

THE HOLINESS CODE AND 'PSYCHOTHERAPY'

Summary of a West Midlands Institute of Psychotherapy Public Lecture
by Anthony Stadlen
at Birmingham Medical Institute, Edgbaston
on Monday 20 September 2004

Summary by Naomi Stadlen

Anthony began by saying that the Holiness Code ran through several chapters of *Leviticus*, a book of the Bible. He said he wanted to focus on chapter 19. He believed it had something to say to everyone, whether they thought in terms of 'God' or had no need of that concept. The Holiness Code was a wonderful collection of ethical principles. Each verse was like granite, placing two or three terse, enigmatic injunctions together in an apparently arbitrary or even contradictory way, sometimes conjoined by the Hebrew conjunction 've', the single letter *vav*, which leaves open whether it is an intensifying 'and' or an adversative 'but'.

He then read verse 18 of chapter 19: 'Thou shalt not take vengeance nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people; thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' In order to understand this, Anthony showed how, by going back to preceding verses, one could see the context building up for this one. So verse 17 was: 'Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart; thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbour, and not bear sin because of him.' This meant, Anthony said, not hating someone in secret, *but* telling your neighbour to his face if you think he has done something wrong. Verse 16 made it even clearer. 'Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people; neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbour.' This meant that you should not spread gossip or speak badly about another person, even if what you say is true. *But* also you shouldn't do nothing if your neighbour has been wronged. Verse 15 added further clarification. Loving one's neighbour, in this context, didn't mean walking down the street feeling a rosy glow, Anthony said. The context of *Leviticus* makes it clear that love is not a cosy feeling. Love is action.

Most other religions, even humanism, teach similar precepts. 'Love thy neighbour' can seem banal, unobjectionable. However, one person who strongly objected was Freud. In *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1929), he wrote that his own love was precious and should be given to a neighbour only 'if he is so like me in important ways that I can love myself in him'. This, Anthony pointed out, is a statement of psychoanalytic narcissism.

He then turned to Freud's essay 'On Transience' (1916) in which Freud considers death and mourning. The capacity for love Freud called 'libido', a pseudo-scientific term which Freud explicitly intended to evoke something like an electric charge. When the 'object' of the libido died, Freud said, the libido could return to the 'ego'. Yet why, he asked himself, was this so painful? Mourning presented psychologists with a riddle.

'It's moving,' said Anthony, 'that in the concordance to Freud's works the word "Liebe" ("love") occurs hundreds of times.' But is Freud's understanding of love adequate? Is it superior to that of ordinary people, or of the Holiness Code?

Today, 'neuropsychanalysis' is popular. In *Why Love Matters* by Sue Gerhardt, we are told that love matters because it shapes the baby's brain. If it didn't, Anthony remarked dryly, would love still matter? He asked the audience: 'How can you learn about love by looking at the brain?'

A concrete example of the psychoanalytic concept of love arises in Freud's 'Dora' case. 'You may argue,' Anthony said, 'that we have come on so far that discussing Freud's cases is like going back to Edison's phonograph. But I cannot agree. The shift from Freud to Fairbairn and "object relations" is not so fundamental. There is still an attempt to reduce love to questions of health, utility, or science. One has to examine Freud, to see where it all started.'

Dora's father paid for her analysis and asked Freud to 'bring her to reason'. He wanted Freud to 'confirm' that Dora was deluded. Most people praise Freud's integrity in not doing this. Freud actually 'confirmed' that Dora's account was accurate in every detail. In particular, he 'confirmed' that her father had tacitly allowed his friend Herr K. to molest Dora sexually in exchange for sexual favours from Herr K.'s wife. But, Anthony asked, how did Freud know this? He couldn't have known. It used to be fashionable for analysts to dismiss as fantasy their patients' reports of childhood sexual abuse. Today it is fashionable for therapists to 'believe' clients who 'disclose', *i.e.* claim, that they have been sexually abused. But the Holiness Code, Anthony said, makes it clear that no judge can tell the difference between truth and falsehood without witnesses. A therapist may sense that the client is telling the truth, but this is different from claiming to *know*. What is wrong with saying: 'I have no reason to disbelieve you'? This would have put Freud in a more honest position towards Dora. Yet no one in the vast literature on the case has pointed this out. In the last quarter-century there has been much criticism of Freud's approach to Dora. But everyone praises him for 'believing' her.

Then, said Anthony, comes the twist, praised by Lacan as a masterly Hegelian 'dialectical reversal' by Freud. Freud wrote: 'When a patient brings forward a sound and incontestable train of argument during psychoanalytic treatment, the physician is liable to feel a moment's embarrassment.' 'But why?' asked Anthony. 'Why wouldn't the "physician" feel pleased if his "patient" seemed to be reasoning well?' Freud's solution to his embarrassment was to assert *a priori* that Dora's reproaches were defences against *self*-reproaches. He didn't say Dora's reproaches were deluded. He simply said she was sick for making them. A 'healthy' girl would have kept her mouth shut. He thus invalidated her and colluded with her father more radically than her father could have dreamed of. Certain verses of the Holiness Code could have guided Freud here.

Freud claimed to have a superior way of seeing love, mourning and revenge. But Anthony considered that much psychoanalytic writing on these themes was not even up to the standards of ordinary people. Ernest Jones called Dora 'a disagreeable creature who preferred revenge to love'.

Anthony emphasised that his critique still applies widely today. For example, most psychoanalysts appear to treat as dogma the idea of a mother's ambivalence towards her baby. Psychotherapists talk about a psychological 'love', by which they mean a feeling, not the authentic love-as-action of the Holiness Code. For them, where there is 'love' there must be 'hate'. Not to feel such hate is to be in 'unhealthy' 'denial'.

Is this version of love really an advance on popular understanding, let alone the wisdom of the Holiness Code or writers such as Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Tolstoy?

Freud himself pointed to his bookshelves and said: 'These are my precursors.' But the language of 'mental health' encourages people, even great thinkers like Freud and Jung, to talk in alienated ways. They can get confused and lose their ordinary humanity. Psychotherapists who quote the Bible usually patronise it. But the Holiness Code, written in ordinary language, transcends the theories of Freud, Jung, and other psychologists.

Anthony said he did not want to be prescriptive. He invited his listeners to think whether Chapter 19 of the Holiness Code suggests more honest ways of relating to clients in 'psychotherapy'.