

Wittgenstein and Psychotherapy: From Paradox to Wonder

John M Heaton Palgrave Macmillan 2014

A Review by Dr Michael Miller

This book follows hard on the heels of Heaton's previous "The Talking Cure" (Heaton 2010) where he again examines his profession of Psychotherapy by using methods developed by Wittgenstein. It is important to emphasise at the outset that this is not the application of Wittgensteinian ideas to psychotherapy, with a view to suggesting that such an approach is an improvement on competing explanations. Rather, Heaton, following Wittgenstein's example, is reminding us of the consequences of thinking in particular ways: specifically, of the difficulties and confusions that arise when psychotherapists allow their thinking to harden and coalesce into sheer belief. This is highly relevant for a practice which aims to help free people from this very state of affairs: how can a therapist help if he too is convinced to the point of bewitchment of the correctness of his viewpoint?

If Heaton focuses on Psychoanalysis and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), he does so not to criticise these disciplines per se. After all there are plenty of practitioners of both disciplines who prove helpful for their patients. Rather, Heaton's examples show what can happen when the psychotherapist forgets that his practice is foremost an ethical one which unlike, say, surgery, does not depend on technique. Heaton's friend and colleague, the late R.D. Laing, put it well by suggesting that

treatment is concerned with how we treat people, and as psychotherapists how we treat or are treated is not commensurate simply with the ideas or methods employed.

The question as to of what sort of activity psychotherapy consists of and thus what might count as justification for this activity is central to the modern history of psychotherapy from the Enlightenment onwards. There is a long tradition of this justification taking the form of a case-study – a story illustrating both the details of the patient's life and problems and the intertwined interventions by the therapist. However very seldom has the case study been simply described or presented as sufficient in itself : the (growing) tendency has been to utilise a more persuasive technical language, which turns the singular story into one that can be generalised in support of the particular psychotherapeutic methodology being pursued by the therapist. In short the case study has functioned as an ideology to promote the view that psychotherapy is largely an empirical matter : the story told being subsumed by the language of the laboratory and only truly revealed by the methods of the laboratory.

Heaton's examples of Psychoanalysis and CBT are thus shown to be two sides of an empirical coin. Whilst the latter pursues its therapeutic strategy through "hard" scientific enquiry (through observations, formulating hypotheses, theory testing) , Psychoanalysis is not far away with its "soft" version. Notwithstanding the greater use made of the narrative story-line within the "case-history" , the conceptual framework of psychoanalysis is often presented in terms analogous to a scientific enquiry, emphasising observational

neutrality and representational fidelity. As this has clearly never been thought satisfactory to orthodox empiricists (eg Ernest Gellner 1985), the most contemporary version of psychoanalysis has finally succumbed to incorporating findings from neuroscience said to vindicate many psychoanalytic ideas.

The trend in post - Enlightenment psychotherapy has thus been towards competing versions of empiricism under the spell of what Wittgenstein referred to as the "craving for generalisation". In between the two paradigmatic examples mentioned above there are now many hundreds of varieties of psychotherapy all vying for justification under a general banner of scientism. However founding yet another school of psychotherapy to join this throng is not Heaton's intent. On the contrary, he follows in the footsteps of his old mentor - Peter Winch- in a rigorous attempt to retain for psychotherapy that which Winch was claiming for the 'social sciences' (Winch 2007); namely that the problems and possible solutions under scrutiny are conceptual through and through, rather than empirical.

In terms of the conceptual work needed, Heaton's criticisms of Psychoanalysis and CBT, following the example of Winch , are not therefore that of a philosophical under-labourer with the task of removing the rough edges to make way for a 'new improved model' all the better to be empirically rendered. Instead Heaton's critique is in the service of holding a mirror up to the language of psychotherapy, to suffering and its alleviation. It is also a reminder that what helps has little to do

with the particular ideas the therapist holds but rather " the placebo effect, the quality of the relationship between therapist and patient, and other non-specific factors are what are important" (Heaton 2014, p1). This might be contrasted to the work, say, of the psychoanalyst Roy Schafer, where his "action language" seems to fit with Winch's notion of the conceptual task of the under-labourer; expunging substantive notions from the Freudian corpus and replacing them with a "language of agency". (Schafer 1976)

Heaton is thus firstly promoting a view of psychotherapy as an activity which is embedded in ordinary , everyday language. In this sense he shares an affinity with the late Peter Lomas who also sought to stem the scientific influence on psychotherapy (Lomas 1981). Secondly, Heaton is utilising a sceptical current in Wittgenstein's work to show how the life -problems that are brought to psychotherapy by the patient share the same root as the scientific pretensions utilised by the psychotherapist to describe what he does. Namely, both patient and psychotherapist are dominated by "the metaphysical impulse..... The essential thing about metaphysics : it obliterates the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations (Wittgenstein 1967. 458)" Heaton 2016.

All this , however, abruptly leads to an aporia –in the sense of an impasse, that is irrevocably linked with resisting "the metaphysical impulse", about which Heaton reminds us can never be solved but may lead, never the less, towards liberation.

In short the aporetic message of Heaton's book , no less than Wittgenstein's , is as brutally paradoxical as the title of a popular book of the 1970's-"If you meet the Buddha in the road kill him"! (Kopp 1976). What sounds like an instruction of some kind offers no solution to follow as to do what or to whom : rather it is an invitation to ponder over how language is being employed with the possibility that it will allow the distinction between facts and concepts to emerge.

Many contemporary writings on psychotherapy fall between practical , instruction manuals on the one hand and more obviously "philosophical" texts, on the other. Both types tend, however, to give undue preference to representational language rather than expressive. That is to say ,they appear to offer a way through the aporia rather than, as Heaton suggests , the opportunity to be reminded of the limitations of language.

Such limitations of language are central to Wittgenstein and have been taken up by many commentators, particularly those favouring a "therapeutic" reading of his work. Much has been made of the framing remarks at the beginning and the end of the Tractatus: "This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it - or similar thoughts. It is therefore not a text-book" (Wittgenstein 1986 p.27);.... "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognises them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)"(Ibid p.189). These

remarks thus seem to point a way towards understanding what Wittgenstein has written as being more like riddles, aphorisms or koans which are presented to bring about a change in the perception of the reader rather than illuminate this or that feature of life. Heaton is thus suggesting that texts about psychotherapy need to be understood in the same way.

In spite of strictures to the contrary, the urge to understand Heaton's book by applying the "instructions" from the "Tractatus" is both seductive and, of course, guaranteed to keeping one entombed in the flybottle! The problem is not that of borrowing remarks from one author and applying them to another so much as relying on one proposition ("throw away the ladder") even as other propositions are treated as senseless. Yet this is the inevitable aporia-the paradox that we readers must grapple with for ourselves: because of the spell cast by scientism, elucidation seems to naturally involve the linear accumulation of knowledge, such that it is too easy to forget that the account one is reading is an account of the author's struggle to "get out of the fly-bottle". Even if one has "similar thoughts" this allows no respite to having to work through to the limits of one's own thinking. The difficulties that such work involves are immense and demonstrated by the dismal state of contemporary psychotherapy which, when faced with the aporetic aspects so deeply embedded in language, defaults to scientism to try and pin down the nature of this work.

Heidegger (2000) understood this difficulty, for instance in the Zollikon seminars, of persuading his audience of psychiatrists

and psychologists that even as these appendages are essential to human life, the brain doesn't think neither does the eye see: thus of not reducing vital persons to animated corpses. In spite of such efforts to counter the tendency to reduce human experience to body parts we should ponder on the fact that 60 years later a growing and influential group of psychotherapists of all persuasions is embracing neuroscience as the legitimising substratum of their practice. Even more alarming is that in the space of 20 or 30 years exploratory psychotherapy has all but disappeared from the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK. It has been replaced by the epitome of a scientific technology: a brief number of "psychological interventions" sometimes with a real person but more often via a computer programme , but both guided by a "psychological manual" into which the patient's problems are shoe horned .It would be wrong to suggest that such procedures never help but it would be a mistake not to see a deeply misanthropic streak at work amongst the appeals to "the evidence" and "the science" that animate such interventions as they ablate the complexities of human suffering.

Over the last 40 years or so Heaton has been working and re-working the same themes in previous books, papers and talks. He has not formed a school around him (but he has plenty of fellow travellers) and he has kept open a much-needed conceptual space as an exemplar for other psychotherapists. This space , informed by Wittgenstein but also by other thinkers in the fields of Phenomenology and Existentialism, is presented

by Heaton in an almost completely unique way. Whilst it is clear that he has his own style of writing he exemplifies that aspect of commonly shared language that Wittgenstein so brilliantly drew attention to. So although Heaton is writing in an area increasingly preoccupied with psychotherapy as a technocratic process, he reminds us of the multifaceted aspects of language which, in the context of psychotherapy practice, are much more concerned with expressing states of affairs than representing them.

What is being suggested by Heaton is that the disorders treated by psychotherapy share common ground with the way much of psychotherapy theorises about what it does: each under the sway of the "metaphysical impulse". To help the patient break away from this entails that the psychotherapist has a measure of freedom from his own ideas and in particular that his ideas could be the basis for his patient to find purchase in or upon. The service which Wittgenstein lends to the activity of philosophy also illuminates the activity of psychotherapy as embodied in Heaton's book. Far from presenting the psychotherapist with a set of ideas to follow, the psychotherapist is encouraged to be himself by coming to understand the limits of language through which he is constituted. Thus presented by Heaton, the practice of psychotherapy may find a path between the Scylla of scientism, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of an authorial monologue, on the other.

The Psychoanalytic Movement: Or The Coming Of Unreason
Ernest Gellner Palladin 1985

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The Interface between Wittgenstein's Philosophical Therapy and
the Empirical Psychotherapies
John M Heaton 15th British Wittgenstein Lecture 2016

Zollikon Seminars: Protocols-Conversations-Letters (SPEP Studies
in Historical Philosophy) Martin Heidegger
Northwestern University Press 2000

If you meet the Buddha on the Road , Kill Him!
Sheldon B Kopp
Bantam USA 1976

The Case for a Personal Psychotherapy
Peter Lomas Oxford University Press 1981

A New Language for Psycho-Analysis
Roy Schafer Yale University Press 1976

The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy
Peter Winch Routledge Classics 2007

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

Wittgenstein Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd 1986