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Ethics, Money, and the Healing Relationship

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Is it moral, just, or justified to pay or receive payment for matters medical, therapeutic, healing, or spiritual? Are we obligated to treat people with little or no financial resources? Should medical and health services be everyone's birthright? Should they provide the healer or teacher with intrinsic rewards that transcend the need for money? How do we protect such services from being confused, corrupted, or polluted by earthly gain? And how and what kind of livelihood should a practitioner of such non-businesslike services achieve?

Such questions, dilemmas, and debates about payment for medical, healing, therapeutic, and spiritual services are not new. The proper principles, means, methods, and amounts of payments for health and healing services have been debated for as long as such services have been offered.

Different cultures have addressed these dilemmas in different ways, finding answers that reflect their moral, economic, and social systems. Among Native American tribes, for example, shamans and medicine people were often the busiest, most sought-after, and poorest members of the community. They were sometimes relieved of the tasks and toils of daily life to leave them free to tend the afflicted. Patients were neither charged nor refused treatment for inability to pay. Rather, medicine people were gifted for their services according to the resources of their patients, and all gifts were accepted with gratitude. Thus, a healer might receive a horse as payment from one neighbor and a basket of nuts from another for the same service. The principles were that healing and spirit belong to everyone; the shaman or healer lives in service to the community; the afflicted pay willingly and honorably according to what they can afford. These practices are not as distant from our contemporary tradition as we might imagine. American country doctors of the nineteenth century worked in the same way. As a contemporary example, I have on occasion received eggs and milk as payment for healing services and certainly sometimes provide services *pro bono*.

In stark contrast, our contemporary American practices reflect life in a society defined as free-enterprise capitalism where each worker is an inde-

pendent agent trying to make the most money for goods or services in a huge, impersonal, and self-propelling system fueled by competition. In such a system, each healer is free to define his or her payment principles and practices within certain ethical conventions. The dominant goal of the culture—that individuals acquire as much as possible—inevitably fuels attitudes and practices toward payments for healing services. Thus “as much as the market will bear” becomes a dominating principle in setting fees while such practices as sliding scales, giving extra phone or office time when needed, giving services for free, traveling to the patient who cannot come to the office, giving more than the traditional 50-minute psychotherapy hour, or a long personal medical consultation all become suspect and are debated as though they were betrayals of the theory of healing itself. In such a cultural ecology, it becomes difficult to determine when we are debating matters that contribute to or detract from our patients’ welfare and when, in fact, we are protecting our own pocketbooks and calendars.

Whenever we become lost or confused, it behooves us to return to our roots. When we wander in professional confusion, we can hearken back to the ideals and dreams that first shaped our choice of profession and calling. Similarly, when an entire profession is confused, it can aid us to reflect on its origins and examine what, in its archetypal condition, it first declared about the principles and practices in question.

Both medicine and psychology have deep roots in shamanic, priestly, medical, and healing practices from all over the world, but their direct roots in Western civilization trace to ancient Greece. Medicine and psychotherapy as we practice them today began in the Western world in the Asklepiian and Socratic traditions. Each tradition had much to say about the proper relationship of fees to services meant to heal and uplift body and soul.

In origins are meanings. This is true in language and culture as well as in medicine and psychology.

The word “physician” derives from the ancient Greek word “*physic*,” not meaning what is physical but meaning nature. The physical was derived from nature. A physician was one who healed through natural means consistent with nature’s processes. As in our naturopathic healing today, nature was studied and used to heal nature.

The word psychotherapist comes from the tradition of Asklepios, the ancient Greek god of healing. “*Psyche*” meant soul, and “*therapeut*” meant attendant or servant. Thus, a psychotherapist was an attendant of the soul. Psy-

chiatrist comes from “psyche” and “iatros.” An *iatros* was a physician or healer. Psychiatrists are literally soul doctors; podiatrists, foot doctors; pediatricians, doctors of children. We should wonder why we consult cardiologists rather than “cardiatricians” for heart illness; “-ologist” from “logos”—as in biologist and paleontologist—connotes one who studies rather than one who heals.

The first psychotherapists in the Western world were those who attended the afflicted in the holistic and dream-healing sanctuaries of Asklepios, the god of healing.¹ They guided patients toward strengthening themselves in body, mind, and spirit. This was achieved first through a period of retreat and rebuilding oneself through both holistic and soul-oriented practices in a sanctuary reserved for that purpose and separated from the stresses of the world. Then the psychotherapist facilitated the patient through the key element of healing. That is, ancient psychotherapists did not sit in years-long consultations deconstructing and rebuilding a patient’s psychodynamics. Rather, ancient psychotherapists primarily facilitated an immersion in a healing strategy at a holistic medical retreat based in both mythological and scientific traditions. With psychotherapeutic and psychiatric guidance, patients slept in special dream chambers, seeking a dream or vision in which Asklepios or any of his divine helpers—the snake, dog, cock, his daughters, or his dwarf assistant—came to the patient and either healed directly or told the remedies or regimen necessary for healing. We have records of thousands of successful Asklepiian dream-healings spanning a period of almost two millennia.

What were the principles and practices regarding fees for these early medical services? Patients were welcome to stay in the healing sanctuaries for as long as they needed to be there. The goal was for patients to recover from the pain, suffering, or stress caused by everyday life rather than return to it as soon as possible. Everyone was equally welcomed in these sanctuaries—from emperors and nobles to slaves, men and women equally. Patients always gave votive offerings of the hand, foot, or whatever body part was healed; for poorer patients these were often simple terra cotta reproductions representing the healing. These provided future patients with evidence and encouragement that healing occurred. Patients were also expected to give a thanks offering after their healing according to their abilities to pay. An emperor might donate a new building, a slave an apple. In the eyes of the divine, these were

1. For a complete history and consideration of the ancient healing practices associated with Asklepios, see Tick 2001.

of equal worth. Sanctuaries were operated and psychotherapists supported by these donations.

This tradition began about 1300 BCE and was practiced for almost two thousand years in more than 320 sanctuaries throughout the Mediterranean world. It led directly to the development of scientific medicine and psychiatry during the Greek enlightenment. Hippocrates, renowned as “the father of modern medicine,” was a son and grandson of Asklepiian priests. He grew up in their temples and sanctuaries, and his principles and practices for the healing enterprise were profoundly influenced by that initiation.

In contrast to psychotherapists in the sanctuaries, Greek physicians practiced and taught privately. Hippocrates affirmed that doctors should receive fees for teaching medicine and tending the ill. The monetary practices of healers during this period can be summarized: “The late Hippocratic treatise *Precepts* recommends that doctors should, where necessary, be prepared to treat their patients without payment. . . . The usual rule was that doctors charged their patients for their services, adjusting their fees to their patients’ means” (Lloyd 1983, 15). As in Asklepiian sanctuaries, health and healing were considered the birthright of all, and doctors were viewed as servants of all. Their ethical standards and practices obligated them to treat all in need, regardless of ability to pay, to adjust their fees and even treat for free when the need demanded. The afflicted could not be sent away from either the Asklepiian sanctuaries or their doctors’ practices because they could not pay the full fee, or even any fee. That was seen as a betrayal of the sacred nature of the calling and art.

The quest for healing through psychotherapy that included holistic and dream practices came to us from the Asklepiian tradition. The quest for healing by engagement in dialogue designed to reveal the essential truth of our natures came to us through the Socratic tradition. Socrates was that great teacher of the early Greek enlightenment, living in Athens from 469–399 BCE, who placed the divine voice not in external nature but in the inward soul. Socrates declared that our first concern in all individual and societal pursuits must be to educate, nurture, and tend the soul.

During Socrates’ time, the dilemma over payments for soul-nurturing and educating services was intensive. Socrates refused to accept any payment for his philosophical teachings that were delivered through question-and-answer discussions in order to uncover truth. He believed, affirmed, and lived the example that the search for truth was its own reward, and that what matters most in any human life is that we never do anything unjust or evil, for it

harms the soul. Socrates was profoundly worried that involving money in any soul enterprise would pollute that enterprise; then money-making instead of soul-making could become its goal. As he explained in his *Apology*:

I have never set up as any man's teacher; but if anyone, young or old, is eager to hear me conversing and carrying out my private mission, I never grudge him the opportunity; nor do I charge a fee for talking to him, and refuse to talk without one; I am ready to answer questions for rich and poor alike, and I am equally ready if anyone prefers to listen to me and answer my questions. (Tredennick 1969, 65)

Xenophon, a student of Socrates who became an honored and heroic military leader later in life, remembered that "some people, after getting some scraps of wisdom from him free, sold them to others at a high price, and were not as democratic as he was, because they refused to converse with those who could not pay" (Tredennick and Waterfield 1990, 85).

Socrates' competitors were the Sophists. Oversimplifying their complex school and movement, these teachers discoursed and dialogued in the public square as did Socrates, teaching oratory and rhetoric. Many believed that truth is relative or unknowable and that, therefore, the best argument won in any debate. They taught oratory in order to develop people's skills of persuasion so that they might convince their listeners that their point of view was best, served the community best, or was closest to the truth. To the Sophists, communication and relationship skills were a valuable commodity worthy of sale in the marketplace.

To Socrates the question was not whether or how much philosophers, physicians, teachers, therapists, and healers should be paid. Rather, it was how to stay true to the nature of the calling, and how to avoid the inevitable corrupting influence that occurs when money is introduced into the exchange of the pure and intangible goods of the soul. From middle age to his execution, Socrates devoted all his efforts to his teachings, and his family lived in poverty as a result. He never accepted money because he never wanted to be accused of seeking truth, goodness, or beauty for personal gain or for any reason other than the intrinsic rewards of the spiritual quest. He never wanted there to be a single blemish on his pursuit of higher values. He never wanted to be seen as favoring one over another student because of their differing abilities to pay his fee, or one over another decision or value because there was a price involved in its attainment. He never wanted to exclude anyone who sincerely wished to seek the truth from gaining his expert assistance. He

believed good soul work was the birthright of everyone equally, from slaves to royalty, and happily and freely assisted anyone who truly wished to learn with him. Ultimately, he believed that divine powers differentiated between human beings not according to their abilities to pay but according to the depth and sincerity of their devotion. As Xenophon observed, “He thought that in offering small sacrifices to the gods from small resources he was in no way falling behind those who offered ample ones from ample resources . . . for human beings life would not be worth living if the offerings of the wicked pleased the gods more than those of the good. On the contrary, he believed that the gods appreciated most the honors paid to them by the most devout people” (Tredennick and Waterfield 1990, 86).

Socrates’ greatest student, Plato, took up these questions as well. Unlike Socrates, Plato came from a wealthy family and remained of independent means throughout his life. But like his master, Plato used all his resources in pursuit of truth, what it is in and of itself. Plato struggled to imagine and create an ideal society that would be guided by truth, operate according to principles of virtue and justice, and practice only that which was good for the soul and the commonweal and in accord with natural and cosmic principles.

Like his teacher, Plato sought to understand what virtue was and how to apply his findings to the creation of a just society. In pursuit of such a society, in *The Republic* and elsewhere, Plato examined every aspect of individual and social intercourse, including the healing enterprises and the relationship between money and service to body and soul. In contrast to the “might makes right” rule of society, or the common interpretation of the Protestant work ethic that argues that those who have the most deserve the most, Plato determined that to be virtuous and just, rulers must always seek the advantage of their subjects, not their own. In like manner, doctors and healers must always seek the advantage of their patients, not their own. In *The Republic*, Plato declared that virtue means to serve others rather than oneself. “One who means to practice his art properly never does what is best for himself, nor commands it when he commands according to his art, but what is best for the subject” (Rouse 1956, 145). He agreed that healers must receive a fee or they would not want to practice their difficult art but declared that “the medical art makes health and the wage-earning art makes the wage” (ibid.). Plato declared that we are in peril of behaving unjustly and damaging our own or our patients’ souls when we mistakenly apply the principles of wage-earning to the principles of healing.

Meditating upon these principles to the end of his life, Plato continually tried to work out what is best for the soul and how to protect it from corruption in both the individual and social spheres. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato explored the struggle between reason and desire, defining temperance as the triumph of reason and excess as the triumph of desire. At the end of his life, in *The Laws*, he declared that “there are in all three things in which every man has an interest: and the interest about money, when rightly regarded, is the third and lowest of them: midway comes the interest of the body; and first of all, that of the soul.” The ideal state “will have been rightly constituted if it ordains honors according to this scale. But if . . . health be preferred to temperance, or wealth to health or temperate habits,” then our laws and practices “must be clearly wrong” (Jowett, n.d., 439). In other words, in all circumstances, our value scale must be: spiritual health first, physical health second, healthy pocketbook last.

The principles and practices of the first psychotherapists in the two-millennia-long Asklepiian tradition and those of Socrates and Plato can, if we are wise in their application, help clear much of the confusion we suffer today in our dilemmas regarding receiving fees for our medical, psychotherapeutic, and other healing services. It was the essence of early philosophy and practice regarding healing and educating the soul, and it restores the roots of our calling, that we consider ourselves as therapists to be servants or attendants, and as physicians to be healers of nature. The boons to the soul of health, healing, wisdom, and spiritual presence are divine gifts rightly belonging to everyone. They do not belong mostly to the rich. They should not be for sale primarily to the wealthy. We must find ways to guarantee that they are distributed democratically. We behave with virtue, in accordance with our sacred calling, if we distribute our soul or nature-goods democratically, even if our society or our profession does not.

Not being willing to live in dire poverty as Socrates did, and not being independently wealthy as Plato was, we can agree that we are entitled to earn a living like everyone else in our culture does. Plato said that fees and wages are necessary to encourage us to do difficult work we might not otherwise choose. We can even agree that we are entitled to earn a comfortable living that enables us to practice an art that inherently overexposes us to too much human discomfort, misery, and suffering, or else we would not be able to adequately rest and restore from that exposure. However, we must struggle

mightily with how to earn that living, charge our fees, and shape our practice while being true to the greatest good of our patients' and our own souls.

We must reconsider contemporary principles and practices regarding payment in medicine or psychotherapy when they argue that the corporate, business, and therapeutic dimensions of medicine and psychotherapy are in fact the same, and that what is good for the doctor or healer's pocketbook is good for the patient's psyche or soma. Many medical and psychological colleagues with this latter point of view declare that medicine and psychotherapy are fundamentally businesses that can be practiced morally. Some hold that there should be no sliding scales, that a poor client should pay our full fees and see us only as often as the client can manage that fee, or else they should consult with inferior healers or public services that in our form of culture are notoriously inadequate. Thus a wealthy client can see us a psychiatrist weekly or even more often, but a poor, disadvantaged, or disabled client can only see a psychiatrist monthly, perhaps, or in a group setting.

In contrast to this practice, keep in mind Socrates' observation that the Divine judges us not by the cost of our sacrifices but by our sincerity and devotion in giving them. We can make the same argument about patients' involvement in their healing, whether through medicine or psychotherapy. We must see that patients are deserving and evaluate their likelihood of success not by how much they can pay us over the span of treatment but by how sincere and devout they are in their quest for health, healing, and growth.

Consider these actual examples from my psychotherapy practice: a compensation lawyer with a million-dollar-plus salary who pays me \$140 per session is offering about 0.5 percent of his income toward his healing even though he has unlimited disposable income. In contrast, a medical secretary who earns \$24,000 a year paying me \$60 per hour offers 10 percent of her income even though she has almost no disposable income. If I evaluated these two cases based upon their socioeconomic factors and their benefit to me, I would be foolish to give equal time to the secretary for less pay to me. If I charged the compensation lawyer an equal proportion of his income as the secretary pays, he would have to pay \$2,500 per therapy session and would clearly take his business elsewhere.

Instead, let us evaluate these cases on the principles taught by the ancestors of our professions. To examine the benefit to me first is to behave without virtue because I am concerned about what benefits me (the wage-earning art) rather than what benefits my subject (the healing art). It also introduces economic favoritism into my practice, thus betraying its roots in service to

all. Such economic favoritism destroys the democratic nature of healing, putting plutocracy—the rule of the wealthy—in its place. This is occurring everywhere in our society; its dominance in medicine and psychotherapy reflect those professions' corruption by our money-driven society wherein ultimate values are reversed for lower-order values. The financial dimensions supersede the moral and spiritual dimensions of healing. Finally, in terms of those soulful conditions necessary to healing, the secretary is sacrificing far more to her healing in proportion to her resources than is the lawyer. It is reflected in the devoutness and sincerity she brings to her psychotherapy and the reward in growth that she derives from it. Perhaps, as Socrates believed, the divine powers attend her healing efforts more powerfully because they perceive greater devotion and sacrifice. In fact, in this particular case comparison, the secretary has been the far more devoted, urgent, and successful patient in her quest for repair, healing, and growth.

One of my successful colleagues equates psychotherapy with business, declaring that in serving our clients we are always and inherently looking for business; in Plato's terms, interest in money is not lowest of our chief concerns but is coequal with interests of the soul. This colleague likens practicing psychotherapy to driving a taxi and declares that, like a cabbie, with each client he is looking for his next tab.

Plato, too, considered this problem. Since we make our livings patient by patient, are we not like shoemakers looking for our next sale or ship's pilots looking for our next fare? In *The Republic* Plato said that doing healing and making money are not coequal but are two different arts, and we imperil our own and our charges' souls if we confuse them. In the *Gorgias*, Plato further declared that it is not accurate to think of a patient as a next fare. We must not, he said, because the art of the ship's pilot (or the taxi driver in our modern example) "is modest and unpretentious, and has no airs or pretences of doing anything extraordinary . . . [passengers] . . . are just the same when he disembarked them as when they embarked, and not a whit better either in their bodies or in their souls" (Jowett, IV, 303–4). Plato would declare that in fact medical and psychotherapy patients cannot be considered our next fares because with them we are involved in an art separate from money-making; we are attempting to do something extraordinary with them; we do indeed want them to be different for the ride they take with us.

We are left with this dilemma: should each or any of us sacrifice our own comfort, lifestyles, or security by accepting less payment, seeing patients

for lower or no fees, preserving and offering full consultation hours—or as long as one takes to perform a full evaluation—rather than shortening it to see more patients? May we give more time than required by medicine or therapy’s conventional or corporate boundaries, by spending time on the phone or making house, hospital, nursing home, or prison calls? Certainly patients will sometimes break boundaries, try to get more and give less, and drain our resources if we don’t protect ourselves. Certainly there are many just issues about money that physicians and therapists should confront during the work of healing, including fair exchanges of fees for services. And certainly we have the right to raise our families at decent standards of living.

But when do the medical or psychological healing arts, by focusing too much on the wage-earning art, compromise our calling itself so that it becomes something less than service to the soul? As Socrates, Plato, Hippocrates, and the first psychotherapists knew and taught, we are engaged in something extraordinary whose principles and practices, while occurring in the public marketplace, partake of dimensions of soul not reducible to the behaviors and values of the marketplace. We ignore the higher calling and its dimensions of justice, virtue, and love at the peril of our own and our patients’ souls. Socrates and Plato both taught that when we do wrong we inherently injure the soul. Using these spiritual and philosophical principles derived from the archetypal dimensions of our calling and modeled by our ancestors, we can help restore soul to its proper position of predominance in our healing efforts. Our final question in determining the ways we each manage the relationship between love, virtue, justice, and money in our practice must be: do my principles and practices deepen and enrich or empty and reduce not my pocketbook but my own and my patients’ souls?

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