



## Naturalistic and Supernaturalistic Disclosures: The Possibility of Relational Miracles

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### Abstract

*This paper explores naturalism and supernaturalism as modes of disclosure that reveal and conceal different aspects of relationality. Naturalism is presented as a worldview or set of philosophical assumptions that posits an objective world that is separable from persons and discoverable or describable via scientific methods. Because psychotherapy tacitly endorses many naturalistic assumptions, psychotherapy relationships may be limited to an instrumentalist ethic premised upon use-value and manipulability. Given these naturalistic limitations, relationships may require a supernatural component – a component which reaches beyond the naturalistic and into the miraculous. The alternative grounding for this supernatural disclosure is found in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and that of Emmanuel Levinas, the former emphasizing the possibilities inherent in contemplative rather than calculative disclosures, and the latter emphasizing ethical obligation and absolute otherness. A therapeutic case is discussed as an exemplar of both kinds of relational disclosure – that is, naturalistic and supernaturalistic – and the therapeutic and relational consequences of each type of disclosure are explored.*

### Naturalistic and Supernaturalistic Disclosures: The Possibility of Relational Miracles

Meaningful human relationships – which include those contained within the context of psychotherapy – invoke the miraculous. The phenomenological thinker and psychological historian J. H. van den Berg (1961) points to this as inhering in a particular quality definitive of interpersonal “nearness”:

There must be sense in God’s becoming visible. His visibility is the nearness between man and man. There is no other nearness. When God is with us, He does not appear as a transparent ghost in the realm of the dead. He stands face to face with us as an acquaintance, a friend, a wife, a husband, or a child. (p. 198)

Obviously, van den Berg is speaking in a particularly theistic vein here, and this paper does not endorse the bias of his choice of terminology. Underpinning van den Berg’s (1961) assertion, however, is the notion of an overlooked, supernatural component as present in every relationship of “nearness” between people – which presence van den Berg (1961) calls “God”.

By “supernatural”, I mean beyond or outside of the reach of naturalistic explanations or relationships. The dichotomy invoked here between “supernatural” and “naturalistic” deserves brief comment. When I say that supernatural explanations are those explanations that move beyond naturalistic ones, I do not intend to suggest anything about *nature itself*. Rather, naturalistic explanations and naturalism are *ways of seeing nature*. As such, naturalistic explanations and naturalism comprise a set of assumptions made about

nature (Slife, 2004). One might, indeed, say that naturalism is a modern way of understanding nature naturalistically, with such an understanding quite independent of one's experience of the natural world. The main contention of this paper is that a supernatural component is the crux of both the possibility and the foundation of a meaningful relationship. From this perspective, miracles (as the epitome of the supernatural) are changes that bring a person "near" or "into relationship" (van den Berg, 1961).

But why call "changes that bring a person near" or "into relationship" a miracle? Not only might the term "miracle" seem strange or out of place, but the proposed definition may seem even more strange. Miracles have traditionally been considered to be divine interventions in the human world which defy the naturalistic order of things (for instance, God's intervention in human affairs). In this view, miracles are defined against a naturalistic worldview. Additionally, from the naturalistic view, miraculous explanations of events are often viewed as primitive or magical – subjective projections that have little to do with what are thought to be accurate descriptions of events within the naturalistic world (Slife & Williams, 1995). These unsophisticated "miraculous" explanations have become unnecessary and untenable in the modern world with the advent of naturalism and the rise of scientific explanation.

This paper will examine how naturalism and the particular mode of disclosure (Heidegger, 1954/1977) that it entails impacts relationships, particularly relationships in psychotherapy. We will see that relationships are ultimately limited to a calculative and instrumentalist ethic when undergirded by the assumptions of naturalism (Heidegger, 1954/1977; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Taylor, 1991). A different kind of disclosure or understanding of relationships – one that allows for the supernatural and its view of the miraculous – is offered as an alternative. This alternative is grounded in the respective philosophies of Martin Heidegger (1959/1966) and Emmanuel Levinas (1961/1969).

As stated above, one of the main assertions of this paper is that relationships require a supernatural component – a component that is *beyond* the naturalistic or out of the reach of the naturalistic. If this is the case, then naturalistic explanations are potentially problematic for relationships because they rule out such supernatural possibilities. As we will see, the miraculous and relationships are intimately related in the context of the supernatural. As van den Berg elaborates above, meaningful closeness in relationships is the miracle that requires the context of the supernatural. Hence, miracles in the supernatural view are meant to be understood in a relational, experiential and shared manner. This alternative view

of the miraculous in terms of meaningful closeness in relationships will be discussed later in a therapeutic case study.

### The Rise of Naturalism

Naturalism refers to a philosophical worldview or set of assumptions about nature (Slife, 2004). In general, nature is objectified and presumed to be in constant, regular patterns of causal interaction (usually efficient and material causal relationships or patterns). When these causal patterns are observed and described – often with the help of scientific method – they are translated into natural laws or principles which are thought to govern the movement of objects in nature (Slife & Williams, 1995). Despite the success of scientific explanations in terms of understanding the natural world, there continues to be debate about the role of science and its ability to disclose aspects of natural reality. For instance, there are questions about whether scientific theories explain a presumed, underlying causal structure of the universe (that is, the realist view) or whether scientific theories are limited to descriptions of observations of the universe (that is, the antirealist view) (Kitcher, 1989; Salmon, 1984; van Fraassen, 1980). In either case, however, scientific method tends to be used to explain the world with reference to naturalistic theories, and, at least from this view, supernatural theories are often rejected as acceptable explanations of the world. Indeed, naturalistic explanations have come to be seen as more truthful or accurate descriptions of the world, supplanting what is considered from the naturalistic view to be the more naïve supernatural and miraculous explanations (Polkinghorne, 1983).

### Materialism and Mechanism

One of the consequences of the rise of naturalism as an explanatory system included a new understanding of human beings. Prior to the advent of naturalism, reality and human interaction were thought to be governed by sacred structures grounded in the meaning and significance of the will of God and the great chain of Being (Taylor, 1991; Taylor, 2007). All human stations in life held meaning and purpose based upon this greater cosmic and divine order. As Jones (1969) describes this pre-modern era, "The universe was a vast sacerdotal system: It had no meaning or value in itself; its importance lay in the role it played – partly symbol, partly stage-set – in the drama of man's salvation" (p. 1). Hence, human beings were not simply human beings. They were children of God, and the supreme task of life was to secure the proper relation to God and thereby secure their salvation (Jones, 1969).

However, with the rise of modern naturalistic explanation, humans came to be seen as physical

objects among other physical objects interacting within the realm of ordered nature (Husserl, 1954/1970). Galileo's laws of accelerated motion and Newton's general laws of motion established the science of mechanics, and, ultimately, this physical and mechanical view of the universe extended to human beings as well. As Husserl (1954/1970) explains, the "soul" became "something real in a sense similar to corporeal nature, the subject matter of natural science" (p. 212). As a result, the horizontal relationships of human beings to others and of human beings to nature became more important than the vertical relationship of human beings to God. Indeed, God was basically displaced – or at least made unessential – as an explanatory force within the context of naturalism (Gunton, 2000). As Robinson (1995), a leading psychological historian explains,

What Newton demonstrated was that bodies set in motion would continue to move, linearly and eternally, unless acted upon by a force opposed to their motion. Quite simply, once the bodies were set in motion, God's will had no further work to do for the motion to continue forever. (p. 235)

The primacy of naturalistic explanations persists in the contemporary context (Husserl, 1954/1970). In the realm of human psychology, natural laws are postulated that are thought to govern our "bodies, behaviours, and minds" (Slife, 2004, p. 45).<sup>1</sup> Consider a therapist who views her client's depression in terms of the neurotransmitter or genetic theories of depression (Aznar et al., 2010; Neumeister, Charney, Drevets, & Tamminga, 2005; van der Stelt, Breuer, Olivier, & Westenberg, 2005). It is presumed by many researchers and practitioners alike that, with more rigorous empirical investigation, the genetic and neurochemical pathways of depression (which are often assumed to be governed by law-like processes) will be better understood, thereby allowing for better treatment approaches (Andreasen, 2001; McIntyre et al., 2007; Robertson et al., 2007). From this naturalistic perspective, the therapeutic relationship often takes a backseat to the genetic and neurochemical "laws" that are thought to govern depression.

Indeed, the emphasis on materiality (that is, physiology) and its mechanistic properties ultimately rules out any meaningful relational interaction between therapist and client. If clients are ultimately determined by hypothesized natural laws (for

<sup>1</sup> While there is some debate between metaphysical and methodological naturalism, with the former being viewed as reductive and the latter being viewed as potentially non-reductive, this paper's contention is that the tacit endorsement of naturalism by psychology tends to be of the metaphysical variety.

example, the hypothesized genetic and neurotransmitter theories mentioned above), then all that is needed to control or change clients (at least theoretically) is knowledge of the laws. In the case of the genetic and neurotransmitter theories, knowledge of the laws implies changes in the patient's neurochemistry, which in turn implicates pharmacotherapies as a treatment approach. Hence, when such hypothesized laws are taken seriously, the interaction between patient and physician, for example, is often reduced to medication maintenance – a discussion surrounding the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the prescribed medication in relation to the patient's observed clinical symptoms. In this naturalistic context, engaged, experiential and relational contact between doctor and patient is ruled out. The relational miracle that van den Berg alludes to cannot occur when the patient is objectified and reduced to a physical, material and mechanized structure only (for a more lengthy discussion of material reductionism, see Bennett & Hacker, 2003; cf. Garza & Fisher Smith, 2009). This is not to say, of course, that psychiatrists and their patients, or therapists and their clients, do not have meaningful relational therapeutic contact. Many do. The point is to note how naturalistic prejudices make such meaningful and ultimately miraculous relational contact difficult if not impossible.

## Naturalistic Frameworks and Relationships

### *The Enframing, Standing Reserve, and Calculative Thinking*

Viewing persons as part of a naturalistic world is, for Heidegger (1954/1977), a specific style of "disclosure" of humans and the world. Heidegger (1954/1977) discusses this disclosure in his explication of the source of the technological essence in the world – what he calls the "Enframing". The "Enframing" itself is nothing technological or mechanical, but rather a *mode of revealing or disclosure* that constitutes the technological worldview (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 302). Under the Enframing, human beings are called upon to reveal things and others within the world as "enframed in a certain way, namely as there merely for our use" (Rojcewicz, 2006, p. 104). Others and things are revealed in terms of quantification, resource, calculation, and "standing reserve" (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 301). As "standing reserve", things are always on hand for future use.

For instance, human beings are challenged to disclose the environment in terms of quantification and "standing reserve". Indeed, Heidegger (1954/1977) asserts that the environment or nature itself is disclosed as the "chief storehouse of the standing reserve energy" (p. 302). In other words, nature is

perceived as an energy supply source from which we “unlock” energy; “what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew” (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 298). The guiding direction for unlocking these energy resources and preserving them for future use is a means-and-ends type of calculation that aspires to retain the “maximum yield at the minimum expense” (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 297). Thus, the kind of relationship we have with things in our environment under the Enframing and as standing reserve is one of use-value and manipulability.

Human beings suffer a similar fate and are not excluded from being viewed in terms of use-value and manipulability as standing-reserve. Under the Enframing, and through the vehicle of naturalistic prejudices, humans themselves are disclosed as resources to be used. The result is that humans are disclosed and “look[ed] upon as disposables”, and therefore the mode of relating or relationship between them is also one of use-value and manipulability (Rojcewicz, 2006, p. 105). For instance, in industry, persons are described as human “resources”, and, in medicine, clinics and hospitals have a “supply” of patients (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 299). Heidegger (1959/1966) has described this mode of relationship elsewhere in terms of calculation or “calculative thinking” that “computes ever new, ever more promising and at the same time more economical possibilities” (p. 46). From this perspective, persons are viewed economically and strategically as serving certain ends or purposes, rather than as being ends in themselves. For Heidegger, the primacy of use-value in the Enframing and the instrumentality of calculative thinking are ultimately dangers to humanity.

Consider as a contemporary example of this type of calculative disclosure the first-person account of the Rwandan genocide by Canadian Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire, the commander assigned as the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping general during the Rwandan crisis of 1994 (Dallaire & Beardsley, 2003). In his account, Dallaire decried the failure of the richest members of the UN (including the United States) to intervene in the Rwandan crisis and thereby potentially prevent the loss of almost one million lives murdered over the course of one hundred days – what has now come to be known as the Rwandan Genocide. What was particularly horrific to Dallaire and to many others was that the ambivalence and ultimate failure of many nations to intercede and potentially prevent the genocide was a result of their calculated, economic and instrumental reasoning. Rwanda, in the eyes of the world powers at the time, simply lacked any “strategic or resource value” (that is, use-value) that made it worth their intervening (Dallaire & Beardsley, 2003, p. 6).

One important danger of the calculative view, then, is that the means-to-ends reasoning it endorses not only reduces everything to its use-value, but has the *capacity* to prioritize self-serving interests over others. The possibility of exploitation is always at play from the calculative perspective, and literally “amounts to an *attack* on things” and others in the world around us (Rojcewicz, 2006, p. 215). As Rojcewicz (2006) explains, calculative thinking “sees all things as there to be ravished and motivates their actual ravishment” (p. 216). While the Rwandan example is extreme, its acuteness also demonstrates how the miraculous dissipates in the context of calculative thinking and the naturalistic worldview from which it emerges. While this mode of disclosure perhaps implies something about how forms of brutalization can erupt between groups within the genocide itself, for the more immediate purposes of this paper, it also speaks to the calculated bystander mentality of the spectator nations who failed to intercede to thwart the genocide based upon their own calculated and strategic interests. Such a calculative disclosure distances and removes us from the humanity and supernatural possibility in relationships, thereby contributing to the multiple factors that allowed (in the case of Rwanda) the genocide to unfold (Staub, 1999; Staub, Pearlman, Gubin, & Hagengimana, 2005).

### *Naturalism, Calculative Thinking, and Psychotherapy*

Relationships in psychotherapy, like many modern relationships, have not necessarily escaped the mode of revealing inherent in the Enframing. When the predominant mode of relationship between therapist and client is one of use-value, manipulability and means-to-end instrumentality, then the therapeutic relationship is being disclosed according to the Heideggerian (1959/1966) notion of calculative thinking. While many therapists and clients probably do not consider their own motives or actions as calculative (particularly in the way discussed in the Rwandan example above), Heidegger’s radical point is to note that this calculative and instrumentalist disclosure is already present and implicit in the taken-for-granted meanings that are embedded in culture. Psycho-therapy, being already a part of culture, partakes implicitly of these meanings. For instance, clients enter therapy with the tacit expectation of attaining maximum results (that is, alleviating distress) with minimal demands on their time and finances, as well as the expectation of rapid and successful treatment (Lambert, Bergin, & Garfield, 2004). The rise in popularity of the brief psychotherapy treatments seems to be, in part, a response to these client expectations of maximum yield at minimum expense.

Indeed, almost all therapies that are now empirically

studied are viewed as brief, given the twin demands of consumer expectation and managed care's requirement of cost-efficiency (Lambert et al., 2004, p. 10). Psychotherapy researchers have become attuned to the concerns of cost-efficiency by examining the psychotherapy outcome relationship between "dose of treatment" and therapeutic "response" (Lambert et al., 2004, p. 10). This dose-response research essentially demonstrates that smaller "doses" of psychotherapy treatment are as effective, and therefore more efficient, than larger "doses" (for instance, about half of the patients who undergo psychotherapy show improvements by the eighth session and clinically meaningful change after thirteen to eighteen sessions) (Anderson & Lambert, 2001; Hansen, Lambert, & Forman, 2002). From this outcome research perspective, it "makes good economic sense" to limit the amount of therapy if the therapeutic gains for the client can be achieved in a shorter amount of time (Lambert et al., 2004, p. 10).

The very goals of brief therapy, dose-effect research and managed care seem undergirded by calculative thinking – the means/end calculation that seeks maximum benefit at minimal cost. From this view, therapeutic relationships may be limited by an inherent self-interest and self-focus that views the relationship from all sides as a means to secure the reciprocal benefit for all the parties involved (that is, client, therapist, and third party payer). This is not to say, of course, that all psychotherapy is conducted with a means/end calculating agenda. Rather, the point is that, when human beings are, as is inherent in calculative-instrumental thinking, disclosed and understood as manipulable resources, then viewing psychotherapy as self-serving contractualism seems inevitable (Guignon, 1992).

How can a psychotherapeutic relationship – or any relationship – be caring for the other's best interests when it is limited from the outset by a self-interested means/end calculation? The highest and most noble relationship achievable here is mere *quid pro quo*. The only relationship that a naturalized world, interpreted as standing-reserve, can leave, then, is a hopelessly impoverished one. What remains to be seen are the kind of relationships that are possible within a non-natural – or perhaps supernatural and miraculous – worldview. Unfortunately, though, miracles have faded away, at least from a naturalistic perspective. However, as van den Berg (1961) notes, miracles only became obsolete when they were required to defy the mechanistic and lawful order of nature. He argues, "... the miracle is not *contra naturam*; it is the nature of the *contra naturam* world which is *contra miraculum*" (p. 203). What might be needed, then, is not so much a miracle that defies the natural order of things as an alternative disclosure – or, in Heidegger's (1954/1977) terms, a different

Enframing, that might allow for the miraculous and a different kind of relationship between things, others and world to emerge.

## Supernatural Frameworks and Relationships

### *Contemplative Thinking*

Heidegger's (1959/1966) alternative to calculative thinking and instrumentalism is what he describes as "meditative thinking" (p. 46). Rojcewicz (2006) translates meditative thinking as "contemplative thinking" (p. 216), and argues that this translation is especially apropos, because "contemplation is what is carried out in a temple, namely a communing with the divine, a raising of the sight to the gods, a gazing into the realm of Being" (p. 216). Hence, contemplation requires an attunement to the supernatural that harkens back to communion with the divine.

Because contemplation is a special kind of thinking carried out in a temple, it is also a kind of thinking that is set aside to observe an "augury", or "a being which bears a divine message" (Rojcewicz, 2006, p. 216). Hence, the proper attitude before an other is contemplation of a kind that views him or her as an augury. This is in direct contradistinction to viewing an other in calculation as a resource to be used. Translated into therapeutic terms, the goals of therapy cannot be achieved through technical proficiency or mastery alone (for example, by relying entirely on therapeutic technique, which in many cases implies performing a treatment on the client or teaching a skill to the client in light of the strategic therapy goals). This would be a recapitulation of calculation and instrumentalism. Rather, the goals of therapy are achieved through the kind of contemplative attitude or presence the therapist has before the client – a presence that allows for the divine to emerge. Viewing others as auguries, then, as messengers of the divine, is what allows for the miraculous in relationships.

A second aspect of contemplative thinking that Heidegger (1959/1966) discusses is "openness to the mystery" – particularly an openness to the hidden meanings of technology that are embedded in the calculative view (p. 55). While Heidegger's main thrust is to emphasize the meaning of technology, his use of the term *mystery* as a simultaneously revealing and concealing dimension is particularly relevant with respect to the kind of relationship that contemplative thinking discloses. In an important sense, others are themselves mysteries, in that what is revealed in them is only an incomplete or partial profile of who they are. Hence, in the contemplative view, certain aspects are revealed in others while other aspects remain hidden. We can never know other persons completely given this quality of their mysteriousness. If

Heidegger's insights are applied therapeutically, they seem to suggest that clients can never be wholly known, given their sacredness as grounded in their mystery, and, ultimately, as grounded in Being.

For Heidegger (1959/1966), the divine message and the mystery are inherently connected to that which is closest to us as beings: the essence of beings, or the meaning of Being. As Rojcewicz (2006) elaborates,

In contemplation, we see *through* beings, see Being through them. Indeed, for Heidegger, beings are the only path to Being. We mortals have no direct access to Being. But it is one thing to take beings as revealing Being and another thing to look upon beings as merely there to satisfy our self-interest. The first way is sincere, the other calculating. (p. 223)

Heidegger's ultimate concerns are obviously ontological. Even his understanding of divinity – the supernatural aspect of contemplative thinking that allows for relationship – is linked in a fundamental way to ontology. According to Heidegger (1959/1966), the most significant danger or threat lies in humanity's potential to forgo one kind of thinking (for instance, contemplative thinking) for another (for instance, calculative thinking), particularly because Heidegger views human beings themselves as contemplative in their essence.

### *Infinity*

In contrast to Heidegger's (1954/1977; 1959/1966) emphasis on ontology as the pivot-point for pointing beyond naturalism, Levinas (1961/1969) underscores what he believes are our pre-existing ethical obligations to others as the grounds for supernatural relationalism. Firstly, Levinas (1961/1969) insists that an encounter with the other presents *more* to the self/ego than could ever be known by the self alone. Hence, Levinas concludes that the Other introduces the notion of excess and transcendence, "the idea of that which exceeds all ideas, the idea of *infinity*" (Manning, 1993, p. 114). Even though we may attempt to capture the Other within the bounds of an intellectual category (for example, diagnosis), the Other's excess always spills over such boundaries – into infinity. Part of the Other, then, remains elusive and mysterious. For Levinas (1961/1969), the excess, elusiveness and incomprehensibility of the Other ultimately emanate from the Other's sacredness – a sacredness that is made manifest in the human face.

The face of the Other reveals an "epiphany of the infinite, of absolute otherness", and absolute otherness is symbolic of God broadly speaking (Peperzak, 1993, p. 63). Others come to us, then, from a

dimension that surpasses us. In Levinas's (1961/1969) understanding, Others are revealed to us from "on high", and this height which exceeds us is the trace of God in the Other. As Levinas (1969/1961) explains, "Man as Other comes to us from the outside, a separated – or holy – face" (p. 291). Merleau-Ponty (1942/1983) argues something similar when he notes that "it seems impossible for us to treat a face or a body ... like a thing", because "they are sacred entities" (p. 167). Thus, as van den Berg (1961) seemed to allude to earlier, all human beings bear a "divine" presence – a supernatural, even miraculous presence – which is revealed in the face of the other, and, ultimately, in one's relationship to the Other.

However, this "divine" presence or "holy face" is easily overlooked, and can only be revealed when we are attuned to what Levinas (1961/1969) describes as our ethical obligation to Others. For Levinas, disclosing others means, at the most fundamental level, revealing them in light of an inherent ethical obligation. Indeed, the Other *demand*s and *command*s this ethical obligation. From this ethical perspective, Others are never viewed as resources or as means to maximize personal ends, as is the case with naturalism and instrumental reason. Rather, Others are treated as ends in themselves given the a priori presence of the ethical obligation. This is not to say, of course, that other forms of disclosure are not possible.

### *The Problem of Egology and Violence*

Rather than viewing Others in ethical concern, for instance, we can view Others through the functional roles they fill in our lives (Levinas, 1961/1969). In this case, the Other becomes a "useful or enjoyable part of my world, with a specific role and function" (Peperzak, 1993, p. 19). This is reminiscent, of course, of viewing persons as Heidegger's (1954/1977) standing reserve – as objects for one's use. In Levinas's terminology, disclosing Others in terms of their functionality or use-value is referred to as "egology" (Peperzak, 1993, p. 15). An "egological" perspective infers that everything in the world is reduced and integrated to the demands of the self-contained ego or self. The ego/self appropriates and subordinates all elements and events in the world in an effort to understand them and make them sensible. In other words, knowing things and Others within the world comes to mean a kind of subordination through possession of those very things and Others. Consider our cultural notion of a highly individualistic self that stresses autonomy and separateness through a "possession of" or an "incorporation of" things and events around us (Cushman, 1990). This is clear even in our characteristic description of everyday events by utilizing the possessive form of language – *my* dinner, *my* birthday, *my* husband, *my* wife, *my* children, *my*

clients, *my* doctor. Everything is understood from the vantage point of the ego/self. This kind of egological appropriation does not allow for the Other to be recognized as a truly separate other, and a functional-instrumental relationship is more likely to occur.

In addition to being described as egological, such attempts to contain the Other, either physically or intellectually, constitutes “totalization” by the ego/self, and totalization is equivalent to committing violence against the other (Peperzak, 1993, p. 128). In the psychotherapeutic relationship, we can perhaps easily conceptualize the results of egological totalization in the case of sexual exploitation of clients. For instance, the therapist objectifies and possesses the client as sexual object to fulfil the personal ends of sexual gratification. This kind of sexual exploitation in the therapeutic context is viewed as an intolerable infraction of the ethics and code of conduct governing the practice of psychology (American Psychological Association, 2002). Such behaviour is even recognized as a kind of violence against the client/other. However, therapists rarely consider the implications of intellectual totalization, a far more subtle form of (Levinasian) violence against clients.

For example, most therapists have a working knowledge of the diagnostic and classificatory system of mental illness (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). If the clinician presumes to “know” the client through the category “depression”, for instance, the danger is (at least theoretically) that the client cannot be or act otherwise than what this categorization and intellectual conceptualization would suggest. The depressive diagnosis encapsulates the client and subordinates him or her to the definitional boundaries of the diagnosis. When we know that a client is depressed, we expect and even predict certain depressive behaviours and outcomes (cf. Ganzach, 2000; Westen & Weinberger, 2004). With this kind of egological knowing, however, the client becomes an “object” of the therapist’s knowledge, and is robbed of exteriority. Nothing mysterious or unknown remains – the miraculous evaporates – and the result is violence against the client.

### **Psychotherapy Praxis: Naturalism and Supernaturalism as Modes of Relating**

Most clinicians, of course, probably do not intentionally use calculative-instrumental reasoning in their interactions with clients. Most clinicians do not intend to harm or enact violence (in the Levinasian sense) against their clients. On the contrary, many clinicians experience themselves as having genuine concerns for their clients, and these genuine concerns are often believed to be independent of any instrumental ends on the clinician’s part. These concerns are manifest in

the therapist’s efforts to help clients achieve psychological health and well-being. Surely, these concerns for the client prevent the kind of manipulative, means/end calculation, and even violence, in relationships that has been described previously. Despite these genuine efforts, however, there appear to be moments in psychotherapy when therapists unwittingly close down possibilities for clients by denying their sacredness, and then the relational miracle cannot occur. Consider the following account of what occurred in the case of a particularly challenging adolescent client whom I will call “Ryan”<sup>2</sup>.

While Ryan is the defined client in this case, the real subject of the case for the purpose of this paper is the therapist – the author of this paper, myself – and my experience of the client. We will see that there were particular modes of relatedness (both naturalistic and supernaturalistic) that emerged between me, the other group psychotherapy members and the client that had a decided impact on the client and the group as a whole. When the predominant mode of relating to and understanding the client was from a naturalistic frame of reference, specific kinds of consequences for the client and the group followed. When the predominant mode of relating to and understanding the client was from a supernaturalistic frame of reference, specific kinds of consequences followed. However, both frames of reference, at least in the beginning, were tacit and unacknowledged, working their influence silently and unconsciously. Part of the purpose of writing about such a therapeutic experience is to make the frames of reference that helped to shape the therapy and their consequences more fully known.

### ***A Case Example***

Ryan was under court order to attend group therapy for adolescent sexual offenders after being charged with the molestation of a young child. Upon his admission to the group, Ryan made perfectly clear his negative feelings and attitudes toward social law, adults and authorities in general, and counsellors in particular. Throughout his tenure in the group, Ryan constantly denied any responsibility for the alleged perpetration, relying on a defensive strategy of blaming others, including his alleged victim. Other adolescent members of the group tried in vain to give Ryan feedback about his blaming and denial. Ryan continued to reject and deflect their efforts and expressed his disdain of the group and its members. At one point, Ryan just stopped participating, pulling his feet up into his chair, leaning over his arms, and

<sup>2</sup> “Ryan” is a pseudonym used to protect the client’s identity. In this instance, protecting the identity of the client also necessitated altering some of the details of the case study.

staring through the window.

As one of the co-therapists (and a training clinician) in the group, I felt ambivalent about Ryan. On the one hand, I knew his history contained a series of painful and even traumatic events including abandonment by his father, a substance-abusing mother, and multiple foster-care placements. My hope was that, if Ryan experienced consistent and healthy relationships through his interpersonal interactions in the group, he might begin to feel safe enough to accept responsibility for his part in the alleged perpetration and gradually loosen his defensive posture. On the other hand, Ryan seemed resistant to treatment, projecting a cavalier and defiant attitude toward others. He could be a charming young man, but his charm was often used to further his own agenda. If anyone in the group challenged his often-times self-serving motivations, he became hostile and attacking.

### *Naturalistic Modes of Relationship*

Ryan's angry and defensive behaviour began to wear on the group members and therapists as his behaviour was recapitulated week after week. I found myself feeling frustration and even anger with Ryan as he continued to reject other group members' invitations for interpersonal interaction. It was at this point that I began to view Ryan not so much as a separate person with his own ends and possibility, but as a hindrance to my own goals for the group. In my eyes, Ryan and his pathology were clearly derailing the progress of the group. I began to view Ryan instrumentally, in terms of whether he was facilitating or blocking what I considered to be the larger purposes of the group. Initially, the other group leader and I had discussed Ryan's potential diagnosis as Conduct Disorder, but as Ryan's behaviour became increasingly disruptive, the initially provisional diagnosis and its symptom specifications became more salient in relation to Ryan as the group continued. That is, I began to relate all of Ryan's actions in the group to the diagnosis itself. Everything he said or did seemed to confirm what the Conduct Disorder diagnosis delineated. Eventually, it was difficult for me to see Ryan as anything except a conduct disordered adolescent.

Borrowing from the language of Levinas (1961/1969), I "totalized" Ryan. I submitted and reduced him to the intellectual category of Conduct Disorder, and I could not imagine him being anything more than what that diagnosis suggested and outlined. In other words, I presumed to "know" all that he was or ever would be based upon his diagnosis. Ryan was surely destined for a grim future that I was certain would culminate in escalating antisocial behaviour and a prison sentence. In short, I lost hope for the possibility of any change in Ryan. In my mind, he was determined to the bleak life predicted by his

diagnostic pathology.

The point here, at least from the perspective of Levinas (1961/1969), is that I lost sight of my ethical obligation to this client. I totalized him within the constraints of a diagnostic category, and therefore I failed to see the "absolute otherness" or "exteriority" that grounded his sacredness. From a totalizing perspective, he could only be a hardened perpetrator and a manipulator of others. In a more Heideggerian (1959/1966) vein, I had failed to maintain a contemplative attitude before Ryan, and had thus failed to remain open to the possibility of the mystery – the augury – in him. Rather, I had adopted a calculating perspective. I had presumed to know everything that there was to know about him, even to the point of projecting a dismal and probably criminal future for him. I had forgotten Heidegger's cautionary insight – that one has access only to an incomplete or partial profile of others, and that it is in this incompleteness that the mystery, or the possibility of possibilities, lies. As van den Berg (1961) would say, rather than bringing Ryan "near", and rather than viewing him as someone with possibilities – which, for van den Berg, constitutes the miraculous – he was set aside and labelled a nuisance. He was thus cast aside as a hopeless case rather than brought "near" into the potential possibility of alternative, pro-social behaviours.

While I certainly did not have a clear sense of it at the time, I was viewing Ryan through a naturalistic frame of reference, or disclosing a naturalistic relationship with Ryan. I say that I did not have a clear sense of it at the time, because much of the disclosure of Ryan through a naturalistic frame of reference and my rendering of him as a hopeless case occurred tacitly and covertly. I did not possess (at the time) a thematic awareness of the therapeutic relationship as grounded in use-value, instrumentality and totalization. Nevertheless, I had performed a kind of intellectual reductionism on Ryan in addition to treating him instrumentally by placing my own therapy goals over and above his personhood. In addition, I had placed Ryan at great relational distance from me as a result of the instrumentality and totalization. All of these naturalistic prejudices had negative consequences for Ryan, as we will see.

### *Supernaturalistic Modes of Relationship*

One week, Ryan arrived for group, and, to the surprise and shock of everyone in the group, he admitted his responsibility in the alleged abuse incidents. He articulated a desire to "change his life", and asked the group for help in setting new life goals. Initially, I listened to Ryan with suspicion and hesitation, looking for a hidden and manipulative agenda on his part that would explain his sudden shift



in understanding. As he continued, however, I became convinced of his sincerity. I was absolutely stunned by him, and suddenly I felt humbled and ashamed. I was ashamed because I had given up hope for Ryan and his possibilities for change, and, in the face of that shame, I apologized to him in the group.

It was a watershed moment, not only for me personally as a training clinician, but for Ryan, as well as for the group as a whole. Indeed, it was a miracle. Who would have suspected such a response from Ryan? Certainly not anyone like myself who had been making the tacit naturalistic assumptions that I had been making. The “miracle” is that Ryan’s disclosure at that particular moment allowed for a relational shift and change in the group such that everyone in the group could *see* Ryan, or see a part of him that had previously remained concealed. In other words, there was an abrupt shift in the pattern that Ryan and I had established with my frozen perception of Ryan as a hopeless case and Ryan’s self-fulfilling behaviours. Openness to this shift was crucial to the relational miracle. Ryan himself had to be open to the unanticipated shift in the pattern of his behaviour. I had to be open to the unanticipated shift in the pattern, and the group members had to be open to it.

Once a space for this openness was created, it was as if we saw Ryan for the first time. In Levinasian terms, it was a disclosure of the infinite, in which one becomes aware of the other’s excess or infinity. The danger, from this perspective, is in slipping back into totalization and denying this vision of the infinite, by choosing instead to continue to see Ryan as containable or knowable within the boundaries of a conduct disordered youth. If I had chosen the route of totalization, I might have chosen to interpret Ryan’s sudden declaration of accountability as manipulation rather than sincere motivation to change, with the possibility of the miracle thus dissipating.

Being willing to disclose to Ryan within a supernaturalistic context meant that the group suddenly had the therapeutic space to discuss what my apology meant to Ryan – what it meant to have an authority-figure and a maternal-figure apologize for giving up on him. Ryan articulated how hurt, angry and dejected he had felt by what he had considered to be my earlier rejection and abandonment of him, and how his entire life had felt like a series of similar rejections and abandonments. These are the negative consequences of a naturalistic disclosure.

Ryan had felt deeply hurt by my rejection of him, and angered by my refusal to recognize his personhood. We often feel angry when someone violates or falsely accuses some aspect of our behaviour. Ryan had rightly felt violated by my refusal to recognize his possibilities for change. In sizing Ryan up through my

own intellectual analysis, I had presumed that he would continue to behave as he had always continued to behave. In my intellectual and clinical judgment, he was on a predictable trajectory of antisocial behaviour. This is the danger of the naturalistic view and the totalization that accompanies it – an insidious determinism and hopelessness.

What was different in this current relational and psychotherapeutic exchange with Ryan, however, was that few had apologized to him in this way before, and this apology led to a whole new life of feeling in him, including feelings of hope and of being cared for. These feelings, in turn, led to feelings of redemption and healing in Ryan. Like openness, hopefulness is a crucial ingredient in the relational miracle. Once I could see Ryan’s possibilities for change – that is, once I was hopeful in relation to him (rather than hopeless) – the miracle in the relationship was underway. Indeed, once both Ryan and I myself were hopeful, our relationship was immediately transformed. Hopefulness shatters the boundaries of our (intellectual) beliefs and expectations of the other and allows for the emergence of the unanticipated and the unexpected. We maintain a hopeful attitude in spite of what might be predicted diagnostically or experientially about the client. In this way, hopefulness is contrasted against the predictability and lawfulness of naturalistic disclosures.

Before this, I had experienced Ryan as a hindrance to therapy and as a delinquent dead-end case. This is what would have been predicted by Ryan’s diagnosis and by my naturalistic disclosure of him. However, in the face of both his transformation and my openness and hopefulness, I saw possibility, responsibility and hope for Ryan’s future. This is the context of a supernatural disclosure. Inversely, whereas Ryan had previously felt hurt, dejected and misunderstood, he now felt hopeful and appreciated. However, none of this would have been conceivable had I not been willing to humble myself in order to see what Heidegger (1959/1966) might call Ryan’s mystery or what Levinas (1961/1969) might describe as Ryan’s exteriority or the emergence of the infinite. Indeed, had I persisted in a naturalistic disclosure, I very likely would have interpreted Ryan’s behaviour as manipulative and disingenuous, and nothing would have become of the healing, redemption or miraculous in Ryan. For the miracle to occur, one must be willing to acknowledge the indescribable excess that defines the other and which eludes our comprehension – the recognition of the sacred in the other. This is the crux of a supernatural relationship.

Some might wonder about clients who seemingly resist change for much longer than Ryan. For instance, what if Ryan had never actively taken responsibility for the alleged perpetration of abuse?

Ryan might never have questioned his initial manipulation and alleged sexual violence against others. Clients, in general, might fail to act in ways that contradict and challenge their diagnoses, continuing instead to live out dysfunctional and destructive patterns of behaviour. This failure to change, however, does not mean that miracles cannot occur. Therapists can always invite miracles by creating a relational space that is characterized by therapeutic and relational openness and hopefulness. In the case of Ryan, the possibility for change was ever-present. I simply chose to conceal those possibilities in the naturalistic manner in which I disclosed Ryan. Hence, the danger is to lose hope for a client or to lose the capacity for therapeutic openness. To lose either of these capacities is to deny and destroy any possibilities for client change, which really ultimately means that the possibility for relationships (that is, relational miracles) and psychotherapy itself are destroyed.

### Conclusion and Implications for Psychotherapy

Some consequences follow for psychotherapy when therapists attempt to disclose clients in a supernatural mode of relationship. Firstly, if others are irreducible – if they resist our total comprehension given their infinitesimal mystery – then any knowledge therapists might have of their clients must be held tentatively. That is, regardless of what therapists “know” about their clients in terms of case conceptualization and diagnosis, clients continue to resist and elude that conceptualization. If therapists fail to respect and recognize this mystery, this fundamental sacredness, then the possibility of the miraculous cannot occur. God, or the divine, can only stand next to us as an embodied other – as the client – if we allow the mystery and the sacredness to reveal itself, and this requires a stance that accepts a provisional, tentative and incomplete knowledge of the client.

Many therapists might argue that they already hold their psychological knowledge tentatively or cautiously in relation to clients. For instance, many clinicians understand that, in practical contexts, the DSM categories are not objectively delineated categories, but descriptive guidelines that should never overshadow clients themselves (Frances, First, & Pincus, 1995).

Hence, some therapists may protest that they do not so readily reduce clients to diagnostic categories. Surely I am simply being a theoretical bull in a therapeutic china shop. However, I would submit that I am the kind of person, and that many of my colleagues are the kinds of persons, who are *keenly* aware of this kind of therapeutic reductionism and its consequences, and who therefore try very explicitly to avoid it, and yet often fail. Despite being mindful of

the limitations of the diagnostic categories, it is seductively easy to intellectually (and tacitly) attempt to contain clients within the categories themselves. Because, in many respects, the DSM categories act as organizing cognitive frameworks for understanding clients, and, because such frameworks are probably necessary for making sense of phenomena (Nickerson, 1998), it is easier than we might think to overshadow and even dominate clients with these frameworks.

Secondly, humility is an essential component of the supernatural mode of relationship and a necessary ingredient for the miraculous in relationships. In part, this means that therapists must relinquish their expert status if occupying this status means presuming to know everything about the client (intellectual reductionism) or if it means treating the client as a means to further some therapeutic and contractual end (instrumentalism). As we saw in the case of Ryan, humility was indispensable to the emerging miracle, because humility allowed Ryan’s sacredness and mystery to shine through. Indeed, when Ryan was faced with a naturalistic relational context of instrumentality and reductionism, it evoked only defensiveness and anger. Ryan was angry and hurt when he was faced with my rejection and wholesale categorization of him, and this intellectual categorization served only to anger and isolate him even further. The saving grace of the case, however, was humility. In the case of Ryan, I was humbled before another’s sacredness – not arrogantly certain – and I was humbled before my own inability to know, rather than instrumental and calculative.

Thirdly, therapists who disclose clients in a supernatural mode of relatedness maintain an attunement to *surprise*. That is, such therapists actively search for therapeutic instances in which the client surprises the therapist by behaving in a manner that is unanticipated. In many respects, these surprises are the sparks of therapeutic miracles that can either come to fruition or be ignored, overlooked and ultimately destroyed. Being surprised means that the therapist catches sight of the client’s sacredness and mystery, because the client’s unanticipated behaviour challenges the grounds of the therapist’s assumptions and provides a glimpse into the client’s infiniteness or unbounded incomprehensibility. This recognition of the client’s incomprehensibility is what gives the client possibility. Therapists ought to explore these surprising or unanticipated moments - moments when the depressed client laughs or makes a joke, moments in which the antisocial client takes responsibility - because these are the miracles that allow therapists and clients to see alternatives, hope and possibility. Indeed, being attuned to surprise is to be attuned to miracles, the miracles that bring redemption and healing to psychotherapy relationships.

## Referencing Format

Fisher Smith, A. (2010). Naturalistic and supernaturalistic disclosures: The possibility of relational miracles. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 10(2), 13 pp.. doi: 10.2989/IPJP.2010.10.2.8.1089

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## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge Brent Slife, Richard Rojcewicz and Scott Churchill for their insightful comments on early versions of this manuscript.

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