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The Impossibility of Goodness in an Impossible Profession

Robin Hobbes

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Summary by Frank Kelley

Robin Hobbes spends his professional life teaching, supervising and practising Transactional Analysis psychotherapy and counselling. He is Ethical Advisor to the European Transactional Analysis Association and writes a regular column on ethics for the EATA Newsletter. He co-founded Elan Training and Development in 1982.

What constitutes goodness in our work as therapists? In his Zoom talk Robin invited us to reconsider the ethics of psychotherapy and counselling. He presented some familiar ethical frameworks for evaluating goodness before engaging with the work of the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida and considering its implications for our work.

Robin is very involved in conversations on ethical practices. Even before his formal positions in Transactional Analysis organisations he always found that people were seeking him out to discuss the ethics of complicated situations in their work.

He finds the works of Heidegger and Derrida helpful.

Martin Heidegger was a German philosopher who is best known for contributions to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism. In *Being and Time* (1927) he talks of *being-in-the-world*. Human existence is an activity more than a state or condition. It is a process that exists in time. Similarly, world is meant to convey a much richer and more meaningful ground for human life than would be conveyed by a more sterile term, such as environment. Being-in-the-world is by its very nature oriented toward meaning and growth.

Jacques Derrida was an Algerian-born French philosopher best known for developing a form of semiotic analysis known as deconstruction. He was interested in multiple possibilities of meaning making. He viewed ethics as an affirmation of friendship and hospitality.

Robin spoke of a difficult situation faced by a supervisee. The varied views in our discussion showed how ethically complex therapeutic relationships are. Equally complex were the different ethics we drew on to imagine possible ways forward for this therapist.

Robin offered us contributions to a possible ethical framework.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant defines **categorical imperatives** as commands or moral laws all persons must follow, regardless of their desires or extenuating circumstances. As morals, these imperatives are binding on everyone. If you do an action, then everyone else should also be able to do it.

There is a classic thought experiment about a railway junction. You can choose to let the train continue and kill five people. Or you can choose to pull a lever and divert the train down a track where one person will die.

There is a second variation of this dilemma. Imagine you are standing on a footbridge above the train tracks. You can see the runaway train hurtling towards the five unsuspecting people, but there's no lever to divert it. However, there is large man standing next to you on the footbridge. You're confident that his bulk would stop the train in its tracks.

So, would you push the man on to the tracks, sacrificing him in order to stop the train and thereby saving five others? While most people would throw the lever, very few would approve of pushing the fat man off the footbridge. There is a distinction between killing and letting die. The former is active while the latter is passive. The categorical imperative is that it is not permissible to directly kill even in the pursuit of a greater good.

Most ethical codes have the character of categorical imperatives. There are certain things you do not do.

There is a UKATA (UK Association for Transactional Analysis) **code of ethics**.

- 1) No exploitation
- 2) Explicit contracts
- 3) Adhere to laws
- 4) Confidentiality
- 5) Complaints procedure

There is also the philosophical idea of **consequentialism**, a modern form of utilitarianism. The good is what produces happiness. You judge good by the consequences of actions. Consequentialism comes into play with euthanasia. In contrast with categorical imperatives no action is universally wrong. Ethical hearings in the therapy world always take consequences into account.

With **Virtue Ethics** the goal of human life is wellbeing or flourishing. Character is important, the honesty and morality of a person. Ethics is a life process and we ask who am I, who do I want to be and how do I get there.

For admirers of the classics there are the **Seven Virtues**.

- 1) Chastity
- 2) Temperance
- 3) Charity
- 4) Diligence
- 5) Kindness
- 6) Patience
- 7) Humility

Thank you to Robin Hobbes for bringing all seven virtues into one seminar, for bringing alive the ethics at the core of our professional lives.