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Metaphysical Resources for the Treatment of Violence: The Self-Action Distinction

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The commentaries by Warren Kinghorn and Giuseppe Butera provide me with the welcome opportunity to reaffirm and briefly address a concern that lies at the core of my work in recent years. It regards the lack of a metaphysical perspective and consequently metaphysically-informed interventions, or what I recently came to term “metaphysical care” (Pârvan 2015), in psychological and medical treatments when there are identifiable metaphysical assumptions at work both in clinicians and treated persons which affect the treatment and the wellbeing of both. In the original article this is exemplified in the failure of both psychotherapists and people affected by violence to operate with a metaphysically grounded self-action distinction which they both need, as it has therapeutic effects for clients *and* therapists, and which they both ineffectively seek to establish on purely psychological or/and moral grounds. The main questions raised by the commentators are: 1) How is the self-action distinction that I propose different from existing therapeutic methods of distancing self from behavior? (Kinghorn) 2) In what does/should the distinction consist? (Butera) 3) Do I need Augustine for it, and reversely, does therapeutic work with Augustine’s ideas need it? (Kinghorn) 4) Does not Aquinas offer more? (Butera)

Regarding the first issue, no psychological therapy operates with a metaphysical view of the self taken as the human being. The self-action distinction cannot be established from a purely psychological perspective because, taken psychologically, both self and behavior are defined in terms of functioning, which means in terms of way-to-act: consequently, self *is* *behavior*; and it can only be distinguished from one *kind* of behavior or another. The distinction, thus, is not between categories of being but kinds of doing. To illustrate this with reference to ACT (since Kinghorn wonders how it differs from my metaphysical approach): the self is distinct from *unwanted* behavior or avoided psychological contents when it observes them or as an observing self. When the self no longer behaves like that, it is no longer distinct from its productions, and in fact, it no longer exists as observing self. Moreover, this noticing self is a wise self, it is the self of mindfulness, the self that tames its cognitive and emotional contents and actions and lives in harmony with them all (Hayes *et al.* 2012). The condition of existence for the many psychological selves is a way of functioning, such that the question about “what the self is” collapses in “what the self does”. Metaphysically, the self is not wise; it just *is* in a way fundamentally distinct from the one in which all its productions (from psychological contents to actions), unwanted *and* wanted are, as their existence depends on the self.

Incorporating in the treatment of violent people a perspective on “what the self is” besides purely psychological views on “how it functions”, generates distinct ontologically informed interventions (Pârvan 2014) and provides metaphysical care to both clients and therapists (Pârvan 2013). The latter is needed because psychological and ethical frameworks necessarily identify violent individuals as dysfunctional and morally flawed human beings, and therefore do not help either therapists or clients to value (nonconflictually and thus effectively) the latter’s self, which is an essential requirement for both therapists’ practice and clients’ change. In consequence, clinicians either struggle (just as their clients) with an ethical dilemma that deeply affects them as human beings and professionals and cannot be solved ethically, or fail to actually cherish their clients as human beings and hence to properly care for them (Mason *et al.* 2002). A metaphysical view of the self helps both therapists and clients to identify that which is valuable in clients on grounds that are not moral or psychological and therefore are neither self-conflicting nor in conflict with psychological and moral assessments, thus facilitating therapeutic alliance, work and change.

This brings me to the second question, which is best answered by a quote from Augustine. One should “neither hate the human being because of his/her vice, nor love the vice because of the human being, but hate the vice and love the human being” (*nec propter vitium oderit hominem nec amet vitium propter hominem, sed oderit vitium, amet hominem; civ.* 14.6). Butera asserts that “a more refined understanding of Augustine’s distinction between self and action” can be achieved by distinguishing “between the metaphysical self... and the moral self, which is indistinguishable from the self’s actions”. This is inaccurate because Augustine always and only distinguishes between the human being (taken in the paper as “the self” for reasons explained there) which is a substance, and the human being’s actions, which are not substances, and cannot therefore “be” what the human being is, although they help construct or deconstruct it (*gr. et pecc. or.* 2.46; *ep.* 153.3; *en. Ps.* 68.1.5; *vera rel.* 39). The distinction is *not* between the human being (as self) and some other entity in it, which would be the “moral self”. Butera’s proposal is a confusing self-self distinction: between the metaphysical self and the moral self; between the moral self and the moral self, given that the moral self is said not to be “the deepest truth about the self, metaphysical or moral”; and hence between the metaphysical and moral selves and a third, unidentified self. Also, Butera posits a moral self only to affirm that it is not distinct from actions, much like the “self” of psychologists. If so, how can it cause or be responsible for moral actions? And what about the morally neutral actions? Is the metaphysical self distinct from these actions?

The third issue, as raised by Kinghorn, is twofold: 1) Augustine’s metaphysics is not needed at all for work with the proposed self-action distinction, because presented as it is apart from its theological context Augustine’s idea becomes a Neoplatonic one; 2) Augustine’s own moral transformation did not result from employing the distinction but from his belief. To address both points at once: Augustine specifically recommends employing the distinction as a method to ontologically form/heal wrongdoers (*ep.* 153.3, *ep. Io. tr.* 7.11; *c. Faust.* 19.24), and this is foreign to Neoplatonic metaphysics. The elements in Augustine’s metaphysics that I used retain validity and are non-distorted even as they are not given in their full theoretical context. But if my account is to “be developed in a more Augustinian way”, as Kinghorn suggests, his elementary error of affirming that “in Augustine’s thought

God is not a substance” can have no place in it, and turns his repeated claim that “Augustine is clearly not for everyone” against himself. I agree that including theological considerations essential to Augustine’s thought in the model would enrich it, but the point is that it would also impoverish it, as the model would then work only for (some) believers, whereas such as it is, it can help clients and therapists regardless their (non)belief, or the latter’s professional commitments regarding belief.

The forth question concerning whether Aquinas’ views on the soul-body unit and the reason-will relation would be more helpful than Augustine’s for the approach I proposed is too complex to be addressed here with the seriousness both these authors deserve. But in speaking of Augustine’s metaphysics of the human person as Neoplatonist and “the radical freedom of the will” in Augustine, Butera’s account is misleading, as scholars of Augustine would immediately warn. Furthermore, how treated persons conceive of the mind-body unit is not necessarily relevant for work with the self-action distinction, which helps them to grasp that the self is something other than their own or someone else’s actions. Finally, Augustine’s idea that a defective will (supported by deficient reasoning or incomprehensible) is a will responsible for action holds a therapeutic value that escapes rational accounts of actions, such as Butera explains Aquinas’ to be. It allows for a view that violent individuals are agents even when they act irrationally and non-deliberately, for they enact a will which is theirs and shows them to be response-able.

What metaphysics does and psychology alone cannot do is to offer something essential to both clients and therapists: a positive *concept* of the self, which can be experienced *before* therapeutic change occurs, morality is (re)constructed and healing achieved, thus providing the basis and resources for all these activities.

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