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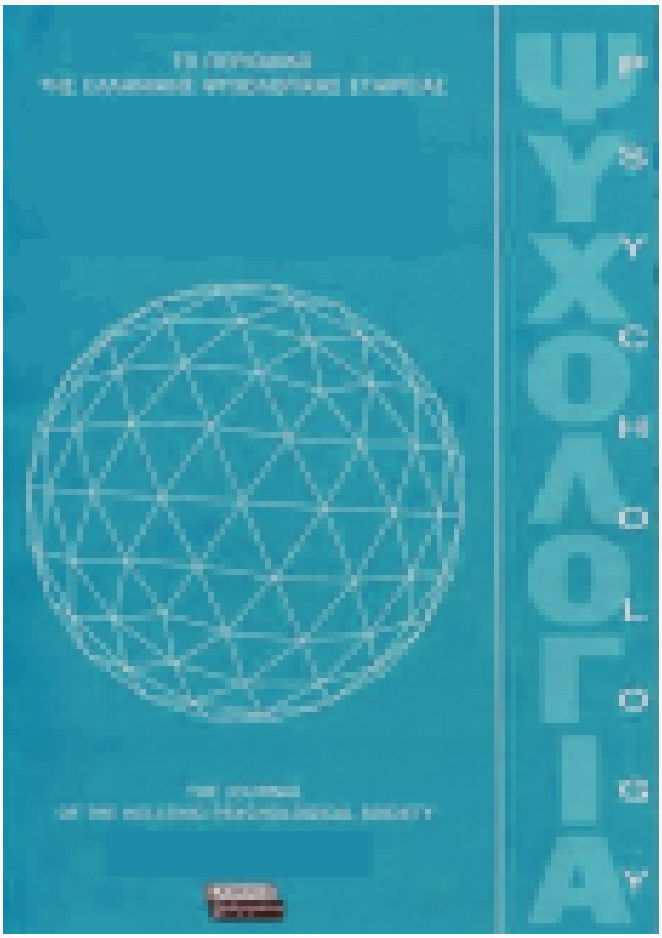

Introduction: Shall we or shall we not attempt to uncover our guiding axioms?

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Introduction: Shall we or shall we not attempt to uncover our guiding axioms?

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ABSTRACT Examining, and attempting to identify our major, basic or fundamental beliefs and dicta of psychology represents a challenging question that Al Mahrer attempts to answer. In this introductory note the benefits as well as the difficulties in answering these questions are presented along with the rationale of why it is important to address them. Implications for clinical practice and the development of the discipline are included.

Key words: Foundational beliefs, Philosophy of science, Psychotherapy.

I have known Al Mahrer for the last 17 years. I am familiar to his ideas, his theories and his passion for psychotherapy. When I met him first – in the early '80s – he was interested in the therapeutic ingredients of psychotherapy and in discovering how psychotherapy works. At the time, he was working in developing and revising his theory and therapy. During the last few years, and after he completed – for the moment – the revision and development of his own branch of experiential theory and psychotherapy, he has been asking questions related to psychotherapeutic change and implicit theories of psychotherapeutic practice. He has been increasingly interested in the nuts and bolts of the nature of human beings and the avenues to change. One of the things that he has always been is straightforward, ready to present and defend his ideas as unorthodox and heretic as they may be. He has found himself often in a space of fringe or marginal space, a place he earned with his lack for 'respect' for established knowledge. He tends to be constructively critical, examining, inquiring, and challenging what the rest of us may readily accept as reality or truth.

I first heard an earlier version of this contribution in a talk in Athens organized by the Division of Clinical Psychology of the Hellenic Psychological Society. I was impressed and I found his propositions challenging enough to merit a rejoinder. I wanted significant, respected and diverse members of the scientific community to react to Mahrer's ideas. The subject was as fresh and as contemporary as ever; Psychology in the beginning of the Millennium with new challenges and roles, and Greek Psychology on the rise, in a quest for the formation of an identity in the new family of the European Union; and all these with a sense of a new identity. It felt to me like one of the best opportunities to bring to a Greek and wider readership a fresh exploration of thinking in a relatively new area of concern in Greece: Philosophy of Science. When I suggested it to the Editor Anastasia Efklides, she

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agreed with me; it was an interesting and important subject for *Psychology: The Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society* to address.

Following this first acceptance of the project, I invited Al Mahrer to turn his talk into an article. He gladly accepted and I was certain then that his contribution would be substantial, challenging and out of the ordinary. Maybe because I know him well, or because he is predictably interesting, I was right. His contribution is indeed characterized by all of the above, and furthermore is complete. Al Mahrer asks some important questions in relation to our discipline, provides us with his own answers, and suggests a method that we can apply to answer the same questions, if we judge that they are important to address. As usual, his position, as outrageous and fringe as it may be, makes sense.

With such a position at hand, finding those that would accept to read and comment on Mahrer's ideas was a challenging job. I wanted to choose those who would have something to add, change, propose and help move forward the thoughts and ideas. I also wanted them to be from different places, different backgrounds and different sensitivities. I wanted them to be well known, but still fresh in their thinking, old and young. Among the dozen of names that came to mind, I chose those ones that I thought would provide different and contradictory comments to Mahrer's proposals; I wanted plurality and openness. I was lucky to intrigue four distinguished colleagues, who have contributed significantly in their own areas of expertise and have marked the field of Psychology. Frank Dumont, a beloved, and respected colleague at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, an expert on inferential processes, with significant contributions in the area of personality, an author of several articles and books, critical, with set ideas and a clear head was my first catch. Shigeru Iwakabe, a junior and promising scholar from Saporo Universiy, in Japan, specializing in emotions in psychotherapy, a critical thinker, whose work on emotions has been positively received by the scientific community, was the second to agree. The addition of Colin Feltham, the Editor of the *British Journal of Counseling*, a well-known and internationally respected colleague, provided for a 'European' reading of Mahrer's thesis. Robert Neimeyer, the internationally known constructivist theorist, offered a constructivistic reading of the contribution. The stage had been set. Four distinguished colleagues addressing an issue that has direct implications to psychological theory building and practice guiding.

Mahrer provided in his contribution a conceptually complete set of questions: What are the basic axioms, or beliefs that our discipline rests upon? Or, what are the basic dicta that provide the conceptual framework for the development of our understanding of human beings? And, he also provided a long provisional list of his own axioms and dicta, – the result of a painstaking process – and a method that we can use to uncover our own answers to these questions. Had this been all, and it is a lot, we could speak of a proposed model to follow and an 'interesting' position in relation to the basic axioms of psychotherapy. But Al does not stop there.

Al insists on presenting us with a challenge and an invitation. The challenge is to articulate and to specify our own philosophical beliefs and values. His invitation is directed to each of us as individuals who profess to help people change, but also, to all of us collectively as a discipline, a specialty, or a group of scientists who share common beliefs and ideas about human beings and psychotherapeutic change.

Is this a good idea? Maybe yes, Dumont and Iwakabe think not. They are right and they have their point to make. They make sense. Mahrer professes that uncovering and specifying our basic beliefs about the nature of human beings and the mechanism of change are quintessential steps in calling ourselves scientists and in advancing the discipline to a higher, more

sophisticated or to a 'true' scientific level. I could argue for or against this position – as some of the invited reaction papers do –. The real value of what Mahrer suggests is the process of uncovering private, implicit, and by nature primordial material that may help us develop as psychotherapists. Whether this exercise will facilitate the development of psychology or psychotherapy as a discipline is irrelevant, somewhat subjective, and definitely individual. Neimeyer seems to be sceptical about it. Knowing where the roots of our understandings, conceptualizations and beliefs about human beings lie, brings us closer into better describing clinical and psychotherapeutic phenomena. The more we know of our basic beliefs and assumptions, the better we can address questions that relate to human beings. The more we become conceptually clear the better psychotherapists we become. It is the uncovering of our beliefs that counts and not the actual content of our beliefs.

The very same issues that Mahrer brings to the fore, have started to be addressed in different fields of psychology, and similar questions as to how and why we proceed the way we proceed with our clients, let this be diagnosis or treatment, are being questioned with the same sense of purpose; clarity, and accountability. While Mahrer adheres to the belief that one's own better sense of what we believe in makes us better therapists, third party payers (mainly for the moment in North America) argue for evidence that what we profess works does indeed work. Therefore, as we are approaching a state of a growing accountability in the psychological services offered to our clients, questions as to how we conduct our therapies, and how do we know that what we do is beneficial to our clients have arisen. There has been a growing movement to re-establish or re-define the criteria used to establish validity of the services offered. It may be that Mahrer's proposal can help us as a discipline to move in that domain as well.

It is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks in forming an identity as a psychotherapist, as a specialist who professes to be able to help heal wounds, on one hand, and develop the potentials of the psyche on the other, to identify our theory of human beings. By theory, I refer to the basic principles that we adhere to, and the basic assumptions, credo, and axioms that guide our understanding of human beings. It is difficult for me to picture us being effective in helping in a meaningful way if we do not have a clear understanding of the nature of people's existence, the causes of their problems, and the method that can alleviate the symptoms or help them change.

In reading the contribution of Mahrer, I found myself challenged to articulate my own belief system, to explicate and untangle my own personal beliefs. I found myself resisting the idea and in finding different, valid and smart (I may add) reasons as to why I should not do it. First, I doubted its usefulness. Then, I did not like the cockiness of Mahrer's writing style. And then I found the process tautological; how can I identify and specify something that by its own definition is to remain elusive and unknown? I felt that I was asked to become self-psychoanalyzed. These defences against even trying this exercise attracted my attention. The mere fact that I defended made me commit more if only because I seemed to have such a strong reaction against it. I found myself initially committed to fussing and complaining but not to trying out what AI proposed. The task was difficult. My first attempt in explicating my general belief system (before I even attempted to address issues of development, psychopathology, etc.) came out with a general statement of how I conceive of human beings. The closest I could come to an answer was: (a) human beings have the capacity to guide themselves, find meaning in life, and solutions to their problems, and, (b) human beings are benevolent creatures with an incredible capacity to learn new behaviours and ways of being. The process of articulating these beliefs was difficult and it represented what I

often call 'constipated thinking'; too much effort for too little results. In terms of experience, I had the same difficulties that Robert Neimeyer reports. The statements were provisional and it seems they need further explication, elaboration, and analysis. It was time and energy consuming process, yet a process that helped me to verbalize, and specify (still not to my complete satisfaction) a few of my personal beliefs. The benefit of such an exercise is that it promoted the development of a personal conceptual map that guides my psychotherapeutic practice both at a conceptual level, that is, the manner I make sense, construct, and relate to the client, and on a technical level, on my choice of interventions and therapeutic strategies. The net effect of specifying and creating my own list of provisional beliefs is that it allows me a conceptually and technically better grasp of our discipline. More and more, it seems to me that the questions that Mahrer poses are worthwhile. Attempting to answer these questions has helped me to become better and more efficient therapist but also a better thinker about psychotherapy.

The rejoinders - as planned - approached Mahrer's ideas from different perspectives and added, corrected, changed, or proposed alternative ways of approaching the same issue and of addressing the same question. I liked that. Different ideas: competing, challenged, and elaborated. We all thought hard, and we did our best to add some knowledge or pose questions. This was done with respect, openness and a sincere and honest interest.

There is a great Greek poet, Constantinos Cavafis, who in his poem 'Ithaca' describes how the voyage towards Ithaca (a legendary island, homeland of Ulysses) is by itself an enriching and unique experience, regardless of whether Ithaca pleases us or not. What Ithaca provided was the opportunity to travel, and to learn through the process of travelling. In that sense, the process of discovering one's own assumptions is rewarding in itself. I guess that those of us involved in psychotherapy process research can relate to, and appreciate, the difference between process and outcome.

Is the method suggested by Mahrer the best method to follow? I find it systematic enough to be thorough, rational enough to not be trusted. After all, how well can I analyze my own belief system, without re-inventing old clichés and selecting cognitive congruent information to come to my foreground? The system is also exhaustive enough to be avoided (the lazy in me I guess). But I have no better solution, no better method to suggest. Dumont, Iwakabe, Feltham, and Niemeyer, however, offer some alternative ways of approaching these questions.

Regardless of the final outcome of such an enterprise, I find the invitation challenging, and I hope that the readers will attempt themselves to discover the well-hidden assumptions of their own theory of human beings. I am pretty sure that if enough of us decide that this is an important enterprise, as Mahrer suggests, it can become a wonderful opportunity to help ourselves, our clients, and our discipline to move further, to become more efficient, more complete and more effective. And if not, at least we will have had the pleasure of trying out something novel and challenging. Keeping in mind that the Ithaca voyage is more about process and less about outcome, we may decide to undertake the adventure and boldly go where no man - or human - has ever gone before....

Bon voyage and good reading!