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Psychotherapy and the White Dodo*

The Dodo is now extinct, victim of an inability to adapt to an increasingly hostile environment. This article argues that psychotherapy needs to react to concerns about its efficacy, uniqueness and potential harm if it is to avoid a similar fate.

Key words: psychotherapy, research, efficacy

> There is … a great fowl of the bignesse of a Turkie, very fat, and so short-winged they cannot flie, being white, and in a manner tame; and so are all the other fowles, as having not been troubled or feared with shot (Tatton, 1625).

This, the White Dodo of the Indian Ocean island of Réunion, seems to have outlasted its better known Mauritian relative by a few decades – though why isn't clear; at least the regular dodo had a reasonable turn of speed, while the Whites, in the only other contemporary account, ' … were so fat they could scarcely walk, for when they walked their belly dragged along the ground' (van Hoorn, 1646). Pictorial evidence is no richer. A couple of crude but vigorous woodcuts by anonymous mariners and an aquarelle of around 1684 by one Pieter Withoos: the last having an improbable assortment of birds in a would-be naturalistic setting – the White Dodo peers out from behind a Siberian goose, with an expression of inane amiability that calls to mind early learning play materials, or the bombed out Arnold Ridley character in *Dad's Army*.

In fact the evidence is so scanty that dodologists disagree on whether the White Dodo and the Réunion Solitaire, which appears in the woodcuts as a scrawny creature with a distinctly evil look in its eye, were different species or – in parallel with the Mauritian Dodo, whose outline changed according to the state of moult and availability of food – were the same bird before and after lunch.

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Interestingly, by the way, they – the dodologists – feel obliged to take up one or other position on the matter, Hachisuka and Rothschild going for the two-species theory, Oudemans for dodo-solitaire identity (Hachisuka, 1953). Perhaps it is impossible to resist Gestalt closure, however meagre and deteriorated that data array; or maybe sciences take on the characteristics of their subject matter, like owners their dogs (witness the superhuman loopiness of theoretical physics, the fascinated rummaging of the sexologists): dodology, anyway, has definite dodoesque qualities, not least a kind of speculatory bloatedness that threatens to overwhelm its evidential skeleton.

But I digress. This is the story, more or less.

A few pigeons, lost or storm-blown or seized by an adventuring spirit, stray a thousand miles or so from their African home and land in paradise. There, endlessly gorging beneath the hawkless trees and through the catless, snakeless undergrowth, they have no need for flight or caution. Their wings shrivel down to neat little stumps, giving the bird a fussy, bourgeois appearance, like a dumpy matron with two handbags. Maybe the males engage in Sumo-like tussles; maybe the selective pressure is to out-eat your neighbour so you can better survive the resulting famine. Anyhow, they get fat.

Eight million years later a ship comes up.

It drops off a couple of pigs, whose descendants, it is hoped, will provision future voyages. The bosun is weary of the pregnant ship's cat – it winds round his legs all day, mangy with malnutrition from a diet of ship's biscuit, begging incessantly for food – but being too soft-hearted to lob it over the side, he leaves it on the beach, miaowing at the disappearing longboat. Half the ship's rats, sniffing the offshore breeze, exchange speculative glances and arrange their own landing.

With nothing to obscure the mathematics of exponential growth (the cats having easier prey) the semi-circular growing-edge of the rat colony rolls across the island. In a dozen generations it hits the opposite shore; in another dozen the backwash has percolated up into the remotest valleys. Some of the birds have enough of the old hard-winged predispositions left to keep an eye on their eggs and newly hatched squabs, and to lunge ponderously at any rats that get too near; they, if their waddling half-grown survive the cats, hold out just long enough to be hit by the pig explosion.

The moral? Don't avoid your enemies, unless you can avoid them forever. The White Dodo should have been looking down on the Siberian goose from a tree, elegantly preening its snowy primaries, clean-lined, swift-winged, alert – retaining the shape given it by its would-be destroyers, which in turn are shaped by their prey (what would a cheetah be, if gazelles were aardvarks?). Alas, its incomparably predator-ridden African homeland was lost to it; free of enemies, it was doomed.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy waddles, bloated with self-congratulation, through a benign undergrowth of conferences, workshops, consulting rooms, congenial journals, its strongest characteristic if not its defining expression one of inane amiability. Occasional Sumo-like struggles take place between competing schools, but conflict is generally dealt with by the antagonists flouncing off and having nothing more to do with each other; so islands and islands-within-islands proliferate, each careful that nothing disagreeable crosses the few interconnecting causeways of dialogue. The biggest island holds the marshes of eclecticism, cloaked in a warm fog, where all who have taken an oath of vegetarianism, and had their teeth surgically blunted, are free to wallow in the mud between the languid tussocks.

Safe, it seems. Far off, the eagle of rigour, the weasels of doubt. The owl of cynicism, hooting with disbelief. The logical hyena, whose jaws crush bones, cackling at every blithe non-sequitur. The creatures here are more congenial: the wombat of complacency, the lemming of hopeful enthusiasm. 'The figures fail to support the hypothesis that psychotherapy facilitates recovery from neurotic disorder' (Eysenck, 1952). 'The only wise course with respect to such a challenge is to ignore it' (Sanford, 1953).

Okay, okay, it hasn't been quite like that. Psychotherapy's best brains have been pitted, etc. An ever-growing accumulation of research data. Smith and Glass, 1977 and years thereafter. Psychotherapy works. In fact *all* the varieties of psychotherapy work … hey wow we chorus, non-competitiveness and pluralism vindicated: let's share some hugs, and then maybe a circle dance …

But not so fast, says the weasel. That 'Dodo bird verdict' (Luborsky et al., 1975) – felicitously so named – 'everyone has won and all must have prizes': isn't there a catch? Indeed, does the psychotherapeutic community's celebration of that result not show up an unnerving intellectual sogginess? Eysenck (inevitably; 1992) argues that, '… if different forms of treatment based on different theories have the same effect, then all these theories must be wrong', and only by the most energetic squirming can the craft avoid being impaled on his kindergarten logic. Three interconnected modes of escape offer themselves:

1. The amusing but implausibly remote possibility that the theories in question are all part-truths of identical validity, so taking equal-sized slices of the therapeutic variance (if that were the case, of course, any form of eclecticism ought to outshine any 'pure' therapy – an unlikely one-up for pluralism);
2. A more sophisticated version of the same – that given the crudity of our conceptual schema, and the (literally) unthinkable complexity of the interactive flux of which psychotherapy and all other human engagements are composed, it may be that the different schools of psychotherapy are in some, at present, ungraspable sense saying the

same thing, and the methods derived from them are doing the same thing;

3. A simplistic and reductionist derivation of (2) is that there might still be some single efficacious nugget or non-specific factor in all psychotherapies – Hanna and Puhakka's (1991) 'resolute perception' of repressed or otherwise warded-off material might be a plausible candidate.

Unless one or other of these somewhat ramshackle manoeuvres can be satisfactorily firmed up, the 'Dodo bird' ('everything works') scenario points very firmly towards a more familiar bunch of non-specific factors: sensitive listening, non-judgmental, encouragement, the ventilation of feeling, and so on. Fine by me, the exclamation resounds – what's so bad about all that?

This. 'Psychotherapy' – it rolls off the tongue; a term with rhetorical leverage, with a big fat claim in it. Of what? Of healing – of quasi-medical skill engendering quasi-medical benefit, of techniques that get results. It might not be unreasonable to propose that the survival of the enterprise, in its current breadth and vigour, and in both its mainstream and alternative branches, depends crucially on just that rhetorical leverage. 'What we do doesn't actually work, in the sense you might expect, but we're jolly good at sensitive listening, encouragement …': try it on BUPA, or a posse of fund-holding GPs in suits – or on some poor right-on scraping along on benefit in the alternative ghetto and making a do-or-die, once-and-for-all attempt to sort her/himself out. (Perhaps I should confess that, like most therapists, I have no doubt that important and uncommon things happen in psychotherapy, that are not explicable in terms of non-specifics or of cognitive-behavioural moves sifting in on the sly; though those 'effects', psychotherapy's real value, lie beyond the quasi-medical, consumerist rhetoric the enterprise has saddled itself with. It makes a difference but not that kind of difference.)

Uncomfortable as it might be, the strong suggestion that psychotherapy doesn't actually work, in the sense its practitioners' various paymasters might reasonably suppose it to, is not its only problem, maybe not even its biggest one.

For whatever doubts there might be about psychotherapy's capacity to do good there can be none about the damage done in its name, or through its exploitative misuse. Jeffrey Masson (1988), of course, goes further, arguing with remorseless documentation that the whole activity is *intrinsically* abusive. His case beats down one's resistance by the sheer cumulative weight of the horrors he recounts (despite, I think, some dodgy logic: for 'psychotherapy' read 'fire' – no catalogue of burns victims adds up to an argument that the stuff should be done away with). At what depth, and with what level of candour, is that case being answered? Is not a major and purgative collective examination of conscience called for, into the insidious way denigration and contempt seep up into therapeutic confrontation, into the way the warm hand of empathy, having

rested reassuringly a while on the young female client's shoulder, is so inclined to slip downward inch by inch? (And for every piece of honest wickedness there is surely a host of micro-abuses, of sneaky little encroachments and belittlings deftly camouflaged and folded into the therapeutic mix.) That examination of conscience doesn't seem to be happening; though of course there has been no lack of damage limitation, psychotherapy again distancing rather than engaging in the face of attack – the game-plan, it would appear, is cover your arse, and then call for more therapy (e.g., Sonne and Pope, 1991; Strean, 1993).

Staying on the themes of effectiveness and abuse, by the way, how is it (as Masson points out) that an enterprise whose *raison d'être* consists largely in helping people with their secrets should for so long have missed the biggest, dirties secret of all – the prevalence of child sexual abuse? More than missed it, actively connived in its suppression? And only have started to acknowledge it – and then, of course, to claim it as an area of special, profitable expertise – once the Women's Movement had rubbed it in our faces?

Other questions hover, buzzard-like. Few common threads run through all schools of psychotherapy – indeed the practices covered by the term are so diverse and so weakly related that one of the biggest question-marks hangs over the coherence of the concept itself; using a single term to cover those practices would have the consumer protection people running if you tried it with anything less abstruse. But one common thread is this: all schools assume, explicitly or implicitly, that at least in some circumstances – once our defences have been rolled back, say – we have direct access to what is going on in us, to our emotions, intentions, thoughts (I cite some chapter and verse elsewhere, see King-Spooner, 1990, p.19). It is difficult to imagine a form of therapy where that assumption was ruled out – in which the answers to 'How do you feel?', 'What are you thinking?', could *never* conceivably be given credence in the usual sense, so that not only did the notion of veracity lose its anchorage but so also did that of dissimulation in all its witting and unwitting modes.

But the notion of such introspective access is dauntingly problematic. There is overwhelming evidence that we are often blithely unaware of why we behave in certain ways – evidence that owes nothing to any theory of ego-defence, and a great deal to behaviouristic social psychology (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). The debate over introspective access has tumbled through the pages of *Psychological Bulletin* and elsewhere for a good few years (e.g., Smith and Miller, 1978; White, 1980, 1988), while in philosophy our commonsense version of the idea has been pretty well cut to pieces (Lyons, 1986). And psychotherapy? How have we been handling the news that one of our foundational premises might turn out to be made of nought? Have whole issues of our journals been given over to the struggle, conferences anxiously convened? Or have we stepped over the whole tiresomely theoretical issue, either in naïve oblivion or with a self-admiring sneer, like a school refuser stepping over an algebra textbook? David Smail, who sees and raises Nisbett and Wilson (Smail, 1984, pp. 65–6) is, characteristically, an exception underlining the rule.

Soaring rather higher on the thermals, perhaps, but with a keen and baleful eye, there is a more recondite consideration. From a social constructionist standpoint, psychotherapy can look like an exercise in cultural vandalism: a blind, virus-like attack on a form of life – represented by the client, however uncomfortably, at the individual level – by an arrogant and deeply fraudulent cultural nihilism; or worse, perhaps, it can be seen as an expeditionary force in the relentless Californication of the world's cultures. Fanon (1967), according to Beveridge and Turnbull (1989, cited in Robertson, 1993) speaks of:

> processes in a relationship of national dependence which lead the native to doubt the worth and significance of inherited ways of life and embrace the styles and values of the coloniser … [It] is through the undermining of natives' self-belief and the disintegration of local identity that political control is secured – a process know as 'inferiorisation'.

One's automatic hand-wringing over the brutalities and inequities of rough working class life, for example; those characteristics are manifested within a (degenerating but still potent) matrix of conviviality and mutual interdependence utterly foreign to the yuppie nomads of the caring profession, whose missionary zeal sees no baby in the bathwater. (I don't claim that all missionary work is essentially malignant, that it gives people a chance the haul back from their cultural matrix is one of psychotherapy's virtues; but it is a virtue saturated with quiet violence, to be pursued cautiously and with sensitivity and regret.)

To repeat: the claim is that psychotherapy's characteristic response to these challenges is the dodoesque one of distancing rather than the more astringent but more foresighted one of engagement. To find support, and in the belief that *Changes* readers have a furtive longing for quantified evidence, I skimmed through all the copies of the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, the *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, and *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* from 1980, the year the second edition of Rachman and Wilson's *The Effects of Psychological Therapy* came out, to late 1993. A dullish penance, but not without its moments of amusement.

Here we go:

Total number of articles: 1857

Articles on outcome research and the question of effectiveness: 13 (0.7 per cent)

Articles discussing the issues of power and abuse: 14 (0.75 per cent)

Articles on the problematics of introspective self-knowledge: 0

Articles on therapeutic cultural vandalism: Ok, I'm joking.

Most of the 27 articles that look at the difficulties in question take, as anticipated, an essentially defensive line – the commonest technique, perhaps, being a cuttlefish-like generation of fog. The odd attempt is made (odd in every sense) to turn apparent difficulties to psychotherapy's advantage (Hynan, 1981). And while there are one or two tries at taking problems face-on they are exceptional, and anyway are limited in scope (Kisch and Kroll, 1980; Strasburger et al., 1992).

The review sections give the same picture. No review of Rachman and Wilson; none of Masson's *Against Therapy*. Five reviews of books which are downright 'anti' or ask seriously awkward questions (I'm afraid I didn't count the total, but it would probably be a hundred times that). The message is slightly ambivalent at one or two points, then, but on the whole we're talking dodo.

But so what, anyway? 'I can't believe that what I am doing isn't right, so I'll follow my intuition and let people who are into that kind of thing sort out the arguments – and if they don't too bad.' Hopeless. That shape on the horizon, it's getting bigger.

The White Dodo waddles back to her nest, crop bulging, eager to rejoin globular nestlings. But in their place there reclines a peculiar four-legged bird, preening its moth-eaten plumage and singing in a low vibratory monotone.

Picture it. One or two scandals, picked up by the tabloids, soul-searching in the *Guardian*. Investigative television: the producer tosses a coin, decides it's going to be an 'anti'. A few Tory rodents waving Masson or Rachman and Wilson in the House, 'cost-effectiveness, manifest superiority of other methods …'; Virginia Bottomley, the Surrey Puma: 'all Health Authorities are urged, pending a full inquiry …'. Psychotherapy could be scoured out of the NHS overnight.

Let us follow that one in. The Inquiry. Decidedly frosty climate; judge leading it an eagle-eyed gerontocrat, deep mistrust of anything beginning with 'psy', more than enough cortex left to laser through the outcome literature, leaving a smoking hole. Several 'sexual misconduct' victims, tears, the judge into fatherly mode: ' … just take your time m'dear …'; one doesn't make it, overdoses the night before, ' … our sympathies extended …' Then a Kleinian, giving a run-down on some background theory; a Jungian, a Reichian. Someone representing an eclectic-integrative-humanistic approach has to be helped from the stand after a tricky four hour cross-examination. A family therapist has difficulty in getting across the thinking behind her use of paradoxical injunction with a multi-problem family: ' … you mean you actually *told* them to … ?' And then the cognitive behavioural folk get a go, incisors gleaming.

The summing up. 'Evidence of damage … unproven value … money changing hands … climate of opinion … public needs to be protected … recommend legislation …'.

We end up operating like hedge priests, making stealthy visits to clients' homes in the guise of central heating mechanics, perhaps, or Liberal Democrat canvassers; estate agents in well-off, trendy areas start adding 'psychotherapist

hole' to the list of a property's attractions. *Changes* goes the way of *Pit Bull News*. Some exemplary sentencing, 'the rule of law … however well-intentioned …'; a new and guileful breed of tobacco baron emerges.

Love your enemies, you need them. The Spirit of the Age is a middle manager with an ulcer and a fraudulently bonhomious handshake. He – oh yes, it's *he* all right – is gradually, inexorably, working his way round all the departments, even the remotest. And when he arrives he'll be asking some pretty searching questions; and, as is the way when the SOA asks questions, the answers will need to be crisp and to the point.

'Can I bite some big pieces out of you please?' says the pig to the dodo, 'Because I'm feeling jolly hungry'.

'Hey, wow, have you got problems' says the dodo, 'hey, c'mon, let's talk about it'.

'Okay' says the pig, 'after dinner'.

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