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Boundary Exegesis: Response to Commentaries on “Some Limits of the Boundary Concept”

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The eminent theologian Paul Tillich titled his autobiography *On the Boundary* (1966), and this title served to echo his lifelong struggle between absolute faith and persistent doubt. The word *boundary* does indeed seem to suggest a struggle between differences, be they those of right and wrong, belongers and outsiders, the sacred and the profane, and always of certainty and uncertainty. Of course, I am pleased that my commentators, most of whom are old friends of mine, chose to struggle not so much with me, but rather with the relevant issue of how psychoanalysis has dealt with this particular concept.

To step back for a moment, I cannot help but wonder if most (or at least many) of the advances in our field have been made by those who were not bounded by what they had been taught about psychoanalysis, but were committed to the essence of psychoanalysis, which, I feel, is its boundlessness—or, perhaps better said, its necessary uncertainty. I became interested in the factors that made psychoanalysis seem a rigid and even fossilized field when I wrote *Moral Stealth* (2007). I hoped therein to demonstrate how our preoccupation with moral issues lent a sort of straitjacket to our practice. My concern with boundary violations is inextricably tied to these moral stealth-like constraints.

I probably failed in my abbreviated essay to make clear how we have become blind to the intrusion of morality into our technical concerns. Both Henry Friedman and Glen Gabbard seem to slip into examples of boundary violations that are intrinsically bad or

wrong or even evil. My point in the suggestion of utilizing rules is to remove or separate mistakes and errors from the ethical arena. I am using *moral* and *ethical* in the manner suggested by Paul Ricoeur, although I recognize that some use the words interchangeably and differently, as does Gabbard. Ethics is defined by Ricoeur as “the wish to live well with and for others in just institutions” while morals are the prohibitions and injunctions that adjudicate ethics, and therefore ethics can be subsumed under more than one set of regulations (Hahn 1995, pp. 51-52).

There is probably no person in psychoanalysis who has greater experience in the study of ethical violations than Gabbard, and I take his example as a launching point for my own position, which may be phrased differently than his but is essentially the same. Surely, the difference between accepting a few apples and accepting a diamond necklace cannot merely be that of expense. It is a technical mistake primarily if it makes further analysis impossible; but then it is best seen as a technical mistake and not as an ethical violation. Yet we subtly decry the acceptance of such gifts without clarifying just what sense of “wrong” we are considering.

Friedman nicely demonstrates that this conflation of wrong with boundary crossing might seem to work well with some theoretical and technical approaches, but not with others. In fact, the job for psychoanalysis is to recognize that a host of prohibitions and injunctions, ranging from gift giving to hand holding and on to confidentiality, and even to writing about patients, must be rethought and reevaluated: not in terms of their status as virtues, but rather as pragmatic acts—i.e., in terms of their usefulness. Of course, this is not to dismiss all considerations of moral and ethical behavior, but to disentangle them from the correct conduct of analytic therapy. We do best to still the shrill criticisms of our moral saints who claim to know what is right and what is wrong. The rules of the road are designed to facilitate driving and not to pinpoint sinners. Boundary violations must be seen as helpful to or hindering analytic work, not as moral misbehavior.

I regret not being clearer about rules, inasmuch as Sharon Zalusky's imagined scene (pp. 900-901) of Dr. A's encounter with a

distraught patient in a coffee shop falls outside the technical rules developed in and for a particular analytic theory. These analytic rules are not meant to be rules for living or behaving. Of course, we all recognize that context is determinate of how we behave, and there is no rule book about being humane. One of the problems with using boundary crossings as a guiding concept is that it often becomes confused with a rule book for living rather than a commentary about technique.

I regularly have to read Warren Poland more than once (or even twice) because he writes so eloquently that the words seem to hypnotize me, and a rereading is mandatory to grasp his meaning. My task was made easier in this case by his noting what seems to be an allegiance to Emmanuel Lévinas, someone who, although a noted philosopher and theologian, had a lifelong animosity toward psychoanalysis and espoused a theory of moral responsibility toward others that he insisted was primordial. The stance of Poland about two different people coming together and then going their separate ways is one that allows me to better define my position, and also to respond to Jay Greenberg.

The psychoanalytic method of gathering data is, of course, distinct from that of other disciplines, and not surprisingly results in definitions that are peculiar to the method and the resulting data. A “person” in social psychology is clearly defined and identified; not so in psychoanalysis. One of the more revolutionary steps in self psychology was that of recognizing that a “self” (not a social person) is composed of selfobjects. So, for me, a committed self psychologist (see Greenberg, p. 885), self psychology is a one-person psychology, and I have no idea if Greenberg's “distinct communicating entities” are to be seen from an “interpersonal” point of view or as a self-selfobject integrated whole. It seems a stretch to argue about the distinction between taking a stock tip from a patient and making an interpretation.

However, I do believe that empathic breaks drive the engine of psychoanalysis, and that these breaks are what are often called boundary crossings. Yes, interpretations are breaks in empathy, albeit

of a nontraumatic type. Yes, so is the act of taking a stock tip, although it may often be traumatic. One is good technique. One is not. I personally feel morality should have no voice here and am puzzled as to why Greenberg takes me to task on this point. Surely, we recognize that not taking stock tips and not seeing a movie may be equally reflective of self-interest (Greenberg, p. 889). That particular guide to proper behavior that he espouses seems overly simplistic and unwise. Self-interest goes both ways. In my essay, I may have seemed loose in my collapsing of crossings and violations, but my intent was to highlight the confusion that exists in today's psychoanalysis.

What I aimed to spell out in “Some Limits of the Boundary Concept” and in *Moral Stealth* (2007) was that we need to forcefully separate our technique from our morals. Greenberg joins with me in saying that that requires a different language for the two. Poland seems to insist that they cannot ever be separated (just as Lév-inas would no doubt say).

I certainly apologize to Greenberg if he sees me as disparaging other psychoanalytic traditions, since I tried to stick to accurate quotations, and I have no doubt that my personal feelings were anything but disparaging. I confess that much of what Greenberg had to say about relationists seemed to me to be not relevant to my essay, since I certainly did not mean *violations* when I wrote *interventions*. Maybe the problem is in the word *error* (Greenberg, p. 888). I think all psychoanalysis proceeds by way of errors (see my *Misunderstanding Freud* [2005]). My commentators seem to feel that errors should be avoided, and each of them, with the single exception of Zalusky, cites something, be it a stock tip or a sexual encounter, that seems “wrong on the face of it.” The phrase *boundary violation* seems to qualify for this characterization.

I invite the reader to try a thought experiment: think of something morally wrong that might help an analysis, and then think of something morally correct that might hurt it. As Poland ends his comments: “Nobody ever said it would be easy”

References

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