

Discussion of "'Someday...' and 'If only...' Fantasies: Pathological Optimism and Inordinate Nostalgia as Related Forms of Idealization." A paper by Salman Akhtar, M.D

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Like Dr. Akhtar's (1995) somewhat related study, "A third individuation: immigration, identity, and the psychoanalytic process," the present paper is in my view a fine example of the theoretically and clinically balanced, inclusive and sophisticated psychoanalytic work being carried on by contemporary representatives of the American ego psychology/object relations tradition of Jacobson, Mahler, Kernberg and others.

In a series of papers (Carveth, 1984, 1987, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b, 1996) I have argued that the major theoretical and technical controversies currently dividing our field may be seen to involve a range of unnecessarily polarized concepts--such as maternal vs. paternal, preoedipal vs. oedipal, deficit vs. conflict, shame vs. guilt, Tragic Man vs. Guilty Man, relationship vs. insight, self vs. object, empathy vs. observation, subjective vs. objective, etc.--one or the other term of which is privileged by particular therapeutic perspectives. I have argued in favour of a dialectical psychoanalytic method that seeks to deconstruct the privileging of either pole of such dichotomies, insisting upon the importance of doing justice to each at different moments in the therapeutic process.

It should come as no surprise, then, that what I most admire about Akhtar's approach is precisely his dialectical inclusiveness. In tracing

the origins of the "someday..." and "if only..." fantasies, he emphasizes "the narcissistic disequilibrium consequent upon the early mother-child separation experiences," but states that "the oedipal conflict also contributes to them" (Abstract). He points out that both fantasies "can be employed as defenses against defective self- and object constancy," but also against "later narcissistic and oedipal traumas" (Abstract).

On the theoretical level, Akhtar seeks to transcend the CONFLICT/DEFICIT and SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION/SELF PSYCHOLOGY debates by including insights from each of these perspectives. Instead of being derailed by the Kohut/Kernberg debate as to whether idealization reflects "residual developmental need" or "an instinctualized defense against deep-seated rage" (p.2), Akhtar recognizes the element of truth in both perspectives and focuses his attention upon the "Someday..." and "If only..." fantasies, exploration of which has until recently been neglected due to our preoccupation with the aforementioned theoretical controversy.

On the level of clinical technique, Akhtar seeks to transcend the opposition between a "searching and skeptical" versus a "credulous and affirming" listening attitude, as well as that between an interpretative emphasis versus one that stresses the holding, containing, and empathic functions of the analyst. He argues that both attitudes have an essential part to play at different moments in the therapeutic process. He writes that "Technical approaches in this realm have leaned either towards providing and sustaining illusion ... or towards the interpretive dissolution of such illusion ..." (p.25). Embracing the position of BOTH/AND rather than EITHER/OR, Akhtar argues that "the treatment must offer both illusion and disillusionment" (p.25).

Akhtar stresses the particular importance for this class of patients--those suffering from

pathological optimism, inordinate nostalgia and other types of idealization--of the analyst's establishment of an "atmosphere of trust, emotional security, and acceptance" in which "the patient's illusion that hope can be fulfilled and lost objects found" (p.26) may be both mobilized and, for a considerable time, actually sustained through "affirmative" rather than "unmasking" interventions. However, he then proceeds to emphasize that the time must eventually come when the analyst must "help the patient unmask what underlies his waiting attitude" (p.28). He makes it clear that "the analyst must be prepared to rupture the patient's inordinate hope" (p.30) in order to effect a process of "optimal disillusionment" which requires that the analyst learn to give up magical thinking as "a necessary precondition for mourning that is otherwise blocked in these patients" (p.31).

Akhtar is very conscious of the potential risks inherent in this confrontational phase of the work and emphasizes the crucial importance of sensitivity to issues of timing and "dosage" of interventions of this type. But in so emphasizing the importance of both "holding" and mourning--I personally believe we can only mourn if we are "held"--he transcends yet another of the false dichotomies that currently plague our field.

Akhtar refers to his approach as an "informed eclecticism" (p.35). The term "eclecticism" is, in my view, an appropriate characterization of Pine's (1990) *Drive, Ego, Object, Self: A Synthesis For Clinical Work*--precisely because Pine's subtitle was misleading in that what he offered was no genuine synthesis, but only a clinical pluralism, however useful on a pragmatic level. But I do not believe the term "eclecticism" is applicable either to Pine's (1995) revised stance, in which he now speaks of "One Psychoanalysis Composed of Many" and in which he seeks to move beyond his earlier pluralism toward a genuine synthesis, or to Akhtar's own approach which I believe is

dialectical rather than eclectic.

II

As a "neo-Mahlerian," if I may so characterize him, Dr. Akhtar is a prominent representative of those contemporary analysts who seek to demonstrate the continuing value of separation-individuation theory in the face of its relative neglect in many quarters since the critique by Stern (1985) and others of its assumption of autistic and symbiotic phases of development--concepts that echo Freud's own postulation of a phase of primary narcissism. Akhtar speaks of "the `all good' mother of the symbiotic phase" (p.11), of the "oceanic feeling" attributed by Freud to the infant during the phase of primary narcissism in which "the self-absorbed infant experiences all of space and time as co-extensive with his ego" (p.11). Again, Akhtar speaks of "The infantile fused self- and object representations" (p.12) and also of the normal ego's "renunciation of infantile omnipotence" (p.19).

Contra Freud, Winnicott, Mahler and the early Kohut, I have always felt that ignorance of impotence is not omnipotence and, hence, that a grandiose self, rather than being a developmental given, is a result of universal and inevitable ("basic" or existential) frustration, sometimes exacerbated by pathological developmental derailment ("surplus" frustration). In other words, such grandiosity or omnipotence is a manic defence in the face of both normal and inevitable and abnormally intensified experiences of helplessness and persecutory anxiety.

In those of his writings that I have not yet had an opportunity to read, Dr. Akhtar (e.g., 1992) may have addressed this issue, as well as the question as to how one can continue to speak the language of symbiosis, fusion, oneness and merger in light of the findings of contemporary infant research. There is little doubt that it was his awareness of this research that led Kohut,

after 1971, to drop the notion of the "merger" transference and to redefine the "selfobject" as an object that performs a range of functions for the self rather than an object incompletely differentiated from the self (Kohut, 1977).

Dr. Akhtar points out that "Adding a significant nuance to Freud's (1911) outlining of the gradual replacement of pleasure principle by reality principle, both Winnicott and Mahler regard this journey from illusion to disillusion as necessary for psychic growth" (p.25). Because I too regard this journey as central in the psychic evolution of every human individual, I have sought to conceptualize it in ways that render it exempt from the critique of the notion of original undifferentiation or oneness. In a recent paper (1994a) I wrote:

Some critics have dismissed Winnicott's thinking in this area on the mistaken grounds of his adherence to the concept of the death instinct. Others reject what he has to say regarding the move away from the subjective through the transitional toward the objective object on the grounds that contemporary infant research (Stern, 1985) has called into question the idea of an early phase of undifferentiation between self and object which Freud's, Winnicott's and Mahler's thinking assumes. Since this is not the place to enter into this debate at any length, let me merely refer to Pine's (1990, ch.11) recent discussion of this issue and his argument that while the notion of a phase of absolute undifferentiation now has to be abandoned, in its one-sided focus upon the most alert and differentiated moments of the infant's day, a good deal of the current infant research may well have neglected those other moments of somnolence in which a sort of "merger" experience may well be

taking place. In a sense, however, all this is beside the point. For whatever Freud may have meant by "primary narcissism" and Mahler by "symbiosis," by "secondary narcissism" and the "subjective object" Freud and Winnicott do not mean to refer to absolute undifferentiation at all; they are referring to a state in which the cognitively differentiated object is emotionally experienced primarily through projections of the subject's own phantasies and self and object representations and predominantly in terms of the subject's pressing needs. They mean to contrast this sort of narcissistic object-relation to one in which the subject is more able to get beyond such projections and egocentric demands for need-satisfaction and to recognize and make empathic contact with the real otherness of the object (pp.242-3).

Today, I would prefer to characterize the journey from the pleasure to the reality principle, or from illusion to disillusion, in Kleinian terms. For like the contemporary infant researchers, Mrs. Klein rejected the notion of initial undifferentiation in favour the idea of the primitive ego's relations with part-objects from the beginning and conceived the psychic evolution from illusion to disillusion as the journey from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position, a journey that, as we know, none of us ever completes once and for all.

III

Arguing that, "Frequently, the two fantasies ["If only..." and "Someday..."] coexist and form a tandem theme: `if only this had not happened, life would be all right, but someday

this will be reversed and life will (again) become totally blissful" (p.21), Akhtar adds a footnote pointing to this dual theme in the Christian doctrine of "original sin" together with the promise of Heaven as the future recovery of the lost Edenic bliss. He goes on to refer to its presence in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and other world religions.

Viewing such religious themes as variations upon the "If only..." and "Someday..." fantasies and as reflecting separation, loss of omnipotence and parricidal oedipal scenarios is not incorrect; it is merely reductionistic. Earlier I argued that the strength of Dr. Akhtar's approach lies in his dialectical and antireductionist stance. Regrettably, he fails to maintain this insofar as his foray into the psychoanalysis of religion, albeit in a footnote, is concerned.

I think it is instructive that psychoanalytic scholars who are circumspect in regard to avoiding reductionism in other areas of psychoanalytic inquiry, still feel free to indulge in it when it comes to religion. Such is the power of the dominant ideology of secular humanism in our field that it is not even seen as an ideology. When psychoanalysts express concern lest analysts inappropriately indoctrinate their analysands in ideologies of various types, they seldom worry that the ideology into which patients are most usually indoctrinated by their analysts is that of secular humanism which, being taken for granted, is not even seen as an ideology.

Suffice it to say that, after the important work of Meissner (1984) on Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience, there is no longer any excuse for repeating Freud's (1907, 1927, 1930) failure to adhere to his own psychoanalytic principle of epigenesis in regard to the study of religion and his consequent failure to distinguish mature from immature varieties of faith. What Akhtar fails to state is that, in the context of a mature as opposed to

an infantile faith, the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the "Fall of Man" forms part of a more general biblical critique of idolatry and idealization and amounts to a demand for a kind of perpetual mourning of our lost (I would say, defensive) omnipotence.

There is no intention here to deny the infantile, magical, supernatural and other regressive forms of religious experience, but only to insist that both sides of the story of religion be told. For just as psychoanalytic theory may itself be held in a regressively ideological form that functions as a defence against a range of anxieties (Hanly, 1993), or in a mature and authentically scientific form that encourages the confrontation with and working through of such anxieties, so, in addition to elements reflecting the magical and illusory denial of separation and death, the biblical tradition contains reminders such as the following (Psalm 103:15-16):

As for man, his days are as grass; as
a flower of the field, so he flourisheth.
For the wind passeth over it, and it is
gone; and the place thereof shall
know it no more.

Echoing the psalmist, the Christian liturgy for Ash Wednesday reminds us that "Of dust thou hast arisen and unto dust thou shalt return," while in the "Order For the Burial of the Dead" (Book of Common Prayer) we are told that "In the midst of life we are in death."

It is difficult to imagine how those who regard religion as nostalgia for a lost symbiosis and as denial of the need to separate and individuate would account for the following passage from The Gospel According to St. Matthew (10:34-39):

Think not that I am come to send
peace on earth: I came not to send
peace, but a sword. For I am come to
set a man at variance against his

father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

In addition to the resurrection hope celebrated on Easter Sunday, there is also in the Christian tradition the dereliction, crucifixion and mourning represented by Good Friday. Certainly, there are in this tradition many instances of failure to maintain ambivalence or self and object constancy and consequently of regression from the so-called depressive to the paranoid-schizoid position. Much splitting is evident in those elements of the tradition which either privilege the resurrection over the crucifixion (in a manic defence), or vice versa (in paranoid-schizoid, depressive/masochistic dynamics). However, both of these regressive manifestations are distinct from more mature forms of the faith which struggle to maintain both elements of the Christian dialectic--thus advancing beyond both mania and depression to what Klein (1935, 1940, 1946) misleadingly termed the "depressive" position.

Since Bultmann's (1960, 1961) theology of "demythologizing," the myth of crucifixion/resurrection has been widely interpreted, at least among the theologically sophisticated, in highly metaphorical terms signifying such things as, for example, the need to "die" to one's "inauthentic" or "false self" in order to permit "resurrection" of one's "authentic" or "true self" (Heidegger, 1927; Winnicott, 1960). Psychoanalysts need to be

aware of these facts in order to avoid reductionist applications of psychoanalytic concepts.

Beyond this, however, psychoanalytic concepts need, in my view, to be applied more frequently to the regressive, magical, defensive and ideological elements to be found in psychoanalysis itself. It would be a worthwhile project to explore the role of the "Someday..." and "If only..." fantasies as they have infiltrated psychoanalytic theory and practice.

IV

One sure sign that an analytic paper is significant is that, having read it, one finds oneself becoming aware of important dynamics in one's patients of which one was previously insufficiently cognizant. Let me conclude this discussion by acknowledging that as I studied Dr. Akhtar's illuminating discussion of the "If only..." and "Someday..." fantasies, I became aware of their presence and importance in the personalities of two analysands, both of whom have significant difficulties in regard to separation-individuation, inhibitions of assertiveness, and conflicts around aggression.

In a recent session, one of these analysands, a man in his early sixties, associated significantly to Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* and began to wonder, in a new way, what in fact it was that he was waiting for and expecting--"Someday..."--to happen to him. The other patient, a man in his early forties, is in the sixth year of what at times has begun to look like a potentially interminable analysis. "If only they had picked me up" has been his constant lament. For six years he was unable to fulfill his father's death-bed request that his ashes be spread in a certain area where he used to fish; only recently has he been able to "let go" of them. Lately, he has begun to recognize that his chronic anger toward his dysfunctional parents, together with the guilt

and self-punishment to which it gives rise, has become for him a way of life that keeps him enmeshed with his family of origin and protects him from the identity diffusion, separation anxiety, separation guilt, and mourning that he must begin to face and work through if he is ever to transcend compulsive repetition and succeed in allowing his past to become his history.

I am grateful to Dr. Akhtar for enhancing my understanding of these and other patients.

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