Reason, Virtue and Psychotherapy
Reason, Virtue and Psychotherapy

Antonia Macaro

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd
Our account will be adequate if its clarity is in line with the subject-matter, because the same degree of precision is not to be sought in all discussions, any more than in works of craftsmanship. . . So we should be content . . . to demonstrate the truth sketchily and in outline, and, because we are making generalizations on the basis of generalizations, to draw conclusions along the same lines. Indeed, the details of our claims, then should be looked at in the same way, since it is a mark of an educated person to look in each area for only that degree of accuracy that the nature of the subject permits. Accepting from a mathematician claims that are mere probabilities seems rather like demanding logical proofs from a rhetorician.

(Appistle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, Chapter 3)¹

¹All text citations of Aristotle are taken from the Crisp edition in the References.
Antonia Macaro is an existential psychotherapist and philosophical counsellor. She has many years’ clinical experience in the field of addictive behaviours. For a number of years she has been exploring the practical uses of philosophy, particularly Aristotelian virtue ethics. She is a supervisor and visiting lecturer at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, London.
I would like to thank all the friends and colleagues who read all or part of the first or second version of this book, and in particular Gerald Rochelle for his extensive and useful feedback. Also thanks to David Arnaud and Tim LeBon for our joint work on practical philosophy and decision making over a number of years – I am sure that even just the idea of writing this must to some extent have been inspired by those conversations. Thanks to Windy Dryden for encouraging me to pursue the idea. Finally, thanks to Colin Whurr and everybody at John Wiley who has in any way been involved with this project.
Introduction: A Therapy for Sisyphus

That life is suffering has been known for millennia. In Buddhism this fact is considered so important as to constitute the foundation of its whole system of thought and discipline. Unlike other animals we are able to reflect on our efforts and their results, and in the light of our considerable limitations we may come to see ourselves as puny and irrelevant creatures. Death seems to cast a shadow on all our achievements and endeavours.

It can indeed seem very puzzling: we are born, live a life in which suffering is inevitable and die, without any obvious explanation for this lamentable state of affairs. So we ask ourselves what life is all about, whether it has any purpose, whether it fits into some mysterious grand scheme that could somehow provide answers and make us feel more important. Without those answers, our daily efforts and strivings can seem utterly insignificant, and the hustle and bustle of a working day appear no different from the mindless activity of ants toiling up an anthill.

Camus (1975) sought to capture this sense of pointlessness through the image of Sisyphus. In the Greek myth Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to spend his life pushing a boulder up a hill without ever succeeding: the boulder would perpetually roll down and Sisyphus had no choice but to push it up again and again, in full knowledge that his efforts would never produce the desired results. Camus used this as a powerful metaphor for the human condition.

Human beings are blessed – or cursed – with the ability to see themselves ‘from the outside’. While on the one hand we take ourselves and our projects very seriously indeed, on the other we are able to reflect on this and see that in the greater scheme of things we do not matter
that much. It does not matter whether we fulfil our potential, get married, have a promotion or become enlightened. In a sense, it would not really matter if we were not here at all. The recognition of this discrepancy between a perspective in which we take ourselves so seriously and one in which we recognise our status as just another animal living on a planet that will be destroyed in a few million years has been seen as the source of our feeling that life is absurd (Nagel, 2000). Many people have found such thoughts depressing.

There have been and still are answers that can give some of us relief. According to these our life is given meaning and purpose by virtue of being part of something bigger, such as the plans of a god, or gods. This connection is questionable, as Nagel (2000, p. 180) vividly explains:

> If we learned that we were being raised to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh, who planned to turn us into cutlets before we got too stringy – even we learned that the human race had been developed by animal breeders precisely for this purpose – that would still not give our life meaning, for two reasons. First, we would still be in the dark as to the significance of the lives of those other beings; second, although we might acknowledge that this culinary role would make our lives meaningful to them, it is not clear how it would make them meaningful to us.

Belief in soothing religious answers has anyway become more problematic because of the likely clash between such answers and what science tells us about the world.

It could be said that the growth of counselling and psychotherapy in our times is directly related to a confusion about how to make the best use of our time on earth, given the loss of old certainties, the lack of sound uncontroversial guidance and the seemingly bleak picture painted by science. It has been pointed out that those who seek help nowadays are more likely to suffer from a sense of meaninglessness, emptiness, depression and lack of values than from traditional neuroses (Guignon, 1999), and that the people who are flocking to counsellors and psychotherapists to examine their lives would in the past have been catered for by priests and rabbis (compare for example, Frankl, 1959).

Some forms of psychotherapy arose specifically in response to this need. Viktor Frankl (1959), a concentration camp survivor and the founding father of logotherapy, wrote of our situation in terms of an ‘existential vacuum’: an inner emptiness, a void, that arises as a result of the fact that we are guided neither by our instincts like other animals, nor by the traditions that seemed so solid before. What we need to do, in his view, is to give up our search for an abstract meaning of life and
instead create our own unique meaning *in* life, looking for the particular values that can give us fulfilment and a sense of purpose. Logotherapy was designed to help people to do just this: become creators of their own values and responsible for their own meaning.

Similarly, existential psychotherapy aims to address the fundamental features of existence that give rise to our puzzlement and anxiety: death, freedom, isolation, meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980). Whilst the label functions more as an umbrella term for a cluster of related practices than as a single defined approach (Cooper, 2003), there are certain shared characteristics. These include working with the clients’ lived experience and helping them to accept the responsibility of authoring their lives when no absolutes are available apart from existential ‘givens’.

While other forms of therapy may be based on models and explanatory systems that depart rather more from the clients’ existential realities, it could be argued that the existential vacuum left by the loss of traditional values and world-views lies behind the extraordinary success of the ‘talking cures’ in general.

In an article entitled ‘The Age of Therapy’, reporting the results of a recent research project commissioned by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, the *Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal* (Nov. 2004) states that ‘Britain is today a “therapy nation” in the making’ (p. 46). The project found that 72 per cent of adults ‘believe that people could be happier if they talked to a therapist about their problems’. The authors see these results as reflecting a change in society as a whole as well as in our values. We are wealthier and less constrained by traditional standards, so we have more opportunities to make choices about who we are and how we want to live. This gives rise to a host of new stresses and anxieties, about which we might want to consult a therapist.

The conclusions that Camus drew from Sisyphus’s predicament were on the whole uplifting: it is possible to find meaning even in eternally pushing a boulder up a hill. But for a latter-day Sisyphus, it would appear, the struggle to find that meaning will often involve some kind of therapy. Therapy seems here to stay.

**DIANA AND THE SOCIOLOGIST**

The public outpouring of emotion after the death of Princess Diana in 1997 has been seen as a deeply symbolic event, marking a profound shift in the mood of the nation from buttoned-up and stiff-upper-lip to
emotionally aware and relaxed about displays of feeling. Many saw this as a good thing. Others did not. One of the latter was Professor Frank Furedi, a sociologist, who considered the phenomenon part and parcel of an unhealthy ‘therapy culture’ that is precipitating us towards dependency and unreason.

Furedi (2003) describes what he calls ‘therapy culture’ as an ethos in which people are encouraged to exchange autonomy and self-reliance for a dubious cult of the emotions. While in the past many life difficulties would have been seen as a normal part of the human condition that we simply had to learn to take in our stride, it is now assumed that we do not have the resources to do this: ‘Through pathologising negative emotional responses to the pressures of life, contemporary culture unwittingly encourages people to feel traumatised and depressed by experiences hitherto regarded as routine’ (p. 6). Hence the perceived need for professional help to sustain our fragile and vulnerable selves. While this gives the illusion of support, in reality it enfeebles people and creates a climate of dependency.

According to Furedi, our therapy culture is self-absorbed and narcissistic to the point where the language of self-fulfilment and self-expression overshadows moral and political concerns: ‘Instead of right and wrong, there are only different ways of feeling about the world’ (p. 73). He connects this with the decline of tradition, religion and politics. Therapy has filled a void caused by ‘the erosion of a system of meaning through which people make sense of their lives’ (p. 86). This system of meaning created connections with accepted ways of doing things and a wider sense of purpose. Its decline has caused fragmentation, anxiety and a narrow focus on the individual self. Previously, religion offered a way of making sense of inner experience that could be shared with others. That role has been taken over by the much more introverted context of therapy.

Taylor (1991) makes related but broader points about the climate of modern American society. One of the trends he criticises is a facile relativism according to which everybody has his or her own values, about which it is impossible to argue. This is linked with what he calls ‘the individualism of self-fulfilment’ (p. 14): a world-view prescribing that everybody should choose his or her own lifestyle on the basis of self-determined values that are beyond challenge or discussion. Instead of following others in attacking this narrow culture of self-fulfilment as selfish and self-indulgent, however, Taylor recognises that it is based on the reasonable moral ideal – however degraded – of being true to oneself.