

Jonah and The Dark Side

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This paper is a sequel to – although it stands independently of – one that I wrote a year ago trying to make sense of my experiences as a trainee counsellor. (Mountford, 2000) There was no intention then, to criticise my particular training programme, the institution that runs it, or the fine people who staff it. There was no intention to carry forward any disagreements with my colleagues. I felt that my experiences were such that I hadn't been prepared for them, and I hadn't read about them in the person-centred literature. I wanted to understand, and I wanted to begin airing some issues that I believe are important.

In the present paper, I seek to deepen my understanding of those issues and to share my current thoughts. Once again, there is no intent to criticise or quarrel. What I speak of is necessarily grounded in my personal experiences, but what I seek to discuss has much greater generality, I believe.

§1

I shall begin with confusion because I *am* confused. In the months since my initial counsellor training ended, and as my client hours grow, I become more, not less, confused.

I chose to train as a person-centred counsellor advisedly. From what I had read, the person-centred way was predicated on faith in 'human nature'. That harmonised with my own sense of an affirming, creative, loving, acceptant potential characteristic of our species. I wasn't disappointed. It was obvious that I had found my way to a profound and deeply nurturing body of theory and practice.

Since 'graduation', my love of the person-centred way has only grown. I marvel at the power and therapeutic beauty of being deeply, honestly, and authentically with another.

This much, then, is all very un-confusing.

Like my deepening commitment to the person-centred way, what troubles me has recent roots in my experiences as a person-centred trainee. Not to revisit old ground, let's just say that as I continue to reflect on those intensive months, it seems that the training community was in many respects just another messy, tangled, frightened, judgemental, un-nurturing human community.

Hence my confusion. I saw in training, and I see repeatedly in my counselling practice, that humans have a glittering, awesome core of strength and lovingness. I also saw in training, and I have experienced all my life, that human communities are frequently harsh, unpleasant places to be.¹

On the one hand, I love my fellow beings so much it hurts: I admire us; I am proud to be one of us.

On the other hand, I despair of us, and I despise us.

¹ I've talked with Brian Thorne about this, and he tells me that out of fifteen training communities which he has helped to shepherd, most had many of the characteristics which I describe.

What am I to make of this contradiction?

§2

Looking back across my life – my own direct experiences as well as observations – I see pairs of individuals and small groups of people ‘bonding’ and ‘nurturing’. I see friendship and support. I see acceptance and love obviating seemingly huge differences and neutralising potential conflict. I also see how once a group of people has grown to more than handful of members, it starts to fragment and factionalise. And once that happens...well, all kinds of games commence. Mostly, the games appear to have to do with power, with hierarchies, and pecking orders, with in-groups and out-groups, and sexual tensions. They *don't* have to do with acceptance and love. They *do* have to do with what person-centred theory calls ‘conditions of worth’,² and with making other people feel bad or inadequate when, or even because, that enhances oneself.

I am not saying that this stuff doesn't happen in one-to-one relationships and in small groups. Of course it does. But it doesn't seem to be *inevitable*. When the numbers are small enough, we humans are capable of a very different way of relating, and when we experience that difference, I think we rather like it: *Is this the 'real us'? Is this what I was longing for?*

However, such affirmations notwithstanding, I *am* saying that my experience indicates that the less pleasant stuff becomes inevitable once a group reaches...oh, say Scout Troop size? I'm choosing my example advisedly because some of my best childhood memories are of my Scout Troop, and yet the kind of nonsense described above was part of the experience. There seemed less nonsense within the Troop's Patrols; I really think that in our smaller groups of six or so we *were* more acceptant and loving.

Our Scout Troop was – coincidentally? – about the same size as the more recently experienced training community. And everything I have witnessed and learned between and including those experiences suggests that humans do pretty well together, and by each other, when the numbers are small enough, but that the picture changes as the numbers increase.

What's going on?

I still believe that what I said in Mountford (2000) is part of the story. Any community that I have experienced in Britain or Canada³ has been firmly located within ‘a culture of abuse and deprivation’ as chronicled by Thompson (1992). But I don't think that what I said earlier goes deep enough. *Why*, when humans have huge potential for love and acceptance, is our everyday cultural background oppressive and foul? *Why* do large groups ‘go wrong’?⁴

² As explicated by Rogers (1959), p. 209, and discussed in most of the subsequent literature.

³ I've lived in Bhutan, as well, and I'm not sure the same is true of that country. But I was only there for two years, and I was, after all, a privileged foreigner. So I forbear from comment.

⁴ This is *my view* of large groups, just as it is *my view* of a training community that I cite here and in Mountford (2000). It is a view which, I understand, causes distress and disquiet to some, particularly when it is offered in print. But I think these things need speaking of. In Canada, there is now a practice of uncovering streams that have been buried by urban development. It is called ‘daylighting’. This stuff needs *daylighting*.

§3

As I sit and reflect upon the question I have posed, something that I seem to have been missing now becomes obvious. That is at least partly because concurrent with writing this paper I am reading Mearns and Thorne (2000). The issue I am puzzling over is an aspect of what Mearns and Thorne introduce as “the shadow side”, “the dark and destructive side”, the “problem of evil”, and which they go on to discuss in the context of person-centred theory.⁵ Thus my confusion is due to a very hoary question indeed:

- ◆ If human beings have, as I asserted earlier, an affirming, creative, loving, acceptant potential which is characteristic of our kind, then how come we go so strange on each other?⁶

Mearns and Thorne chronicle two broad and current responses to the problem of evil. I characterise them as follows:

Response One is to ‘dissolve’ the problem, to claim that humans *aren’t* evil when you really get to know them. They are often damaged, wounded, frightened, confused...that stuff. It is stuff which leads to some awful behaviours, and to events which in common parlance are *called* ‘evil’, but it is stuff which can be ministered to. It isn’t in any way definitive of or central to being human.

Response Two is to accept that we are complex creatures living in a complex, and in many ways unknown, world. Perhaps we aren’t, at our core, purely love, made solely in the image of a beneficent God, or moving inexorably towards our Buddha nature. Or if we are, perhaps, as Brian Thorne seems to posit when he writes of “access to a world where hostile or tormented spirits roam”, there are real and literal darker influences to take account of.⁷

For myself – and speaking, I should admit, from my moral philosopher’s configuration as much as in my ingenué counsellor role – neither response fully satisfies me. To *some degree*, I am willing to buy Response One. In my experience, there’s *no such thing* as an evil person when one really gets to know them. It is as though the perception of evil is inevitably dispelled on close acquaintance. But consider an analogy. Stand close to an oil painting done with large brush strokes, or to a pointillist work, and the representation is dispelled. One sees only the paint, the hues, the brush marks, the texture. Pull back, and the image re-asserts itself. Similarly with a villainous client. Sit with them, one-on-one, and open your heart to them, and they are not evil. It is not that one becomes blind to or unaware of what they’ve done. As Dave Mearns points out, to the contrary.⁸ But to call a fellow human or even their actions ‘evil’ in that context is to entirely miss the point. This is not evil. It is tragedy, pathos; it was probably unavoidable; it is sorrow and pain all round. But now pull back a little, see the client with more distance and in their social context, and doesn’t the sense of evil re-assert itself? Well, it does for me, and I need to understand that. And unlike Brian, I prefer to do so without availing myself of theological notions of evil.

⁵ Mearns and Thorne (2000), pp. 61-72.

⁶ Or as Mearns and Thorne (2000), p. 62, put it: “How is it...possible to hold...an essentially positive view of the person if *in their group life* those same persons behave so negatively and destructively towards each other?” (My emphasis.)

⁷ Mearns and Thorne (2000) p. 61. This is, of course, the traditional view of most religions I have encountered.

⁸ Mearns and Thorne (2000), p. 59.

§4

What I've just sketched is the bigger picture surrounding my smaller interest in a perceived discrepancy between human behaviour in small groups and in large groups. It is a *very* big picture. I'm now going to retreat to my narrower interest. But I do so recognising that I am working with an instance of a much larger problem.

Suppose we set aside moral and, so far as possible, axiological notions altogether and just consider the person-centred viewpoint.

Person-centred theory tells us that humans are powered by an 'actualising tendency' that will struggle to assert itself whatever circumstances the individual encounters.⁹ Those circumstances include the approbation and disapprobation proffered by others, and approbation and disapprobation are very meaningful things to us. We respond to the positive regard of others like a plant responds to light: we grow towards it, thus making ourselves after the image of the conditions of worth foisted upon us. We need to *be*, and we need to be *accepted*.

There is also the growth and sustenance of a 'self concept' (or 'self concepts') to factor in.¹⁰ That involves a story (or stories) about who we are which helps us to meet conditions of worth. If I add 'self concept' to the metaphors of the 'actualising tendency' and 'conditions of worth', and if I take sufficient account of the need to preserve and protect this fictional being (these fictional beings), then there is no a famously elegant and powerful system of explanation to hand.¹¹

But does it explain the discrepancy I observe between small and large groups?

Okay, what follows is simplistic, but let us try it for size.

Suppose five or six of us are gathered together with our needs to *be*, to be *positively regarded*, and to *nourish our conceptual selves*. My guess is that we can find ways of providing caringly but honestly for *each other* while still looking after our *own* selves. Now suppose that twenty of us are similarly gathered. Do you feel as I do that the task has suddenly grown more than fourfold in immensity? *Why is that?*

I don't know, of course, and that's not a rhetorical ignorance. Right now, as I type out these words, I just don't know, and I *want* to know because it feels important. If fundamental human needs can be readily met within a small group, but are more difficult for us to meet in a large group, then that has profound significance. It implies that we will tend to be more anxious and fearful in larger groups, and we will tend to meet our needs in ways that are less than caring towards our fellows. We will probably find ourselves separating into smaller groups that *can* meet our needs. We may find ourselves fighting at the trough.

§5

Hmmm...thinking back to my Scout Troop, to my experience of a counsellor training community, to every other club, class, and body I have belonged to, the above feels right.

⁹ As explicated in Rogers (1959), p. 196.

¹⁰ Rogers (1951), for example, p. 501, Proposition X, and ubiquitous in the subsequent literature.

¹¹ The parenthetical pluralities are, of course, in deference to Dave Mearns' recent work on configurations. See Mearns and Thorne (2000), pp. 101-119, "The Nature of 'Configurations' within Self".

What's more – and now I am entering the larger context once again – this story is consistent with a 'reasonable' account of the human (if not more broadly based) evil.

What gets perceived and labelled as evil behaviour is, roughly speaking, the attempt by one person to meet their needs in ways which harm another person. In terms of person-centred theory, and again roughly speaking, this will involve thwarting another person's actualising tendency. It may involve objectifying the other person, and – in the Kantian phrase – it will certainly make that other person merely a means to someone else's ends.¹² Generally speaking, there's nothing much wrong with the needs that drive the process; it's the way they are being met which creates the problem. However, the way the needs are met is invariably chosen out of perceived necessity. The 'evil doer' is only trying to survive and possibly flourish.

Thinking back to my oil-painting analogy, this construal of evil does suggest that its appearance would dissipate upon close acquaintance with the *evil-doer* only to reform again when I step back and take in the broader scene. Focussing upon and engaging with the 'phenomenal world of a villain' – as a counsellor must sometimes do – reveals human *needs* and the *attempt* to meet them. But when I step back and outside the narrow therapeutic context I see again that someone has been badly hurt...everyone involved has been badly hurt... *Isn't that evil?*

Perhaps it is a part of wisdom to hold *both* views in awareness. Indeed, I sometimes wonder if that's what loving in the sense of 'charity' or 'unconditional positive regard' isn't really all about. To see both the villain and the evil clearly, and somehow to accept and embrace both without reservation. Both are *what is*, and it is not my place to judge *what is*.¹³

That *sounds* good, doesn't it? But it isn't easy to accomplish. And, for me, there remains discomfort in asserting that humans have what I earlier trumpeted as "a glittering, awesome core of strength and lovingness" *and* the capacity for evil.

It helps me to deal with this discomfort if I use religious imagery. Yes, we do have what Christianity calls 'God within' and Buddhism calls 'Buddha nature'. But this *is* within a frail and human being. We experience *needs*. We experience *powerful* needs. When they can't be readily met, we get fearful, and we are not too fussy about hurting others. Spiritual development can be characterised as the process of becoming and expressing our loving core more and more fully, while still continuing to meet our own 'legitimate' needs, and gradually shedding the necessity that we sustain and protect a particular conceptual self (or array of conceptual selves). Is that what Carl Rogers meant by "maturity"?¹⁴ If so, and if secular language is preferred, then perhaps the explanation is available without religious metaphors.

¹² Some of us may now want to widen this account of evil, replacing the other 'person' in it with 'sentient being', or 'living thing', or an even more morally generous denotation. But that's more an issue for my moral philosopher configuration than for the counselling one. As counsellors, we are only concerned with other human beings. Therefore, I note this issue only to pass on by.

¹³ Thus I am uncomfortable – to put it mildly – when Dave Mearns says "I *feel* 'disparaging' to those who would attach this four-letter word to a human being." (Mearns and Thorne 2000, p. 67.) There's a place for the *epithet* 'evil'. And maybe we can even attach it to people sometimes. What there isn't a place for is *rejection*.

¹⁴ Rogers (1959), p. 207.

§6

So far, so good, but a central question remains unanswered:

- ◆ Why can fundamental human needs, as understood by person-centred theory, be more readily met within a small group than a large one?

The more I reflect, the more crucially important this question seems. Answering it may even help explain why human kind is not only tearing its own poor flesh, but destroying its only home, our lovely, and increasingly ravaged, blue-green planet: *We would, wouldn't we, if we were forced into huge conglomerations in which we couldn't meet our needs?*

However, if I had a clear answer to the question, then I probably wouldn't pose it in a short paper like this. In a sense, all I am saying for now is: *Here is a fundamental problem, what do you think about it?*

Even so, there is at least one lead in the literature that is worth considering. I shall be brief for a number of reasons. Shortage of space is one, but the need for considerable reflection upon what follows is another.

The literary critic and *penseur* René Girard has developed and published a number of works that present and apply "a certain view of imitation that binds together literary and anthropological questions."¹⁵ If I understand Girard correctly, then the core of his thinking is captured by the following quotation.¹⁶ Girard is writing about two people, whom he calls "A" and "B", who both seek to "appropriate", or obtain for themselves, the same object:

If the appropriative gesture of...A is rooted in the imitation of...B...[then]... [t]hey become rivals for that object. If the tendency to imitate appropriation is present on both sides...it must be subject to...a positive feedback. ...[T]he individual who first acts as a model will experience an increase in his own appropriative urge when he finds himself thwarted by his imitator. And reciprocally. ...Violence is generated by this process; or rather violence is the process itself...

Girard (1979), p. 9

Suppose that the 'object' in question is not a material entity at all, but a 'way of being'. A way of being is something usually acquired through imitation. And suppose that, for reasons as yet unclear, those who seek this way of being don't have it in their awareness that the way of being is something which all can appropriate without any of them having to share in it any the less. Grant all this for argument, and grant that Girard is right about what happens next. Grant, too, that the "violence" which Girard posits can be construed to include emotional and societal 'oppression' and 'abuse'. Doesn't this now sound a lot like what happens in a training community? And a Scout Troop? And possibly larger communities as well?¹⁷

¹⁵ Girard (1988), p. vii.

¹⁶ I find Girard's prose less than transparent, but riveting none the less. A brief and relatively accessible account of his ideas is provided by Paul Dumouchel's "Introduction" to Dumouchel (1987).

¹⁷ Girard also has interesting things to say about the practice of 'scapegoating', by which he means something much closer to the original Biblical practice of real sacrifice than contemporary usage. For me, that too rings true for large-group contexts.

Well...maybe.

One thing which needs explaining, now, is why intelligent, sensitive people would fail to recognise that we can all – the whole human race if we wish – seek to embody the person-centred core conditions and way of being without any of us embodying them any the less. Here is a possible explanation.

Suppose you and I believe that the only way to be a good person-centred therapist is to model ourselves as closely as possible on 'Dr Fred', our trainer and mentor. We both seek to *become* Dr Fred-clones; we both seek to *become* Dr Fred. But there is only *one* Dr Fred. Do you feel as I do that there's conflict brewing here? Now suppose that you and I believe our best way forward is to work to embody the person-centred way *in our own uniquely individual fashions*. I become a more person centred Mountford, and you become more person-centredly *your* self. There's nothing to fight about.

Thus I wonder whether part of what happens on person-centred training courses – and in the world at large – is that a *false belief* about the nature of our enterprise becomes *destructive* courtesy of the 'Girard Effect'. Paradoxically, a deeper understanding of the person-centred enterprise – that each of us is to become more completely our own selves – offers a good antidote. As Alexander Pope wrote: "Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring".¹⁸

There's another questionable fly in the Girardian ointment: why doesn't what Girard himself calls "mimetic escalation" occur in small groups? Or does it? Perhaps in small groups mimetic escalation is simply easier to defuse because there aren't so many people clambering onto the mimetic bandwagon.

I don't *know*, of course. I don't have 'the answers', yet, but I do think this line of enquiry is promising and may even have useful things to say about the nature of 'evil'.

§7

Before concluding, there are two loose ends I want to note and try to knot.

First, I am now wondering if *you* are wondering whether the perceived difference I find between small groups and larger groups is 'really there'. *Is it all just a function of Mountford's own problems and preferences? He is comfortable with small groups, he has 'problems' with large ones, and he is painting this onto our world for us. No thank you, Sir.* It's possible that I am doing this, but it doesn't feel as though I am. And when I reflect, I find evidence in my favour.

The Scout Patrol that I mentioned earlier is of a size which humans seem to be comfortable with and use as a kind of 'building block'. The famous Roman legions, for example, were divided into centuries, and their centuries into groups of ten men. If I am not mistaken, this military example has been roughly followed into contemporary times. Work places are routinely organised into 'teams' and groupings of this sort of size whether it is done officially or unofficially. Sport routinely involves teams of this size. And my guess is that most of us don't have more than a dozen close friends and relatives, and we probably have fewer. It's easy to miss this 'small group' preference because it is ubiquitous. We humans *are* most at ease and at our best in small groups, and larger groups – like person-

¹⁸ Alexander Pope (1711) *An Essay on Criticism*, l. 216.

centred training communities – generate problems not solely because of their *raison d'être*, but also because we aren't very good at them.

Second, what about the tension – the unbearable tension – between the love and loathing I expressed for human kind? (And thus for myself, of course.) The tension eases, I find, when I look at matters the way I have done in this reflection, but it doesn't entirely dissipate, and the next time I walk away from a particularly 'political' group interchange, it will come back with force. If I understood better *why* our human needs are so much more at home in small groups, or perhaps if I knew why I see things that way, then I might have more leverage to assert against the tension. But I don't.

I am confused.¹⁹

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¹⁹ I wish to thank Brian Thorne for his encouragement, his conversation, and the vast resource provided by his willingness to let other aspirants on the person-centred way pick his brains. I also wish to thank Judy Moore, who has the rare ability of being able to save me from my own excess.