In Pursuit of the Truth
An Essay on an Epistemological Approach to Psychoanalytic Supervision

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DIMENSIONS OF THE FIELD

I suggest that a minimal definition of psychoanalysis would indicate a process in which the behaviors of the psychoanalyst would be calculated to influence the present and future behaviors of the patient, including his thoughts, feelings, attitudes, attention, speech patterns, fantasy life, and the like. In parallel fashion, a minimal definition of psychoanalytic supervision would indicate a process in which the behaviors of the supervisor would be calculated to influence the behaviors of the supervisee with his patient.

The supervisor's tools for the task will include the following: some understanding of human behavior as influenced by past and present contexts, including particularly the psychoanalytic situation; some understanding both of the behaviors of the patient being reported to him and of the psychotherapist's reporting on his patient as well as an understanding of the interactions of the two; and finally, an awareness of the transactions between himself and his trainee. The latter requires the self-knowledge one presumes the supervisor to have acquired. These are among the many dimensions of the field and they are formidable.

The supervisor—thus armed—will oversee the student's work with his patient. He will, when indicated, in addition to instruction in the art
of conducting psychoanalysis, attempt to increase his trainee’s understanding of his patient and of their interactions. In the course of this work, the matter of the student’s lack of self-understanding in this instance or that may become apparent in his handling of the patient as well as in the manner of his dealing with the supervisor. The central question that is being engaged, however, is the matter of the behaviors of the one influencing the behaviors of the other.

I submit that the basic element in influencing behavior psychoanalytically lies in bringing certain matters to the conscious attention of the other—matters that are either unknown or unsuspected, inattended, or that are noted but that are not considered significant. There are several key factors that focusing on such matters bring to bear on the fate of such communications either in psychotherapy or in supervision and, for that matter, in life in general. There is bound to be some element of surprise on the part of the recipient of such a communication that will have to be dealt with by him. The recipient has to recover from the surprise in order to continue the transaction. His recovery may take many forms, some of which may warrant such labels as avoidance, denial, or resistance, all of which find themselves in that part of the relationship we prefer to call transference, possibly of the negative variety, and the like. The period of recovery may be brief or relatively prolonged. It may result in manifestations of grief, anger, laughter, stony or perplexed silence, and the like. Optimally, surprise will result in the facilitation of associations, amplification, and clarification. I suggest that the processes of recovery from surprise in a psychological sense are quite unexplored. It may be useful to note that synonyms of the infinitive to surprise include the following: to startle, perplex, bewilder, astonish, amaze, astound, confound, and dumbfound. The nature of the psychoanalytic inquiry is such that it provides, when successful, many surprises for both patient and practitioner. For those who can tolerate surprises, psychoanalysis can be a joy and, no doubt, this factor helps account for the popularity psychoanalysis has achieved. Failure in psychoanalysis can often be traced to the opposite of surprise—to dullness in the psychotherapist whether in manner, inflection, or in the use of limited, unimaginative, or jargon-filled speech. The experience of surprise stresses the individual—a factor that helps shape his subsequent behavior.

The surprising message is generally conveyed by words, sometimes modulated or amplified by inflection, emotional overtone, gesture, or postural change. There may have been some preparation for the message, or there may have been virtually none. The words chosen may be everyday or technical. They may assume the form of a question or of a declarative statement. The words may, additionally, convey the message