logic* held within the system. Dryden says:

It is illogical, in that there is no logical connection between his ‘asserted preference’ component, which is not rigid, and his ‘asserted demand’ component, which is rigid. In logic, something rigid cannot logically follow from something that is not rigid. (Dryden, *op. cit.*, p. 10)

In terms of modern symbolic, post-Fregean, logic, this is neither true nor false; he can infer something rigid or not, exactly as he chooses, though he may not rationally believe it is necessitated by a universal law. It is not prohibited, though it is not entailed either. That would leave us once again in what I have dubbed the Sartrean position of an absolute disjunction of fact and value.

Whereas, if the ‘logic’ in question is nearer to Aristotelian logic, then there is a ‘nature of things’ connection being appealed to, such as that ‘like only follows from like’. Then the ‘I must do well in my forthcoming test’, with its two components of: an ‘asserted preference’ component (i.e. ‘I really want to do well in my forthcoming test’) and an ‘asserted demand’ component (‘—therefore I absolutely have to do so’), would be precluded as illogical, because the demand that is inferred would have to be *congruent* with the desire it is inferred from, or *proportionate*, to use the term we used above. Now, doubtless there is some very deep psychological law of talion (‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’), or proportionality, which is being appealed to here, which is opposed to the law of infinite demand or infinite punishment/consequence/catastrophe (‘awfulising’). We find ourselves wrestling with the

impact of these laws when we are dealing with those all-too-familiar beliefs which Dryden summarises as: the primary irrational belief and (the) three other irrational beliefs (which) are derived from it. These beliefs are awfulising beliefs, low frustration tolerance (LFT) beliefs and self-, other- and life-depreciation beliefs. These are of course equally familiar as ‘introjects’, ‘internal saboteurs’, ‘critical parent messages and ego-states’, and so on, depending on what school provides the labels, and we immediately realise that REBT is, in its own way, operating in the familiar territory we are all in.

Back to positive values

But, on this assumption, Dryden is operating on a value-system basis anyway, and is in effect, though tacitly, helping people to change by persuading them, Socratically and otherwise, to adopt a different, less catastrophising, more lawful and proportionate, way of life. So, on that model, we can welcome REBT to the world of value-laden psychotherapy with the rest of us! I will not pursue this further here, as it is, as we have seen, not necessary to establish the point, on either assumption, but I do believe it could be shown Dryden is indeed in this position, and that REBT is indeed offering a modern mixed Stoic/Epicurean approach to life and experience. If this is so, then the aspiration towards an especial relation to a neutral science base in psychology (C) for psychotherapy, becomes redundant. All the psychotherapies, including the cognitive–behavioural psychotherapies, then, are on all fours, precisely in the same position, as value systems which explore experience from within one realm of values or another, or at best within an alternation of values. With regard to the other two main candidates for a value-free scientific base, psychoanalysis and client-centred therapy, it is very easy to show this is an illusion (c.f. Wilkinson, 2002), and I shall not pursue this here.

Learning theory based therapy was always the most plausible candidate for a science-based therapy, and we have here a clear indication that not even it can fulfil the requirement.

The implications of recognizing the value-basis of psychotherapy

Can there be a value-based science? And why is psychotherapy irrevocably value-laden, in all its forms? This paper will rest content with suggesting the negative proof that the attempt to offer an alternative will fall. If we turn briefly to the proposed basis in psychiatry, this eludes the human realm even more fundamentally, except where it is its servant, once more, wherever psychiatry’s specific claims have some substance. Where its claims to determine the human realm of psychotherapy are pursued, they will be found to be even more value-laden than psychology (C),—massively to do with a mechanistic or neo-Darwinian favouring of *well-adapted* (‘normal’) stances in the human world,—than the modest and sober Stoic–Epicurean stances of the cognitive–behavioural psychotherapies. (‘Normal’ is through and through evaluative, as Pirsig, *op. cit.*, shows.) Once again, in parallel with the previous argument, if this position is merely factual, it stakes no unambiguous claim on value, whilst if it is itself a value system then it competes in the marketplace of value systems with the rest of us.

Value-systems can be derived or resourced from any manner of sources. And so it is with psychotherapy. Psychotherapy centrally, though not exclusively, deals with, and is based around, the issue of reflexive methodology for human emotional change, and our emotions are the primary nuclei of our value systems. Nietzsche (2002) says that at various times all the human drives have philosophised. One may add that, within the limits of the 20th/21st Century culture, they have many of them done psychotherapy as well! And more will, and in ways we cannot yet foresee, as globalisation and the mingling of peoples and cultures takes

psychotherapy into ever new areas of human tradition, nationhood, culture, and activity—a huge international alchemical melting pot where it would be impossible *not* to be pluralistic.

Widening the concept of science and the basis of psychotherapy

And what has this to do with science? Everything! If by science we mean not hard science, but the emerging broad-based science of the human we spoke of earlier. To repeat, this would be an account of human nature which would be inclusive, comprehensive, descriptive, non-single-discipline based, non-reductive, inclusive of the value dimension, drawing from artistic and philosophic resources, as well as from ‘hard science’ resources, ecumenical and non-prescriptive, non-hierarchical and non-imperialising, in its trend, based upon dialogue and qualitative resources, as well as ‘factual’ and quantitative materials, which would be valued servants not masters of the process of enquiry, yet equally not rendered redundant either.

A science in this sense would indeed be a science of the future, as well as one which was a ‘scientia’ in the sense of wisdom, as it was in the past, and nothing human would be foreign to it. With such science, psychotherapy in all its manifold forms might be honoured to be in partnership, and to be a primary tool of research. And, on the basis of such a science, this pluralistic organisation, which is the European Association for Psychotherapy, would truly be in the vanguard, pioneering something new, yet incorporating what is good in the old. It would not be derivative upon those outmoded notions of ‘hard science’, which are the dogmatic bases of bad, and theoretically belated, management systematisers, politicians, and economists, and which have already been long superseded by the most advanced thought within the sciences themselves. The European Association for Psychotherapy, whilst sustaining its commitment to science, would also then be in the vanguard of the value-developments necessitated for us by the post-modern world.

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Résumé Cet article a pour but de souligner à nouveau les caractéristiques de la psychothérapie, telle que comprise par l’Association Européenne de Psychothérapie au regard de 1) son autonomie, en particulier dans sa relation non subordonnée à la psychologie et à la psychiatrie 2) son pluralisme et 3) sa nature scientifique. Construit autour d’une discussion sur ce dernier point, l’article avance que la psychothérapie est scientifique au sens large (non étroit, «dur», «scientifique»), selon un modèle composé de sagesse, de pluralisme, de multiplicité et ayant un rapport inhérent aux valeurs. La question est posée—à travers une discussion sur une thérapie comportementale émotive-rationnelle, et une forme de psychothérapie cognitive-comportementale—de savoir si ce champ apparemment le plus

«scientifique» de la thérapie est fondamentalement normatif et si, de ce fait, il comporte les caractéristiques universelles de la psychothérapie, en tant que méthode et activité émotionnelle-évaluative. Avec la pluralité de ses méthodes et la largeur du modèle scientifique qu'elle représente, la psychothérapie est par conséquent amenée à embrasser tous les aspects de la vie humaine de façon de plus en plus importante.

Zusammenfassung *In diesem Beitrag wird nochmals das Verständnis der Europäischen Gesellschaft für Psychotherapie (EAP) bezüglich des Feldes der Psychotherapie charakterisiert und dargestellt – und zwar bezüglich (1) der Autonomie des Feldes gerade in seiner nicht-untergeordneten Beziehung zur Psychologie und zur Psychiatrie, (2) in seiner pluralistischen Natur und (3) in seinem wissenschaftlichen Charakter. Die Gliederung des Beitrags wird anhand einer Diskussion zum wissenschaftlichen Charakters der Psychotherapie entwickelt. Es wird argumentiert, dass die Psychotherapie in einem weiteren, aber nicht in einem engen („harten“) Sinn wissenschaftlich ist – gemäss einem Wissenschaftsverständnis, das Aspekte von Weisheit, Pluralismus, Multiplizität und inhärenten Wertbezügen umfasst. Im Zusammenhang einer Erörterung der Rational-Emotiven Therapie, einer Form der kognitiven Verhaltenstherapie, wird die Frage gestellt, ob diese unter den Psychotherapieformen offensichtlich höchst wissenschaftliche Form ihrem Wesen nach normativ ist – und somit den universellen Charakter von Psychotherapie als emotional-evaluative Aktivität und Methode teilt. Die Psychotherapie, in der Pluralität ihrer Methoden und ihrem breiten Verständnis von Wissenschaftlichkeit, umfasst daher alle Aspekte des menschlichen Lebens und wird dies in Zukunft zunehmend mehr tun.*