Systems of Spiritual Direction

Benjamin Nelson
Professor Don Browning of the Divinity School chaired an afternoon seminar after a morning lecture by Professor Benjamin Nelson. He pointed to the graciousness with which the guest had consented to speak informally and to reveal something of the connections he himself made between his work in medieval history, Max Weber, and psychoanalysis. He posed the questions: “How does it happen that a medievalist can get us interested in systems of spiritual direction, both ancient and modern, as you have done? What is at stake in the questions you have put to yourself—and to us? Why does this theme occupy your interests?” What follows is Professor Nelson’s reply:

Your wonderful directness compels me to remark that from where I sit there seems to be a prior question—prior to the one you put to me. It is a question for which I haven’t really ever found an answer that is satisfactory to any of my friends and students. How did I (Benjamin Nelson) ever become a medievalist in the first place?

Well, I hadn’t the faintest idea that the journey on which I was engaged could carry me along that rugged road. My first decisive steps occurred in these realms as an undergraduate in a course in the Philosophy of Law I took with Prof. Morris Raphael Cohen at C.C.N.Y. Prof. Cohen is perhaps known to some for his work here at the University of Chicago. I chanced to read a passage in Holdsworth’s History of English Law which referred to the fact that it hadn’t always been taken for granted by all people that every individual had an absolute right to use and abuse with respect to what he called his own. That struck me as unusually interesting and I looked at the notes and noticed as references two books: W. E. H. Lecky’s History of the Rise of Rationalism and another work by W. J. Ashley, An Introduction to English Economic Theory and Legislation. I proceeded to read the works in order to get some sort of clue as to what this sentence meant and what its base was.

I guess that as I read I was overcome by a notion especially strong in Ashley, that once upon a time, in an era almost wholly unknown to me except through some undergraduate courses which had not indeed
contained this emphasis, it had occurred to men to suppose that they could fashion a world that answered to the highest demands of the moral impulse. This was an astonishing idea, and I felt that I had to find out how they came to think they could reconcile their differences and what kinds of instrumentalities they applied to make sure that they were going along a track that made sense. How were they able to assure others that they were achieving some actualization of the ideal.

Now, it just happened that Ashley gave us a chapter entitled "The Canonist Doctrine of Usury." I didn't know anything at the time about usury (though over the years more than one friend and colleague has suspected that I have had some connection with the practice!). When I read Ashley's chapter, I discover another fascinating fact, namely, that in the Middle Ages people had worked out an elaborate structure, a framework of moral and juridical government for almost every sort of activity, experience, or relation that they would have.

Such was my outlook when I came to Columbia University for graduate work. My professor there had other plans for me. He wanted me to work on the Manuscript (Ms) 609 Toulouse with a view to establishing that those who had been charged with heresy were indeed men who were intent upon the assertion of the right of free enterprise, which was opposed by the Church. But I was already too deep into analysis of the work on usury to take that suggestion at face value, because I knew that the Church as such did not prohibit free enterprise or intend to stand in its way, at least not clearly or unambiguously. But it did do something else, and that was to prohibit the manifest practice of usury as the Church defined it. Indeed, it did require that those who had taken high interest or those who had been apprehended in the act, who were manifest practitioners, would be put under the obligation to make restitution.

That is where I started. Then I went forward with studies in a terrain that at that time was very uncultivated, and for which, unhappily as I was to find, there were few mentors. Now the situation is wholly different. We have an extraordinarily excellent group of people, including many very young ones, who are thoroughly equipped in the sources and substantive doctrine of the Romano-canonical jurisprudence of the Middle Ages. Anyhow, I did write a dissertation on the *Restitution of Usury*. By the time I finished it, though, I had become aware of something. I was working on another book: *The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood*. In the course of working out that book I was struck by the fact that for several thousand years there had been an unambiguous prohibition of usury between brothers. The texts referred to were always the same. Then in the era called the Reformation, with Luther and Calvin, there occurred the most extraordinary change in the terms and contexts of the discussion. I had fixed on a passage, Deuteronomy 23:19,20, and
had decided to study the history of the exegesis of that passage with the utmost care and detail.

The book issuing from this research wasn’t acknowledged by American church historians as stating the whole truth unambiguously, but was rather better received in Europe among those who had a wider knowledge of the central structures of conscience and consciousness—I use the word “conscience” now for the first time—sensibility, the terms of reference for self, society and so on that had evolved and yet were very active elements in the life of religious communities.

Again and again in the course of my life, I was to discover that I never really knew what I was doing until I had done it. Thus, it was only as I was finishing The Idea of Usury that I recognized that it might have been wise to have done it altogether differently. Thus my book has an epilogue which said that now that the book was done I was aware of the fact that it was a tiny footnote in a larger study which ought to have focused on the problems of conscience and casuistry. I had become sensitive to the fact that it didn’t help to try and make sense out of the sorts of developments that I had been concerned with without understanding the structures of conscience and consciousness, and without understanding all of the relations between conscience and the settings and horizons of conscience—the way in which conscience serves as the pivot of a very complex orchestration, a kind of triangulation of institutions, and so on. I saw this and didn’t quite know what to do about it. I had already started to work on the other book even before I had finished this one; but I got on to the issue of conscience and casuistry and said to myself, “Well, I’m not really going to try to link up much with the ‘cure of souls,’ not in the next book, if I ever get it written.” But the truth is that I had become interested in the issues of spiritual direction.

As an undergraduate I had become concerned about all of the possible meanings of Freudian theory, especially the theory of symbolism, in reference to cultural expression and productions. Since I am being so autobiographical, I must tell you that my initial efforts in that sphere “turned me off.” I found that I could more readily sympathize with the work of D. H. Lawrence and some of his mentors than I could with Karl Abraham, especially with his studies of the area of culture. So I did nothing with it for the longest time—postponed it, so to speak, and said that some day I would get back to the question, “What would a Freudian theory of symbolism have to be in order to throw light upon the sociocultural processes, the actual productions of men in art, in science, in all the spheres of creative activity?”

Now as I worked within this frame of conscience and casuistry I found myself having to hold off this interest in a Freudian theory of symbolism and culture and draw into my interest in “conscience,” casuistry and the
“cure of souls.” Since I didn’t really know anything about the evolution of “conscience”—not in any genuine or systematic way—it became imperative to look over that complex of issues very closely. What happened was that I made a certain sort of discovery, familiar enough to theologians who practice it in a forum of conscience, but who, being practitioners, being committed also to many other sorts of interests and obligations, did not perhaps have the opportunity to look at the wider ranges of reference that were embedded in these notions—or at least, so many have told me.

At the risk of overloading the autobiographical content of my argument, I continue:

What I discovered was that the era called the Middle Ages witnessed a flowering—rather than a nadir—of the notion of conscience. Feelings of guilt and remorse and conscientiousness had of course existed from time immemorial and are to be found almost everywhere. But I was concerned with making distinctions between behavioral levels and levels of ordered symbolic articulations—and I have been concerned with this in all the work I have done. I was concerned to analyze the actual logics and dialectics that came to be centered in the notion of “conscience.”

I discovered that the concept “conscience” was actually given new thrust in the 11th and 12th centuries. The person who was perhaps most responsible for giving it an extraordinary dimension and range was Abelard. He had most comprehensively articulated the critical questions with respect to intention and had prepared the way for a rethinking of the whole of human activity, despite his own setbacks—for as you know, he was pursued and hunted and hounded for a variety of reasons, including theological ones, by Bernard of Clairvaux, Walter de Saint Thierry and others. It proved to be the case that the entire structure of rationality and thought in the 12th and 13th century was built on the foundations that he had erected. The whole of moral theology and the whole of the canon law had come out of or been reconstituted in the light of the questions that he had asked.

Now, at that time very notable changes were going on in the actual structures of consciousness. (Now I’m speaking with hindsight—I didn’t see all of this as I was working). I did recognize that very critical changes were occurring in the structures of consciousness, of which the development of the dialectic and logic of conscience was an absolutely decisive illustration. The great struggles of Bernard of Clairvaux and Abelard needed to be seen in a new light.

If you think about it, there is nothing necessary about the supposition that each of us is possessed of a conscience, which is answerable to whatever, is something that occurred in the course of historic time in
response to great complexes of alterations within the texture of relations of man and in the structures of groups and in their perceptions and awarenesses and so on. So there was this notion of "conscience."

Now it proved to be the case that Abelard became a specialist in working out the rationales and problematics, if you will, on the moral conscience. When I say that, I don't mean the remorseful conscience, which only comes into existence retrospectively, in the analysis of acts which are known to be sinful or guilty, but the prospective conscience. Well, this was a great discovery for me, I must tell you, because I lived in the years when men were "beyond conscience."

There is a book of that title, written some years ago on this campus by Prof. T. V. Smith of the Department of Philosophy. Much of the ethical and political force of the day was really predicated on the supposition that we were beyond conscience, that conscience was not really to be taken as a critical component in a logical decision. I think that we all understand this—at least as a basis for my curiosity in that matter. Whenever people thought of conscience, they thought of it as more or less connected to or linked with the sense of guilt. Here in the Middle Ages was the supposition of a moral conscience that was prospective. In my own experience there were many people who entertained many hopes—political, social—but could not relate very well to the notion of a moral conscience.

So I worked through that and all the problems of the casuistry and discovered that it was an extraordinary kind of relief to discover that at some point or other men had been sufficiently predicamental in their vision and had been sufficiently concerned to try to find a place for the activity of conscience in all spheres of existence, that they had in fact elaborated treatises of human acts. They had worked out these summae of the cases of conscience and had perceived the necessity of a kind of casuistry of conscience. They kept hammering away at the rationales of conscience; they had also perceived that in the course of our existence all of us at one time or another, in one way or another, fail to keep pace or peace. We go aground and discover that we may need help in one or another way. It seems to me that they had seen this, so that there had actually come into being this extraordinary orchestration and these triangulated institutions of conscience, casuistry and the cure of souls.

I determined to ascertain just what was going on here, to see what was at work, without ever imagining, as I do not imagine now, that I will be truly able to plumb its depth because there are ontological commitments of various sorts which are doubtless caught up here. These would give even greater resonance to the structure than I was actually giving it.

Something which struck me carried me forward here. What if I were to consider all the developments from the Protestant Reformation forward
into the 20th century from this perspective? What actually happened when this triangulated structure was broken up for a variety of reasons—which appeared to be very good so far as those who could not tolerate the structure were concerned. They could not tolerate casuistry, since it seemed to them in every case to be a deviation from the moral principle which could be understood with absolute clarity through scripture or through inner light, or through some other source. How was the casuistry part of it taken care of? And then, how was the cure the souls taken care of? I was keenly interested in that.

So, I worked my way through a great deal of material of the later era, and was, of course, intrigued by how these were taken care of in the 20th century and in the various forms of analysis, particularly Freudian psychoanalysis, and how—if one were to think of all the contemporary forms of therapy and analysis in terms of this complex of functions—these various functions were in fact handled in the framework of the contemporary cure.

Maybe, I thought, I could get a little of this message across to people who were engaged in carrying forward psychoanalysis and psychotherapy in varied shapes and forms, but I failed to do so. The hope that I could was one of the notions that drew me back to the East from the University of Minnesota.

I could not do very much in Minnesota for a variety of reasons. Some of my closest friends among the renowned psychologists and psychoanalysts could not see that these historical matters which were of so much great interest to me might be relevant to them or to their work. They knew the answers to moral questions because in one way or another there was a direct line which gave them the answer that most responsibly, in their view, quickly resolved the moral predicaments. They also felt that there had been developed new thoroughly scientific non-historical ways of relating to the predicaments of men who came into the treatment-situation, a situation which once upon a time was called the forum of conscience, the cure of souls.

When I returned East to New York City I thought I could have a greater impact. In a very short time, I was invited to give lectures at psychoanalytic institutes. The first of these were devoted to "symbolism." I temporarily placed my interest in "conscience" between brackets and proceeded to work through the historic unfoldings of structures of existing experiences and expression. Through such an exploration perhaps I could interest practicing therapists in carefully considering all the varied questions which required the articulation of a theory of Symbolism.

This mission failed. Some therapists had some glimmering of what I was talking about. Despite the faintness and implicitness of this knowledge, I managed to find a way to interest some friends in what eventually came to be called objective-relations-analysis—object-relations therapy. This
is a very strategic move to make. Allow me to recommend this move to all of you who are interested in carrying forward this kind of work. If we can get psychoanalysts to become interested in object-relations, we can also get them to be interested in the experienced world, to become interested in the predicaments of men in the world, and we can get them to face the complexity of the therapeutic situation in its full range.

What I was trying to do at this level was to work toward a theory of psychoanalytic-psychotherapeutic technique which would describe the situation in terms of what went on in it, of the setting in which it occurred, of all of the ranges of claims that were mediated within the institution, of all the dramatic rehearsals that in fact occurred within the analytic or therapeutic situation, and of all the prospective goals that might be conceivably envisaged as involved in therapy. It is in this context that I welcome the opportunity to rehearse these concerns in this company of students at the University of Chicago, in the presence of Professors Peter Homans and Don Browning who share these concerns.

My message may already be known to many of you, perhaps in a manner that is likely to be more directly effective in whatever work you may propose to do. I did work toward a convincing comprehensive theory of psychoanalytic technique, only to discover to my surprise that few therapists care to concern themselves with a theory of technique. By their own admission, such concern confuses many therapists; therapists want to do treatment and not think about it; indeed, most therapists think it's bad for the doing of it to think about it!

In seeking to strengthen my appeal to therapists, I stressed the fact that initially, at least, it was not necessary for therapists to apply any theory such as mine in the doing of their work; it was enough if, from time to time, they made use of theory in their reflections on what they had done and what had happened in treatment. We do not now have a reliable or comprehensive theory of technique. More critically, we do not have an adequate statement of the analytic situation in several different senses.

Begin at the very heart of the matter. An individual is under treatment. Who shall we say he is? And what shall we say are the presenting symptoms? If we advance in our work, we must come to see that the decision as to what these symptoms are is the most critical element in the entire therapeutic relation. We must acknowledge that with the help or hindrance of a particular psychoanalytic theory we can define the situation in such a way as to block access to all of these arenas of experience that are integral to the unfolding of the person in the course of a life in the world. When this happens, our treatment and your image of cure are likely to be flawed.

Now, I went through Freud very carefully from this point-of-view and discovered that at least from my own perspective he had not fulfilled one of his most important promises, which was to produce a theory of
psychoanalytic technique. There was a reason for his delay in putting forward a systematic theory of the technique. He had evolved a theory of psychoanalysis which had many different senses for him, one which was to be a kind of foundation for neurology and for the study of psychology generally, but as he worked that out, he built it on certain foundations. Then, as the years passed, his actual clinical experiences were pointing in such other directions that he was unable to pursue right then into their very center. He never did finish writing his work on technique.

A central question that came up in the 1920s is the clue to his unease in regard to these issues. I refer to the debate over the problem of psychosynthesis. A number of theorists and clinicians who were having very great difficulty in their treatment rooms continued to note that it was not inevitably the case that the interpretation of the analyst did put the person together in a way that somehow gave him enhanced agency to act with efficacy and with a certain kind of personhood in respect to the moral, social and other sorts of options that he encountered in his existence. There were analysts who saw that, and who proposed that psychoanalysis did a very great job in some regards. But there was a necessity for another part of treatment called psychosynthesis. Freud regarded this as an utterly false idea. He rejected it wholly. Interestingly, his rejection included a revelation of what was a key to something that had hitherto been concealed—not deliberately, by any means—but I suspect concealed from Freud himself. He was committed to a pre-established harmony, principally with respect to those components of the complex that had been analyzed out of the complex in the course of the therapeutic situation by the act of interpretation of the analyst. He supposed that when the elements were released from the unhappy complex, they would all find their way back again to a new fusion which would be ego-syntonic as well as world-syntonic; and that the individual would now have new agency, new capacity, enhanced power to function.

Holding the rather restricted view he did, perhaps it is to Freud’s credit that he fancied that there were very few moral predicaments in the world, and he thought that almost everyone would know precisely where the moral obligation was. He imagined that the person who had enhanced agency would inevitably want to do what was, in a sense, best for him and for others to do. The issue of synthesis was not for him a central issue, because he so conceived the analytic situation that the job was done when the individual, having worked through the transference-neurosis into which all other neuroses had collapsed, would then work free, and be his own master in a world he was presumably free to make.
Now, I looked at very many other notions, teachings, schools, theories, and points of view. I came to see that I could not, unaided, make very much of an impression on men who were working in this sphere.

Despite all this, I have a continuing conviction that it is of the utmost importance for the comparative, depth-historical study of the social cultural processes, the utmost importance for our understanding of our structures of consciousness as they elaborate across time, the utmost importance for our hopes of being moral agents in very wide senses—that we address ourselves to this whole range of questions that chance to be encapsulated in a form often anachronistic and even repressive—the structure of conscience, casuistry and cure of souls.

To me, it is unthinkable that men should expect to create a new and better world with an ethic that is predicated on a transmoral conscience. It seems imperative that if we are to use the concept or notion of conscience that we shall strive to understand the rationales of conscience and also to apply them to all spheres. It is inconceivable that we should favor conscience without casuistry, which is the situation we have to a very considerable extent today. The fact is that it is precisely now that all of the sorts of issues that are to be disentangled from this complex have an extraordinary kind of importance and urgency.

Recently I have been turning my attention elsewhere. I have become curious about several questions related to my growing interest in the comparative study of civilization and of intercivilizational relations. Does the concept "conscience" give us any clue as to some of the differences in the distinctive patterns of development in various parts of the world? What are the relations between the structures of conscience and the tumultuous sociocultural processes of the 20th century across the world? In brief, I am now persuaded that it is necessary to work one's way back through questions of this sort if we hope to work toward a basic foundation for sociology, history, and psychology and anthropology. We are in great need of a comparative historical analysis of the changing structures of consciousness and conscience across time and places. Some of you may say that we already have such an analysis. We do not. Max Weber did not give it to us; he ran away from questions at that depth. Emile Durkheim had an idea that consciousness and conscience were very decisive spheres to relate to, but he never gave us a comparative historical analysis of the phenomena in this sphere. The fact is that we are now obliged to do a massive amount of work to get anywhere near these questions.