Culture and Psychopathology

by
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Men and women today are haunted by a sense that in the midst of plenty, our lives seem barren. We are hungry for a greater nourishment of the soul. In the England of today, a businessman turned philosopher, Charles Handy, has won a widespread following with his writing. Capitalism, he argues, delivers the means but not the point of life. Now that we are satisfying our outer needs, we must pay more attention to those within—for beauty, spiritual growth, and human connection. "In Africa," Handy writes, "they say there are two hungers... the lesser hunger is for the things that sustain life, the goods and services, and the money to pay for them, which we all need. The greater hunger is for an answer to the question 'why?,' for some understanding of what life is for."

- David Gergen, editorial, "U.S. News & World Report," August 23, 1999.

John Schumaker contends that we live in a certain kind of "age of insanity" and wonders why. He reports having long been intrigued, like many of us, by "anthropological accounts of non-Western societies that appear to be psychologically immunized against mental disorders that are rampant in the Western world."[1] Schumaker usefully reviews a number of these findings, locates them in a wider historical and cultural context than social scientists usually do, and analyzes in an incisive manner what they might mean.

Modernity and Mental Health

Schumaker briefly sketches a view of human nature and sociality according to which humans are inherently social and cultural animals whose enculturation is always "conservative" in the sense of assuring much "cognitive overlap" between conventional meanings and individual identities, but who also are always in a sense "modern" because they endlessly experiment with themselves and are often unable to foresee the results of that experimentation.[2] He goes on to suggest that we can cautiously generalize about certain basic human needs for "social connectedness, identity and recognition, transcendence, ritual and drama, intellectual stimulation and personal growth" and to "participate meaningfully" in a culture.[3] Also, he stresses the intimate interweaving of individual and group, such that a "distinct personal identity" is possible only if one has a "significant relationship" with and role to play in "the world of people."[4]

Schumaker argues persuasively that a number of "megatrends" in modern society cut against the grain of our deeply social condition. Modernity drastically "detraditionalizes the world and sets in motion multiple out-of-control processes that require constant cultural, political and institutional innovation."[5] We tend to be a "disorganized dust of individuals who have been freed too much from all genuine social bonds."[6] Thus we tend to become somewhat helpless pawns in large bureaucratic systems like the modern market and impersonal state apparatus—a situation that tends to foster a variety of emotional and spiritual ills.

In Schumaker's view, a key result and component of our way of life is a "free-floating" and "ephemeral" structure of identity in a great many modern people.[7] He argues that in more collectivist cultures individuals have access to, and feel supported by "socially sanctioned identity templates" and have recourse to shared "cultural coping strategies" in times of loss, conflict or moral confusion. Of course, most of us moderns would find life in more traditional societies far too conformist and confining. However, Schumaker drives home the point effectively that there is often a great price to be paid for the relative absence of such shared meanings and coping strategies in our kind of society. To an often impossible extent, individuals have to devise or invent answers of their own to life's many stresses and crises of meaning. With limited experience and resources, operating in considerable emotional isolation, they have to innovate many of their own coping techniques, workable defenses, credible answers to ethical dilemmas, or convincing consoling or meaning-giving philosophical or religious beliefs. Moreover, they have to cope actively and often "through personal control, direct action and confrontation with others."[8] Thus, they may be saddled with excessive personal responsibility in a situation of limited resources and support, a virtual recipe for chronic emotional strain and idiosyncratic, unreliable coping. Or, overwhelmed and/or discouraged, they may withdraw into debilitating passivity and emotional "deadness."[9]

For example, in a chapter entitled, "*The Cultural Dynamics of Depression*," Schumaker points out that most cognitive therapists and many others "still persist in locating depression-generating cognitions within the individual, simultaneously overlooking culture as the source of most cognitions."[10] Even if the notion of "learned helplessness" illuminates depression to some extent, Schumaker argues, there are a host of broader cultural patterns in the modern West that predispose people toward helplessness. Depression may indeed centrally involve the "internalization of negative emotions." But many of our "socialization practices" and resulting way of life, Schumaker contends, enforce a great deal of such excessive internalization and offer few opportunities for expression or catharsis, even after possibly helpful psychotherapy.

Wider historical and cultural perspectives on depression allow one to begin to make sense of a striking increase, as much as tenfold, of "clinical depression" in modern Western societies over the last half century.[11] Also, they allow us to appreciate and possibly learn from a "notable absence of postnatal depression in the vast majority of non-Western cultures."[12] Research indicates that at least 50 percent of women in our society experience "maternity blues" and approximately 20 percent go on to develop more serious postnatal depression. But among the Kipsigis people of Kenya, medical anthropologists can find no evidence whatsoever for postpartum depression. In that culture, a predictable pattern of practices, rituals, and gifts following childbirth mark out a "distinct culturally acknowledged postnatal period," one that "confirm[s] symbolically the new mother's elevated standing" in the community, affords her "pampered social seclusion and mandated rest," and provides assistance with her new responsibilities for a time from community members.[13]

Schumaker argues that neither evidence for a genetic component of depression nor the fact that antidepressant medications are sometimes effective in reducing the symptoms of depression imply an "automatic causal link between depression and biological characteristics."[14] Rather, there is considerable evidence to suggest that a culture’s shared meanings and more communitarian coping strategies can raise the threshold for depression very high for most people. In a manner similar to his treatment of depression, Schumaker analyzes old and new forms of anxiety in modern life, “interpersonal health,” and our problematic relations to the physical world.

In a chapter on “*Materialism, Consumption and Mental Health*,” Schumaker speculates about the influence of “materialism” as a value system and way of life on emotional well-being. He cites and interprets a number of studies that seem to confirm that a culture which focuses individuals primarily on material interests and pleasurable sensations tends to promote self-centeredness, lack of generosity to others, less value placed on self-respect and ironically, self-defeatingly, less personal happiness and satisfaction with life as a whole.[15] Another quite interesting chapter on “*Spiritual and Existential Health*” summarizes the author’s view that our experience with modern cultural fragmentation and a materialistic, consumerist way of life renders implausible a human need for transcendence. “Manufactured desires” that do not really satisfy lead to an increasingly restless pursuit of the same, and to an increasingly frantic search for escape from boredom. In a thoroughly practical and nonsectarian manner, Schumaker explores how in most traditional societies “culturally constructed reality is usually designed as a strategic blend of fact and illusion,” allowing people to “see”—sometimes quite literally in the sense of hallucination—and to “be part of an expanded and positively biased reality.”[16] He wonders if we can do more than fight a “losing battle for self-distraction”[17] without an existential orientation that includes a sense of transcendence. Without it, we may not be able to escape meaninglessness or a “persistent inability to find truth and value in the things one does or anticipates doing,” to manage almost intolerable loneliness, or to cultivate a badly needed ability to be stimulated by the ordinary.[18]

Concerns about Modern Psychology and Psychotherapy

Schumaker’s notion that a culture’s shared meanings and associated coping strategies can raise or lower the threshold for emotional and interpersonal problems seems quite helpful. We should note, however, that although he explicitly warns us not to romanticize premodern cultures or to “direct our existential yearnings toward the past,” he touches only very lightly on the question of how to respond constructively to these presumed modern dilemmas in living.[19]

Over the last half of the twentieth century, a number of social critics and critically-minded psychologists have dug a little deeper into the nature of the configuration of meanings and practices that seems to breed a great deal of emotional malaise in our kind of society. They note that psychology and psychotherapy are in many ways a unique twentieth century phenomenon. They are an intimate part of the warp and woof of our turbulent era. Because of this entanglement in culture, they suggest, modern psychology and psychotherapy may both creatively address emotional problems in living and inadvertently perpetuate ideals and practices of our way of life that could actually contribute to those very problems.

For example, in the 1960’s, the sociologist Peter Berger commented on a "social phenomenon of truly astounding scope."[20] He referred to the emergence of a new "psychological society" dominated by "an assortment of ideas and activities derived in one way or another from the Freudian revolution in psychology." This "institutionalized psychology is so well suited to our contemporary situation,” Berger suggests, that "if Freud had not existed, he would have had to be invented."[21] Traditional religious belief is losing its authority, and as it does so, psychotherapists, social workers, career counselors, psychiatrists, management trainers, organizational development consultants, and other specialists come to play a pivotal role in providing guidance and direction in our society. Institutionalized psychologism, he remarks, can "commute along with its clientele" from bedroom to boardroom, offering help with personal emotional problems while also providing "nonviolent techniques of social control" to be used by bureaucracies in the private and public sectors.

In the 1970’s, Jerome Frank thoughtfully observed that as "institutions of American society, all psychotherapies... share a value system that accords primacy to individual self-fulfillment," including "maximum self-awareness, unlimited access to one's own feelings, increased autonomy and creativity." The individual is seen as "the center of his moral universe, and concern for others is believed to follow from his own self-realization." In Frank's view, these values are admirable in many ways, and modern therapies are often beneficial, even life saving. Nevertheless, he notes, the implicit value system of modern psychotherapy "can easily become a source of misery in itself" because of its unrealistic expectations for personal happiness and the burden of resentment it imposes when inevitable disappointments occur. In his opinion, the literature of psychotherapy gives little attention to such traditional, possibly worthwhile values or virtues as "the redemptive power of suffering, acceptance of one's lot in life, adherence to tradition, self-restraint, and moderation."[22]

In recent years, Philip Cushman argues that our society defines the mature or ideal individual as a bounded, masterful self that is expected to “function in a highly autonomous, isolated way" and "to be self-soothing, self-loving, and self-sufficient."[23] However, Cushman thinks there is evidence that the inflated, would-be autonomous self almost inevitably collapses into an empty self, whose characteristics of fragility, sense of emptiness, and proneness to fluctuation between feelings of worthlessness and grandiosity are often said to be the hallmarks of neurotic psychopathology in our day.[24]

Cushman defines emptiness as, "in part, an absence of communal forms and beliefs," which leaves individuals quite vulnerable to influence from cultural forms such as advertising and psychology—both professional and pop—which emanate authority and certainty.[25] So it is telling that the goals of psychotherapy are usually rendered in terms of more effective individual behavior, enhanced self-realization or personal authenticity. Little is said about ethical qualities of character or commitment that many feel are essential to a worthwhile or fulfilled life. Their absence may be a virtual recipe for personal shallowness and social fragmentation. Moreover, in their absence it is unclear why such autonomous, self-interested individuals would ever "choose to undergo the self-sacrifice and suffering necessary" to raise children in modern America.[26] A danger in all this, Cushman believes, is that academic and professional psychology may reinforce a one-sided preoccupation with the inner self, which "causes the social world to be devalued or ignored except to the degree that it mirrors and thus becomes appropriated by the self." As a result, the social and cultural milieu "loses its impact as a material force, and social problems lose their relation to political action.”[27]

In a similar vein, Robert Fancher argues that modern therapy systems claim to be based on some kind of "science" of psychopathology, but in reality reflect and surreptitiously promote a particular view of the good life, a value system, or a culture.[28] Concerning psychoanalysis, for example, Fancher writes: “There is no inherent reason why internal dynamics, rather that one's place in society, must be the principle source of health or illness. For most of history, in most civilized cultures, the kind of internal fulfillment that psychoanalysis values has been suspect, and fidelity to ‘one's station and its duties’ has generally been a higher value.” For some, psychoanalysis “may offer a superior way to live, or a way of living that makes more sense in a highly mobile, modern society.” But psychoanalysts promulgate “a set of values that they rarely defend on moral or social grounds—though the moral and social ramifications of these values are immense.” Instead, they deceptively justify these values by claiming “that this is what ‘health’ is”.[29]

In the end, these thinkers provide us with valuable insights into our problems but only a little in the way of a creative response to them. We might say that they fall short of a solution to the problem articulated so wittily by Philip Rieff that after psychoanalysis has lowered one's compulsions and increased one's options in living, one still may face the dilemma of "being freed to choose and then having no choice worth making."[30] Fancher gives us no clues as to how we might envision a cultural universe in which it would make sense once again, or in some new way, to practice "fidelity to one's station and duties" as opposed to keeping up with the Joneses or grabbing all the gusto while we go around (presumably) once. Frank gives few suggestions as to how we might synthesize self-restraint or find meaning in suffering with the aggressive modern pursuit of health, success and individual self-fulfillment. A characteristic modern stress on individual self-fulfillment and the neglected values Frank and Fancher mention can seem like mutually exclusive alternatives.

Liberal Individualism

It seems to some of us that we might make progress by tracing the source of many of these difficulties in a careful way to tensions within certain problematic cultural ideologies that imbue our way of life and then—it should no longer surprise us—turn up at the root of theory and practice in modern psychology.[31] Indeed, it appears that much of the social commentary and cultural criticism of the last two centuries has centered on sorting out the good and the bad, the worthwhile and the harmful, of modern individualism as a credo and way of life.

The distinctive moral temper of the modern age is antiauthoritarian and emancipatory. It celebrates the ideal of an autonomous and free individual who distances oneself from the past and the social world and seeks above all “to be self-responsible, to rely on one’s own judgment, to find one’s purpose in oneself.”[32] Surely, mature religious as well as secular individuals today are committed to some form of this ideal—to resisting tyranny and insisting on respect for the dignity and equal worth of every individual. But the evidence mounts that this kind of individualism is one-sided and risks emotional isolation and debilitating alienation by significantly downplaying lasting social ties, a sense of tradition or wider purposes beyond individual self-realization.[33]

Robert Coles, when he toured the USA, found that no matter where he went, people were all too ready to speak in a psychologically charged vocabulary of their "problems" and "issues." "The hallmark of our time, he writes, is "lots of psychological chatter, lots of self-consciousness, lots of 'interpretation.'"[34] Psychology here means "a concentration, persistent, if not feverish, upon one's thoughts, feelings, wishes, worries—bordering on, if not embracing, solipsism: the self as the only or main form of (existential) reality."[35] Robert Bellah and his colleagues use the term "ontological individualism" to describe this widespread modern notion that the basic unit of human reality is the individual person, who is assumed to exist and have determinate characteristics prior to and independent of his or her social existence.[36] Social systems, in this view, must be understood as artificial aggregates of individuals, which are set up to satisfy the needs of those individuals. Ontological individualism serves as the cornerstone of a modern way of life with its stress on personal autonomy and self-realization, its sharp distinction between public and private realms, and its tendency to privilege or idealize relatively distant, “thin,” or merely contractual ties between individuals who cooperate or compete for ultimately individual ends.

However, we must emphasize that there is more to the modern outlook and modern ethics than just ontological individualism. Modern individualism or liberal individualism[37] typically counterbalances its heavy stress on self-interest and self-realization with a serious ethical emphasis on regarding human agents as imbued with dignity, inherent worth, and as possessed of natural rights. Clearly, ontological individualism’s view of things runs a high risk of deteriorating into an amoral clash of will against will, power against power. In order to prevent such a calamity, the modern moral outlook supplements an uncompromising stress on autonomy and self-interest with a serious commitment to respecting individual dignity and rights. Needless to say, there is considerable tension between these two ethical poles of radical self-interest and deep obligation to respecting the rights of others. We experience this tension in one form or another often in everyday life.

Liberal individualism links together the ideals of self-interest and respect for the rights of others in a unique modern approach to ethics. First formulated by the philosopher Kant, this approach centers on formal principles of procedural justice or fairness.[38] Such principles "constitute a fair framework within which individuals and groups can choose their own values and ends, consistent with a similar liberty for others.”[39] The purpose of this scheme is to avoid designating any particular ends in living or ways of life as superior while still assuring respect for individuals and their choices. In the mental health arena, we adopt this approach by talking about more or less “effective” therapeutic means to reaching ends that we often label “health” or “well-being,” as if these ends were purely given by nature or chosen by clients without any outside influence. We maintain both our neutrality about others’ choices and our dedication to their welfare by obscuring how much “health” is always, in part, defined by cultural and moral norms, and how much we influence clients in adopting or reworking the meanings by which they live.[40] These meanings are assumed to exist inside the client, rather than as something constructed in interaction with others and given shape in the social world. Therapists who think in these terms can blithely assume that they are merely facilitating a natural developmental process that is unaffected by their personal influence. However, as Hoffman observes, this is simply not the case: “When we interpret the transference, we like to think that we are merely bringing to the surface what is already ‘there,’ rather than that we are cultivating something in the patient and in the relationship that might not have developed in the same way otherwise... our hands are not clean.”[41]

Liberal individualism represents a sincere effort to affirm freedom without dissolving responsibility, or to eliminate dogmatism without abandoning our moral duties to others. Nevertheless, this approach is one-sided. It is embroiled in the paradox of advocating a thoroughgoing neutrality toward all values as a way of promoting certain basic values of liberty, tolerance, and human rights. Justice is strictly procedural, which means that the focus is on formal rules or codes that we hope will protect our rights and prerogatives while ensuring that no one can define the good life for anyone else. However, if we cannot reason together meaningfully about the worth of ends, we also cannot defend liberal individualism’s own vision of a way of life characterized by dignity and respect![42] A serious commitment to human dignity and rights clearly sketches out a way of life that is taken to be morally superior or good in itself. But what is to prevent a principled neutrality toward all notions of the good life from extending to those basic values of liberty and human dignity as well, undermining their credibility and stripping them of any possibility of rational defense?[43] A slide toward moral relativism and social fragmentation seems inevitable. On a practical level, liberal individualism's insistent characterization of human action and motivation as exclusively self-interested is likely a self-fulfilling prophecy. The direct pursuit of security and happiness seems progressively to dissolve the capacity to respect and cherish others.[44]

Beyond Individualism

If this analysis is correct, our modern individualist credo—at its best—is not an advocacy of unbridled selfishness or narcissism but a sincere (if rather confused) moral program; one recommending that we live hell-bent for personal satisfaction and security while somehow being willing and able to put on the brakes when called for in order to respect (or even actively to promote!) the rights of others to the same kind of life. The severe internal tensions and contradictions of this program for living appear to be a major source of the many, almost epidemic, emotional and interpersonal ills that afflict life and living in our freedom-loving, hyperactive, stressed-out, turbo-capitalist way of life.

I must say I feel much more confident in this diagnosis of the cultural roots of psychopathology than I do about my own or anyone else’s ability to prescribe an alternative moral outlook or social practices than might yield better results. Elsewhere,[45] I have analyzed the efforts of leading critics of modern psychology like Erich Fromm, Philip Cushman, and others to sketch genuine alternatives for us.[46] Illuminating as they are, they all seem to fall short in one key respect—they have difficulty finding a way to tame the modern stress on what is often called “negative liberty,” give pride of place at all costs to individual freedom and the undoing of arbitrary authority, and thus have difficulty giving equal weight to what Schumaker calls a need for “social connectedness” and for playing a role in “the world of people” (to say nothing about Schumaker’s “need for transcendence and ritual”).

Secular solutions to this problem seem unable to envision being connected or devoted to a wider ethical purpose beyond helping others achieve the kind of freedom or mastery that by itself, Cushman tells us, tends to collapse into emptiness. Religious responses to these dilemmas (to which I am strongly inclined) tend at least to sound to a modern ear somewhat arbitrary, dogmatic, or "out of the blue." They have trouble making it clear how a relationship with God can seem quite as real as anything else, or how the transcendent actually fulfills our freedom, and not just arbitrarily limits or quashes its excesses. In the brief space remaining, I can only touch on several fragmented ideas, which I think point us in a better direction.

A few years ago, I was quite taken by the ideas of so-called "communitarian" social thinkers who speak directly to some of these issues.[47] For example, Amitai Etzioni argues that there can be "excessive liberty." Without limits on choice, provided first and foremost by a set of shared moral convictions, neither a coherent sense of personal identity nor social peace is really possible. Thus, we have "a need for a much thicker social order... reflecting the fact that all societies promote some shared values... [which] mobilize some of their members' time, assets, energies, and loyalties to the service of one or more common purposes."[48] Thinkers like Etzioni are looking for a partly new public philosophy that provides an alternative to both (1) the liberal individualist view that seeks to maximize personal autonomy, and (2) the approach of many social conservatives who seem to want to impose order and virtue at the price of liberty. This approach seeks to nourish shared values that are largely voluntary and envisions not one overall community but rather a "community of communities."[49] Thus, Etzioni recommends that in the "next historical phase" we find a way to "blend the virtues of tradition with the liberation of modernity."[50] On a more individual level, Etzioni suggests that the familiar "golden rule" which appears in different forms in many cultural traditions is too narrowly interpersonal and might be reformulated: "Respect and uphold society's moral order as you would have society respect and uphold your autonomy."[51] Such a notion fully acknowledges our dependence on others and society at the same time that it encourages individuals to cultivate excellence and develop their unique powers to the fullest extent possible.

I still find this perspective quite illuminating and helpful. But it seems to me that its core notion of "community" may be either crucially vague or else too static to make sense of human ties and relationships in a diverse, pluralistic, steadily changing society like our own in which people are often highly individuated and feel that their very integrity depends on coming to their own personal, thoughtful, usually somewhat idiosyncratic viewpoint concerning moral and spiritual questions. Thus, it seems to me we need to dig beneath any sort of language that relies heavily on contrasting and seeking to interrelate "individual" and "community." Instead, we need to conceive of what is most basic in human life less in terms of "selves" (or a community of "selves") and more in terms of "relationships."

I suggest that my colleague Brent Slife's notion of "strong relationality" could serve as a cornerstone for efforts to make this needed ontological shift. Slife argues that the vast majority of psychological theories incorporate a model of what he calls "weak relationality" or "interaction," consisting mainly in reciprocal exchanges of influence or information "between essentially self-contained organisms."[52] Such theories presuppose a bounded modern self and dangerously dilute social bonds. By contrast, in strong relationality or ontological relationality, relationships are "not just the interactions of what was originally nonrelational" but are "relational all the way down." Each person "is first and always a nexus of relations." In this view, in fact, all things “have a shared being and a mutual constitution.”[53]

There may be no place where a one-sided individualism and “weak relationality” are more fully overcome than with the notion of a “dialogical self” elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin and Charles Taylor.[54] In this view, the mature human self is not a center of monological consciousness, but a scene or locus of dialogue. What gets internalized in human development is not simply a set of social prohibitions. Rather, it is "the whole [cultural] conversation, with the inter-animation of its voices" that is assimilated and joined.[55] Thus, the self "arises within conversation."[56]

Bakhtin imagines this self as a conversation or struggle among multiple voices, speaking from different positions and invested with different kinds and degrees of authority. Thus, Baxter and Montgomery argue that we should not speak about “communication in relationships” but about “relationships as dialogues.” They quote Bakhtin: “I achieve self-consciousness, I become myself only by revealing myself to another, through another and with another’s help.” And they add that “the self of [Bakhtin’s] dialogism is a relation between self and other, a simultaneity of sameness and difference out of which knowing becomes possible.”[57] Whether this kind of dialogue occurs within or between people, the sort of individual uniqueness and peculiarity that seem irrepressible in a modern context need not fray or dilute meaningful social ties or loyal relationships. They can greatly enrich such relationships, as much of a challenge as that can be.

I believe the notion of strong relationality applied in this way to human agency offers a powerful way of reconnecting with religious experience and transcendence in a plausible manner, as opposed to regarding religious realities—whether one regrets doing so or not—as merely “subjective.” Jeffrey Rubin, who has written extensively on psychoanalysis and Buddhism, would agree with Philip Cushman that the “bounded, masterful self” of modern imagination is largely an illusion and a harmful one.[58] Rubin argues that we need both to preserve modern culture’s affirmation of human dignity and rights and thoroughly revise the concept of a separate ‘I’. We require an “expanded view of human subjectivity.” To this end, Rubin recommends that we explore the reality and importance of what he calls “non-self-centric states of being.” In such states, “there is a nonpathological dedifferentiation of boundaries between self and world: a self-empowering sense of connection between self and world that results in a lack of self-preoccupation, a sense of timelessness, efficacy, and peace.” He adds, “[such] moments of non-self-centricity—whether surrendering, merging, yielding, letting go—seem to be part of most spiritual traditions.”[59] We need to think more “dialectically,” he feels, and appreciate that self and other—person and world— define one another in essential respects and permeate one another’s being.

In another discussion of psychoanalysis and Buddhism, Lawrence Christensen describes how a major Buddhist tradition called “the Middle Way” emphasizes that nothing, including the self, stands alone but instead exists only in a “web of interconnectedness.”[60] This view does not deny the existence of the self, only that there is any intrinsic nature of self, any permanent, separate, unchanging self, with which to identify and to which one can cling or attach—such attachment and craving for being (or non-being) leading, of course, to suffering and dis-ease. Christensen writes, “Buddhism emphasizes not being attached to self or to no-self, to both, or to no view of the self.” He adds, the “self is dialectical, having both form and yet constantly changing, being separate and yet interdependent.”[61] Christensen indicates that we are dealing not with a brute paradox so much as a subtle reality in which our lives are caught up, one that usually takes a great deal of ethical or spiritual maturity to apprehend.

It seems plain to me, many differences notwithstanding, that this Buddhist view in important respects parallels the Biblical view of humans as created in the image of God and existing only in relation—an intimate and “strong relationality,” if you will—with the Divine ground of our human being. There is something about Rubin’s and Christensen’s Buddhist treatment of the subject that seems especially helpful in bringing this kind of relation to the transcendent to light from within the sort of modern outlook that tends greatly to obscure it.

Social Bonds Revisited

Let me return briefly, in conclusion, to the matter of culture and psychopathology. Recent writings of the distinguished sociologist Thomas Scheff analyze the effects of current culture on emotional life.[62] For example, he offers an original, penetrating reinterpretation of rage, shame, and depression in much less individualistic terms than usual, one that I and my students find fresh and exciting. In Scheff’s view, some kind of hurt, insult, psychological wound or nick—a common enough occurrence—produces feelings of rejection or inadequacy that are not acknowledged, to others or even to oneself. An essential part of this injury is that it threatens or severs a social bond. It is followed by a continuing spiral of “intense emotions of shame and anger” which is “experienced as hate and rage.” This spiral of hatred and rage, rather than “expressing and discharging one’s shame,” masks it with rage and aggression. A “loop of unlimited duration and intensity,” in which one may be angry that one is ashamed and ashamed that one is angry, can serve as the “emotional basis of lengthy episodes or even life-long hatred and rage.”[63]

Scheff argues that the prevalence of depression and other ills in our society may stem from the fact that “human interdependency” and experiences of shame are routinely denied by us, reflected in the fact that “our public discourse is in the language of individuals, rather than relationships.“ In his view, this makes it difficult to effect what is often the best, sometimes the only, cure for estrangement or hostility between individuals or groups, namely an “apology/forgiveness transaction.”

Healing through apology begins with acknowledgement of our profound human interdependency. When the bond is threatened, both parties are in “a state of shame,” one for injuring, one for being injured. A successful apology allows both parties to acknowledge and discharge the shame evoked by the injury. The apology “makes things right” between the parties, both emotionally and cognitively. It repairs the breach in the bond. “The success of the action of repair is felt and signaled by both parties; they both feel and display the emotion of pride.” Pride is another emotion Scheff wants to reinterpret, as the experience, at its best, of a mutually indebted accomplishment of something worthwhile rather than merely an individualistic sense of achievement or sheer superiority.[64]

Scheff’s remarks about an apology/forgiveness transaction take significant first steps toward a concrete analysis of human experience in more relational terms in line with the views of Slife and Rubin just described. He stresses the primacy of the social bond. “Shame” is not so much an individual’s emotional reaction to an outer event or its meaning as it is the damaged condition of a bond that essentially links and defines two or more people. Of course, these remarks just scratch the surface of this topic; one that I would suggest requires the wisdom of our spiritual traditions to be developed more fully.

In a recent paper, Kathy Frost and I argue that what Slife terms “strong relational” affiliation among people may be deeply cooperative but easily becomes distorted by defensiveness, fear, or malice.[65] Moreover, there may not be as much of a “live and let live” middle ground between these two options as we commonly would like to think. Or rather, being able to really “live and let live,” genuine tolerance, may be even more of an achievement of character or spirit than we often appreciate.

We point out the theoretical psychologist John Christopher remarking that “authentic encounters with difference” may require “psychological capacities or a certain kind of character” that we often overlook.[66] For example, the capacity to remain open to having one’s authentic convictions challenged in dialogue seems to require almost a kind of “spiritual surrender” or ability to make a leap of faith.[67] It requires a kind of letting go of attachment to oneself and one’s beliefs that doesn’t make sense or register as important to the common sense of an individualistic age. In Buddhist terms, Christopher suggests, we might think of such genuine openness to others or authentic dialogue as “mindfulness in action.”

Ideals of forgiveness, acceptance, or letting go can be understood in either trite and escapist or exceptionally profound and life-giving ways. We need to approach their rehabilitation with care. In this regard, there may be much to be learned about how such ideals can play an active or responsive role in living well, not a passive and escapist one, from examples like that of Iulia de Beausobre, a Russian peasant woman who was tortured and made the subject of medical experimentation in one of Stalin’s prisons in the early 1930’s.[68] de Beausobre eventually wrote two books, *The Woman Who Could Not Die* and *Creative Suffering*, describing her redemptive suffering in the face of such cruelty and sadism. She states that one way to survive is to cause the torturer to lose interest by becoming completely passive and indifferent (“clod-like,” she puts it), but the cost of doing so is losing a humanity one will never recover.

However, there is an alternative kind of “invulnerability” (her word for it) that involves intense, creative engagement with the situation. It requires close attention to one’s surroundings and the examiner, trying to gain insight into his mind, even cultivating a kind of sympathy that has nothing to do with sentimentality or excusing responsibility. Passions like “self-pity, fear, and despair must be controlled because they severely upset clarity of perception” and interfere with the job or purpose at hand of relating as honestly and kindly as possible to one’s tormentor.[69] One has to let go of any protection those passions might provide, as well as the illusion of most ordinary possibilities for influence or control.

What we have termed strong relationality comes into the picture for de Beausobre in two main ways. First, there forms a “bond between the tortured and the torturer; they do not remain isolated from one another, but become a part of each other’s lives. Together they are part of one event.”[70] Second, de Beausobre feels that her self at its core has no separate identity of its own but lives in union with a divine love that “goes forth from her to others.”[71] Of course, this is the barest summary of her remarkable journey and reflections.

One might wonder whether or not this kind of creative suffering and active forgiveness has much of a role to play in ordinary life situations where threats to physical well-being or survival are not an issue. However, I suspect that they do apply in fundamental ways to coping with the psychological stress and pain that crop up regularly in daily life in a competitive, somewhat emotionally isolating culture of narcissism, replete with pressures to conform, threats to one’s integrity, and a dearth of models or support for the kind of courage and humility required for authentic living. These are topics that current psychology only fitfully touches on or explores.

The hope is that this kind of clarification of such notions and ideals as strong relationality, social bonds, forgiveness, and letting go will serve several worthy purposes. They might bring us closer to lived experience or actual human struggles. They might provide means for better coping or greater human flourishing in an always imperfect world. And they might offer some guidelines for our efforts to nurture a more humane and loving way of life, one that could obviate some needless suffering in an “age of insanity.”

Notes

1. J. Schumaker, *The Age of Insanity: Modernity and Mental Health*, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001).

2. Ibid, 5.

3. Ibid, 4-11.

4. Ibid, 7.

5. Ibid, 1-2.

6. Ibid, 16.

7. Ibid, 14ff.

8. Ibid, 15.

9. Ibid, 26.

10. Ibid, 53.

11. M. Seligman, “Why is there so much depression today?” in R. Ingram ed., *Contemporary*

Approaches to Depression, (New York: Plenum Press, 1990).

12. Schumaker, T*he Age of Insanity*, 59.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid, 53.

15. Ibid, 37-9.

16. Ibid, 131.

17. Ibid, 126.

18. Ibid, 125, 126.

19. Ibid, 133.

20. P. Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity*, (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 23.

21. Ibid.

22. J. D. Frank and J. B. Frank, *Persuasion and Healing: A Comparative Study of Psychotherapy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1991), 6-7.

23. P. Cushman, "Why the Self is Empty," *American Psychologist*, 45, (1990), 604.

24. Ibid, see also, H. Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self*, (New York: International Universities Press, 1977).

25. "Why the Self is Empty," 604.

26. Ibid, 605.

27. Ibid.

28. R. Fancher, *Cultures of Healing: Correcting the Image of American Mental Health Care*, (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1995).

29. Ibid, 124-5.

30. P. Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, (New York: Harper, 1966), 93.

31. See F. Richardson, B. Fowers & C. Guignon, *Re-envisioning Psychology: Moral Dimensions of Theory and Practice*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999). And also, F. Richardson, & B. Fowers, "Interpretive Social Science: An overview," American Behavioral Scientist, 41, (1998),

465-495.

32. C. Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1995), 7.

33. R. Bellah, R. Madsen, W. Sullivan, A. Swindler, & S. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

34. R. Coles, "Civility and psychology," in R. Bellah and R. Madsen eds., *Individualism and Commitment in American Life: Readings on the Themes of Habits of the Heart*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 189.

35. Ibid.

36. *Habits of the Heart*, 143.

37. It is important in this context to remember that the political views of the conventional "liberal" and "conservative" camps in today's politics, from this perspective, are more alike than different. They are different versions of the same underlying modern individualistic doctrine. One advocates large-scale social programs and a high degree of personal or "lifestyle" autonomy, the other stresses reliance on broad market forces and celebrates individual economic freedom. Both political viewpoints make individuals and individual freedom the cornerstone of their approach, even though they understand these notions somewhat differently. Both tend to rely on large-scale impersonal mechanisms, either the state or market, to sort out our differences, and downplay more traditional notions of community, civil society, or reasoning together about the public interest or common good (Etzioni. 1996; Sarason, 1986; Wolfe, 1989).

38. See P. Neal, "Justice as Fairness," *Political Theory*, 18, (1990), 24-50, and also, J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971.

39. M. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 11.

40. See J. Christopher, "Situating Psychological Well-Being: Exploring the Cultural Roots of its Theory and Research," *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 77, (1999), 141-152, as well as Fancher, *Cultures of Healing*, and F. Richardson, B. Fowers & C. Guignon, *Re-envisioning Psychology: Moral Dimensions of Theory and Practice*.

41. I. Z. Hoffman, "The Intimate and Ironic Authority of the Psychoanalyst's Presence," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly,* 65, (1996), 109.

42. W. Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 39.

43. See L. Kolakowski, "The Idolatry of Politics," *The New Republic*, (1986, June 16), 29-36, and S. Sarason, "And What is the Public Interest?" *American Psychologist*, 41, (1986), 899-905.

44. D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

45. F. Richardson, “Psychotherapy and Modern Dilemmas,” In *Critical thinking about psychology: Hidden assumptions and plausible alternatives*, B. Slife, J. Reber, & F. Richardson eds., (Washington, D. C.: APA Books, 2005); F. Richardson & T. Zeddies, “Individualism and Modern Psychotherapy,” in B. Slife, R. Williams and S. Barlow, *Critical Issues in Psychotherapy: Translating New Ideas Into Practice*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001).

46. For E. Fromm see his *Escape from Freedom*, (New York: Avon, 1969) and *Man for Himself*, (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1975). For P. Cushman see his “Why the Self is Empty,” and also P. Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*. (Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995).

47. See A. Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*, (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*; P. Selznick, *The Moral Commonwealth*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

48. Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule*, 10.

49. Ibid, 176.

50. Ibid, xvii.

51. Ibid.

52. B. Slife, “Taking Practices Seriously: Toward a Relational Ontology,” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 24, (2004), 158.

53. Ibid, 159.

54. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Michael Holquist, ed., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); C. Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” in J. Bohman, D. Hiley and R. Schusterman, eds., *The Interpretive Turn*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 304-314.

55. Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” 314.

56. Ibid, 312.

57. L. Baxter and B. Montgomery, *Relating: Dialogues & Dialectics*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996), 3.

58. J. Rubin, *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: Toward an Integration*, (New York: Plenum Press, 1996); J. Rubin, “Psychoanalysis is Self-Centered,” in C. Spezzano & G. Garguilo eds., *Soul on the Couch: Spirituality, Religion, and Morality in Contemporary Psychoanalysis* (Hillsdale, NJ:

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59. Rubin, “Psychoanalysis is Self-centered,” 84.

60. L. Christensen, “Suffering and the Dialectical Self in Buddhism and Relational Psychoanalysis,” *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 59, (1999), 37-56. See also, J. Garfield, *Mulamadhyamakakarika: The Wisdom of the Middle Way*, (New York: Oxford, 1995).

61. Christensen, “Suffering and the Dialectical Self,” 44,43.

62. T. Scheff, *Microsociology: Emotion, Discourse, and Social Structure*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994);

“Shame and Community: Social Components in Depression,” (2000), available at: http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/scheff/; “Is hatred formed by hidden shame and rage?” Humanity & Society, 28, (2004), 25- 39.

63. Scheff, “Is Hatred,” 25-9.

64. Scheff, “Shame and Community.”

65. F. Richardson and K. Frost, “Power, Interdependence, and ‘Letting Go,’” Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August, 2007.

66. J. Christopher, “Culture as moral topographies of the Self,” Paper delivered at the biannual meeting of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, Toronto, June 2007, 17.

67. Ibid.

68. D. Allen, *Traces of God in a Frequently Hostile World*, (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications).

69. Ibid, 63.

70. Ibid, 64.

71. Ibid, 66.