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Subversion and desire: pathways to transindividuation

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BOOK REVIEW

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Introduction

This review is in two parts. The first part, written by Nikolaos Kypriotakis, gives a general appreciation of Bazzano's work, with some questioning of specifics in his thinking as presented in *Subversion and Desire*. Part 2, by Judy Moore, questions in particular Bazzano's dismissal of elements of the original Client-Centered theory that echo elements of his own thought and beliefs.

First part, by Nikolaos Kypriotakis

In *Subversion and Desire* Bazzano writes,

Self-loss is essential to self-knowledge; without it, there cannot be either a future nor 'experience', unless we think of the future as upgrade and of experience as repetition. (p. 131)

In that sense, we, the readers of this book, need to prepare to leave our usual self(–knowledge) aside ... otherwise we might just stay unaffected, stay the same ... our experience might be just a kind of (reading) repetition ...

Are we ready to accept 'ambiguity and indeterminacy as fundamental'? (p. 123) To let passion, desire, love and sexuality affect us? Are we ready to grieve, just grieve, but away from established norms? To be ex-static? Are we ready to allow otherness to dismantle and transform us? Are we ready to allow 'more society' (p. 199) in our life and thought?

Like a Socratic fly which teases the 'horse' of the common psychotherapeutic world, Bazzano will unsettle the simplified, accepted hypotheses with which we usually think, practice therapy and interpret emergent phenomena.

His own theoretical work draws from post-structuralism, Deleuze & Guattari, Nietzsche, Laplanche, Butler, critical psychology, feminism, Zen, many kinds of philosophy and literature, ancient or modern, and like Circe, he won't let us return to our usual Ithaca of the self/subject.

His writings dare to put into words unpopular views, views against solipsism, foundationalism, reductionism, essentialism of any kind, against neo-liberal and positivist agendas and ideologies (hidden or not) of regulation and control, against any kind of sanitization and sterilization of human (and non-human) life.

His writings critique any kind of established, fashionable system of psychotherapy: Trauma industry, attachment theory, the scientism of research methods, humanism itself, conventional humanistic therapy, either Rogerian or existential, you name it ... and, like Nietzsche, he diagnoses certain 'bad' turns of our times, reactive forces and ways of suppressing desire: dataism, scientism, sexophobia, somatophobia, bureaucratism, the politics of injury, the culture of resentment, anthropocentrism, the anti-daimonic model, the de-democratization of democracy, the reign of consciousness and of the self-bound, self-existing subject, mental

hygiene, affect regulation, anodyne or facile notions of embodiment, the prejudice of inner life, the pathologizing of the unconscious, utilitarianism, the drive to identity – and so forth.

Here and there, in his books, you can come across direct or indirect ‘warnings’ regarding the inept and banal character of bodies (either private or governmental) which regulate the usual psychotherapeutic discourse . . .

Is it a pathetic illusion the pledge of becoming ‘fully-functioning’ in a thoroughly dysfunctional world? And is that an oversimplification? But is it not also an important message? A kind of alert of great significance?

Is this not-only-a-Nietzschean, affect-driven, vision of psychotherapy, after all, banal, compliant, conservative itself? Or is it not?

Is Bazzanian vision (symbolically) ‘exiled’, is he an ‘orphan’? (p. 157) Or is he not?

Is conventional psychotherapy imprisoned in managerial ego-therapy?

And how can psychotherapy escape this prison of being the new fortress of surveillance, and normativity?

But, leaving politics aside for the moment, could we, readers, more generally, accept his short critiques regarding phenomenology (pp. 192–3), Aristotle’s hylomorphism (p.259), ‘felt sense’, etc.? With very carefully chosen short and important comments, some paragraphs very quickly dismiss whole ‘areas’ of classification and theoretical (or practical) systems. But can any theoretical system stand for . . . what is life? Can phenomenology/ies be so quickly dismissed? And when one discovers ‘secondhand metaphysics’ here and there, applied badly and superficially for commercial reasons, can one then summarily dismiss metaphysics overall?

In a more general manner, if Zen is a vital vehicle in Bazzano’s life and work (p. 234), could then some implications of Zen Buddhism (e.g. regarding its notion of ‘no-self’) not be demystified, disqualified because of its connection to fascism? (e.g. Žižek, 2003).

And, regarding hylomorphism: According to Suzanne Mansion (1946, pp. 360–1), ‘Matter is not separate because it cannot exist without form. [. . .] As for form, it can only be separated by thought’. (My translation).

Regarding notions of ‘embodiment’, ‘felt sensing’, ‘experience/ing’, etc.: Can any question be good or bad? If we hear the words ‘Where do you feel that in your body?’ (p. 240) would that make it bad therapy and/or express an anodyne notion of embodiment? How is one supposed to ‘be with’ such a question? Like Bazzano, or like Massumi (2021)? Very briefly, in Massumi’s view, ‘Where do you feel that in your body?’ is a very serious and important question. One might carry it further to get a glimpse of how ‘experience’ and its movement (the movement of body-situation-environment) ‘has us’ rather than ‘we have experience’.

Of course, one can say that the whole area of ‘experience’ might be a territory and a going-in-circles life, following Krishnamurti’s teachings that ‘the experienter is the experienced’ (and vice versa), but does that dismiss ‘experience’ and ‘experiencing’, just like that, in a few words?

Some final remarks

In *Subversion and Desire* Bazzano is expressing his own journey. We can sense what motivates him, his own ‘speaking from (his) life’, his ‘pre-theoretical mode of existence’ juxtaposed with his kind of ‘knowing’, but we will not learn about anything in detail. We will not read in detail what motivates opponents in opposing theoretical views. If we are to deeply understand the areas that he gives passing attention to we need to accept the situatedness of ‘old’ teachings and writings, including phenomenology, Aristotle, metaphysics, felt sensing, experiencing and why we might ask questions such as ‘Where/how do you feel that?’

Paying respects to all these ‘teachings’, to Bazzano’s own writings, to any kind of similar question(s), might be a matter of just offering deep and serious consideration, radically

accepting the multi-schematic nature of any kind of explicit symbolization of any kind of implicit, affective, or unconscious 'something' (at least, and in a whole gamut of articulateness, if we, the readers, like Dilthey, are interested in *any* kind of aspect of our life and practices, as *they are* and as *they are lived-through*).

How can any one of us really consider all these matters by ignoring their situatedness? Also, is it not true that, in that process, our being situated often leads us to mis-regard some aspects, to mis-read, to mis-interpret any kind of 'old' teachings and writings?

Many among us might see in his writings specific, new, anti-Cartesian notions and directions, well clarified at a first level, for theory and for practice, even though that kind of view, processual and anti-Cartesian, is a difficult thing to clarify and a more difficult thing to 'translate' into common sense and into common discourse and practice.

Bazzano can inspire us into that direction . . . He writes about differences that matter, really matter; he writes, with agon, about 'colors made of tears' (p. 226).

It is good to have a culture-space-time panoramic and in-depth view of a whole territory . . . To realize and recognize the centripetal (Ptolemaic) forces toward a supposed unity of the self and the otherwise centrifugal (Copernican) force toward otherness which de-centralize the self . . . and open up the autonomy of affect . . .

As Bazzano writes, 'This exploration has only just begun. I hope it will continue. And if it won't be me doing it, I am certain others will' (p. 3).

I would suggest that this new book, *Subversion and Desire*, works like a scene . . . a theatrical one, where the readers enter, slowly, silently . . . finding themselves among the 'fight', the tendencies and polarities of different directions and diversions. A scene of antagonisms! There, into that scene, being affectively moved, alarmed, pleased and displeased, one has to 'answer back', has to find one's own way among superficiality and depth, the organismic and the formal, meaning and significance, the creation of meaning and its sedimentation.

Second part, by Judy Moore

Across the essays of *Subversion and Desire* runs a very compelling central argument that psychology needs to free itself from 'its myopic focus on subjectivity' (p. 17) in favor of an awareness that 'what makes us who we are is something that *precedes* us' (p. 119). In my own favorite chapter in the book, 'Therapy as Art and Praxis', Bazzano proposes that ' . . . much can be gained from parallels between the *aesthetic* response to the work of art and the *therapeutic* response in the clinic' (p. 186). If, as clinicians, we can turn our focus to the 'emergent phenomenon' in the therapeutic encounter (as we might open ourselves to be moved by great art or literature) then therapy becomes a very different enterprise, no longer a reinforcement of the 'self-bound, self-existing subject' (p. 198) but an affirmation of 'the aliveness and dialectical ambivalence inherent to existence and immanent in the therapeutic encounter' (p. 187).

Subversion and Desire is, however, a challenging read because many of the chapters unfold in a dazzling sequence of references that often feel more designed to impress than elucidate. In such chapters the writing seems to be addressed to an elite audience, one that is well-versed in critical theory, coconspirators in the author's disdain for some of the simplistic truisms of the therapy world, individuals who also share his taste in literature and art.

In terms of simple emotional response, the book worked for me when Bazzano confirmed my own views and prejudices. I nodded in agreement over such phrases as 'the work of the therapist needs to focus on the enigma' (p. 56), '[mainstream] therapy . . . is *ego-therapy* rather than *psycho-therapy*' (p. 117), [w]hat makes us who we are is something that *precedes* us' (p. 119) and so on. I was happy with his questioning of

attachment theory, his championing of ‘transformation over cosmetic change and social adjustment’ (p. 133), his undermining of the ‘scientism’ that manifests as a fixation on “evidence-based” truth so dear to dominant discourse in psychotherapy’ (p. 162), his attacks on ‘goal-driven’ therapies as practised by ‘pluralistic therapists who allow us to pick and choose from the wide range of methods available on the shelves of the psych supermarket’ (p. 140).

It was a different matter when Bazzano’s scorn was turned on elements of the original client-centered theory that I see as being of immeasurable value. These are phenomena that were carefully observed and (initially) tentatively formulated to address and access the very subtleties of experiencing that lie at the heart of the open and fluid psychotherapeutic receptivity that he would wish to promote.

Such receptivity needs unconstrained and welcoming openness to the phenomena of experiencing, such as is generally understood by what Bazzano refers to as ‘the holy trinity’ of ‘empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard’ (p.89). Openness to understanding some of the formative cultural complexities that Bazzano articulates does not negate the value of therapeutic conditions that were formulated only after decades of observational research. Bazzano misses a point well understood in the 1950s by the original ‘Rogers group’ that their work was meant to free the ‘gossamer threads’ of theoretical hypotheses from turning into ‘iron chains of dogma from which dynamic psychology is only recently beginning to free itself’ (1959, p. 191). Many ‘iron chains of dogma’ have been forged since then, but there is much in early client-centered theory that is in tune with Bazzano’s advocacy of ‘self-loss’ and ‘the norm as immanent and subject to change’ (2023, p. 128).

At the heart of a fluid understanding of the self (the term ‘organismic self’ does not actually appear in the writings of Carl Rogers) is the work of Eugene Gendlin. There is no direct reference to Gendlin in *Subversion and Desire*, but the term ‘felt sense’ (a term introduced by Gendlin) appears on several occasions, only to be scornfully dismissed: ‘the near mystical belief in the unassailable truth of the felt sense’ (p. 77), ‘a gnostic entity magically gifted with near-divinatory power [by various phenomena including] the felt sense’ (p. 118), ‘a parallel foundational notion of “ground” ... found alongside a craving for metaphysical validation, be they felt sense, organismic self, being, ground of relatedness, the gnostic truth of the body and so forth’ (pp. 153–4).

But where did the term ‘felt sense’ come from and what does it point to? In the late 1950s Eugene Gendlin set out to explain how understanding of the phenomenon of experiencing, which he described as ‘an inward sensitivity of the living body’ (Gendlin, 1962/1997, p. 27) would be helpful to the new discipline of psychology. He saw that there was a need to go beyond the concepts that constrain understanding by listening directly to the ‘felt sense’ (originally termed the ‘direct referent’) of experiencing to discover more precise personal meaning. Interestingly, he observed that ‘experiencing’ (in the late 50s, early 60s) ‘is currently better dealt with in literature and the humanities than in science’ (1962/1997, p. 23) and points out that ‘metaphor emphasizes that experiencing itself changes in the act of symbolizing it’ (1962/1997, p. 267). This perspective is very much in tune with Bazzano’s chapter on ‘Therapy as Art and Praxis’.

In the tentative thinking and formulations of Rogers, Gendlin and their early colleagues there is more that is compatible with Bazzano’s position than is incompatible. It is a mistake to conflate the thoughtful considerations of the early years of Client-Centred Therapy with later developments that are often only carefully-marketed extrapolations or developments designed to fit research criteria to prove that the therapy in question is ‘evidence-based’. This rising of flotsam to the surface of the original depths, this trend toward marketable superficiality is wholly at odds with the open searching of the

early years where even the ‘construct’ of the self was under question as the research group came to understand that ‘the self could be defined in many different ways’ (Rogers, 1959, p. 202).

Conclusion

Subversion and Desire contains significant material, particularly in terms of critical theory, that could be of great value to the world of psychotherapy. My concern is that the central argument is too deeply buried under the weight of its own erudition; meanwhile too much is swept aside in waves of dismissal, including material potentially in tune with Bazzano’s own thinking.

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