

PSYCHOTHERAPY AS CONTEMPLATIVE CONVERSATION

LA PSICOTERAPIA COMO CONVERSACIÓN CONTEMPLATIVA

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Abstract

The conception of psychotherapy as contemplative conversation is presented. As preliminary request training in Conscious Attention is required, a 30 session model of how to do it is offered, the EAC/ULL. The ontological nature of conversation in human life is explored and tools are offered to reach out for its depth and amplitude. To address the topic of contemplation, neuroscientific research is reviewed. Likewise, practical implications for the therapeutic sessions are derived from this approach.

Keywords: *contemplative neuroscience, contemplation, therapeutic conversation.*

Resumen

Se presenta la visión de la psicoterapia como una conversación contemplativa. Como preliminar a la conversación contemplativa se propone el Entrenamiento en Atención Consciente y se ofrece un modelo en 30 sesiones (EAC/ULL). Se plantea la naturaleza ontológica de la conversación en la vida humana y se ofrecen ejes para comprender su profundidad y alcance. También se aborda la investigación neurocientífica actual para acercarse al tema de la contemplación. Por último, se abordan cuestiones prácticas para utilizar este enfoque en la sesión terapéutica.

Palabras clave: *neurociencia contemplativa, contemplación, conversación terapéutica.*



(...) psychoanalysis is not a science in the same sense that physics or chemistry are, but rather a secular form of spirituality. (Safran, 2003, 2)

Introduction

Let's begin with the context:

A few months ago, when the director of this journal, Luís Ángel Saúl, mentioned the idea of writing an essay about conversation in psychotherapy, I immediately felt drawn to the project and agreed to send him an article with this title. When I made this commitment, I could not have known that something would completely divert my attention from this topic. That something is COVID-19.

Soon afterward, the Dean of the School of Psychology and Logopedia at ULL, María Ángeles Alonso, asked me to collaborate on a webpage about the coronavirus, the purpose of which was not only to inform about the virus, but also to offer resources to help health professionals, as well as the general public, cope with the situation. Specifically, I was asked to provide tools to relieve anxiety and depression. I turned my full attention to this task.

These resources are now available as thirty short sessions of approximately ten minutes each in the section Recursos para la Población General, on the webpage www.ull.es/coronavirus

The Universidad de La Laguna Conscious Attention Training (EAC/ULL)

Even though this program is available to anyone online, I will provide a brief description of it in this article for two reasons. First, because the Conscious Attention Training serves as a preliminary step for contemplative conversation. The program provides a map of consciousness which is useful for both formal and informal practice. It explains how to work with sensory awareness, which is the window to external perception, and body awareness, the window to the interior, in addition to mental and interpersonal awareness. With this kind of map it is much easier to work with negative states of mind as well as positive ones. The purpose of the program is to encourage practitioners to adopt a formal and informal practice of awareness in their lives.

The first task was an obvious one: to provide quick and effective ways of “bringing one’s attention home,” as my colleagues from Madrid’s Hospital La Paz—who, led by Beatriz Rodríguez Vega, set up a program similar to EAC/ULL—would say. The first session of our program is called “A Pause for Awareness,” and it comes with precise instructions. The three sessions that follow are devoted to information about stress, and how to relax in a simple and effective way. Next, the basic practice is explained and instructions are given on how to create a *sacred space*.

The basic practice is described starting with three commitments practitioners make to themselves:

1. Embodied stillness. This includes knowing how to ground oneself in an erect posture and feel the sensations surrounding one’s body; and unders-

tanding the role of embodied posture in Conscious Attention practice. All these elements come in handy when working with the internal perception of one's own body.

2. Familiarity with focused attention on breathing experienced as a specific and accessible support for the practice. There is a very subtle aspect involved here, which I learned of from my teacher, Lama Tashi— the tendency to becoming attached to the object of attention itself. This attachment is contrary to the type of passive attention that is the goal of this practice.
3. Bring back the focus to the object or support of attention. Let go of distractions. Notice attention changes and conflicts. Work on attitude with regards to attention gaps. Loving kindness.

The primary goal of this practice is to help the practitioner stabilize attention. At the same time, it helps understand the nature of consciousness, the nature of becoming aware. The issue here is that typically awareness comes late. As Zambrano (1958/1988) says:

It happens in reality, as much in personal life and in history, that only in certain exceptional moments does doing correspond to willing. Indeed, what characterizes human experience is exactly the twofold necessity underlying any action: on the one hand required by circumstance, to meet that challenge which circumstance is continually casting before Man and to which he must respond even at the cost of being annihilated; and on the other hand, required by his own internal condition; it is exactly here that the tragedy of human experience lies: every man knows himself, even before thinking, as doing and carrying out; he knows after he has acted. When he does something, that which most answers his passions, his longings, he does it without knowing that he is doing so (pp. 62-63).

With her customary lucidity, Zambrano hits the nail on the head with regards to the need to be able to observe experience as it happens. In classical terms, this is tantamount to being able to take the *witness's* seat.

Let's return to the dynamics of training: during the next sessions, the practitioner's task is to practice. Repetition is the key to practice. That is what the persistence of ritual, the guardrails without which culture wouldn't exist, teaches us. Practice is a window in which what matters is that you care, as Hokusai says. It does matter, a lot, how we do what we do in our practice. It is necessary to repeat a sequence that will help you see yourself doing what you do.

Once some stability on concentrating attention on the experience of being in the present moment is achieved, life begins to change. At this point it becomes necessary to have at one's disposal a map with which to order the small chaos of the new internal and external sensations one is beginning to experience, as a consequence of the practice. This is easily verifiable if one is willing to commit to practicing ten to fifteen minutes a day— if it is twice a day, better. The construction of the map involves, as it is natural, the gradual discovery of new territories of one's own body and mind. In this phase, therapeutic writing can help.

Next, the organization of consciousness is tackled in more detail with the map of consciousness, on the basis of four quadrants, as Siegel (2018) did:

First quadrant: the five senses

Second quadrant: embodied awareness (interoception and proprioception)

Third quadrant: mental awareness (operations versus mental content)

Fourth quadrant: interpersonal awareness (complex mental states)

As I indicated earlier, this program is available on the ULL webpage devoted to the coronavirus—a crisis which is a gamechanger and which perhaps will also make us more aware of how we participate in the construction of the realities we inhabit. The intention underlying the thirty recordings is that they may be useful and inspiring to my colleagues, students, friends and anyone else who might benefit from the practice.

From the point of view that will be argued in this article in order to understand psychotherapy as contemplative conversation, Conscious Attention Training proves to be a prerequisite. In other words, in order to enter the contemplative stance, it is necessary to draw on a certain ability to stabilize attention. Gathering attention precedes contemplation, as has always been known in religious contexts.

Before delving into the nature of the contemplative gaze, we will discuss the topic of conversation, or rather the ontological status of conversation in human life. We will tackle this subject with the help of Maturana, Wittgenstein and Arnau.

Next, we will address the nature of contemplation, not from a religious angle, which is where tradition preserved practices, but from current neuroscientific research on the one hand, and from its psychotherapeutic side, on the other.

Finally, we will ask what are the implications of the idea of psychotherapy as contemplative conversation with regards to practice during a session. That is to say, in order to build the therapeutic relationship, on the one hand, and to lead the session, on the other.

The Ontological Nature of Conversation

Psychotherapy is a conversation. Freud already said as much when he spoke of *the talking cure*. That is why it is important to know what type of reality we are talking about.

Conversation is spoken language. It leads us to the orality of language, which is the natural and pristine condition of language, of our being *linguistic beings*, as Walter Ong (1984) and Humberto Maturana (1994) argued. On the other hand, as Arnau (2014) explains in his *Manual de Filosofía portátil* [*“The Portable Philosophy Manual”*], it was Wittgenstein who opened the door to the therapeutic value of language. His philosophy is concerned with tracing the boundaries between sense and nonsense and determining the role of language in human thought and life. The author of the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein, 1953/2017) held the belief that what is truly important in life is ineffable. Yet, he also established that the structure of language is what determines the way in which we think the world (Arnau, 2014).

Word meanings come from their different uses, and these uses have nothing more in common than a “family resemblance.” The ultimate purpose of Wittgenstein’s philosophy is therapeutic, namely, to eliminate intellectual confusion stemming from an erroneous conception of the nature of language (Arnau, 2014). Moreover, it is precisely because we belong to a linguistic community governed by rules, and we rely on collective criteria for our private experiences, that we can have a language that refers to these experiences.

Conversation is the natural place in which language usage occurs and meanings are created and recreated. Maturana, who elaborated a biological and ontological conception of language, maintains that conversation is the *natural ecological niche* of humans. He succinctly summed up his contribution as follows:

Conversation is the weave of human life, and survival its fundamental phenomenon. This implies that the conservation of organization and adaptation is the generative mechanism by which this phenomenon is preserved. The implementation of this mechanism results in learning, which is observable. The preservation of consistency between the behavior of an organism and the disturbances the medium exerts upon it is:

- a) A necessary condition of existence of the organism, implicit in the preservation of organization and adaptation during ontogeny and,
- b) A result of the fact that the structural change of the organism, including its nervous system, always follows a course determined by the coincidence of environmental disturbances and the preservation of organization and adaptation, which effectively constitute the condition of existence of the organism.

Maturana continues, adding that this may sound like like a tautology, and it is. Ultimately it is a system of equations with a few variables: the initial structure (a zygote in an organism with sexuated reproduction, for example) and the sequence of disturbances that constitute the effective medium in which the ontogeny of the organism takes place, which, once fixed, determine a single outcome: the individual history of the organism consistent with the medium (niche) until its death (loss of its congruence in the medium).

Stressing the conversational character of psychotherapy helps clarify a few things, such as its presential character, its immediacy. It occurs at the pre-reflective level, which is also the level where conversation takes place in daily life. Because of this, the formal Practice of Conscious Attention (from three to five minutes), carried out by patient and therapist together, helps the session unfold in real time, that of life, which is corporeal—versus the virtual time of the internet or the accelerated time of mental consciousness. Psychotherapy is a space of affective resonance.

Thirty years ago, Guillem Feixas was a young professor at the University of Barcelona and I had recently joined the faculty at the Universidad de la Laguna in Tenerife, Canary Islands. In 1990 we crossed paths in Memphis, Tennessee, at the *First Congress on Constructivism in Psychotherapy*, organized by R. Neimeyer and

Michael J. Mahoney, with whom we were both independently acquainted. When Guillem and I met, we realized that we were in the same situation, as we both were coming up for promotion and thus needed to craft an educational curriculum as part of our dossier. In the following months, Feixas and I exchanged ideas and materials for our respective curricula. We both came up for review and both were awarded tenure in 1992. Later, we decided to put together our projects, and that is how *Aproximaciones a la psicoterapia, una introducción a los tratamientos psicológicos* ["Approximations to Psychotherapy, an Introduction to Psychological Treatments"] was born. It was published in 1993 and was reprinted year after year until now; this year, 2020, the contract with the publisher expires and soon the book will no longer be available. So this seems like an appropriate time to undertake a reflection, shared across the distance, on what has happened in the field over the past thirty years or so. I will proceed by contrast with respect to my understanding of the field when we wrote the Feixas and Miró textbook (1993).

After a couple of introductory chapters on the history and concept of psychotherapy, the book followed a clear-cut structure: to present what we thought were the five fundamental models comprising the field of psychotherapies and end by raising the issue of how to integrate this body of knowledge. Our gamble came down to the fact that, with the development of a scientific psychotherapy, our ability to relieve unnecessary suffering was going to be more effective. This premise was ultimately the book's common thread. But now I no longer see it this way. Incidentally, mindfulness is not mentioned one single time in the book. In the early nineties it was not on the horizon of psychotherapy. But from 2000 on it began to experience exponential growth.

My perspective on the object of the discipline has also changed. Now I lean more toward de-pathologization and the idea that in the twenty-first century it may be more useful to view the discipline as belonging in the spiritual sphere rather than the fringes of medical treatments. When I was young and wanted to be admitted to the club of clinical psychology, I had more faith in diagnostic categories than I do now, after the multiple scandals with the DSM and the growing institutionalization and the sheer proliferation of the commercial uses (the pharmaceutical industry) of diagnostic labels, which greatly contribute to a cold and abstract reading of suffering in the advanced hyper-technologized societies in which we live nowadays. In terms of determining what inner life is about, there is a huge gap between Freud, who detested bicycles and typewriters alike, and consuming one's life in front of a screen.

Between Freud's obscene elements in the unconscious and Wittgenstein's linguistic mental health, there is also the passage from a first to a second industrial revolution. Psychotherapy is a cultural practice which developed over the twentieth century, *the century of the self*. As Eva Illouz lucidly argued, the therapeutic discourse, along with contractual law and economic liberalism, has played a central role in the construction of the secularized and autonomous present-day self which is the legacy of modernity (Illouz, 2010).

Psychotherapy as a cultural practice begins with the cultural impact of psychoanalysis. In a society in great ferment due to the first industrial revolution, which brought changes ranging from the automobile to women's suffrage, the psychoanalyst's study was a safe place where one could speak about one's biography without fear of being morally judged. It offered an alternative to the moralizing traditional religion, the space where what Rieff (1966) called *compromise therapies* had established themselves. Among them, he includes traditional forms through which ritual was employed to reintegrate individuals to the order of the group.

The analytic technique practiced three or four times a week introduced by Freud helped people adopt a distanced, analytic attitude toward their own experience, so that with time they would be able to know what was happening to them while it was happening to them. In practice, free association, similarly to mindfulness, contributes to develop the stance of *witness* toward one's own experience.

Psychoanalysis, however, was elitist. Even so, it became very popular thanks to film and the publishing industry. The concepts of unconscious, defense mechanisms, and, above all, repression and its "pathologizing" role quickly entered the collective imaginary. A couple of decades later, the collective imaginary broadened with concepts borrowed from *humanist psychology*: personal development, self-realization, authenticity, achievement, etc. Among all of these, the star concept was without a doubt self-realization.

As Illouz (2010) explained, self-realization functioned as a negative social category. That is to say, it worked because when you hear your teachers talk about self-realization you realize you are not realized. In the seventies, weekend workshops of personal development in multiple versions proliferated. At this time psychotherapy became popular and became available to everyone—it was "democratized" (Miró 2018).

Nowadays the personal development or self-help industry moves millions of euros. And, as has been so often pointed out, it contributes to generate the demand it purports to remedy. This industry is unable to question the premise upon which it is built, that is, that we have something that needs improving. But aren't we originally pure, as Buddhism proposes?

With the rise of positive psychology and the expansion of the mindfulness movement in clinical practice, the negative bias that has dominated the field of psychological treatments since the sixties and seventies in the last century has lessened. The study of virtues, as well as the practice of the virtuous circle of mindfulness, have contributed to promote a more positive, kinder and more benevolent view of human beings.

Contemplation, Neuroscience and Psychotherapy

Understanding the nature of contemplation is no longer the exclusive domain of sapiential traditions. These days we have a contemplative neuroscience at our disposal. The data from the neuroscientific research are available to us, and this

gives us a huge advantage when it comes to describing and understanding conscious states, their contents and functions. These data are also relevant when it comes to doing psychotherapy or being present in the contemplative conversation that psychotherapy can be in the twenty-first century. I would say that this idea of the discipline is consistent not only with Baumann's idea of *liquid modernity*, but also with the realization that the narratives/great histories of religions from the past are in crisis. This crisis actually began when the cold reason of scientific rationalism triumphed. As Rieff (1966) said, the *homo religiosus* of pre-modernity has been replaced by the *homo psicologicus* of post-modernity.

— *The consciousness that we are versus phenomenal consciousness*

Explaining phenomenal consciousness is not difficult insofar as everyone can easily know from their experience the sweet taste of sugar, the warmth of the sun, or the green surface of the table. The five senses are five windows onto five types of universes of lived experiences. Exploring them is one of the objectives of the EAC/ULL.

Along with the sensations pertaining to the exterior—external perception—internal perception, interoception and proprioception, also form part of the phenomenal experience. All contemplative practices throughout time work with corporeality. Examples include the rituality of postures to pray, meditate, or move doing tai-chi or chi-qong, or dancing, as in Sufi whirling.

Mental and interpersonal consciousness are also part of phenomenal consciousness. In the first case, we delve into our use of language and the internal or private talk and its kindness. The Practice of Conscious Attention with regards to thoughts, memories, and so on contributes to greatly broaden the referential space of the mind, the coordinates of solitude, or the quality of the soundtrack of each person's movie - recognizing, once again, the cinematic character of present-day personal life.

Conscious Attention on the interpersonal level contributes to becoming familiar with establishing positive states of confidence, kindness, and affective resonance on one hand, and with the exploration of mental states that are complex or interesting for their negativity or some other feature, on the other.

So far so good. Once we have a map of the phenomenal consciousness, the unavoidable question is—is this all there is? Or is there something else? What about the issue of the self, of the “I am”? All sapiential traditions have spoken about a consciousness separate from phenomenal consciousness, which is always present beneath the surface. Philosophers like to call it “Being,” Judaism and Christianity “God,” Buddhism “Buddha-nature,” and so on. In each case, however, what is postulated is a nature devoid of specific or phenomenal content. It is frequently described as pure light or internal silence and, above all, as something that happens.

From the neuroscientific point of view, it is possible to study silent states of consciousness. Bernard Baars (2013), from the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla,

California, published a very interesting paper, titled “*A Scientific Approach to Silent Consciousness.*” This silent consciousness is equivalent to what has been referred to as *the consciousness that we are here.*

The idea underlying sapiential traditions is that silent consciousness, the consciousness that we are, exists continuously in the three states (wakefulness, sleep, and deep sleep); and that contemplative practices are ways to facilitate access to this consciousness that we are, by pulling back the curtain that hides truth, as the Greeks said.

The access to silent consciousness is frequently interpreted in ontological terms, as a more direct (and transcendent) communication with the *creator* or as a sensation of vastness corresponding to the Buddhists’ *oceanic consciousness* or other types of metaphysical realities. But if we adhere to a scientific approach, these types of interpretations are not pertinent here. It is better to rely on empirical evidence and see what can be said about the states of silent consciousness from the standpoint of neuroscience. In the essay we are discussing, Baars adheres to the task and goes on to make the following points:

In the neuroscientific context, one of the fundamental discoveries was what Benson achieved with transcendental meditation (continual silent and internal repetition of a sound mantra). This brought him to the formulation of the existence of a “relaxation response” which could counter the stress reaction homeostatically. The relationship between silent consciousness and relaxation response, however, is not clearly established and requires more research.

Baars proposes that silent consciousness is produced by a redundancy effect created by the continued repetitions of sounds, views, or actions. Advanced practitioners spend hundreds or thousands of hours silently repeating a syllable, a posture, a breathing technique, a hand gesture, etc. Gestalt psychologists explored the *ganzfeld* and the satiation effect, which were both the product of repetition. As they require no special apparatus, they may have been part of the most ancient contemplative practices.

The *ganzfeld* effect occurs when a visual field lacks temporal or spatial contrast. The explanation seems to reside in the fact that many of the visual neurons are contrast-sensitive, and in these conditions they must drop down to a baseline. Brightness and hue disappear during *ganzfeld* effect “blank-outs” while consciousness continues. As examples of this effect, Baars (2013) quotes the following haikus from the Kashmiri tradition:

- 1) In summer when you see the entire sky endlessly clear, *enter such clarity,*
- 2) Simply by looking into the blue sky beyond clouds, *the serenity.*

Baars points out that since a blue sky does not have temporal or spatial contrasts it could be regarded as a *ganzfeld* effect condition. In terms of vision, images that are stabilized also have a function of redundancy. The repetition of words, heavily employed in all contemplative practices, has a similar effect. For example, the repetition of mantras is a sensory-motor action which, with practice, diminishes

redundant elements in consciousness.

Practitioners describe moments of silence as separate or discontinuous moments with respect to the normal flow, as if they were a gap in the flow of conscious sensations, images or internal monologue. In this respect, perhaps they could be studied with a gap-detection task.

Another type of stimulus leading to silence is endogen silences, which may inhibit the perception of external sounds. Binaural sounds, which are heard in the center of the head, can also produce a state of silent consciousness.

During silent states, absorption and pleasure are also often reported. The former refers to the engagement with a single stream of thought. Silences are also described as “blissful,” which adds a hedonic dimension to the experience.

Baars’s conclusion points to the fact that the conscious experience is believed to involve widespread oscillations in the cortico-thalamic circuit. Thus the silent consciousness may correspond to an increment in theta-alpha oscillation power spreading from the cortex with minimal higher “content” frequencies, as it has been reported frequently in research on contemplative practices. The ultimate metaphor Baars offers in his paper points to an analogy between musical training and the training in contemplative practices. Neither is arbitrary: *Contemplative training seems designed to evoke certain conscious experiences, particularly “consciousness without content.”* Baars concludes by calling for a principled method to study the psychophysics of momentary silent consciousness (Baars, 2013, 95).

Besides the neurosciences, the other privileged point from which to explore the nature of contemplation is psychotherapy itself. Thanks to the proliferation of Interventions Based in Mindfulness (IBM), nowadays the practice of mindfulness is fully integrated into the treatment of any disturbance. All the so-called third-generation therapies have adopted the practice of mindfulness as an important part of the intervention. Of course psychoanalytic and systemic therapy have also incorporated the practice of mindfulness to their current repertoire.

Applications in Group and Individual Therapy Sessions

Formal contemplative practices such as silence with a focus on breathing and posture for five minutes can be a very beneficial way to begin both group and individual sessions. In standardized mindfulness programs like MBSR or MBCT, the session begins in silence. On the one hand, this approach makes it possible for everyone to “join” in the session, and on the other, it establishes a peaceful rhythm for the remainder of the encounter.

Most of the problems we deal with in consultation one way or the other have something to do with the reaction to stress, anxiety, or depression. If, alongside the individual consultation, the patient is able to undertake a training in Conscious Attention such as the EAC/ULL, the time of treatment may be considerably shortened. Looking to the future, this is not a trivial issue, as we are going to need all available resources to overcome this crisis and emerge from it—as well as one can

emerge from a crisis—with a greater awareness of the precious gift that life is. And especially “*la vita activa*” and “*la vita contemplativa*”.

The practice of mindfulness is not a miracle cure, nor does it offer a quick fix like a tranquillizer. In the long run, however, it aligns itself with life, with the life that is worth living. On this point I prefer to let the poet Roger Keyes speak, who expressed what I would like to be able to say in the clear and simple way of Japanese haikus. He wrote this poem while he was a disciple of a Japanese painter named Hokusai.

Hokusai says look carefully.
He says pay attention, notice.
He says keep looking, stay curious.
He says there is no end to seeing.
He says look forward to getting old.
He says keep changing,
you just get more who you really are.
He says get stuck, accept it, repeat
yourself as long as it is interesting.
He says keep doing what you love.
He says keep praying.
He says every one of us is a child,
every one of us is ancient,
every one of us has a body.
He says every one of us is frightened.
He says every one of us has to find
a way to live with fear.
He says everything is alive—
shells, buildings, people, fish,
mountains, trees, wood is alive.
Water is alive.
Everything has its own life.
Everything lives inside us.
He says live with the world inside you.
He says it doesn't matter if you draw,
or write books. It doesn't matter
if you saw wood, or catch fish.
It doesn't matter if you sit at home
and stare at the ants on your veranda
or the shadows of the trees
and grasses in your garden.
It matters that you care.
It matters that you feel.
It matters that you notice.

It matters that life lives through you.
 Contentment is life living through you.
 Joy is life living through you.
 Satisfaction and strength
 is life living through you.
 He says don't be afraid.
 Don't be afraid.
 Love, feel, let life take you by the hand.
 Let life live through you.

Summary

This essay discusses psychotherapy as contemplative conversation. It proposes Conscious Attention Training as a premise to contemplative conversation and provides a model in thirty sessions (EAC/ULL). It examines the ontological nature of conversation in human life and introduces core concepts in order to grasp its depth and reach. It also reviews current neuroscientific research in order to approach the topic of contemplation. Finally, it touches on practical issues pertaining to the use of this approach in therapeutic sessions. However, much work remains to be done to unfold the ideas outlined here.

Translated by Adria Frizzi

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