

Regarding the other

Regarding the other

“Regard” – what a wonderfully elastic word that is. It stretches across the breadth of engagement from a fully detached surveying of a broad field to a more focused but still removed looking at a narrower specific focus with an interested curiosity in which other emotional investment is absent, then extending all the way to an observing that is participatory and includes such personal emotional engagement as caring.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* makes clear that the word “regard” has covered the full diversity of levels of dispassion and passion throughout its history. The word comes to us from the French *regarder*, to look at or watch, with that word deriving from the Old French *regardeur*, implying guarding or protecting. Indeed, *regardeur* is tellingly linked to its sibling, the Old Northern French variant *rewarder*, to give a reward. Regard, warden, and guard all belong to the same small genetic family.

The expanse of implications of the verb “to regard” shows through in a specific incarnation, the vast range of ways analysis has, through its history, thought of the analyst’s relationship to the patient – from fully detached examining to a beginning consideration of an analyst’s engagement as seen only as an interfering artifice, then on to appreciation of the place of participant–observer oscillations, from there on farther to valuing of the dyadic mutuality as the very medium of the analytic process, and even reaching at times to a radical relationalism in which separate individualities are absented.

Is one of these views to be taken as valid and are the others to be deemed mistaken? At times, polemical debates between analysts sound as if that were so. Can all of these views have simultaneous validity, even as they can appear to be contradictory? How is one to conceive the nature of the analyst–patient engagement? How do so-called one-person and two-person psychologies mesh or conflict in shaping understanding?

Our minds strive to comprehend experience by breaking it into bite-sized pieces so that we can grasp, identify, and categorize them. Our literature reflects, often with an excess of fervor, the endless variety of such points of view, yet our minds seem ill equipped or insufficient to integrate fully the implicit paradoxes of such varied considerations.

This is the hard problem of psychoanalysis. Neuroscientists have used the term “hard problem” to describe the enigma of consciousness. How is it that among the overwhelmingly complex multiplicity of brain activities, there is one process that leaps from insensate function to the creation of consciousness? That challenge for neuroscientists demands their bridging the separate phenomenological universes studied in the distinct disciplines of biology and psychology.

Psychoanalysis has its own internal hard problem, and it is one that is entirely internal to the discipline of psychology. It is the challenge to integrate the phenomena of human separateness and commonality. How can one best conceive of a person as a particular distinct individual while simultaneously holding in mind the implications of the view that there is no such thing as a person outside the common human fabric? How well can anyone keep in mind separateness and unified human experience all at once?

The words we use serve us to conceptualize and express ideas. By our reflecting on them, they also can inform us of how our minds struggle to combine denotations that have specificity of viewpoint with connotations that keep open varied aspects of understanding. As we have seen, the word “regard” has the flexibility we require for consideration of the clinical analytic process.

The problem, of course, is more than clinical. At its heart, even beyond its therapeutic application, psychoanalysis is a form of inquiry, a disciplined technique developed as a specific tool for allowing exploration of the hidden parts of a mind at work. It is a tool for knowledge, a tool that makes possible a unique way of knowing.

In knowing something, the dilemmas are present. What do we mean when we say we know? I do not attempt to open the vast continent of epistemology, now wishing only to note that the word “know” is as varied in its connotations as is “regard.” On this abstract level as on the experiential clinical level, the word extends from descriptive perceiving to inferential understanding, those themselves both ranging from disinterested objectivity to emotionally detached engagement, then reaching all the way to the connection of what might be termed emotional tasting, extending yet farther to merger, becoming a part of and unifying with the object, as in knowing sexually (“to know in a biblical sense”).

When trying to name the experiences I describe in the chapter on the analyst’s witnessing, I felt that the word “witnessing” was never more than almost right. First, one tends to link the work to legal matters, where testifying is implicit, and testifying is importantly excluded from witnessing as an analytic function. Also, the word carries powerful emotional and even religious undertones as a result of the Holocaust. Can any word ever be quite right?

If one looks closely at any analytic unfolding, the enigma of separateness and commonality is always present. Perhaps that is so for all human endeavors, yet it is only in retrospect that I have recognized that this dilemma has always shaped my thinking and my work. It is the reason I feel “regarding” to be the word that comes nearest to covering the multiple ways an analyst approaches, experiences, and engages with the other person in the analysis.

Concluding reflections en route

Perhaps I should have recognized this earlier. Looking backward, I see this concern for clarifying the relationship between self definition and otherness as having shaped my thinking beyond my awareness. I see it now evident even when as a young analyst responding to a request for a statement on self analysis I wrote,

For me, grasping reality always requires a stretch to try to realize what self and otherness mean, to struggle to contain with great difficulty the awareness that, while you and I share the same world, we have different and equally valid realities.

(Poland 1996, p. 246)

It shocks me now to realize that I have spent well over 50 years behind the couch. Even now, it still is as it was at the start: I am trying to learn *how* to analyze. I feel keenly identified with an elderly Japanese Noh mask carver I met who said of the same point in his career,

People ask me if my carving has improved over the years. I really can’t answer that. Each mask is different. I approach each one as if I am carving for the first time. Work done slowly, carefully, patiently and with *the open mind of a beginner* will be good.

(Personal communication)

“The open mind of a beginner” – analytic candidacy is the start of training, not its end.

Finding a face buried in a block of wood and helping someone with self inquiry are both bound to fall short of perfection. That each time is “for the first time” is vital so that a patient’s self inquiry not be carved to the design of the analyst’s favorite theory or view of the world.

Aware of the power of self delusion, we know the wisdom in the tennis coach’s saying, “Practice makes permanent.” Long practice can lead to growing skills, but merely repeated experience can also lead to calling something growth that in fact is only personal comfort.

There is a point where mask carving and analyzing split ways. An irony innate to analysis is that while a patient asks an analyst’s help, analysis by its very definition is the study of whatever it is that people do *not* want to know about themselves. The wood gives itself up to the carver. A patient, however, is in conflict, torn, pulled from as well as toward insight.

What I have written is not intended either to proclaim or to promote a point. Writing is my way of trying to understand; what I offer is meant not as last words but only as how I grasp a topic at this point. This mirrors how I work, or try to work, in practice, always in an inquiry to try to find whatever meaning lies behind what has unfolded. Analyzing is like extending a clearing in the forest.

When advancing, one always works at the edge of darkness, and too much clarity at work raises concern that what is uncertain has been left for the safety of what is congenial.

When I passed the 50-year marker, I asked myself what was the most important thing I had learned in that half century. Perhaps I should not have been, but I was surprised to recognize that the hardest thing for me to learn was the most obvious. It is that the patient is somebody else! Not me, not part of me, but really somebody else, somebody with a full life that does not include me. Not simply a patient in my office, a character in my mind, a person in my life, but somebody truly "else," a person entire in his or her own life. I am the other's other.

Indeed, I am actually only one person among very many others in the patient's life. Yes, I am one with a privileged position inside that person's mind, but I am there only at that person's invitation, asked in for a specific purpose and consequently for a limited time.

When I think of all I have written as my part in what Dr. Johnson called the epidemic conspiracy for the destruction of trees, one of the few sentences that satisfies me is one that seems almost a throw-away line, the final sentence in an early paper on neutrality: "All the technical principles ... are reasonable, logical, and inevitable consequences of remembering *who* the analyst is and *why* the analyst is there" (Poland 1996, p. 100).

Whatever the desire to extend psychoanalytic knowledge, the analyst's clinical participation in another's introspective journey is always primarily in the service of that patient. The ethics of clinical responsibility toward the patient take priority over purely academic exploration. The analyst works in the service of the other.

Experience has led me to conclude that there is a contribution the analyst makes even more basic than that of advancing the patient's self inquiry. It is the analyst's respectful recognition of the patient as having a self in its own right, distinct and with its own values, regardless of those of the analyst. Not only is such an attitude essential for exploration to unfold, but also it has a fundamental beneficial import in and of itself.

It is crucial for a patient, for any person, to be seen, acknowledged, and appreciated for that person's unique self. Being seen and being gotten, without being acted on for the sake of the other's purposes, even therapeutic – that is vital and essential.

As we know, psychoanalysis is not a spectator sport. The analyst has many differing ways of coming to understand. One is conscious attention to unfolding associations. Another has to do with experiencing the patient's emotional world, doing so in a way that oscillates between engaged empathy and detached reflection. The analyst's self analysis is essential for this to succeed, for experiencing but not getting lost in the patient's dream world brought to life.

Any clinician soon learns that the analyst's self analytic in-and-out is not as easy as it may sound, yet it is basic to the process. The analyst's *silent* self analysis is something a patient picks up. It is through that picking up that the patient develops the patient's own ability similarly to shift between conflictual

and observing spheres of the mind, the patient's own ability to oscillate between subjectivity and objectivity.

Technique is not simply explicit activity consciously planned. Much more significantly, technique is attitude actualized. What is in the back of the analyst's mind, including *how* the analyst's mind works, shapes the analyst's functioning ... and the patient picks that up, whether wittingly or not.

In terms of self-other differentiation, whatever the analyst says, from the most trivial clarification to the most profound interpretation, whatever the content of the words, also communicates an implicit individuating message:

No, I am not you, nor am I one of your ghosts, but as separate people we can speak to and with each other of what is going on. No, I am not part of your dream, but as a person separate from you, I can help you find the words to say it.

② Contact between separate people replaces merger.

This consideration was recognized early by Stone when he wrote, "The psychoanalytic situation is one in which two persons in the state of 'intimate separation' ... express the whole gamut of tensions which may rise between them" (Stone 1961, p. 91). "Intimate separation" is essential and intrinsic to the fundamental psychoanalytic situation, whatever the derivative manifestations – for instance, the tendency to merge or, inevitably, the development of a psychological couple – whether viewed in terms of the dyad, the analytic third (Ogden 1994), or the bi-personal field (Baranger & Baranger 2008).

Analysis cannot be conceived without appreciation of the intersubjective context within which it unfolds. Nonetheless, when the work goes well, the patient's individuality, profoundly respected from the start, grows in autonomous strength through the collaborative work.

This is what I attempt to explore in what follows. I do so in the presence of unresolved concerns ever present. For illustration I mention two, the misuse of theory and the psychoanalytic tendency to pathologize life. I will make a brief comment on each.

First, the misuse of theory. I could not overestimate the value of what I have learned from my teachers and colleagues, that cumulative knowledge combined and codified into what we call theory. Not to appreciate theory is to believe that ignorance actually is bliss. Closing one's mind to learning is mental suicide.

Nonetheless, rapid resort to theory is counter productive, closing questions rather than opening them. It is too easy to fall back on theory to minimize the discomfort of feeling lost when facing the edge of darkness, the land where inquiry lives. There is no GPS for exploring *terra incognita*. To paraphrase Clive James (2007, p. 606), a sense of experience reveals variety, and an ideology conceals it.

A second unsolved difficulty has to do with flaws intrinsic to psychoanalytic thinking itself. The primary data of analytic knowledge necessarily come from clinical practice, from analytically disciplined work with patients. An undesired consequence of work done in such a clinical laboratory is the tendency

of psychoanalysis to pathologize life. We must find a way that when we search the index of our knowledge, the listing for "How the mind works" does not say "See Pathology."

Dilemmas notwithstanding, it is hard not to feel awe at what an astonishing world was exposed when Freud pulled back the curtain hiding unconscious forces and at how fortunate we are to be lost in exploring such terrain. How privileged we are to be welcomed into the lives of specific, singular, and unique individual others to share such a project.

References

- Baranger, M. & Baranger, W. (2008). The analytic situation as a dynamic field. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 89:795–826.
- James, C. (2007). *Culture Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts*. New York: Norton.
- Ogden, T.H. (1994). The analytic third: Working with intersubjective clinical facts. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 75:3–19.
- Poland, W. (1996). *Melting the Darkness: The Dyad and Principles of Clinical Practice*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Stone, L. (1961). *The Psychoanalytic Situation: An Examination of Its Developmental and Essential Nature*. New York: International Universities Press.

Rather my own shortcomings

Lord, help me find the truth, and, Lord,
protect me from those who have already found it.
— An ancient prayer

Most of them met at art school, the Académie Julian, gifted youngsters eager not only to learn from their masters but also to move beyond them. Influenced by ideas Sérusier had brought from Gauguin in Brittany, the young Vuillard, Denis, Bonnard, and others banded together. Wanting to leave the prevailing style of impressionism behind, they called themselves Nabis, prophets, and together with a few added colleagues set out to find a new approach to painting and color.

Denis became their theorist. In 1890, when only 19 years old, he published his *Définition du néo-traditionnisme*. Its first paragraph famously set down the basic premise from which the other principles of the Nabis derived: "Remember that before it is a warhorse, a naked woman, or a trumpery anecdote, a painting is essentially flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order" (Russell 1971, p. 20). As is common with any diktat of theory, implications for possible rules of technique soon followed.

As time passed, the individuals among the Nabis painted and experimented, some staying close to the principles set down by Denis and some moving away. Troubled by a style felt to be insufficiently true to the theory, in 1898 Denis sent Vuillard a letter of concern about Vuillard's having wandered too far afield. In a long reply, a letter that seemed at once an effort at self-defense yet also a genuine striving toward self-definition, Vuillard wrote, "To sum up, I have a horror (or rather, an absolute terror) of general ideas that I have not arrived at by myself. It is not that I deny their validity. I'd rather own up to my shortcomings than pretend to an understanding that I don't really possess" (Russell 1971, p. 65).

So much is present in those three short sentences. Vuillard does not rebelliously repudiate the principles offered but respectfully values their validity. Nonetheless, he insists on his need to digest and assimilate those principles for him to make them his own rather than accept them as a formulaic recipe for technical procedure.