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OPEN SPACE

Citizen thinking and the social value of psychotherapy

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> Oh, must we dream our dreams
> and have them, too?
> —*Questions of Travel*, Elizabeth Bishop

Introduction

When I first entered into psychotherapy in my thirties, I did not know that my therapist had been married to a well-known writer. One day I came into her consulting room, put my jacket down on the chair and went over to lie on the couch. During the session she said, *It seems you are wondering whether I am related to the author of the book you are reading*. I sat bolt upright and looked over at my jacket which I had placed just so with the novel carrying the author's name on the top of the front cover showing from out of my pocket. I *was* curious of course and shocked to find out that the fact was so hidden from me. I had literally not been able to think about it. Instead, I had contrived to arrange the world – buying the book, placing it in my pocket and taking it with me to the session, discarding the jacket in a way that made the author's name visible to the therapist while I looked in another direction – all without realising consciously what was on my mind.

Without having designs on the client, the analytic psychotherapist speaks truthfully of their feelings as they arise in the session, giving the client the opportunity to make something of it. My therapist was not finding fault in my behaviour or telling me what to think. She was being true to her experience of me in the present. In this paper, ideas from Hannah Arendt's political philosophy to Elizabeth Bishop's poetic practice are used as lenses through which to see

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psychotherapy, drawing out its value not just to the individual but to society as a whole. The chief psychoanalytic theorist I have in mind is Wilfred Bion. For Bion, having a thought is the infant's necessary response to the absence of the desired object. It is a coping mechanism from the first; we are forced into thinking as a refuge from overwhelming feelings and do so with the help of other minds. Yet throughout mental development and into adult life, thinking is not a simple matter; an account of its uses and misuses are examined in individuals and groups throughout Bion's complex theoretical works (1961, 1962, 1967, 1970). I am particularly interested here in its relationship to decision-making and action, including the act of communication.

Ways of thinking

As Hannah Arendt liked to emphasise, we are each of us two-in-one, capable of having thoughts but also aware of ourselves having them, adopting the twin roles of me and myself. She quotes from *Richard III*: 'What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by' (1978, p. 189). A positive illustration of the idea of duality might be from Gillian Rose's philosophical memoir *Love's Work*, 'You may be weaker than the whole world but you are always stronger than yourself' (1995, p. 51). The therapist is there to take up a third position, enabling a dialogue within the self to happen by being observer and witness, a presence that is benign, non-judgemental and facilitating. The therapist is both imagined and real: conjured up by the client but paradoxically also an objective, independent being outside of their control. Furthermore, analogously, the client presents himself as a reader in the sense that he has relationships with people and other objects outside the consulting room and is continually bringing to the encounter multiple examples of those relationships, like the host at a party. Like all hosts, they are keen that everyone should get along. Yet this aspect of friendliness is more than just a preference. For thinking to be done well it has to be relational, meaning the mind has to be on good terms with itself – whilst allowing that at times the best of friends will disagree. The correspondence between Arendt and Mary McCarthy – published as *Between Friends* (1995)—comes to life early in their friendship in an exchange of August 1954. McCarthy was later to achieve success with *The Group*, her best-selling novel set in Manhattan. Part of a circle of New York intellectuals, the two first met in 1944 and, after recovering from a disagreement which led to a three-year stand-off, remained close for the rest of their lives, with McCarthy editing Arendt's posthumous *The Life of the Mind* (1978), conceived in three parts: 'Thinking', 'Willing' and 'Judging' although the final volume was not completed in her lifetime. In a moving obituary to her friend McCarthy wrote, 'Hannah is the only person I have ever watched *think*. She lay motionless on a sofa or day bed . . . This lasted – I don't know – from ten minutes to half an hour. Everyone tiptoed past if we had to come into the room in which she lay oblivious' (1985, p. 41). For Arendt, thinking on its own is never enough. It is part of a tri-partite structure of the mind, only made possible

by the presence of the other two elements. These other two make themselves felt in the world of appearances, rooted in time and in place, whereas Thinking is outside of time, and even outside of place, happening in a 'nowhere' (1978, p. 199). Judging happens in relation to the past, and Willing is how as social beings we put some pressure on the future.

In her letter of 10 August 1954, McCarthy introduces 'One thing I am anxious to talk to you about . . .' (1995, p. 18, which turns out to be the failure of ordinary citizens to be able to think through ethical questions. The puzzle is set in the form of a character in the novel McCarthy is writing who exhibits 'thoughtful feeblemindedness', which leads to the inability to make even basic moral choices. The author wants to understand more about the history behind this phenomenon. How did the question of doubt about what can be known make us so timid in making everyday decisions? In a spontaneous sounding gesture – 'let me go into the midst of it' (1995, p. 24) – Arendt's reply sketches an historical account of epistemology, naming the key philosophers and 'Last not least, Pascal'. And then finally adding ' ... a word of my own ... ', with Arendt's personal addition being that

> The chief fallacy is to believe that Truth comes at the end of a thought process. Truth on the contrary is always at the beginning of thought; thinking is always results-less.

Arendt wants to say that ethical thinking of the type McCarthy's character is finding so difficult *is* possible, and yet the old decision-making frameworks of religion and common sense have been dismantled. Thinking needs to be approached in a different way. She goes on,

> This notion that Truth is the result of thought is very old and goes back to ancient classical philosophy, possibly to Socrates himself. if I am right as it is a fallacy, then it is probably the oldest fallacy of Western philosophy . . . . Truth is not 'in' thought, but to use Kant's language [,] the condition for the possibility of thinking. It is both, beginning and *a priori*.
>
> (1995, p. 25)

If thinking is 'results-less' what is it doing for us? And if we cannot begin to think without truth, it must exist in some form without having been thought about. This sounds unlikely, until I go back to my younger self, lying on the couch that day, blissfully unaware of what was really on my mind. The experience of wanting to begin psychotherapy can be like having a hunch, knowing something and wanting to do something about it. But what is the status of this truth that cannot be (yet) be spoken? The temptation here is to want to answer this question rather than to stay with the uncertainty. One way to keep it open is to introduce the idea of (non-religious) faith (1970, p. 26), and 'learning from experience' (1962) in Bion's terms. That is to say, we are always bound to be misunderstood, and to fail to name the truth of our experience. Dialogue and relationship may be the best that we can do, learning in the present from the company of others.

Arendt asks the most evocative questions about thinking, such as 'Where are we when we think?' and is generous and passionate when describing the intellectual talents of others such as Walter Benjamin (1970). In her introduction to Benjamin's *Illuminations*, she identifies in him 'something which may not be unique but is extremely rare: the gift of *thinking poetically'* (1970, p. 51). This idea is shaped amongst other things by Benjamin's commitment to metaphor, and his practice of collecting quotations as a method of thinking. This focus of attention on fragments from the past yields an assemblage, what Arendt calls a 'sort of surrealistic montage' (1970, p. 51). The method has echoes of Arendt's own approach insofar as her work is multidisciplinary across the boundaries of political science, literature and philosophy and is never overly impressed with logic for its own sake, apparently seeing value in non-sequiturs and spontaneity. Moreover, both of these major twentieth century writers agree that in the end 'all problems are linguistic problems' (1970, p. 53). Arendt acknowledges that while her friend Benjamin, who died in 1940, could not have read more recent works in the philosophy of language, he had a strong sense of the solutions Wittgenstein was to later arrive at in his *Philosophical Investigations*.

When thinking goes wrong

This sense of truth being out of reach is reminiscent of Bion's position, for example, in 'Lies and the Thinker' whereby the truth does not need a thinker in order to exist (1970, p. 104). It is only a lie that needs to be actively thought. There is no guarantee that thinking will lead to good outcomes, partly due to how we use and misuse opportunities to think. It is easy not make anything of our thoughts, to keep them to ourselves and/or to split them off. The failure to integrate can be a structural fault if the learning in the therapeutic encounter is not carried over into real life beyond the consulting room. This behaviour is dramatised in an episode of the TV series *Succession* about four siblings and the battle to inherit their father's fortune: when faced with a personal conflict that might thwart his ambition the character Kendall Roy says of his father: 'I love him, I hate him, I'm gonna … outsource it to my therapist' (2021).

To secure a known outcome, organisations like individuals can stop being curious and rely instead upon power, blame and denigration of others often in the form of racism and other forms of violent scapegoating. A shocking image of how this can operate was produced this year by the Grenfell Tower enquiry. Sir Richard Millet KC used a diagram now known as 'The Grenfell Web of Blame' to describe the 'merry-go-round of buck-passing' by the individuals and companies involved in renovating the tower block in such a way that the ideology of deregulation and cost-cutting was repeatedly prioritised over safety (2024). This system in which each part failed to take responsibility in relation to the whole caused the fire which led to 72 avoidable deaths of those living inside, 85% of whom were from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. What psychoanalytically informed interventions promote is linkage between disparate elements, creating a picture of inter-relationship

with the parts being only as strong as the sum. The value of integration for the individual or the organisation is that thinking only happens on a circuit. If there is a failure at any point the circuit is broken; the thought train is stopped in its tracks and sometimes derailed with disastrous consequences.

Even when thinking apparatus is intellectually world class, there is no guarantee that it will go in the right direction. Some of Hannah Arendt's own failures of judgement are testament to this, as Lyndsey Stonebridge brings out in her recent book, *We are Free to Change the World – Hannah Arendt's Lessons in Love & Disobedience*. Arendt claimed that as a Jew, her sympathy for Black people and their civil rights could be taken for granted as for 'all oppressed and under-privileged people' (2024, p. 126). However, this attempt to short-cut thinking led to some grievous errors, including her opposition to the desegregation of schools in the Jim Crow South of the USA in the 1950s.

Stonebridge demonstrates how Arendt did re-consider such mistakes and take responsibility for them, for example, in the context of the civil rights movement by writing to the novelist Ralph Ellison to admit she had failed to ' … understand the complexities of the situation' (2024, p. 129) in her essay objecting to the fate of one of the Little Rock Nine. Elizabeth Eckford was a 15-year-old Black girl who had run the gauntlet of press and protesters to assert her right to attend High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. Stonebridge brings out how it is perhaps an over-identification and a protective impulse that led Arendt to fail to absorb what the facts were telling her, leading to her implication, described by Lyndsey Stonebridge as 'truly scandalous' (2024, p. 120), that Elizabeth Eckford had been failed by her parents. Due to the structural inequalities caused by racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination, sometimes there is no option *but* to think (and to act). Stonebridge suggests how this is something Hannah Arendt knew as a victim of antisemitism as a child, when she would have first learnt that thinking is not just an individual intellectual pursuit but a collective, social activity through which political freedom is lost and potentially gained and maintained.

Thinking and action

It is a fairer reflection of Arendt's position to admit we all get thinking – and judging – wrong all the time, and yet it is the effort of attention that matters: to try each time to apply thinking to each new situation. Containment is provided by one's own mind and the minds of others, and by cultural objects which in their making can help us to create a link between thought and action. To try to illustrate this, I will introduce a poem by Elizabeth Bishop. Bishop had been an undergraduate alongside Mary McCarthy at Vassar College. Separately, Arendt spent a memorable evening together with Bishop and her partner, the architect Lota de Macedo Soares. Arendt is enthusiastic about Soares: 'Elizabeth Bishop came with her Brazilian friend who is an extraordinary woman whom you probably know. If not, get to know her by all means. She is very amusing and full of well-told stories' (1995, p. 50). McCarthy's

novels tend to draw on the author's personal life in a way that Bishop found lacked imagination; her own writing is much less interested any trace of the confessional, yet her work is intimate in another way by often showing the reader a picture of the mind thinking.

'Questions of Travel' is the title poem of Elizabeth Bishop's third volume, dedicated to Soares and published in 1965. After a dreamy, partly anxious description of place, the questions referred to appear as a list in the second stanza and ask the reader to think about what travel means. They are ethical questions but also existential and epistemological, asking us to consider, in the weary tone of a visitor who has momentarily had enough and cannot make sense of it anymore, what we have learned by travel and whether it was worth it. The poem asks, 'Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?' as if thinking itself was itself a kind of travel. The pacing of questions and the rhythm of enquiry builds to a high point, then modulation:

> Oh, must we dream our dreams
> and have them too?
> And have we room
> for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

Just as for Bion, where thinking is partly dreaming, in 'Questions of Travel' the boundary between internal and external worlds is blurred. The poem ends by arriving at a quotation as if from a fictional notebook, in what would be called a speech act if it were spoken. This device gives a voice to this citizenthinker who is able to give an unauthorised version of the questions central to the poem. This act of writing dramatises the difference pertinent to all psychodynamic practitioners between thinking and action, including the act of communication. The traveller's writing appears in italics and in quotation marks and is quoted here in full along with the preceding two lines:

> *Is it lack of imagination that makes us come*
> *to imagined places, not just stay at home?*
> *Or could Pascal have not been entirely right*
> *about just sitting quietly in one's room?*
> *Continent, city, country, society:*
> *the choice is never wide and never free.*
> *And here, or there . . . .No. Should we have stayed at home,*
> *wherever that may be?* (2008, p. 75)

and then a sudden golden silence
in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:

The reference here is to Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century mathematician and philosopher, who wrote in *Pensées*, 'I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber' (2011, No. 139). The traveller is setting up Pascal himself as the archetypal thinker enjoying the capacity to solve human problems purely

through cogitation. Although the levels of reading and misreading multiply in that Pascal in fact was suggesting in that the human condition would be very different if we could just retreat in this way yet we cannot, and we would be wrong to blame ourselves for this.

In the closing lines the traveller's words begin to undermine the poem's own foundations by questioning the idea of ' … home/wherever that may be'. If home itself is a place of the imagination as much as a physical territory, then we are back to the indeterminacy of language. In therapy, as much as in philosophy and poetry, we exist in our use of language, not in isolation but in communication with ourselves and others.

Why thinking matters now

The choice to sit down with an analytic psychotherapist is a fundamentally relational act. The emphasis that it places on seeing the other, appreciating difference, grappling with the inevitability of being misunderstood, stands in contrast to therapies that are industrialised and manualised and which have the political advantage of being designed to produce quantifiable results (see Jackson & Rizq, 2019). It may be well understood that psychoanalytic work has great value and efficacy in treating tyrannies of the mind. However, it is an ongoing task to advocate for the quality of its impact at a social level, which is achieved by promoting interdependence and thereby strengthening ties within persons, groups and organisations. The cultural shift entailed in today's radical individualism risks privatising the concept of mental health such that we are not curious even about each other, afraid to engage in benign enquiry of even our closest friends and family.

Lyndsey Stonebridge's book begins with an acknowledgement that election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016 caused a surge in popularity for Arendt's major work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* for which sales increased by over 1000% in the year since Trump took office. Arendt was no adherent of psychoanalysis, fearing that an emphasis on the unconscious wanted to impose a metanarrative on us all, reducing individuals to types depending on the history of their early relationships, and downplaying the role of personal responsibility. Yet Stonebridge maintains that Arendt's assumptions about the human psyche are compatible with a contemporary psychoanalytic approach. In the present historical moment, the restless energy within analytic theory and practice offers a space for thinking at a time where government and corporate attitudes risk being dominated by action alone.

How are we taught to think? I had come across some graffiti as a young teenager and was so intrigued by it I had copied it down. Now, decades later I recall it as, 'The great philosophers have sought to understand the world. The point, however, is to change it' (This was only slightly misremembered: see, Marx, 1845/1969, No. XI). I can remember the weather, and exactly where we were, driving along a country lane. At the time,

I asked a fellow passenger what it meant. He replied by asking me what *I* thought it meant. When I gave my uncertain answer, he accepted my account, saying that they thought it was a good one. This early attempt at interpretation was more literary than political but the oppositional force in the formulation by Karl Marx stays with me from that time as a young adolescent, when the possibility of revolution had some appeal. I realise I am still fascinated by this tension between understanding and change and the part that thinking plays in the difference between them.

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Notes on contributor

Dominic McLoughlin originally studied philosophy, then trained in Psychodynamic Counselling and later took a PhD in Creative Writing. He has worked for over 20 years in student support in higher education and is currently Counselling Service Manager at University of Westminster.

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