

The Renewal of Humanism in Psychoanalytic Therapy

Robert D. Stolorow

Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis, Los Angeles, California

The renewal of humanistic values and practices in contemporary psychoanalytic therapy is exemplified vividly by the impact of Heidegger's existential philosophy on a psychoanalytic perspective called *post-Cartesian psychoanalysis*. This perspective is a *phenomenological-contextualist* one in which the focus of psychoanalytic inquiry is shifted from Cartesian isolated minds to ways of being-in-the-world, and from endogenously arising drive derivatives to relationally constituted emotional experiences. A phenomenological-contextualist approach is shown to be especially fruitful in the understanding of, and therapeutic approach to, emotional trauma. The establishment of a hospitable relational home in which traumatic emotional pain and excruciating existential vulnerability can find a context of human understanding in which they can be held is crucial for therapeutic transformation.

Keywords: being-in-the-world, contextualism, Heidegger, phenomenology, post-Cartesian psychoanalysis

The lucid courage for essential anxiety assures us the enigmatic possibility of experiencing Being. For close by essential anxiety as horror of the abyss dwells awe.

—Martin Heidegger (1943/1998, p. 234)

Phenomenological Contextualism

The renewal of humanistic values and practices in contemporary psychoanalytic therapy is exemplified vividly by the impact of existential philosophy on what I call *post-Cartesian psychoanalysis* (Stolorow, 2011), a psychoanalytic perspective that may be characterized as a *phenomenological contextualism*. It is phenomenological in that it investigates and illuminates organizations or worlds of emotional experience. It is contextual in that it holds that such organizations of emotional experience take form, both in early development and in the psychoanalytic situation, in constitutive relational or intersubjective contexts. Freud's psychoanalysis expanded the Cartesian mind to include a vast unconscious realm. Nonetheless, the Freudian mind remained a Cartesian mind, a self-enclosed mental apparatus containing and working over mental contents. A phenomenological contextualism, by contrast, concerns emotional experience and its organization, not reified mind entities, and it reunites the Cartesian mind with its world, its context.

Traditional Freudian theory is pervaded by the Cartesian "myth of the isolated mind" (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992). Descartes's (1641/1989) philosophy bifurcated the subjective world into inner and outer regions, severed both mind from body and cognition from affect, reified and absolutized the resulting divisions, and pictured the mind as an objective entity that takes its place among other objects, a "thinking thing" that has an inside with contents and that looks out on an external world from which it is essentially estranged. The Freudian psyche is fundamentally a Cartesian mind

in that it is a container of contents (instinctual energies, wishes, etc.), a "thinking thing" that, precisely because it is a thing, is ontologically decontextualized, fundamentally separated from its world.

Within philosophy, perhaps the most important challenge to Descartes's metaphysical dualism was mounted by Martin Heidegger (1927/1962), whose analysis of human existence provides philosophical grounding for phenomenological contextualism. Descartes's vision can be characterized as a decontextualization of both mind and world. Mind, the "thinking thing," is isolated from the world in which it dwells, just as the world is purged of all human significance. In his existential analytic, Heidegger sought to refine the unity of our being, split asunder in the Cartesian bifurcation. His ontological contextualism is made explicit in his "laying bare" the constitutive structure of our existence as a "being-in-the-world" (p. 65). The hyphens unifying the expression being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) indicate that the traditional ontological gap between our being and our world is to be definitively closed and that, in their indissoluble unity, our being and our world "primordially and constantly" (p. 65) contextualize one another. Heidegger's existential analytic unveils the basic structure of our being as a rich contextual whole, in which human being is saturated with the world in which we dwell, just as the world we inhabit is drenched in human meanings and purposes.

In light of this fundamental contextualization, Heidegger's consideration of affectivity is especially noteworthy. Heidegger's name for the existential ground of affectivity (feelings and moods) is *Befindlichkeit*, a term he invented to capture a basic dimension of human existence. Literally, the word might be translated as "how-one-finds-oneseif-ness." As Gendlin (1988) has pointed out, Heidegger's word for the structure of affectivity denotes both how one feels and the situation within which one is feeling, a felt sense of oneself in a situation, prior to a Cartesian split between inside and outside. *Befindlichkeit* is disclosive of our always already having been delivered over to the situatedness in which we find ourselves. For Heidegger, *Befindlichkeit*—disclosive affectivity—is a mode of being-in-the-world, profoundly embedded in constitutive context. Heidegger's concept underscores the exquisite context dependence and context sensitivity

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Robert D. Stolorow, PhD, 2444 Wilshire Boulevard, #624, Santa Monica, CA 90403. E-mail: robertdstolorow@gmail.com

of emotional experience—a context-embeddedness that takes on enormous importance in view of post-Cartesian psychoanalysis's placing of affectivity at the motivational center of human psychological life.

It is a central tenet of post-Cartesian psychoanalysis that a shift in psychoanalytic thinking from the motivational primacy of drive to the motivational primacy of affectivity moves psychoanalysis toward a phenomenological contextualism and a central focus on dynamic intersubjective systems. Unlike drives, which originate deep within the interior of a Cartesian isolated mind, affect—that is, subjective emotional experience—is something that from birth onward is constituted within ongoing relational systems. Therefore, locating affect at its motivational center automatically entails a radical contextualization of virtually all aspects of human psychological life. From a post-Cartesian perspective, the phenomena that traditionally have been central to psychoanalytic theory and practice—including trauma and pathogenesis, psychic conflict, dreams, unconsciousness, transference and resistance, and the therapeutic action of psychoanalytic interpretation—are all seen as taking form within systems of interacting, differently organized, mutually influencing emotional worlds.

Emotional Trauma

A phenomenological-contextualist approach has been especially fruitful in the understanding of, and therapeutic approach to, emotional trauma. Over the course of the two decades during which I have been investigating and writing about trauma, two interweaving central themes have crystallized. On one hand, painful emotional experiences become enduringly traumatic—that is, unendurable—in the absence of a “relational home” or context of human understanding in which they can be held and integrated. On the other hand, in virtue of our finitude and the finitude of all those we love, emotional trauma is built into the basic constitution of human existence.

I have contended (Stolorow, 2007) that the essence of emotional trauma lies in the shattering of what I call the “absolutisms of everyday life,” the system of illusory beliefs that allow us to function in the world, experienced as stable, predictable, and safe. Such shattering is a massive loss of innocence exposing the inescapable contingency of our existence on a universe that is chaotic and unpredictable and in which no safety or continuity of being can be assured. Emotional trauma brings us face to face with our existential vulnerability, plunging us into a form of what Heidegger (1927/1962) calls *authentic (owned) being-toward-death*, wherein death and loss are apprehended as distinctive possibilities that are constitutive of our very existence, of our intelligibility to ourselves in our futurity and finitude—possibilities that are both certain and indefinite as to their “when” and that therefore always impend as constant threats. Stripped of its sheltering illusions, the everyday world loses its significance, and the traumatized person feels anxious and uncanny, no longer safely at home in the everyday world.

I have shown that a psychoanalytic phenomenological contextualism finds philosophical grounding in Heidegger's ontological contextualism and that the psychoanalytic understanding of emotional trauma is greatly enriched by an encounter with Heidegger's elucidation of the structures of authentic existing. A crucial therapeutic implication of these two claims is that emotional trauma

(along with other forms of emotional suffering) can be rendered more bearable when it finds a context of human understanding with a therapist.

Illustrative Clinical Vignette

A young woman who had been repeatedly sexually abused by her father when she was a child began an analysis with a female analyst-in-training whom I was supervising. Early in the treatment, whenever the patient began to remember and describe the sexual abuse, or to recount analogously invasive experiences in her current life, she would display emotional reactions that consisted of two distinctive parts, both of which seemed entirely bodily. One was a trembling in her arms and upper torso, which sometimes escalated into violent shaking. The other was an intense flushing of her face. On these occasions, my supervisee was quite alarmed by her patient's shaking and was concerned to find some way to calm her.

I had a hunch that the shaking was a bodily manifestation of a traumatized state and that the flushing was a somatic form of the patient's shame about exposing this state to her analyst, and I suggested to my supervisee that she focus her inquiries on the flushing rather than the shaking. As a result of this shift in focus, the patient began to speak about how she believed her analyst viewed her when she was trembling or shaking: surely her analyst must be regarding her with disdain, seeing her as a damaged mess of a human being. As this belief was repeatedly disconfirmed by her analyst's responding with attunement and understanding rather than contempt, both the flushing and the shaking diminished in intensity. The traumatized states actually underwent a process of transformation from being exclusively bodily states into ones in which the bodily sensations came to be united with words. Instead of only shaking, the patient began to *speak* about her terror of annihilating intrusion.

The one and only time the patient had attempted to speak to her mother about the sexual abuse, her mother shamed her severely, declaring her to be a wicked little girl for making up such lies about her father. Thereafter, the patient did not tell any other human being about her trauma until she revealed it to her analyst, and both the flushing of her face and the restriction of her experience of terror to its nameless bodily component were heir to her mother's shaming. Only with a shift in her perception of her analyst from one in which her analyst was potentially or secretly shaming to one in which she was accepting and understanding could the patient's emotional experience of her traumatized states shift from an exclusively bodily form to an experience that could be felt and *named* as terror. It is in the formation of such somatic-linguistic unities, the bringing of emotional experience into language within a holding context of human understanding, that a sense of being can be born, restored, or consolidated. In highlighting the pivotal therapeutic role played by a dialogue of emotional understanding, this vignette illustrates the centrality of humanistic values in post-Cartesian psychoanalytic practice.

Concluding Remarks

What makes the finding of a relational home for traumatic emotional pain possible? I have contended (Stolorow, 2007) that just as finitude and vulnerability to death and loss are fundamental to our existential constitution, so, too, is it constitutive of our

existence that we meet each other as “siblings in the same darkness,” deeply connected with one another in virtue of our *common* finitude. Thus, although the possibility of emotional trauma is ever present, so, too, is the possibility of forming bonds of deep emotional understanding within which devastating emotional pain can be held, rendered more tolerable, and eventually integrated. Emotional pain and existential vulnerability that find a hospitable relational home can be seamlessly and constitutively integrated into whom we experience ourselves as being, making a more authentic way of existing possible. These are therapeutic principles that can be applied to a broad range of clinical problems and issues.

Russell Carr, for example, a navy psychiatrist who got hold of my book, *Trauma and Human Existence* (Stolorow, 2007), while deployed in Iraq, successfully applied the ideas I have outlined here in doing therapy with traumatized soldiers and Marines on the front lines, and he has recently published an article (Carr, 2011) describing a model using the basic principles of phenomenological contextualism for the short-term treatment of combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I have learned that the navy’s Psychiatry Specialty Leader has sent a Pdf of Carr’s article to every psychiatrist in the navy and that it has attracted interest within the Department of Defense. A report on Carr’s work will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *APA Monitor*.

George Atwood has, for some three decades, devoted himself to a phenomenological-contextualist approach to the grasping of, and therapeutic approach to, the phenomenon of madness, and he has elegantly demonstrated that even psychotic states, when understood, can be shown to disclose “the inner truth of a life” (Atwood, 2011, p. xiv). Furthermore, Donna Orange (2011), drawing on the dialogical-hermeneutic philosophies of Gadamer (1975/1991) and Levinas (1969), has illuminated the important implications of a phenomenological-contextualist sensibility for therapeutic ethics.

In sum, post-Cartesian psychoanalytic practice seeks dialogically to explore and illuminate emotional worlds in all their richness, diversity, and context-embeddedness. In such practice, emo-

tional worlds are enabled to shine with a kind of sacredness that calls forth an ethical, respectful, and caring engagement (Stolorow, 2011). Such a therapeutic attitude, I believe, embodies the essence of humanism and exemplifies the foundational shift emphasized in the articles of this special section away from formulaic and manualized techniques and toward engaged empathic-introspective inquiry and emotional understanding.

References

- Atwood, G. E. (2011). *The abyss of madness*. New York: Routledge.
- Carr, R. B. (2011). Combat and human existence: Toward an intersubjective approach to combat-related PTSD. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 28, 471–496. doi:10.1037/a0024174
- Descartes, R. (1641/1989). *Meditations*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Gadamer, H-G. (1975/1991). *Truth and method* (2nd ed.). New York: Crossroads.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1988). *Befindlichkeit: Heidegger and the philosophy of psychology*. In K. Hoeller (Ed.), *Heidegger and psychology* (pp. 43–71). Seattle, WA: Review of Existential Psychology & Psychiatry.
- Heidegger, M. (1927/1962). *Being and time*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Heidegger, M. (1943/1998). Postscript to “What is Metaphysics?” In W. McNeill (Ed.), *Pathmarks* (pp. 231–238). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Orange, D. M. (2011). *The suffering stranger: Hermeneutics for everyday clinical practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Stolorow, R. D., & Atwood, G. E. (1992). *Contexts of being: The intersubjective foundations of psychological life*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Stolorow, R. D. (2007). *Trauma and human existence: Autobiographical, psychoanalytic, and philosophical reflections*. New York: Routledge.
- Stolorow, R. D. (2011). *World, affectivity, trauma: Heidegger and post-Cartesian psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.

Received December 21, 2011

Accepted December 22, 2011 ■