

Book Review

The Talking Cure: Wittgenstein on Language as Bewitchment & Clarity. John M. Heaton. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, xvi + 227 pages, £19.99 (paperback), ISBN-13 978-1-137-32643-0.

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John M. Heaton's *The Talking Cure: Wittgenstein on Language as Bewitchment & Clarity* follows a number of other publications by the author on Wittgenstein and psychoanalysis, including *The Talking Cure: Wittgenstein's Therapeutic Method for Psychotherapy* (2010). His latest book continues a project that attempts to inject a measure of clarity into the discourse on psychotherapeutic praxis by moving away from schematic approaches that rely upon "picture-driven theorising which takes 'the mind' to refer to some sort of substance with an innate structure" (p. xii). Instead, by attending to Wittgenstein's insights on usage and the particularities of linguistic convention, psychotherapy as "initiate learning" can be distinguished from psychoanalytic approaches that assume "empirical notions such as de facto norms of the mind and society that underwrite an individual's actions" (p. xiii).

In Chapter 1, "The Problem," Heaton connects Freudian psychoanalysis to a larger positivist metaphysical tradition in which "'reality' is scientific reality" (p. 2). With a brief canter through the history of geometry, he likens the common psychotherapist to "people who thought that space is Euclidean" (p. 5), rather than an instrumental representation with explanatory power. Theory, he argues, is not to be identified with: Heaton links the plausibility of the theoretician's conceptual apparatus with an abstraction from the particular case. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein's concerns with a related linguistic approach, then, it is "our craving for generality and the contemptuous attitude with the particular case" that "leads us astray" (p. 7). In the same way that linguistic confusion leads to epistemological errors, a patient's dogmatic adherence to/acceptance of the psychoanalytic theory du jour can actually produce neurosis and psychosis; thus, if the therapist and patient confuse a theoretical apparatus with an accurate schematic representation of the psyche, the patient may be 'tricked' by language that blocks her ability to speak for herself.

Chapter 2, "Fearless Speech", begins with a "brief account of psychotherapy in the ancient world of Greece and Rome" (p. 15) that traces the historical significance of parrhesia (free speech or fearless speech) in therapy. Heaton relates this practice to free association in the psychoanalytic process. However, the important distinction is made through the re-casting of the relationship between analyst and analysand: "it is as important for the patient to assess the therapist's truthfulness as it is for the therapist to judge the patient's" (p. 19). Free, fearless speech cannot be evaluated solely from an expert position but is dependent upon pragmatic contextual concerns like "the nature of

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the situation, and how [the parties] react to the demands it places upon them". This discourse is ethical, since free, truthful speech is a call for plain, intimate language at the expense of 'rules' that depend upon theories of the 'psychical apparatus' accessible only to the therapist. Heaton links this targeted discourse to Wittgenstein's confessional writing practice.

Chapter 3, "Talking versus Writing", begins with a *longue duree* history of the development of writing and the transformation of oral to literate cultures. Heaton articulates the major difference as one dealing with the speakers' positions of enunciation, writing as "detached from [its] sender" and possessing "a stable physical presence on paper", the reification of which becomes a temptation to view language as having "an existence in its own right apart from people" (p. 39). Picking up on well-known arguments from places like Plato's *Phaedrus*, Heaton provides the Wittgensteinian lesson of this history as the imperative to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 116), thereby bypassing a Freudian tendency to obscure the 'answerability' inherent in spoken language (the domain of "agreement in judgment" (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 242) in favor of self-contained linguistic-conceptual systems that eliminate chance elements like gesture. "The meaning-bearing elements in language do not mirror the world but depend on our involvement in practices from which meaning is acquired...Speaking can remind us of this weaving between language, gesture, and action much more than writing" (p. 49).

Chapter 4, "The Critical Method", repeats further Heaton's focus on the "clarification of language use" (p. 51), linking therapy to mathematics, which Wittgenstein understood to consist not in the collection of theories but as a practice that disavows (despite, perhaps, what Frege argued) "a system of eternal truths waiting, in some third realm, to be discovered" (p. 52). In practice, then, the psychotherapist gives patients 'space' to think, feel, and speak, which generates an 'activity' that is "timely and moving" (p. 53), questions posed and answered by both therapist and patient ("[we] can only understand a neurotic complaint when we have understood the question which it is trying to answer"). This 'method' requires the 'problem' to be conceived not merely as something to be diagnosed but as something that grips a patient in an embodied way; language well-suited to this endeavor is not purely referential but contains traces of a form, style, and position of enunciation. Heaton also, here as elsewhere, draws attention to the ways Wittgenstein's own writing does this, careful not to distinguish between "the saying and the content of what is said" (p. 63). When Heaton quotes him as writing, "really one should write philosophy as one writes a poem" (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 28), he means to direct one's attention to the physicality of words and the aphorism that is "lost in the traditional case history."

Chapter 5, "Reasons and Causes", appropriately begins with Wittgenstein's claim that "it was Freud's confusion between reasons and causes that led his disciples into making an abominable mess" (p. 64). Since causal accounts identify agents, what we pin down as a cause has significant consequences for treatment. Generally, causal explanations in therapy "assume that at root all mental patients are essentially the same" when it is actually "the beliefs of the therapists that are in common" (p. 66). Recognizing language itself as a root, and that reason is itself tied up in linguistic conventions, Heaton attempts to move beyond the notion that naïve argumentation is the appropriate framework for psychotherapy: "arguments are of little use in neurosis or psychosis. In fact, people with phobias and obsessions, for example are usually well aware their troubles are irrational"

(p. 77). The talking cure does not consist merely in the uncovering of a cause but in helping patients to ‘develop’ reason “in the particular area where they have lost it”. A form of pragmatism with a Wittgensteinian basis, this is also to understand action “in terms of capacities rather than dispositions” (p. 92), moving beyond a representational view of the mind dominant in much cognitive behavior theory.

Chapter 6, “Elucidation”, moves specifically to Wittgenstein’s critique of correspondence theories of language, motivating a “turn toward the concrete phenomena of language-in-use” in order to “clarify the shifting patterns of how symbols symbolize” (p. 95). Heaton argues that theorists of psychotherapy often construct their understanding of language on top of a theory of mind in which “thinking is conceived as rule-bound information processing and manipulation of symbols, mirroring an autonomous, pre-existing reality” (p. 96). This conceals “the role in which we live in our descriptions”, the way we actually talk (p. 97). ‘Elucidation’ refers to the clarification of our linguistic confusions that brackets the mind as referential object. Ultimately, it leads to “the recognition of the autonomy of language” (p. 99), the understanding that language as a system has no foundational structure beyond use. Focusing on three aspects of Wittgenstein’s investigations (the infant’s acquisition of a mother tongue, the language-game, and the status of logic in relation to sense-making), Heaton consolidates a number of Wittgenstein’s insights around the proposition that there is no ‘gap’ between language, thought, and reality. While the language-game specifies “the connection between spoken words, actions and situations, which need not be spoken” (p. 109), attention to formal logic enforces the distinction between propositions that represent states of affairs and propositions “that draw attention to how the expressions of our language are being used” (p. 122): the latter are the concern of therapeutic ‘elucidation.’

Chapter 7, “Back to the Rough Ground”, looks more closely at the Freudian (and Jungian) assumptions behind mental disorders in order to further develop a practical distinction between ‘empirical’ and ‘elucidatory’ approaches. While Freud “was fond of a metaphor of depth” (the passions) and Jung “appealed to the heights” (the sublime idea) (p. 136), the “rough ground” of a Wittgensteinian analysis reconciles and contextualizes the two by locating “[human] misery, confusion and despair” in “culture and the place of the person within it” (p. 137). Ultimately, Heaton works from Wittgenstein’s skeptical rejection (or qualification) of metaphysics, finding in neurosis or psychosis a “confused practice” instead of an abnormal, disordered “entity or set of processes” in the mind (p. 139). Then, instead of seeing ordinary language as the veil of a true meaning that needs a specialized language for its articulation, expression and meaning are linked directly in a talking cure that rejects the unconscious as an ontological category – “meanings are not in the head...but are anchored by language in the physical environment and in social practice” (p. 146). Looking at traditional psychoanalytic material like slips of the tongue and dreams, Heaton rejects the idea of both as containing an inner process that causes meaning in a ‘dead’ symptom.

Chapter 8, “The Self and Images”, examines the ontological problem of selfhood in the context of therapy. For Freudian psychoanalysis, explaining subject-formation requires speculating about the infant, “who is assumed to be originally wrapped up in the pleasure principle, totally out of touch with ‘reality’” (p. 178). Heaton argues here that this picture of development and the entire problematic of accounting for the reality principle is incoherent as a theory of mind. Related to Wittgenstein’s rejection of private languages, any solipsistic “language of sensation” (on which this model is based) is nonsensical; a

language of “tension and needs” already “owes its meaning to its connections to the physical world” (p. 179). As such, Heaton argues, there is no ‘self’ prior to the reality principle, no solipsistic “wordless primary experience,” since this kind of language is itself circular, asserting that “infancy is the origin of language and language the origin of infancy” (p. 182). The Freudian model, in other words, “[makes] impossible demands on language” (p. 183), leading to nonsensical propositions of the self as something we ‘have’ or possess; rather, he says, the ‘I’ is a “use, not an entity; it is enacted in speaking or thinking” (p. 191).

Chapter 9, “A Non-Foundational Therapy”, completes the work with a final look at desire, wishing, and love. Beginning with a critique of Freud’s account of the oral phase, in which “we seek fulfillment of unconscious wishes through the restoration of signs which are bound to the experience of satisfaction” (p. 200-201), Heaton looks at Wittgenstein’s conception of desire, which is expressive rather than (merely) descriptive. Thus there is a logically intricate relationship between desire and language: disorders (neurosis and psychosis) stem from the assumption that “part or the whole of language is a calculus which pre-determines instructions as to how things are, irrespective of the range of situations in which the person may find themselves” (p. 209). Assuming that both Wittgenstein and the major psychoanalysts believed happiness to be the purpose of life, Heaton claims that we lack happiness when we ‘act mechanically’; the ‘talking cure’ is simply “the creation of reflective judgments concerning mechanical rule following” (p. 210). Heaton ends by returning to Wittgenstein’s famous statement about philosophy and the ‘fly-bottle’ – both philosophy and therapy are about liberation, but this liberation requires recognition of the indexical limits of psychoanalytic theory.

Heaton’s continued study is an interesting one, and this book in particular is quite useful for analysts and theorists in an age when a lack of clarity in the literature breeds a series of schematic monstrosities that are not always useful in practice. An incorporation of Wittgenstein into the theory is a necessary, if limited, remedy. Heaton’s focus on language and use, however, leads one to wonder why Lacan is nearly ignored completely in this book: could not Lacan’s structuralist analysis of speech aid this project and eliminate the need to dismiss psychoanalytic theories of the subject with a wave of Wittgenstein’s wand? A brief mention and dismissal of the mirror stage and the Imaginary ego (in Chapter 8) conceals the relevance of Lacan’s analysis of the Symbolic order and the subject of the signifier – if it is inevitable that Heaton has another brave effort in him, he would do well to deal fully with Lacan.

References

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