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To: Dr. Jay Greenberg

***Contemporary Psychoanalysis***

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(Letter to the Editor)

While appreciating that Fr. Meissner found much that he was in sympathy with in his reading of ***Soul on the Couch***: (see vol. 34. No 3, p.462ff) his criticisms that most of the articles were postmodern, self-psychological, or exclusively relational were more than puzzling.

In an effort to see areas of unity between spirituality, both eastern and western, and psychoanalytic thought, many of the authors attempted to present a broader understanding of some traditional analytic concepts. Intrinsic to giving a broader meaning to any concept is, of course, the recognition that human language is ultimately metaphorical. This is not a denial of objective reality, just the recognition that it is interpretable and open to multiple meanings. Human ingenuity finds new aspects of the world through new interpretations. Was this not Freud's genius, taking everyday slips of the tongue and/or everyday dreams and interpreting a meaning hidden beneath the obvious? In his various models of the mind, from the topographical to the structural, was Freud himself not struggling to find models for the complexity of the self and self-understanding.

In view of this, it is puzzling that Fr.Meissner sees the text as some type of polemic promoting postmodern thought and/or subjectivist relationalism. These terms are introduced as if some betrayal of contemporary psychoanalysis were at

play. As one of the editors, I am not aware of any overwhelming self-psychological or post modern thought in the text; notwithstanding the fact that it is listed in the relational series of the Analytic Press.

What Fr. Meissner seems to object to is the attempt to expand an understanding of such terms as the unconscious, mind, and/or the “I” (or the self). Many authors, following this approach were attempting to build bridges between psychoanalytic thought and western as well as eastern spirituality and not to promote a postmodern discourse (e.g. Rubin). When speaking of western spirituality the focus was on the mystical tradition, particularly articulated by Meister Eckhart, the thirteenth century mystic and philosopher who emphasized the immanence of what we humans call the Divine. Since Fr. Meissner, given his background, would be familiar with this tradition of negative theology, it is difficult to understand his dismissal of it as subjectivist. He goes on to state that “*Theologians would be troubled...*” with the text. Given the extensive variety of religious traditions in the world, I am curious which theologians he has in mind. My point is that the approach many authors followed was not concerned with any particular parochial interpretation of the spiritual, but with a psychoanalytic understanding of such concepts as the self, the mind, the unconscious, which might provide areas of insight and enhance our clinical work with patients.

The self or “I,” in my article and in Greifinger’s, is described as Illusory. My article “Inner Mind Outer Mind and the Quest for the “I” clearly states that one cannot understand the self or the “I” outside of the total psychological/cultural/historical context of an individual. To speak of it as understandable *in*

*itself* is illusory and reductionistic. The same can be said of the concept of mind which was presented, building on the thought of D.W.Winnicott and Marcia Cavell (both of whom I quote) as having, *possibly*, more applicability to man/s cultural achievements than to his individuality (all this without denying individual memory, imagination and thinking.) Admittedly such a view is a new use of the term, but its usefulness or not is hardly served by a glib characterization and dismissal.

Since Freud gave us an interpretative science and did not wish to establish a philosophy that posited new ontological essences, it is once again a cursory dismissal to claim, as Fr. Meissner does, that I deny the unconscious. What I wrote was that interpretation existentially creates the unconscious for us. I was not arguing for or against the ontological reality of the unconscious since such arguments, for me at least, are in the tradition of medieval scholastic disputations. Spirituality, east and west, attempts to aid an individual in experiencing what we call God, or in some traditions, the ground luminosity. It is not concerned with theological proofs. Psychoanalysis is also concerned with experience, not with proofs. Winnicott reminds us that health is not the absence of neurosis, but the capacity to experience life creatively and with an inner sense of personal presence. Thus his prayer, profoundly spiritual, *Oh God, may I be alive when I die*. A possibility, paradoxically, when the "I" is no longer a focus or a concern, when the self is no longer narcissistically encapsulated but responsive and contributing to the world.

As psychoanalysts we are dedicated to helping people be *alive* and if analysts achieve that with alternate models – the result is what matters. (Note Freud’s injunction to let theory follow clinical experience.) All this is rather obvious, yet we analysts continue to argue, in the best tradition of religious warfare, over which model is correct. Pluralism, in a democratic society, is not an accommodation to the many, but a rather belated awareness that no one, no model, no theory, no theology, preempts the truth. Pluralism, which is *not* an “anything goes” relativism, can help keep us honest, a goal sacred to spiritual traditions as well as to psychoanalysis.

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