

THE DIALECTICAL CORE OF SELF PSYCHOLOGY: A REFLECTION ON COBURN'S AND MADURO'S ESSAYS

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In this article, I explore what I find to be the essence of Coburn's and Maduro's articles: the tension between thinking of humans as independent selves and as contextually determined. I try to show that this "dialectical core of self psychology," as problematic as it might seem, is necessary if we are to have an adequate basis for a system of ethics and justice, and that the West's overemphasis on autonomy has been deeply injurious. I, then, integrate the two papers by proposing, along with Coburn, that the ability to concomitantly "own" one's contextuality and individual freedom is the basis for a new concept of psychological maturity, and that Maduro's concepts of courageous knowing, emotional experiencing, and rigorous relationality are the keys to developing this innovative vision of psychological maturity.

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Peter Maduro's and Bill Coburn's explorations of what is commensurable and incommensurable with their self-psychological perspectives appear on the surface to be quite different. Coburn's article deals with the central conceptual paradox of self psychology—that the self is both an independent center of initiative and perception and also fully enmeshed with its social environments. It reveals how difficult and important this paradox is in the case of Doug, the extreme individualist, being treated by Bill, the extreme contextualist. Maduro's article, on the other hand, seems to be a statement of his primary conceptual beliefs—rigorous relationality, the primacy of emotional experiencing, and courageous knowing, along with a statement of what positions he finds to be incommensurable with these primary principles. However, Maduro describes himself as an existential relational analyst, and tells us that he has come to his individual beliefs through a unique personal history, and that had his life history been different, his beliefs might have been different. That is, Maduro inscribes the paradox:

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he claims to be an existential individual with the right and responsibility to take a stance as to what he as an individual believes, while simultaneously claiming that his beliefs were in part determined by a set of social circumstances. Hence, both thinkers place before us the fundamental paradox of self psychology: that we need to think of ourselves as both individuals who have the freedom and responsibility to be unique selves but who are also inextricably interwoven with and determined by our contexts. As Coburn so eloquently states: “And thus, this points us to one of our human conundrums—a most complex paradox: Each of us is, in many senses, separate, individual, and unique, while also systems generated and embedded in contexts far beyond our making or our control” (Coburn, this issue, p. 165). He sees the ability “to tolerate simultaneously a sense of separateness (and perhaps estrangement), autonomy, and personal agency, on the one hand, and a sense of ‘thrownness’ . . . a sense of being emergent, situated, and contextualized by life histories, cultures, and circumstances that are out of one’s hands, on the other hand” as one of the crucial signs of developmental maturity (Coburn, this issue, p. 165).

This paradox of individuality/contextuality is what I would like to call “the dialectical core” of self psychology, thereby invoking the most complex of the German thinkers, Hegel, for whom the truth was always a fusion of opposing concepts. What I would like to do in this commentary on the fine articles by Maduro and Coburn is to explicate with some depth what this “dialectical core” of self psychology is, how it leads to the most important facts about our common human nature—that we are forever incomplete, unfinished, fragile creatures that are inherently subject to the vicissitudes of our social and natural environments, but who also who have extraordinary individual resources by which rise above the pressures of these environments and respond to them with a spontaneous uniqueness. We are both singular beings attempting to forge our own individualized lives and inherently contextualized by our internalizations of others and the socio-discursive power structures of our societies. Any theoretical attempt to conceptually break the irrational contradiction that defines our selves and reduce us to either an atomistic independence or a contextual determinism is incommensurable with self psychology and leads to abstractions and untruths.

So, first let us ask what is unique and singular about human beings? Part of the uniqueness can be expressed only negatively, namely, by saying that we can know a great deal about the external circumstances of a person’s life and still be unable to predict with any degree of exactitude what the psychological consequences will be. Part of the reason why Freud gave up his “seduction theory” was precisely the inability to go from objective events to how they were subjectively registered; nor could he infer from a subjective set of meanings what objectively happened to a person. There seems to be an originality of responsiveness that cannot be erased by locating contextual influences.

Hegel called the ability we have to negate any trait or pressure on us as our “negative freedom” and said that it was the fundamental irrevocable characteristic of self-consciousness. That is, our ability to negate or refuse any set of meanings is primordial and can never be erased. You might say, “You were born with a male body—how do you negate that?” and I respond, “It is me who determines what the meaning of this body is—I can grant it extreme importance or no importance at all; I can reject the gender

that biology has given me and determine how I gender myself.” It is this power of negativity inherent in self-consciousness that is often missed by critical theorists who bemoan that we are fully determined by socio-discursive disciplinary structures.

Positively, our feeling of unique singularity derives from what Kohut called a “nuclear self” that has a “nuclear program” of ambitions and ideals coalesced around favored traits and predispositions. When we act on our nuclear programs we feel fully vitalized, spontaneous, coherent, and “ourselves,” rather than feeling bland or put upon because we are being motivated by socially ingressed codes. That is, there are many psychic pressures working on the ego (that agency which makes choices and acts), including immensely powerful social inscriptions, discourses, and codes that have been unconsciously assimilated. In locating a different source of motivation from either the bodily drives or socialized inscriptions, Kohut gives us hope that there really is a “me” that is my very own self, that can initiate actions and a style of life that feel deeply consonant with the core of my being in a way that acting from biological or social pressures just can not be.

However, Kohut also discovered our selves are not genetically given, but are the precipitates of a developmental process which requires felicitous responsiveness from others. This responsiveness and the transmuting internalization of early selfobjects are essential, embedded parts of self-structure. That is, the very foundation of our individuality arises out of social contexts and embodies them. But this process of internalization is not one of mere repetition or causal determinism, for it always involves a unique way of responding to the social environment—the self “transmutes” the input of others into its own psychic protein. Since selfobjects literally function as part of the self for the course of a lifetime, it seems that the self is not only singular and uniquely situated in a personal psyche but also exists in the relationships with essential others and as such exists in a field of relationality rather than just at a singular nodule.

In this understanding of the self as singular and contextual, positional and relational, self psychology mirrors the most profound principle of quantum mechanics: that every particle can be understood both as occupying a particular space/time location and as exhibiting wave functions. Hence, everything in the sub-atomic world is both a particle and a wave, a singular being located at a particular place and everywhere along an extensive continuum. Likewise, every self is located in a unique particular person and in the field of that person’s relationships as they stretch through time.

The classical Kohutians tend to emphasize the importance of a singular self at the core of psychological functioning and see self-psychological therapy as the attempt to repair injuries to that self. If this position were taken too far into a kind of radical Nietzschean individualism, then persons would lose track of how they are essentially related to others. On the other hand, relationalists and intersubjectivists tend to concentrate more on selfobject relationships, especially those in the clinical setting, as the key to psychic well-being, rather than locating what is happening with the self and attempting to release its idiosyncratic possibilities. One prominent relationalist, in a personal conversation, said that there really is no such thing as “the self”; there are as many selves as there are relationships. While such a position fits nicely with French de-construction of all essential categories and narratives, especially the narrative of the essential self, it

leaves persons without a ground or sense of integrity or meaningfulness. It is clear that both classical self psychology and relational/intersubjective self psychology are part of the truth and it is my supposition that in practice they are not so different, for attending to selfobject relations helps restore the self and attending to injuries to the self and the forward edges of development leads to deepened selfobject relations.

To be clear: previous philosophies of individualism have generally focused on the individual versus society (Nietzsche, Freud), or the natural person versus the socialized person (Emerson, Thoreau); whereas self psychology says that individuals are an inseparable amalgam of social interactions and a natural orientation. Those selfobject relations that help to form a nuclear self and which are embedded within it are not opposed to the uniqueness and spontaneity of the self but are part of its very core. The crucial conflict is not between the individual and the social, but between the self with its incorporated selfobjects versus the internalized social pressures to conform to regnant codes.

It is because self psychology embraces a dialectical understanding of the self, that it, alone, of contemporary theories of human nature can provide an adequate way of thinking about such essential concepts as integrity, agency, responsibility, and ethical life. When the paradox is broken and one side of the self is favored over the other, then not only do conceptual problems arise, but also some of the most unjust and injurious of social practices.

As Bill Coburn points out, the West has over-emphasized the ability of the human psyche to free itself from its contextuality, and that this supposed freedom is the fundamental presupposition of Western law and ethics. This theory of the autonomous individual finds its roots in Plato's and Aristotle's attempts to change our conceptualization of human life from one which proclaimed "fate" to rule human existence, as found in Greek tragedy, to a view in which we can be self-determining individuals—a view in which the power of reason grants us the ability to choose our way of being human. The cost of this new philosophic view was, however, quite high: we must accept responsibility for what we do and not blame the gods or other external forces.

The problem with this view, and also with what happens when we leap to the other side and see ourselves as fundamentally determined by social circumstance, is humorously expressed in a famous song from Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, "Gee, Officer Krupke." In the song, a set of juvenile delinquents (the Jets) protest to Officer Krupke that they are not responsible for any wrongs they might do because they come from rotten families and could not be other than the delinquents that they are. Officer Krupke's stern response presupposes Hegel's negative freedom—that we can free ourselves from all conditioning factors and are fully responsible for developing into law-abiding, upstanding citizens. Hence, he will happily punish them for their misdemeanors.

Obviously, there is something wrong with both the Jets' complaint and Officer Krupke's response, as each denies the dialectical core of human existence. The Jets do not recognize the power of the ego to overcome contexts, while the law does not recognize the extraordinary power of circumstance to form unconscious organizing principles that dictate how we perceive our worlds, develop values to deal with them, and conceive of possibilities within them. We are not abstract Cartesian egos fully transparent to ourselves and fully able to overcome the contextuality that formed us, especially

the social inputs of early experience that become imbedded in unconscious anticipations and the structuring of experience. While both the Jets and Officer Krupke are wrong, Officer Krupke and the legal system he represents are more wrong than the Jets, for the law's expectation that each human has equal freedom to overcome their contexts/circumstances is psychologically false and, in fact, perpetrates systematic injustice that has led to an extraordinarily high percentage of underprivileged persons being incarcerated.

And, yet, I am very reluctant to dismiss the Western legal tradition and its understanding of agency and individual responsibility, for it is also a truth that each person needs to accept responsibility for who they are and what they do. We might be enmeshed with our selfobjects; however, when we act, we do not act as a matrix of selfobjects but as individuals. It is not the supporting matrix of selfobjects—past or present, positive or negative—that is responsible for the misdeeds of an individual, but the individual. If it were otherwise, no one would be a therapist, as the legal risk of being implicated in anything any client did wrong would be too high. We also might really fear about becoming parents!

And, yet, as both Maduro and Coburn show, we are inherently fused with our social contexts, and this inescapable contextuality needs to be taken into account in our theory of responsibility. While Western law and ethics will continue to be centered on individual responsibility for actions, it needs to become more nuanced in relation to developmental circumstance, if it is to be more just and more in line with self psychology's understanding of human nature.

What would a self-psychological theory of responsibility look like? I think the basis for this new theory can come when we distinguish between "taking responsibility" and "accepting responsibility" (Lear, 1998; also Riker, 1996, 2010). We need to take responsibility for those acts we consciously intend and whose consequences can be clearly predicted, while we need to accept responsibility for the consequences of our deeds/personality that we do not choose or consciously intend. When we take responsibility for an action, we imply that we chose it and if it has negative social consequences, then we must suffer guilt and some form of disapprobation. However, if we do something we do not consciously intend, such as breaking Aunt Edith's favorite Chinese vase when we unfortunately trip, we can accept responsibility, suffer remorse, and perhaps make reparations; but we do not need to suffer guilt, for we did not intend to break the vase. When we discover in a psychoanalytic treatment that we have been unconsciously acting out oedipal motivations and causing massive suffering to our partners and ourselves, we need to accept responsibility for harboring these compulsions. This acceptance once again does not involve guilt, for one does not choose to be oedipally fixated; but it does involve the responsibility to cease acting out and to do everything one can to work through the compulsions so they are not motivationally dominant. It does not mean that one must become "pure" of such impulses, for this might be impossible; but it does mean that one must become aware that one has such impulses and develop the knowledge and strength of character to deal with them.

However, things get quite messy when the two kinds of responsibility are fused. If Joe deliberately punches someone and causes physical harm, then he seemingly needs

to take responsibility for that deed and suffer the consequences for it. However, Joe also has a developmental history that produced someone full of rage and a short fuse. He did not choose to suffer the physical and emotional abuse that caused him to become this kind of person. It feels hideous to say that Joe needs to take responsibility for crucial aspects of his personality that he neither chose nor wanted. Yet, it is precisely this deep structure of his personality that is implicated in his “deliberately” punching an offending party. Does he need to “take” full responsibility and suffer the full penalty for his deed?

Here, we need to turn to psychoanalysis, for what it has discovered is that all of our actions have an unconscious layer to them that is often highly determinative of what we do. We are conscious-deliberative/unconscious-determined beings who are both fated and free. The full theory of responsibility then includes both an ability to take responsibility for the conscious/deliberative part of my actions and to accept responsibility for the unconscious motivations I harbor within and the character structure that is infused with them. In short, the theory of responsibility implied by the dialectical understanding of the self involves a paradoxical fusion of taking and accepting responsibility, of incurring some guilt for what one does but not for who one is.

How such a theory would work itself out in social and legal practice is not something we can develop here, but I would strongly suggest that a penal system based in a self-psychological understanding of humans would focus mainly on psychotherapy, the experience of remorse, and rehabilitation through psychological transformation, rather than the imposition of guilt and the attempt to transform through processes of negative reinforcement (infliction of pain), that have been proven so ineffective.

What is important about these ideas for psychotherapists is attending to how this complex sense of responsibility is being developed and nourished in their clients. Coburn’s work with Doug is an example of this process. Doug was fully intent on taking responsibility for everything he did, as though he were master of himself, captain of his soul. Coburn helped him to grasp the power of his contextuality as it sedimented in unconscious structures and Doug started to go too much the other way—to see himself as the victim of circumstance and not responsible. There will be a further development when Doug comes to own who he is and accept (not take) responsibility for the suffering he causes. This learning how to achieve psychic integrity through the process of coming to own who one really is and accepting responsibility for our unconscious motivations needs to become part of a new concept of maturity.

What is this new vision of maturity? I think that Bill Coburn’s vision of “experiential selfhood” must be part of it. We need to mature into persons who can live “with a lively sense of paradox—a complex one in which I experience myself to have been handed my corporeal existence, my history and life circumstances, my surround, not exactly in my control, while also, by coming to know and appreciate my thrownness, I can live in a sense of personal ownership and authorship of my life, even a sense of aloneness, autonomy, and singularity—a finite freedom, as Heidegger . . . called it” (Coburn, this issue, p. 169).

Let us call this new vision of maturity “self-ownership.” But how does one go about owning a self? I suggest the answer lies in Peter Maduro’s article which can be read as his attempt to “own” his traumatized personal history, to see how it has influenced him in all

the areas of his life, including the theories he holds, and with this understanding to see what the actual possibilities are for him rather than unlimited possibilities.

We see in his article that owning who one is involves, first, “courageous knowing.” This is crucial because what psychoanalysis has taught us is that we disown parts of ourselves and histories because knowing them and seeing them as part of who we really are is too painful, too anxiety-provoking. Ergo, to seek these disowned experiences, self-states, emotions, and so on, often involves feeling feelings that verge on the unbearable. To undertake this kind of inquiry, then, one needs courage, the courage of a hero exploring a lost and dangerous land.

This exploration of the dark territory of the disowned, however, cannot simply be carried out by an abstract rationality, for such a knowing keeps what is known as an object, a truth about oneself that one might know but still not own—still keep at a distance from oneself. To fully own what one is trying to know about oneself involves the practice of Maduro’s second maxim: the primacy of emotional experiencing. The “knowing” of ourselves means “emotionally experiencing” who we are, what we have suffered, and what we have perpetrated to defend against that suffering. It is coming out of our narcissistic defenses of greatness and power to emotionally experience how damaged, imperfect, vulnerable, driven, and hateful we have been.

As this process of emotional knowing is taking place, we need to practice the third of Maduro’s maxims: rigorous relationality. Maduro, of course, means by this principle that we see how who we are has been deeply influenced by the primary relations of our lives, such as his relation to his father who suddenly died and his mother who went into a cold denial of that death; but he also means that we must be in a rigorous relationality with ourselves. That is the heart of who we are is not some kind of stable, set identity, but a relationship, a relationship of ourselves with ourselves in a process of becoming ourselves.

The heart of the inner conversation, to me, is between the conscious ego (the “I”—the conscious/self-conscious subject of experiencing)—and “the self”—who I really am, but often am not. All great enduring relationships have problems and the ego’s relation to the self is no different. As Freud said, the ego’s primary job is to successfully relate the organism to its natural and social environments, and to do this it must organize the organism’s activities and positionality in the world to be successful. The ego must be pragmatic. The self, as we learn from Kohut, has values, ideals, and selfobject needs that are often at odds with the power/control values of the ego. The two centers of our psychic life then often need to be in a protracted negotiation about how to live our lives, where to make compromises, where to stand firm, and so on.

The deep problems with this inner relationality occur when the self is the site of trauma and the ensuing fragmentation, pain, and narcissistic rage which trauma causes. The injured self has regressed developmental needs that are embarrassing and shameful for the ego attempting to establish itself as a player in the world. The ego then wants to ignore or divorce the injured self (and often the idiosyncratic healthy self) as its needs are antithetical to the ego’s need to successfully negotiate the world. And so the inner conversation comes to an end and the ego becomes tyrannical in its quest to achieve not

only mastery of the psyche but also the world. Here is the Western notion of the rational ego that ought to take responsibility for everything.

How is such a subject ever to re-invest in the inner dialogue with the self? The answer is clear from self psychology: The ego must learn to have empathy for the self, its injuries, and its protective defenses. When we come to know how ragefully destructive we have been, we do not simply become ragefully destructive as a repetition, nor do we know our rage as a fact of our personal histories like we know that we are blue-eyed; rather, we empathically experience it—feeling the rage but not identifying with it; being both one with it and not it. Here is another of the great paradoxes of self psychology—empathy is both feeling and not feeling a certain feeling. It is empathically grasping our split-off emotions and self-states that allows us to slowly integrate them into our personhoods, that is, to own them.

In summary, what we find when we put Coburn's and Maduro's articles together is nothing less than an important emerging concept of how best to be human, how to become a mature human being who can live with integrity and full responsibility. This new kind of human being cannot come into existence without our being able to first conceptualize a new ideal of excellence, an ideal in which we fuse Greek tragedy and philosophy, the fated individual rooted in his primary contextual systems but free to truly individuate by allowing their selves to ground their choices. This paradoxical vision of what it means to be human is a radical departure from the West's understanding of maturity as self-mastery imposed through rational decision-making. It is a profound corrective and deeply humanizing; and Maduro and Coburn have immensely helped us to envision this possibility.

What is incommensurable with self psychology? Any theory which refuses to accept our dialectical nature, any theory which proclaims that we are fully contextually determined or fully free to be anything we want to be. Psychoanalysis and self psychology are not just developments in the field of psychological health, they are, as we learn in these papers, compelling and innovative cultural visions of what it means to be human and how best to live our uniquely human lives.

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