

The Paradigm Shift: Psychotherapy Today-Psychotherapy Tomorrow

The disastrous separation of body and mind, characteristic of philosophical systems which are in an important respect derived from Cartesianism, is avoided in the philosophy of organism. Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality

The doctrine thus cries out for a conception of organism as fundamental to nature...The reality is the process. Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World

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In this article, I elaborate upon the path the field of psychotherapy has travelled so far and the path which lies ahead.

A golden age is on its way

Mick Cooper and John McLeod are undoubtedly right, in my opinion, in judging ‘that the field of psychotherapy and counselling is, in essence, still in a ‘pre-paradigmatic’ state’—terminology, they explain, ‘the philosopher Thomas Kuhn uses...to refer to a period in the development of a scientific discipline in which a shared understanding has yet to be reached, and is characterised by ‘competing schools of thought’ that ‘possess differing procedures, theories, even metaphysical assumptions’ (Bird, 2009)’ (Cooper & McLeod, 2011).

Which is to say that if we consider the enterprise of psychotherapy to be a scientific discipline (which not everyone does), then the field of psychotherapy with its multiplicity of differing theories is at that stage in the development of a scientific discipline Thomas Kuhn has identified as preceding the emergence of a *paradigm*, i.e. where a psychotherapy *paradigm* would connote a unitary and unifying mindset subscribed to by all psychotherapists, one that features an overarching paradigm theory, agreed upon practical procedures, and a single set of metaphysical assumptions.

Put differently, what this means is that we in the field of psychotherapy are on the brink of a golden age: a golden age in which harmony will reign among psychotherapists over how to make theoretical sense of what psychotherapy is and how it should be practised.

The fuller picture

In saying, though, that I believed Cooper and McLeod to be right in judging the field of psychotherapy to be in a Kuhnian pre-paradigmatic state, what I didn’t say was that the pair present us with a seriously limited account of Kuhn’s portrayal of such a state. For Cooper and McLeod speak solely of a paradigm emerging from a pre-paradigm state, whereas Kuhn focuses primarily upon the situation where the pre-paradigmatic condition not only precedes the emergence of a new paradigm, but follows upon dissatisfaction with a previously existing, less adequate older one.

This was in many ways the central feature of Kuhn’s theorising and why he titled his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. For Kuhn theorised that the superseding of one paradigm by another was a revolutionary intellectual event, a transition that took place after

the fashion of a visual *Gestalt switch*, comparable, say, to now seeing the rabbit and no longer the duck in a ‘duck-rabbit’ picture. Kuhn terms such an intellectual *Gestalt switch* a ‘paradigm shift’, the nature of which Carl Rogers describes in his book *A Way of Being*.

On Kuhn’s interpretation, expounds Rogers,

our scientific view of the world, at any one time fits into a general pattern. To be sure, there are events and phenomena that do not quite fit, but they are disregarded until they begin to pile up and can no longer be ignored. Then, a Copernicus or an Einstein provides us with a whole new pattern, a new world view. It is not something patched onto the old paradigm, although it absorbs the old. It is a totally new conceptualization. One cannot move gradually from the old to the new. One must adopt one or the other: this is the paradigm shift. (1980)

In my view, therefore, the pre-paradigmatic state that the field of psychotherapy is in today is that it has reached ‘the turning point’ (Capra, 1982) of shifting from an old to a new paradigm: an in-between condition where theoretical ideas belonging to the new paradigm have come to jostle alongside those belonging to the old; but where the old paradigm still mainly holds sway.

The identity and nature of these two paradigms is something Carl Rogers also sheds light upon.

The Old Paradigm

In 1972 Carl Rogers gave a talk to a meeting of the American Psychological Association reflecting on his forty-five year career as a clinical psychologist. Rogers was extremely provocative in what he had to say. But perhaps that was unavoidable, given that he was informing his audience of the nature of the paradigm shift he believed needed to happen in their discipline, the paradigm shift they seemed incapable of taking on board.

‘Dare we develop a human science?’, Rogers challenged. ‘Or will we continue as a pseudoscience?’, one in which ‘we have determinedly tied ourselves to...[the] old Newtonian conception of science, seemingly unaware of the changes in views of science that have been taking place in theoretical physics and other ‘hard’ as well as ‘soft sciences’ (Rogers, 1980).

Now, of course, Newton’s conception of science embraces Descartes’ conception of physical nature as a machine composed of ‘dead’ matter, made up, for Newton, of ‘billiard ball’ atoms that get moved about by external forces like the parts of a machine. Integral to this conception, too, are the presumptions (a) that the human body is a part of physical nature and as such machine-like in the way it operates; (b) that the human mind is not ‘dead’ but alive, active, and conscious and operates on the basis of the principles of rational thought; (c) that, given that the concepts of *mind* and *matter* are incompatible, incommensurable ‘substances’, that any attempt to formulate a unitary conceptual scheme on this dualistic *Cartesian-Newtonian* paradigmatic basis—the kind of scheme required to adequately conceptualise the unitary being of the human being—is doomed to failure.

It was this *Cartesian-Newtonian* model, then, that almost fifty years ago Rogers told his fellow clinical psychologists they needed to abandon. But the fact that they and psychotherapists never got the message has in recent years been convincingly evidenced by Campbell Purton in his book *The Trouble with Psychotherapy* (2014).

For it is Purton's judgement, as a 'Wittgensteinian 'philosopher'', that 'although the different theories [of psychotherapy] are different in some ways, most of them are permeated by the Cartesian picture in which a human being is a composite of 'mind' and 'body' (Purton, 2014). 'This misleading picture feeds, and is fed by, certain theoretical ways of talking,' elucidates Purton: ways 'that are fundamentally confused and incoherent'—the result being that 'the Cartesian picture has distorted the development of psychotherapy theories' and 'most psychotherapy suffers from the incoherence implicit in Descartes' picture of the human being' (Purton, 2014).

Most prominently, I would add, through the dominance of the machine 'picture' or 'model' ('picture' being Wittgenstein's word for 'model') and resultant attempts to provide quasi-Newtonian explanations of psychotherapy processes, viz., psychotherapeutic change involving the movement of 'unpleasant' atomic ideas from one part of the mental 'apparatus' to another; 'energy' being transferred from one such mental billiard ball to another.

The New Paradigm

Referred to by Rogers above and elaborated further in additional articles in *A Way of Being*, it is Rogers' position that the 'transformational crisis'/'paradigm shift' the human sciences are currently undergoing is part and parcel of an intellectual Gestalt switch/change of worldview taking place in science as a whole, central to which is the shift from mechanistic Newtonian physics to the modern physics of relativity theory and quantum theory (Rogers, 1980). This 'new collective vision', contends Rogers, is rooted in 'a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including humankind', one that enshrines the 'recognition that the whole universe, including ourselves is a 'cosmic dance' 'a world that consists only of vibrating energy ['oscillations'], a world of process and change' (1980).

For Rogers, therefore, 'there is a great deal of evidence to indicate that in many aspects of our culture, including science, we are moving toward a process conception of all aspects of living and life' (Rogers, 1968/1990): evidence he finds supplied by such thinkers as process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, founder of the philosophy of organism; Fritjof Capra, former physicist and systems theorist; Michael Polanyi, philosopher of science and originator of the idea of tacit knowing; and Jean Piaget, developmental child psychologist. And here, an individual I would add to Rogers' list is someone not known to him: the logician and art philosopher Susanne Langer—Langer's theorising being steeped in the ideas of Whitehead, her 'great Teacher and Friend' (Langer, 1957).

Various terms have been used to designate the common mindset of the above thinkers, viz. *process*, *organismic*, *systemic*, *holistic*, *Gestaltising*. Of these I prefer *organismic* since it helps foreground a fundamental contrast with the *Cartesian-Newtonian* mindset: the

Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm being based upon the ‘picture’ of the functioning of a machine; the newer paradigm upon the ‘picture’ of the functioning of the living organism.

Beyond characterising matters in such general terms, however, what, more concretely, are likely to be key features of an *organismic* psychotherapy meta-theory? In the next section, I speculate upon their identity employing ideas developed by the above thinkers.

Proposed key features of an *organismic* psychotherapy meta-theory

- (i) To overcome the mind-body dichotomy, the ‘raw material’ comprising both ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious’ facets of the person is taken to be growthful *process*, evolving patterns of activity spawned by an ubiquitous principle of creativity (i.e. a somewhat rejigged version of Rogers’ ‘formative tendency’ (Rogers, 1980)). Here, a vibration/pulsation/oscillation represents *process* in its simplest form and constitutes a dynamic *Gestalt*, *a la* a musical melody. To Whitehead these fundamental constituents of reality that so ‘become and perish’ are *events* (Whitehead, 1925); while Gestalt therapists designate them *Gestalt cycles* (Clarkson, 1999).
- (ii) Enduring existence, our perceiving of lasting ‘things’, comes about through the ‘re-creation’ or ‘repetition of [the same pattern] in successive events’ (Whitehead, 1925): comparable to the unchanging picture on the movie screen produced by successive frames of the film bearing the same visual pattern. Organisms, as networks of events, maintain an enduring existence through such rhythmic repetition, with even non-living enduring entities being classed as ‘organisms’.
- (iii) Like ripples in a river, *events* simple and complex react to/‘grasp’/Gestaltise the presence of other events. In this context, a novel and entirely new event becomes created through a condition of *mutuality*, of two or more *congruent* events mutually grasping each other. This *dialectical* creation process may be pictured as two hands grasping one another to create the new entity of a handshake, an image that Martin Buber employs apropos ‘I-Thou’ relating: that form of interrelating that in the context of psychotherapy Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper describe as interacting at ‘relationship depth’.
- (iv) The image of the handshake elucidates how different levels of increasingly complex *events* become created through such a *mirroring* procedure; how multi-level complex networks of events, structured organisms, are brought into being in the form of a nested (Russian Doll) hierarchy; how the human being can be considered a multi-level organism, as in the theory underpinning Leslie Greenberg’s *Emotion-Focused Therapy*.

- (v) Consciousness is ‘felt’ process, comparable to the sound produced by the vibrating strings of a stringed instrument when that vibration reaches a certain intensity. Thereby vibrating sense-making processes at different levels give rise to different types of consciousness; while personal mental harmony is to be compared to the situation when all the instruments strings are in tune and their concordant vibration produces a harmonious sound.
- (vi) Constructive personal change brought about through psychotherapy is a reparative process that follows the path of normal personal growth. Which is to say that it transcends a number of developmental stages to form a nested hierarchy wherein later, more complex stages entrain and incorporate earlier less complex stages, i.e. where in Polanyi’s terminology, less complex stages in ‘focal’ form become ‘subsidiarily’ and ‘tacitly’ present at more complex stages.
- (vii) As Rogers indicates, to be effective the therapist tries ‘to resonate’ to the client ‘at all levels’ (1980), i.e. to *mirror* in their own multi-level organism those matching sense-making processes of the client at the various levels of complexity. In order of complexity, these levels are:
- (a) the *somatic level*—where the individual’s sense-making is at the focal form of bodily feeling
 - (b) the *iconic level*—where focal sense-making is in terms of imagery (visual or otherwise) and *somatic* sense-making is ‘subsidiarily’ experienced
 - (c) the *discursive level*—where sense-making in terms of ordinary language becomes focal and *iconic* sense-making is subsidiarily, *somatic* sense-making sub-subsidiary.
- (viii) Disharmony between levels of sense-making involves dis-entrainment, or ‘reversion’, as Whitehead terms it: the strength of lower level processes having become relatively greater than those more complex. In extreme cases, such disharmony results in what traditionally has been termed ‘madness’. Regarding which, the present scheme deems psychotic *hallucinations* to arise where *iconic* sense-making has ceased to be ‘subsidiary’ and become ‘focal’; and *catatonia* where *somatic* sense-making has similarly become ‘focal’.

- (ix) Mirroring a paradigm shift, psychotherapeutic change involves a client undergoing an experiential shift from a less to more complex level of sense-making.

Basic thesis restated

Thus, in relation to the current state of the field of psychotherapy, my basic thesis concords with that of Fritjof Capra and Luigi Luisi when they state that ‘the *Zeitgeist* of the early twenty-first century is being shaped by a profound change of paradigms, characterized by a shift of metaphors from the world as a machine to the world as a network’, whereby ‘the new paradigm may be called a holistic worldview, seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts’ (2014); and that although ‘physics was the first discipline in which scientists experienced dramatic changes in their basic concepts and ideas...[s]ubsequently, the same change of paradigms occurred in the life sciences’ (2014).

Within psychotherapy theories across the board, I would claim, there is evidence of such a paradigm shift in progress: increased awareness (a) of the inadequacy of *Cartesian-Newtonian* ideas; (b) of the greater adequacy of alternative ideas belonging to a worldview variously labelled *organismic*, *process*, *holistic*, *systemic*.

Postscript

As Thomas Kuhn postulates, the coming of a new paradigm is a revolutionary affair; and, in my view, the advent of the *organismic* paradigm vis-à-vis the field of psychotherapy is no exception. But what makes matters more acute in the realm of psychotherapy is that not only is the *organismic* theoretical mindset revolutionary apropos the *Cartesian-Newtonian*, but revolutionary too with respect to another general mindset found within the field—a mindset that is fundamentally at odds with both *Cartesian-Newtonian* and *organismic* paradigms.

Arguably the most popular theoretical mindset within the field today and enjoying the support of a considerable number of the field’s major figures (Clarkson, 1995; Cooper & McLeod, 2011; Cooper & Dryden, 2016), the truly radical nature of this third mindset can perhaps best be encapsulated by designating it: *the paradigmatic theoretical mindset that doesn’t believe in paradigmatic theoretical mindsets*.

For what advocates of this third worldview propound is ‘the rejection of ‘grand narratives’ in theory [i.e. paradigm theories] and the replacement of a search for truth with a celebration of the multiplicity of (equally valid) perspectives’ (Burr, 2015), viz. a worldview in which the creation story in Genesis is considered as equally valid as Darwin’s ‘story’ of evolution, and where one psychotherapy theory is considered as equally valid as (no truer than) another. A state of affairs, in other words, that places the field of psychotherapy on a par with the domain of religious studies, not that of scientific disciplines.

This is the theoretical mindset of ‘postmodernist pluralism’ which in fixating on the failings of *Cartesian-Newtonian* modernity has obscured apprehension of the *Cartesian-Newtonian* to *organismic* paradigm shift and failed to countenance that paradigm advance is itself organismically nonlinear in terms of perishing preceding becoming.

What's needed now, therefore, for the *organismic paradigm* to be actualised in the field of psychotherapy is for theorists in the various psychotherapeutic approaches to think *organismically* and *paradigmatically*; and on that basis first work on redefining the concepts in their own approach in *organismic* terms; second seek to harmoniously interconnect those concepts across approaches.

A golden age awaits.

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- [*This article is dedicated to the memory of Bernie Neville who had such a profound knowledge of Whitehead.*]