

DISCUSSION

**OF "DEMYTHOLOGIZING PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPLANATIONS" BY GARY
AHLKOG, Ph.D.**

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Dr. Ahlskog has addressed the issue of methodological criteria in psychoanalysis, a common concern, and proposed a notion of justice as normative, an uncommon response. The paper is intelligently written, persuasively argued, and evocative in its thesis on justice. Students of psychoanalysis, reacting to the claims made for "scientific" verification, can be in basic sympathy with Dr. Ahlskog's concern to demythologize the "charm" of psychoanalytic explanations. He argues for a defensible norm, for a prescription that is not "casual, idiosyncratic nor transitory" in its application. The level of discourse in this article is both necessary for the particular undertaking and invigorating, given the usual lack of philosophical argumentation in psychoanalytic literature today.

Rudolf Bultmann (1970), the German theologian, has given currency to the concept of demythologizing in his challenging approach to understanding the Christian gospels. Dr. Ahlskog is, likewise, concerned with arriving at a defensible, intelligible norm for psychoanalytic explanations. Just as Bultmann will question the literal historicity of, for example, the New Testament story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, so Ahlskog observes that "repetitive associations cannot double as evidence for their own explanation." And further, "A complete and relevant explanation is a much more rigorous undertaking than the matching of psychic or historical patterns." In criticizing a simple notion of historical reconstruction by means of present associations, even repeatable associations, Ahlskog is questioning an unreflected, and therefore uncritical, position which all too frequently takes psychoanalytic reconstruction as demonstrable proof. Bultmann would maintain that there is a New Testament message which transcends historical cultural expression; likewise, Ahlskog states there is a concept of psychic health that "is ultimately synonymous with a mature moral consciousness, defined as the capacity to use the principle of justice in human transactions." And these transactions are not only interpersonal, but intra- and interpsychic as well.

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Dr. Ahlskog is concerned with the necessary implications of psychoanalysis for human life; he does not want, for example, to reduce the complexity of adult heterosexuality to the relatively simple patterns of childhood, however enticing a genetic explanation might prove. Since the variables of adult psychic life and childhood memory are so enormous, one can easily see that demonstrable validation cannot rest simply on reconstruction or lifting childhood amnesia. There must be a normative principle which escapes the mythological vagaries that follow upon the different interpretations pursued by different analysts. The "endorsable" critique Dr. Ahlskog suggests is justice; he states as an operative principle, "it must be possible to employ the ego's rules reciprocally without creating contradiction." He ends his thoughts speaking about the goal of self-realization "in a world that defines humanness as the capacity for fairness in the pursuit of satisfaction and self-congruency."

Justice, however, is blind. While I am impressed by the articulate rigor and level of critical discourse of Dr. Ahlskog's argument and the necessity for raising the question, I do not think he has shaken the foundations quite enough; that is, I believe the demythologizing process was not allowed its full expression.

Francois Roustang, a French psychoanalyst, has addressed similar issues in a recent work entitled *Dire Mastery* (1982), but from a different perspective. Because of Roustang's continental education, he is not caught, in my opinion, in the web of Anglo-American empiricism and is able, therefore, to speak of theory without the constraint of immediate verifiability intruding itself as a prerequisite for any discussion. Speaking about methodology and the role of theory, Roustang notes: "In order to question analysis, one must first stop being fascinated by theory and analyze the fantasies or desires that give rise to it; one must analyze theory as the text of a dream or myth" (p. 58). And further, "Theory therefore has no consistency of its own. It is of interest only if it can be undone, first on a logical basis, and second on a fantasmatic level. In analysis its only role is to act as a sufficiently large and diversified safety net, so that the analysts—analysands can transfer onto it and discover their own mythology" (p. 59).

When one demythologizes one's own mythology, one is confronted not with the perception of the ego's applicability of justice, but, I believe, along with Roustang, with one's personal madness, one's personal delirium—the delirium of the presence of the unknowable unconscious and, following upon that, the need for language (ever presently evolving theory?) to hold together the randomness of associative thought. To articulate the psyche in terms of the topographical model and within that to normatize the notion of justice is but one side of a complex phenomenon. There is a danger in any teleological principle operative in psychoanalysis, namely, it will undo psychoanalysis. Americans, on the whole, seem to want dynamic therapy; they want and have great respect for what works, and if they can validate a theory and abstract from it an operative principle, they are enormously satisfied. They have little patience for the unknown or the unknowable; and while they value individualism, they do so in chorus. In this light, I think Dr. Ahlskog's notions of justice are easily susceptible of being used as a transpersonal verifiable principle from which we look down upon and organize our work. There is a danger here in trying to escape the idiosyncrasies of the analyst and analysand by setting up a more subtle mythology, the myth of the psyche as reasonable. Blind justice, fair in her deliberations. But there is a personal madness that psychoanalysis uncovers which gives the lie to ratiocination; it is a madness so dense and unk-

nowable that even psychoanalysts have fled back into reasonableness, or developmental tasks, or the concept of adaptability and, of course, the ever present reality principle.

In respect to demythologizing psychoanalytic explanations, Roustang speaks to the danger of any teleological or normative principle being employed as a defence against the internal aloneness of man. He notes, "Each time a psychoanalyst or theoretician pretends he knows . . . the secret that will bring intelligence and life, psychoanalysis as a whole swings back into religion, which puts an end to the possibility of discovery; obscurantism returns in full force" (p. 62). It just may be that we are not masters of our house: that reality is a metaphorical construction, that validation is a defense against madness, and that justice is a blind goddess who can help us negotiate life only as we, occasionally, pull into harbor.

I am fully sympathetic with Dr. Ahlskog's desire to offset the danger from a psychoanalyst's idiosyncratic personal charisma or his/her use of preset ideological interpretations masquerading as psychoanalysis. His articulation of the norm of justice, however, does not seem comprehensive enough to incorporate the madness of the human psyche. If I have understood him correctly, this is an area he will have to address.

REFERENCES

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