

Transcending Religion: Reflections on Spirituality and Psychoanalysis

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Natural science . . . describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning . . . it makes the sharp separation between the world and the “I” impossible.

Werner Heisenberg (1999, p. 81)

. . . if the entire cosmos were scaled down to the size of the Earth, the part accessible to us would be much smaller than a grain of sand.

Brian Greene (2004, p. 285)

Psychoanalysis and Spirituality

Like a personal analysis, spirituality is a most private matter. Each human being, who is not in flight from life, knows the silence of the internal alone space that Winnicott speaks of. Grounded by such a silent space, an individual can experience—depending on time and place, on knowledge and myth, on personal experience and individual need—the possibility for what one can appreciate as a spiritual depth. In this essay, I evaluate psychoanalytic process and spirituality, a spirituality, however, that is rooted in what is known as negative theology. Negative theology is known, more formally, as the “apophatic way,” the philosophical roots of which date to the third-century philosopher Plotinus.¹ I do not discuss psychoanalytic technique or specific spiritual practices, not that such content is unimportant. I intend, rather, to focus on the implications that a spirituality, based on negative theology, has for psychoanalysis.

¹ Another important influence in the negative theology tradition, although his/her actual identity is unknown, is called the Pseudo-Dionysius, 418-485 A.D. (Copleston, 1993, pp. 91-100).

Throughout history, as far as we can tell, individuals have reached for a wider framework than themselves in which to pass their days. Some find political power as a vehicle for self-experience; contemporary capitalism, for example, promotes product acquisition as normative for self-expression. Within religious ideologies, Buddhism's *nirvana* is, perhaps, the most easily recognizable experience of transcending the repetitiveness of time and the tasks of daily life by overcoming the illusions of self and other. Judeo/Christian mystics and thinkers have sought an expansive context by which to interpret as well as appreciate life. They have done this primarily through postulating an ultimate transcendent reality and teaching obedience to God's ordinances, by practicing justice, and/or through the acceptance of "God's son" as an ideal by which to live one's life.

Transcending the confines of the self-enclosed, self-preoccupied individual was also Freud's goal. And, as we know, his was a theory and a technique dedicated to freeing humans from the confining cultural and religious beliefs that shackled them and to finding a personal truth that offered relief from the burden of neurotic singularity, all of which is implied in his sentiment that at the end of an analysis one should be able to love and to work. His was a philosophical, existential position rather than an empirically verifiable scientific conclusion. The psychoanalytic goals of self-honesty, self-exploration, and self-confrontation stand solidly in a western tradition of ethical/philosophical/spiritual exploration. By patiently exploring an individual's private world, psychoanalysis offers, paradoxically, a way out of the confines of that world.² As I discuss it in this article, spirituality has nothing to do with any particular formulaic ritual

² . Psychoanalysis offers the possibility of what Edward Glover designates as *freed will* (Glover, 1963, p. 193).

or dogmatic belief system, nor with the necessity of postulating any absolutely transcendent-other reality. I hope to show that psychoanalysis, appreciated within the perspective of negative theology, encapsulates a profound spirituality—a natural spirituality—one that fosters transcendence, but a transcendence that focuses on the here and now, what I have called an *everyday transcendence* (Gargiulo 2004, p. 13).

Such an everyday transcendence, which is concomitant with the natural spirituality I will be discussing, has more to do with how to live with a modicum of wisdom by pursuing integrity—as elusive as that concept sometimes turns out to be—than with the positing of any absolute power over, beyond, or in opposition to the world in which we live. The quest for power, that quicksand of human desire, is so pervasive in human experience that most religions establish a theistic god as its untouchable sanctuary. Then, by a process of identification, they reclaim that power for their followers, while decentering its locus. Likewise empirical science has frequently been made to carry the burden of truth (read power), thereby eclipsing it as a method of investigation with ever-tentative, but testable conclusions. Unfortunately, psychoanalysis has not always avoided this common human pitfall of power acquisition. As Francois Roustang (1982,1983) makes clear, the all knowing analyst, who possesses the key to the arcane and at times ominous unconscious, is more in the tradition of religious gnosis than of any humanistic-scientific enterprise (Gargiulo, 1989).

Positive theology, which most westerners equate with religion and spirituality, in contrast to negative theology, proposes an understanding of humanity based on either a mythic past or a transcendent present, usually expressed through what is called revelation. The Christian belief in original

sin, although not based in any scriptural conviction, teaches that each person is born subject to the concupiscence of the flesh and the pride of individuality. St. Augustine's battle with Pelagius, the English monk of the fourth century, had to do with whether people can find a saving "grace" in nature or whether they must confess their pride and unworthiness (read original sin) and seek redemption from outside. Augustine triumphed and cast his shadow over western history; he succeeded in having newborn babies baptized in order to cleanse them from an original sin they were born into and powerless to change. Such a belief is one reason for an outside intervention to "save" individuals-----and for all that follows in the formation of religions, i.e., ministers, dogmas, and rituals. Psychoanalysis, though dedicated to resolving the issue of power by giving it back to an individual, thereby freeing him or her to seek whatever wisdom he or she might find, can inadvertently perpetuate a vestige of its own psychological version of original sin. It does this through its classical formulations of drives and unfulfillable phantasies, repressed wishes and split off memories which has lead to subsuming, as mentioned above, the *unknowing* patient to the interpreting, that is, the *knowing*, analyst. Although Freud believed that an analyst had to present him- or herself as the doctor who knows, he did this because he thought it was the only stance that could break through a patient's resistance(s). Happily, contemporary psychoanalysis has developed more effective interventions for addressing resistances; however, the damage done to analysts, who were trained in this orthodox tradition, has not been so easily remedied. For our purposes, we can say that a spirituality that has to do with transcending self-preoccupation, pursuing personal honesty and experiencing a depth to life has little to do with the achievement of power,

with special knowledge, or with extricating a postulated fallen or damaged human nature.

Spirituality, Process and The Question of God

Within a western philosophical tradition, there are many thinkers who espouse what is called process theology, following the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Both these thinkers believe that western metaphysics has perpetuated a fatal flaw in its positing any reality that is over and against, or above and beyond, the history of the world in which we live—that is, a reality that is absolutely transcendent.³ Whitehead speaks of God's *primordial* and *consequent* natures—a philosophical interpretative aspect of God's ongoing evolution that is coterminous with the world. Building on this approach, Charles Hartshorne speaks of *panentheism* in lieu of any absolute transcendent other (Hartshorne & Reese, 1965).

But if one repudiates any notion of an absolute transcendent God, what becomes of the notion of spirituality? Is it simply a religious name for the silent alone, *permanently unknown* space of Winnicott (1965, p. 187)? Is it just the silent space of living in the here and now without the critique of the superego or the ego's self-monitoring? Although I agree that Winnicott's alone space is an evocative metaphor for each individual's quiet dialogue within him- or herself, as well as with the world in which one lives, the silence of the spirituality that I am outlining is not found solely in the non-communicable depth of the individual but in the open space of life as well. One could well argue that both perspectives are ultimately the same; note the introductory quote by Werner Heisenberg about the self and the world. The silent space of life and of one's individual aloneness is a silence that

³ See Johnson (1963) and Hartshorne (1976). Note Whitehead's (1957) view: "Neither God, nor the World, reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty" (p. 529).

underlies phantasy, punctuates reverie, and informs language. It is a silence that an individual comes to, as well as a silence that, in some sense, finds an individual.

The spirituality I am discussing informs and deepens one's everyday experiences. It is a spirituality that is consonant with and promoted by psychoanalysis; it is as comfortable with the exchange of neurotic misery for common unhappiness as it is with the awareness of one's existence as evoking mystery and awe. It has no need to promote the occult, is not regressively oceanic, and is not necessarily tied to any aesthetic feeling of the sublime. It is a spirituality that is not necessarily tied to any ascetical practice(s), but rather, as mentioned, can be experienced through the sense of awe and mystery that one brings to each of life's events. (By *mystery* I [2004, p. 25] mean *an awareness of an ever-receding, yet simultaneously inviting, horizon to one's knowledge*). It is a natural spirituality that is not tied to creedal formulations or, more importantly, the search for consolations. Freud's *common unhappiness*, which recognizes and accepts life's complexity, its unpredictability and its absurdity, is quite consonant, as I have noted, with such a spirituality (Freud, 1893-1895, p. 305).

It should be clear from what I have said that I consider psychoanalysis and spirituality to be walking, so to speak, on the same bridge. They walk on different sides and consequently have different views. They traverse the same bridge, however, a bridge to life. Psychoanalysis speaks to resolving our conscious and unconscious self-hiding, our turning away from what is too painful, too grief evoking, too puzzling to integrate. A spiritual journey entails a sober recognition of our place in the cosmos, our interdependence with all that is, while simultaneously addressing the potential self-reference and self-delusion that hinders such awareness. The commitment to be

honest, to practice civility and compassion, along with a self-transcending desire for justice, are operative goals for any spiritual journey as well as for a personal psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis and Negative Theology

Within an apophatic theology, the awareness of what has been called the holy cannot be categorized as an aesthetic experience (Otto, 1958). Rather, it is no nameable experience at all, as strange as it is to put it this way. Some authors speak of a “mystical atheism” as a way of trying to understand such an approach (Caputo, 1982, p. 278), an atheism that refuses, so to speak, to locate the silent awe of life in some other place, with some other reality over and against the reality in which we live. Furthermore it refuses to simply reduce it to what has been called, following a Yoga tradition, “soul mysticism” (Otto, 1970, p. 161). It is a type of atheism which Meister Eckhart supports with his conviction that any talk of God is ultimately talk about, and to, ourselves; silence, he suggests, is a better venue. Eckhart goes so far as to say “the greatest honor the soul can pay to God [is] to leave God to himself and to be free of him” (McGinn, 2001, p. 145).

For the most part, psychoanalysis has made traditional, positive, dogmatic theological metaphors untenable for an analyzed person. This need not follow from an analysis but frequently does, in my experience. Psychoanalysis does offer, as we have mentioned, alternate metaphors - metaphors of integration, of personal awareness, of working through, of self-honesty, of sustained relational caring. Such metaphors are in harmony with the most universal of religious values, as well as with what we are speaking of as the content of a negative theology. Suspicious of any *consoling* “ism,” psychoanalysis aims to help individuals find their life-truth within

themselves. Freud's reductionistic yet insightful characterization of the traditional theistic God as a projection of our needs, and our fears, does no violence to a spirituality based on a negative theology.

The spirituality of an everyday transcendence attempts to ground the human condition not escape from it.⁴ "By their fruits you will know them," Jesus, the Hebrew prophet, is reported to have said. A good-enough analysis is judged by the same criteria. Said another way: if an individual does not achieve a capacity to care for the world, is he or she able to care for himself or herself? *To care for* is to use personal power in the service of others as well as oneself, the opposite of using power for self-aggrandizement. Rather than the consolation of a promised immortality, or God's omnipotent power to change the events of one's personal history, the only consolation that a negative theology promotes is the care and concern that individuals owe each other and the world. Not to know that human beings owe such concern is psychic illness as well as spiritual blindness. From this perspective, psychoanalysis is as much a spiritual journey as it is a therapeutic encounter.

Psychoanalytic and spiritual journeys are both private and public; like poetry they are both deeply subjective and simultaneously universal. Good poetry deepens an individual's hold on life, which is also the goal for any effective spiritual pursuit and/or psychoanalytic experience. Just as good poetry awakens one to life, psychoanalytic and spiritual experiences should do the same. And if one is awake to life, "detachment"—the perennial concept in most spiritual traditions—will manifest itself, I believe, not as a possible indifference to the world one inhabits but, rather, as *attentiveness*. Such attentiveness implies a sense of awe, and sometimes mystery, that greet our everyday experiences and thereby enable one to have a conceptual and

⁴ (See Epictetus, 1994, for an ancient philosophical study of the human condition).

emotional *distance*, which, in fact, deepens involvement. A distance, that is, which deepens involvement by militating against a narcissistic ownership of one's possessions, one's experiences, or even one's pain.

Throughout most of recorded history, religious organizations have promoted bifurcating metaphors. Starting with Zoroastrianism, religious consciousness has addressed itself in terms of light versus darkness, good versus evil, dirty versus clean, saved versus damned, holy versus the profane, even, to some extent, enlightenment versus unenlightenment (Armstrong, 2005). The metaphors we use give us the world we live in; they are the medium for self-understanding and for interpreting our experience. Although such metaphors can be helpful as evocative adjectives, there is an ever-present tendency to read them in a literal, fundamentalist way—that is, as definitive alternatives. Fundamentalism codifies and concretizes “truth”—a truth that has been found and needs to be preserved against the ravages of time and place. Truth as a goal of personal honesty is replaced with truth as a possession—as a locus of power. Such religious bifurcating metaphors are alienating because they form consciousness in a way that hinders the acceptance of the necessary and inherent ambiguity of one's historical actuality. All too frequently, they attempt to resolve the unknowingness and anxiety of death by promising resolution rather than invitation. Any spiritual practice that hinders the experience of the present by interpreting it either in terms of a supernatural future, or by obsessively categorizing the present, is in danger of missing the experience of being alive.

Whether or not our individual life transcends our historical actuality is not available to us to know. That human beings have a deep fear of their personal deaths is obvious; that most creatures struggle to stay alive is equally obvious. The distinguishing feature seems to be the human

propensity for narcissism, which generates a sense of specialness. Alternately, fear of personal death can also be related to fears of retaliatory punishment for one's supposed aggression or badness. Loss of life is equated with loss of love, with punishment, with personal injury. Good/bad, life/death, saved/lost are alienating in their dichotomizing—they promote, consequently, a false spiritual awareness.

Neurotic defenses and characterological rigidity are the psychological equivalent of religious fundamentalism. They do not allow for flexible insight because they reduce the complexity of the world to formulas of interaction; societies and individuals are divided into believers and non-believers, into good people and bad people. In psychoanalysis, when the process goes well, *good self*, *bad self*, are ultimately replaced by just *real self*; good and bad are experienced as adjectives not nouns. They are adjectival designations that take their meaning from the historical moment in which one is living. The recognition that morality, individual ethics, as well as a communal sense of what is right and wrong, depend on the historical moment in which they emerge does not promote an irresponsible relativism. Rather, only with the recognition of the relativity of one's historical moment can an individual give assent to the task of creating, in Winnicott's sense, the found world, and thereby living an honest and reflective life.

Such a position, I believe, guarantees personal freedom without sacrificing communal responsibility. Such a position avoids threatening damnation, in religious language, or alienation, in political language, in order to promote interpersonal cooperation. Of course, such a position assumes that individuals are fed, provided with health care, have shelter, and have been offered education. These tasks are the works of compassion, of justice, and even of civility; any morality that does not promote them reflects

a self-preoccupied spirituality, which, of course, is no spirituality at all. Such has been the message of spiritual guides, in both the East and West, throughout history. A psychoanalytic journey which issues in personal insight without a willingness to take care of that which may not be immediately experienced as “mine” is ultimately in the service of identity diffusion rather than identity stabilization. If a person no longer experiences his or her interconnection with others and with the world, identity stability collapses into a narcissistic anxious ego. Once we no longer experience that we are constituted by our relationships, just as we are constituted by language, we have a distorted consciousness. A glass of water is still a glass of water without severing its relationship to the well from which it came and by which it is known.

Once a person is free not to prove or establish God’s existence, he or she is equally free not to engage in proving God’s non-existence. To the extent that the experience of being alive is appreciated, with all its beauty, its complexity as well as its grief at the inevitable loss that life entails, one is free not to concern oneself with an immortality that may or may not be a reality. Such questions ultimately distract us from living in the here and now. Respect and compassion for both oneself and for others suggests that one abandons any missionizing; missionizing, all too often, missionizing is an unrecognized quest for personal or institutional power. A natural spirituality—built on a negative theological perspective—grounds the personally meaningful as that which ties one to the world in which one lives through the care, compassion, justice and concern one evidences.

Metaphors and Analogies

Many of the thoughts that I have delineated in showing the relationship between psychoanalysis and spirituality are similar to Zen reflections

(Bobrow, 1977, Suzuki, Fromm, & DeMartino, 1963). Many Western authors have looked to Zen Buddhism to ground their spiritual reflections; I believe that one can also achieve a deep understanding of a natural spirituality by looking to contemporary quantum mechanics for possible analogies (Gargiulo, 2004, pp. 11-23).

In its quest to find productive cosmological models, quantum mechanics has posited what it calls superstring theory. Space does not permit an attempt to delineate this complex theory here. Instead I would like to outline some of the consequences that follow from such a model. Quantum physics offers a scientific yet elusive read on what we call reality. Its theories support such philosophical inquiries as the nature of reality and the possibility as well as the limits of knowledge; its postulates promote an appreciation of process, mystery, and awe.

Shakespeare reminds us “We are such stuff as dreams are made on” With the Bard’s permission I would like to suggest that the reader let his or her imagination roam and picture tiny strings of energy, variously shaped, vibrating at different intensities—too small to see with any of our instruments to date, but nevertheless offering, by their postulate, a way of understanding matter, time, and space. Such a postulate that may fulfill the promise of a unified theory (i.e., one in harmony with Einstein’s findings) by which to explain the cosmos. In an attempt to understand the “why” of reality, in all its manifestations, John Wheeler of Princeton University, a leading quantum theorist, has spoken about the micro-world that supports our macro-world as *a mist of infinite possibilities*, that is, a quantum foam of probabilities (Greene, 2000, p. 128-129).

If the cosmos is a world in process, echoing Whitehead and Hartshorne, a process however that has no clear or definable goal, then any theoretical

model that can help us get beyond the apparent concreteness of the world can foster inspiring awe and manageable mystery. The model of a cosmos of infinite possibilities where, for example, a proton can traverse every possible route available, even *backwards* in time, according to Richard Feynman (Hawking, 1988, pp.134ff), is one such invitation to get beyond an everyday experience of reality, or what Whitehead (1957, p.11), from a philosophical perspective, speaks of as *misplaced concreteness*. A model, likewise, where light can be experienced as either a wave or a particle; where what is referred to as the *probability wave function* means accepting such a strange concept as non-locality (quantum entanglement)—which implies that distance does not exist. A world of possibilities where, as Heisenberg has established, following what is known as the Copenhagen interpretation, one cannot establish, simultaneously, the location and speed of a proton. Probability becomes normative—not certainty. If we take the metaphor of a mist of infinite possibilities seriously, it implies a constant coming to be of life, out of a world of probabilities. Such a theory is congenial with the process philosophy of Whitehead and Hartshorne, mentioned above, congenial as well with the psychoanalytic and spiritual ideals I have described.

, Given its search for the most elementary aspect of matter, quantum theory grounds a sense of awe and mystery in the world in which we live and offers us usable theoretical models to understand that world. If the cosmos is a quantum system (Lloyd, 2006, p.122) as are its constituents, i.e., human beings, then we have posited the multifaceted development and interrelationship of everything. We might even say that every point of reference in the world, from persons to events to atoms to more basic elementary particles, is knowable because each of them is a point of

information. One benefit, for an individual, of appreciating such interrelationship is the possibility it offers of counterbalancing the corrosive role of narcissism. Rather than understanding such a perception of our total interrelationship as an assumed primitive merger with the early mother (mother and I are one), psychoanalysis would do well to appreciate that if physicists are reiterating what philosophers, religious thinkers, and spiritual guides have taught for centuries—that is, highlighting each person’s interconnection—then for an individual not to recognize such interconnection and be committed to the common benefit is an indication of pathology.

In this vein, we can note that separation/individuation is not a final goal of psychological integration, but rather a developmental stage leading to a capacity to appreciate and experience human interconnection. The great poets have always known such truths. When Dante ended his *Divine Comedy* with a song of praise for “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars” (Dante, 1982, p. 296), he was talking about the interconnection of everything with everything. That is, understanding love as that which binds together. All the lasting spiritual traditions, however, speak to the great oneness of things and the illusion of separation. Seng-TS-AN, the sixth-century Taoist/Buddhist mystic, wrote, “One—this is all, /all—this is one” (Bercholz & Kohn, 1993, p. 152). Writing within his religious tradition, Meister Eckhart states, “the eye that I see God with is the same eye that God sees me, My eye and God’s eye is one eye and one seeing, one knowing, and one loving.” (McGinn, 2001, p. 149). One need not accept such religious metaphors to experience a natural spirituality; what matters, ultimately, is an individual’s experience of aliveness. Aliveness is the awareness of interconnectedness.

Language organizes our world and our consciousness; it also deforms experience by categorizations. Quantum physics, like Zen tradition, has questioned the very concept of reality. Edwin Schrödinger, a major figure in quantum physics, speaks of reality as a necessary but merely operational construct. Summarizing Schrodinger's thoughts, Mara Beller (1999) writes "the concept of reality as such, as it objectively exists independent of all human observers, is indefensible, if not downright meaningless. . . . Still, the concept of reality, Schrödinger held, is as indispensable in science as it is in everyday life" (p. 282). We humans only grasp tiny bits and pieces of our world— as Brian Green (2004, 2004) reminds us. A natural spirituality, based on a negative theology, is more comfortable with not knowing than with knowing, with a darkness that can give birth to discovery, rather than with the light of certainty, with a silence which knows that the truths of life more frequently find us than we find them. "Self-recognition," Paul Ricoeur (1974, p.185) reminds us, is such a truth and is the core of psychoanalysis.

An everyday transcendence appreciates the open-endedness that the world presents—an open-endedness that humans likewise exemplify. An everyday transcendence is not compatible with dogmas—religious, spiritual or psychoanalytic. Dogma attempts to resolve the anxiety of unknowingness by a flight to certainty. A good-enough psychoanalytic experience does not necessarily enable one to definitively resolve anxiety but rather to contextualize it and appreciate its source. A good-enough spiritual awareness does likewise; that is, one need not be in flight from anxiety or suffering. An individual can experience the normal life-force fear and anxiety over death; to fear death, for example, is not anti-spiritual. Notwithstanding personal narcissism, the life force wishes to hold together rather than split apart. To recognize that we are held by the life force, as

much if not more so than personal narcissism, is intrinsic to being alive rather than merely existing.

In a previous publication (Gargiulo, 2004), I wrote:

Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco of God creating man depicts them as finger close yet worlds apart. In reality, what touches us, what gives life to us, is the open-ended depth of the world and of ourselves as part of such an open-ended depth. Such openness does not entail either creedal beliefs or specific spiritual exercises. It does entail a quiet experience of mystery, an awareness of awe, an acceptance of the dignity we owe the world, [ourselves, and each other]. (p. 127)

Psychoanalysis is dedicated to such a goal; but it has, all too often, offered a reductionistic reading of spirituality, not merely of religious practices. It reflected, consequently, a failure to differentiate the existential goals behind various spiritual traditions from the particular religious forms that expressed them. Mystery is not mystification and altruism is not masochism. "Mystery can hold us as well as knowledge; out of such a place we can love the world, live in it and make it real" (Gargiulo, 2006). But such sentiments, as psychoanalysis is well aware, must be grounded in lived experience—a lived experience which we can summarize by saying that the pursuit of life wisdom issues in a desire to promote justice, to manifest civility, and to appreciate the need for compassion and empathy in our dealings with others and with ourselves. Without such experiences, an individual loses his or her moorings, that is, his or her soul.

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