

BOOK REVIEW

Moral Stealth: How “Correct Behaviour” Insinuates Itself into Psychotherapeutic Practice

By Arnold Goldberg MD, University of Chicago Press, 2007

**Reviewed by: Barbara Russell PhD, Bioethicist
Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto, Canada.**

It seems vicarious moral distress prompted Goldberg, a psychiatrist at Chicago’s Institute for Psychoanalysis, to write this book. He speaks about two psychiatrists whose actions he believes are wrong, but is unsure what exactly is wrong. To better understand such wrongness, *Moral Stealth* enjoins therapists to make explicit and respond to moral considerations that can be appropriately and inappropriately part of psychotherapeutic practices.

Moral Stealth has three sections, each rich with complex cases. The first section begins by questioning who is the legitimate authority to define what constitutes desirable behaviours, thoughts, motivations, and relationships: the client, community, or therapist? The complexity of being a therapist is further explored with the question, “Must a good therapist be a virtuous person (in terms of behaviour and character) as well as technically knowledgeable and skilled?” Rejecting therapists’ appeal to moral absolutes and characterological perfections, Goldberg recommends pragmatism. However his pragmatic approach does not privilege whatever works. Instead it is about “continu[ing] the conversation” (42) given the uncertainty, ambivalence, and ambiguity that exist in both morality and psychotherapy.

The second section discusses how expectations of correct behaviour can confound psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Three commonly lauded behaviours are scrutinized in detail: for therapists, protecting client confidentiality; for clients, being a thoughtful person; for psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, resolving ambivalence. Goldberg concludes that none is as crucial as typically assumed. The last two chapters explore the client-therapist relationship and transference-countertransference. While he favours conversations and paying attention to the language therapists and clients use, the author worries this will ultimately result in “trafficking in themes of social relationships” (94), something antithetical to Freud’s work. Accordingly, Goldberg replaces the traditional metaphor of “inner-outer” to explain human behaviour with the metaphor of ownership to help therapists better understand and deal with transference and countertransference.

The concluding section begins by questioning therapists’ efforts to remain impartial, their reliance on moral relativism, and their certainty about the moral defensibility of their own behaviour. Goldberg’s focus is on outcomes: which psychotherapeutic techniques are most effective for which clients, which therapists qua persons are most effective for which clients, and which clients or situations are least harmful to therapists. Answers to these critical concerns, the author believes, will remain elusive if moral factors and concerns involved in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis are not made more explicit and are not critically examined.

As a philosophically trained bioethicist, I think Goldberg makes a stronger case for morality-ethics (M-E) than he perhaps expects. The cases effectively demonstrate that M-E can arise because a client wants to be a certain kind of person or act in certain ways. But the cases and ensuing analysis also show that M-E is inherent to psychotherapeutic practices (i.e., they don’t just “creep in”). Contrary to Goldberg’s claim that ethicists focus on rules and moral truths---and so are not very helpful---my experience has been that many bioethicists/clinical ethicists work with diverse values, “thick descriptions,” dialogue, reflection, uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence. In addition to the psychotherapy community, Goldberg should find much support from the ethics community for his probing questions and analysis.

Competing Interests: I am a contributing editor of JEMH

Acknowledgments: none

Address for Correspondence: barbara.russell@utoronto.ca
