

Applied philosophy and psychotherapy: Heraclitus as case study¹

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Abstract

This article investigates a recent attempt to apply philosophy within the discipline of psychotherapy and to investigate the somewhat undefined realm of philosophical counselling. After introducing the claims of this interdisciplinary exercise and after addressing the problems involved in crossing the boundaries between philosophy and psychotherapy, the article elaborates on Alex Howard's (2000) [Philosophy for counselling and psychotherapy: Pythagoras to post-modernism. London: Macmillan] attempt to make explicit use of philosophy in psychotherapy, using his interpretation and application of Heraclitus' philosophy as case study.

The task of humanism in our time cannot simply be to resurrect a compact and apodictic model of "human nature", divorced from empirical findings and concrete experience

(F R Dallmayer, quoted in Schrag 1980:57)

1. CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND APPLIED PHILOSOPHY

What is real? What is merely apparent? How do we distinguish a fact from a story, from an opinion, from a prejudice? And if we know what is real, does that knowledge make a

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difference to our lives and the way we observe and live life? Or, what is the relation between knowledge and applicability? Do these questions matter? Continental³ philosophers have always upheld the notion that these questions do matter, and so do attempts to answer them. Some of the continental philosophers have answered these questions brilliantly, but – and that, to my opinion, is a hallmark of continental philosophy – always in a highly idiosyncratic, often inaccessible fashion. Continental philosophers have always used concepts that are difficult, sometimes close to if not wholly, impossible to grasp. Their answers, however brilliant, are often perceived to be alien, if not hostile, to *real life* – the everyday lives of breathing, acting human beings; the lives of engineers, policemen, miners and bankers. The trait of *skoteinos*, this dark remoteness of continental philosophy, then raises an important question: *Does philosophy still mean anything to those not formally trained in philosophy?*

This is a question often asked but seldom answered to the satisfaction of those not formally trained in this most complex of academic disciplines. Philosophy can indeed be unworldly. It is true that continental philosophers, especially within the context of some of the postmodernists' work, have a reputation amongst laymen for being incomprehensible, even naïve. It is, of course, an altogether different issue whether philosophers *are* to that extent esoteric and out of touch with real life, but the reputation itself is not discarded with ease. Continental philosophers in particular, over the past four centuries, are perceived to have investigated the deepest cores of reality with much hardship and personal sacrifice – but in the end they are perceived to have nothing but esoteric and eclectic concepts to offer; they teach the real world seemingly nothing about real life.

This is a tragic disposition continental philosophers find themselves in. Their discipline is complex because the topics of their investigations – reality, truth, the good,

³ Even analytic philosophers are often accused of being obscure and indifferent to real life, even those, like Bertrand Russell, who took the trouble to write “plain English” (Foot 2000:ix). Having said that, the mere notion of “analysis” seems to indicate that there must be a self-imposed limit upon the scope of philosophical activity. This means that, in contrast to the continental tradition of 19th century idealism, especially Hegelianism, whose practitioners engaged in constructing complete systems of thought regarding the whole universe, analysts undertake the more modest task of working upon individual problems. Not only are these problems single and manageable, but they all fit into a single class of analysis, namely the analysis of the meanings and usages of language. Analytic philosophy does not ascribe to the continental view that the task of the philosopher is to investigate the nature of reality by constructing complex systems of thought or to fashion moral, political and religious philosophies of behaviour, but considers philosophy to be an activity rather than a doctrine. This is why analytic philosophy reflects a more accessible approach to real life than the continental tradition's historical obsession with grand, often obscure, systems of thought.

justice, freedom, beauty *et al* – are immensely complex. Whenever they try to simplify these concepts, they soon become convinced that they are, exactly, deceiving the complexity of things. Eventually they quite often cease to take themselves or anybody else seriously, which has been the particular trait of some of the dominant strands of thought in contemporary continental philosophy, where philosophy itself has become a game of self-perpetuating, fluctuating meanings and perspectives, a series of self-economizing discourses. To those not formally trained in philosophy, this relativist discourse has probably brought into final disarray any hope of finding something noteworthy in the philosopher's notebook.

Not only is it tragic that continental philosophy is being perceived by those not formally trained in philosophy as mere self-reflection (philosophers ask questions of interest only to other philosophers and is being understood only by other philosophers), but it is also deeply ironic. It is ironic because the first Western philosophers – the Greeks – were convinced that philosophy should be asking questions that mattered to all of us. Those questions should be answered in such a way that the importance was self-evident in its daily, practical consequences, for the way all of us thought, made our choices, acted and interacted with our environment and other human beings. Amongst 20th century philosophers, only some existentialists and perhaps a few phenomenologists are perceived to have come close in realizing that. The question then, looms: Is there anything *Greek* left in contemporary philosophy? In other words, would one (still) encounter notions such as meaning, the good, happiness, healing, friendship, wisdom and sanity in philosophy? Any philosophy that was not able to sustain these notions would have been utter nonsense to the classic philosophers. Philosophy had to be able to make for good conversation on the *agora*, it had to promote the critical but simultaneous pragmatic sentiments of Socratic dialogue. I regret to say that one finds very little of these notions intact in contemporary continental philosophy. With a few exceptions, one will only encounter self-reflection and a seemingly deep-seated hatred of humanity – or, eventually, the “subject” – in contemporary philosophy. Not that the continental philosophers themselves had much of a choice. 20th century Europe left them with nothing but dread and despair. But the absence of notions such as meaning, the good, happiness, healing, friendship and so on in the mainstream continental philosophy of our time, was brought home in a particularly violent fashion on September 11th 2001. That

dreadful day reminded the whole of Western civilization how fragile civilization itself is, rudely re-awakening our sense of the value of real life singularities such as meaning and sanity. It brought home, once again, the philosophical necessity of investigating these notions, which, for all practical consequences, have been declared obsolete by the continental prophets of extremity. If analytic philosopher Bertrand Russell's sober and streetwise philosophy could serve as a reminder of just *how* accessible philosophy can be, retaining its elegance amidst its own linguistic and methodological difficulties, it is perhaps time for students of continental philosophy to take stock of where their philosophy stands today with regards to real life.⁴

But there is another stimulus involved in re-associating continental philosophy with real life: Being educated in the continental tradition myself, I am particularly weary of so-called "practical philosophy", a contemporary quasi-intellectualism encountered amongst all kinds of professionals, from lawyers to medical practitioners to engineers, which strive to completely de-contextualize philosophical texts and put arbitrary, rudimentary interpretations of philosophical texts forward as the basis of, for example, health management, human resources management or economic policy. An example of this populist assault on philosophy is to be found in editor E D Cohen's book, *Philosophers at work: Issues and practice of philosophy* (1999), only one of many recent publications in the dreadful, reckless field of "practical philosophy": Now, more than ever it seems, institutions of higher education are being called upon to provide students with information in the classroom that can contribute to the success of students in the workplace. With philosophers and departments of philosophy struggling to justify budgets and make ends meet, for some this is the easy way out. Unlike an authentic philosophical text, which engages in dialogue with the history of ideas, this kind of book typically contains "practice" sections written by "philosopher practitioners" who attempt

⁴ I hasten to add that the established opposition of continental or critical philosophy and Anglo-Saxon or analytic (or "common-sense") philosophy, an opposition which I clearly, for sake of argument, sustain here, does not seem to hold up any longer as a rule of necessity. Some critical theorists, such as Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas, have already established some renewed common grounds with analytic philosophers. Their own brands of critique of culture, grounded in notions such as "philosophical pragmatism" and "communicative action" have shown that real life is not the philosophical prerogative of the common-sense inclined. A number of analytic philosophers, on the other hand, have been promoting a more self-critical attitude towards the task and nature of philosophy itself: Russell, James and Whitehead, in particular. There seems, to my understanding, to be a growing synergy or even symbiosis between these two old intellectual traditions in Western philosophy. The platform of this symbiosis is, amongst other things, the necessity of bringing philosophy back to the people, back to real life.

to demonstrate how their knowledge of the problems, methods, and theories of philosophy provide powerful tools for addressing the dilemmas that arise in diverse work settings. Through typical “practice” sections in these kind of books, students are supposedly able to gain an understanding of the practical value of philosophy. The lack of subtlety and the superficial nature of exegesis in these textbooks for “practical philosophy” leave me breathless. “Practical philosophy” thrives on continental philosophy’s obscurity, it pretends to give access to its idiosyncrasies and enlighten the obscure philosophies of Enlightenment. But in the end it gives access to a totally different discourse, something that is not philosophy by any stretch of the imagination. The quicker continental philosophy self-adjusts to real life, the quicker, one can only hope, this kind of artificial “philosophy” will go away. I want to make clear that I believe “practical philosophy” will take us nowhere and it certainly is not the kind of real life philosophy that I have in mind here.

What I do have in mind, is what is rather sometimes being referred to as *applied philosophy*. There has been a stream of publications⁵ over the past few years in this discipline, if one could take the liberty of calling it a discipline at this early stage of its development, showing that philosophy is indeed applicable beyond the internal philosophical discourse, in a fair and justifiable manner. Philosophy, applied philosophy makes clear, does not belong to philosophers alone.

Applied philosophy, unlike “practical philosophy”, certainly is a *kind* of philosophy; a kind that departs from the postulate that philosophy has the inherent ability to inform, guide and constrain all practice (conversely, actions divorced from theory lack perspective). It promotes philosophy *both* as critique and activity, thus teaming up continental and analytic notions of philosophy. The critical stance – the very process of questioning meaning – disengages us from action and may initially pitch us into a felt sense of meaninglessness. But progress, however intellectually defined, requires that

⁵ The young British philosopher Alain de Botton, for example, has utilised the notion of applied philosophy very well in his stylish *The Consolations of Philosophy* (2000). But there are numerous other recent publications that have addressed the relation between philosophy, accessibility and actuality by appealing to the claims of applied philosophy: See, *inter alia*, Corey (2000), Diamond (1999), Kingwell (2000), Le Bon (2001), Marinoff (1999), Morris (1998), Phillips (2001), Raabe (2000) and Schuster (1999). Some of these texts, like those of Corey and Raabe, are very well written. Some of them, I regret to say, actually damage the intellectually legitimate claims of applied philosophy with their snappy titles and lack of philosophical substance (*Aristotle would have liked Oprah If Aristotle ran General Motors From Plato to Prozac*).

meanings and understandings should be questioned if we are to find their limitations and improve on them. A balance has to be found, within any area of human activity, between questioning assumptions and acting on them.

There is constructive potential in this kind of philosophical undertaking. It promotes both the critical and commonsense perspectives on philosophy. There is something beautifully Greek about it. It has a clear Socratic ring to it. If philosophy is to be taken seriously in contexts beyond the complex and esoteric internal philosophical discourse, this kind of applied philosophy could indeed provide one direction which could take us forward. Real life matters here. Philosophical claims and investigations are hereby shown to be taken seriously, not only by philosophers, but also by everyone occupied with meaning, sense and happiness.

One discipline that seems to be very successful in applying philosophy in this fashion is psychotherapy. An example of the way in which philosophy could be externally applied in other contexts, disciplines and frameworks of reference, is American therapist Alex Howard's finely crafted *Philosophy for Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2000). Howard does not only provide us with an example of how this kind of applied philosophy functions, but with a stimulating history of ideas from Pythagoras onwards and an intellectual and moral journey through the encyclopaedia of Western philosophy. Before we turn our attention to Howard's project, we need to clarify the relation between applied philosophy and philosophical counselling, as a particular form of counselling.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING AND APPLIED PHILOSOPHY

Everyone seems to have a therapist today. With clerics abandoned and philosophers of the deconstructionist kind having declared themselves obsolete, therapists have become the new priests of Western civilization. Even if therapists enjoy only a fraction of the power, influence and formative abilities priests seem to have had during the heyday of the church, they would indeed be very influential in society. That is why we need to be as critical of them as we have become of priests and ministers. We need to be as cautious of them as we have become of the epistemologically violent postmodernists. And they, the therapists, should not be indifferent to, at the very least, the intellectual framework of reference their craft presupposes.

The words “(psycho)therapist” and “counsellor” are often used interchangeably, with uncertain clarity of definition.⁶ Counselling (in Afrikaans commonly referred to as “berading”) in particular, has become a common practice. Literally thousands call themselves counsellors, or practitioners of counselling skills. Counsellor training has grown correspondingly, with a maze of courses and an enormous choice of textbooks and journals on counselling. Out of this a whole family of industries has grown. Counsellors/therapists train within specific schools, adopting preferred models, according to favorite theories and theoreticians. But what are the intellectual foundations of those theories? How are those theories that are being put forward by therapists, intellectually grounded? These are the sort of questions applied philosophy attempts to answer within the context of psychotherapy. But the relation between applied philosophy and psychotherapy should not be confused with an altogether different phenomenon, namely *philosophical counselling*.

Philosophical counselling is a field that purports to help people with life's problems by purely engaging them in philosophical discussions. Modern philosophical counselling started, as far as one can establish, in the beginning of the 1980's when German philosopher Gerd Achenbach opened his practice in Cologne, Germany. Since then philosophical counselling has spread all over the world and there are quite a number of philosophical counsellors giving philosophical advice and discussing various philosophical issues with clients. While the media has paid attention to this phenomenon, academic philosophers and professionals in the other fields of counselling do not seem so enthusiastic – and with good reason, one might add. Rectifying a number of what she considers to be misunderstandings in this regard, Shlomit Schuster's *Philosophy Practice: An Alternative to Counselling and Psychotherapy* (1999) is an introduction to philosophical counselling and the practice of understanding life in all its richness with the aid of philosophy, essentially loyal to Achenbach's initializing project of a “beyond method method” of therapy. Unlike a less erudite publication, Lou Marinoff's *Plato not Prozac!* (1999), this otherwise well-written book is not only directed at potential clients but to a critical and philosophically educated public as well. Schuster tackles a common

⁶ This unclarity probably has to do with the fact that both these enterprises, unlike psychiatry, are essentially “talking treatments”. The concept of “counselling” only seem to have appeared with Carl Rogers in the 1950's. “Counselling psychology” is another word which appeared only recently, but which is already and rapidly developing its own literature.

presupposition about philosophical counselling, namely that philosophical counselling is or should be a hybrid of philosophy and psychology or psychotherapy. “Many people who think, speak, and write about philosophical practitioners refer to them as though they were therapists in the usual sense of the term” (Schuster 1999:2), and she devotes the first chapter of her book to oppose and distance herself from that particular notion. Schuster attempts to demonstrate that the relationship between counsellor and client is dialogical and dialectic, and not authoritative and hierarchical. The initial and theoretical part of her book contextualizes the historical setting of philosophical practice as well as contemporary philosophical practice, while she attempts to justify the non-clinical approach of her version of philosophical counselling. Schuster does not treat mental problems as illnesses and she points out that what is thought of as a problem is often only problematic by reference to a certain conception of it, imposed upon the client by others. Of the many approaches to philosophical counselling that she presents, Schuster eventually defends and supports Achenbach's understanding of philosophical counselling as an open-ended, non-definitive inquiry. The philosopher-counsellor's task is to assist the client to “think through” their situation and replace the problem with philosophical understanding. Schuster's version of philosophical counselling is essentially dialogue, and however Schuster attempts to divert our attention away from medicine and the clinic, I am not at all convinced that their “beyond method” eventually constitutes a form of therapy. Insight, perspective, self-understanding, intellectual balance? – yes; Therapy? – no. Some clients or patients *do* need Prozac – not Plato, or Hegel, for that matter. Counsellors like Schuster tend to forget that philosophy is a difficult discipline that requires a healthy, radically active intellect. How a mentally ill, or severely traumatized patient, will meet that requirement is never made clear. On the other hand, I can almost hear the objection being raised, philosophers such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer did some of their best work when they were themselves mentally affected. True: but making or doing philosophy in a frenzied, dionisic state of mind is one thing - getting your mental health back, something quite different. Philosophy as such is not even a particularly healthy preoccupation; I have experienced in my own life just how mentally and emotionally detrimental and destructive philosophical labour can be. In short: Schuster's version of philosophical counselling negates the fact that some patients do need *medicine*, pure and simple.

A more balanced view on the relationship between philosophical counselling and psychotherapy, and, eventually, philosophy and medicine, is the one sustained in P B Raabe's *Philosophical Counselling: Theory and Practice* (2000). Strikingly, Raabe is critical of the abovementioned style of philosophical counselling and the "beyond method method" of Achenbach, as utilised by Schuster. Raabe's view, completely different from Schuster's, is that philosophical counselling actually has a broad overlap with psychological counselling and that this interdisciplinarity should be recognized. He shows that a number of methods of psychological counselling, such as cognitive therapy and rational motive behavior therapy, deal extensively with philosophic ideas, albeit not necessarily in an explicit fashion. Part of Raabe's task is to find something that would in fact distinguish philosophical counselling from other already well established forms of counselling and to explain in what sense philosophical counselling can, in certain contexts, be a more justifiable approach than psychological counselling.

Some problems in life should clearly be diagnosed as clearly medical problems. Other problems in life should clearly be recognized as clearly educational problems. One might, according to Raabe, imagine a boundary between medicine and education, a place where the influence of the structure of the body blends with the influence of ideas to determine our various capabilities, aptitudes and attitudes, as well as our experience of happiness and existence. One side of that boundary is the terrain of the therapist, the other side of that boundary is the terrain of the philosopher. Raabe's argument is thus not a particularly complex. He distinguishes between the disciplines without letting go of the notion of interdisciplinarity. At the very least he recognizes a fundamental extent of interplay between philosophical counselling and psychotherapy and admits that philosophy alone, without any kind of interdisciplinarity, would struggle to claim therapeutic status. But, more importantly, Raabe confirms my earlier objection to "practical philosophy" and therapeutical models founded on its loose grip. Unless any application of philosophy can intellectually establish just what the consequences of its practicality are, charlatans will threaten it.

This is exactly what Alex Howard sets out to do. He is clearly not a philosophical counsellor in Schuster's sense of the word. He underwrites Raabe's perspective of maintaining the distinction between philosophy and psychotherapy – or education and medicine. Howard is a psychotherapist that clearly appreciates philosophy and openly

proclaims that philosophers, from Pythagoras to the contemporary deconstructionists, have a lot to teach therapists about meaning, healing and wisdom in real life (Howard 2000:xii). If therapists try to learn from philosophers, they can develop a broader, deeper vision of therapeutic talk and action and become aware of its problems and possibilities. Howard's version of applied philosophy will, at the end, not provide final answers. But it will contribute to the understanding of a sharper, larger picture – of where we are now and how we got here. But most important, the notion that a therapist is just “listening” or just taking part in dialogue is a dangerous illusion that has much more currency than it deserves. Philosophy, through the ages, teaches us that it is impossible to “just listen”. Listening is a creative act that cannot take place without utilising the ideas, experiences and values that matter to us. Philosophy teaches us to be critical of those ideas, nuanced about those experiences and cautious of those values. It teaches therapists to listen very carefully – to be *critical*, in short.

In his book, Howard presents us an interpretation of more than thirty of the most influential Western philosophers who “teach therapists how to listen” (Howard 2000:xiv). He believes that philosophy underpins therapy as a means to healing, identity, direction and meaning (Howard 2000:xiv). Of course, one could add, many others have much to offer on the subjects of healing and meaning: poets, painters, novelists and composers, amongst others. But philosophers seem to have the cunning ability not to give final answers. Philosophers rarely provide us with products, models or answers. They simply keep on asking questions, never accepting the first, second or third answer as the “final answer” or “model”. When the music's over, the philosopher will still be around, asking questions. That is the inherent dynamics and the true value of philosophical critique. Philosophers, therefore, provide us with an ongoing investigation into the heart of matters – into the real life that matters to us all.

Howard's survey of thinkers, from Pythagoras onwards, is well grounded. Each of the philosophies presented is shown to have far deeper implications for real life than one would have come to expect from esoteric creatures like philosophers, which brings me to the first appreciative remark on Howard's book. It is original and often delightfully surprising, for example, the way Luther, Freud and Jung is being presented as essentially *philosophers*, whose thinking had immediate consequences for religion and psychology. Howard attempts to make a difference to the way in which philosophy is being perceived

as radically esoteric and I believe he succeeds in doing that. He has a comfortable and engaging style, never disregarding the complexity of the material he entertains us with. For example, he introduces every thinker by means of key points and a core application, before moving over to the analysis of the philosophy under discussion itself. Every analysis is being concluded with a worksheet, consisting of questions and exercises. Apart from the conventional bibliography, useful website references is presented at the end of every chapter. Of course the cynical (and typical intra-philosophical) concern would be that Howard is not primarily a philosopher and that superficial analysis is to be expected. This is simply not the case. Actually, Howards strikes one as being a first-class intellectual. He handles the primary texts with obvious ease, he is eloquent and he knows exactly where he is going with each chapter. He is being very selective in the way he goes about interpreting and applying the texts under discussion, but read against the background and objective of the book, this is quite understandable. This elegant kind of applied philosophy could only be the work of a skilful operator.

Interdisciplinary exercises are not without problems, at least not without methodological problems. Philosophers and psychotherapists work towards different objectives: A long-standing tradition in continental philosophy has been that one of the principal goals of philosophical reflection is to establish secure epistemological and metaphysical foundations, by means of what is known, at least since Kant, as *critique*. Today, the vogue is to desecure these foundations, but the foundations themselves are still of predominant importance. Philosophers, yesterday and today, are not primarily interested in health and sanity as such - they are interested in critique. That does not mean that philosophers should not be interested in notions such as health and happiness. But those simply are not their primary objectives. Psychotherapists have an altogether different objective: to guide and heal by means of anthropologies which do not necessarily draw on the time-honored philosophical goal of securing epistemological and metaphysical foundations. Whenever there is a crossing of boundaries, from psychotherapy into the domain of philosophy, one risks the danger of pseudo-intellectualism, as manifested in “practical philosophy”, hereby referring to any anthropology which pretends to draw on those foundations, but in fact negates them or is ignorant of them. Calvin Schrag (1980:56-57) is convinced that any discipline that ventures into the philosophical realm would have to adopt the critical stance would

initially *have* to draw upon these foundations and/or a critique of these foundations. Psychotherapy that endeavours to apply philosophy or establish a crossover to philosophy, must, in the first instance, show itself to be a *critical* psychotherapy, just as any theology which draws upon philosophical reflection, would have to be a critical theology. In Schrag's own words: A psychotherapy that crosses over to philosophy must itself become a *radical anthropology* (Schrag 1980:57). Only then can psychotherapists pretend to make sense of Kant's question, "What is man?" and the primacy which he ascribed to it in his *Introduction to Logic*. Schrag is not implying that such a psychotherapy or theology must become subordinate to philosophy: what he is saying is if this question is being asked by psychotherapists who are venturing into philosophy, they must be prepared to adopt a critical and, most of all, a *selfcritical* attitude. Only then can psychotherapists reformulate Kant's question as to become a question about human beings's understanding and interpretation of themselves within the fabric of their ordinary, lived experience, the fabric of real life, rather than a question about a possible philosophical concept of "human nature". Only then can psychotherapists pretend to address real life philosophically. Howard does not hesitate to comment on the shortcomings of psychotherapy or to scrutinize typical psychotherapeutical models.⁷ And, importantly, he is bringing his conclusions back to real life, to the lived experience, not back to another continental concept of "human nature".

3. HERACLITUS AS CASE STUDY

Instead of cryptically surveying all thirty-plus philosophers being applied in this book, I have opted for a discussion of one of the most brilliant Greek philosophers, trusting that it will serve as a sufficient stimulus to take up Howard's text yourself and explore how he

⁷ A critical remark though: I am not at all convinced that Howard has treated the postmodernists with the rigour and discipline they require from their students. One would have to do a lot better to discredit intellectual sentinels such as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard, than presenting one sweeping, overall discrediting chapter (see Howard 2000: 356-368). In this sense the subtitle of the book is somewhat misleading. It should rather have been titled *Pythagoras to Sartre*. One may be able to understand why Howard feels so uncomfortable in the company of thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze. They demolish the notion of objective truth and a grand hermeneutical masternarrative, which explains smaller or subsequent metanarratives, without any compromise. I fail to see how a modern therapeutical model would survive Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, or Derrida's (1978:196-231) essay on Freud, for example. I believe Howard's lack of a more nuanced analysis of the postmodernists is strategic. He can't afford to take them too seriously. They will, quite possibly, bring an end to the notion of therapy itself, like they have done with the notion of rehabilitation.

applies his assembly of philosophers in the realm of psychotherapy.⁸ I turn our attention to the brilliant Heraclitus.

3.1 Heraclitus' philosophical stance

Heraclitus' philosophy is well-known. His thought is initially being presented in conventional fashion as a philosophy which, essentially, departed from the notion that there is nothing at all permanent, anywhere, in the whole of existence (Howard 2000:10ff). Everything is flux, change, process, *becoming something else*. Everything, therefore, is interconnected with everything else since there is no object or thing that has any permanent defined boundary keeping it separate, other and different from its surroundings. Heraclitus famously observed that one could not step into the same river twice since the river was always in process, in flow, always moving on. It is not that we move through life, life flows through us: we are not so much in the world, as *of* the world. The Heraclitean view implies that "I" am not some solid essence that can be revealed via analysis and careful introspection. "I" am, rather, more like "x" in algebra, a variable more than a constant. "I" change in meaning, direction and value according to context and circumstances: and, of course, these too are ever changing. "I" am intimately intermixed with these surroundings. "I" am not just in them, "I" am *of* them.

Heraclitus argued that boundaries between self and world are not absolute, but fluid within one interconnected process: the river cannot be extracted from its context

⁸ Pythagoras (p 1); Heraclitus (p 10); Sophocles (p 17); Socrates and Plato (p 24); Aristotle (p 39); Epicureanism (p 55); Stoicism (p 62); St Augustine (p 80); St Thomas Aquinas (p 90); Niccolo Machiavelli (p 98); Martin Luther (p 106); Thomas Hobbes (p 115); René Descartes (p 126); Baruch de Spinoza (p 138); John Locke (p 148); G Wilhelm Leibniz (p 158); George Berkeley (p 165); David Hume (p 172); Jean Jacques Rousseau (p 182); Immanuel Kant (p 197); Jeremy Bentham (p 207); G W Friedrich Hegel (p 214); Arthur Schopenhauer (p 225); John Stuart Mill (p 238); Sören Kierkegaard (p 249); Karl Marx (p 262); Friedrich W Nietzsche (p 274); Sigmund Freud (p 287); Carl G Jung (p 300); Ludwig Wittgenstein (p 313); Martin Heidegger (p 327); Jean-Paul Sartre (p 341) and a final chapter ("What next?") on postmodern philosophy. It is clear that, with the exception of Luther, Freud and Jung, Howard is following a more or less conventional survey of the encyclopedia of Western philosophy, as one would encounter in most introductions to philosophy. I am nevertheless surprised that no exponents of the analytic tradition (save Wittgenstein), especially Bertrand Russell, nor any member of the Frankfurt School was given any attention in this survey, not even by high implication. On both sides of the English Channel there have scarcely been more influential philosophers in the 20th century than Russell and Frankfurt philosophers like Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin and Habermas. Of course, it is always easy to comment on what is missing, but I consider this to be a drawback. No contemporary analytic philosopher has, to my restricted knowledge, been more involved in real life than Bertrand Russell. I find it furthermore strange that no female philosophers earned themselves a place in Howard's gallery (see Howard [2000:xv], for a somewhat lackluster explanation for their absence). At the very least, exactly in terms of the objective of the book, Simone de Beauvoir, Ayn Rand and Hannah Arendt belong in his assembly.

since it is both the flow of the water and the context on which it sits and moves. Likewise, “I” cannot be extracted from, analysed without, or understood independently of, my circumstances. They form and comprise me, and I form and comprise them, just as the soil on which the river flows shapes and is shaped by the movement of water.

3.2 Heraclitus and psychotherapy

Less conventional is Howard’s application of these ideas to psychotherapy. The first drastic implication of Heraclitus’ view for psychotherapy is that the idea that we can discover a firm, fixed, authentically solid self, becomes problematic. For Heraclitus, a person’s true colours could not be known except within the stream of their own life, with their significant others, environments and routines. Knowledge of this context becomes at least as important as information gained from private confessions concerning the subject or client’s inner stream of consciousness. If Heraclitus’ philosophy is being accepted, the danger of exploring client agendas outside the actual stream of their life is that the activity of therapy can become somewhat “dry” (Howard 2000:11). The therapist certainly does not get scorched or soaked by the client’s circumstance because the fire and flow of their life is described and analysed, rather than actually entered and experienced. The therapist is a non-participant and thereby gains, and loses, all the insight and understanding that is available from the observer who does not directly observe anything.

Many therapists claim that one of the most important ways in which they can assist is to “be there” for the client. What they mean by this, one has to suppose, is that they are “there” in imagination only. They seek to empathise with the client and feel “with” them. But they are never in fact there with the client, as an active participant in the client’s daily circumstances. Therapy is almost always confined to the therapy room. It is a one-on-one encounter and remains both confidential and disconnected from the actual course, content and context of a person’s life. This current and circumstance shapes and is shaped by the person yet the therapist never actually engages directly with it all. The therapist, therefore, never allows himself or herself to be directly shaping of, and shaped by, the particulars of the client’s existence.

It is true that to be out of sight may allow some insight. In order to gain perspective, therapists need to withdraw sometimes. But Heraclitus implies: How much

is lost? There is, according to Heraclitus, no independent self that moves into, or out, its life and its circumstances. Life flows *through* us. It scours, scores us and changes us constantly and continually. All the surrounding paraphernalia of the self does not merely surround the self: they are, in part, a part of self, part of what we are, at this very moment. That is the reason why we may sense a loss of self when key people and circumstances change or disappear altogether. Howard (2000:12) draws our attention to a beautiful Heraclitean paradox: To be alive, to be aware and awake, is to be conscious not of a fixed and unchanging self, or “me”, at all. Rather it is to inhale, in each moment, something new and mysterious, and to exhale and lose something old, familiar, precious and a part of what I thought was “me”. If Heraclitus got it right, then it is not enough to say that I am in a process of change and movement; I *am*, exactly, a process and movement. Therefore there can be no final finding of myself, no complete certainty of self-awareness and no final insight. Instead there is just a continual loss of what we might have hoped we could keep as us and ours, and a continual gaining of what we do not understand; what disturbs, mystifies and seems to undermine the self we thought we were.

If Heraclitus is right - and like Hegel, I am convinced that he is, to a very large extent⁹ - we humans are more *events* than objects. We move and change, we become attached to what seems fixed and final, only to see it move on. And like Howard, I am certain that this perspective has a lot to offer within therapeutic contexts dealing with loss, *angst* and uncertainty in particular. From this perspective, clients could be guided to accept the seemingly unacceptable, namely to embrace the variability of life, the imperative lingering: Walk on!

⁹ It is common knowledge that continental philosophers like Schopenhauer, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger took Heraclitus' philosophy more serious than they do any other of the classical Greeks. Heraclitus was the first of many who have, over the centuries, thought that change within an underlying unity is more fundamental than solidity in diversity. Hegel, very probably, became the most important and most influential continental supporter of this view. Hegel explored the notion that this overall unity existed in a state of dynamic tension, and Heraclitus anticipated this. We may look around and see a world of divergence, opposites, conflict, fragmentation and polarity. But, according to Hegel, beneath these surfaces were principles that brought the fragments and polarities together, or better stated, revealed that everything was already an interconnected and harmonious unity. It is true that postmodern critique, from Nietzsche onwards, had catastrophic consequences for an uncritical acceptance of the Hegelian stance. Versions of Hegelian integration nevertheless provided the dominant way of looking at Self and world in the 19th century. They then fell from prominence and in the early 20th century we became, once again, but then under the influence of quantum mechanics, more atomistic in our conception of how the fundamentals of existence were organised.

In summary: Heraclitus is teaching therapists and their clients that change does not imply chaos. Heraclitus thought he could see coherent principles, an underlying *logos*, governing an interconnected movement of existence. Heraclitus encourage us to swim in a river of change. Deeper still: you are being dissolved in the river. You are not in the river, you are *of* the river.

According to Howard (2000:10), Heraclitus' views have profound importance for clients who seek insight into their identity and their relationship with their environment: Heraclitus offers a holistic vision of self and world. By embracing, rather than resisting, change we may best survive and find inspiration. The movement and interconnection of existence may inspire awe, humility and reverence.

3.3 A Heraclitean worksheet for therapists

Questions for the client (Howard 2000:15):

- What metaphors and images do you have of yourself? Does anything come to mind or does this strike you as a strange question?
- What can you think of that is fixed and unchanging about yourself?
- What can you think of about yourself that has changed and/or will change? Because of you? Because of changing circumstances?
- When is it worth asking, "Who am I?". When is it best just to get on with the next task in hand? Can you think of a few examples of each?

Exercises for the therapist and/or client (Howard 2000:15):

- You, and/or a client, might like to assemble a list of what is important and unchanged in yourself and your circumstances. How do you feel about each item?
- Compare this with a list of what is important and *different* within and about you compared with five or ten years ago.
- Make a list of important items that will be the same and different in five or ten years' time.
- "If only this, if only that..." – *What* exactly, yesterday, would have made you a different person? What, tomorrow, would make you a different person? Different in what way? What thoughts come to mind? What feelings about the thoughts? Record and share your responses as appropriate.

This case study merely illustrates Howard's *modus operandi*, being only one of thirty-three similar surveys in his book. Cautious as we should be, both of the pseudo-intellectualism of "practical philosophy" and the superficial, commercial nature of philosophical populism, one cannot help but feel seduced by Alex Howard's application of philosophy in the realm of psychotherapy. Not only philosophical counsellors and psychotherapists, but all involved with counselling in its various formats, have a lot to gain from his intelligent project. His version of the life and times of the continental obscurants offers us some insight in real life.

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