Confidentiality as a Virtue

CHAPTER 1
I discuss this in detail in my book Love and Its Place in hlum (Text, 1998).

...
the \textit{\textbf{confidentiality of a virtue}}.  

Jonathan Lear
ancient world, I would say that psychoanalysis is a master craft rather than a science. (This is the sense in which medicine is a master craft, not a science.) It applies very complicated knowledge in peculiar ways with the aim of helping people in peculiar ways. To what extent has the professionalization of the craft gotten in the way of the craft?

Are there ways to deal with these problems? Or, do we have to accept with Freud and Janet Malcolm that psychoanalysis is an “impossible profession”? Is the conflict I have been delineating irresolvable? Psychoanalysts ought to be well equipped to think about compromises, to think about better and worse approaches to a conflict. I want to go back to one of my heroes, Aristotle, because a feature of ancient Greek ethics may be of help.

The psychoanalytic profession has unwittingly approached ethics from one particular point of view and ignored another. It starts with Freud. It is striking that when Freud was interested in myth he went to the Greeks but when he was interested in ethics he went to the Jews and Christians. For him, ethics was the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that tradition was the tradition of the Law. That is one of two vibrant approaches to ethics in the Western tradition, but it is a tradition of _thou shalt_ and _thou shalt not._

The ethics of the Judeo-Christian tradition is an ethics of absolutes and laws. This is certainly what concerned Freud. He was especially concerned with how these absolutes emerged in a cruel and punishing superego. But there is another rich ethical tradition, which begins with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and it stands in healthy contrast with the Judeo-Christian tradition. As an ethical tradition, it has been ignored in psychoanalysis.

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are all concerned with the virtues or excellences of the human psyche. They want to know what kind of character leads to the living of a full, rich, happy life, and they want to know how to instill that character. This is of ethical significance. In the _Nicomachean Ethics,_ Aristotle makes it clear that laws and rule books are not themselves sufficient for an ethical life. Consider a virtue like courage. Aristotle makes it clear that there isn’t going to be any rule book for courage, nor will there be any contentful law to obey. There are certain times when the courageous thing to do is to retreat, other times when the courageous thing to do is to keep on analyzing. Given any purported rule—“stand fast in front of the enemy” or “always say what you think”—there are going to be circumstances in which following the rule is foolhardy, immature, or rash, certainly not courageous. A courageous person, with a certain sensitivity to the situations in which she finds herself, will have certain motivations to act on that sensitivity. She will know when to step forward and when to step back, and why. There won’t be a hard-and-fast rule; there will be a sensitivity to life’s changing circumstances.²

This is of course relevant to the analytic situation. For an analyst must have the sensitivity to know when it is time to step in with an appropriate interpretation and when it is appropriate to step back and let the analysand carry on his own analytic work.

Are there ways to build up good analytic characters? Do we need to build up analytic wisdom or good judgment? Aristotle had a word for this, the _phronimos,_ which means the person of overall good judgment, the practically wise person. Aristotle needed to concentrate on the _phronimos_ because courage isn’t the only virtue; it is one among others. There is also, for example, generosity. In a particular set of circumstances, the disposition toward courage will tell you what the courageous thing to do is, and the disposition toward generosity will tell you what the generous thing to do is. But one needs to know overall what the best thing to do is. That is what the _phronimos_ knows. And that is what she wants to do.

What kind of training will produce an analytic _phronimos,_ that is, an analytically wise person? That question is too big to address here, but it is one well worth asking. I want to concentrate here on the smaller question of what it might be like to instil confidentiality as virtue. That is, what kind of training, what kinds of procedures, should we have in analytic institutes and in our professional organizations so that we instill in our own psyches a disposition toward confidentiality, and good judgment when it comes to all the particular complexities of confidentiality that might arise? Can confidentiality be a disposition or character trait of the soul? Can confidentiality become a part of us, a part of the way we see the world, a source of judgment that flows from deep within us?

This question looks difficult to tackle. A tip of the trade I learned from Aristotle is that when a question looks overwhelming, try to break it down into its constituent parts, try to see how it might apply to particular cases. If we are thinking about building up confidentiality as a virtue in the analyst’s psyche, then we have to think about what we already know is crucial to analytic training.

Confidentially as a whole.

1. Confirmationary and a thing.
confidentiality and privilege I. Confidentiality as a Virtue

Jonathan Lear
References

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