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DEPENDENCE AND COUNTERDEPENDENCY IN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND RELIGIOUS FAITH

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It is striking to observe at this point in Western history the massive cultural representations of the striving for independence. We are concerned with the rights of children to follow their own interests and proceed at their own pace in our educational systems. We affirm the importance of individuality in dress and in life-style, as well as in distinctive vocational pursuits. We champion independent entrepreneurial business enterprises and simultaneously the independence and legitimacy of deviations within the counterculture. In both philosophy and the social sciences there are methodological celebrations of phenomenology and other forms of understanding that recognize pluralism within the culture and the idiosyncratic nature of each individual's perception of reality. We express scorn and experience shame in matters of conformity. We reserve the highest prohibitions in the university for plagiarism and express constantly the importance of independent ideas, giving our highest praise only for those who demonstrate genuine creativity and innovation.

There are special manifestations of this striving for independence

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in Protestant religious experience. We take very seriously the admonition to "work out our own salvation in fear and trembling." We encourage the mature emergence of an individual confession of faith. We feel both justified and responsible in assertions of the "Protestant principle" as the priesthood of all believers, taking it to mean individual believers.

Yet while there is solid conviction as well as psychological wisdom in both religious and general cultural manifestations of independence, the excess of such claims easily leads us to the suspicion that they may betray more underlying anxiety about forms of dependence. That is to say that while independence may be identified with maturation, both personally and religiously, such claims are often absolutized because of unacknowledged apprehension about all forms of dependency as though they inevitably represented personal weakness, immaturity, or a dynamic of regression to infantile relationships, even characterized sometimes as "oral fixation."

Some of the most clear and interesting analyses of the psychologic components of dependency have indeed emerged within the psychoanalytic tradition—especially, of course, in Freud's own writing. It is especially striking that in addition to the descriptive discussions of the dynamics of dependency in psychosexual development, Freud's general argument (indeed his ethic, if we follow the argument of Philip Rieff in *Freud: The Mind of a Moralist*[1]) has generated a climate in which all subsequent forms of dependency appear suspect, especially those forms that have either the theological sanctions or the ritual affirmation of religious justification. Undoubtedly, Freud more than anyone else in contemporary intellectual history has cast intense suspicion on all forms of religious practice and belief that smack of a retreat into the secure illusion of some ultimate dependency as though inevitably characteristic of infantile states of helplessness.

Actually, Freud's discussions of dependency occur in three different contexts: (1) in his observations on the process of human development in its early stages, (2) in his analysis of social class, and (3) in his discussion of the psychodynamics of regression, wish fulfillment, illusion, and religion. I will reserve comment on the second until a later stage of this paper, and for the present focus on the first and third.

Developmentally, Freud discusses briefly the dependency characteristics of the oral stage of psychosexual development. In this phase the infant is entirely dependent, especially upon the mother, for nourishment and affection. The fact that this dependence has survival benefits can be easily forgotten in later allusions to the neurotic-regressive characteristics of this dependency.

For purposes of our present discussion, it is Freud's analysis of the regressive characteristics of dependency, particularly in religious experience, that is most important. My general contention would be that Freud's analysis of religion as meeting "unrealistic" and childlike dependency needs is a key factor in generating the special kind of anxiety over dependency typical of much religious doubt as well as of the culture generally.

Freud analyzes the psychodynamics of religion in various ways. One way is to examine the wish-fulfillment characteristics of much religious yearning for a wise and judging father-God, reminiscent of the wise but feared authorities represented in infantile consciousness (*Civilization and Its Discontent*). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud's analysis of religion turns on repetition-compulsion features, which again have the quality of return to the dependency state of childhood and illusions of mastery in situations of abandonment. In *Future of an Illusion* Freud assesses religious phenomena as based on the illusion of consolation, which is psychogenetically determined by the dependency needs for security and protection in a fateful and unknown universe, as well as dependency needs for moral certitude. In *Moses and Monotheism,* the analysis of religion points to the return of the repressed guilt, again stemming from a desire to annihilate the controlling parent and to end the dependency. Here we are dealing with the infantile characteristics of the Oedipal wish, though elaborated in resistance to and identification with a larger controlling "parent" (God). It could further be suggested within the psychoanalytic context that relationships with God incorporate elements of a transference neurosis in which there is the simultaneous overestimation of the importance of the authority figure, coupled with resentment and resistance against that figure. Even in Freud's earliest discussions of religion in his essay on "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices," the analysis of obsession smacks of the irrational, prelogical, and unproductive repetition typical of childlike rituals.

The point is that Freud's psychoanalytic explorations into religious motivation are closely tied at every point to his critique of regression into the dependency posture of childhood. In such discussions, dependency is always understood as "neurotic dependency." What makes it neurotic is the combination of suspected anxiety generating the claim that there is something or someone worth depending upon, and the presumed unrealistic character of the claim itself. But seeing this, one is led to ask, What if there are in fact *dependable* structures and processes of reality that it would be hazardous and egoistic not to acknowledge? And what if an even greater anxiety motivates the flight from any awesome recognition of our dependence on a form and power of Being over which we are by no means even precarious

masters? Such questions lead me to want to investigate more precisely the clinical nature of neurotic dependency and to see if it is possible to differentiate neurotic dependency from what might be called "ontological dependence." It is exactly this task upon which the rest of the paper will focus.

Neurotic Dependency

Let us draw together the various psychodynamic characteristics that are most pertinent in a description of neurotic dependency—aside from the simple reminiscences of infantile psychological posture. A glossary definition typically deals with dependency reactions, as in: "The tendency to lean on other persons and to depend on others for help in initiating activity or in making decisions."[2] In normal development, dependent, childlike reactions are modified through reality testing, which usually leads to an adequate sense of separation between parent and child. Pathological developments involve prolongation and extent of the dependence as well as resistance to reality testing. Difficulties with dependency generally are reflected in those instances where "children never become emotionally independent, but remain attached to their original Oedipal object all their life, [many continuing] to live unmarried in the parental home, with a partially sublimated but still intense attachment to the mother or father."[3]

From a clinical perspective, it is also noteworthy that a number of psychosomatic problems such as asthma, diabetes, hypertension, hyperthyroidism, obesity, and ulcerative colitis have been discussed in relation to neurotic dependency. With obesity, for instance, an analysis can often be made showing there are parents whose own needs to be dependent and loved keep them from adequately loving the child. Instead, they may have substituted the giving of food for the giving of love. The child, when grown, still needs love but continues to substitute the food gratification. Thus, like the parent, such a child is similarly unable to deal with dependency longings.

My own clinical observations lead me to confirm that the most dependent persons are precisely those who have been least sure of any adequate source of nurturance in their development. That is, when there has been no stable person to give dependable love, and instead a series of conflicting or double-bind messages leading to apprehension about "no win" situations, then compulsive and unrealistic attempts to ferret out an acceptable but often self-defying mode of behavior may dominate one's motivation. Sometimes, through fatigue, even these attempts may be abandoned, and there may emerge what appear to be very selfish or erratic modes of behavior.

Neurotic dependency can also be described as the denial of one's

internal potential for self-initiated growth. Typically, the neurotically dependent person feels that any growth or positive gain must be initiated from sources outside the self, and frequently tends to blame these sources as unresponsive or insufficient when growth is not experienced. When such a person does receive acclaim as having made significant achievements in personal maturation or productivity, these claims are discarded or diverted onto what Karen Horney calls a "neurotic partner,"[4] that is, onto someone in whose debt the individual feels, or whose well-being is essential to one's parasitical self-image. Neurotic dependency may also be analyzed as a way of avoiding responsibility in that the reassertion of infantile needs or the practice of demurring to the potency of others evades the chances for both blame and praise.

Neurotic dependency can also be described as an evasion of decision through either a direct willingness or indirect capitulation of having one's life lived by another. As in Freud's analysis of the "ego lived by the id," the ego may also renounce capability for decision making and seek forms of eventually resented solace under the control of authority figures.

It might be suggested that neurotic dependency is also marked by apathy in the face of troubling social and interpersonal circumstance. In such troubling circumstances one may depend on others not only to make personal decisions but also to make hard social and political decisions that eventually will affect the life of the individual. This dependency may be accompanied by acceptance of a subordinate role within the political or ideological structure of society. And with that acceptance comes increasingly passive deference to strong authority figures as though legitimately and absolutely in possession of the right to control.

It is at this point that I return to Freud's comments on dependency in the second sense of social class analysis, where I find his position dangerous and also irresponsible. Freud suggests that there is an "innate and ineradicable inequality of men in their tendency to fall into two classes of leaders and followers."[5] From this analysis Freud further argued that we should educate an upper stratum of men who will give direction to the predominantly dependent masses. In such comments I see Freud giving a demonic blessing to forms of social inequality and elitism that could very well encourage the forms of neurotic dependency that he elsewhere is eager to eradicate. Such inconsistency is more than intellectually incongruent; it is politically and personally dehumanizing and disenfranchising.

Neurotic dependency is also marked by forms of repetitive and irrational behavior. This characteristic is typical when tasks are carried

out regardless of the circumstances or the utility of the acts. The actions may at one time have been valuable in attracting the attention or approval of a parental figure and hence effective in supporting the dependency. But particularly in situations where the dominant behavior of that parental figure was hostile, or worse, radically inconsistent and unpredictable, the anxiety of the child (related to the insecurity experienced in such settings) would block new learning, cut off perception of feedback, and rigidify infantile patterns of behavior that would increasingly be maladaptive. Hence, what might have started out as a relaxing or pleasurable playful activity, for instance, may take on what Kubie describes as the "earnest, rigid intensity which characterizes neurotic phenomena."[6] There develops as an underlying substructure an "automatic repetition irrespective of the situation, the utility, or the consequences of the act."[7] Once again, the political implications of this characteristic are noteworthy in the rigidity of bureaucratic responses to new social problems or in the stagnation of foreign policy, as well as in the life of individual persons unable to learn new forms because of the continuing bewilderment of earlier dependency experiences.

Neurotic dependency is also characterized by the inability to feel good about one's self unless one is convinced that everyone is pleased with one's behavior and attitudes. Obviously such an eventuality is impossible, and the dependent person is led inevitably to feelings of guilt and depression generated by the failure to meet typically contradictory expectations presented from various sources.

It is especially important to note that neurotic dependency is frequently characterized by a failure to acknowledge the subtly controlling character of the dependency. That is, if one appears too weak, or too incapable, or too needy to accomplish things for one's self, this may be a manipulative form of getting others to do those things in one's place. This is close again to the essence of Horney's analysis of the need for appeasing a "partner" in the "self-effacing" neurotic solution when a person places unrealistic stress on the partner's achievements and on one's own weakness as a way of coercing the partner to remain supportive.[8] This element is also active in Hellmuth Kaiser's interesting discussion of dominance and submission in *Effective Psychotherapy*.[9] Starting out with observations about a scaling procedure identifying domineering characteristics as demanding, controlling, arrogant, advice-giving, etc., and submissive or dependent characteristics as doing anything requested, self-effacing, subordinating actions to the wishes of others, etc., Kaiser quickly comes to the conclusion that such polarities constitute a false spectrum. For instance, where do you scale a person in psychotherapy who demands

advice, wants to be told what to talk about, or wants to be told what psychological characteristics fit with what symptom patterns? Or where do you scale the person who demands that the therapist say how the patient feels because the patient himself cannot tell? Such clinical experiences reveal both dominating and dependent characteristics interwoven with one another, such that a polar spectrum would be useless in differentiating their characteristics. What appeared to be submissive or dependency responses in these cases may be exactly forms of domination or control. To go on, Kaiser attempts to understand the motivation behind dependent behavior, and comes to the awareness that frequently the neurotic tendency may be a "readiness to obey without decision," as suggested in the German expression: "Er ist ein willeloses werkzeug in meiner hand."[10] In such phenomena there is the pretense that one has no decision-making power of his or her own, and hence it can be suggested that there is a strong *delusional* element in neurotic dependency accompanying the disguised manipulative features.

Finally, neurotic dependency may sometimes be characterized by behaviors typical of a reaction formation, that is, by overprotestations of the opposite tendencies toward a pretended absolute independence. It is this pretense at independence, unconsciously calculated to deny real forms of neurotic dependency, that could be termed "counterdependency." Such counterdependency occurs especially in cases in which the neurotic dependency longings of the individual constitute a danger of collapsing a fragilely constructed ego defense. Malamud cites an interesting case of this sort in which a married man of twenty-eight was in a minor auto accident from which he emerged completely blind. Neurological examination showed negative findings, leading to a diagnosis of hysterical blindness. It happened that the accident had occurred as the man was driving to the hospital to visit his wife and new firstborn child. The man's first remark to the psychiatrist upon examination was to the effect that he could not tie his wife down to a blind man and would now divorce her. This reaction is intelligible only in relation to a series of adolescent experiences in which the man had tried to escape a domineering mother by leaving home early and radically asserting his "complete independence"—resisting especially any permanent relationships with women. When marriage did come, to a woman who was strongly reminiscent of his mother in many ways, and then the birth of a child further reduced his previous "freedom" to walk out of relationships, a more dramatic psychic maneuver was necessary in order to evade confrontation with his denied dependency longings—especially those that had led to the marriage.

In this case we see what would be described as a form of counterdependency in that the longings for dependency are hidden (even from the person himself) by a vigorous assertion of independent "courage"—even apparently self-sacrificing in the interest of the other. Beneath this courage to remove oneself from a potentially dependent situation can be seen the powerful dread of denied dependence needs. For this reason, counterdependency might be considered an even more vitiating form of neurotic dependency because of the double contrivance necessary to maintain the neurotic system —thereby making acknowledging and transforming it doubly difficult.[11]

Using this analysis of counterdependency as the key, we may initiate a transition toward our understanding of other forms of dependency that should be carefully distinguished from neurotic dependency. The phenomenon of counterdependency demonstrates psychodynamically what we suspected in the observations regarding cultural phenomena in the beginning of this essay. That is, there are forms of independence that may be manifestations of genuine maturity, but there may also be forms of "independence" that betray counterdependency in that they demonstrate neurotic anxiety regarding dependency.

Real Dependence

Conversely, while some dependent characteristics may be recognizable as forms of neurotic dependency, there are other forms which may be essential to maturity and health. The interesting thing about counterdependency is that it implicitly affirms realistic contexts in which there is genuine dependence, while observing that it is the neurotic denial of such dependence that gets expressed in the overprotestations of "independence" or autonomy.

It should not be too difficult to demonstrate that there are numerous ontological or real structures that transcend and support individual life, and upon which we are all dependent. Every process of individual growth and personal renewal depends upon a complex web of interactions having familial, interpersonal, communal, and environmental dimensions—dimensions that in an ontological framework may be seen as expressions of what Tillich calls the "power of Being." Religious affirmations of such ontological dependence are expressed in the profound acknowledgment of the reality of creativity and healing that is essential in support of all life, and that transcends life and death both in the sense that it does not fall under human domination and that it appears timeless in the sweep beyond the finite moment of human history.

Something of the power of ontological dependence is expressed in the patristic notion of the "impassibility of God." This doctrine, far from asserting a remote and disinterested God, represents the psychological and theological truth of a fundamental quality of strength and security out of which genuine compassion and giving can come. Only out of fundamental ontological security can one give of one's self in the abandon that knows no fear of the loss of the self. It is only ultimately in the assurance of such ontological dependence that one can avoid the apprehension that Ronald Laing terms "engulfment," in which relationships are constantly threatened by the fear of dissolution of self through the overwhelming impingement of the realities of others.[12]

Within the social context, forms of realistic dependence are explicit in our reliance on the culture's provision of language, ideal systems, views of history and time, etc. Were it not for such forms, there would be massive disorientation in time and space, as well as no possibility for political and economic cooperation, shared personal endeavors, communication, work, or a vision of the future. Furthermore, it is only with an ideological and normative perspective that is dependable and transcending particular circumstances that we are enabled to challenge the injustices in the social and political sphere rather than being simply victimized by history as given. In this sense, our independence in forming prophetic observations of existing cultural forms stems from a more profound dependence on a normative vision provided by a culture's ontological and moral dimensions.

In the interpersonal context it should also be clear that there are innumerable networks of interactional dependence. We never outgrow our genuine needs for love, support, reassurance, and a sense of belonging to a community of shared concern. Indeed, the true courage to stand out for what one perceives as right—even when there is disagreement, ridicule, and rejection—stems from the security of being able to depend on a community of witnesses and supporters who share, or at least understand, the intensity and significance of that stand. Going back to the discussion of dependency in human development, we may observe that the needs for nurturance, affection, and belonging extend throughout life, such that our acknowledgment of them as significant aspects of development, far from being an expression of infantile regression, is an affirmation of the essential context for health throughout all of life. One of the profound and enduring benefits of the women's movement has been the reawakening of our awareness of the importance of such nurturance over against individualistic self-aggrandizement in both male and female adulthood.

The acknowledgment of such forms of real dependence in interpersonal, social, and genuinely ontological dimensions stands in direct contrast to the observations made about neurotic dependency. Indeed, one could go further and suggest that the reason the denial of such essential dependence has persisted lies in the confluence of forces driven on the one hand by the dependency anxiety we have analyzed and on the other by what could be called "ontic repression." Anxiety about the immature implications of dependency has generalized so pervasively that the acknowledgment of real and significant forms of dependence has been made extremely difficult. Added to this, the counterdependent cult of "individuality" has forced a repression of acknowledgment of the ontological structures in which all of life coheres and on which all of life depends.

Yet it is only when this awareness is recovered that we can move toward a mature and realistic acknowledgment of the interaction of dependence and independence in what I would term a "reciprocal transdependence." Stated somewhat differently, both neurotic dependency and forms of counterdependency can be overcome in a more mature acknowledgment of the necessary and healthy forms of mutual or reciprocal dependence at an interpersonal level, viewed at the same time within the context of the transcendent structures of our ontological dependence.

The reaffirmation of the importance of forms of ontological dependence, as distinct from neurotic dependency, also helps to clarify some theological concerns where there has been a danger, similar to that in psychological denial, of masking real dependence under over-individualized views of salvation. In some periods of the history of Christian theology, apprehension over a fateful domination by destiny, predestination, or divine omnipotence, with counterpart human anxieties of impotence, has led to forms of assertion of human will, responsibility, power, and merit. But these have always been brought into balance, and placed under judgment, by theological sensitivities cautious of the same kinds of abuse that I have identified psychologically as counterdependency. "He who would save his own life shall lose it."

Think, for instance, of how Saint Paul speaks of liberation into a new kind of freedom precisely at the point where we discover ourselves reconciled, or renewed in right relationship, with God upon whom all life depends and who has been active in human history on our behalf. We are incomplete and in bondage apart from an acknowledgment of this redemptive activity. And a major part of what we are saved from is exactly the anxiety of feeling we have to prove, and inevitably fail to prove, our own independent merit. Paul's

criticism of our obsessive dependency on obedience to the law as a way of justifying ourselves (with all of its pitfalls of self-aggrandizement, temporary glorification of our power to "win" salvation, and the depression of failure) takes on added dimensions when such justifying is viewed as a form of counterdependency. Indeed, one pervasive biblical view of sin as hybris or prideful self-assertion both expands and is expanded by the psychological insights into counter-dependency.

Over against counterdependency, we find innumerable expressions of empowerment and joy in recognizing our appropriate forms of ontological dependence. One of the strongest assertions of the centrality of this recognition is in Schleiermacher's pivotal definition of the essence of religion as the "feeling of absolute dependency."[13] In Schleiermacher's dialectic of knowing, doing, and feeling, it was the consciousness of absolute dependence that gave both immediate existential intensity to life and appropriate location of each life moment in its diversity and cohesiveness within ultimate ontological possibility. Because of that dependence we are made both humble and whole.

Finally, a reawakening of the constructive and essential dimensions of ontological dependence, coupled with an awareness of the distortions of neurotic dependency, should have important ethical bearing on several significant social problems. The harsh reality for women and minorities in many instances has been a socially justified assignment to roles that have many of the debilitating characteristics that we have identified in the dynamics of neurotic dependency. That is, social roles have demanded forms of submission, passivity, denial of initiative, repetitiveness, and neurotic partnerships that have simultaneously been judged pathological. Such abuses may be attacked most vigorously when viewed under the transdependent perspective of ontological structures in which all persons—male and female, majority and minority, powerful and weak—must stand. Viewed within the category of "reciprocal transdependence," the male/female relationship may be characterized more by mutuality of support and power, interactive nurturance, and reciprocity in functional operations, rather than by domination versus submission or elite roles versus secondary augmentation. Racism, likewise, is challenged by the possibility of mutuality in respect, vocation, compensation, and services when all persons are viewed under the overarching structures of ontic dependence and not left as victimized heirs of slavery and dehumanizing subjugation. It is clearly well past the time that we should expunge those political and social practices that perpetuate enforced dependency, should transcend the individual anxieties of neurotic dependency, including counterdependency, and should lift up in

both celebration and humility the ontological dependence of all humanity.

NOTES

1. Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of a Moralist* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961).
2. John M. Hadley, *Clinical and Counseling Psychology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 658.
3. Norman Cameron, *Personality Development and Psychopathology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963), p. 215.
4. Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1950).
5. Sigmund Freud, "On War," in *Character and Culture* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963), p. 144.
6. L. S. Kubie, "The Repetitive Core of Neuroses," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 10 (1941): 23–43.
7. L. S. Kubie, "The Fundamental Nature of the Distinction between Normality and Neurosis," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 23 (1954): 167.
8. Horney (n. 4 above).
9. Hellmuth Kaiser, *Effective Psychotherapy* (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 110–11.
10. Ibid., p. 112 [He is a will-less tool in my hand].
11. By double contrivance I mean, first, the unconscious defense against security needs met in the dependency strivings and, second, the unconscious concealment of those dependency strivings in forms of counterdependency, such as courage in allowing others their freedom.
12. Ronald Laing, *Self and Others* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).
13. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Naperville, Ill: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1928), pp. 12, 56, 57.