

The Ethical Attitude in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy

An ethical attitude is at the heart of psychoanalytic practice; it is written into the BPC Code of Ethics and is safeguarded by their Complaints Procedure.

Following Mary Twyman in her book *The Ethical Attitude in Analytic Practice* co-authored by Hester McFarland Soloman, an ethical attitude is ethical because it does not depend on the behaviour of others towards us:

a decision is effectively taken by the therapist to behave in the patient's best interests regardless of the way the patient treats them.

This is extremely important in work which contains a necessary imbalance of power between therapist and patient and where the possibility of abuse is therefore present. The ethical attitude safeguards this power disparity so that the therapist uses their power in a positive way in the service of the work and thus sets the context in which work can take place.

If thought of in this way, the therapist's power can be seen as deriving from an understanding of the meaning of the emotional exchanges between patient and therapist, and communicating this in the service of the patient's best interests rather than in the satisfaction of any personal ambitions.

Therefore an ethical attitude is based on values that protect and promote the psychological development of the patient, rather than undermine it.

There are many ways in which the values that promote psychological development can be undermined, from the therapist's emotional unavailability to full blown sexual or physical abuse. These have some affinity with the ways in which parents (who share a similar power imbalance in relation to their children as therapists have in relation to their patients) can hinder their children's development by prioritising their own needs and not keeping their children's best interests in mind. Parents who have not sufficiently resolved their own internal conflicts can unconsciously misunderstand their relationships with their children and look to them to meet their own needs.

This is at the heart of requiring all those who wish to train as psychoanalytic therapists to have their own analysis.

Seen in this way, an ethical attitude is at one with the analytic attitude in the consulting room where the therapist's primary task is one of understanding and communication rather than the satisfaction of a hope to bring about psychic change in the patient.

In order to preserve and protect this unique space the therapist has to be alert to attempts made by the patient, and sometimes by themselves, to act rather than think, instead of understanding and mourning the passing away of earlier, often intense, desires and ambitions to gain pleasure and satisfaction from making things happen.

Without an ethical attitude to the patient, and the therapeutic work, it would not be possible for the patient to bring powerful desires into the safe (analytic) space where they can be worked through. As such, analysis is a potentially dangerous enterprise and this is why it is so important that the therapist's thinking and behaviour is securely underpinned by an ethical attitude.