More-Than-Personal: Political, Spiritual and Ecological Dimensions of the Psychotherapy Relationship

One Credit Course taken over two days

Professor Andrew Samuels D.H.L.

Biography:

Andrew Samuels D.H.L. is Professor of Analytical Psychology at the University of Essex, Visiting Adjunct Clinical Professor in the Postdoctoral Program in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, New York University, Honorary Professor of Psychology and Therapeutic Studies at Roehampton University and Visiting Professor of Psychoanalytic Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

He is the elected Chair of the UK Council for Psychotherapy, the national body for the profession. He is a Training Analyst of the Society of Analytical Psychology, London, where he is in clinical practice. He is the founder of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, the 2003 holder of the Hans W. Loewald Award for Distinguished Services of the International Federation for Psychoanalytic Education, and a founder Board Member of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy. Former Scientific Associate, American Academy of Psychoanalysis. He is the founder editor of the journal *Psychotherapy and Politics International*.


General introduction and short course description:

The aim of the course is to provide a place in which participants can explore the issues of politics, spirituality ecology in a manner that is personally illuminating, theoretically innovative, and useful in their clinical work. Psychotherapists who seek to honor the manifold ways in which they and their clients are embedded in complex psycho-social networks of vulnerability and power are often handicapped by the fact that they have not yet sufficiently explored this matter on a personal level. The course is divided into three segments: (1) *The ‘Political Self’* – in which participants explore personal aspects of political processes with clinical utility in mind; (2) *Psychotherapy, Politics, Spirituality: Challenges for Contemporary Psychotherapy* – including an approach to the spiritual dimensions of experience specially evolved for psychotherapists; (3) *Ecological*
perspectives on the analytical experience. (Please note that the course contains experiential components.)

All reading is recommended reading but those items marked *** are particularly useful because they give an overview.

Learning outcomes:

By the end of the course, participants will be able to:

1. Identify political, spiritual and ecological dimensions of the psychotherapy relationship;
2. Be cognisant of the interweave of power and vulnerability on the part of the psychotherapist;
3. Be more aware of the personal determinants of their own political attitudes and engagements;
4. Assess realistically the necessity to introduce a dimension of understanding into the psychotherapy process that incorporates spiritual and more-than-personal perspectives.
5. Assess critically similarities and dissimilarities between approaches from relational psychoanalysis and post-Jungian analysis.

Course description:

Day 1

THE ‘POLITICAL SELF’

We will look at political aspects of selfhood, locating these as one important strand of self-experience and action in the world. Influences on the political stance and style of an individual subject will be explored: family, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic, ethnic, national, religious – together with other, less rational, factors.

The notion of ‘political energy’ will be introduced as a heuristic means by which an individual can achieve greater awareness of the processes and dynamics of their political selfhood. Some individuals, for whatever reasons, manifest high levels of political energy; others operate politically at a lower energetic level. This is very context specific: some individuals are highly ‘political’ at home but may be less so at work, some apparently uninterested in current events.

We will also discuss whether an external (i.e. visible) manifestation of political energy is required for its existence to be noted – individuals often track the politics of their day in a very intense but invisible manner. These may be called introverts, poets, mystics – or they may be understood as constituting a particular kind of socio-political exclusion under current arrangements. Such individuals rarely vote, for example. Others carry out
their politics via bodily processes functioning as a sort of unconscious commentary on the political.

‘Political style’ is a useful approach to conflict resolution: sometimes differences over the content of a political issue are more accurately understood as a result of the disputants carrying out their politics in quite different ways.

In this first day of the course, we will also pay special attention to the following:

(a) the role of aggression and violence in the political self;

(b) the images the subject carries of the intimate relationship of her/his parents as indicative of unconscious engagement with political themes;

(c) the key concept of ‘political memory’ will be introduced with the intention of showing how it is often in memories (whether powerful or merely early) of a political kind that we can find keys to the subject’s ‘political autobiography.’

(d) clinical applications of the above, leading to a proposal for a model for responsible but direct work with political, social and cultural material in the clinical setting.

Recommended reading:


Day 2

**PART I - PSYCHOTHERAPY, POLITICS, SPIRITUALITY: CHALLENGES FOR CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOTHERAPY**

The course may be understood as seeking to look beyond the personal aspects and dimensions of emotional distress. Up to now, in this course, this more-than-personal (i.e. collective) dimension has been carried by political, social and cultural problematics and issues. But there is another more-than-personal element to consider, which has itself a
long connection to healing and has received a good deal of attention from psychoanalytic theory: the spiritual dimensions of experience.

Many psychoanalysts and psychotherapists are suspicious of the facile use of the word ‘spirituality’ – sometimes we hear the phrase ‘the “S” word’. They criticise an avoidance of social realities and the vicissitudes of the instinctual drives. Some note that a mindless appeal to tradition and to the past may masquerade as a spiritual concern, thereby dignifying cultural anxiety and moral panic. A degree of narcissism or elitism may also be present in those who self-define as ‘spiritual’. These and other problems with the introduction of a spiritual dimension to psychotherapeutic work will be discussed.

At the same time, modes of understanding the contemporary crises in Western societies that avoid implications clustering round ‘spirituality’ may lack an important ingredient. They may be ineffective when questions of loss of meaning and a sense of purpose in life arise in analysis. They may also lack a capacity to engage with the general malaises that irradiate the inner and outer lives of clients and therapists alike.

In recent times, several attempts have been made to draw parallels between spiritual and mystical practices and the psychotherapeutic endeavour. The project that will be presented for discussion in this segment of the course is different in that it rests on the argument that we still do not have an approach to spirituality that is congruent with the values and practices of psychotherapy, or can sit comfortably with the various social critiques evolved by (for example) psychoanalysis.

The attempt will then be made to sketch out what such an approach to spirituality would look like and then to link this back to those political more-than-personal themes that will have been discussed earlier in the course.

Recommended reading:


PART II – ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ANALYTICAL EXPERIENCE

There is now a school of ecopsychology in existence. Its principles include the recognition that much anxiety and depression has origins in the environmental and ecological crises that we face. Specifically, species depletion and the unsustainable nature of economic activity form the more-than-personal background to the issues that many patients bring to the clinical situation.
A simple example of eco-therapy would be the responses people feel in relation to a beautiful landscape or a sunrise or a gorgeous wild animal. How can this kind of thing be rescued for therapy in the office? The notion of 'the wild' is beginning to be re-valued in psychoanalytic clinical theorizing.

From Freud's ideas about 'wild analysis' to Groddeck's refutation of them, we see how a tension between 'nature' and 'the wild' forms one current of psychoanalytic speculation since the beginning. Jung was one of the first to talk about the depth psychological consequences of humanity's divorce from the land.

Recommended reading:


