

KANT'S CONTRIBUTION TO PSYCHOTHERAPY

The relevance of Kant's writings in the tradition of ethical enquiry for the field of Psychotherapy

APORTACIONES DE KANT A LA PSICOTERAPIA

La importancia de la obra de Kant en la tradición de la investigación ética aplicada a la Psicoterapia

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Abstract

The study and integration of the ethics into the psychotherapeutic realm has a fundamental role in order to help therapist to take right decisions that will affect to the wellbeing of clients. For the purpose of this article Kant's perspective of Ethics is considered in order to offer a guidance to practitioners and to facilitate the resolution or understanding of ethical dilemmas that may arise within the psychotherapeutic encounter. Criticism to his work are taken into account with the aim to expand his view and to include the role of the emotions in the study of ethics and psychotherapy.

Keywords: *Kant, Ethics, Moral, Psychotherapy*

Resumen

El estudio y la aplicación de la ética al ámbito de la psicoterapia ocupan un papel fundamental a la hora de ayudar a los profesionales de la salud a tomar decisiones adecuadas para mejorar el bienestar de sus clientes. El propósito de este artículo es el de revisar la aportación de Kant al campo de la ética con el objetivo de ofrecer una guía para facilitar el entendimiento o resolución de dilemas éticos que puedan emerger en el encuentro psicoterapéutico. Además, la visión de Kant es analizada desde una perspectiva crítica reclamando el papel de las emociones en el ámbito de la ética y la psicoterapia.

Palabras clave: *Kant, Ética Moral, Psicoterapia.*



*All our knowledge begins with the senses,
proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason.
There is nothing higher than reason.
Kant & Smith (1929)*

Introduction

The practice of psychotherapy brings many ethical dilemmas. Psychotherapists must be aware of feelings, transferences and prejudices that may arise in their inner world as a result of the therapeutic relationship. Additionally, psychotherapists must explore these feelings or attitudes from a position of curiosity and respect with clients at the same time that they are aware of the legal system and ethical codes of behavior. Consequently, inconsistencies between personal attitudes and legal issues can lead to moral and ethical dilemmas for therapists.

Cohen and Cohen (1999) define Ethical theory as a way of providing directions for living a good and moral life, formulating general criteria for distinguishing the morally good from the morally bad. There are many schools of knowledge in relation to Ethics, the two fundamental types are virtues ethics and rule ethics. Rule ethics proposes different principles of moral conduct. On one hand, one form of rule ethics is Utilitarianism which considers that actions are good or bad in terms of their consequences. On the other hand another form of rule ethics is developed by Kant, who highlights the motive of actions, emphasizing the good will. Following, Kant's concepts of ethics are described and applied to the processes of psychotherapy.

Kantian Ethics

Kant is considered as one of the principal thinkers of the Enlightenment, 18th century, and one of the greatest philosophers of all time. Kant initiated an era in the development of philosophical thought influenced by the rationalism, which stresses reason; and the empiricism, which stresses experience (Johnson & Cureton in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2004).

One of the main and most relevant Kant's writings is the Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics. In this work, Kant provides rational justifications for fundamental moral principles and the development of an ethical system (Callender, 1998). For Kant, ethical behavior consists of obeying the moral law out of respect for it. The moral law is our duty to do the right thing in any situation (Kant & Wolff, 1969).

By reviewing this writing, Stumpf and Abel (2001) highlight the importance of the good will in Kant's theory, being the good will the most valuable good. Hence Kant's aim is to study what makes a will good, considering the morality of actions in terms of motive. Thus when a person acts morally, means that what the person wants to do is what duty requires and consequently is acting from duty.

Kant's ideas on acting from duty led him to formulate three propositions of

morality. The first is that an action must be done from duty in order to have moral worth. An action done from any motive other than duty doesn't have a moral value (Stumpf & Abel, 2001). Kant's second proposition of morality states that an action done from duty derives its moral worth from the maxim, a ground rule or subjective principle, by which it is determined. Therefore morality is determined by the maxim, not by the result that happens when one acts on this maxim, but on whether the maxim itself is morally acceptable. Kant's third proposition is a definition: Duty is the "necessity of acting from respect for the law". Thus, duty is the obligation to obey the law because it is the law (Stumpf & Abel, 2001).

Furthermore, Kant proposes the existence of moral imperatives founded on the principles of reason. These moral imperatives are universal and applicable to all rational beings in all circumstances (Whittemore, 2005). The central principle is the Categorical Imperative. It is categorical in the sense that is not instrumental to achieve some other end, but comes to us as an end in itself (Whittemore, 2005). Kant offered three major formulations of the categorical imperative in an attempt to clarify what this unconditional imperative entails. They are: the principle of universalization, the principle of respect for persons, and the principle of autonomy. These principles are not separate rules but merely different ways of understanding what our moral duty is (Paton, 1967).

The principle of universalization means that an act is moral only if you can universalize the rule of that behavior (Kant & Wolff, 1969). For example, if a person considers lying to get out of trouble, it is not moral because it is not possible to universalize the rule of that behavior. For Kant, it is wrong to do something that you cannot will to be a universal rule. One implication of this principle is that it is not moral to make oneself an exception to a rule that applies to everyone else (Whittemore, 2005).

His second formulation of the categorical imperative is referred to as the principle of respect for persons. For Kant, respecting a person is the recognition of a person's inherent dignity. Regarding individuals as an end themselves, and not merely as means to some other end, such as someone else's personal gain (Kant & Wolff, 1969). Kant states that all human transactions involve using others to get something, whether it is a waiter getting a meal or a physician giving a needed prescription. What is crucial to treating others ethically is not the absence of using them, but the presence of respect for them as ends in themselves, and not as means only (Whittemore, 2005).

His third basic formulation of the categorical imperative, referred to as the autonomy principle, is that one must always decide for oneself what choices to make and what rules one will follow (Kant & Wolff, 1969; Paton, 1967). This involves taking responsibility for own decisions and for the reasons used to make decisions. For Kant, a good will involves not only doing the right thing but also doing it for the right reason (Whittemore, 2005).

Following, the application of these principles will be considered in relation to

psychotherapy.

Application of Kant's theory on psychotherapy

The psychotherapeutic work has a huge significance because can be considered that therapists have the power to do good and have the power to do ill. Most of the therapeutic approaches in use today would place a high value on such concepts as awareness, choice, responsibility and an attitude of concern for others (Palmer, 2001). Kant's principles of universality, respect for persons, and autonomy, leads to guidelines in attitude and behavior, reflecting ethical rules in the field of psychotherapy. Some of these rules are related to the establishment of boundary guidelines and warnings against a dual relationship between therapist and client or truth telling in presenting one's expertise (Whittemore, 2005). The ethical implications of these principles are embedded in ethical codes of conduct such as the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 1992).

The psychotherapeutic encounter between therapist and client goes beyond of the therapist position of superiority. The role of the therapist is not based on giving advices, making decisions or to solve client's problems, but as Rogers formulates is to accompany the client in his or her own process, providing empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence (Rogers, 1961). Kant's principles of respect and autonomy concordance with Roger's perspective, taking into account the general therapeutic strategy of empowering clients and in refraining from simple advice giving. These principles guide the therapist in knowing how to communicate so that the interventions empower the clients, preventing the development of dependence for decision making to the therapist. This is particularly challenging with lower functioning clients, since they may need a complex intervention based on self-care skills, boundaries, goals, communication and negotiating skills that can be transmitted by the therapist according to Kant's rules of ethics (Whittemore, 2005). The consideration of principles of respect and autonomy will benefit clients making their own decisions and selecting ends for themselves. Kant's approach can help therapist to work with clients from an equal perspective and reaffirming respect for clients as autonomous persons (Whittemore, 2005).

Kant stated that humans being needs to treat humanity, never just as a means, but always at the same time as an end. Thus, to behave in ways which are destructive to oneself or others is not only distressing, but also ethically unacceptable. (Callender, 1998). Many clients, who attend psychotherapy, present problems that have their origin in traumatic experience of having been used as the means to the end of another. These clients have been damaged by different reasons such us upbringing characterized by emotional deprivation, abuse, or insecure attachment. The end results of such experiences may at worst be a fragmented sense of self, as is found in clients with personality disorders, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. These individuals lack a self-concept of being ends in themselves and

consequently are vulnerable to domination and exploitation by others. According to Kant's ideas, Psychotherapy should not only be aimed at improvement in the client, but should also help him towards living in relationships of mutual respect with his fellow human beings (Callender, 1998).

Criticism of Kant's theory of Ethics

Psychotherapists need to be prepared to face a wide range of difficulties in the therapeutic context, from crossing boundaries with clients to deal with clients with suicidal ideation. Kant's philosophy serves as a reminder of the importance of obeying one's duty. However for Kant, the consequences were not the reason for obeying duty, but moral actions proceeds from a good will as manifested in action performed for the sake of duty (Whittemore, 2005).

According to Kant, an action is morally worthy only if it is done out of respect for the moral law, as prescribed by practical reason. In Kant's ethical theory reason is the only legitimate motive of action, underestimating feelings and emotions. Kant doesn't consider emotions as valid motives (Cohen & Cohen, 1999). Contemporary theorists criticize Kant for failing to give proper value to emotions; Hegel argues that Kant's limited view of the human nature create an internal conflict between reason and desire. For Hegel, it is unnatural for humans to suppress their desire and subordinate it to reason. This means that, by not addressing the tension between self-interest and morality, Kant's ethics cannot give humans any reason to be moral (Singer, 1951). Therefore Kant's adherence to pure practical reason overlooks the importance of emotion in moral experience and life in general, especially when it comes to the moral significance of personal relationships in different contexts such as the psychotherapeutic relationship.

The lack of consideration of the context is another aspect of Kant's theory of Ethics that has been criticized. For example, Kant's consideration of suicide as to end one's own suffering is always wrong. Nevertheless, in oppositions to Kant view, it is questionable that under some severe circumstances of extreme pain, suicide can be justified and moral. Hence Cohen and Cohen (1999) state that Kant's conceptualization of ethical questions by theoretical calculations without consideration of concrete situations seems to simplify the process of ethical decision making.

Conclusion

Despite of criticism to Kant's theory, the analysis of ethical dilemmas from Kant's perspective may guide therapists in their therapeutic practice. Kant's ideas on rationality, good will and ethics are part of a philosophical system, which offer a relevant theoretical framework for considering ethical issues in psychotherapy (Callender, 1998). Therefore, there are certain elements that therapists need to consider in order to have a better relationship with clients and to achieve better outcomes for them. These elements are the following: the understanding of ethics

and ethical principles the law, the knowledge of professional codes of ethic, therapist's self-awareness and perception of boundaries as well as confidentiality issues in therapy (Palmer & Murdin, 2001). Thus the relevance of ethics in the psychotherapeutic field is acknowledged. Consequently Kant's theory of ethics can help therapists to overcome difficulties that they may face in their arduous work.

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