

SOUL AND IDENTITY IN SUPERVISION

Manu Bazzano

Summary *An experiential and theoretical exploration of the challenges and rewards of supervision in relation to the dual notions of soul and identity. What is 'soul'? What is 'identity'? Are the two compatible? It is impossible to discover the limits of the soul, or psyché, says Heraclitus, even if we travelled every road to do so – such is the depth of its meaning. Is this expansive notion of soul the same as 'identity' in our era of 'identity politics'? Or has identity superseded soul? Through one or two examples drawn from my work, I will discuss transcultural issues of race, gender, and diversity and how these concretely relate to the notion of soul.*

1. The Consolations of Identity

I will begin by presenting one example from my experience as a primary tutor at a supervision diploma course. The episode, as participants will hear, culminates in a meeting I had with a trainee ('William'),

his manager, and the course director. The difficulty, distress and necessary reflections that this event produced in its wake have been instrumental in fostering some understanding about one crucial aspect of identity – what is commonly known as ‘identity politics’.

Two fundamental questions arise. (a) What is *identity*? (b) What is meant by the term ‘*identity politics*’?

Identity

To owe and acknowledge one’s sense of individual agency; to value and understand one’s own sense of belonging; to cherish subjective experience – these are some of the important aspects that are closely linked to a basic notion of identity.

Two questions arise:

- (a) Has our culture reached an impasse?

- (b) Have we become stuck with subjectivism, with the shielding of *me* and *mine* – my feelings, my emotions, my perception, my group, and so forth?

Arguably, psychotherapy culture has contributed to some degree to this state of affairs. Initially, it helped us understand how crucial it is to own and express what is subjectively true. This has certainly been a very good thing – until recently. Perhaps the tide has turned in recent years, as we may have become collectively unable to see beyond our own very precious backyard. Many strands of humanistic psychology have historically been inclined to *universalize* subjective identity. One more question:

- (c) Can subjective identity become a prison, particularly when it sings along merrily to the blinkered tunes of nationalism from within fortresses of privilege and wealth? Or when it is found complicit, to some degree, to the lack of substantive response to societal and political

challenges, i.e. to the world outside our own immediate and very personal concerns?

Identity Politics

In the public arena, this has resulted in championing identity politics at the expense of social and *soulful* solidarity. Writing about racial discrimination, the investigative journalist Asad Haider (2018), has defined identity politics as “the *neutralization* of movements against racial oppression” (p. 12). This may seem paradoxical at first, but in fact it reflects the replacement of “mass movements ... with a placid multiculturalism” (p. 19). What once constituted a unitary front of solidarity against a common enemy, i.e. capitalism (with its commodification of human life), has now splintered in many subgroups that cannot see past their particular experience.

In a broader sense, queer theorist and philosopher Judith Butler (1997) has made a very important

clarification in the footsteps of Foucault: “identities – she writes – are formed within contemporary political arrangements in relation to certain requirements of the liberal state” (p. 100). To some degree, to be a ‘subject’ means to be ‘subjugated’ to an existing order that defines me before I can define myself. Identity is only partly what I choose. For the most part, it is assigned/imposed to me by the Powers.

2. Soul, the Butterfly

Transformation and Multiplicity

If notions of identity inevitably end up being constrictive, ‘soul’ is expansive. In one of Heraclitus’ fragments we read:

It is impossible to discover the limits of *A coalition of affects*

*Alas! Albertine was several people in one
(Proust, 1923/1996 p. 384).*

*Nietzsche is consistently full of praise for the work of
the eighteenth century Jesuit priest, polymath and
diplomat Boscovich. The latter's Theory of Natural
Philosophy (1763/2015) had a considerable influence
on his thought (Stack, 1983), an influence that perhaps
has not been fully recognized (Whitlock, 1999), given
that it was central in Nietzsche's formulation of the two
notions of will to power and the eternal recurrence.
Boscovich's writings also encouraged Nietzsche to
formulate a shrewd analysis of human subjectivity.
"Boscovich – Nietzsche says – taught us to abjure belief
in the last thing on earth that 'stood firm' – belief in*

'substance', in 'matter', in the earth-residuum and particle atom" (1886/1978, p 25). We must go even further, he adds: we must "declare war on the atomistic need" which, just like that other, more celebrated, metaphysical need, goes on living where we'd least expect it:

One must also first of all finish off that other and more fateful atomism which Christianity has taught best and longest, the soul atomism (ibid).

Nietzsche is determined to take apart this view of the soul as indissoluble atom or eternal monad. He sees this as a continuation of similar developments that in the natural sciences have critiqued the notion of indivisible matter. At the same time, his is not a facile secularism, for it does not exclude the soul hypothesis

but prompts him to bring forth new arresting descriptions: he writes of the “‘mortal soul’ and of the ‘soul as multiplicity of the subject’; he speaks of ‘soul as social structure of the drives and emotions’” (ibid, p. 25). As a “new psychologist”, he feels “condemned himself to inventing (finden) the new – and, who knows? — perhaps to discovering (erfinden) it” (ibid, p. 26).

the soul, or psyché, even if we travelled every road to do so – such is the depth of its meaning. In this view, soul is not and cannot be individual; it contradicts the very notion of a separate, atomistic entity. Instead, it encompasses the whole of nature. Soul or *psyché* in Greek means butterfly, a tangible and present symbol of transformation. Transformation is an infinite task. Its conditions are *difference* and the *body*, “vehicle and instrument of

transformation” (Butler, 2004, p. 193). This notion is at the opposite pole of a view of identity or individual soul as delimited, unitary and self-existing: it is

It is precisely this expansive, all-encompassing notion of soul that is an inspiration to supervision work.

Going back to the episode at the beginning: I believe that both the deep sadness I felt and the strong impulse, despite everything to reach out to ‘William’ belong to the soul domain. The profound and painful divide between us belongs instead to the domain of identity – and identity politics in particular, in the way I have described it.

How then can supervision enhance *soul* and foster a better understanding of the limitations of identity? What needs to change, if anything, for supervision to align itself more closely to soul?

Affect and Vicarious Trauma

At some point in his deeply humane and learned book *When the Sun Bursts*, Christopher Bollas writes of a workshop he used to conduct in New York in the 1980s. I adopted the exercise in the last few years in supervision group settings with surprising results. Therapists from various backgrounds meet in a group and discuss a clinical presentation, but the process is rather unconventional:

The presenter was asked to eliminate all of his or her own comments and associations. No background information of any kind was to be provided; no history, no explanations of names mentioned, not even the patients gender or age. All we would hear would be the stream of ideas, in the patient's words.

Every few minutes I would stop the presenter and ask the group to associate. Interpretations were forbidden. Instead people were encouraged to

offer associations from life, or feelings, or images, or to dwell on what might be evoked by individual words that struck them. We were not to ask the presenter questions of any kind, and when voicing our associations we were to avoid looking at the presenter so that we would not be influenced by any facial expressions. While we were speaking, the presenter would take notes Then we had the task of summing up what we thought we had thought. ... Then the presenter had half an hour to tell us about how what we had thought linked up to the case¹.

The above example foster a view of supervision that is not management but open exploration. Bollas understands the above in terms of the unconscious; I understand it in terms of *affect*. Through being affected, therapist and supervisor can unfasten the artificial separateness of client-therapist-supervisor.

That is when experience may be more genuinely accessed. This accessing of experience is soulful in the sense of allowing us to be affected within the shared domain of soul.

For this to happen, we must reconsider the current “professionalization of supervision” that has tended to frame “the difficult experiences of therapists as deficits”². We must bracket our pathologizing of suffering and reassess our need to protect ourselves. This is most evident when working with vicarious trauma. Zoë Krupka writes:

The concept of vicarious trauma ... cements the idea that some trauma ... is surrogate or derivate experiencing and needs to be challenged through various means including compassion, reducing

empathic connection and sometimes more physiologically distancing and buffering strategies ... But why shouldn't we be traumatised by the brutalisation of others, either known or unknown to us? Why should our witness pain be pathologized in this way? Should we be protected from the impacts of forces that are much greater than the individual?³

Soul becomes more than a belief or an idea – it becomes tangible, provided we allow ourselves to be affected by our clients' suffering and our supervisees' own difficulties in dealing with that. What becomes clear in the process of letting go of our parameters of isolation and exclusion is that there exists a permeable, soulful area of experience.

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All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Manu Bazzano is a psychotherapist, supervisor, visiting lecturer at Roehampton University. He facilitates men's groups as well as workshops on Zen and Phenomenology in the UK and abroad. He has a background in philosophy and rock music and is the author of several books, including *Zen and Therapy: Heretical Perspectives* (Routledge), *Re-visioning Person-centred Therapy* (Ed), (Routledge), and *Therapy and the Counter-tradition* (co-editor) and the forthcoming *Nietzsche and Psychotherapy* (Routledge). He studied Eastern contemplative practices since 1980 and in 2004 was ordained in the Soto and Rinzai traditions of Zen Buddhism. www.manubazzano.com.

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