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An analyst by virtue?

A response to Gwion Jones

As Gwion has shown there is movement again in the attempts by UKCP to formulate an ethical position for all of us, a position that could do justice not only to the shifting demands for the regulation of our work made by those who purport to speak for the 'general public' but also to the many and varied forms of therapy it represents.

Previously, it had been primarily a matter of safe-guarding our clientele from the transgressive desires of the therapist, saying next to nothing about the good that therapy itself constitutes and promotes. Then we had, in line with the currently dominant discourses of 'health and safety' and of the transparency the customer is deemed to be owed, a shift towards the qualities of the person of the therapist under the label of 'fitness to practice'. This focus on the therapist persists in the latest UKCP proposal, even if it is now being couched in a more positive language, with the recently suggested move towards a new (old) virtue ethics for our field.

What are we to make of this?

Virtues, which adhere to the person of the therapist? Problem, surely. One set of virtues setting the standard for all types of therapy? Big problem! For what else can this lead to but an ideal image of the therapist as an upright citizen of certified moral standing, someone who is not only a trustworthy professional but also, surely, a good model for identification for their troubled customers.

But let us proceed a little slower here.

Bernard Williams defines a virtue as 'a disposition of character to choose or reject actions because they are of a certain ethically relevant kind' (2006, p.9). But if this means, for instance in relation to courage, a characteristic highly prized in ancient Greece, that a person must always do what is most courageous in any given situation, it can be quickly shown that to be courageous can also mean to be very silly – and soon very dead (see the *Iliad* for endless examples of this).

Or take honesty, a quality highly valued by Freud, and one which Philip Rieff (or was it Susan Sontag, her then husband, who wrote *Freud, the Mind of the Moralists?*) took to be at the ethical heart of the psychoanalytic enterprise. But whilst honesty might appear to be a pretty straight-forward demand as it is expressed in the fundamental rule of free association, it becomes a complicated affair on the part of the analyst, especially when dealing with a patient in love. In 'Observations on Transference Love', already quoted by Gwion, Freud writes:

[...] psycho-analytic treatment is founded on truthfulness [*Wahrhaftigkeit*]. In this fact lies a great part of its educative effect and its ethical value. It is dangerous to depart from this foundation. Anyone who has become saturated in the analytic technique will no longer be able to make use of the lies and pretences which a doctor normally finds unavoidable; and if, with the best intentions, he does attempt to do so, he is very likely to betray himself. Since we demand strict truthfulness from our patients, we jeopardize our whole authority if we let ourselves be caught out by them in a departure from the truth. Besides, the experiment of letting oneself go a little way in tender feelings for the patient is not altogether without danger. Our control over ourselves is not so complete that we may not suddenly one day go further than we had intended. In my opinion, therefore, we ought not to give up the neutrality towards the patient, which we have acquired through keeping the counter-transference in check. SE12, 164.

‘Our truth’ here is the indifference we purport to feel, the neutrality resulting from our having wrestled down other aspects of our subjective responses to our patients. No lies then, but only *after* the analyst’s feelings have been thoroughly doused!

We could now say, Freud was a hypocrite selling us the analyst’s suppressions, or even repression, as a higher form of truthfulness – a funny claim for an analyst to make, to say the least. We could say, see, we have to give up on virtue, it is no good! I want to try something different though. I want to see if we cannot rescue something from Aristotle’s ethics, so long as we keep an eye not just on the person but also on the work. Am I being courageous in attempting this? Or just fool-hardy? I am keen to find out!

In Aristotle’s ethics virtues are ‘internalized dispositions of action, desire, and feeling’; they are concerned, as all ethics is, with the relation between thought and action, involve the intelligent judgement of the person and are as such linked to practical reason. Thinking virtue as always connected to a particular *praxis* allows us to get it into view in a different way. (This line of thinking is inspired, to some extent, by MacIntyre’s 1981 *After Virtue*.) Rather than starting off with an idea that virtue is a quality belonging primarily to the individual person who then brings it to whatever aspect of life they are engaged in, virtue might better be thought of as an effect on the person of the sustained engagement in a certain kind of social practice; it is what gets internalised through immersion in this practice over time. We could think of it as the precipitate of this immersion; the better one gets at doing this sort of thing, the more the person is shaped by what it takes to be doing this sort of thing well.

Jonathan Lear (2003) calls psychoanalysis a ‘subjective profession’, in the sense that the analyst has to (continue to) form him or herself as a certain kind of subject, the psychoanalytic subject, so as to be of assistance to their patients in their process of forming or re-forming as subjects. The point is that the subjective modification on the part of the analyst relates to the way the work is conceived; the question is always whether this self-reshaping on the part of the analyst is best suited to sustain the very particular inquiry for the patient who addresses them.

Psychoanalysis is orientated towards a certain formulation of the good; let's call it, for instance, the bringing to the fore of unconscious desire. In order to facilitate this aim the analyst needs to position themselves in a particular way in relation to the patient and the material they bring to the session. We all know, because we have been told it many times, we have read it again and again, and we have experienced this ourselves, that this is far from a purely technical point. We have to have undergone something of this experience ourselves and made it our own in ways that go beyond having comprehended it. In our work we have probably come to embody it; we live it, so to speak, as our second (or third?) 'nature'. This is why personal analysis has become a training requirement, why training takes so long and, in some sense, never stops (and perhaps *ought to never stop*?).

In our, the College's, very own Maresfield Report, which formed our response to the government's attempts at regulating our profession, we state that training to become a psychoanalyst has not so much to do with the acquisition of a set of knowledge and skills; rather, it entails the loss of something we thought we got. We liken it to the loss of a limb – I leave it to you to imagine which one. Becoming a psychoanalyst, and perhaps eventually becoming good at being one, then entails the coming to terms with this loss and making this loss work in the service of the work we do. It is like becoming good at limping – and even making a virtue of it...

Isn't this what was aimed at by the institution of the 'pass' in Lacanian analysis – some evidence that a subjective transformation has taken place in the candidate by virtue of having undergone analysis themselves? Other trainings try different terms to point to requirements concerning personal qualities thought to be essential to the work we do: self-reflectivity; maturity; personal readiness amongst them. All of them vague of course, all of them problematic.

Let's go back once more to Freud's claim about *Wahrhaftigkeit*, his vouching both for the truthfulness of psychoanalysis and his own position vis-à-vis his patient. By the time he writes this I think his appreciation of what psychoanalytic work requires has deepened to such an extent that he no longer registers that his formulation of truth might well be seen to contain an un-truth, the suppression of another kind of truth. When he asserts his truth, I believe he speaks from a place of utter conviction; were we to use the problematic language of authenticity we could say Freud is *authentically* inauthentic. (Might this be a promising candidate for a list of therapists' virtues? Someone who has turned themselves into an authentically inauthentic person?) I suggest, Freud's dissembling is best thought of as bearing witness to another type of truthfulness: the remaining true to the task in hand which is the analysis of this patient.

When Lacan says the desire of the psychoanalyst is psychoanalysis, this is as much descriptive as it is prescriptive. This is how it should be regarding the analyst's desire – it ought to remain oriented towards the task of analysis. But presumably this orientation of the analyst is not something that belongs to the person as a character trait predating his engagement with psychoanalysis; rather it is a disposition acquired through the process of training, which is a type of formation after all. But if we agree with this, are we then not in the area of 'internalized dispositions of action, desire, and feeling' which defines the Aristotelian virtues?

The virtue at issue here arises *by virtue of* the analyst being (becoming) an analyst.

But if the virtues do not so much adhere to the person as such, but rather manifesting the dispositions formed through the work and playing themselves out in the work, can we, should we, attempt to make them a basis for a code of ethics? I am not so sure. Or, rather not. Given the specificity not only of the work as it is conceived by the different orientations within psychoanalysis, let alone all other types of psychotherapy, but also in the relation between the particular patient and analyst I think we'd create more problems than we'd solve. Perhaps it is time to consider again a less ambitious route towards the safeguarding of ethical practice: a few rules with some flexibility regarding their implementation.

References

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