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Adult Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment

MARVIN W. ACKLIN

ABSTRACT: The psychoanalytic theory of religion has been seriously limited in its development, largely owing to Freud's emphasis on religion's neurotic elements and an overemphasis on the infantile origins of religious development. This paper offers a conceptual framework and advances the thesis, based on contemporary psychoanalytic, developmental theory, that 1) Erikson's concept of epigenesis has applicability across the life span; 2) that beyond-the-self identity is constituent to human maturation and self-completion; 3) that successful adult maturation requires a mirroring-facilitating environment; and 4) that religious values, meanings, images, and communities play an essential role as elements of the facilitating environment of later life.

In recent years, psychoanalytic developmental psychology has made significant advances in the understanding of personality formation in infants and children. The aim of this paper is the application of several key concepts, which have traditionally been reserved to infant and child development, to the latter stages of life. Of interest here are: (1) epigenesis, the phase-specific emergence of developmental potentials; (2) the "developmental line" of self-boundaries formation across the life span; and (3) the often unrecognized, determinative role of the facilitating environment in adult maturation.

The developmental framework that serves as a background in this study is that of Erik H. Erikson. The following developmental stages are of special interest: Stage V, identity versus identity diffusion; Stage VI, intimacy versus isolation; Stage VII, generativity versus self-absorption; and Stage VIII, integrity versus despair.¹ These stages, taken together, comprise life-span development from adolescence, through young and middle adulthood, to mature age.

The concept of epigenesis, deriving originally from the work of Freud and libido theory,² and more recently in the work of Piaget³ and Erikson, has catalyzed the study of personality development. Borrowed from embryology,

. . . this principle states that anything that grows has a ground plan and that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole.⁴

According to this view, the formation of psychic structure (the internalized organizations of affectively-colored mental representations and regulating mental structures) is driven by innate, phase-specific maturational pressures. This developmental drive functions in tandem with activation and support

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from the familial, social, and cultural environment vitally to inform (or deform) the individual's growth toward psychological differentiation, individuation, and self-completion. As I hope to demonstrate, the phase-specific sequence of emergent potentialities informs adult development in no less determinative a way than it does the intense growth of infants and young children.

Ego boundaries,⁵ or as they will be called here, self-boundaries is a:

... structural conception that refers to the boundaries that differentiate the phenomenal self in varying degrees (1) from those aspects of the personality not represented in consciousness, and (2) from the world of reality external to the person, as psychologically experienced; the latter includes not only the social sphere but the realms of nature to which human beings are variously related.⁶

The proposal advanced here is that there is a "developmental line" of boundary formation which designates the progressive structuralization of self-boundaries in identity formation and development.⁷ There is solid clinical and empirical evidence to emphasize the importance of psychological boundary formation in the infant's and toddler's rudimentary experience of inside and outside, on the one hand, and self and non-self, on the other. Self-boundaries are centrally involved in the coalescence and integration of the sense of self. The line of identity development ranges from the initial recognition "that I am" to "what I am" to "who I am." The formation of boundaries is essential to the integration of thought and affect, and in the development of an accurate, as opposed to fantasy-dominated, capacity to perceive reality. An example of this is the body boundary⁸ or body image,⁹ which symbolically represents the limits of the physical self, notably the sense of where the body begins and ends.¹⁰ A differentiated sense of self, as distinct and separate from other persons, is a critical developmental achievement. It has profound implications for the quality of later interpersonal relations. Self-boundary deficits have been implicated in the whole range of psychopathology including schizophrenia,¹¹ character neuroses,¹² anorexia nervosa,¹³ borderline conditions,¹⁴ and opiate addiction.¹⁵

Intrapsychically, the degrees of differentiation in mental representations of self and others can be visualized along a continuum. This ranges from psychotic, at the lower end, to "healthy" levels of self-other differentiation, at the upper end. In psychosis, for example, the individual experiences a perpetual wish for, but also an intense dread of, symbiotic fusion with others, where the sense of self is threatened with engulfment or isolation.¹⁶ There is, further, an inability, frequently observed in psychotic delusions, to distinguish between human and non-human orders of experience.¹⁷ In the middle range of the continuum, one observes the all-or-nothing, stormy distancing and merging of self and object representations in the borderline conditions, especially under circumstances of emotional intimacy, conflict, or loss,¹⁸ or the narcissistic use of others ("self-objects") to maintain a precariously cohesive sense of self.¹⁹ At the upper end of the continuum, one observes the more fully developed representation at the separate wholeness, uniqueness, and enduring reality of self and others. Sophisticated methods for the differential diagnosis

of boundary differentiation, maintenance, and deficits have emerged and are finding their way into clinical practice.²⁰

There are two early-life developmental achievements which centrally involve the consolidation of self-boundaries and the correlative integration of experience. First, there is the achievement of self- and object-constancy (hereafter called object constancy). This occurs when the internalized representations of the self and other are perceived and experienced as substantial, enduring, and psychologically separate. In this situation, the young child no longer requires the close physical proximity of another person in order to maintain a stable feeling of self-cohesion and continuity. D.W. Winnicott calls this the "capacity to be alone."²¹ Correlative to the achievement of object constancy is the development of "whole object" relations. This occurs where other persons' qualities are no longer perceived or valued solely on the basis of whether they are need-satisfying or frustrating (for example, the idealized "all good" mother as opposed to the devalued "all bad" mother). The child, having integrated gratifying and frustrating experiences, begins to perceive self and others in a more realistic light, recognizing that persons have both positive and negative qualities. With the development of object constancy and whole object relations—the consequences of differentiation, integration, and consolidation of self-boundaries—self and others are experienced fully independent, with specific, unique, and enduring needs and feelings.

While it is a matter of controversy, there is a general agreement among psychoanalytic theorists that these developmental milestones are reached prior to latency—five or six years of age—and that further development adds little to them. Some theorists postulate the reworking of boundary configurations during an adolescent recapitulation of the separation-individuation process.²² Generally speaking, however, psychoanalytic theorists tend to view the attainment of object constancy and whole object relations as ideal and determinative developmental achievements.

In contrast, Erik Erikson emphasizes the achievement of "ego identity" as the goal and culmination of early development. Erikson defines ego identity as the

accrued confidence that one's ability to maintain inner sameness and continuity . . . is matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others, as evidenced in the tangible promise of a career.²³

As he makes clear in this definition, Erikson points out the reciprocity between the emerging sense of identity and its mirrored recognition and confirmation by the community. This point, to which we will return later, is a critical and relatively unrecognized aspect of maturational processes in later adult life.

Psychoanalytic developmental psychology aspires to a comprehensive, adequate life-span theory of object relations. However, adult development has tended to be viewed only as the elaboration of early life issues. Anna Freud and her collaborators,²⁴ in a classic paper on metapsychological assessment of the adult personality, spoke of the adult personality as a "finished product." A theory preoccupied with early development is without a workable framework

for observing and assessing the nature, requirements, and success or failure of adult maturational processes. Such a theory does not adequately apply and extend the principle of epigenesis, that vital phase-specific readiness to be driven toward, to be aware of, and to interact with, a widening social and cultural radius across the life-cycle. Epigenesis is the biological basis for transcendence. By transcendence, I refer to a developing sense of identity, continuity, and growth of the self beyond-the-self, an essential constituent of adult maturation.

Far from representing a terminus of development, object constancy and whole object relations, or the adolescent attainment of ego identity, are important stages along the way. They are, in fact, the foundation and preconditions for adult development. Maturation processes optimally proceed through a process of self-boundary decentration²⁵ and extension into life-domains beyond the self. This process, not unlike early childhood and adolescent development, has a phase-specific nature, though more telescoped across time. It is perhaps less dependent on specific biological factors, yet has, like childhood growth, certain requirements for, and a dependence upon, a sponsoring milieu.

Much of psychoanalytic developmental theory has stressed growth in terms of differentiation, separation, and the achievement of autonomy. In the developmental model advanced here, the maturing adult extends self-boundaries, as well, toward greater integration, inclusion, and comprehension.²⁶ From an epistemological and phenomenological point of view, these self-boundary decentrations create new conditions for, and new avenues of experiencing, enabling a richer empathy, relatedness, and identification with life beyond-the-self. It is the expansion of the horizon of self-experience. Building on the earlier precursors of self-object differentiation, this horizon extending "cathexis of otherness"²⁷ or "openness to beyondness"²⁸ is reflected in the early adult's capacity for intimacy versus isolation (Erikson's Stage VI), where the other, whether spouse or neighbor, is valued as the self, and the virtue of Love is established.²⁹ In middle adult development, through the successful resolution of Stage VII issues (what Erikson calls generativity versus stagnation), the individual extends an investment of self to the next generation of the life-cycle. The primary modes of generativity, Erikson writes, are parental, didactic, productive, and curative.³⁰ Generativity establishes the human strength of care, that "widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity, or accident."³¹ A failure or arrest in this important adult transition yields self-absorption and failure to thrive through retreat from seasoning self-investment in the on-going cycle of generations. "Individuals who do not develop generativity often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their one and only child."³² Early invalidism, physical or psychological, becomes, then, the chief vehicle of concern.

In the development of the adult strengths of intimacy and generativity, self-boundary potentials are extended across interpersonal, social, and generational lines. Crossing of the boundaries of the self is the basis for the subjective experience of transcendence.³³ This calls forth a redeployment of self-interest and a broadening of the horizons of self-experience toward a sense of identification with first "my kind," and then humankind. This widening

scope of identification extends even further in the strength of care,³⁴ to other orders of natural life, both animate and inanimate, toward a global sense of self. This movement toward beyondness anticipates the rarely attained cosmic prehension of self, where the perimeter of felt-relations extends to a feeling of relation and connectedness with the ultimate environment.³⁵

Like earlier development, later life boundary transformations are associated with phase-specific crises. Unlike early life development, they tend more to be triggered by social and psychological developmental events than by biological development. These crises may occur as responses to the completion of parenthood, retirement, the illness and death of parents or friends, the inevitable loss of physical and sexual prowess, of cosmetic and social attributes, and the realization of one's personal mortality. These life crises, no less than developmental transitions in early life, represent crucial developmental turning points. Their negotiation and resolution have a profound impact on the subsequent quality of life. They are, in fact, critical periods for the transformation of narcissism.³⁶ Viewed in this light, Erikson's familiar psychosocial crises become crucial junctures and transition points in the developmental line of narcissism described by Kohut³⁷ and Wolf.³⁸ This development occurs as the previously cathected self-representations and deployment of self-boundaries shift "from a local [or personal] to a generally human system of references."³⁹

In Kohut's terms, human beings have an abiding need for a matrix of mirroring and confirming self-objects through the whole span of life.⁴⁰ In later life, Wolf writes:

Substitution of persons, depersonal diffusion, and symbolization create for the adult a whole matrix of self-object relations that take over much of the function of the originally highly personal, concrete, and focused relation to the archaic self-objects of childhood.⁴¹

Shifts in self-boundaries reflect the continuing necessity for a sustaining self-object milieu—that is, a framework of life meaning—in intangible, enduring cultural forms and representations that are beyond decay or loss, providing a sense of vital participation and connectedness to the larger currents of ongoing life.

Robert J. Lifton calls these developmental processes "transcendence to symbolic modes of immortality."⁴² They represent the press toward a sense of continuity and vital participation in larger life processes that have gone before and that extend beyond the span of the solitary life span. Lifton emphasizes the role of culture in the provision of adequate symbols, meanings, and social rituals as the matrix for later adult development. The imagery of connection is represented in the sense of continued life through one's progeny (the biosocial mode), through creative work and influence in the emergence of the next generation (the creative mode), through communion with rhythms and continuity of nature (the natural mode), through identification with religious traditions (the theological mode), and, ultimately, correlative with what Islam calls the "Supreme Identity," the sense of self identified with all of creation (the mystical mode).

Like early life development, the horizon extending transcendence of middle and late adult life does not develop *sui generis*. It requires a sponsoring milieu, an average expectable environment.⁴³ The matrix of development is the collective traditions of values, meanings, and images, as well as social rituals, which provide a guiding and confirming environment that meets and invites—or as Kohut maintains, mirrors—developmental achievements and a broadened sense of self-identity. No less than in the capacity to stand upright and walk and its mirrored recognition and enjoyment by “good enough” parents, environmental mirroring facilitates the transmuting internalizations⁴⁴ of later life development. This includes natural growth beyond the individual’s parochial self-definitions and a relinquishing of one’s claims of personal omnipotence. In contrast to early life development, where the infant-mother dyad is the matrix and field of development, the “holding environment”⁴⁵ of adult development is culture.⁴⁶

The undeveloped nature of a beyond-the-self theory of identity formation in personality theory to some extent reflects a prevailing cultural interest with individualism and self-actualization. This has been called by one author the “culture of narcissism.”⁴⁷ With a generally youth-oriented focus on the achievement of individual self-fulfillment, this perspective tends to view aging as catastrophic and the psychopathology of later life as nothing but the problematic and inevitable response to irreversible deprivation, loss, and decline. From the point of view advanced here, the most common forms of late life psychopathology—depression, paranoia, and hypochondriasis—may be seen as the consequences of developmental failure. In place of ego integrity (Erikson’s Stage VIII)—the feeling of coherence and linkage to ongoing life—there is instead despair, the sense of being finished, wiped out, with no time left to start again. Representing failure in the transformation of narcissism, there instead emerge disorders of the isolated, mortal self with its precarious social, physical, and existential security. In the place of self-completion, where the self and its connections, both proximate and ultimate, are assembled and integrated, there is the regressive concern with one’s joints, bowels, and mental functions,⁴⁸ accompanied by bitter feelings of depletion, threat, and defeat.

One cultural institution whose role in sponsoring adult maturation has been undervalued is religion. Religiosity has traditionally been viewed as a static, neurotic phenomenon,⁴⁹ no doubt the legacy of Freud’s fierce rationalism and materialistic inclinations. Additionally, the psychoanalytic psychology of religion has seriously lagged behind in the theoretical integration and application of recent advancements in developmental theory⁵⁰ and self psychology.⁵¹ These approaches promise to serve as more effective vehicles for a positive view of religiosity in human development. (For two recent contributions, see Meissner⁵² and Rizzuto.⁵³) From the point of view advanced here, religious institutions and traditions function as important constituents of the facilitating environment, as bearers of collective values, meanings, and images which sanction the innate human drive for transcendence and completion of the self. There is, experientially speaking, little room in psychoanalytic theory for awe or reverence, that rare, disturbing sensibility where the boundaries of the self are transcended in response to the mystery

and ineffability of life beyond the self.

This form of mature religious experience represents a post-identity object relations development. It contrasts strongly with the sort of "cosmic consciousness" frequently encountered in schizophrenic persons.⁵⁴ This psychotic mysticism is actually a pre-identity boundary condition in which transcendence is caricatured and ultimately miscarried.

I have emphasized the necessary integration and reciprocity between individual maturational processes and activating collective images, social rituals, and confirming ideologies of culture which define, mirror, and support the maturational potentials of later life. The institutions, traditions, and ideologies of culture represent the milieu for completion of the individual life-cycle. Self-completion—the maturation of personality—is then a product of culture, the result of guidance and recognition of maturational potentials across the life-span. Self-completion is, further, a responsible contribution to culture and the ongoing cycle of generations. As Erikson writes:

. . . any span of the life cycle lived without vigorous meaning, at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end, endangers the sense of life . . . in all whose life stages are intertwined.⁵⁵

In short, the success or failure of self-completion reflects upon the quality and adequacy of the social, political, and historical influences that condition the facilitating environment.

My aim in this short paper has been to develop a perspective for understanding adult development from an ecological object relations perspective. This perspective recognizes both the developmental initiatives innate in human beings across the life span and the environmental requisites for their emergence and fulfillment. The principles of epigenesis and transcendence—those vital forces so visible in early development—applied to later, adult stages of life, provide psychoanalytic developmental psychology a useful construct with which it can give an account of clinically and culturally significant phenomena. Equally as important, psychoanalysis as a scientific and humanistic discipline and a cultural institution is strengthened in envisioning and enabling viable images of human maturation, and the mediating, holding environments in which they unfold.

This is not merely an academic matter. Empathy is based on the identification in one's own experience of certain aspects of the other.⁵⁶ In terms presented here, empathy is a function of self-boundary decentration and extension to include the other, whether it be other persons, species, or orders of life. An epigenetic object relations theory of adult development represents a useful tool in the therapeutic and cultural task of understanding, healing, and preventing developmental failure in later life, and, further, in the study, maintenance, and enhancement of sponsoring milieus which facilitate maturation. In a global setting dangerously fragmented along racial, sexual, national, and generational boundaries, where issues of destruction of the natural world and its inhabitants are pressing—through the taint of pollution or the conflagration of holocaust—empathy with the other is a challenging and compelling necessity.

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