

MYSTICAL ASPECTS OF PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC EFFICACY

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To this day psycho-analysis is regarded as savouring of mysticism, and its unconscious is looked upon as one of the things between heaven and earth which philosophy refuses to dream of.

— Sigmund Freud (1921)

Yet, I repeat once more, the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we believe.

— William James (1901)

Although it is my intention to argue for a relevance between philosophy, psychology, and mysticism, I am not unmindful of the interdisciplinary morass I am about to enter. “Philosophers have long been cautioned against ‘psychologism,’ which appears to repel them much as sin repels (and attracts) theologians” (Scharfstein, 1980, p. 45). At the same time the attitude of psychology toward mystics is not any better. “They have not hesitated to call St. Paul an epileptic, St. Theresa the ‘patron saint of hysterics’; and have found room for most of their spiritual kindred in various departments of the pathological museum,” said Evelyn Underhill (1957) in her classic book *Mysticism* (p. 58). Nevertheless, I will explore what I understand are significant areas of influence of mysticism on the psychotherapy process when it is effective.

In speaking of psychotherapy, my frame of reference will be the psychotherapy of the psychoanalytic method. This is not only the area most familiar to me, but also the most influential theory in all of psychotherapy. While there are very few “orthodox” Freudian analysts today, still plying their trade precisely as Freud ordained, the earth abounds with neo-Freudians who have attempted to apply and enlarge

his many seminal ideas to the culture and needs of our times. Even those psychotherapists who disdain the Freudian connection at all, have nevertheless been exposed to his genius, thus making Freudian psychology the *lingua franca* of the field.

Before defining a mystic, some explanation is offered here for my perceived affinity between psychotherapy and mysticism.

Science is the pursuit of irrefutable truths. Philosophy makes distinctions between truth and meaning. Every therapist, from Freud onward, knows that for the therapy patient there can be only “psychological truth.” We know that there is little to be gained by attempting to establish the “truth” of the patient’s experience. We must, instead, accept the patient’s account of his life events and understand the meaning of it to the patient. This, it seems to me, is one way in which we are more philosopher than scientist.

Further, our work is riddled with the indescribable. Freud, whom Sulloway (1978) called a “crypto-biologist,” sought to establish laws of human psychic development, that is, infantile sexuality, the theory of instincts, and the Oedipus complex. This was true to his scientific heritage as a neurologist and to the 19th century German philosophers who influenced him. Today we argue over the translation of *trieb* (Freud’s word) as instinct or drive, over what exactly is the female oedipal and how is it resolved, and infantile sexuality is replaced with the even more obscure preoedipal experience.

In our contemporary era of narcissistic and borderline disorders, who can clearly define or distinguish between them? Who can define “identity diffusion”? Has anyone ever observed an ego “splitting”? With volumes being written and blamed on the earliest mother–child emotional interaction, how can we infer what transpired in infancy from our work with adults? Can we achieve this transubstantiation with “empathy”? When we “diagnose” today’s emotional disorders, do we not base it on the therapist’s sense of the difference between his perspective and the patient’s, a most subjective, unscientific, value-laden, ambiguous and irrational approach to “diagnosis”? In short, is there not more mystery and less science in how we practice our craft?

According to Bettelheim (1982), Freud’s innate humanism was eroded by translators seeking to make him appear more “scientific” and hence medical.

In his work and in his writings, Freud often spoke of the soul—of its nature and structure, its development, its attributes, how it reveals itself

in all we do and dream. Unfortunately, no one who reads him in English could guess this, because nearly all of his many references to the soul, and to matters pertaining to the soul, have been excised in translation. (p. 52)

In a letter to Oskar Pfister, quoted by Bettelheim (1982), Freud said that he wishes to entrust psychoanalysis “. . . to a profession that doesn't yet exist, a profession of secular ministers of soul, who don't have to be physicians and must not be priests” (p. 52).

WHAT IS A MYSTIC?

Mystics, it seems have always been with us. They have come from every part of the world — both East and West — and have appeared in ancient, medieval, and modern times. It has been said that they have neither birthday nor native land. Their works show a curious commonality in that their methods and aims are often the same. All mystics believe there is another way of experiencing reality than our usual way. Some well-known mystics are the Roman Plotinus, St. John of the Cross, Baal Shem Tov, Lord Buddha, Ramakrishna, Walt Whitman, and Aldous Huxley.

Bertrand Russell, says LeShan (1966), “did not think very much of the mystical approach to reality, although he confessed himself to be puzzled by the very high quality of the people who believed in it.” He reviews four characteristics of the mystic perception of reality that were originally described by Russell:

1. That there is a better way of gaining information than through the senses.
2. That there is a fundamental unity to all things.
3. That time is an illusion.
4. That all evil is mere appearance.

As can be seen from this, items three and four flow naturally from an acceptance of item two.

In describing a mystic, I could do no better than this quote from Evelyn Underhill, an English mystic, who wrote these words in 1911:

Mysticism is seen to be a highly specialized form of that search for reality, for heightened and completed life, which we have found to be a constant characteristic of human consciousness. It is largely prosecuted by that “spiritual spark,” that transcendental faculty which,

though the life of our life, remains below the threshold in ordinary men. Emerging from its hiddenness in the mystic, it gradually becomes the dominant factor in his life; subduing to its service, and enhancing by its saving contact with reality, those vital powers of love and will which we attribute to the heart, rather than those of mere reason and perception, which we attribute to the head. Under the spur of this love and will, the whole personality rises in the acts of contemplation and ecstasy to a level of consciousness at which it becomes aware of a new field of perception. By this awareness, by this "loving sight," it is stimulated to a new life in accordance with the Reality which it has beheld. So strange and exalted is this life, that it never fails to provoke either the anger or the admiration of men. (pp. 93-94)

The mystic, then, is one who undergoes a profound change, not through the head (knowledge) but through the heart (experience). The person who seeks psychotherapy also seeks change. Some would argue that knowledge or insight results in behavior change (i.e., traumatic event, repression, neurotic symptom, interpretation, insight, symptom relief). However, according to Hobbs (1981), the idea that knowledge can change behavior cannot be accounted for by any principle devised from experimental psychology. Many psychologists therefore believe that behavior change in therapy is an epiphenomenon.

We know that behavior change is not just the province of psychotherapy or mysticism. Personal transformation can occur within organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, est, Catholicism, Zen, Moonies, etc. Hobbs believes that all of these have the following in common:

1. A belief system (may be described as a faith).
2. An interpreter of the belief system (therapist, guru, priest, teacher).
3. Communication (abreaction, confession).
4. Action (missionaries, group uniting).
5. Community (Christian brotherhood, Marxist solidarity, group therapy).

All of these seem self-evident and could be applied to mystics, analysts and other seekers of personal healing. However, I will consider in addition three powerful areas of psychotherapeutic change, descendants of the mystical tradition, which I believe are present in any meaningful and effective psychotherapy experience. These are, as I have called them, the transforming experience, paradox and metaphor and altered views of reality.

THE TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

The mystical idea of transcending the self is present in the transference neurosis of psychoanalysis. It is as old as the initiation rites of the shamans and as recent as the “born-again” Christians. The achievement of cure by the discarding of the self also conveys an attendant notion of a journey, and to the mystics there are three stages to this journey: purgation, illumination, and union. These stages do not unfold in an orderly progression, but overlap and result ultimately (and rarely) in a different relationship with reality.

The transference phenomenon in psychotherapy is one in which the patient experiences feelings toward the therapist that existed in the past toward significant people in the patient’s life and which have been repressed. In particular, psychoanalytic therapies encourage the development of the transference and the ultimate analysis of this becomes the patient’s journey. The emergence of these early, unpleasant and therefore repressed feelings create discomfort in the patient (purgation); the analysis of resistance and defense takes place with interpretation (illumination) and the termination of therapy should leave the patient with a sense of emotional integration and harmony (union).

There are ecstatic or trance-like states in both mysticism and psychosis, although for mystics this is a stage to which they are not attached and from which they move on; for psychotics it is a fixation. Although some theorists, notably Laing, would legitimize psychotic suffering, most would not. The important point to be made is that

. . . the mind seems to insist on being involved in some form of journey or other — in normality or pathology, neurosis or psychosis — for its continual survival. A visit to a nursing home or chronic psychiatric ward is informative of what mind without a sense of journey actually looks like. (Podvoll, 1979, p. 571)

This sense of transcendental journey is the transforming of the self that is played out in the effective psychotherapy experience.

PARADOX AND METAPHOR

Metaphor and paradox seem deeply embedded in philosophy, mysticism and psychotherapy. At the heart of the mystic experience is a great paradox, that the mystic strives for a union with a spirit, presence, or god that is more real than anything to them and yet it re-

mains indescribable. Mysticism, being about a state of feeling rather than a state of intellect, simply defies expression, becomes ineffable. In an effort to define the mysteries of the mystic state, the writing of mystics are often negative (telling us what it is not), metaphorical, epigrammatic, paradoxical, and in parables.

Certain philosophers also embrace the paradoxical and deserve the appellation of “paradoxical philosophers”; an example that comes to mind is Kierkegaard. Scharfstein (1980) speculates that philosophers who deal with philosophical problems with contradictions and antinomies do so to act out the ambivalence and paradoxical stress present in their own lives. Be that as it may, Brown (1959) sees Freud’s thought as

committed to dialectics, because it is committed to the vision of mental life as basically an arena of conflict; . . . and there is a particular need for psychoanalysis, as part of the psychoanalysis of psychoanalysis, to become conscious of the dialectical, poetical, mystical stream that runs in its blood. (p. 320)

To many psychotherapists the therapy experience is a totally metaphorical process which, by metaphor and paradox, the immediate experience becomes enlarged and enriched via implication, innovation, and emotion. Perhaps no one has better caught the grand paradox implied by psychoanalysis than Olinick (1980), a contemporary psychoanalyst who said the analytic paradox is

also a paradox of living, of growth and development — that, to become mature, “independent,” and self-directing, one must first trace a way through the twisting and turnings of dependence and submission. The paradox of analysis — that the analyst as the advocate of autonomy is also the agent and initiator of a process of regressive dependence — is one that, for the therapist, has become resolved through familiarity and comprehension.

It seems to me that paradox and metaphor are more than the expression of anxiety and its attendant ambivalence. It is also the generator of a necessary tension that insures the continuation of the process. One might metaphorically say that paradox and metaphor provide the fuel for the journey.

ALTERED VIEWS OF REALITY

Mystics appear to live quite comfortably with the notion of dual reality — the world of multiplicity in which we live and the world of the Spiritual or the One, which they strive for. Plotinus describes man

as an amphibian who must live in both worlds, water and land, the One and the Many, to achieve his full growth. Ramakrishna used a similar allegory, saying man is a tadpole in his youth, living in water, and becomes a frog that needs to live in both land and water when “the tail of ignorance drops off” (LeShan, 1966, p. 17). Embracing this reality perhaps explains why it was not uncommon for mystics to also participate fully in life and have an active involvement in matters of the real world.

In a marvelous paper on psychoanalysis and sorcery, Nelson (1976) examines the words of Castenada. She quotes Castenada explaining that “Don Juan’s task, as a practitioner making his system accessible to me, was to disarrange a particular certainty which I share with everyone else, the certainty that our ‘common sense’ views of the world are final” (p. 10). To an analyst, Castenada developed a transference relationship to don Juan, resulting in his growth and development and recapitulating the developmental life cycle during his odyssey with don Juan.

Psychoanalysis, too, though not overtly employing a didactic method, disarranges our commonsense belief pattern, at least those regulating interpersonal contact; it also casts grave doubt on the views of the world with which we are inculcated from childhood. And learning emotionally and cognitively to conceptualize human interaction according to the psychoanalytic experience accords us life-time membership in our own particular subculture of “veteran analysts.” Thereafter we are never quite the same. (Nelson, 1976, p. 333)

Thus psychoanalysis offers the transforming experience, with the aid of the tension induced by metaphor and paradox to alter the views of reality from whence the analyst’s demons come.

REDEFINING REALITY

Having written of philosophers, mystics, metaphysicians, psychologists, sorcerers, and psychoanalysts, it came as a great surprise to me to read that physicists — are they not hardheaded realists? — may have entered the fray and offered the proof of the mystic’s Other Reality.

It seems that experiments in the last decade have supported quantum theory, the mathematical rules used to study subatomic particles, over “realistic” or “classical” physicists. The results of the experiments leave realist physicists with a choice of rejecting causality or the traditional view of the independent existence of the real world. Quantum

physics postulates that the observer and the object observed may not be independent of one another and that there are multiple realities and multiple worlds that coexist.¹

Every person, then, who awakens to consciousness of a Reality which transcends the normal world of sense—however small, weak, imperfect that consciousness may be—is put on a road which follows at low levels the path which the mystic treads at high levels. (Underhill, 1957, p. 445)

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that there are similarities between the mystical journey and the psychotherapy experience. I have elaborated on what seems to me to be three major areas in which these separate pathways converge. However, in its search for respectability via the scientific, much psychotherapy has denied similarities to the mystical experience. Perhaps it is not *so* unfortunate that Freud and many of his followers were physicians, for only with the scientific cloak of medicine could psychoanalysis have had the powerful cultural impact it has had in this country and the western world. On balance, I think more of its influence has been humanizing and good than bad.

The emancipation experienced by the analysand is the result of a different sense of his inner reality. It cannot compare with the limitless sense of enlargement that mystics describe in their vision of Union. Psychotherapy may be on the tip of the mystical iceberg and it would seem to me that there is much to be gained by psychotherapists from further understanding of our mystical heritage.

Karl Jaspers (1965) said that the “contemporary psychotherapist . . . *has to be a philosopher*, consciously or no . . . ” (p. 28). As student, practitioner, and teacher of psychotherapy, I am not sure if this is possible; but no doubt, if it were so, it would surely improve the breed! Our role with patients is essentially a liberating one, one that offers alternatives in place of rigidity, emotional education in place of ignorance, new and richer thoughts and feelings in place of the old and empty. To do this, we as therapists must have had not only the liberating experience of our own therapy, but also the constant expansion of our minds by emotional and intellectual enrichment. Whether that be by philosophy, theology, the arts or science, we owe it to ourselves and our patients to remain seekers of that which enlarges our human vision. In *The Life of the Mind* Hannah Arendt (1978) in commenting on the death of God, said

the way God had been thought of for thousands of years is no longer convincing; if anything is dead, it can only be the traditional *thought* of God. And something similar is true of the end of philosophy and metaphysics: not that the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men on earth have become "meaningless," but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility. (p. 10)

In this article, by exploring the search of the mystic and relating it to psychotherapy, I have attempted to show an old and a new approach to eternal questions and by reframing to offer answers that might have more plausibility today.

NOTE

1. For a good layman's explanation of quantum physics, see "Mystery at the Heart of Subatomic Matter," *The Economist*, 283:93-98. Although a nonmathematical essay, it is not for the faint hearted.

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The Psychoanalytic Review
Vol. 72, No. 4, Winter 1985