

# JOHN HEATON SYMPOSIUM

A discussion of his last works  
Saturday 10 November 2018



“Forget your  
perfect offering.  
There is a crack,  
a crack in  
everything.  
That’s how the  
light gets in.”

Leonard Cohen

Philadelphia Association

Newsletter March 2019

# **PA NEWSLETTER**

## **MARCH 2019**

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## JOHN HEATON MEMORIAL SYMPOSIUM: A DISCUSSION OF HIS LAST WORKS – ABSTRACTS

KATHERINE MORRIS

I will focus on chapter 7 (Trust and Wonder) in *Wittgenstein and Psychotherapy*.

I take off from a point where I find myself in disagreement about something which John Heaton says (pp. 129-30): that when we are in a traffic jam and lean forward ‘as if we could push the car from the inside’ we are ‘tyrannized by a picture’. I don’t think this is Wittgenstein’s view (the passage quoted on pp. 130-1 reverses the terms of the description), but this prompts me to reflect quite generally on Wittgenstein’s remarks about ‘magical behaviour’, about which, on the face of it, he expresses a surprising ambivalence; how to make sense of this apparent ambivalence?

MIRANDA GLOSSOP

‘On (or against) Abstraction’

At the heart of John’s life and work was a concern with and critique of the dangers of abstraction (theoretical, metaphysical) particularly when used to explain aspects of human experience and interaction. The problem I want to think about in particular concerns the nature of truth, lies ... and sincerity. Are we in a post-truth era? What’s real, what’s fake ... and how would we know? What kind of truths, if any, do we seek in therapy and what are some of the conceptual confusions that can get in the way?

ONEL BROOKS

‘Parrhesia and Psychotherapy’

I would like to raise a number of issues and questions to do with practices of parrhesia and psychotherapy, as outlined in chapter 2 of *The Talking Cure*. Here are some of the questions and concerns related to that chapter. If parrhesia is often glossed or paraphrased as ‘speaking truth to power’, do we leave out or pass by much of why it is important to psychotherapists? What are the similarities and differences between parrhesia and free association? If psychotherapy was practised in ancient Greece and Rome without theories of the mind and its content, what does this suggest about psychotherapeutic theories? Might we worry that we are at a stage now when we dare not regard

psychotherapy as a practice of parrhesia?  
Might we feel that we cannot speak  
honestly and plainly as psychotherapists?  
And even if we do not quite believe it  
ourselves, it is better to present ourselves and  
what we do as modern, scientific,  
technique and evidence based?

#### MILES CLAPHAM

##### ‘Initiate Learning’

John always emphasised the way a child learns language as central to understanding how we come to mean what we say, or not, and all the subtleties and humour of this, an interest redoubled with his growing grandchildren. Given that we learn to understand one another as children, and vitally, not just through language, the question becomes what is the further implication of this for training psychotherapists, whose business it is to understand others (or is it?), and, again with many caveats, potentially to help them (or is it?).

Initiate learning has its origins in a way of life that the child is immersed in, and indeed in life itself. As Wittgenstein tries to show, when it comes to language, and meaning, there is no foundational knowledge, and trying to explicate foundations results in propositions that are senseless. A related trope in some

recent psychoanalytic thought, is that of not knowing, or unknowing. I cannot be an ‘expert’ in someone else (or her ‘mind’) nor of course can she be an ‘expert’ in herself (as CBT therapists tend to claim). The small child John says is not so much interested in learning language as such, but wants to play a part in the human life that surrounds it. This opens to view the huge potential gap for children whose initiation into life leaves them without words for certain pains, or experiences, or emotions, or where adult language has denied the child’s experiences or done violence to them.

Those wanting to train in psychotherapy often have their own initiation into human pain. What further initiation do they need when training? Can I be taught how to be with another in distress? “How can I be told how the proposition represents?” These questions circle around any psychotherapy training, although answered in different ways. I will take the idea of initiate learning to

question what it might be to attempt to understand another person.

LUKE HEATON

‘On Understanding and Explaining Human Behaviour’

People want to believe that someone understands what they are going through, but what constitutes understanding? There is no simple answer to that question, but it is important to insist that ‘knowing the facts’ and ‘understanding’ are not always the same thing. Understanding is made evident by the way we interact, and most forms of understanding have little to do with measurement, disinterested observations, mathematical or deductive frameworks, or any of the other hallmarks of scientific or factual claims. For example, if I ask a shopkeeper ‘Where is the milk?’, and they point me towards some milk, then I feel I have been understood. We are not always understood in this way, as I may ask for some milk in a foreign country, where people don’t speak the same language as me. So what is the nature of this

understanding between shopkeeper and customer? I don’t expect the shopkeeper to have any sense of what I am feeling, or to have some deep insight into my personal state. I rightly feel understood simply because the shopkeeper heard what I said, and responded appropriately. If I tell my computer to ‘order milk’, and it responds by placing an order online, I would say that my computer has understood me. Clearly, there is no sense in which the computer is sharing my mental state, or feeling what I feel. It is simply responding to my command as I wanted it to do. Of course, the kinds of understanding we can reasonably hope to enjoy go well beyond our demands for milk. For example, suppose that I am crying because my father has died, and someone says, rather coldly, ‘You are crying because your father has died.’ In that case we would not feel understood, even though someone has correctly identified a fact that ought to be included in any good explanation of why I am crying.

So why am I not understood? Well, the person who coldly states the facts of my bereavement has not responded appropriately. Baldly stating the facts of the case diminishes my distress, and it is obnoxious to suggest that my tears can be explained away even though they know nothing about what my father was like. Without adopting an appropriate tone of voice, with a suggestion that what is particular about my case is what matters, my interlocutor would violate the expectations of the English mode of grief. In short, they have responded in a way that does not show that they have seen what my situation is like.

Animals that call out to one another need those calls to live the way they do. Similarly, our ways of life depend on our use of language. Words are used for making moves in a situation, not from a detached position in which nothing hangs on what we say or think. Without language we could not coordinate our

behaviour, or enjoy the relief of expressing how we feel.

It is also worth stressing that an appropriate response is not the same thing as a desired response. If I ask a shopkeeper for milk, and they then tell me they don't sell it, they have shown that they understand my request even though they leave me disappointed. More generally, we don't need to be singing from the same hymn sheet in order to understand one another. Indeed, it is telling that when two people who dislike each other find a way to get on with their respective days without making matters worse, we say that they have 'come to an understanding'.



## PARRHESIA AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

ONEL BROOKS

In his introduction to John Heaton's chapter in the book *Critical Psychiatry*, a chapter that has much to say about parrhesia, DB Double writes, 'The Philadelphia Association does not subscribe to a particular theoretical model or school, but utilises philosophy, particularly phenomenology, existentialism, the sceptical philosophies and psychoanalytic thought, to think about mental life and question the cultural norms and assumptions that may be implicit in a person's suffering or accepted ways of understanding it' (Double 2006: 7). Perhaps the first question then, is whether in uttering these words now, a member or trainee of the PA is speaking truthfully and whether this what we all think the PA is, and there is no desire to subscribe to a model or school and just get on with applying

what is known and obvious or apparently well supported.

In his chapter in this book, (*Critical Psychiatry*) John tells us that, 'There were some fundamental texts that were vital to the thinking of David Cooper, Laing and myself' (Heaton 2006:46) and that there was a practice of having a copy of these philosophical and Buddhist texts in the community household. John writes, 'The point of this was not to turn people into amateur philosophers or Buddhists but to show that we are all "in the same boat". There is a long and distinguished tradition of thought about the human condition which is far greater than the narrow positivism of psychoanalysis and modern psychiatry and people were helped by becoming aware of it' (Heaton 2006: 46-47).

To formulate a question related to the one above, are we in the same boat, or even if the boat is the same, are we impressed by claims to be able to control the seas?

One reminder of the richness of thoughts and practices unfamiliar to us, that might stimulate us to thought, conversation, changing who we are and what we do, is the notion of parrhesia or 'fearless speech', which is found in Foucault's text *Fearless Speech* (2001). In chapter 2 of *The Talking Cure*, John writes, 'The parrhesiastes was someone who said everything she had in mind, who opened her heart and mind completely to other people through discourse. As emphasised by Foucault (2001), the word parrhesia refers to the type of relationship between the speaker and what she says' (Heaton 2010: 16).

So although 'speaking truth to power' is a part of it, this is so because the idea is that to speak truthfully about oneself exposes us to censorship or punishment. The emphasis seems to be not on the desire to 'fight the powers that be', as much as being able to speak courageously and open-heartedly about oneself. It seems to be a practice for exposing and combating our enslavement to our passions, especially our vanity, pride and tendency to deceive ourselves.

What is the difference between parrhesia and free association in psychoanalysis? John's argument is that in psychoanalysis, although the patient may be instructed to speak freely, the analyst tends to interpret in a way that is not free, that depends on psychoanalytic shibboleths, assumptions and practices. One such assumption is that the patient's free association is not free but determined by forces and complexes in the unconscious (Heaton 2010: 19-20).

If John, following Foucault, shows us that in Ancient Greece and Rome

psychotherapy was practiced around the notion of parrhesia without the construction of theories of the mind, the idea of an internal world or psychic apparatus, does this imply that our psychotherapeutic speculations about our minds are, as Richard Rorty would say, 'optional'?

Parrhesia is concerned with speaking, with dialogue or conversation, with the harmony between what we say and what we do, rather than with accounts of what is going on in our minds as we say and do. This notion and practice turns our attention to talking, our use of words, and how we behave.

Following Wittgenstein, John often said something to the effect that 'confusion in speech bedevil clarity' (Heaton 2010: 18). We need to attend carefully to words and how they are being used. A philosopher who was also influenced by Wittgenstein, Donald Davidson, is perhaps saying something similar when he writes, 'Terminological infelicities have a way of breeding

conceptual confusion' (Davidson in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge').

John quotes Hobbes as saying that wise men do not overvalue words, as fools do, especially when they are the words of some authority or expert (Heaton 2010:18). John also reminds us that words can be 'duplicitous', and as Francis Bacon said, we should trust 'countenances and deeds' more than we trust words, and the 'sudden' surprising word that seems to slip out, rather than the words that seem to be prepared and staged (Heaton 2010: 18-19).

Perhaps the last word on how we need to be attentive to the words but learn to attend more to use, meaning, significant, should belong to Chaung Tsu, a figure who was mentioned a number of times in my conversations with John: 'The fish trap exists because of the fish. Once you have gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit. Once you have gotten the rabbit, you can forget the



snare. Words exist because of meaning. Once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten the words so I can talk with him' (Chuang Tzu, *Inner Chapters*).

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It is tempting to try to say more words about how being attentive to words and the meanings and significance they help to convey is not the same as being fixated on or obsessional about words, semantics and the construction of a logically perfect language, which is superior to the language we use every day in that the words in the propositions of a logically perfect language correspond to the facts, and complex propositions are made up of simple ones. It is tempting to try to say more about the difference between, on the one hand, a focus on how we express ourselves, on our truthfulness or lack of truthfulness, the significance of what we say, and on the other hand, ideas of building systems of representation of the

world where some words and sentences really refer and truth as correspondence to the facts is preserved.

Searching in vain for the exact reference for the quotation above, often attributed to Chuang Tzu, I found something else, and something that I would have liked to share with John, but this will make a little more sense if I refer to John's manner and conversation as a therapist, as well as what he wrote and what he said in public. What is crucial is his being able to leave a client alone – without abandoning him – his not having to borrow into, alter and make demands on a client, his ability to wait for what might emerge.

And perhaps I feel that I have failed so far in trying to say what parrhesia is and why it is so important, so I want to try again. I take the notion of parrhesia to be important not only when we think of psychotherapy as made up of scenes of talking, not talking, expressing ourselves, not being able to or not wanting to express ourselves. Language as

something we move in, use, misuse, lose ourselves in, rather than language as some abstract structure to be studied. I think the notion of parrhesia as a practice of being concerned with and expressive of our own failings is perhaps present in Wittgenstein's expression of his own struggles around his concern that he is vain and his wanting to be or feel less vain being also tied up with his vanity. I see it also in Nietzsche's concern with our preoccupation with speaking the truth, the importance of having an intellectual conscience and making every yes and no a matter of conscience, his insistence that we need to go to a 'hard school' at the right time (to learn something about self-discipline, having to work and struggle rather than be encouraged to make it easy on ourselves).

John could be incisive and brutal about psychoanalysis, and speak like someone who knew his way around analytical as well as continental philosophy. His remarks were those of a person who had engaged with these

subjects seriously and still had his sense of proportion and sense of humour intact. I have never met a therapist who was engaged in psychoanalysis and philosophy in this way and to this extent, who could be serious and amused in this way and to this extent, and who was able to not intrude or violate. What he did was hard. There will not be many like him. And there may be many who do not like him for his failure to be apologetic enough, for his ridicule of inflated and confused phrases, arguments and people, for his failure to counterfeit respect and appreciation he did not feel. Perhaps he spoke his mind and failed to be political enough. Such traits and tendencies helped me to trust him to say what he meant, and to mean what he said, in as far as we are able to do this.

Unfortunately, I did not get a chance to discuss with him something I found whilst looking for the quotation from Chaung Tzu above. It is about how the King of the Southern Sea and the King of the Northern Sea were on good

terms with Chaos, the King of the Centre, and wanted to do something good for him, help him. So they decided that as humans have seven orifices – ‘two eyes, ears, nostrils and a mouth’ – and poor Chaos did not have any orifices, they would kindly make him one orifice a day. On the seventh day Chaos died, as it was no longer Chaos but structured, ordered and like the people around it. Chaung Tzu or Zhaung Zi finishes this paragraph with, ‘All beings should be left in their natural deprived state; one should not seek to perfect them artificially, otherwise they cease to be what they were, and should remain’ (Zhaung Zi, Chapter 7, G).

In the next paragraph he writes, ‘One should not do violence to nature, even under the pretext of putting it right’ (Zhaung Zi, Chapter 8, A).

I think I might have had a memorable conversation with John about how therapy might be seen as about ripping someone a new orifice – to beat severely or rip into someone – under the

pretext of putting them right or even with the good intention of doing them a good turn or putting them right. I think he would have got this and been able to engage with it.

This imaginary conversation might have led to Nietzsche’s words: ‘One must yet have Chaos in one to give birth to a dancing star’ (Zarathustra Prologue), which is a valuing of the chaos at the centre of us and our lives, and a deep suspicion of those who want to offer to bring us to order, calm us down and put us to sleep. I am glad that no one managed to put John right and take away his concerns, struggles and belligerence, rendering him serene. I would have trusted him less.

## INITIATE LEARNING

### MILES CLAPHAM

COMMENTARY ON *WITTGENSTEIN AND PSYCHOTHERAPY: FROM PARADOX TO WONDER*, CHAPTER 5 (HEATON, 2014)

#### INTRODUCTION – ON TEACHING

John's chapter on 'Initiate Learning' for me triggers some thoughts on teaching people what they perhaps in a sense already 'know', and leads me to try to understand some of the complexities he weaves through. Psychotherapy John would say does not involve learning a second language, but using a carefully considered first language with all that implies. But how do we teach someone to understand another's suffering, or what is somewhat different, to be understanding? 'Initiate Learning' is about how children learn their mother tongue. John rather dismisses psychoanalytic notions of innate ideas; contemporary linguistics has its own version, as the child seems to leap

ahead in language use far faster than it could be taught. Chomsky and Pinker refer to 'Plato's problem', so come up with 'universal grammar' and 'mentalese' as explanatory hypotheses. We can see that children do respond to adults' smiles and other facial expressions, to gestures, tone of voice and other bodily expressions fairly universally.

John asks how do we learn to make sense? This is different from, or more than just, learning a language, and requires involvement with all of human life. John emphasises making sense as vital to psychotherapy, but the complexities and subtleties of this tend to be passed over in theoretical models that rely either on set frameworks for meaning, or assume that thoughts are represented in the brain and this gives them some kind of causal force.

Stanley Cavell, an American ordinary language philosopher John in places refers to, says: "Teaching" here [he is referring to children learning a first language] would mean something like "showing them what we say and do", and "accepting what they say and do as what we say and do", etc; and this will be more than we know, or can say.' We show children what we do with words, and all kinds of other things, and accept their approximations as what is just perfect for them to say, or do. The cuteness (us finding it cute) of the child's gestures and use of language is part of what drives this acceptance.

I want to emphasise this 'more than' – perhaps what Cavell is getting at is similar to John saying we cannot theorise the origins of language. Perhaps; we can make evolutionary and other theories, the point is more, what we do

with our children is so much more than we could ever even describe. We are caught up in something, and that is where and how the child learns. What we say is from a perspective, we construct ways of seeing through language, through our culture, our gender and all sorts. There is always the unsaid, and perhaps the unsayable. John does not theorise the unconscious, deliberately avoiding this. Our lack of knowledge of ourselves, our deep unknowing, can be approached in many ways (Henderson). Wittgenstein was as much concerned with what language cannot do, as well as what it can.

How do we learn to speak of emotions, or pain and other sensations that are supposedly private, 'our own' experiences? Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 244) suggests that adults, going to a crying child who has hurt himself,

teach the child verbal expressions for pain that replace the 'primitive, natural' expressions of pain such as crying. This seems another aspect of initiate learning. Crying, screaming, our animal expressions, are never fully replaced. The point Wittgenstein emphasises is that the words don't name or describe the pain, they express it. Words are, to use Mulhall's term, 'grafted onto' bodily and gestural expressions, expressions that are appropriate to the situation (more or less), gradually this realm of expression widens. Not seeing the expressive (rather than descriptive) quality of language here gets psychiatry into deep confusions. I don't have 'depression', I am showing how miserable I am and how terrible my life seems.

We initiate the child with 'patience, art, care and skill' (McManus,

2006, p. 205).<sup>1</sup> John talks of the need for non-dogmatic adults (how many children are lucky in this?) and the child seeing what she says mirrored in the response of the adults. Words make sense in the context, like a child to her absent dad on the phone: 'I don't get blowed kisses.' The physicality, and the nature of that physicality, of the relations in which language is acquired is all important.

Children of course may not be given words to express their pain, they may be slapped down when trying to say something, or told never to speak of 'our secret' by some abusive adult. It's a truism that even in 'ordinary situations' being able to 'express one's feelings' is problematic in many ways. Seeing a need to 'learn' something here is common, and often part of the path to wanting to be a therapist.

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein suggests we should always describe, never explain. What is happening in the situation when someone says 'I am in pain', or more obviously, 'it hurts, mummy, it hurts!' is that the child, the person is letting you know, without crying or screaming, her situation. She is not describing a symptom but letting you know how it is for her. It is neither a description nor an explanation, although in a sense, if a mother is running for the bus and her little daughter is limping, unable to run, her saying 'it hurts' might be taken as a kind of explanation. Nevertheless it is still an expressive response to the child's pain in a situation where the expression might have more than one purpose.

## FORMS OF LIFE

John relies on Wittgenstein's emphasis on a 'form of life' as the backdrop to language learning, indeed learning to be human – not 'a' human, but a person in this culture, society, language group, class. 'The subject cannot be seen in isolation from the world.' 'Children learn language and world together.' They are initiated into a particular form of life. Initiation means immersion, there is no 'outside' to the form of life we are initiated into in early life. Psychotherapy training also requires immersion and initiation, particular trainings induct us into their own way of seeing and understanding. Then of course we like to think we have the right way!

## PROPOSITIONAL VS. EXPRESSION / ARTISTIC USE OF LANGUAGE

John brings out aspects of language that are not just propositional, as Wittgenstein

did. We are in the realm of ritual, gesture, touch, sound, singing, incantation, performance, poetry, pantomime, oracles and language as unveiling, revealing. Words can touch us, and the power of a poem or someone's appeal may move us. Language and meaning arise causelessly, (outside a simplistic cause and effect model) words perhaps are gifts from the gods.

The opening words of the *Illiad*: 'Rage – Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles, murderous, doomed...' says the poem is from Athena, goddess of war (and wisdom) and the poet merely the reciter – but not merely because his or her breath and voice give shape and expression to the words, the poem is performance, an incantation, a revelation. John doesn't use the word inspiration in this chapter – he does talk of breath – nevertheless it is implicit; elsewhere he has talked about encounters with language, which happen unlooked for, words springing to mind or out of our mouth. The quote from Wittgenstein on

finding the 'right' word is telling, he sometimes seems to choose words by 'fine differences of smell'. And further: 'doesn't the word that occurs to you "come" in a rather special way? ... How? – I act it.' We do this in therapy too, in many situations our speech is action.

To return to teaching. John's starts this chapter with a well-known quote. 'How can I be *told how* a proposition represents? Or can this not be *said* to me at all? And if that is so how can I "*know*" it?' There is a logical paradox here, which McManus (2006) draws on, as it suggests the impossibility of learning a first language. Grossly simplifying, importantly this relies on a particular – con-formist – idea of both language and learning, you would have to 'know' how language works before you can learn it. Hence Chomsky and 'Plato's problem'. Knowing that a noun names an object is not a problem learning a second language, but learning a first is entirely different. One has to see this, it is no use, with a child, pointing over and over to a tree and

saying 'that is a tree', because the frame we are drawing around the world is particular, and what the child has to see is the way things are framed.

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

John says 'The evidence is the child first participates with adults who respond to it. It is as if there is a dance between adult and child, each responding to the other in a dynamically unfolding interaction.' Cavell (1969/2002) explores all angles of the 'scary' sceptical position on pain, 'we cannot know what another person is feeling because we cannot have the same feeling, feel his pain, feel it the way he feels it.' And the answer is not that we can have the same pain, although it might make sense in certain circumstances to say this.

The key Cavell suggests is acknowledgement – he draws out two modes. There is first person

acknowledgement or confession, when it could make sense to say: 'I *know* I'm in pain', or, 'I know I'm a mess', said in exasperation, or in a reluctant admission when one has been doing one's best to hide it. If I can link this with initiate learning, I would say this kind of confession one learns in intimate relationships, including therapy. Intimate relationships often need such acknowledgement to continue – 'I know my drinking is a problem'.

The second mode is second person, this is Cavell's idea, as Wittgenstein does not talk of this, we might wonder why. It is where psychotherapy is located. Here what we depend on, or dwell with, is my acknowledging that you are in pain, showing in some way that I see your pain, that I do in a way feel your pain – not of course literally – or feel for you in your pain. Wittgenstein tells us he 'very often can know' – quite plainly – 'that another is in pain' – one major problem therefore is how often we act as if we don't know

that another is in pain – or that very many others are.

This returns us to the question of initiate learning: do we learn this at our mother's or father's knee? There are many lines we could take here. I want to stay with the question of acknowledgement. This is at the heart of what we might learn as a child; arguably being initiated as a child, helps later. When the adults go to the child who has hurt himself, and give him words to express his pain rather than just raw screaming, amongst other things they are acknowledging the pain. Their concern, their response even if not very concerned, is an acknowledgement. It is showing an understanding of the other; the implication is we also learn this, or the capacity for this, as a child. It seems unlikely that if one does not have this capacity in some degree from early life, that it can be acquired as an adult.



## BELIEF/TRUST IN THE OTHER RATHER THAN CERTAINTY

John makes a number of references to *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein's last work. This is about not intellectual certainty, knowing that, but living in relation to the world and others such that certain things stand fast without consideration, without having to be stated; statements can be made but sound strange, 'fishy', out of place. The child 'believes the adult', 'learns to react in such-and-such a way, and in so reacting ... doesn't so far know anything.' And cannot doubt either.

John says: 'initiation is required because it involves first being given a space in the human world, being recognized as a fellow human; from there we can learn to speak.' The infant needs familiarity, trust, and stage setting, that is particular situations where familiar actions occur, getting dressed in the morning, changing nappies, meal times. Appropriate responses are required, from the baby, and of course from the adult.

The adult is in charge, has authority, and the child has no choice in accepting the adult's actions – Cavell furthers this a little: in this initiation 'we must make ourselves exemplary and take responsibility for that assumption of authority' (Cavell, 1979). Exemplary here is a word full of challenge – we set the example, this is an important part of teaching, completely applicable to psychotherapy.

Wittgenstein has said ethics cannot be expressed or taught; there was an old debate in the PA about whether psychotherapy could be too. We rather loosely talk of apprenticeship. John as we know started the training. To transpose a suggestion by McManus, it's not that the term 'teaching' is not applicable to psychotherapy, rather a restricted concept of 'teaching' might constrain our understanding. The restricted sense limits itself to propositional knowledge, with a view that language to be true must 'conform' with reality. So, can psychotherapy

be taught? The question becomes, what counts as 'teaching?'

What do we do when 'teaching'? We might 'draw comparisons, offer analogies, and ask for imaginative exploration'; there is much discussion and debate, we make suggestions and logical (or meaningful) links (McManus). It is not the transmission of a strict set of knowledge, but neither is it a mysterious or ineffable conveying of some vague third realm (or fifth province). Clearly, it is neither thoughtless nor inarticulate. It requires initiation, immersion, and clear thinking (and probably a lot more besides).

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## ON UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLAINING HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

### LUKE HEATON

People want to believe that someone understands what they are going through, but what constitutes understanding? There is no simple answer to that question, but it is important to insist that ‘knowing the facts’ and ‘understanding’ are not always the same thing. Understanding is made evident by the way we interact, and most forms of understanding have little to do with measurement, disinterested observations, mathematical or deductive frameworks, or any of the other hallmarks of scientific or factual claims. For example, if I ask a shopkeeper ‘Where is the milk?’, and they point me towards some milk, then I feel I have been understood. We are not always understood in this way, as I may ask for some milk in a foreign country, where people don’t speak the same language as me. So what is the nature of this understanding between shopkeeper and customer? I don’t expect the shopkeeper

to have any sense of what I am feeling, or to have some deep insight into my personal state. I rightly feel understood simply because the shopkeeper heard what I said, and responded appropriately.

If I tell my computer to ‘order milk’, and it responds by placing an order online, I would say that my computer has understood me. Clearly, there is no sense in which the computer is sharing my mental state, or feeling what I feel. It is simply responding to my command as I wanted it to do. Of course, the kinds of understanding we can reasonably hope to enjoy go well beyond our demands for milk. For example, suppose that I am crying because my father has died, and someone says, rather coldly, ‘You are crying because your father has died.’ In that case we would not feel understood, even though someone has correctly identified a fact that ought to be included

in any good explanation of why I am crying.

So why am I not understood? Well, the person who coldly states the facts of my bereavement has not responded appropriately. Baldly stating the facts of the case diminishes my distress, and it is obnoxious to suggest that my tears can be explained away even though they know nothing about what my father was like. Without adopting an appropriate tone of voice, with a suggestion that what is particular about my case is what matters, my interlocutor would violate the expectations of the English mode of grief. In short, they have responded in a way that does not show that they have seen what my situation is like.

Animals that call out to one another need those calls to live the way they do. Similarly, our ways of life depend

on our use of language. Words are used for making moves in a situation, not from a detached position in which nothing hangs on what we say or think. Without language we could not coordinate our behaviour, or enjoy the relief of expressing how we feel.

It is also worth stressing that an appropriate response is not the same thing as a desired response. If I ask a shopkeeper for milk, and they then tell me they don't sell it, they have shown that they understand my request even though they leave me disappointed. More generally, we don't need to be singing from the same hymn sheet in order to understand one another. Indeed, it is telling that when two people who dislike each other find a way to get on with their respective days without making matters worse, we say that they have 'come to an understanding.'

It is generally impossible to set out strict limits on the kinds of behaviour that constitute an appropriate response,

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even for a simple statement, but we can *show* that we understand, and recognise inappropriate behaviour when we see it. This can be very subtle, as even when two people speak the same language, what counts as appropriate behaviour in one culture may seem jarring in another. Indeed, the process of learning about another culture is a kind of journey, where we go from being baffled as to why they behave as they do, to being able to picture an appropriate way for us to participate in the pattern of their lives. Crucially, this account of understanding should show that grasping the truth of a situation is not just a matter of being acquainted with the relevant knowledge or sharable facts. How we respond also matters, and there is great danger in valuing truth independently of how it is received. Truth is not a commodity that can immediately be grasped and stated, ready packaged for us to buy and consume. We sometimes see the truth, but cannot possess it just by going along with what the most qualified people have asserted.

In short, the possibility of arranging a pattern of life together is fundamental to human speech, and when we talk of understanding, we are gesturing towards the immanence of that possibility. As Jürgen Habermas has argued in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, "*A speaker reaches understanding with another with regard to some matter. [...] Of course, understanding the meaning of a linguistic expression and reaching understanding about something with the help of an utterance held to be valid are two different things [but] one simply would not know what it is to understand the meaning of a linguistic expression if one did not know how one could make use of it in order to reach understanding with someone about something.*"

Human forms of life involve understanding, but they also involve resistances to understanding ourselves and other people. We express and do not express ourselves, understand and fail to understand ourselves. We are riddles, to

ourselves and others. Although we are mysterious, people have reasons for acting as they do. So how can we explain a person's actions? Is there some knowable thing inside me that makes me act the way I do? Can one become expert on why people do the things they do? To address that question, it is crucial to appreciate that causes and reasons are completely different things, though we sometimes make the mistake of talking about reasons as though they were a cause. If an event A is the cause of an event B, then one would need to verify, in a sufficient number of cases, that A is regularly followed by B. Causes are established by experiment, through statistics, or by seeing a mechanism, such as when we see one billiard ball hit another, thus causing the second ball to move.

Reasons are established differently. To give a reason for acting in a certain way is to explain (or try to explain) your action, and that is usually part of an attempt to justify what you have done.

Put in this abstract way, it is hard to see what we mean by a reason, but it becomes clearer when we consider particular examples. 'Why did you get up from your chair?' 'To make a cup of tea.' That is a reason. Having a reason for doing something is not the same as being subject to a purely internal impulse. If your arm moves because of a bodily spasm, there may be a medical explanation for that event, but you personally did not have a reason for moving your arm.

If you think you have a reason for doing something, that entails having a certain kind of feeling, namely *the feeling that others might understand why you are acting in the way you have decided to act*. Reasons are informed by values, ideals, beliefs, emotional states, objective facts, and every other kind of human understanding, as any kind of understanding (or misunderstanding) might help to explain or justify our acts. For example, if a doctor recommends a

course of treatment, they generally have good reasons for making that particular suggestion. The diagnostic tests they have performed, and the outcomes of medical trials, are relevant, reason-giving facts, and in presenting their reasons for deciding on a particular course of treatment, the doctor should be able to make their decision understandable.

Now imagine asking why someone is playing the guitar. 'I love making music' is a perfectly good reason, and if you share the sense that making music is worthwhile, you have no difficulty understanding why they are acting as they do. The person might also say 'Playing the guitar helps me pick up women', which is another, understandable reason, and we can accept both of these reasons simultaneously. Sometimes our actions are a means to an end, and other times they are valued in and of themselves. In either case, our hopes, desires, and sense of purpose are all relevant, so the process

of formulating and sharing our reasons is expressive of our inner life.

When we talk about someone's reasons, we aim to capture the notion of decision and choice, both of which are central to our understanding of ourselves and others. Hence it is part of the grammar, or logic, of the word 'reason' that the agent who acts is an authority on their reasons for acting as they do. That is simply because in most cases, our interest is in the person's own account of his or her actions. Even if they are deeply confused, such an account is revealing.

When a person gives a reason, we are not obliged to accept it uncritically. We can utilise many resources in judging each other's reasons, and we often think of reasons that *ought* to guide how people act. However, when a person gives a reason for their own, particular actions, they are rarely presenting anything independent from themselves. Reasons don't state themselves, and we do not look inside ourselves and report on the reason,

as a reason is not an internal object. People have psychological depth, and we can change our view of our own reasons, but that is not because there is a 'real reason' hiding inside us. If a statement of our reasons feels authentic and expressive, those qualities may be the very traits that we should look for. Like expressions of emotion, an account of our own reasons can be confused or insincere, but we cannot make a mistake in the way that we can make a mistake about the cause of an event.

Reasons, and explicit statements of those reasons, can be judged in many ways, not just by whether they are expressive or sincere. Sometimes we have excellent grounds for judging one way or another, but unlike facts (which are states of affairs that make a statement true), reasons are always a deeply human affair. Hence when we understand a doctor's reasons for suggesting a particular course of treatment, the important thing is to grasp an objective body of facts, but in

general, we depend on truthfulness and sincerity in assessing the reasons that people give. Even in the case of a doctor giving good advice, our feelings, values and sense of purpose are relevant in some sense. The doctor's aim or purpose ought to be the well-being of the patient, but knowing that is the case does not put an end to our thirst to understand. If our doctor was being absurdly thorough in stating their reasons for acting as they do, they might say 'I have evidence that this is the most effective treatment, and I want to see you get better,' but they might also say 'I have evidence that this is the most effective treatment, and I would feel guilty suggesting anything else.' There is a difference between these reasons, even if the patient does not, and should not, care.

Although we are the most important suppliers of reasons when it comes to our own acts, it would be wrong to suggest that each of us is on our own when it comes to giving reasons. After all, it matters that our reasons can be judged,



and that involves culture, discussion and agreement. For example, imagine a woman shaving her legs. Perhaps she has a date that night, and doesn't want to be seen with hairy legs. Perhaps shaving her legs is a sensual pleasure, and again, we might see that as a good reason for acting as she does, whether or not anyone else will see her legs. We might also point out that children are hairless and relatively powerless, and it is telling that our culture views hairlessness as an attractive feature in a woman. Indeed, we may take that observation as a reason to refrain from shaving. Also note that if someone from a very different culture observed our shaving woman, they may be baffled as to what she is doing, just as we might be baffled if we saw someone from Vanuatu binding their child's head to a stone. Crucially, this kind of bafflement is not a matter of failing to understand a *causal* relationship.

When we are calculating the most efficient means for achieving a particular

goal, that desired result is part of our reason for acting as we do. Hence 'I want to smash that window' is a reason for throwing a stone. But not all of our actions are exercises in working out the best way to move towards a deliberate goal, and our understanding of good reasons is not the same thing as our understanding of valid, instrumental decision making. We understand the reason why someone looks at a sunset, but that is not because we know that looking at sunsets achieves a particular result. It is also worth noting that reasons can run out: I can give no further reasons for acting as I do. Causes, on the other hand, form an infinite chain, as each event is caused by events, and those events cause further events in turn.

Human beings are intensely social, and as social agents we become accustomed to having our actions guided by speech, and the mutual recognition of good reasons. Hence we understand the reason why someone shaves their legs, or

why someone goes to work in the morning. In this way relatively stable patterns of social order begin to form that do not depend directly on credible threats of punishment, on shared religious traditions, or antecedent moral values, though each of those things can help to establish ways of acting, and ways of giving reasons why we act.

So how should we approach psychological explanations for acting as we do? We are not obliged to believe there must be something hidden inside me, that makes my life one way and not another. However, that is not to deny the possibility of explaining our behaviour by making statements about our temperament or character. There is, after all, a big difference between kicking a stone and kicking a dog. If you kick a stone, what happens is largely a consequence of how hard you kick. It really doesn't matter what happened to the stone last week, last year, or any other time. But if you kick a dog, it matters very

much if it has been trained to fight, or if it's a well-trained pet. That is not because of any weird, non-physical effects, it is just that dogs, robots and people are complicated enough to have an internal organization that depends on the circumstances or experience of the past.

The behaviour of people does not just depend on their current situation. What happened in the past has left a trace. Furthermore, we are not born as a blank slate. Just as some dogs are easy to train, and others are not, each person is born with a temperament. We need to live in the world to develop a character, but the differences between siblings clearly show that even if we are subject to the same kind of family life, some people will find certain habits easy to pick up, while others learn to behave in quite a different manner. Some people are shy, while others are outgoing, and although those tendencies can be exacerbated by the way that we are treated, it would be

strange to insist that formative experiences are the *only* relevant factor.

Just as we can explain the breaking of glass by saying that glass is brittle, it is an explanation of sorts when we say that someone is shouting because they are quick to anger. If you didn't know that the person in question often gets angry, you might be worried that something serious had happened, when in fact their shouting is a frequent occurrence, that will soon be forgotten. Note that saying that a person is quick to anger is not a *causal* explanation of why they are shouting, any more than saying that glass is brittle is a causal explanation of why a glass has smashed.

In both cases we are simply pointing out a general pattern or tendency: glass things tend to break when you drop them or hit them with stones, and the person in question often shouts and shakes their fist. If we know these things, then we can predict how the glass, or the angry person, are likely to react in

certain kinds of situation. But the brittleness of glass is not the thing that caused the glass to break, nor is it quite right to say that the person's fit of pique is caused by their short temper. It is rather that *because* the person suffers from fits of pique, we are justified in saying that they have a short temper. Hence we can characterise people, and anticipate their behaviour, but we are confused if we treat that characterisation as if it were a hidden causal mechanism, and not merely a way of talking about the behaviour we can see.

Giving reasons, and evaluating the reasons of others, involves countless capabilities, including those that could only arise within a cultural context. For example, if live in a culture where the value of music is taken for granted, it is easy to see that the love of music is a reason to play the guitar. But if I am raised by a community that is blind to the value of music, I may struggle to see, or say, why I am drawn to make music. More generally, it is misleading to imagine

that our understanding of reasons can ever be value neutral. For when we talk about people and the situations they are in, we cannot help but be partial: looking at things from a perspective that makes most sense to some community or other. In the words of George Christoph Lichtenberg in *Aphorisms*, “*All impartiality is artificial. Man is always partial and quite right to be so. Even impartiality is partial. He belonged to the party of the impartial.*”

That is not to say that when someone claims to be impartial, they are always lying or deluded. We can be more or less partial, strongly favouring one person or community over another, or acting like we haven't taken sides. Indeed, the very notion of legal or moral rules, that ought to apply to everyone, depends on our ability to consider descriptions of events in a person-blind manner, where we do not know, or pretend not to know, who the facts concern. We should also remember that adopting a person-blind

stance is not the only way that we can earn membership of the party of the impartial. In particular, therapists attend to people, in all their specificity, and their discipline does not consist in acting as though they were listening to just anyone. What makes a therapist relatively impartial is the effort they make to suspend judgement, and the way they refrain from policing the truth or falsity of what is said, in order to give space for the patient to see the qualities of their own, communicative acts. Nevertheless, a therapist could not see or understand other people if they were deprived of the abilities that we use in deciding which people, and which communities, we would like to claim as our own.

We are not disinterested spectators, and when we engage with the process of perception, we are aware that evaluative language provides an apt description. People and places can be friendly or threatening, and the words that we use to describe our situation

tends to suggest an appropriate attitude towards the thing in question. After all, the world that we see is the world that we must live in. Hence the words that spring to mind when we talk about a person are often complements or insults, such as brave, stupid, considerate or cruel. We can delay judgement, but the valued or loathsome qualities we perceive are present from the start, and not some kind of conclusion that we reach after we have conducted the business of seeing what there is.

In short, knowledge can be organised into a conceptual scheme, but understanding takes place in a context. We may have reasons for pretending that our understanding of human nature flows from a knowable, sharable conceptual scheme (as is the case in science), for such schemes have uses, and carry cultural authority. However, when our concern is the actual, daily life of someone who should speak for themselves, it is misguided to believe that our model of

understanding should be one that is impersonal, impartial and objective. Although those traits may be desirable in some general sense, our ability to make sense of personal realities is profoundly partial in every sense of that word, and it is wrong to pretend otherwise.

## PHOTOGRAPHS









**FOR JOHN**  
**IAN MCMILLAN**

The day of my first supervision session, I got lost on the way and somehow ended up on Hampstead Heath. When I told John, he smiled and said 'It's not my cup of tea' and in that moment, I felt heard and accepted.

Fast forward to the session when I arrived and John said he had something to tell me. I felt an excitement – John never told me anything. But then he told me he was dying. I was in shock and asked if he would still see me. He said 'I look forward to seeing you.' I could see he was in pain but felt that it was his way of letting me know he wanted to be there for me, even though he knew he wouldn't be able to do that in person.

I remembered my father, at my sister's wedding after I had come out. 'I know your type', he had said, and I had felt the force of his disdain, his non-acceptance. When I told my father I was gay, he had said 'I don't care where you

came from and I don't care where you go.' A reference to my having been adopted. I was rejected and despised for being honest about who I am. And I now reflect on how different that was from John's first comment, on his doorstep. In that moment, I had felt accepted and welcome, despite our differences. It is only now that I fully realise the depth of that gift he gave me that day. A replacement for the rejecting and judgemental father. It was as if, in that moment, John had recognised the damage that had left me feeling at that time like 'an erased boy'.

When I began my training at the PA, I was terrified of being labelled and pathologised. It was there that I first met John.

Years later after I qualified I worked as a PA house therapist and felt I found a place in the community, with John as my guide. I served my

apprenticeship with him and became increasingly aware of feeling that I could take anything to him. It felt different to any other relationship I had had – I experienced acceptance. Encouragement. Love? I grew as an individual and a therapist.

Work felt empty after John died. But then I began to remember what I had experienced in the room with him. His warmth, above all. I realised that I had lost the warmth in my heart. That was what had been missing in my life before. Warmth in my heart. Now I feel I am not erased. I have a place in the world. When I think of John, I feel 'It'll be ok' – he didn't say a lot but I felt his attentiveness. I felt his message of 'I'm going to be there for you.'

It never felt like a 'tick box exercise' in sessions with John, I felt his passion and interest in the work. 'It's the relationship', he used to say, and I want to

say 'John, you gave me the chance, I want you to be proud of me.' I wanted him to enjoy the experience, as he had shown me. I didn't want him to feel invisible but know that he mattered. We spent twenty years in each other's lives and I was completely in it, in the most intimate way one can be. I felt we connected as people, irrespective of the professional relationship.

John once said that I reminded him of RD Laing. I like to think that if John and I had been training together, we would have been allies ... I felt I would have been in his 'gang'.

What I liked most about John was how he seemed very kind-hearted, gentle, yet in his quietness and shyness, he could be very clear – a kind of masculinity I'd not encountered before – playful, strong but not macho. I liked it that sometimes he swore!

He sometimes let a glimpse of the angry young man out and would get very animated and passionate – he wasn't afraid to voice his opinions, even if they



were not universally popular.

That said, at first I also found him frustrating. I wished he'd say more! He never told me anything but always encouraged me to think. He was never directive and I felt he was always helping me to think for myself and to find my own way. But I did wish he would tell me something. And yet the one time when he told me something, that he was going to die ... that was the one thing I wished he hadn't had to tell me.

As I think back over our relationship, I am aware how much I wanted to be his student and in allowing me to take that role he was able to help me believe in myself. Perhaps he saw something of himself in me? Both anti-establishment. Both, in our own ways, on the periphery but not on the outside. I have learned since that John argued for me to be given a place on the PA training, in doing so he remembered a Professor at Cambridge, who interviewed him after getting thrown out of school ... a man credited with being a good judge of 'those

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who were still rather wild but not wicked'.

Over time, I have come to feel that the PA is my home – I arrived feeling right out on the margins of society but now feel that I have found my clan. I can finally say that I am quite happy with who I am and where I am in life and I feel so fortunate to have served my apprenticeship with John.

I never got the chance to reflect back to John what he gave me. Yet, nearly two years on I realise that it is a desire to try to share with others, the experience that John gave to me.

The age-old cycle of life – the mentor takes on the apprentice, who in turn becomes the mentor. And so, the artisan crafts are shared, passed on from one generation to the next, preserving the ancient essence of what it is to be a person.

