

'To create, perform, produce psychology from scratch':
Negativity in the work of Wolfgang Giegerich

In a recent book on psychology that draws on Jung, Wolfgang Giegerich, and the novelist Joseph Conrad, Greg Mogenson (2019) argues that while modern psychology is significantly versed in the positive and empirical, it does not have much to offer in terms of the *negative*. He states that academic and clinical psychology “knows a tremendous amount” about “memory, perception (..) sexuality, and attachment behaviour” but doesn’t much address what Conrad describes as ‘that glimpse of truth which we forgot to ask for’ (p. 9). Much of psychotherapy works in the realm of the *positive* - treatment goals, acute symptoms, scaling assessments - but more rarely attends to the *negative* in the patient. This is reinforced by many patients themselves, who are increasingly armed with psycho ed. and are well-versed in their knowledge of psychological terms like attachment styles and come with specific treatment plans, goals and even notions of what qualifies as successful therapy. As Mogenson suggests, however, the therapeutic process often elicits that which we didn’t ask for, or as Jung frequently asserts: the other picture that looms up in the background behind the analysand. It is this *negativity* that often matters most in psychotherapeutic practice.

In making this claim, Mogenson draws on the notion of the negative in psychotherapy advanced at length by Wolfgang Giegerich. For Giegerich, the negative identifies the non-empirical heart of psychology - psychology’s true object of focus, and a focus which stands at odds with much contemporary psychotherapy, Jungian analysis and clinical psychology. In stressing the negative in psychotherapy (and recovering the negative in Jung’s work itself), Giegerich pushes against contemporary goal-oriented psychotherapy. This focus has implications for many aspects of psychotherapeutic practice such as its temporal orientation (its tense) as well as the stance and role of the therapist. Working in the space or tense of the negative, he argues, is to be backward-looking and performative; it is an ephemeral labour produced and reproduced by both analyst and patient, effecting not results or goals, but temporary “glimpses” of psychological truth.

The negative in fairy tales: integrating Hegel

Giegerich’s use of negativity draws greatly from Hegel and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In Volume 3 of his Collected Writing in English, *Soul-Violence*, Giegerich uses a fairy tale to exemplify the work of negation or negativity in psychology. He recounts the tale of the *Robber Bridegroom*, a folk tale about a miller’s daughter who is promised to a rich suitor. In the tale, the daughter sets off to visit the suitor in a forest and comes upon the den of an ancient woman, who warns the daughter that she is in a murderer’s den and so conceals the daughter behind a barrel. The daughter then witnesses the robbers’s violently dismembering another girl who they have led

into the house thinking it to be the promised bride. The girl remains behind the barrel and ultimately escapes and marries the suitor, producing the ring finger of the chopped-up girl as proof of her ordeal. For Giegerich, this fairy tale, and in particular, the girl's stance toward the event, exemplifies the role of negativity in psychology, and most significantly, the successful engagement *with* the negative on the part of the girl in the tale. What stands out most for Giegerich is that the girl in the fairy tale is able to witness and withstand the horror of the dismemberment without fleeing.

She is obviously up to the horror that takes place before her eyes. She is able to bear the 'unbearable' sight. She does not experience the horror as absolute trauma. She demonstrates quite literally what it means 'to look the negative in the face and to tarry with it' ... (Giegerich, 2020b, p.148).

For Giegerich, the negative figures importantly in psychotherapy as something that must be lingered within or tarried with. In invoking tarrying with the negative, of course, he draws upon Hegel's famous sentence in the *Phenomenology*, a passage that Giegerich returns to frequently in his work. In this same passage, Hegel (1977) describes the life of Spirit as that which does not "shrink from death and keep itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it" (p. 19). This "maintaining" itself in the face of the negative is what Giegerich (2020b) identifies in the fairy tale, as a dialectical "integration" in psychological work, often experienced or expressed through violence: "the witnessing of the dismemberment of another always implies one's own annihilation namely through the narcissistic insult, indeed the killing of one's own ideal inherent in this *sight*" (p.149). Tarrying with the negative in psychology involves a dialectical devastation that has been "withstood, been received by consciousness" and which consciousness "has grown in the experience" (p. 149). Giegerich's work stresses the violence or cut implied in Hegel's description of "devastation," and places it at the centre of psychological work. To think or experience something psychologically for Giegerich is precisely to be "touched" by devastation in the way that the girl does in the fairy tale.

Tarrying with the negative in the perfect tense

This cut of devastation for Giegerich assumes a particular tense in the psychological scene, a tense that puts his argument about psychology in opposition to contemporary models of psychology. Giegerich frequently speaks against the developmental - or future-oriented - model of therapy so prevalent in modern modes of clinical practice. The developmental model is rooted in positivism and empiricism, which for him are not the work of psychotherapy.

What I conceive, by contrast, is a "psychotherapy of the perfect tense." No ideal. No wishing and hoping. No Sollen and striving. Because there is nothing to strive for, no goal set for us. Any developmental goal envisioned by psychology can be seen through as an ego program, our own agenda. What is needed instead of all this is merely our "catching up with" what has already become real (2020a, p. 416)

The negative inhabits the space of “the catching up.” Psychotherapy in the perfect tense means to catch up and tarry with that which *already happened* but which the ego has not yet realized, or from which it often flees. Psychotherapy thus always looks backward, a tense that puts it at odds with many applications of contemporary therapy and many clients’ wishes and plans for betterment, improvement or even more “meaningful” or purposive forms of existence. Giegerich sees the desire for “meaning” or purpose as a neurotic formation precisely because it is *positively* conceived. Meaning in the contemporary psychological scene is largely *positivized* as some external Other based on a lack. This is true of clinical practice that promises evidence-based metrics or SMART goals that seem to provide empirical proof of psychic improvement. We achieve meaning as a result or effect of satisfying a series of psychological goals. Here we can think of common prescriptions or treatment for depression as existing empirically *in front* of the client - if only they walk or exercise more they will find greater meaning and purpose out there in the world. Positive psychology is one that presents the cure on the horizon in front of the client rather than as something more immanent and, in Giegerich’s terms, already embedded in the client’s logical negativity. In speaking directly on the question of “meaning” as a clinical goal, Giegerich argues that it is always only *immanent* rather than *transcendent* (or logically negative). “Is it really so terrible to live without a higher meaning? Is it really the void that yawns before us when we are without it? After all, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe...etc. etc. Are they not enough? More than enough? (2020a, p. 230-31). In other words, we do not *make* meaning through psychotherapy as a kind of positive empirical enterprise.

Psychotherapy in the *perfect tense* mirrors in some ways the Freudian arc of analysis as gaining recognition of one’s false or outgrown childhood illusions and aspirations (recognition one’s castration). Giegerich often cites a parallel quote from Roland Barthes where he states that being modern “is to know what is no longer possible” (2020c, p. 179). We might say the same thing in the work of psychotherapy, an insight that echoes Freud’s view that therapy leaves us sadder, but wiser. For Giegerich, this knowledge is also the work of psychological thinking, but with the additional cut of violent recognition. For Giegerich, *knowing* what is no longer possible represents a negation, or a killing which initiates a new mode of knowing (and a letting go of ego-illusions). Greg Mogenson (2005) describes it this way: “Psychological reflection above all knows itself, even if the reflective moment of that knowing changes it, [kills it] requiring yet other reflective acts ad infinitum” (p. 12).

The distinction that Giegerich draws between the developmental modes of psychotherapy and ‘psychology with soul’ is akin to the distinction that Hegel draws between his dialectical method and the insights drawn through science, positivism or Schelling. Dialectical insight for Hegel (1977) cannot be achieved “like a shot from a pistol” as immediately graspable (p. 16). Rather, “true thoughts and scientific insight are only to be won through the labour of the Notion” (p. 43). In other parts of the dialectic Hegel speaks about truth being “ripened to its properly matured form so as to be capable of being the property of all self-consciousness Reason” (p.43). For Hegel, philosophy enters after the fact, looking backward, following the Owl of Minerva.

For Giegerich, similarly, psychology happens as a catching up after the fact and a truth borne through a labour with the negative, a *coming home* to that which *already is* (or has become true).

Recovering the negative in Jung

In making the case for a psychotherapy in the perfect tense Giegerich recovers an orientation towards the negative that he sees and underlines in Jung. Giegerich frequently returns to a passage in Jung where he describes psychology as something which happens in the background of the clinical scene: “behind the impressions of daily life - behind the scenes - another picture looms up, covered by a thin veil of facts” (1997, p.8). Giegerich conceives the ‘other picture’ that looms up as what he calls the *psychological difference*, mapping the space between the empirical/ factual presentations of the patient (their statements, their symptoms) and what Jungians often refer to as the *objective psyche*. Drawing on a line from Joseph Conrad, Greg Mogenson refers to this looming picture (always negative) as ‘that glimpse of truth for which you had forgotten to ask’ (p.9). Psychology always has an ear for this other picture that looms up, between the lines, or even against the grain of what the patient *positively* identifies as the therapeutic goal or presenting problem. The art of therapy often consists of drawing attention to this other picture or forgotten question that can frequently break the alliance and create the appearance that the therapist isn’t listening to the client’s real (*positive*) concerns.

Attending to that which occurs in the background distinguishes this kind of psychology from what Giegerich describes as the technician approach in much of clinical psychology. He speaks of hatching or circumambulating as verbs to describe therapeutic work, actions that seek not to isolate the symptom and its direct resolution but rather to encourage the patient to *think psychologically*. Here again he draws upon particular passages in Jung where he sees attention to the negative. He often reiterates a central claim by Jung that the therapist meets the patient not as a technician or even physician but empty-handed like an attendant, nurse or servant: “*Therapon* means first of all servant, caretaker, attendant, nurse. Only that! Nothing heroic or magnificent” (Giegerich, *Dreams*, p. 38). The dangers of the current psychological modality (or psychological epistle), for Giegerich, is to reify the symptom - to limit the symptom as a *positivity* or a *thing* - a thing that can be categorized and to which one can apply the treatment systematically. As he argues, “soul” or Geist “does not have a permanent (thing-like) existence” (*Geist*, p. 33). It is not empirically given.

Psychology and psychological thinking must therefore also be ephemeral and performative. He hangs on a particular line from Jung (1961) where he notes that psychological interpretation involves a re-telling of the symptom in the analytical space - to “say it again, as well as you can” (p. 591). This *retelling* is where the negative *glimpse* of psychology resides. Psychology is thus linguistic, performative, ephemeral and of course always approximate. In speaking about dreams as psychological phenomena, for instance, he challenges the often-used symbology that Jungian analysts use as guides to interpreting client dreams. Against this, he argues that dreams are not in themselves psychologically important (as positive matter); they become psychologically meaningful only in what Jung described as their interpretive re-telling.

He compares this to works of art like poetry or painting, noting that they are not empirically given things. Works of art come into being or into existence through their being thought by the viewer: it “needs to be re-created afresh by the viewer. And it exists only in this act of re-creation and only as long as it lasts and maintained, kept alive” (*Geist*, p.33).

Psychology's lack of Archimedean point

In stressing the ephemeral and performative/ linguistic notion of psychology, Giegerich refines another subtle but crucial aspect of Jung's psychology: psychology's lack of an Archimedean point. Giegerich (following Jung) troubles psychology's self-embrace as a positivistic science, adopting the Archimedean point of observation and knowledge similar to other sciences like biology. Distinguishing psychology from the other sciences, Giegerich (2020a) argues that it is not a discipline constituted "through a structural difference between subject and object" (p. 570). In science, he continues, the object of study is irrevocably outside of itself. In depth psychology there is no Archimedean point outside of itself: “This means that psychology is logically so constituted that it operates within a fundamental identity. It is structurally not different from itself. Symbolically expressed: it is uroboric. It bites its own tail” (p. 570). Greg Mogenson describes this notion in Giegerich using the figure of total immersion in the sea without a boat:

In contrast to other sciences which theorize from a position that is supposedly outside the phenomena that they are concerned with (for which they may be called “dry land” or “ship's deck” sciences), psychology is immersed in itself as in an infinite sea inasmuch as everything it says about its subject matter, the psyche, is but a further phenomenal expression of the psyche, strokes of the swimming it must learn in order to built itself at sea” (*psychology as discipline*, p.200)

Psychology, as Sheldon Cashdan argues (1998) must start from scratch in every instant and build itself up from the bath of the patient's content (p. 152). This is co-constructed by the patient as well, and psychology *happens only* in the fleeting instances where this co-construction occurs. It is not made visible through diagnostic or assessment - it is not positively *there* in the patient for the therapist to identify or discover. Psychology only happens when the patient is touched by that which is logically negative. It is performative and linguistic. As Giegerich (2021) argues “it is only in my and the patient's or any person's actual achieving here and now a *psychological understanding* of something. (p. 62) It is a happening, a momentary event and not something empirically-given.

Thought as mediation of the empirically-given

Thought occupies a central place in Giegerich's notion of psychology's “happening,” and is what he interprets Jung to mean in his notes to analysts on how to interpret patient symptoms such as dreams: “What the dream, which is not manufactured by us, says is *just so*. Say it again, as well as you can.” (p. 591). Giegerich highlights the last part of Jung's passage to stress Jung's

notion of “thinking *again*” that is the work of psychology: a production that always occurs after the fact of the symptom. “Thinking is the art to allow the matter that we are dealing with to speak for itself.” (Giegerich, 2020a, p.16). One way we might think about this is in terms of clinical psychology accounts of disorders or pathologies and their seemingly factual existence. For instance, in the PHQ9 assessment for depression, we explore whether or not a client *has* certain symptoms like sleep issues, lack of motivation or appetite. A greater quantity of these indicates the likelihood that the patient *has* depression or *is* depressed. Giegerich’s point is that this is not yet psychology. Psychology, citing Hegel, (2020a) “only begins its flight at dusk, when the day is over. Thinking thinks what has already happened and now is” (p.17) It is the *thinking again* of the symptoms that allows the psychological phenomena to “be released into their truth.” (p.17). This again involves the patient and the therapist in a different relation than in modern clinical psychology. The symptom is not identified and discovered in the patient but is produced and mediated *after the fact*. Assessment may be useful in mapping some of the terrain, but it is not yet psychology in Giegerich’s sense.

Patients know this intuitively as well since there is rarely an experience of decisive satisfaction as a result of assessment or diagnosis - knowing what it is they *have*. We may even offer that there is little satisfaction to be gained from causality theory such as may be found in attachment history or family of origin work. Knowing that one may be predisposed to relational anxiety does not necessarily produce satisfaction. Satisfaction, if it is to arrive, comes not from identifying and quantifying the symptoms but, in another Hegelian allusion - in letting that empirical knowledge *come home to itself*. Here Giegerich’s notion of psychology closely resembles Hegel’s notion of speculation, which he distinguishes from reflection. Reflection, for Hegel, is categorical and scientific, producing “in thought, a world that is dead” (Verene, p. 2). We could argue that much of clinical psychology operates in this mode, where “psycho education” operates as a kind of scientific schema where all psychological “objects are fully categorized and rendered lifeless, labelled, like parts of a skeleton, or pigeon-holed, like boxes in a grocer’s stall” (Verene, p. 2). This for Giegerich keeps the symptoms at bay, as empirical objects outside the subject. *Coming home to oneself* mirrors more closely what Hegel means in speculative thinking where we know something as a subject through thought’s reflection *into itself*. It is this dialectical or “circular” speculative knowing that Giegerich casts as psychology or psychological work. In Hegel, speculative truth exists uroborically, it “is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning” (Verene, p.18). Giegerich names this process in psychology as *absolute negative interiorization*, which like Hegel’s dialectic, moves in the direction of sublation and the restored position.

Looking at this phenomenon clinically, this dialectic can be seen as a series of negations in the patient that work in the direction of sublation - “a negation which maintains the key dimension of the negated phenomenon and elevates it into a higher level” (Zizek, p. 61). In this process, what matters is that the *externality* - the thingness - of the symptom is dissolved and negated (as something that has inflicted and befallen me like an illness). The symptom is allowed to come home to itself, integrated into the life world of the patient and de-literalized and dispersed into larger narratives of the self. The patient begins to see depression, in one example,

as an expression of a life trajectory, an affective expression of a combination of regrets, sadness, feelings of shame, guilt and built-up resentments. This work involves the tracing, mapping and *thinking* of these thoughts in the presence of the affects associated with depression - and building it afresh in each session. Tarrying with the negative, psychologically, for Giegerich, is thus to build psychology *from scratch* in each session. It is not a process that is fixed or finite, but because it is logically negative, remains an ongoing production performed anew in each session. It is a labour that begins with the empirical situation - the presenting problem - but labours always in that which looms up behind the analytical scene.

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