Psychotherapy Ethics and the Limits of Mechanistic Explanation

The ‘mechanisms of change’ in psychotherapy remain poorly understood. Indeed, crude mechanistic explanations seem particularly ill-suited to track the multi-faceted, often unforeseen, at times only gradually revealed effects of the interpersonal therapeutic encounter. In this talk we address two major limitations of current approaches to psychotherapy research and outline their ethical implications. Our first point centers around what one might call the reflexivity of such interventions. Clients appropriate and respond to what happens in therapy in a variety of ways, inside and outside the clinic. Alongside this, clinicians’ explanations of how their respective brand of therapy works are very likely to become part of the treatment. The second point concerns the neglect of non-clinical contexts in the evaluation of therapeutic interventions. Psychotherapy never happens in a social vacuum, and it can alter clients’ lives in ways that underscore its moral dimension. That is, following recent work in psychotherapy ethics, one could argue that clinical encounters are essentially moral encounters. Theoretical frameworks may be used by patients to make sense of their mental suffering and, along with therapeutic practices, offer “ethical proposals” for what it means to live well. Hence evaluating a treatment’s effectiveness, in a clinical sense, is insufficient for assessing how it might help an individual. This, in turn, implies that clinical evaluation should not be considered a theoretically agnostic enterprise; rather, the ethical and social implications of therapeutic practice require critical scrutiny.