

## **wellbeing, morality, and the aim of psychoanalysis**

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What is the aim of psychoanalysis? Why should we do it? Or, to put it in capitalistic consumerist terms, what is it selling? At the end of the day, one's life is somehow supposed to improve after analysis. But what would count as improvement? What are the standards against which such improvement will be evaluated and who is to set those standards? This is how the question of the aim of analysis relates to the ethical question that haunts philosophy since its beginnings in Ancient Greece. What is the good life? Is there a general answer to that question; and, if not, then how are we to approach the question of what the good life looks like in each individual life?

This psychoanalytic concern and philosophical question of the good life comprises a central theme in Russell Grigg's recent work, primarily in his conference papers. My engagement with Grigg's philosophy of psychoanalysis has been predominantly through his spoken thought, in conferences as well as in an ongoing private communication since 2008, during which I profited enormously from his guidance and psychoanalytic insights.<sup>2</sup> This ongoing conversation with Grigg, a Lacanian psychoanalyst and a Lacanian thinker, has been possible even if Lacan's work is largely a mystery to me, thanks to Grigg's rare capacity for speaking about psychoanalysis in ordinary language. Arguably this is traceable to Wittgenstein's influence that runs through our shared array of philosophical references, including Quine, Donald Davidson, Harry Frankfurt, Richard Moran and Christine Kors-

gaard.

In what follows, I examine Grigg's spoken reflections about the question of wellbeing, a constant problem or irritant for the philosophy and the practice of psychoanalysis. I shall offer a brief critical reading of the talks he has given during the time that I have had known him, ask some questions that I would like to form the basis of on-going conversations on these topics and finally suggest my own take on the matter of the aim of psychoanalysis.

A layperson would expect, perhaps, that the aim of psychoanalysis is to increase one's happiness or wellbeing. But this is, surprisingly, decidedly not the case, at least not in any straightforward way. That is, somehow analysis should, if all goes well, increase the patient's wellbeing, but not by *aiming* to achieve wellbeing as a goal.

To begin with, the patient cannot aim for it because she does not know exactly in the beginning of analysis what the notion of wellbeing would mean to her at the end of analysis. In fact, it is more than likely that her initial ideas of what a happy life would be for her comprise part of her problem. Rather than having a clear idea of the good life from the start, a successful analysis would reveal or rather get a person to realize what is good for her and in what way.

Neither should the analyst aim for the patient's wellbeing because it is not the analyst's role to impose any specific notion of wellbeing (and there are many of those around) on the patient. As Jonathan Lear often emphasizes, analysis is meant to increase a person's freedom.<sup>3</sup> Guiding a person toward a specific goal would unduly constrain her and put obstacles in her way to mental health. Neville Symington describes such an intentional activity as interference with therapy, and quotes Wilfred Bion saying: "I don't know why you are so angry with me. I am not trying to help you."<sup>4</sup> In fact, this quote suggests that trying to help an analysand is more than interference, but an act of aggression, an intrusion on a person's freedom and capacity to make up her own mind, to identify her own desires.

Yet Symington recently asked me about my own psychotherapist: "Did she help you?" Somehow, although analysts are not supposed to *intentionally* help their patients – that is, they are not to help *under that description*, as Elizabeth Anscombe would say<sup>5</sup>—it is nevertheless a good synoptic description of what they are doing, if they are doing a good job, which involves, paradoxically, not trying to help.

And so Grigg says:

Psychoanalysis is not a helping profession; it is not even a form of therapy, if being a therapy implies having a therapeutic aim. [...] What therapeutic benefits there are that come out of analysis arise from the fact that the aim is directed elsewhere, towards some other outcome. Of course, this takes place on the assumption that something beneficial for the patient will arise out of it, but only as a fringe benefit, as it were, of the treatment itself. This therapeutic paradox is similar to the hedonistic paradox, according to which you will never achieve happiness by making happiness your goal. You have to aim at something else, whatever that something else might be, and then, if you're lucky, pursuing *that* goal might make you happy. Psychoanalysis works in the same way: aim to make your patients' life go better and you will most likely fail. Aim to maintain a discourse in which they can explore their unconscious desires, and there's a chance their life will go better.<sup>6</sup>

“A chance their life will go better”? Isn't that an aim then? And how are we to understand the term “better” here? And why would anyone go to analysis if this betterment were a mere accidental “fringe benefit” that may or may not occur, depending on “chance” or luck? Let me acknowledge my own persisting desire to understand what psychoanalysts refuse to spell out by rephrasing one of Grigg's favorite quotes by Octave Manonni who notices the frequency with which people say... “*I know very well.... But still...*”:<sup>7</sup> So yes, *we know very well* that analysis does not set wellbeing as its goal, *but still*—we all go to analysis with the hope that this newly found self-understanding will make us somehow happier or help us lead a better life. So once we get there, what did we get exactly? How can we understand this non-aim that we are all nevertheless striving for?

What we achieve, says Grigg, is some kind of character development, which *prima facie* seems similar to the Aristotelian call for the development of the virtues. But there are two crucial differences from the Aristotelian notion, which make it unsuitable to be the aim of psychoanalysis. First, as Grigg explains, Aristotle understands the human flourishing that is achievable through the cultivation of virtues to be universal.<sup>8</sup> Grigg emphasizes the universality of the notion of “*eudaimonia*” and talks about its constituents as constituting “the sovereign good”. Grigg claims then, that inasmuch as psychoanalysis is concerned, universal notions of the good consist in ideals that often ironically comprise an obstacle to the good life.

Secondly, the virtues Aristotle has in mind belong to the moral realm. But whatever virtues or character traits one should aim to develop in analysis—they are not going to belong to the moral realm. In fact, Grigg claims that psychoanalysis does not see morality as part of the good life. It is rather a cause for pathology. As Grigg explains, Freud saw morality as unhealthy for us.<sup>9</sup> The more “moral” we are, says Grigg, the more critical we are of ourselves.<sup>10</sup> Our moral standards cause us great guilt. And that guilt is often unconscious, it comes together with an unconscious desire to be punished, and it manifests itself in psychological symptoms and in our refusal to let go of those symptoms.<sup>11</sup> In short, as Grigg says: “The therapeutic aim of analysis frequently finds itself at loggerheads with morality.”<sup>12</sup>

I want to claim here, that these two differences actually converge to what psychoanalysis should object to in Aristotle, an objection that is not at all evident in psychoanalytic literature. I am referring to the *Phrominos*, the Aristotelian ideal of the fully virtuous person who thanks to education and self-cultivation feels or undergoes emotional episodes “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way” as well as does the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons.<sup>13</sup> This ideal character is not only universal and moral, it is also ideally rational, and it is this ideal that clashes with the aims of psychoanalysis, whatever those may be. People who think they are close to this ideal in this or that respect, that they are “less than fully virtuous” but not that much less—live an illusion they would be better off without.<sup>14</sup>

Rather than to Aristotle, Grigg suggests that the philosophical ancestry of psychoanalysis goes back to Plato, in particular to the allegory of the cave. Similarly to Plato’s call to see the shadows of the cave for what they are, psychoanalysis also aims at enlightenment, a “loss of illusions, [a] collapsing of ideals, and even a certain collapsing of morality.”<sup>15</sup>

Grigg here uses the Lacanian term “semblant,” which means in French something between appearance and pretense, with the further connotation of imitation.<sup>16</sup> As I interpret Grigg interpreting Lacan, semblants are close to what Christine Korsgaard calls “practical identities,” our social roles and group belongings, such as being a wife, a mother, or a member of the neighborhood cat rescue organization. The notion of character here is no longer a collection of virtues but of practical identities. But unlike the seriousness with which Korsgaard describes a practical identity, as “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth under-

taking,”<sup>17</sup> these practical identities come with a Sartrean twist. Recall what Sartre says about the waiter in a Parisian café:

His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. [...] He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? [...] He is playing at *being* a waiter in a café.<sup>18</sup>

At some level we know that our social roles do not sum us up, that their typical characterizations are forced upon us by the social world, and that to some extent we are not just playing our roles—we are role-playing. For Sartre this was important: on the one hand we are the roles that we play and the manner in which we cooperate with our social definitions, and on the other hand we are not. Avowing only one aspect of ourselves, either the way we are objectified by others under certain identities or group-belongings, or alternatively the way that we as subjects can transcend any such objectification, can often be exploited as a strategy of bad faith and denial of responsibility. A stable social life is a life where we implicitly accept both these aspects, where we negotiate how we specifically inhabit our practical identities and what they commit us to through our choices and actions. But according to Grigg, in analysis, this implicit knowledge of the indeterminacy of our practical identities becomes a difficult explicit realization. At some point in analysis our semblants or our practical identities become “wobbly”, as Grigg describes them.<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Lear also speaks of such moments and characterizes them as “ironic.” These are moments where, according to Lear, a person reflects on her duties and obligations that she associates with a certain practical identity, say on her being a woman, and on her various actions made under that identity about which she is emotionally conflicted, and asks herself: “What does *any of this* have to do with *being a woman?*”<sup>20</sup>

This wobbling of identities has been called the “Socratic Effect.”<sup>21</sup> The phrase, “Socratic Effect,” was a term in currency amongst the French intellectuals to refer to the effect of truth-telling, explains Grigg in conversation. But there is another

way to understand the suitability of the term for the occasion. What is a woman? What obligations or commitments and responsibilities are involved in this role? This is a typical Socratic question.

Grigg further says that suddenly losing confidence in our practical identities, or suddenly losing one such identity entirely or gaining a new and unfamiliar one, comprises a trauma of the sort that often brings us to analysis, such as “[b]eing abandoned by a lover, falling in love, losing a job, getting a job one can’t manage [...]”<sup>22</sup> Unlike such traumas that are inflicted upon us suddenly by our social reality and experienced as a crisis that may lead us to analysis, analysis itself is what Grigg calls “a gentle awakening”, a “slow-burn” trauma. And somehow, this “non-traumatic traumatization,” through which, I take it, we may abandon an identity or adopt a new one or change our way of inhabiting existing identities, is supposed to be beneficial.<sup>23</sup> It is useful to recall Ian Hacking here saying that “[s]elf-knowledge is a virtue in its own right.”<sup>24</sup> There is clearly an ethics of truth here, a struggle against self-deception and bad faith, “a recognition of reality,” as Freud put it.<sup>25</sup>

I am skeptical about wobbling of semblants and their Socratic effect or about ironic reflections about practical identities. These descriptions seem to me to be *ad hoc* rationalizations of a longer process that has already happened by the time it is described. But I will not pursue this line of criticism here. Whatever is the case, I want to ask Grigg to say more about the truth that remains. Whereas the Socratic dialogues often end in *aporia*, Grigg promises us that “[t]his slow process of ‘disidentification’ doesn’t mean that the subject ends up with no identifications.”<sup>26</sup> What does the patient end up with then? What sense do we make of the notion of character that is composed of our practical identities? What would count as a beneficial development of a character described in this manner? Korsgaard and Lear impose rational constraints on the collection of one’s practical identities. Does Grigg? How is this disidentification meant to occur? This is an issue we need to hear more about.

At times Grigg gives a positive description: “a certain robustness of character, let’s say, that makes you resilient to life’s misfortunes, capable of enjoying the pleasures of life, which includes the capacity for love, and a readiness to change the world to meet your desires, which is the capacity for work.”<sup>27</sup> What would count as healthy resilience in contrast to unhealthy repression? Many well-functioning people who love and work need and go to psychotherapy. The trick is to

see how these could be improved. If this is how wellbeing is spelled out then we need to know what counts as *good* love and *good* work.

In conversations, Russell Grigg abandons the notion of character development and talks about the benefit of analysis in terms of a person's symptom, which is normally what brings a person to seek therapy in the first place. The point is not to cure the patient from the symptom, but "to put the symptom to use."<sup>28</sup> In other words—people can make the symptom work for them. *For* them? To make their life better? For their wellbeing? And what is that?

Most of Grigg's detailed discussion about the question of the good psychoanalysis can bring a person is a negative characterization of analysis—it is *not* aimed at happiness, it is *not* aimed at becoming moral, indeed it is a lot about *ridding* the patient from harsh moral demands that make her suffer from harmful guilt feelings; and it is about *giving up* and slowly dissolving illusory or unsuitable identities and too demanding ideals. What we have here is a notion of freedom *from...* rather than of freedom *to...* I take Grigg's spelling-out of this negative notion to be a retroactive description of what I want to call the *letting-go* we find ourselves experiencing in analysis. *But still*, where does this letting-go lead and what is the good of it?

I conclude by raising a challenge to Grigg, and by suggesting a different take on the question of the aim of psychoanalysis. Firstly, Freud, as Grigg explains, thought morality is a cause of pathology and aggression toward others as well as toward oneself.<sup>29</sup> Granted, morality has a dark side, specifically since, as Russell explains in his discussion of Freud and Kant in *Lacan, Language, and Philosophy*, morality is often a matter of prohibition, of what we should not do. But Freud would also agree that prohibition is what makes civilization possible. In fact, the prohibition of incest, for example, is the very condition of possibility of civilization, according to Freud, who was a great admirer of civilization, despite the neuroses that it produces in its citizens. Surely to say that morality is bad for us *tout court*—a claim that Grigg ascribes to Freud<sup>30</sup>—is to overspeak. Indeed, I highly doubt that Grigg or any other psychoanalyst would be so delighted to liberate the desires of a murderous sociopath or a paedophile rapist as to think of these liberated desires as exemplary of mental health. Although there is surely an important insight in the thought that morality can be bad for us, we need a better understanding of that insight which, unqualified, is highly implausible.

Somehow we need to make a distinction between healthy morality on the one hand and unhealthy moralism on the other, where we reserve the harshness of undue punishment to moralistic rather than to moral demands we have of ourselves. What is the difference between being moral and being too moral? This is a philosophical question that further depends on getting clear about what morality is in the first place—a highly vexed question in its own right.<sup>31</sup> And it is another place where psychoanalysis and philosophy intersect. As Grigg's thought repeatedly shows, the work in the psychoanalyst's clinic and conceptual questions about psychology inter-relate and mutually enrich one another.

I return to the matter of the aim of analysis. Psychoanalysis may not be selling a product, but it nevertheless requires further self-understanding, a more clear idea of how to supplement or fill out its purely negative notion of wellbeing. And this is not at all as paradoxical as Grigg and others would have it. The analyst cannot impose any specific instructions of what that patient's good life shall be, whether she should change jobs or leave home etc. But this does not mean that psychoanalysis cannot aim at some positive picture of the good life, and by "picture" I am referring to Wittgenstein's idea of a model that captures the imagination, that is not in itself true or false, and that has content only when applied to reality.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the *Phronimos* is not merely the collection of virtues; it also comes with a picture. The Aristotelian notion does not provide an actual person to imitate or follow, nor a list of instructions of what to do when. It provides a picture of the rational and moral person: a bit of guru; wise and flawless; well-measured and balanced. Psychoanalysis should be able to offer an alternative picture to this rationalistic image.

That picture, as I will all too briefly sketch here, would be of a person that *is giving in to life*, a phrase that requires unpacking, but that I hope is nonetheless suggestive, and that includes an openness to unpredictable change in one's emotions, desires and values. Instead of finding the *Phronimos's* "middle way" between extremes it is a person who can live with those contradictions that are irreconcilable in her emotions, desires and values. One cannot exactly aim at becoming this person, since life, the affective life of emotions and desires, is something that happens, not something we choose to have. And giving-in to life and the letting-go that occurs in analysis and which facilitates this adventurous surrender and acceptance of one's own creativity, also belong to the realm of affect. But this is not an accidental fringe benefit. It is rather a more or less anticipated side-effect, which importantly also includes a relief from the original issue that brought one

to analysis, even if by the time that relief arrives the person no longer sees it as her primary goal. It is a side-effect of the skill of self-awareness one acquires in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, the skill to “listen” to oneself,<sup>32</sup> to become aware of one’s ongoing associations, of the imaginative connections among thoughts, emotions, desires, or memories that pop in one’s mind or bodily reactions that come to one’s attention. There is such a thing as *imaginative self-knowledge* and that is, I take it, the aim of psychoanalysis.

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## NOTES

1. I am grateful to David Macarthur for his insightful comments on drafts of this paper.
2. In that sense Russell Grigg partakes in a great and largely unknown oral tradition in mid- to late-twentieth century Anglo-American philosophy of philosophers who have an enormous impact through conversation, e.g. Rogers Albritton, Thompson Clarke, Burt Dreben, and Sidney Mogenbesser.
3. See for example Jonathan Lear, *Freud*. London: Routledge, 2006, chapter 1.
4. Neville Symington, "Where is the medicine of healing in psychoanalysis?" *Australasian Journal of Psychotherapy*, 25: 2 (2005), 6-22.
5. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd Ed. [1963] Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Octave Mannoni, "Je sais bien, mais quand même [1963]", in *Clefs Pour L'Imaginaire ou L'autre Scène*. Paris, France: Editions du Seuil, 1969, 9-33.
8. Russell Grigg, "Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," talk given at a conference of The New Lacanian School, *What Lacan Knew About Women*, on May 1, 2013, Miami.
9. See Grigg, "Philosophy and Psychoanalysis."
10. Russell Grigg, "The Aim of Psychoanalysis: Wellbeing or Enlightenment?," talk given at the University of Sydney Philosophy Department Seminar, Nov 2, 2011.
11. Russell Grigg, *Lacan, Language, and Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press: 2008, chapter 7, in particular 104-107. See also Grigg, "Philosophy and Psychoanalysis."
12. Grigg, "The Aim of Psychoanalysis."
13. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Vol. 2, The Revised Oxford Translation*. Ed. Jonathan Barnes Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1991, 1106b14-b21
14. Peter Goldie, "Emotion, reason, and virtue." In Dylan Evans & Pierre Cruise eds., *Emotion, Evolution, and Rationality*. Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2004, 249-267. In fact, this image of us as by and large and in the main having the right emotions at the right circumstances is shared by most contemporary philosophers of emotion, see Talia Morag, "The Tracking Dogma in the Philosophy of Emotion," *Argumenta*, forthcoming 2017.
15. Grigg, "The Aim of Psychoanalysis."
16. Grigg, "The Aim of Psychoanalysis."
17. Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 101.
18. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Bad Faith", in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* [1943]. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. NY: Philosophical Library, 1956, 101-102.
19. See for example Grigg, "Philosophy and Psychoanalysis."
20. Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, 59.
21. Grigg ascribes this phrase to Lacan in "The Aim of Analysis."
22. Grigg, "Philosophy and Psychoanalysis."
23. Grigg, "The Aim of Psychoanalysis."
24. Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 265.
25. Sigmund Freud "Analysis terminable and interminable," *S.E.* 23, 209-253, 248. Quoted in Grigg, "The Aim of Psychoanalysis."
26. Grigg, "Philosophy and Psychoanalysis."

27. Grigg, "The Aim of Psychoanalysis."
28. This is how Grigg translates (in conversation), with a bit of creative license, the expression "savoir y faire avec son symptôme," from Lacan's seminar: <http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-l-insu-que-sait-de-l-une-bevue-s-aile-a-mourre-1976-1977,262>.
29. See in particular Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, *S.E.*, 19, 1-59; and Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* [1929], 1930, *S.E.* 18, 57-146.
30. Grigg, "The Aim of Psychoanalysis."
31. See Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, Preface, for an expression of doubts about what constitutes the scope of the moral.
32. See, for example, Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §1, §427, §115). For a discussion of Wittgenstein's pictures in the Investigations see David Macarthur, "Wittgenstein on Philosophy as Imaginative Therapy," unpublished ms.
33. I describe the acquisition of that skill at length in Talia Morag, *Emotion, Imagination, and the Limits of Reason*. Oxford: Routledge, 2016, chapter 6.