

The ideas of personal freedom and responsibility

Presentation by Prof. Robert Spillane on 24 October 2015 – review by Juliana Triml

After CAPA AGM on 24 October 2015 we were challenged again by Prof. Spillane, this time on the topic of personal responsibility related to having freedom to choose our actions. Many influential psychologists in the past gave a variety of convincing explanation for whatever reasons an individual cannot be called responsible for their behavior. They believed that human behavior is determined by internal (biological structures, mental health, emotional influences, etc) and external forces (social structures, situational, resulting from drug effects, family patterns/dynamics, etc).

So what can we do with it as psychotherapists? Whilst we gain understanding of clients' motivation to engage in a specific behavior, is that enough? Or does the client need to understand that he/she is free to choose his/her actions rather than "blame" our brain chemistry, parents' ways or someone else's actions? Very often clients come to consult us when things in their life become uncomfortable and they want some changes to occur, sometimes it may be the other's behavior/actions that are blamed for the problem, what can we say then?

Prof. Spillane offered a philosophical underpinning of above assumptions. He noted that the notion of responsibility and freedom relates more to counselling rather than psychotherapy. However, I would think that the process of adopting a different attitude whilst accepting past formative influences, calls for more than counselling approach. As Prof Spillane noted, definition of Mind is varied and controversial, depending from which view it is interpreted, including its location in the body. Assume that Mind is an abstract that produces thoughts and feelings but if something is impossible in the logic, it is impossible in any other way.

Freud posited that psychically freedom is an illusion (Cartesian duality of Body and Mind). Jungian position was that neurosis is an illness imitating behavior and the habituation of that behavior; further, to be crazy is a social concept – not a medical condition. Eysenck attributed personality and behavior to determinism and heredity, while encouraging people to be more autonomous. For Skinner, freedom and responsibility were seen as meaningless.

So, next step will be turning to philosophy: J.P. Sartre was one of first existentialists and he is well known for his promotion of liberty (perhaps more political than psychological). However, he always linked liberty to freedom (options/choices) and responsibility (obligations). He stated "Those who hide from total freedom, with solemnity or deterministic excuses, I call cowards (1945 – reference can be obtained). Later, Victor Frankl was criticized for performing lobotomy during his times and that he noted that it is the intention of performing the lobotomy or any other form of technique (to make people feel better?) and not the choice to perform it. On the

other hand, Albert Ellis made an open statement: “Diagnosing and institutionalizing mentally ill individuals without their consent has some evil consequences, but not diagnosing and institutionalizing these individuals would tend to have even greater evil results”. Well, here comes Shakespeare’s question – “To be or not to be?”.

Several factors need to be considered when exploring how well is the client able to understand that he/she is free to act AND at the same time is responsible for the consequences of his/her actions:

1/ the Mind and the unconscious; 2/ Emotive forces; 3/ Conditioning- repeated introduction of stimuli; 4/ The structure of personality ; 5/ Health and illness. And, as many of traits are inherited, where does it leave any space for individual responsibility?

Prof. Spillane again stimulated our thinking. Perhaps, we need to encourage clients to ask “How did I allow that to happen” rather than “How did that happen?” (my emphasis). So, eventually, as psychologists and therapists, we need to turn to philosophy to gain a deeper ethical point of view, going beyond behaviourism. At the same time, we need to be knowledgeable to become aware if/when we get to the point at which our empathy and listening may actually be perpetuating client’s lack of personal responsibility (allowing the blame to continue) for their free choices. When I have clients who tend to blame certain traits on their heredity (parents), I would encourage them “as you feel that your mother/father did not fulfill the role, perhaps it may help for YOU to become your own father/mother and giving yourself what you now need”. This would be followed by a series of therapeutic interventions.

I must acknowledge that whilst writing this review my own philosophical underpinning may have influenced the content and I wish to own it as such.