The Polar Unities as a Guide to Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT: The author recognizes the need for a psychotherapy that aims to be either spiritual or wholistic to ground itself in appropriate philosophical and theological constructs. As one small step in this direction, the ontological elements as discussed by Paul Tillich are applied to some specific therapeutic issues. Striking parallels are found between Tillich’s first two ontological elements (individualization-participation, and dynamics-form) and the two dimensions (cohesion and adaptability) of the circumplex model of family therapy. It is suggested that Tillich’s third ontological element (freedom-destiny) throws useful light on the educational and psychotherapeutic issue of permissiveness versus authoritarianism.

Every system of psychotherapy is grounded in philosophical and theological assumptions. Assumptions are made regarding how we judge anything to be true or false (epistemology), regarding the fundamental nature of reality or “being” (ontology or metaphysics), regarding the nature of the good or the desirable (ethics), and regarding the nature of what should be our ultimate commitment or loyalty (theology). When a psychotherapeutic system pretends to operate without philosophical and theological assumptions, it in fact is simply operating with implicit assumptions that are unexamined and therefore in danger of being rather muddled. It is therefore essential that psychotherapists who take the dimension of the spirit seriously properly ground their psychotherapeutic principles in theological and philosophical constructs that are appropriate and clearly formulated. By suggesting the relevance for psychotherapy of the ontological “elements” in Tillich’s work (and their ethical implications), I hope in a small way to indicate the direction in which we might move for a proper grounding of a spiritual psychotherapy.

The ontological elements with which we shall be concerned are a priori in nature. That is to say, they are brought to experience as an aspect of the structuring activity of the subject. They are not derived from experience. As Tillich says, “Ontological concepts are a priori in the strict sense of the word. They determine the nature of experience. They are present whenever something is experienced.” A priori, as he points out, does not necessarily mean “not subject to change.”

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This paper will be concerned primarily with the ontological dimension of analysis and will, of necessity, touch upon epistemological and ethical matters. Tillich says that "the arena of ontological discussion is not the theological arena, although the theologian must be familiar in it." This paper stays within the highly illuminating philosophical dimension of Tillich's thought. Some of the specifically theological dimensions of Tillich's thought seem to me to be more problematical. In any case, the theological grounding of psychotherapy is an important task that is beyond the scope of what is attempted here.

The great usefulness of Tillich's thought seems to me to derive from his fundamental grasp of the dialectical nature of all creative processes and of being itself. Each of the ontological elements (individualization and participation, dynamics and form, and freedom and destiny) are conceptualized in terms of polarities. Tillich's understanding of polarity is that "each pole is limited as well as sustained by the other one. A complete balance between them presupposes a balanced whole. But such a whole is not given." He points out that "each pole is meaningful only in so far as it refers by implication to the opposite pole."

Charles Hartshore refers to Tillich as being in the "great tradition of dipolar theists." The tradition of understanding the fundamental nature of being in a dialectical manner is, of course, very ancient. It is, it would seem, an archetypal structure of the human mind. Since it is such a fruitful structure with regard to so many different dimensions of reality, it seems reasonable to assume that it is also in some sense reflective of the nature of objective reality.

One can see the "dialectical" or "dipolar" motif in the interplay between the Yin and the Yang in ancient Chinese thought. In Tantric thought the same polar nature of reality is suggested by the notion that the ultimate or "Satchedananda" is called Siva-Sakti, the hyphenated word suggesting that Siva, or the absolute, and Sakti, or its creative power, are eternally conjoined like a word and its meaning: the one cannot be thought of without the other. A conception of pure consciousness or being which denies Sakti, or the power to become, is, according to Tantra, only half of the truth." Again the same dialectical sense of reality can be found in the Greek tradition in the ethics of Aristotle or in the European tradition, notably in the philosophy of Hegel. A psychological thinker who makes a great deal of use of dialectical thinking is Carl Jung. Here the goal of psychic development, the "Self," is seen to be the outcome of the balanced unification of polar elements that are symbolized in a variety of ways.

Another interesting variation of the same theme can be found in the notion of the three forces that are behind any event in the thought based on the esoteric thinker Gurdjieff. This system of thought makes it clear that, while dialectical thinking is usually thought of as involving two elements, actually a third element is always implied. The basic practical and ethical implication of understanding a process in a dialectical manner is that the greatest good obtains not from affirming more of one pole and less of the other but rather from finding the proper balance or relationship between the poles. This proper