

Academic Paper

The useless therapist

An appreciation of non-doing

By Alex Delogu



With the huge amount of variability between people it is near impossible to say what the purpose of therapy is. It will differ from person to person. This article aims to explore what this means, leaning into the idea that therapy is something more than just a useful tool.

'How much concentration, industry, and tact it takes to destroy our *raison d'être!*'

Emil Cioran

Introduction

Being useless is a way of not being a fixer or the bearer of useful techniques, emptying out the proverbial toolbox, and just being. This article will explore some various ideas of uselessness. The aim of therapy will be explored from a psychoanalytic and existential

perspective. A clarification of uselessness will follow. The historical context from which our views sprout will be briefed and an alternative view from Taoism will be considered. For the purposes of this article the terms idleness, useless, purposeless, play etc., are used interchangeably, all broadly meaning activity without a particular aim.

The cure

In his book *The Cure for Psychoanalysis* Adam Phillips raises some very interesting points about

the aim of psychoanalysis. The idea of cure is taken to be one possible aim of therapy. To state the basics: if you go to the doctor with a broken arm there is some established criteria for curing, whereas if you are suffering from a broken heart it is not so clear what, or how, this is to be cured (Phillips, 2021, p.147). It is as though approaching a broken heart as if it were something that needed curing misses something essential about what it is and how we are to be with it. Phillips goes on to explore further possibilities for an aim to psychoanalysis such as simply learning from the patient (p.156), abandoning the notion of cure (p.165), or to find personal solutions (p.169). There may in fact be as many aims to therapy as there are people who practice and attend it, an unavoidable conclusion if our uniqueness is taken seriously.

The question he mentions, and that I want to pursue here, is this one: 'what would psychoanalysis be like, in both theory and practice, if it had no curative intentions whatsoever?' (Phillips, 2021, p.165). More simply still, what if therapy was not aiming at anything at all? Or, more precisely, what if it was aiming at aimlessness itself? Let's explore.

What's the point?

Stepping back momentarily to survey the wider vista: As we go through life we have all these projects that we undertake and these projects may come to an end as we grow beyond them. We might take up swimming, or painting, or whatever else. Psychotherapy is another of

these possible projects. We often undertake these things to achieve something, whether it be improving ourselves or the world, or to achieve something, or because we think we should be doing this or that, or even out of boredom.

A humbling view is that these projects, in the grand scheme of things, have very little impact on the world at large. 'That a man should publish three or thirty articles a year, that he should finish or not finish his great allegorical picture, are questions of little interest to the world' (Stevenson, 2009, p.12). I'll go on...

All these small projects are embedded within the context of a single lifetime. When life comes to an end, there is nothing next. It is like the ultimate project. So what is the purpose of living? It is not easy to answer this question as, 'it is not a consensual fact that life is worth living, finding it worth living is a basic problem' (Phillips, 2021, p.19). We don't come fitted with a reason for living. It is a basic but profound question that confronts us and is likely to arise at trying times.

If we take the aim of life to be that which comes at the end, we are left in a rather sorry state. An existential inclination would place death, or nothingness, definitively at the end. We don't get to keep anything from our lives, we are on borrowed time. Heidegger would say we are 'Being-towards-death' (1962, p.296), that our very being is oriented by its own potential absence. From this perspective there is an inescapable limit to life. Bearing in mind that the existentialist position will argue that this transience is precisely what gives life meaning, and that accepting this fact allows one to live more authentically (Heidegger, 1962, p.304–305). Death is 'life's picture frame' (Anton, 2021, p.123). However, if what comes at the end is the point, then there seems, paradoxically, to be no point. Maybe

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the trouble here is that measuring life by what comes at the end is to use the wrong measure altogether. 'Just as one does not dance to get to the end of a song, or listen to a piece of music to get to the final beat, so, too, the meaning of life is not found at the end of life or somehow "after" it, but in the living of it' (Anton, 2021, p.149).

Perhaps there is something of this pointlessness within therapy, something the idea of a cure tries to avoid.

Intrinsic purpose

A helpful distinction can be drawn here between intrinsic and extrinsic purpose. Extrinsic purpose is the goal or the aim of something. A toaster has a very specific aim. To toast the bread. It either achieves this or does not. It has a particular use and is directed towards that. If it does something different, this result is seen as a failure. In terms of psychotherapy, the idea of "cure" falls into this category, as does, for that matter, any other defining goal or aim. Any aim of therapy that is beyond its basic practice is extrinsic to the process of therapy itself.

On the other hand, intrinsic purpose is more like a dance or music, it has no purpose other than the act itself. In contrast to extrinsic purpose, this appears comparatively useless. It exists not for anything other than itself and it is not particularly important if it is not directed towards some specific goal or if it achieves anything. I am suggesting that psychotherapy is more like dance and music than anything particularly goal orientated. When therapy is assessed in terms

of what it is good for, its aim, this actually ends up muddling the process, as in the idea of cure. 'Such things have intrinsic purpose: trying to find an extrinsic purpose fails, and in the process, devalues them: it feels like a betrayal' (McGilchrist, 2021, p.1168). Not that it's easy, but just being with someone is rewarding in its own right and for reasons that often elude description.

In an article titled *The Goals of Psychoanalysis?* Christopher Bollas arrives at a similar conclusion. He sees free association as the only aim of analysis, and as such, it is not an extrinsic aim, it is a method, or to put it in the terminology used thus far it is an intrinsic way of being. It has no goals beyond itself 'and whenever any practitioner nominates goals transcendent to the method he is almost inevitably in conflict with the terms of the method' (Bollas, 1999, p.69). Whenever we attempt to do more than free associate we are betraying the process. Whenever we are doing we are no longer being. Calling back to Cioran's opening epigram: we destroy our *raison d'être* with great industriousness.

The sovereignly useless

'Voyages are accomplished inwardly, and the most hazardous ones, needless to say, are mad without moving from the spot.'

Henry Miller

McGilchrist grounds this in his neuroscientific analysis when he proposes that the two hemispheres of the brain attend and present the world in different ways. 'Here one sees the first and most obvious hemispheric distinction: that between a strategic purpose, as the left hemisphere sees it, designed to issue in utility; and purpose as the celebration of life, creativity, difference and uniqueness, as the

right hemisphere takes it to be.’ (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 1168).

The part of the brain that reinforces purposiveness (the left hemisphere) recoils at the idea of there not being an instrumental purpose. Because it deals in utility it deems anything that does not fit this paradigm as pointless and without value. The left hemisphere demands a purpose and militates against anything that doesn't follow suit.

To view therapy in a right hemisphere fashion is to appreciate the free-roaming, undetermined, and unique qualities of the process that needn't be aiming at anything in particular. This shift is to escape from the 'cheerless gloom of necessity' (McGilchrist, 2010, p.124) that everything must be done for a reason. And therapy, after all, has been posited as a primarily right-brain to right-brain process (Schore, 2019). It's an 'adventure' (Phillips, 2021, p.162).

On balance

This does not mean we are doing nothing, as, especially in therapy, we are trying to avoid doing further harm. There is a common misconception about improvisation that without any rules we enter into an indistinct free-for-all. This is not the case. There are structures and parameters of a different kind. Maintaining a space that is not overrun with aims is a skill in itself that requires diligent practice and training. It is not just chaotic spontaneity. It is contained and bounded adventure. We still prepare when going on an adventure.

Also, this does not mean we are to do away with purposes, goals, and aims altogether. We do not reject aims that might arise but try to think about them. This is not the abandonment of reason in favour of a pure intuition. It is '[n]ot through the romance of becoming natural but through adjusting the balance of being and thinking about being' (Toop, 2016, p.42). The

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point here is to rebalance things in favour of implicit, creative, and non-goal orientated ways of being. In short: more play, idleness, purposelessness. If reasons and goals arise it is a happy accident but these are not themselves the reason for playing. 'Should an interesting thought, of value to ongoing or future projects, arise during idleness, it is a serendipitous outcome.' (O'Connor, 2018, p.6). The foundation is the open space in which these serendipities can arise and on which this arising depends.

In the case of McGilchrist, he argues that it is the right hemisphere view that is more fundamental to our understanding of each other and the world, and that the left hemisphere functions more as a helper, or an emissary. His broader critique is that we have come to overvalue the instrumentality of the left hemisphere and that this is deeply problematic for us as a species (McGilchrist, 2010; 2021).

Inherited attitudes

While we may have our individual views around the topic of idleness, or the useless, it is important to note that these attitudes are deeply influenced by social and historical views. As much as we might hold dear our personal views, they are infused and shaped by social forces greater than ourselves.

Phillips, in speaking of cure, makes a connection to inherited religious ideas where he says that a 'culture that believes in cure is living in the fallout, in the aftermath, of religious cultures of redemption' (Phillips, 2021, p.153). This is reminiscent of Nietzsche's observation that even

a society that has moved beyond God still carries the same religious values in a different form. Following Nietzsche, Deleuze writes that '[n]othing has changed, for the same reactive life, the same slavery that had triumphed in the shadow of the divine values now triumphs through human ones' (2001, p.80). So religious redemption becomes secular cure.

Some of the connections between work as redemption can be seen as extending back to the Garden of Eden where humans were punished by God with work (Graeber, 2019, p.221). Another take is that human work is a more 'modest instantiation' of divine creation (Graeber, 2019, p.221). Later variations, in the 16th century for example, took work to be both punishment and redemption (Graeber, 2019, p.228). Arguments against idleness are strung throughout the history of philosophy (O'Connor, 2018). Here we encounter claims about work making us 'worthy' people (2018, p.51) or that work alone admits us any social status and recognition (2018, p.76). There is a long history of anxiousness amidst doing; an entire history of disdain towards idleness. There have also been many defenders, though let's focus on one of particular interest.

Historical alternative

'Everyone knows the profit to be reaped from the useful, but nobody knows the benefit to be gained from the useless.'

Janina Duszejko in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk

An interesting alternative to this sort of disdain for idleness can be found in certain works of Eastern philosophy. Taoism, Zhuangzi's version in particular, holds an appreciation for both what is useless and for a specific type of not doing.

This is, incidentally, an influence on McGilchrist who writes:

'In Taoism, it is posited that only when the mind is free from pragmatic concerns, free for playfulness in thinking, and spontaneity in action, can there be creativity. This is referred to as "uselessness" – having no practical purpose in view. Creativity is not willed, and has no purpose. And of course what the left hemisphere particularly values is control and use: we require the right hemisphere to transcend such concerns (2021, p.745).

As mentioned before, this is not to jettison reason, but to emphasise the fundamental importance of uselessness.

Zhuangzi challenges us to think: 'It is only when you know uselessness that you can know anything about the useful' (Ziporyn, 2020, p.222). What an interesting thought. How often do we stop to appreciate that which has no purpose? Zhuangzi continues: 'The earth is certainly vast and wide, but a man at any time uses only as much of it as his two feet can cover. But if you were to dig away all the earth around his feet [...] would that little patch he stands on be of any use to him?' (Ziporyn, 2020, p.222). That which rests outside our narrow view is the very thing that allows us to have a view at all. Our eagerness to be useful to others may hide the benefits of our uselessness. *How can we be useless in a way that is of benefit to others?* Or, to put it another way, how can we be used in a way that does not use ourselves up? This is, and if not, it should be, a standard part of therapeutic practice. To not be fixing, to not be doing too much work and to not exhaust ourselves in the process.

Wuwei

'There's a fine art to being idle in fact. That's right, there is an art to it, and very few people are naturally in possession of the gumption and

It is important, to restate it from earlier, that this is not a fantasy whereby we escape disturbance by simply existing intuitively

fortitude necessary to pull it off.'

Checkout 19 by Claire-Louis Bennett

Within Taoism there is a concept called *wu-wei*. This is variously translated as 'effortless action' (Slingerland, 2003), 'nonaction' (Watts, 1975, p.75), or 'absence-acting' (Hinton, 2020, p.97). This does not mean laziness or a complete absence of action, but precisely the sort of behaviour that has been mentioned previously. It is action without the predetermination of a specific goal. A kind of spontaneousness. 'It is important to realize, however, that *wu-wei* properly refers not to what is actually happening (or not happening) in the realm of observable action but rather to the state of mind of the actor' (Slingerland, 2003, p.7).

This state of mind is described by one commentator as 'floating' (Jullien, 2007, p.113). 'To float is to designate no port and set no goal, while maintaining oneself in an emergent state – alert and unencumbered' (Jullien, 2007, p.114). There is an appreciation here of being responsive to change and remaining open to alternatives.

It is important, to restate it from earlier, that this is not a fantasy whereby we escape disturbance by simply existing intuitively, as if being totally intuitive would solve all our problems. If only life were so easy! This view is alluring and appears frequently. One commentator points out that 'the foremost expert has recognized that his intuitions do not suffice, and neither an expert

solution nor a heuristic rule will serve him in this tricky situation; instead, he must switch to a slower and more deliberate and effortful form of thinking' (Nylan, 2018, p.221). Some things require effort and deliberate thought. Knowing when to apply or not apply effort is a skill in itself. This seems like such a basic point it's amazing how often it is overlooked.

Floating downstream

This adventure brings us full circle back to therapy by way of a linguistic connection. Freud spoke of maintaining free-floating attention. Our attention is to remain open to possibilities, 'as opposed to simply hearing what we want to hear or expect in advance to hear' (Fink, 2007, p.10). This is much like foraging, where peripheral awareness opens up, where we are open to the unexpected. Much in line with what has been said so far, Freud recommended suspending the critical faculty, or what has been referred to here as left hemisphere attention. The therapist 'should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind' (Freud cited in Epstein, p.115).

It is curious to note that the art of listening, one of the basic ways of attending in therapy, disappeared in a 'protracted silence' for many decades after Freud's initial recommendations (Akhtar, 2018, p.22). Our mode of perceiving became absent from the discourse for so long. Perhaps this was the result of the scientific, objectifying gaze or just that we are like fish in water, often ignorant of the very medium through which we connect.

More recently, we see that how we attend is of great significance as 'therapists need to focus on *how* they are with clients as more primary than what they *do* in the therapy session' (Geller, 2018, p.107). Focusing on our own being and how we are attending, even to ourselves, is seen as fundamental. McGilchrist

again: 'The choice we make in how we dispose our consciousness is the ultimate creative act: it renders the world that is. It is, therefore, a moral act: it has consequences' (2021, p.17). How we choose to attend to the world is an ethical decision. It is not just some default disposition we have towards the world, as if all perceiving is simply the same. We participate in how we perceive. The world is not just 'out there' neutrally beaming into our minds.

Forgetting

Heidegger said that we forget Being and that it was the ancient Greek philosophers who were last in touch with it (Moran, 2000, p.195-196). McGilchrist argues that we have cycled through eras of greater and lesser emphasis on Being (2010). Refining this further I think that contact with Being sprouts up in us, like mushrooms, at various times and in various places (Delogu, 2020). It appears in the guise of play, improvisation, free association, meditation, and so forth. Not that these things are all the same, but they share certain fundamental characteristics. We constantly forget this basic form of being and as such

it gets discovered anew each time. We play hide and seek with our very own selves.

Conclusion

'We are in danger of losing the capacity to reflect, to deliberate, to ponder, even to communicate and to learn in the true sense of that term' (Standing, 2017, p.177). Psychotherapy's primary virtue is that it provides a space to ponder in open-ended exploration. A relationship that is free from rigid goals allows for creative thought to arise and for thought to flow. This is not to say it is easy. For the practitioner, this requires ongoing awareness of oneself and how one is attending and on the felt presence of another person. An excessive focus on goals shuts down play and prevents potentially useful but unforeseeable thoughts from arising. To hold rigidly to an idea like cure, or any other goal, is to close down the play of therapy. The aim of the therapist is to be aimless.

Addendum

I was discussing elements of this article with someone and they asked me, 'What is the point of the article?'

I fumbled a response. It only occurred to me later that there is no point to the article beyond writing it. These are topics that intrigue me and I have woven them together here in the hope that they resonate well together as a reading experience, more like a musical composition than a final statement of fact. I cannot foresee, nor do I wish to assume, what use, if any, this piece of writing might have for you, but if it does I hope it's of benefit. ☺

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between the descriptions of grief as fleeting and simply “taxing,” and grief as a conduit to reflect on the most profound metaphysical questions in life.

Within his staunch scientific stance, Bonanno, in fact, goes so far as to support the diagnosis that long-term grief is nothing less than a psychological illness, i.e., “prolonged grief disorder” (ibid., p. 110); “People who are overwhelmed by sadness get lost in themselves; they [have] an insatiable desire [i.e., appetite] to have the deceased person back again.” (ibid., p. 97). Given his rather myopic focus on evolution and function, it is little wonder the ‘new science’ has nothing whatsoever to say about common, though complex, human emotions such as, ambivalent affective responses, nostalgia or survivor guilt. None of these emotions serve a positive evolutionary function, yet each are familiar to people across the globe.

Conclusion

Within the arena of clinical psychology, the ‘new science of bereavement’ has gained popular support both from professionals in the field and lay readers alike. Nevertheless, it has been my contention there exists a serious and misleading analysis of this core human emotion. It is in both the contradictory taxonomy of sadness offered and in the misguided description of long-term grief offered. My alternative analysis details what I have referred to as ‘*affirmative grief*,’ a concept which recognises how grief can contain a proper desire, heightens loving bonds and is future directed.

I have attempted to show how George Bonanno’s account leaves unacknowledged the appetitive component, how it can contain a wish dimension, can be overlapped by love and can be directly related to our self-preservation.

Such grief is, then, not merely a wholly negative, isolating and painful trauma but, rather, an emotion which becomes embroidered into the fabric of the griever’s character

‘*Affirmative grief*’ allows the griever to recognise, in periods of reflection and reappraisal, the necessity of moving on in a way that is not damaging to him/herself. Inevitably, this is something they find easier to achieve with the support of the other loving relationships they share with family and friends and, crucially, with the knowledge that the deceased would also have wanted this for them.

Such grief is, then, not merely a wholly negative, isolating and painful trauma but, rather, an emotion which becomes embroidered into the fabric of the griever’s character, allowing them to adjust, without being overwhelmed, to the new reality into which they have been placed. ☺

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