# BRIEF HISTORY OF
# ETHICS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

**Selections from Chapter One of**
***The Ethical Lives of Clients - Transcending Self-Interest in Psychotherapy***
**by William J. Doherty, Ph.D.**

The vast entire literature on ethics and psychotherapy had dealt almost exclusively with ethical practice of therapists in their professional role, ignoring how therapists engage with ethical dilemmas in the lives of clients.

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Therapy's neglect of the ethical side of human life goes all the way back to Freud, who placed morality in the superego, not the ego, and thus outside of the focus of psychanalytic treatment.

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On a socio-historical level, the therapy field has reflected the rise and dominance of individualism. Rieff articulated four "character ideals" that have dominated eras of Western history:

a. The Political Person of classic antiquity,
b. The Religious Person in Judaism and Christianity until the Enlightenment,
c. The Economic Person (the Enlightenment through the early 20th century),
d. The Psychological Person whose goal is self-satisfaction and personal insight, with the ethical/moral realm reduced to what is good for the self.

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Similar critiques of Western individualism have been offered by other social scientists and social critics, notably by Robert Bellah and colleagues in their influential book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life.*

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The idea of the unfettered, self-made person made its way into mainstream culture by the 1970s. Here is a quote from popular writer Gail Sheehy's best-selling book *Passages*:

*"You can't take everything with you when you leave on the midlife journey. You are moving away. Away from institutional claims and other people's agenda. Away from*

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*external valuations and accreditations, in search of an inner validation. You are moving out of roles and into the self. If I could give everyone a gift for the send-off on this journey, it would be a tent. A tent for tentativeness. The gift of portable roots....For each of us there is the opportunity to emerge reborn, authentically unique, with an enlarged capacity to love ourselves and embrace others.... The delights of self-discovery are always available. Though loved ones move in and out of our lives, the capacity to love remains"* (Sheehy, 1976, p. 364, 513).

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Push back within the therapy field began as early as 1964 with a book by psychologist Perry London, who argued that the major models of therapy have implicit moral codes, most of which are about the primacy of individual agency to experience the life a person wants to live. Other therapists have followed, with limited visible effect on mainstream psychotherapy, perhaps for two reasons: individualism is culturally powerful and there has not been a way to show how therapists could serve as ethical consultants and still be true to traditional values such as respecting client autonomy.

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The larger culture is shifting, however, towards a greater sense that we have to solve problems collectively, not individually. Robert Putnam (2020), author of *Bowling Alone* in 2000, has written in his book *The Upswing*, that as shift is underway towards more communal efforts to solve our social and environmental problems.

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In therapy, attachment and other interpersonal models have come into prominence. And *The Ethical Lives of Clients* is an attempt to show how ethical consultation can be done in the everyday practice of therapy.

Reference:

Doherty, W. J. (2022). *The ethical lives of clients: Transcending self-interest in psychotherapy.* American Psychological Association.

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