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Book Review Essay: “The Ethic of Honesty” by Michael Thompson

At the end of his book *The Ethic of Honesty*, M. Guy Thompson provides an afterward, a “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” in which he directly addresses his audience:

my intention was to explore a dimension of analytic inquiry that is latent in virtually all scientific schools and their respective theories. You may recognize in the pages you just read conclusions that you have arrived at yourself, though you may have gotten there by different means. (p. 144)

This is a book for practitioners, and the pronoun “you” works to create an intimacy with the individual reader and, at the same time, with an open group, with what may be an inclusive, professional collective in which the individual analyst may find a location. One may enter this collective readership “by different means”: the approach to analysis is not through theory, as “unscientific” indicates, but on the basis of a common experience. Put otherwise, the address attempts to form a consensus. Thompson’s claim is that “the problems encountered by the psychoanalytic endeavor are too complex, subtle, and enigmatic to assume that any theory, no matter how sophisticated or compelling, could ever do them justice” (p. 144). The refusal of theory is a refusal of dogma, of insistence on formulas and jargon, and a commitment to treat each analysand as a unique subject. At the same time, the refusal of theory needs must fall back on a common sense vocabulary that carries its own presuppositions and unexamined meanings; Thompson’s final suggestion that “Perhaps, in order to be psychoanalysts, we should become, not students of analysis in the narrow sense, but of the human condition” (p. 144) relies on an accepted sense of the “human condition” that builds consensus by means of ordinary language.

The Ethic of Honesty proposes a return to Freud in setting out a set of specific principles, taken from his writings, that establish rules of conduct to ground a practice of analysis in an ethics. It describes psychoanalysis as a phenomenology (and the references to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and Heidegger imply that phenomenology is already a theoretical, or at least a philosophical, approach to analysis). Hence, psychoanalysis proceeds “from the analyst’s lived experience” (xv); the analyst as phenomenologist “goes directly to the person [patient] himself, by examining his experience of his relationship with this person” (xvi). The set of first principles that the book elaborates from Freud’s writing are taken as rules or restraints governing the analyst. Thompson defines these technical recommendations as “nothing less than ethical precepts” (xviii) because they are “cautionary” restraints on the analyst’s ambitions and protections from risks. The principles lead Thompson to a modest, careful perspective producing flexibility and receptivity, since “the phenomenologist admits from the beginning of his inquiries that he does not know where he is going and does not pretend to (xvii). His method, in each chapter, is to cull Freud’s statements on each of eight principles, contrasting Freud’s suggestions with the more partial, fixed, or hardened positions and practices of Freud’s followers. Freud, in this treatment, emerges as a phenomenologist: “I perceive in Freud’s technical formulations a sensibility that faithfully approximates a phenomenological orientation, even when his theories contradict clinical intuition. . . . Indeed, Freud’s principles of technique make little sense outside of a phenomenological context” (xvii). A phenomenology of psychoanalysis as an experience

in which the patient's "life unfolds in the here-and-now of the psychoanalytic treatment" (p. 32) guides Thompson's explication of the principles directing the analyst's role: neutrality, abstinence, transference, countertransference, therapeutic ambition, and working through.

Neutrality, the practice of evenly suspended attention, enjoins equanimity, non-interference, and an open mind rejecting "prejudice and condemnation" (p. 39). The position of neutrality is rooted in skepticism; it is not "specifically concerned with affect but with the way analysts divide their attention during the analytic hour . . . and the manner by which they bring their thoughts to bear on what their patients confide" (p. 52). However, neutrality is not an absolute posture, for it "was never intended to be employed universally, at every moment of one's [sic.] analysis" (p. 56). Neutrality is to be balanced against the principle of abstinence, the analyst's noncompliance with the patient's demand for love. Moreover, an adherence to complete neutrality would reduce the analyst to "playing the part of a permissive patron" (p. 56), and neutrality is regularly compromised in the act of interpretation. In all cases, though, honesty subtends neutrality, since "analytic treatment is rooted in a commitment of honesty. This commitment, however, applies to analysts as well; otherwise patients would lose their respect for a double standard" (p. 54). Thompson's formulation of neutrality and abstinence is convincingly derived from Freud, but his common sense appeal to the analyst's "honesty" bypasses the complexity and the context of the analytic role: the analyst is not engaged in an ordinary conversation and cannot be expected to be completely open, respond to personal questions, or freely reveal associations; an analyst is not involved in a friendship nor in an equal relationship with a patient but operates in a restricted setting that evokes relations of power and dependency, relations that must be handled carefully. What it means for an analyst to be honest in such a setting surely is inflected by his professional role.

Thompson's understanding of Freud as a romantic influences his explication of abstinence and, ultimately, of transference: "Though Freud believed that the quest for love is the guiding principle of every human endeavor, he also realized that it doesn't bring heaven on earth but frustration, disappointment, and more suffering" (p. 71). Unrequited love and the frustrations it evokes are to be perpetuated in analysis, "bringing the patient closer to the object of desire but without satisfying it. This continuum of agony, anxiety, and momentary relief in turn organizes the interpersonal relationship between analyst and patient in the form of the transference neurosis" (pp. 67-8). If love is artificially induced in transference, the analyst's refusal to give in to the demand for love, as dictated by abstinence, has an educative effect: it is intended to prolong frustration, to delay gratification, and to block satisfaction in order "to enhance the patient's capacity for bearing hardship, thus learning something of value from the disappointments and frustrations suffered" (p. 66). Interpretations should support the principle of abstinence: they are to be directed "to thwart the (unconscious) gain patients gain from their symptomology or from their (transference) relationship with the analyst" (p. 67).

The description of Freud as a romantic likewise compels Thompson's understanding of transference, which results from "nothing more than a predisposition to love each person with whom we find ourselves in a relation" (p. 83); it is "essentially a longing for love" (p. 84). As "Freud's views about the nature of love, friendship, and rapport" (p. 79) led to his formulation of transference, and since, as a romantic, he "conceived psychoanalysis as a matter of the heart," Thompson claims that for Freud "psychopathology was a consequence of unrequited love," and "he conceived transference as the vehicle through which patients repeat an experience of tragic proportions" (p. 80). So transference is literally the transferring of memories of figures from the past, usually associated with "parental figures," onto the person of the analyst, who reminds the patient of previous frustrations. Adopting Montaigne, in his writing on friendship, as a kind of precursor of Freud, Thompson concludes, "In effect, the transference neurosis is a form of friendship, manifested by the trials of aim-inhibited love" (p. 94). Countertransference is what obstructs the transference; countertransference functions as a "cautionary principle" that alerts analysts to the obstacles they erect to "the patient owning his experience" (p. 122). The principle of therapeutic ambition may motivate such obstacles; that is, the analyst's feelings of inadequacy, fear of failure, or even arrogance may promote excessive, dogmatic, or overly insistent interpretation. Thompson is meticulous in showing that Freud guarded against countertransference and therapeutic ambition as he developed, structuring "the analytic situation so that the meaning of the patient's conflicts could be verbalized (and, hence, uncovered) by the patient, not the analyst" (p. 119). At the same time, Thompson points out the interference of therapeutic

ambition in Freud's treatment of Dora: Dora "was a failed treatment . . . in no small measure because she was an unsuitable patient for analysis and because Freud's interventions were simply too active" (p. 119); that is to say, Freud's understanding of therapeutic ambition developed in response to his own work. The ethical practice of the analyst—the non-authoritarian, non-directive, receptive, and self-aware conduct—is the counterpart to the analysand's ethical practice, founded upon the fundamental rule that guides free association. Thompson emphasizes, from the opening chapter, the distinction between the fundamental rule, that is, the difference between the analysand's promise to speak freely and the practice of free association. The fundamental rule is "a form of commitment that entails a pledge to be honest with another person" (p. 8). The fundamental rule, the patient's adherence to honesty, "binds" patient and analyst "in common cause," (p. 9) which is the conduct of "psychoanalysis as a moral enterprise whose aim is to further honesty" (p. 19). The ethic of honesty, then, is in the first place the patient's commitment to free association. Analysis, it follows, is the practice of honesty, and the fundamental rule "is simply an admonition to be candid" (p. 3).

Thompson's ordinary language phenomenology of honesty runs up against Freud. Thompson reads Freud to present free association as a kind of unburdening, "as an opportunity to disclose [suppressed] secrets to another person" (p. 25); Freud "merely invited his patients to talk about themselves with a view to taking stock of their experience of doing so" (p. 32). The appeal to common sense expression that is a feature of Thompson's writing style—"merely," "simply"—reduces free association to self-revelation, resistances to "secrets," and language to communication. Thompson does describe free association in analysis as entailing a special form of awareness, since it requires "hearing what one says while giving thought to one's disclosures at the moment they are spoken" (p. 32). However, his phenomenology of "experience" ignores the unconscious. What can the "here and now" of the "analytic moment" be in the time of the unconscious, in the insistence of memory, and the in the projections of transference? What is the meaning of honesty when Lacan's unpacking of "the liar's paradox" shows that the unconscious lies truthfully? Freud's postulate of an original lie at the origin of hysteria at the very least complicates the analysand's honesty and candor. As well, to treat language simply as communication is to preclude Freud's elaboration of unconscious representation along with unconscious determination. Indeed, Thompson claims the unconscious to be freedom: "In my view, the fact that emotions, attitudes and behaviors are 'determined' by unconscious wishes simply indicates that the unconscious is freedom in its essence" (p. 30).

Working through, the last of the fundamental principles Thompson derives from Freud, is accordingly "the task of perseverance when the work of analysis (compliance with the fundamental rule) breaks down" (p. 129). It is, in effect, a kind of intention or will to be honest:

To genuinely "free" associate assumes nothing less than—forgive me—opening one's heart to another person, by taking that person into one's confidence and confessing one's innermost existence. Hence "working through" the resistance entails the ability to recover the capacity for candor that was momentarily lost. If, in the final analysis, resistance is nothing more than a 'loss of heart,' then working through is the wherewithal to open one's heart again. (p. 133).

As Thompson explains it, the difficulties of working through, of fully committing to free association, and the anxiety and guilt aroused in analysis stem from the subject's everyday compromises with a society that demands conformity. Since the ethical injunction of the fundamental rule to be honest is not socially rewarded in ordinary life, nor is it a tactic of ordinary social behavior, "we" feel embarrassed by our secrets and guilty for our thoughts and for "aspirations we secretly harbor but dare not admit" (p. 17) because of social convention. The analyst's role, consequently, is to encourage communication, "to mention the unmentionable by eliciting what is obvious but remains obstinately unspoken" (p. 17). The analysand, it seems to be assumed, is in control of honesty.

Thompson's return to Freud is a selective reading. Nowhere does it consider the death drive. Childhood sexuality—the primal scene, seduction, fantasy, Oedipus—the scandal of Freud for his contemporaries, do not appear. Nor does it approach the trauma of the desire of the Other, the enigmas of signifiers, sexual difference. With the disavowal of the Freudian unconscious, ethics is made too easy. In fact, at times Thompson engages an oddly moral vocabulary: free association is "a matter of honor" determined by "the patient's conscience" (p. 12); the basis of psychoanalysis is in "ideas whose goal is the right way to live" (p.

1). Ethics becomes a kind of morality when treatment “relies on the patient’s capacity to sit in judgment by another” (xxii) and the analyst obligates, monitors, and enjoins truthfulness. Honesty in some contexts seems like a form of ritual confession, while in others analysis becomes a species of jurisprudence in which “In effect, patients are invited to play the role of juror at their own inquisition, while assuming the role of Inquisitor. The analyst plays the part of the judge who knows what the rules are and whose task is to monitor their observance” (p. 11). Finally, the undertheorized appeal to “experience” simplifies the goal of psychoanalysis, which is a kind of authenticity-“to return the patient to the ground of his or her originary experience” (xxiii)-or the discovery of a transparent self-“to uncover the latent truth about ourselves by disclosing it” (p. 19).

The Ethics of Honesty formulates a mode of conduct for the analyst that the professional community invoked in the “Concluding Unscientific Postscript” may agree upon. In this sense, it offers an ethics for a practice grounded in Freud. But what psychoanalysis is, other than a practice of free association, and what its goals may be are different questions. Acceptance of Thompson’s concept of analysis and its goals, and hence his analytic technique, may have a lot to do with one’s theory, and one’s theory may have more to do with one’s practice than Thompson acknowledges. Thompson’s reasonable, practical phenomenological description of the experience of analysis itself assumes a theory that will not be convincing to all readers.