

## Argument for psychotherapy

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**Abstract:** The soul hurts, too! It also crouches in the mother's womb when surrounded by the danger causing terrible fear. It can also joyfully dance on Earth, among clouds or stars when... But what is the soul? We are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we still cannot brag that we know a great deal about it. However, the purpose in the following lines is not to provide an answer to the question "What is the soul?" Their goal is to draw attention on the fact that we do have it, that we do not know it and that – most of the times – we have no clue what it really wants. And, precisely because we do not really know how to treat it, I wish to argue that we can always find a support in a psychotherapist. Such specialist – if gifted – can add the word art to the science status of psychotherapy.

**Keywords:** psychotherapeutic relation, fears, humanism

Concerning the social essence of the human *psyche*, a consensus has been reached, which happens very rarely concerning other aspect of the soul construct. Religion has a clear viewpoint. "It is not good for man to be alone!" (Genesis 18, 2); and if God says "it is not *good*", that means man cannot live by himself.

Philosophy doesn't contradict this aspect. Aristotle basically said the same thing by defining the man as "zoon politikon", an essentially social being. Science – psychology, sociology, history, etc – confirms that, if born and raised without social contact, we cannot reach our true potential and we would remain simple beings, without what we like to call reason (Heatherston et al. 2004; Leahy 2012). And, whereas it is more that obvious that we cannot live without the others, we should become aware that our deeds, our emotions and the experiences we express through language are assessed and judged every instant by the people around us, either close to us or not.

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Thus, we are born and we die as social beings, surrounded and accompanied by the others. However, from among all social relations burgeoning between us and the others, I have chosen to write about one that is extremely complex and controversial: the psychotherapeutic relationship. And, among all those who can or may have a role in our lives, I will be writing about the psychotherapist and the particularities of the psychological field guiding his interventions, i.e. psychotherapy. The reason why I felt like this was necessary is the abundance of misconceptions related to the psychotherapist's status, to the legitimacy of psychotherapy as a science and to the social importance of the psychotherapeutic relationship. It is true that – since the 19<sup>th</sup> century – we have benefitted from a science of the soul, after Wundt defied the influential philosopher Kant, who had stated that the human soul could not be the object of a science. Wundt did not just found a science, but he also created a research space, i.e. the laboratory in Leipzig. Furthermore, he trained a small army of researches who went on to become zealous missionaries, disseminating on all continents the new pragmatic and objective approach to the soul. Nonetheless, the status of psychology as a science is still a hard pill to swallow, and the field of psychotherapy has the “privilege” of serious negationists on the inside.

I will argue, as follows, that many of the controversies and contestations derive from a series of misunderstandings, triggered – in their turn – by a set of fears. Such fears are explicable, but they make it harder or even impossible to get to a psychotherapist. My aim is, by naming them, to chase away as many of them as possible.

A first important cause for avoiding to consult a psychotherapist is the fear of pain. I was saying that soul has its pains, and the fear of pain may determine us to avoid seeing a psychotherapist, for fear of exacerbating it. Given that pain is the only sensation to which we cannot adapt, the only one escaping the rules of desensitisation, as long as we have an illness, we can be pretty sure that pain is present.

At this point, the easiest way is to compare psychotherapy to medicine and a psychotherapist with the physician. And the soul should be compared here with the body; mental disorder with physical illness. Often, psychotherapy likes to be defined as a border field between psychology and medicine because a psychotherapist uses scientific knowledge and methods; sets diagnoses; prescribes treatment regimens that are meant to treat symptoms in order to alleviate or even to eliminate them (Butler & Strupp 1986). However, because

psychotherapy is defined as therapy through word, this comparison becomes rather bold, because medicine does not agree to it. This led to the emergence of psychiatry – a medical field treating the soul – using medication as for the body, because they target dysfunctions of an important component of the human body: the brain, responsible for the soul functioning well or getting sick.

Then, why go to a psychotherapist? If you suffer from mental illness, you go to a psychiatrist and if you do not, then a psychotherapist is all the more useless. This is actually the main argument use by people when – for various reasons – they are advised to see a psychotherapist. “I’m not going to any psychologist! I’m not crazy!”

But, as paradoxical as it may sound, only a small part of a psychotherapist’s clients displays symptoms of a mental illness, so you don’t have to be crazy to see a psychologist. And, no matter how many similarities we may search and find, psychotherapy is not medicine. For this reason, in serious cases, the collaboration with a psychiatrist becomes imperious. Illness is a state of extreme imbalance, a state where all bodily and spiritual defence mechanisms are overcome. Only in such cases, a psychotherapist admits that medication may become necessary, though medication is generally an invasive treatment that a psychotherapist instinctively avoids.

Another fear – as serious as that of pain – is the fear of the unknown. We often use a mirror to know our body and I know that, in some cases, we get upset with it for showing an extra wrinkle, a wart or zits. For the body – this “prison for the soul”, as the ancient Greeks considered it – we do a lot more than we do for the soul. We diet; we go to the gym; we take it regularly to a physician. And one of the most important things is that we have several mirrors for it: in bathrooms, in hallways, in rooms...

But what mirror do we use to understand the soul? How do we know if it is beautiful or not? Is our own assessment enough? We do not want to admit that we are afraid! Terribly afraid of what we may find within us, where our look had never got before. Like Snow White’s stepmother, we are terrified that the mirror will tell us we are nothing like what we love to think about ourselves; that our soul is anything but beautiful.

A psychotherapist is – before attempting to make any intervention – a mirror. He may show us dysfunctional aspects of our soul, which we cannot see ourselves. Pursuant to his expertise and training, he must

and can do this in a correct and objective way. We can definitely not be an objective mirror for our own soul because – irrespective of our knowledge and experience – we also have defence mechanisms protecting our self-image and distorting it too much, generally by making it more positive.

And, because it is not enough to know that we need a mirror, but I highlight that we need an objective mirror, no matter how much we would like it, our mother cannot be our therapists. She is the person we hold dearest, but in her eyes, we are often the most beautiful, the best and, as such, she protects us unconditionally, even when this does more bad than good. A therapist is not our mother! He is not bound to protect me under any circumstances; he has to have the power and knowledge of performing spiritual surgery when necessary. If such is the case, he must show that flaws that our mother tends to hide.

It is also worth pointing out that the therapist-mirror fulfils his mission through words. This is thought to be the most vulnerable point of psychotherapy. Regular people and more find it hard to believe in the healing power of words. Even though thousands of writings state that we hold immense powers due exclusively to the use of words: they heal or they make sick; they order or they flatter; they create or they destroy; they caress or they punch; they make and unmake; they kill or resurrect. On an extreme note, ancient people believed in these powers. “Just say the word and it will be done”: the centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant using only words. The same Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”, thus using word for the miracle of resurrection.

Nowadays – whereas the evidence from the field of scientific psychological research confirming the essential role of language and thought is overwhelming – lack of trust in the psychotherapist’s power of healing through words seems to evolve in a reversely proportional manner. It is true that words may also have side effects, especially if they are inadequate or spoken in vain without abilities, but such possible side effects are incomparable to those of drugs that are excessively or misused. I believe it is no coincidence that psychoanalysis emerged with the important contribution of Breuer’s patient, known as Anna O., who defined the psychotherapy sessions she attended as “my verbal round of treatment” (Freud 2010).

To the fear of the unknown, we may add an aggravating factor, namely the fear of change, joining our fear of pain and of the unknown. Out of all our behaviours, 99% are automatic acts, either

simple acts or complex rituals, as stated by renowned cognitivist psychologists (Barg 1997). Thus, our awareness states are rather rare, energy-consuming, reason for which we are tempted to make economy and to use the “automatic pilot” for the spiritual activity.

It is well known that the purpose of thought, reason, conscience, is to solve our problems, and the proper tool for it is language. Or, a psychotherapist invites to meditation, to involvement for eliminating cognitively the dysfunctional automatisms, to a revisiting of personal development strategies. He/She invites to change. But any change can be painful and, automatically, fear emerges, which gives us immediately the impulse of running from the problem or of avoiding/ignoring it. It is more comfortable to be led by old habits, even if they are wrong and inefficient, rather than making the colossal effort of making the agents of our own change.

To the array of fears related to psychotherapy that I have listed so far, I must add the justified fear of social judgments, of moral judgments, but we pretend not to know that a psychotherapist is not allowed to make such judgments. He must reflect correctly the issues blocking or preventing the client’s personal development, but he may not judge from a social and moral perspective. A mirror shows your flaws without judging them. Several centuries ago, if you committed a serious error before the community and you were prosecuted to pay for it, the only place you could go to escape their anger and to hope to get away with what you did was the sanctuary, a holy place where you were protected by the gods and where man was not the master. What many people fearing psychotherapy fail to understand is that nowadays, a psychotherapist’s office may be considered such a sanctuary where your problems – regardless of their nature – are protected by client privilege, and the psychotherapist becomes some sort of alter-ego seeking together not only ways to solve the problem, but also positive spiritual evolution paths.

I believe I am not wrong to say that the main target of psychotherapy is not illness, but crises of growth. Throughout the years, we go through various stages of mental development, each stage with its own characteristics, described thoroughly and explained by scientific psychology. Hence, a parent may see a psychologist, eager to find out how to understand his four-year-old, who always talks to his imaginary friend around the house. Another person may want to understand why his teenage son is overly shy all the time and then, suddenly, engage in acts of bravado that may bring great prejudice. We

would prescribe medication without any problem, but with all due respect for medicine or psychiatry research, I have never heard of an anti-divorce pill or of a medication regulating the relationship between parents and children, the parents and their teenage children, or dysfunctional professional relations. Not even for the onset of panic attacks or for phobias, one cannot rely on medication, but we must seek the help of a psychotherapist.

Together with the humanist psychologists, we believe that the goal of psychotherapy is not to diagnose and cure the past, but to find ways to retrieve the self from the future by reconstructing the present. And, because psychologists are cautious when it comes to using the word “happiness”, we will be using the phrase “subjective well-being” to name the state of balance towards which we guide our clients.

“Nobody teaches anybody anything” Carl Rogers (1995) stated at a certain point, thus disappointing the pedagogues and psychologists attending a conference, thus stirring vehement reactions. But, under the influence of the existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard, Carl Rogers only used those words to point out that – without the involvement of the apprentice, the disciple, the client – there is no learning and change. A mirror is useless and cannot tell anything if you are blind and do nothing about it.

I want to be clear: As the authentic philosophers – who do not see themselves as wise, but as persons seeking wisdom – a psychotherapist cannot see himself as all-knowing, but as a being seeking the state of balance and self-knowledge, based on curiosity, on the wish for knowledge and self-knowledge, on experience and, not least, on permanent use of new and reliable information provided by a science of psychology in full bloom. This permanent desire for self-knowledge and evolution keeps the soul alive and allows it to be a mirror and an inspiration for another soul that is still looking for balance. In the therapeutic relationship, you never know ‘who gives and who receives’.

Finally, I will attempt to provide an answer to another question blocking many of those who wish to develop themselves: where do we find a good psychotherapist? The answer hereof is simple. As in case of a confessor or a teacher, a good psychotherapist is to be searched. Reaching perfect compatibility and empathy is not a guarantee from anyone. One thing is for sure and I only paraphrase known truths here: you have to get the courage to knock for the door to be opened; you have to be open to searching in order to find out!

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