Koichi Togashi, *The Psychoanalytic Zero*: A Decolonizing Study of Therapeutic Dialogues.

Routledge, London and New York. 2020

Koichi Togashi trained as a psychoanalyst in New York (in English, his second language) and then returned in 2006 to his native Japan, where he has endeavored to integrate self psychological and intersubjective perspectives with the cultural and clinical experiences that he encountered at home. In order to fully engage his patients, he discovered he needed to go beyond the “understanding and explaining” that has traditionally characterized Kohut’s (1981) Self Psychology and enter into a distinctly Japanese realm characterized by such concepts as *emptiness, makoto* (sincerity) and *mono –no-aware* (appreciative acceptance of transience).

“The Psychoanalytic Zero” offers the fruit of that integration and a window into how our theories are shaped by their cultural context and how they must stretch when translated into new ones.

Togashi’s treatment of a young woman, Miyuki, whose face was disfigured by a fire when she was four years old offers a beautiful example how his clinical acumen is shaped by his analytic training in conjunction with the Japanese moral ideal of *makoto,* which can be translated as “sincerity” but conveys something profounder than that English equivalent suggests. *Makoto,* says Togashi, implies a “pure and selfless mind,” one “open to the cosmic tide of the psychoanalytic process” in which each participant is both aware of, but transcends, “their personal, professional and societal roles” in order engage at a level of radical sincerity or authenticity. In Miyuki’s case, social convention required everyone, herself included, to minimize or ignore her prominent facial scars. For a long time, she affected a cheerful nonchalance about her appearance, though she entered treatment complaining that her family treated her differently than her siblings, never arguing with her, always treating her with great delicacy, leading ultimately to a profound sense of unreality and non-recognition. For a long time, the subject of her appearance remained off limits in therapy as well. Finally, one day, Togashi writes, “She surprised me with a question that had long been taboo between us. “‘I am ugly, aren’t I?’ she asked.” He reports that all the usual reassurances immediately ran through his mind, but he said nothing. Something in her expression made him feel “she would not allow me to whitewash my response.” After what felt like a long silence, he “simply and slightly nodded once. She did not reply.” Eventually, she was able to tell him “I was shocked by your confirmation of my word. But it was good because you were honest. People always try to be nice, but it is a lie…that was a moment of honesty and it made me feel better about my life.”

Togashi maintains that what he displayed in that silent nod cannot be understood by any of our Western notions of honesty, sincerity or authenticity. It was not an expression of what he was actually thinking or feeling, “not an action matched to my subjectivity or conviction” but one “that happened to appear in the moment when my preoccupation with my own thoughts, intentions and feelings disappeared.” He goes onto to say, “*Makoto* in this case can be understood as surrendering myself to the cosmic tide of the universe, which can be seen as the irrationality of the world and human vulnerability. In this dimension, all personal and professional considerations were let go, and I was not thinking about myself or Miyuki. The nodding was less my own action than an element in the intersubjective field.” I have quoted Togashi at some length here to give, not just an account of his successful clinical intervention –one which frankly, would not seem out of place in a self psychological or relational case presentation here in America –but to convey the flavor of what he feels and thinks about what happened, the philosophical and ethical context in which he places it, and how he sees that larger, “cosmic” perspective transcending his, and our, usual professional role.

Togashi repeatedly returns to grounding his work in the shared twinship of simply being human, of being a vulnerable creature in a random, unpredictable world. He translates his maxim of “being precedes awareness” into a therapy of presence rather than one based on understanding, let alone interpretation. The Japanese aesthetic of *mono-no-aware*– the appreciation of transience- is invoked in his case of a suicidal woman, Mizuho, who had been raised in a violent household and who had since childhood had a sexual relationship with a cousin who lived with the family. The year before her seeking therapy, the cousin hung himself in the apartment, where Mizuho found his dead body and somehow took it down herself. Afterwards she continued to live in the room where killed himself. She told Togashi, “I do not think you can understand me. I loved my cousin who I thought of as my brother and I had slept with. Then, I cared for his dead body. I had been many times assaulted by my father and many times feared being killed by him. There is no expectation in me to be understood. No way.” Togashi realizes there “is a part of her which I never reached or understood *because she was not me (*italics in the original)*,* but the other” and that he could not stop her from killing herself if she chose. All he can offer is an acknowledgment of this basic human condition, of being thrown into a traumatizing world “without informed consent.”

With another patient, a blocked artist who regularly fell asleep on his couch, no form of inquiry or understanding seemed to penetrate or influence what he came to call her cocoon state. Finally, he says, what transformed this impasse was his own surrender to the circumstance. “I stopped thinking, exploring, analyzing and focusing on her from a psychoanalytic perspective and only tried to be present.” The therapeutic relationship had dwindled to zero. Yet, when “I finally relinquished my analytic mindset, [her] creativity came back to her.”

From acutely drawn case studies such as these, we can see that Togashi has a achieved a clinically masterful integration of self psychological thinking with a his own uniquely Japanese perspective and conceptualization. I trust that *The Psychoanalytic Zero* will prove to be an invaluable guide to a new generation of analytically inclined Japanese therapists. But what are we, as Westerners, to make of his innovations? If concepts like *emptiness, makoto* or *mono-no-aware* describe a unique Japanese sensibility or orientation to life and are a fundamental dimension of his clinical acumen, to what extent is it possible to export them to the West? Togashi remarks on the typographical similarity between 0 (zero) and Bion’s (1970) “O,” but contends “Unlike O, the zero does not refer to the ground of being or ultimate nature of the patient, but to an aspect of Nature emerging in the infinite universe or the analytic work. In other words, zero is neither something in the patient, nor the analyst, nor in the relationship between them.” His clinical stance, to a Western audience, might sometimes sound very similar to one of simply holding or containing. How much does it matter that he insists on the radical difference of “zero?” Is it a difference that makes a difference?

Now, it is the case that some of this sensibility has already come West with the current interest in Buddhism. I, myself, am a product of this transmission from East to West, having practiced Zen for over forty years, received Dharma transmission as a Zen teacher in my own right, and taught students of my own for the past twenty years. My own writing has endeavored to formulate an integration of Buddhism and psychoanalysis in much the same way as has Togashi, though coming from the opposite direction, so to speak. Here is where things get complicated, because the place I find myself disagreeing with Togachi is precisely where he seeks to ground his analytic “zero” in the Buddhist idea of “emptiness.”

In his Preface, Togashi states as axiomatic that “Being precedes awareness.” This means that, in his example, when you receive a phone from a prospective patient, there is a moment in which each person, before they fall into their roles of psychoanalyst and patient, of someone in pain and seeking help, and someone who offers that help, a moment *without context* that he refers to as *the psychoanalytic zero.*  As in the case of Miyuki, there is a sense that our socially constructed selves are accommodative adaptions that overlay an underlying core in a way that (to my Western analytic ears) sounds analogous to Winnicott’s (1960) distinction between the true and false self. In support of that comparison, Togashi says “*makoto* is strongly connected to the struggle to live as a human being within a rigid social system.” The implication is that the social system imposes on us an accommodative self, but *underneath* that social shell, lies “a human being” free of social context and definition. For Winnicott, that “human” alternative was characterized by a subjective sense of agency and creativity but for Togashi “being” precedes not only our social roles, but even awareness, conceptualization and understanding, and thus is designated by “zero” or the Buddhist concept of “emptiness.”

Togashi cites the well-known Buddhist text known as *The Heart Sutra* which declares “Form is exactly Emptiness; Emptiness exactly Form” as embodying the “true nature of the universe, which is impermanence, suffering, non-self and emptiness.” His interpretation gives primacy to the emptiness side of the equation, to the “zero,” as if it *precedes, underlies,* or is somehow a foundationalground of Being, out of which our ordinary, socially constructed world arises. This is what allows him to imagine a way of being that exists prior to context, an emptiness without form. Let me (from my perspective as a Zen teacher), offer an interpretation of *The Heart Sutra* that suggests something different. To say that *form is exactly emptiness* means that form (things, or the elements of the world) has no inner, unchanging essential nature. “Form” is meant to include all those aspects of our physical reality that we usually take to be solid, unchanging objects. But it also includes objects of *experience*, our thoughts, feelings, conceptions etc. To say that all of these forms – mental and subjective as well as physical and objective- are *empty* says that they only exist *as* the intersection of constantly changing interactions. Everything is interaction and change (a description quite compatible with an intersubjective or relational perspective). Another word for this matrix of constantly changing causal interactions is “context.” Who and what we are not only *arises out* of this context, but more radically, we are *nothing but* context. Even what we experience as emptiness, being or transcendence is inseparable from context. This has profound implications for notions of the self, which like everything else, exists *as* the intersection (relational, intersubjective, causal) of everything that makes up our world. “Non-self” thus means not an absent or non-existent self (as Buddhism is often mistakenly said to claim), but a self that is context all the way down, with no core or pure or “true” self to be discovered deep inside or under layers of conditioning. So, to use Togashi’s example, I am not my “true” self *before* I enter the office, pick up the ringing phone and slip into my professional role, because whoever or whatever I am before *or* after is still context-dependent, i.e., empty. My non-self is what is being expressed *in the moment*, including moments in which I’m enacting a role, for these too have no fixed or enduring solidity.

A Zen koan asks the student, “Show me your original face before the birth of your parents.” The question is phrased to elicit our fantasy that our original face, our true self, must be something deep inside that pre-exists our conditioning, our parents –i.e. our context. But that’s not where it is at all. Our original face is inseparable from the one in the mirror (“form is *exactly* emptiness”) and we are called upon to recognize we are fully expressing our true self moment by moment. Nothing is hidden. (This is not to say that we are transparent to ourselves or that there is no such thing as dissociation, rather that there is no authentic or inner self uncontaminated by context waiting to be uncovered.) Paradoxically, we bury our true self in fantasies of depth, authenticity and even emptiness, obscuring what is already there.

The idea that through an experience of emptiness we can be “without context” is, ironically, the mirror image of the Western pursuit of objectivity, which Kohut (1959) rejected as an appropriate foundation for psychoanalysis. In both cases, we imagine that our subjectivity, our context, is like a set of lenses which we can remove, and it doesn’t matter whether what we say what lies underneath is pure rationality or “zero.” Both are fantasies of what Nietzsche (1977) called “immaculate perception.” Rather, ours is always a view from somewhere, never from nowhere. It is perhaps, doubly ironic to be making this argument in a journal with “Context” in its name.

I would venture to suggest that being a psychoanalyst or a Buddhist creates its own context, one very different from our usual social context, especially one defined by rigid social and cultural expectations. Within that new context, it may feel that something –or nothing- extraordinary is able to happen. Within Japanese culture, the contrast with everyday social expectations is evidently so radical that Togashi is impelled to call this new context “no context.” But the language of “no context” that Togashi uses to such advantage, has for me, serious problems when translated back into our Western philosophical context. The meaning and usefulness of “no context” turns out to be very context dependent. But within his own context, “no context” is very useful indeed.

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