

An Epistemological (Therapeutic ?) Audit Trail

Session theme: If we do not know how, epistemologically, to validate our chosen meta-narrative, how can we resist the hegemony of the dominant meta-narrative ?

The aims of this epistemological trail are:

- 1 To enable exploration of the sources of validity of foundational terms and concepts which are used in the theory of your chosen form of therapy.
- 2 To lay a foundation for consideration of relationships between epistemological issues and meta-narratives.
- 3 To raise questions about the criteria for comparability/commensurability among competing meta-narratives.
- 4 To stimulate a response to the session theme.
- 5 To illustrate a way in which applied philosophy might work.
- 6 To provide a follow-up to the lecture which has been sent out.

If you are able to read the chapter extract prior to the session (attached after the trail) and complete at least some sections of the epistemological trail this will save time on the 25 January and will provide a basis for our discussion. I have not put the chapter extract into a lecture form because of time shortage.

I have included some suggestions for the seminar discussion at the end of this trail but, of course, these do not preclude discussion of your own issues/questions.

If you have neither time nor inclination to read the chapter extract nor complete the whole trail, then I suggest that you respond to a 'short form' of the trail, **Sections 4, 5, 6 and 7**. I learned in the last session about SF 36 !! If you do not have time to do even this, then I have posed **four questions on p 8** which you might like to tackle prior to the session.

I suggest that you complete a version of the trail in brief form and bring a copy to the seminar. This is the first time that I have produced a trail of this particular sort (I used to produce boring 'quality trails' and I have used a similar format in producing sequenced experiential tasks). I would welcome feedback on how useful/irritating/impossible it was to complete it.

It is reported that Socrates was condemned to death for asking irritating epistemological questions. This is, of course, a group of therapists ! And Wittgenstein did say that

‘philosophy is therapy’.

Those numbers followed by (M) are ones which I think are particularly relevant to issues of meta-narratives which will come at the end of the trail.

Section 1: Titles

- 1 What is the formal and widely accepted title of your chosen therapy ?
- 2 What are the historical sources of this title ?
- 3 How would you formally define this term ?
- 4(M) What are some of the sources of this definition ? eg. research, traditions, custom and practice, iconic historical texts and iconic individuals and so on.
- 5 If you have any reservations about the definition which you have provided please state them:
.....
.....
.....
- 6 In relation to what I assume to be the hegemony of bio-medical models how would you label your therapy ?

Alternative
Complementary
Supplementary
Other Please provide a descriptor.
- 7 In which respects is your therapy:

similar to

different from

bio-medical therapies ?

Section 2 Aims of your therapy

- 1(M) Why are you engaged in this particular form of therapy ?

- 2 What are the *main aims* of this form of therapy ?
- 3 How would you attempt *to justify* these aims and what are *your criteria* ?
- 4 How are these main aims translated into your therapeutic/clinical action ? What do you actually do to implement these aims ?
- 5(M) On what basis do you assume that your clinical practice actually relates to your theoretical concepts and aims ?

Section 3 Your aims and your clients' needs

- 6(M) What do clients with whom you work typically seem to want from you ?
- 7(M) How does what they want tend to match/mis-match with your own aims and the constructs of your theory ?
- 8 How do you deal with (serious) mis-match ?
- 9(M) How do you attempt to ensure consonance between your aims and practices and the needs of your clients ?
- 10 What evidence do you have of such consonance ?
- 11 Do your aims work in practice ? Why (not) ?

Section 4 Assumptions

- 1 What assumptions about dis-ease /ill health/malfunction do you make when you decide that your form of therapy is appropriate for a client ?
- 2(M) What are the evidential or other sources which validate these assumptions ?
- 3(M) What notions of causality do you assume when you agree to treat a 'condition' ? That is, what do you assume *to have caused* the condition?

4(M) What assumptions do you make about the causal relationship between the form of treatment which you offer and the symptoms of the condition ? That is, what notion of *therapeutic causality* do you entertain?

5(M) Where would you place (X) your view of your therapy on the following continuum ?

Beliefs/myths.....	Researched
Existential frameworks	evidence.
of meaning. Religious	Rational.
belief system	Empirical.

Why is the X there rather than somewhere else ?

Were you tempted to put in an elongated X....X or two Xs ? Ponder.

6(M) How is *valid knowledge* constructed in your chosen therapy ?

7(M) What kind of knowledge is it ?

8 How does this form of knowledge get challenged by practitioners ? In other words how does this knowledge develop and change over time ?

9(M) What would need to happen for this form of knowledge to become *invalid* for you ?

10 How would you describe the (training) *culture* in which this form of therapeutic knowledge transmitted ?

11 In whose interests is it to maintain and transmit this form of knowledge ?

12(M) Is the form of knowledge created by your therapy generally believed among practitioners to be essentially true and universally applicable ? Briefly explain your Yes/No.

Section 4 Theoretical and Existential Framework

1 What are the *foundational concepts* which you adopt in terms of the meaning(s) which you give to your form of therapy ?

2 In what respects do *gender* and *cultural issues* influence this theoretical/existential framework which you create and which gives meaning to your therapeutic practice ?

3(M) What *values* and *beliefs* of yours are embedded within the broad existential framework which creates the parameters of your therapy ?

4(M) How does your therapy ‘fit’ with your personal existential framework – your personal model of meaning or meta-narrative ?

Section 5 Meta-narratives, epistemology and your therapeutic theory/practice

1(M) Do you think that the ideas and language used about the conditions which you treat correspond directly to the conditions themselves ? In other words are you a sort of *epistemological realist*?

2(M) For an epistemological idealist, knowledge – indeed reality - is an ‘ideal’ state of being towards which the human mind/spirit can aspire and be committed. For some even matter is an expression of the Ideal. Bodily ‘conditions’ are seen as manifestations of the approximation to the ideal. Are you *a version of an epistemological idealist* ?

3(M) Do you believe that the conditions which you treat are constructions of the embodied-mind-in-its-culture and that the ideas which you have of these conditions are also constructions of your mind in your culture– that is are you *an epistemological constructivist* ?

4(M) How do you know that there is any form of correspondence between your theoretical constructs and the conditions which you treat ? In other words, **what is the epistemological validity of your theoretical constructs and your practice ?**

If this trail (trial ??) has enabled you to become clearer about the epistemological basis of your therapeutic practice – and this will include your ideas about the world, your values and beliefs, your ideas about people, and ideas about the ‘conditions’ which you treat - then you might be in position to consider the meta-narrative which ‘fits’ with your epistemology.

Meta-narrative options

A meta-narrative is a comprehensive, culturally created conceptual framework within which meanings are constructed; values and beliefs located and derived and views of our relationship with the world/cosmos and with other people are validated. It is the source of ontologies/forms of knowledge, the validator of valid questions and valid answers, and within which our own personal, therapeutic and cultural narratives are created. They tend to have notions of origins, meanings and future goals. They tend to be teleological. Meta-narratives have tendencies to be totalising. There is, I propose, no way of validating a meta-narrative by reference to a supra meta-narrative. Meta-narratives are more or less believable but certainly not provable. It is also, I suggest, impossible to subject them to

falsifiability. In this general approach I think I follow Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard to drop just a few names. Indeed the last named advocated an attitude of incredulity towards meta-narratives.

For example, you might be any of the following, all of which tend to be meta-narratives:

A neo-Darwinian, secular, liberal humanist.

You may be a neo-Darwinian evolutionist, what is these days pejoratively called an 'ultra' Darwinist. A genetic determinist. Pinker. Humphrey.

A neo-Marxist materialist.

A Freudian post-modernist.

You may adopt a religious and metaphysical meta-narrative which is a form of dualism in which there is God on one 'side' – and everything else which is contingent upon God on the other 'side'. This may imply that you are a revelationist. Perhaps a fundamentalist because revelation 'must' be 'true'.

You may be a secular liberal humanist. I currently call myself a nihilistic humanist. My epistemological position is: a multi-perspectival realist with constructivist and idealist tendencies.

You may be religious and a rationalist – another form of dualism.

You may be a pan-psychic meta-physicalist in which all is part of the one cosmos, which cosmos is MIND of which minds are reflections (Plato). In this case you might be a monist – all is one, or a dualist for whom MIND and mind are in epistemological tension.

You may be a rational dualist in which the world is on one side and your mind on the other. Descartes would be reasonably happy with this, but he would need his God in order to validate the rational results of the mind thinking rationally. Without God to verify the reality and validity of rational thought how do we know that thought is rational and that what thought thinks about is **real** ?

You may be a version of a phenomenologist for whom all we have are appearances which are created and accessed by our consciousness – the contents of which are not 'real' (noumenal or ontic) but are phenomenal. Kant and other Big Names would have sympathy.

You may be 'none of the above' and you may have constructed your own meta-narrative which does not easily 'fit' with any of the above suggestions. In which case, how would you label your meta-narrative ?

It is clear to me that whatever meta-narrative(s) one adopts, epistemology issues are endemic to the meta-narrative.

What is your own meta-narrative ?

Whatever meta-narrative you adopt I suggest that it will inevitably include your particular and chosen therapy – for considerations of coherence and consistency. I assume that your meta-narrative will also be that existential framework within which you create your values, beliefs, personal, relational and cultural narrative. Also included will be your model of meaning, form of rationality, morality and agency. Your sense of who you are.

It may just be that you inhabit two or more meta-narratives at more or less the same time. Or that you seem to adopt one of these two in different contexts. In which case you may have become aware of some tensions and conflicts between your dual meta-narratives. Or you may come to believe that meta-narrational dualism (or multiplicity) is needed in order to incorporate irreconcilable complexities.

I suspect that one cannot be a meta-narrative free-zone. I thought I was for a time then I realised that I wasn't.

Section 6 Some final epistemological/meta-narrational questions:

- 1 What sort of epistemological evidence do you think supports your choice and practice of therapy ?
- 2 What form does this evidence take ?
- 3 Are there dissensus among colleagues in your therapy ? If so, what are the typical sources of this dissensus ? Might it be due to epistemological confusion and conflicting (but implicit) meta-narratives ?
- 4 How is this dissensus 'managed' within your therapy profession ?
- 5 How does your chosen therapy and its related meta-narrative cope with issues of (in)commensurability with the dominant bio-medical meta-narrative to which your own is complementary/alternative/supplementary/other ?

Section 7 Suggested topics for the seminar session

- 1 If we do not know how, epistemologically, to validate our chosen meta-narrative, how can we resist the hegemony of the dominant meta-narrative?**
(The title of this seminar).
- 2 By what criteria might one compare the (in)validity of different meta-narratives ?**
- 3 What is the extent of match/mis-match between your meta-narrative and your chosen therapy ?** If there is serious mis-match presumably this might indicate a lack of confidence in the consistency between your therapeutic narrative and your meta-narrative. Might this suggest a lack of consistency, coherence and integrity ?
- 4 If there is a close match between your therapeutic theory and your meta-narrative then you presumably have at least the benefit of consistency.** However, mere consistency does not imply epistemological validity !
- 5 What issues/questions occur to you ?**

If all else fails you might like to respond to the following questions:

- 1 Do you believe that there is One Reality and that our symbols/language(s) are/should be finally capable of producing accurate and total correspondence with that One Reality ? YES/NO**
- 2 If your answer was YES, how would you know that your symbols/language had achieved correspondence with that One Reality ? What are the implications for your therapeutic theory and practice if you answer YES ?**
- 3 What are the implications for your therapeutic theory and practice if you answer NO ?**
- 4 A teasing little rider: Do you think that your mind is part of that One Reality or different from it ?**

Meta-narratives, postmodernism and psychotherapy

Revision: 4 January 2002.

Geoff Heath

In addition to the Epistemological Audit Trail you may wish to read this piece which is an extract from a much longer chapter in what I hope will be published in a book titled: 'Philosophy, Power and Psychotherapy'. I have included some issues which I think are particularly relevant to the 25 January seminar, but these are in the form of thoughts rather than carefully constructed arguments.

I've put these quotations here because I find them interesting and I may use them later in the main text. They are, I think, relevant to the meta-narratives seminar.

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied upon it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements (Lyotard 1984 p xxiv.)

In Jean-François Lyotard's work the epistemic exclusion of the other also has moral and political implications although it can by no means reduced to these. In The Postmodern Condition Lyotard contrasted the 'grand narratives' of the Enlightenment to the 'petit recits' of women, children, fools and primitives. The exclusion of small narrativity, argued Lyotard, was an aspect of the grandiose vision of the modernizing western tradition. (Benhabib 1992, p15).

What looks odd or inexplicable if you approach it with one set of presuppositions may not only make perfect sense if you start from a different point, but also reveal elements that otherwise might have been invisible. (Radcliffe Richards 2000, p 1)

If one starts out assuming some belief is just delusional, it will be impossible to uncover why the belief is held in that cultural context. (Ashman and Baringer 2001 p 7).

*This book arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – or **our** thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up the order surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the world profusion of things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (I) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine*

*camel hair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of this fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, that stark impossibility of thinking **that**.* (Foucault 1970 p xv).

Clive James: The Guardian 23 June 2001. *When you grow up in an epoch seemingly dedicated to extermination, it influences your world view for life. Opinions can change – they are on the surface of the mind – but a world view is part of the soul, as fundamental as your sense of what is fair or funny.*

In cancer research, it was the asking of a new question that revolutionised the field. The old question, which had the merit of seeming reasonable but the drawback of being unanswerable, was: why do some people get cancer? The new question was: why doesn't everybody get it? The answer turned out to be that everyone does, all the time, but a process called apoptosis ensures that in most people the disease makes no progress.

This leads me to the thought that living implicitly and unconsciously, within a meta-narrative or world view makes some questions seem reasonable and even answerable. A particular meta-narrative seems to validate certain kinds of questions and certain kinds of answers. A problem is that the same meta-narrative which validates some answers and some questions at the same time tends to preclude other types of questions and different kinds of answers. The meta-narrative seems to preclude or inhibit the posing of very different kinds of questions which questions may be both important and perhaps potentially answerable.

One of the advantages of 'alternative' approaches to healing (alternative that is to the 'orthodox' bio-medical model) is that the opportunity for posing different kinds of questions is created. One problem about this is that these 'new' kinds of questions may not be answerable because they shift the meta-narrative from one based on researchable attempts to discover answers to one which is based on beliefs and myths and which is not susceptible to answers which are available in the epistemological parameters of the scientific meta-narrative. In other words there is a problem of (meta-narrative) commensurability.

Questions can be roughly of two types: scientifically significant and potentially answerable. Existentially significant and potentially unanswerable – but none the less important in the sense that we need belief frameworks and myths within which to live. Link this to Radcliffe Richards' idea.

What looks odd or inexplicable if you approach it with one set of presuppositions may not only make perfect sense if you start from a different point, but also reveal elements that otherwise might have been invisible. (Radcliffe Richards 2000, p 1)

The crucial point about beliefs is not so much that they are ours. They must at least purport to be about something independent of the belief. Whether or no they are true is

then a matter of what the world is like. . . . One problem is what will count as evidence or reason for belief in the first place. . . . Thought and language can then seem not just a means of access to reality, They can appear to have a major role in forming it. . . . Can we distinguish talk of the world as it is in itself from a world built up from empirical evidence at our disposal ? . . . The view that only the material can be real becomes a metaphysical doctrine, making claims about what lies far outside our experience. (Trigg 2002, pp 12-19)

Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made. (Kant: gesammelte Schriften, Berlin, 1900 vol. 8 p 23, line 22 quoted in Hardy and Hausheer 1998 p 16)

We find the sense of life through articulating it. We moderns have become acutely aware of how much sense being there for us depends on our own powers of expression. Discovering here depends on, is interwoven with, inventing. Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate. (Taylor 1992 p 18.)

No model can encompass the whole of experience once and for all: each is exclusive and at best casts light on a portion of human life. (Hardy and Hausheer 1998 p xxviii)

According to Foucault, the Kantian and post-Kantian project of (self) reflection, in which consciousness attempts to turn round upon itself and know the fundamental conditions of its own being, is doomed to engage in a series of 'warped and twisted forms of reflection'. (Sass 1992 p 331)

Thus if we emphasise the determined or empirical nature of mind, thinking of consciousness as merely a thing among other things, then it becomes impossible to understand how such an entity could possibly know the truth about its own nature. . . . In Foucault's view it is the failure to recognise these impossibilities that is the key blindspot at the core of the modern episteme: it is this that dooms modern thought to a fundamental instability, a constant shuttling between incompatible alternatives. Modern man nevertheless remains obsessed with the prospect of a kind of absolute self-knowledge, a self-knowledge that promises to unriddle the universe; yet all the while this prospect of perfect enlightenment, of utter awakening to the truth itself about the self, is the source of the greatest self-delusion. Foucault compares it to a sleep – a sleep so 'deep that thought experiences it paradoxically as vigilance'. (Sass 1992 p 332.)

We may not be able to claim knowledge that the world has an underlying order, but we can still claim that it is methodologically rational to act as though it has. It is a better bet. (Radcliffe Richards 2000 p 37.)

Most traditional philosophy of science (with the problematic exception of Descartes's) has adopted some form of empiricism. Empiricism's silent partner has been a theory of the subject, that is, of the knower. The paradigmatic knower in Western epistemology is an individual – an individual who, in several classic instances, has struggled to free himself from the distortions in understanding and perception that result from attachment. Plato, for example, maintained that knowledge of the good is possible only for those

*whose reason is capable of controlling their appetites and passionsThe struggle for epistemic autonomy is even harder for Descartes who suspends belief in all but his own existence in order to create a body of knowledge cleansed of faults, impurities, and uncertainties. For Descartes, only those grounds available to a single, unattached, disembodied mind are acceptable principles for the construction of a system of beliefs. Most subsequent epistemology has granted Descartes's conditions and disputed what those grounds are and whether any proposed grounds are sufficient grounds for knowledge. . . . Explicitly or implicitly in modern epistemology, whether rationalist or empiricist, the individual consciousness that is the subject of knowledge is transparent to itself, operates according to principles that are independent of embodied experience, and generates knowledge in a value-neutral way. . . One set of feminist epistemological strategies, sometimes described as modifications or rejections of empiricism, can also, and perhaps better, be described as **changing the subject**. Lederman and Bartsch eds (2001 pp 214-215 Emphasis added).*

There may be other structural features as well, such as those related to the institutions of heterosexuality, that condition subjectivity. Because each individual occupies a location in a multidimensional grid marked by numerous interacting structures of power asymmetry, the analytical task is not to determine which is epistemically most adequate. Rather, the task is to understand how these complexly conditioned subjectivities are expressed in action and belief. Can a particular subject position be supported by an a priori argument? It can, but only by an argument that claims a particular structure for the world and then identifies a particular subjectivity as uniquely capable of knowing that structure. The problem with such arguments is that they beg the question. The one subject position that could be advanced as epistemically superior to others without presupposing something about the structure of the world is the unconditioned position, the position of the view from nowhere. Attractive as this ideal might seem, arguments in the philosophy of science suggest that this is a chimera. Lederman and Bartsch eds (2001 p 216).

In practice historians, scientists and all other persons who are certified by their apprenticeship to a tradition of knowledge production as tellers of tales adopt a simple principle: no single recalcitrant episode may unseat the narrative. Narratives unseat narratives. Every description of an episode occurs within a narrative context. So when examining the strain between a recalcitrant episode and an unfolding narrative we must examine that episode's encapsulated narrative along with the unfolding narrative. The recalcitrant episode may be shelved until the unfolding narrative becomes sufficiently rich to incorporate the episode in reconceptualized form, or the story of the episode is retold, or if there are enough other such recalcitrant episodes which, taken together, threaten the line of the unfolding narrative it may be transformed to accommodate them. In this way paradigm shifts absorb anomalies. When that happens alternative competing narratives are compared and judged according to such values as accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity, fruitfulness, comprehensiveness, cogency, openness to further narratizing, or the like. (Harrß and Krausz 1996 p 93).

From a more philosophical perspective, postmodernism is a reaction against the philosophy of the Enlightenment and its values like tolerance, individual freedom, reasonableness, and confidence in the inevitable nature of progress due to scientific discoveries and rationality, which served as the criterion of measurement for progress and as a reliable guide in a universe that could gradually be understood. The vision of the Enlightenment period was that of human beings capable of learning the secrets of nature and the laws that governed the physical world and gaining control over nature in order to improve human life. At an elevated position in the center of the world stood the rational, self-determined, autonomous, human being, reflecting an epistemological optimism and anthropocentrism that is anathema to many postmodernists.

Within the context of postmodern thought, the self disappears to the margin of the world instead of occupying its center. Although there was a skeptical spirit in the Enlightenment philosophy especially with respect to metaphysics, postmodernists develop this trend even further by stressing that meaning and knowledge are uncertain and that one cannot rely on texts for certainty. For a postmodern thinker like Foucault, knowledge becomes an act of power. Since there is no longer any truth or certainty that can be established by a correspondence between the human mind and objective reality, and since it is impossible to gain any vantage point out-side of the world in order to conceive of a unified worldview, not only is an all-encompassing world-view untenable, but Rorty claims that we should give up the search for truth and be satisfied with interpretation. Therefore, there can be no foundation for philosophy or any theory, and it is wise to be suspicious of any universal claims to validity made by reason. (Olson 2000 pp 15-16)

. . . if we always insisted on precise definitions we all would be speechless almost all the time. Definitions and precise theoretical constructs are the final product, not the starting point of inquiry. Weiskrantz (1998 p 183 quoted in The Journal of Consciousness Studies Vol 8, No. 2 2001.)

Critical reading provides students with an awakened understanding (and) furnishes the engaged mind with an alertness to the lazy rhetoric and automatic language-use that has so often covered up abuses of power. The Times Higher Education Supplement 09/03/01 Report by John Higgins on Edward Said's lecture on Education Policy at Kistrtenbusch Gardens, Cape Town.

Foucault's problem is not that of formulating the moral norms that accord with our present moral constitution, but rather the Nietzschean problem of suggesting ways in which we might become what we are. (Moss 1998 p 76.)

*In the final analysis, power is the right to have your definition of reality prevail over all other people's definition of reality. Military forces, police, weapons, prisons, abuse, instructions, laws, rituals an such like are simply the tools by which one definition of reality can be made to prevail over all others. Many people who wish to impose their definition of reality would deny that they are involved in gaining power. They would say that because of their greater knowledge, wisdom, training and experience they know what is best. **The most dangerous people in the world are those who believe that they know what is best for others.** People who believe that they know what is best for other people*

are denying other people's truths. Whenever our own truth is denied, ignored or invalidated we experience the greatest fear we can ever know: the threat to the annihilation of our self. (Dorothy Rowe in the Foreword to Masson (1992) pp 16-17. Emphasis in original.)

The ' . . . ' are from Wittgenstein. *'Our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings'* OC 229. *The context implies that to know one thing is to know another; one cannot just know one thing. 'I want to say : we use our judgements as principles of judgement'* OC 124. *Our beliefs form a system which, once acknowledged makes knowledge possible. Philosophical recognition of this context and its function in making knowledge possible is owned by Wittgenstein when he argues that description must replace explanation: 'At some point one has to pass from explanation to mere description.'* OC 189 *Mere description works because it makes the context of the disputed proposition perspicuous.* (Genova 1995. P 198.)

Indeed, perhaps a picture of knowledge without certainty will make us less ethnocentric and more open to other points of view and other ways of living. Jacob Bronowski, in the episode called 'Knowledge and Certainty' of his old television series 'The Ascent of Man' makes this point dramatically. Standing ankle deep in a concentration camp pool, he lets the ashes of millions of dead Jews sift through his fingers as he pleads with us to become less sure about what we know. When it comes to knowledge, humility is the best policy. Certainty, indubitability, necessity, were all requirements for being more than human and always gave way before the clever skeptic. . . . Skepticism, if you will, has become an essential ingredient of knowing rather than its arch enemy. Paradoxically, for Wittgenstein, knowing is at the same time not-knowing. One need not believe in what one knows; one can be, indeed is better off being, uncertain. (Genova 1995 pp 195- 196.)

The limits of my language . . . mean the limits of my world. (Genova 1995 p 146 quoting Wittgenstein)

Notion that meta-narratives may be supra national – for example religious or politically revolutionary.

Some meta-narratives are at the same time supra national and are firmly located within organisations which organisations are themselves aspects of supra national – almost global – world views. For example science is supra national, global (or rather western and expanding) and is firmly located within national organisations.

Some religions are also supra national – certainly all the major ones which have universalist and essentialist assumptions and values. Some religions become very attached to 'imperial' and political meta-narratives and thus their missionary zeal may become attached to national and political expansionism.

Meta-narratives – incredible but difficult to escape

What looks odd or inexplicable if you approach it with one set of presuppositions may not only make perfect sense if you start from a different point, but also reveal elements that otherwise might have been invisible. (Radcliffe Richards 2000, p 1)

Most psychotherapeutic theories lay great emphasis on the personal past of clients. However, when it comes to the history of ideas, the history of psychotherapeutic theories tends to go no further than those ideas of the founding fathers (mostly fathers and typically dead). The notion that ideas have long histories and that understanding these histories should be an important aspect of psychotherapeutic theorising and training seems to be avoided. Exploring the history of ideas which constitute psychotherapeutic theories is essential if these theories are not to be mistakenly presumed to have emerged *ab initio* from the autonomous thinking of (enlightened) individuals. Ideas do have sometimes very long histories and the fact that we are not necessarily aware of these histories makes it possible for the historical bases our presuppositions to be out of awareness. This ‘out of awareness’ has its dangers in the sense that we may take ideas for granted and even assume that they are self-evidently both recent and true.

The history of ideas is the gateway to self- knowledge. (Annan’s Foreword to ‘The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays – Isaiah Berlin, edited by Hardy and Hausheer 1998 p xiv)

It is very difficult for us to become aware of our presuppositions. Just as we are, and are likely to remain, *subjectively* unaware of the brain processes which give rise to our individual sense of consciousness, so in some important respects we are unaware of the deep influences of culture on our ways of being in the world and on our very foundational perceptions of the world in which we live. The basic structures of our social and personal interactions – which are the interactive outcome of our biology and our culture, are very resistant to either external scrutiny or internal awareness. The ‘invisibility’ to which Radcliffe Richards refers is recognised in our experience when we are confronted with an aspect of ourselves and our presuppositions which had resisted awareness previously. ‘I hadn’t thought of looking at it that way’ and from henceforth our conscious world becomes, in some respects, a different consciousness, and our awareness of ourselves and of that of which we are aware becomes different. I say ‘resisted’ but of course it may also simply be that I hadn’t thought about that way of thinking before – I would not wish to propagate the idea that all failures of knowledge and awareness are due to unconscious processes of resistance. I recall for the first time reading that Nietzsche had said that ‘God is dead’ and as I was training for the Methodist Ministry at the time the idea came as something as a shock to me. Over time I came to agree with Nietzsche – or rather more precisely to believe that God had never existed - and it certainly changed my view of the world and of the place of myself in it. I had not been aware of God’s ‘demise’ before I heard the Nietzschean pronouncement. I simply hadn’t thought of a world and my life without God. The thought took root and changed the way in which I construed both the world and my life in it.

At a more trivial level I went to see Tracey Emin's bed – the Turner Prize winning 'art' at the Tate in London. I was duly puzzled, but after about an hour of pondering I concluded that if Tracey's bed was art then anything which human beings create is art. All artefacts are art. As I came out of the Tate I looked at lamp-posts and taxis with different eyes. I had become aware of the democratisation of art. I think I'm serious about that. My presuppositions had been fairly radically challenged. I still harbour questions about the affects of context on perception !

One of the presuppositions which 'we' have fairly recently become aware of is that of meta-narratives. I shall provide a brief background before discussing meta-narratives in detail.

From Plato to Descartes and beyond

Descartes (1596 – 1650) '*declares himself* 'certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me' '. (Taylor 1992 p 144)

Thus Descartes shifted from the *external Idealism* of Plato in which Ideas were metaphysical, out there, of which the human mind only had dim ideas (ideas in lower case) to *internal idealism* in which Descartes' own ideas were the source of his understanding of the external world. Much has been written about this Cartesian shift and of its significance in the western project of understanding the world in which we live. One facet of the importance of this shift is that it is not possible to test the validity of the Platonic Ideas – they were beyond our mental reach (metaphysical) and we only had vague notions of them rather than direct access to them. On the other hand in the Cartesian mind set we can test the validity of *our ideas* about the world by carrying out careful observations, constructing hypotheses and carrying out experiments in order to ascertain whether our ideas actually correspond to the external reality to which the ideas relate – or may relate, or the degree of probability of the relationship. It was this change from a metaphysical view of the source of ideas and their relation to the world to a view of their existence *in the human mind only* which was largely responsible for the development of science in the West. While we were lumbered with metaphysics we could not make scientific progress in understanding because metaphysics are, by definition, beyond the physical. It was a shift from *invention* (myths) to *discovery* (scientific knowledge) that laid the ground for scientific development. The period within which this shift took place is known as the Enlightenment and it had its origins in the 17th century. It has been called 'the long 18th century' because of the related roots of thinking in the 16th century and spilling over into the 19th century. Porter (2000) has written an excellent exposition of the religious, political, scientific, literary and philosophical ideas which were driving the Enlightenment project.

Another aspect of this Cartesian and Enlightenment shift relates to the high level of confidence in the ability of the human mind to understand, to create technologies of control and to aspire to make progress on all fronts. Progress, not merely in terms of scientific understanding, but progress in terms of moral, political and social development. This optimistic presupposition, this sense of human progress in knowledge allied to a belief in a (Judaeo-Christian) God who had created 'man' as the apex of creation, in His own image, allowed a very powerful meta-narrative to develop. It could be said without exaggeration that this western Enlightenment meta-narrative was the source of imperialism, of high levels of social and political confidence, of a sense of adventure and discovery and of a sense that there was all to play for because human beings were on the side of the divine. For many during the Enlightenment there was a potent fusion of a rationalised religion and a rational science. Even for those who eschewed religion, human reason became the equivalent or replacement of divine knowledge. Reason ruled and allowed the truth to be discovered, albeit a rational rather than a divine truth.

Awareness of the historical origins, and impact, of this high level of human confidence to be able to understand the world and ourselves may have dimmed over time – Porter's book is a timely reminder of the history of such, perhaps hubristic, confidence. Not only has this dimming taken place, but the horrors of human behaviour evidenced in the wars of the last century have shaken our confidence in the idea of moral progress, even while science has continued its progress within its own terms and largely dissociated from its original Christian/theological ally. But firmly linked with its rational ally. There are those who still try to make a case for moral progress and it has been argued, with some validity, that the international development of human rights has been a significant moral consequence of the horrors of war and torture. (See Klug 2000.)

For my purposes the significance of this shift from Plato's metaphysical 'Ideas' to human 'ideas' is that the ideas which we have within us are largely out of consciousness and yet they structure our perceptions of the world and hence our behaviour in the world. This sense of 'within-ness' perhaps indicates why Plato and others came to believe in the notion that these ideas have been implanted within us by a divine originator of ideas. Ideas are such mysterious 'things' even in the early part of the 21st century. The complex relatedness of sets of ideas allow us to develop 'world views', models of the meaning of life. These complex sets of ideas have been termed, by some, meta-narratives. They are, or seem to be, above the mere, and transient narratives of our own individual lives. They provide the backdrop to our lives. They are the sources of who we think we are and they provide the basis of the (apparent) reality of the world in which we live out our lives. If not subjected to careful scrutiny and critique they could easily engender the belief that they are metaphysical or theological validators of what are only human constructions.

A discussion about meta-narratives (or over-arching grand narratives) brings together many of the issues which I am dealing with in this book. Meta-narratives also involve discussions about the work of influential – and therefore controversial – thinkers whose ideas have had influence, not only in their areas of specialism, but in a wide range of areas of knowledge from science to literature. Our meta-narratives define our reality, the world in which we live, our aspirations, our very sense of being. They define 'us' to

ourselves as they define ‘us’ as being different from ‘them’ – the ‘others’ who believe in different meta-narratives.

I shall now provide a brief elucidation of three ‘types’ of meta-narrative in order to create a conceptual framing of the rest of the discussion.

Metaphysical meta-narratives.

One way of expressing this type is to talk of MIND and mind. In this model it is assumed that the universe is premised on MIND and it is this which creates and sustains that which appears. Mind, as humans experience it, is in ‘tune’ with the universal MIND and mind is therefore able to an extent to access the realities of the universe. Therefore what we know is validated by the correspondence between MIND and mind. The act of knowing and that which is known is an act of *discovery* because of the coincidence of mental concepts with objects. There is, from my point of view, a mystical merging of word and object because of the underlying assumption of the relationship between MIND and mind. I suspect that this kind of meta-narrative is fairly widely assumed at an unconscious level. I also sense that it is applied to the assumption that mind can develop concepts which actually and real-ly correspond to its own functioning. Religious belief systems are good examples of a metaphysical meta-narrative, but there are also political ideologies – Marxism comes to mind – in which it is assumed that the human mind can detect and conceptualise the overall pattern of historical development. It could even be said that what has come to be known as ultra Darwinism is a metaphysical meta-narrative because its exponents seem to assume that they can detect and discover the ‘real’ pattern of evolution and the impact of evolution on the whole of human biology, behaviour and personal and mental functioning.

Idealist meta-narratives.

These are similar to the metaphysical meta-narratives and it is possible to identify two forms of Idealism:

Platonic idealism which I shall term ‘external idealism’. That is to say, that Ideas are the basis of the universe and everything and that the human ideas (lower case) are able to understand, albeit dimly, the Ideas which are behind the Forms of everything which exists. Mind and Ideas are the reality and minds and ideas are dim understandings of that Reality.

Cartesian idealism which I shall term ‘inner idealism’. By this I mean that Descartes seemed to work from inside to outside. That is, he viewed rational ideas of the rational human mind as corresponding to the rationally created universe of a rational God. This rational God validated the rational ideas, particularly mathematical ideas which, again, could discover certain truths about the world. In Cartesian idealism there is a greater degree of certainty about human knowledge when it derives from the clear exercise of rational thinking.

Whereas Platonic Idealism resulted in pale reflections of the Ideas behind the world, Cartesian idealism was much more open to experimental scrutiny and validation and thus laid the basis for Western science. The Idealism of Plato, on the other hand, could not be empirically checked and thus Ideas still escaped human discovery in any certain sense.

Realist meta-narratives.

These are related to Cartesian idealism in that they develop the notion that we can not only know that there is a real world external to human thought but that human thought can access that real world in real, valid and confident ways. The realist meta-narrative drives the scientific project and even leads some of its exponents (Wilson 1998 for example) to assume that the human mind is capable of, and will achieve, certain knowledge about everything thus achieving the status of the 'mind of God' (Hawking 1988). The confidence exuded by the ultra-exponents of this realist meta-narrative is somewhat challenged by difficult questions about 'meaning' and 'subjectivity' but their commitment to the ultimate power of third person ability and objectivity to allow explanation as well as description seems to remain undimmed.

An inappropriate coalescence/collapse

A basic assumption which seems to bind together all three of the above meta-narratives is that there are causal relationships between things and between events and between things and events and that these causal relationships are capable of being understood by a mind which is independent of this causality. The mind becomes, in this model, an uncaused observer of causal relationships outside itself. The mind is a tacit given, accumulating knowledge and discovering, to a greater rather than lesser degree, the realities of the external world. Even a cursory knowledge of quantum physics suggests that it is no longer valid to assume that the mind is an uncaused observer of caused events, rather than the act of observing profoundly influences that which is being observed. Indeed, that the processes of observation are deeply problematic in terms of the interpretation of what is 'there'.

I have come to the conclusion that much of psychotherapeutic theorising involves an unconscious mixture of the above meta-narratives. Psychotherapeutic theorising is noted, not for epistemological care and scepticism, but for whimsical and over-confident proliferation. Thus exponents of 'their' theories seem to make deep assumptions about the ability of the mind, not only to understand and discover external realities and their causal relationships, but also internal realities and their causal relationships. (See Spinelli 2001).

This pseudo-confidence seems to result from not only making idealist and realist assumptions in relation to knowledge about the human mind, and not only in relation to assumptions about clinical practices which can derive from such knowledge, but it results from an assumption that knowledge about the processes of the mind can be *discovered* and not, as I shall be arguing, *invented*.

In summary, much psychotherapeutic and other forms of theorising seem to assume that confident knowledge about the mind leads to confident clinical practice in relation to therapeutic treatment of the mind.

Many cognitive scientists and neurobiologists as well as those who study consciousness are not at all clear as to what the mind is, let alone how it works. This lack of certainty is also present amongst careful artificial intelligence researchers (see Clocksin's chapter in Cornwell 1998. See also Edelman and Tonini 2000 for an empirical and computer model approach to consciousness).

The incredulous Lyotard.

It is fairly common for us to be incredulous about other people's meta-narratives. Christians have typically been not only incredulous about other religions – and vice versa – but made strident attempts to convert the 'others' to the 'one true faith', or the one true meta-narrative. It is likewise fairly common for there to be a sense of mutual incredulity (hostility) towards other people's political and religious ideologies. Indeed wars have been based on, and justified by, such incredulity.

However, there was a French philosopher who came to the view that *all* meta-narratives should be viewed with incredulity, not only the meta-narratives of other people.

Jean-Francois Lyotard (English edition 1984) used the term 'postmodern' to label a significant shift in thinking in the Western world. (See p xxiii – xxv in his Introduction for a summary of his views on the Enlightenment and postmodernism.) This Introduction also contains his famous phrase about adopting '*an attitude of incredulity towards meta-narratives*'.

Meta-narratives are those all encompassing world views which purport to include all forms of knowledge, and of morality, and which have implications for what knowledge we think worth constructing, how we construct knowledge and the very meaning of life itself.

The year 1975 was a turning point for Lyotard. . . . Under the influence of Wittgenstein, his research from that point on focused on the analysis of 'language games', the multiplicity and incommensurability of which invalidate any claim to unity under the authority of a meta-language or of a totalising 'great narrative'. . . . In La Condition post-moderne (1979), this idea is located historically: the modern mechanism of legitimization based on the hegemony of a meta-narrative of emancipation, which has arguably entered an irreversible crisis, is replaced by the postmodern alternative. This is founded upon the plurality of 'little narratives', 'the atomization of the social into flexible networks of language' which will admit of 'parology', invention, disagreement. (Rogozinski in Critchley and Schroeder (eds) (1999) p 575).

Pietersma (2000) has a form of analysis which I am quoting because it provides an version of meta-narratives which I think is useful in positing a further elucidation of the conceptual basis of meta-narratives. The quotation is taken from a chapter: 'Phenomenology and Externalism' in which he is exploring problems of knowing about the external world and of ways in which we perceive the given aspects of the world through the cultural frameworks and beliefs which we have internalised and through which and by which we perceive. He is also taking a sceptical stance seriously – scepticism against any tendencies to reify those concepts which seem, but only seem, to correspond to the external givens to which they are applied by conscious and linguistically developed minds.

*What does this mean, for instance, with regard to perception? It means that as serious epistemologists we cannot say that perception is an awareness of the thing in itself and that it therefore bestows justification on beliefs, for such an asseveration is based on the assumption that perception is a generally reliable source of knowledge. . . . That would once again be a failure to take scepticism seriously, because it would involve an appeal to reason as a (superior) source of knowledge. The only way the transcendental epistemologist can give status to perception is by introducing the framework or context of concepts within which it functions and which therefore gives it this status. . . . Perception no longer depends on the givenness of an object, but rather on the kinds of beliefs that form its background. A transcendentalist account does not stop here. The entire framework within which perception functions must itself be subjected to a transcendental critique. It cannot be taken as an ultimate because radical scepticism focuses its doubt, not on this or that particular perception, but on the capacity of perception in general. . . . The radical sceptic asks: is not that entire framework **merely** a set of deep-seated beliefs that is perhaps shared by all human beings but has no basis in fact ? (pp 18-19). (Emphasis in original).*

'The kinds of beliefs that form its background' is, I suggest, Pietersma's version of meta-narratives. He is also of the view that scepticism – Lyotard's 'incredulity' – needs to be rigorous in order to challenge any loose assumptions of the ultimate validity of these conceptual frameworks. The meta-narrative is the culturally and therefore symbolically induced mental/conceptual state within which we make sense of the world – not as it is but as we have learned to perceive it.

What is a conceptual framework ? As a first step we can say quite simply that it is an extensive interpretative scheme in terms of which the factual data of a domain of entities are conceptualized or understood. What it consists of, we might initially say, are concepts whose cognitive standing is, in traditional terminology, a priori and whose role is transcendental (in a broad sense). (Pietersma 2000, p 21).

It is a framework the coherence of which is conceptual; the connection between its constituent elements is conceptual rather than merely factual. (p 22).

The whole of Pietersma's Introductory chapter – indeed book – is worth reading for its careful analysis of phenomenology and epistemology. It not only bears on issues of what this chapter is titling 'meta-narratives' but is a profound challenge to what I perceive to be loose thinking about self in a phenomenological context in psychotherapeutic theorising.

These 'conceptual frameworks' may give the impression of being 'views from nowhere' (see Nagel 1986) because their presuppositions have never become clearly articulated or subjected to close scepticism, but rather have remained unconsciously embedded. It is my contention that they are so deeply embedded that we are left with the impression that they are just there, an integral part of reality which we can observe and understand. The main point of this chapter is that there is no such thing as a view from nowhere. All human viewing is from somewhere. We are embodiments of subjectivity. Minds are embodied, we are enculturated beings, our biology only comes to linguistic and reflective life when we are socially constructed. Language is a major means by which we reach out to the world and attempt to engage with it.

Language reaches beyond itself, whether in the concept of rain or in the concept of what there is, though what it reaches can only be designated by using language or some other form of representation. (Nagel 1986 p 108.)

My argument is that meta-narratives are indeed views from somewhere, they are the views of mentally embodied people whose views in turn are infused by the cultural presuppositions of the very meta-narrative which may have become invisible by overuse - a form of conceptual blindness. The cultural artefact known as language is an essential aspect of the 'somewhere' from which we perceive the world. The language gives us a form of sight, a view of the world, but we tend to be blind as to the intrusion of language between us and the world. A peculiar paradox of this form of conceptual blindness is that we delude ourselves into thinking that blindness is actually sight.

Modern man (sic) nevertheless remains obsessed with the prospect of a kind of absolute self-knowledge, a self-knowledge that promises to unriddle the universe; yet all the while this prospect of perfect enlightenment, of utter awakening to the truth itself about the self, is the source of the greatest self-delusion. Foucault compares it to a sleep – a sleep so 'deep that thought experiences it paradoxically as vigilance'. (Sass 1992 p 332.)

Not only is human knowing not a view from nowhere, it is also therefore not a view from an Archimedean standpoint which allows us to have the grand overall view of things without being influenced by the things which we know.

There is no one position from which value-free knowledge can be developed, but some positions are better than others. (Longino in Lederman and Bartsch 2001 p 215.)

Not only is human knowledge not value free, it is also not epistemically individualistic nor is it disembodied.

Traditional epistemology, I have explained, is individualistic. (Tanesini 1999 p 53.) She is speaking from a Western perspective.

Knowledge should be understood in terms of engagements with the world. (p 32.)

Once the mind is seen as multilayered rather than unitary, it is possible to conceive new connections between the mind and the sexed nature of bodies. . . .

An excessive separation of mind from body is also at the root of traditional failure to see that reason cannot be independent of emotions, and of other cognitive capacities which are closely connected to bodily functions. (p 217)

There are many 'somewheres' from which we perceive the world - brain, culture and gender being just three of them

Knowledge is not purely objective knowledge of the world. Knowledge is a process not an arrival. Knowledge is not true, it is a temporary form of understanding.

In other words, human knowing is just that – humans trying to know. And humans and their knowledges are plural because the isolated human, lacking the enculturation provided by other humans, cannot create knowledge in the sense of being a reflexive knower. Knowledge and the processes of knowing are co-operative. The radical shift in the concept of 'the knower' also impacts radically on the notion of 'knowledge'. If the knower is a knower only when embedded within a culture, then knowledge is also embedded within that culture. Thus knowledge becomes culturally relative and culturally specific. It is not the view of everything from nowhere. Indeed there are those who argue that the very notion of the self (so central to the Enlightenment and others meta-narratives) needs to be removed from centre stage. It all makes the process of knowing somewhat complex. As John Donne said:

*And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The Element of fire is quite put out,
The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.*

The First Anniversarie, 1611. Quoted in Porter (2000 p 130.)

The human knowledges which are embedded in cultures become meta-narratives, world views, existential frameworks of meaning. Culturally specific and culturally diverse. Lyotard's advocacy of incredulity towards them is saying: do not believe them to be true. They are inventions. He also opened up another can of worms with the term postmodernism.

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Revised: 4 January 2002