

The Ethical Dilemmas in ‘Ethical Dilemmas’

Andy Rogers

The subtlety with which we can portray ourselves in a decent garb even when aiming to be unadorned can hardly be overestimated. Peter Lomas¹

Why ask readers of a therapy journal to respond to an ‘ethical dilemma’? Perhaps to raise awareness of the difficult choices we face in our work? Or to exercise our thinking, so that we are fit to approach such dilemmas ‘for real’ (forewarned is forearmed)? Are these not reasonable goals? Should we not accept them uncritically and get on with thinking about the dilemmas themselves? Or are there other things to consider first?

Who are we being, for example, as we write our responses: intellectual observers; supervisors to the protagonists and their situation; actors inhabiting parts in a drama? What in each case can our reflections really tell us about being a participant? How genuinely can we experience the dilemmas as if they were our own? If we are role-playing, what is likely to be missing in our replies? What of the infinite unmentioned factors beyond the text of the vignettes? Are we to imagine them, or should we see these thinly sketched scenarios as self-contained thought experiments?

If we pencil in the contexts and details, what ends up being left out? What is assumed and what is ignored? Do we highlight seriousness and compassion while downplaying our capacities for humour and self-interest? What of impulsiveness, mischief and outrage? Or distraction, error and tragedy? Do we sacrifice gritty, chaotic realism for smooth, accomplished professionalism? Does the ordinary lose out to the technical, the mundane to the exceptional, the personal to the professional?

Why – because the exercise is about best practice? What does ‘best practice’ mean? Are hubris and idealism best practice? Are denial and distortion best practice? Are cleanliness and order best practice? Is it best practice to push out of awareness the awkward and unresolved in favour of a neat summary?

What personal and professional agendas are at work when we decide to say one thing and not the other? What feeds our self-censorship? Aren’t these questions central to therapeutic activity? How much do we fear the judgement of those who will read our responses? Is the gravitas of the dilemma’s ethical component too overwhelming – the potential costs of getting it ‘wrong’ too devastating to risk not internalising the imagined criticism of our peers? Is it better to play safe?

What’s so good about safety? Is safety the touchstone of ethics? Need it be? If an ethical dilemma is a crossroads, where do we end up if we only take the safest route? And what is the ‘safest route’ anyway – to stick to established professional orthodoxy, to name-check our organisational codes or frameworks and to give textbook accounts of our theoretical allegiances? For whom is this safe? Client? Practitioner? Or ‘the profession’ as an entity in its own right, with its own interests? What might these interests be, and how are they best served? Is it always (ever?) ethical to prioritise the interests of the profession?

1 Peter Lomas, *Doing Good? Psychotherapy out of Its Depths*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 12

Is it ethical to concoct a consensus on ethics? Should we embrace local differences, in hand with global uncertainty, or seek an overarching corporate consensus to which other variations are subordinated? How does an apparent consensus on professional ethics – codified or merely strongly implied – help us in real-life practice dilemmas? Does it facilitate responsible decision-making, distilling the wisdom of many to reveal useful ways forward, or does it dilute complexity so that the truths it once contained become too submerged to be meaningful for the specific, the unique and the emergent?

Might the aspiration for consensus operate as an oppressive condition of professional worth, creating rigid norms of acceptable thinking and acting, outside of which we are devalued or even derided? How might enforced deference to this condition suffocate the personal and the idiosyncratic in the experience of those at the centre of the dilemma, suppressing the very elements out of which creative responses might otherwise emerge – responses that honour the unique subjectivities, relationships and contexts of the encounter, however dissonant they might be with current professional assumptions?

And where do our published dilemmas actually occur? In the heads and hearts of those who write and read the responses? Are these worlds not touched by our personal and professional lives and the dynamics of our organisations? Are these not connected in turn to changes in the social structure – to economics, politics and culture? How does power flow through such connections, and to what effect? Can we acknowledge and explore these spheres of influence and others (ecological? spiritual? genetic?) in our engagement with ethical themes? Or do we decide they are secondary, that there isn't enough space, that it is not safe to do so?

Given all these unanswered questions, why reintroduce an ethical dilemmas feature to *Self & Society*? Can we do things differently, while acknowledging that it will be no mean feat to even partially disentangle ourselves from the various internal and external agendas that so influence the realm of ethics in therapy and their expression in this form? Can we address and transcend the dilemmas we find in the very act of responding?

Can our engagement with the questions posed here open doors to more uncertain, explorative territory? Can we harness our critical faculties, not to shore up existing narratives, established norms and recycled truths, but to embrace new possibilities? Can we somehow articulate and learn from the tensions of responding, opening up the process of our engagement, making it as transparent as possible and tapping the wisdom of the hitherto unspoken relationship between ourselves and these 'dilemmas'? Is this where we will find the good stuff?

I guess there's only one way to find out.

The Dilemma

A colleague has found some work doing one-to-one therapy in your local Improving Access to the Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service. Despite her account of a 'relaxed' attitude to her broadly humanistic approach at interview, she now reports finding herself under increasing pressure in-post to use only Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and to see a CBT supervisor. She talks lightheartedly about the possibility of 'playing the game' and then doing what she pleases in the client work, but the situation appears to be troubling her. Leaving the job, she says, would have significant financial consequences and is 'not an option'. How might you respond to her request for advice?

Please send responses of up to 400 words – along with your ideas for new dilemmas – to: Andrew.Rogers@sparsholt.ac.uk