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A Complex Paradox: Individuality and the Prereflective Systems Consciousness

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«This tremendous world I have inside of me. How to free myself, and this world, without tearing myself to pieces. And rather tear myself to a thousand pieces than be buried with this world within me»

-- Franz Kafka, *Diaries* (1910-23)

«When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances» (p. 287)

-- Henry James, *The Portrait of A Lady* (1881)

From a psychoanalytic complexity perspective, here is one way, among many others, in which to imagine the self: Drawing from the work of Mark Taylor (2001), think of yourself for a moment as simultaneously two types of screens (perhaps not a particularly pleasant thought): First, the type of screen onto which material of all kinds (visual, biological, physical, emotional, spiritual) are projected, and think of the projector as the larger array of interpenetrating, nonlinear, complex systems that exist everywhere—all interacting and all interrelated; and then the second type of screen, a semipermeable membrane that filters material, like the screen on a patio door. Essentially, think of your self as a projection and a filter, simultaneously, just as a photon, by analogy, is simultaneously a particle and a wave. In this way, we are at once an idiosyncratic nodal point for the emergence and expression of larger complex (relational) systems and a unique determiner of what, exactly and specifically, emerges from and gets expressed about those systems. This is not to suggest by any means that you, or what you think of as your self, are not real. Quite the contrary! One's experiential world is more real than anything I can think of. It is the currency of our lives and of living lives that are so embedded and intertwined in what we think of as the world. As Orange (2001) reminds us, "[w]e inhabit the world just as the world inhabits us." It is just that our experiential worlds are not exactly ours, explanatorily speaking—they just often may feel like it, phenomenologically speaking. And thus, our human conundrum—or at least one of them—our most *complex paradox*.

The notion of the individual self, with its concomitant attributions of individuality, autonomy, and agency, has commanded our theoretical, philosophical, scientific, practical, and of course clinical attention for decades—in some respects, for centuries. Historically, biophysiological, psychological selves were thought to have emerged in their nascent form, vulnerable but with a developmental trajectory. Mature selves somehow became separate, albeit sometimes alienated, from their originary matrix. To use Charles Taylor's term, the *punctual self* was one of "disengagement and rational control." He tells us, "the key to this figure is that it gains control through disengagement." In many traditional circles, separating and disengaging the self from its surround, effectively

decontextualizing it, led to rational control in which autonomy and agency could be realized and exercised. This individual self, individuality, and the uniqueness of the person and his or her efforts at understanding and expressing it, have been privileged and sought after for millennia. Inextricably linked to preoccupations with the nature of the self, the person, his or her consciousness, and its meaning-making propensity, has been also the notion that such selves, we individuals, are fundamentally separate and isolated entities grappling with internal forces, and occasionally bumping into each other, perhaps because of those forces. The scientific endeavors of Freud and many of his colleagues were certainly informed by this presumption of the singularity and separateness of the person. In psychoanalysis, it is no surprise that the unit of study had been defined accordingly. The experience of individuality and the assumption of its separateness had wound its way into a multitude of Western philosophies, sciences, and cultures—particularly ours—and helped inform what we still experience today as the “tradition of individualism.”

As pervasive as this tradition has been, our more contemporary contextualist trends, found throughout a variety of disciplines (not just psychoanalysis), have radically overturned these assumptions and have reconceptualized our ideas about personal autonomy, agency, authorship, ownership, and even free will. And because of our having resituated the individual person in a socio-cultural-historical, relational, contextualist, complex systems framework, the idea of individuality poses a challenge particularly to clinicians and researchers who work within the currency of, well, individual persons.

The person and his or her subjective world are the product and property of larger complex, biological, relational systems, but he or she is still a separate individual, correct? Each of us of course prefers not to think of ourselves as gelatinous, largely permeable, indeterminate particles floating in an amorphous soup of human systems; our experiences, for the most part, indicate otherwise. We naturally presume that each of us is a separate and singular being, influenced by others and the world, most certainly, but not determined by it. We can experience agency, autonomy, and free will. Well, perhaps, and perhaps not. Roger Frie and I took up this conundrum in our book, *Persons In Context* (2011), in which we wrote: “Individuality is one interpretation of being human, among others; it has no privileged status in telling us about our ‘true’ human nature. We experience ourselves as unique individuals, in some way separate from, yet connected to others, as a result of the social, cultural, and biological contexts that provide us with our framework for understanding human experience.” Trilling (1955), a bit sardonically, wrote: “This intense conviction of the existence of the self apart from culture, is, as culture well knows, its noblest and most generous achievement” (Lionel Trilling, *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture*).

With so much relationality, contextualism, intersubjectivity, and complex systems sensibilities having infiltrated psychoanalysis, what has become of the individual person? How do we understand this person, now not so simply and reductionistically determined by drives, or internalized self and object representations, or true selves and false selves, or isolated-mind motivations and organizing principles, or even internalized interaction structures? Where are the agency, authorship, ownership, and free will in the contextualized person, with himself or herself, his or her experiential world, being a product and property of larger relational systems—complex systems that are not simply originary but are ongoing and unrelenting as well? As Frie and I pointed out, “as a result of this tension, many clinicians are left to wonder how to understand the notion of ‘individual’ experience either conceptually or clinically. Are there ways to think about the notion of individuality and individual experience without falling back into a one-person [or even two-person] model of thinking and practicing?” This is the “complex paradox” to which Adrienne Harris refers in her comment: “...there is no single problem giving more worry, in every branch of psychoanalysis, than the question of how the system and the person co-mingle, co-construct, and evolve. ...theorists are trying to establish the

site or purview or habitation of the individual while living and practicing and theorizing in the full absorption of the porousness and intersubjective experience of any living beings..." (Harris, 2013). And similarly, many of us are trying to live and practice in a contextualist, complex systems framework while trying to address the real, unique, individual person who sits in front of us and looks to us for help. If personal individuality is so systems-dependent, not simply influenced and contextualized by larger complex systems but indeed is always and already an emergent property and product thereof, has it been rendered conceptually too ephemeral, inapprehensible, illusory, or even nonexistent? Will our complexity theory and contextualist strivings and sensibilities ultimately abolish our sense of individuality, our sense of uniqueness? Does retaining the notion of the individual, bounded person, theoretically and clinically, perpetuate the Scylla of pathologizing and decontextualizing emotional experience and relational patterns presumed to emanate from an isolated mind, and, alternatively, does over-contextualizing, or over-complexifying (Sucharov, 2013), one's experiential world encourage the Charybdis of it being rendered or "reduced down" solely to an illusory epiphenomenon, thereby privileging systems over human individuals? In what way might we hold, live with, and, as Harris says, "[work] with a complex paradox" (Harris, 2013)?

In this light, this morning I aim to explore and expand upon our conceptualizations of individuality and the individual person, largely through a complex systems theory lens. In extending others' ideas, as well as my own, I will also talk about what I playfully think of as the "prereflective systems consciousness," partly inspired by Sartre's concept of the "prereflective self consciousness"—that sense of knowing oneself while not really knowing one knows oneself, an unthought known (Bollas), if you will, about who one is. The "prereflective *systems* consciousness" pertains to our unthought known about the contexts and systems that have given rise, and continue to give rise, to who we are and to where we find ourselves. And, I will share some clinical experiences that I think are relevant to at least my own struggles in this arena. There are several entry points into this exploration that I wish to propose.

First, I will speak about several somewhat contrasting perspectives—by no means an exhaustive list—that have interrogated, and have attempted to define, individuality. Second, I will talk about the theoretical and clinical ramifications of arriving at a felt truth about what individuality is: The attitudes we hold about individuality and the individual person—its origins and its trajectories—will determine how we engage with that person, will determine what we remain alert to, what we privilege, and what we discount or perhaps ignore. Our personal conceptualizations of the nature of individuality call forth specific, corresponding attitudes that have profound effects on how we respond and interact in the clinical setting, not to mention how we ultimately conceptualize therapeutic action. And of course, in reciprocal fashion, the attitudes we may already hold about a vast number of questions and concerns in our field may likewise inform how we think about individuality. My initial foray into highlighting and considering the powerful role attitudes play emerged several years ago in my efforts to flesh out the clinical ramifications of adopting a psychoanalytic complexity sensibility. [Expand?] Third, along with sharing some clinical instances, I will offer more of my own ideas about how we might define individuality and what that might mean for the person who is struggling toward realizing self-delineation and achieving a greater degree of authorship and ownership of his or her life.

Let us first turn to the work of Louis Sander and, in particular, his preoccupation with the "complex paradox" of the individual. In his chapter, "Paradox and Resolution," he (2008) asserts that a number of paradoxes can be found in the developing infant and infant-caregiver system. He highlights one in particular, that is, the "singularity, the uniqueness of each newborn, each family system, and each individual's own particular pathway of development. The other side of the apparent paradox," he states, "emerges from the extensive research on the minutiae of events within the flow

of interaction between infant and caregiver” (1998, p. 167). He envisions the paradox in that “we begin with two biological ‘givens’: the requirement for self-regulation (the agency to initiate action to self-regulate within the context of one’s unique life support system must be the individual’s own agency to initiate; the ‘being distinct from’ pole) and the capacity for microsecond synchrony and attunement with an ‘other’ (not cognitively managed by the individual; the ‘being together with’ pole). Both givens,” he says, “are there from the beginning of life...” (p. 167). For Sander, the individual is hardly an isolated entity on its own developmental trajectory: The seamless integration of both poles lies at the center of the early, developmental process. He asks: “What would it mean for caregivers to think in terms of systems instead of individuals; in terms of process instead of structure; in terms of a flow of sequence, recurrence, and expectancy within the recurring exchanges between themselves and their charges instead of thinking in terms of isolated events?” His question bears, of course, a strong resemblance to thinking in terms of reflecting, speaking, and, in general, working relationally in the consultation room—we are no longer there to examine solely the person but importantly the flow of transference-countertransference experiences and exchanges that emerge from within the system.

And where then are the individual and individuality in Sander’s framework? For Sander, the uniqueness of the person ultimately does not reside, well, in the person, but ultimately is an emergent property and integration of the “being distinct from” pole (self-regulatory initiation, a rudimentary form of agency) and the “being together with” pole (the dyad’s relative attunement, synchrony, and mutual adaptations). He tells us, “we begin life ‘connected,’ as part of each other.” Indeed, we always already are. And thus, in terms of understanding the emerging person, from an *explanatory* view, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, we can no longer say, this is I, and mine, and this is you, and yours; but from a phenomenological standpoint, each of us is quite unique and necessarily stands apart and separate from the world. (I will soon address at greater length this vital distinction between the realm of the *explanatory* and the realm of the *phenomenological*.) It is particularly during moments of “open space,” for Sander, and for Winnicott (whom Sander references), that experiences of self-organizing initiative can emerge and can be realized, imparting that sense of agency, authorship, and ownership so essential to being a creative and expansive human being. In regards to the capacity to be alone, Winnicott writes, “the basis of the capacity to be alone is [itself] a paradox: it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present. ...it is only when alone (i.e., in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli” (1965, pp. 30-34). “Discovering his own personal life,” in the midst of being in relation to and intensely contextualized, I would argue, is exactly one principal facet of human experiencing that I associate with individuality.

Historically, in other sectors of our field, most notably in the work of Harry Stack Sullivan and those who were either influenced by him and/or built upon his ideas, the idea of personal individuality was a tricky subject. Many subsequent thinkers felt that Sullivan himself struggled with this seeming paradox—the paradox of experiencing an individual self of one’s own and yet being so embedded in and overdetermined by the sociocultural matrices that presumably gave rise to it. Sullivan wrote: “What the personality [or individual] does, which can be studied and observed only in relations between personalities or among personalities, is truly and terribly marvelous, and is human, and is the function of creatures living in indissoluble contact with the world of culture and [other] people.” And also: “Personality is manifest in interpersonal situations, and not otherwise. ...no such thing as the durable, unique, individual personality is ever justified.” He did not deny or eschew the existence of such individuality in the minds of others—how we hold, and perhaps need to hold, in our minds the presumption of the individual self; he just felt it was not in the purview of psychiatry or psychoanalysis. Crowley, in 1973, takes up Sullivan’s perhaps implicit struggle and

fleshes out one rendition of our paradox. He states: “Sullivan taught that, through elimination of parataxic distortions in personal relationships, one was freed from those automatic, repetitious, constricted patterns of response, in which the ‘individuality’ of the other person was practically nonexistent, and was then free to respond to the real characteristics of another person, as distinct from responding unwittingly to images of that person required by his past. In theory, individuality is liquidated; in practice, it becomes a goal, in the sense of responding to the real characteristics of another person. A paradox, indeed!” How does one slough off the encumbrances of “transference distortions” in the service of achieving the clarity of vision that would allow one to see the real individual other when that individual “other” is at least theoretically nonexistent? Sullivan would not, in Crowley’s words, deny an individual self to anyone—he simply found the concept unnecessary and clearly not relevant to an interpersonal psychoanalysis.

Other prominent thinkers have grappled with how and where to locate the individual, with an eye to its clinical implications. Wachtel (2013), for instance, addresses this challenge in his reflections on the contributions of David Shapiro in Craig Piers’ book, *Personality and Psychopathology*. Importantly Wachtel speaks to the conceptual and clinical tensions and contradictions inherent in both a one-person model and a two-person model. Where does the person end and the influencing context begin? How do we hold individuality and contextuality in our minds at once? He writes: “I have, only half in jest, referred to the one-person – two-person distinction as more accurately depicted as one between one-and-a-quarter-person theorists and one-and-three-quarter-person theorists (Wachtel, 2008). Putatively one-person thinkers are rarely as inattentive to the relational context or to the role of the observer as their two-person critics imply; and putatively two-person thinkers are rarely as free from ‘monadic’ elements in their accounts of personality as the one-person, two-person language implies.” [p. 34] This tension (or is it context-dependent equivocation?) reflects our continuing discomfort with under-contextualizing and over-contextualizing, given that indeed we do sit across from another individual, just as that person sits across from us—*across* from, and presumably *separate* from, in many ways. Explanatorily speaking, our respective experiential worlds are so profoundly and inextricably intertwined and mutually determining of the other, whereas phenomenologically, each of us resides in a relatively private and highly distinct experiential world.

Similarly, Eagle addresses the individuality/contextuality conundrum when he explores how we might conceptualize the “unit of study.” Citing Mitchell’s comment that “An individual mind is an oxymoron,” Eagle observes that “the very possibility of developing a human mind [that] depends on human interactions seems indisputable and, today, relatively noncontroversial. That the mind is composed of ‘relational configurations’ . . . is perhaps somewhat more controversial and less clear, but also defensible. However, somewhat puzzling is the assertion that ‘the basic unit of study is not the individual as a separate entity...but an interactional field’ (Mitchell, 1988, p. 3). . . .for most analysts the basic ‘unit of study’ is indeed the individual as a separate entity” (2011, pp. 135-136). Throughout this passage, Eagle calls to task the degree to which Mitchell was influenced by Sullivan and the illusion of individual personality. He finds confusing Mitchell’s statement that “in Sullivan’s way of thinking, people are not separate entities, but participants in interactions with actual others and with ‘personifications’ (or ‘representations’) of others derived from interactions with actual others (p. 25).” Being rendered understandably confused by this passage, Eagle asks, “How can one be a participant in an interaction with actual others without being a separate entity. And how can one interact with actual others without these others also being separate entities?” My immediate answer to these questions is that one is always already inextricably embedded in and comprised by our relational surround, explanatorily speaking, and, seemingly paradoxical, is equally unique, separate, and distinguishable from actual others, phenomenologically speaking.

Some resolution to this ongoing and provocative tension, just witnessed, for examples, in the writings of Wachtel and of Eagle, might be found in addressing, as I alluded to earlier, one of the attitudes that emanate from a psychoanalytic complexity perspective about which I have previously written—that is, the attitude of valuing making the distinction between at least two levels of discourse: in this case, the *phenomenological* and the *explanatory*. Placing our focus on individuality aside for a moment, I wish briefly to elaborate on the importance of this distinction. Many of the hypotheses or seemingly self-evident truths philosophers, theorists, and clinicians have constructed, or “discovered,” over time are the result of distilling, reducing, and reifying personal lived experience, and then elevating it to the status of “truth and reality.” Descartes’ conclusions about mind-body dualism, the separation of reason and passion, and the “radically disengaged” nature of human thought doubtless emanated from his first-hand experience of feeling separated and estranged from his world context (see Stolorow, 1992). In other words, if I experience myself to be a “punctual self” (Taylor, 1989), then I must be one. This reifying activity relies on the conflation of two dimensions of discourse: the *phenomenological* and the *explanatory*. Elsewhere (2002, 2007, 2009) I have underscored and elaborated the necessity of acknowledging this distinction, in contexts of theorizing, conversing, teaching, and engaging in psychoanalytic practice, lest we confuse whether we speak of personal lived experience or the contexts presumed to give rise to such experience.

In the absence of this distinction, it is unclear whether we are investigating and attempting to describe (not explain) emergent emotional experience and meaning, or whether we are examining the socio-cultural-relational-historical contexts in which we are fundamentally and relentlessly embedded. A striking example of this potential for confusion can be drawn from Heinz Kohut’s use of the term *self*. Depending on the dimension of discourse in which one is thinking and speaking about the self, it could be understood as a dimension of experience, an ontological entity (agent), or an intrapsychic structure. Muddling or ignoring differences between the phenomenological and explanatory dimensions has far-reaching, negative implications not only for the outcome of professional dialogue, but also for the relationship and truth-finding trajectory of clinical engagements.

This attitude, then, underscores the importance of not conflating two very distinct levels of discourse—one pertaining to lived, subjective experience and the other to the explanatory frameworks we might invoke to understand and describe such experience. One striking characteristic of complex systems, especially when applied to the domain of human experiencing, is the ubiquitous discrepancy between how systems work and how systems feel. That is, individual emotional life is pictured here as an emergent property of larger, interpenetrating relational systems, of which each of us is a constituent, and not as the product of one specific component or person. Thus, whereas I may experience my emotional world as *mine*, it is understood explanatorily as derivative of and belonging to a larger relational network.

And thus, phenomenological description refers to a realm of discourse grounded in felt experience that can variously range across a wide spectrum of relative states of formulation. Whereas this range of states can extend to relatively vague, unformulated though nevertheless potentially accessible states of mind and mood (D. B. Stern 1997), it primarily includes those emotional experiences that are conscious and articulable, and thus, those that can be reflected upon. In this realm of discourse, speaking of the self would refer to one’s experience of oneself, or experiential selfhood—anxious, sad, calm, perplexed, disoriented, centered, and so forth. And it can refer to the experience of having parts or aspects of oneself from one moment or one physical context to the next, which is a prerequisite for the experience of personal conflict. In this language, referring to this part of me or that part of me acknowledges aspects of my felt experiential world, residing in various degrees of accessibility and/or disavowal, and not the presumption of the presence of any objectified

psychic parts that are sometimes presumed to be dormant and sometimes not (i.e., something akin to the Freudian dynamic unconscious). And it can most certainly refer to being a “separate entity,” just as it can refer to inseparability and dissolution, to the experience of having no self at all.

The second level of discourse, metaphysical/explanatory assumptions, is less content organized and more concept and process oriented. It refers to one’s foundational (sometimes unconscious) assumptions about how things work, to one’s convictions about the underpinnings and origination of emotional experience and meaning. An example would be the assumption that all human experiencing and meaning making is inextricably embedded in a larger world context or complex system of which each of us is but a part. Another example would be the “self” of Mark Taylor, to which I had alluded at the outset of my paper—the screen and the filter. Another related example is the assumption that such experiencing and meaning-making can never be attributed solely to one’s past, to one’s present, or to one’s imagined future, and that the proportion of these influences will remain forever indeterminate. Speaking on the level of explanatory assumptions, as the term is employed here, does not address the nature of individual experience, nor the themes that organize it, but rather references the broad universal presuppositions—our convictions about the way things work—that then organize the contents and processes of the phenomenological realm of discourse. Distinguishing between these two levels of discourse is not only crucial in subverting conflation and muddle in conversations about psychoanalytic theory, but is also an essential attitudinal ingredient implicated in the emergence of therapeutic action in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Much of human emotional pain and strife, or alternatively, emotional and relational numbness and complacency resulting in the narrowing of one’s affective horizons, is and are attributable to the ubiquitous discrepancies between these two levels of discourse. And appreciating the discrepancies can help us, and our patients, mediate our natural human tendency toward reifying personal experience and instead understand our experience in part as a function of interpretive activity. Jill Gentile (2008) has written quite explicitly about the usefulness of making this distinction in our clinical work.

And thus, explanatorily speaking, we can’t really think in terms of “separate entities,” and in that sense, Sullivan and Mitchell were quite correct that the unit of study must be the interactional field (and I would add—must be the larger relational systems, past and present, of which we are comprised). However, phenomenologically, we must always be open to thinking in terms of “separate entities,” given that that is how we so frequently experience ourselves and others, and in that sense, Eagle and many others are quite accurate that the unit of study, ultimately, in one sense is the *individual* who comes to us for help. As we shall see, *the capacity to hold both in one’s experiential world may be a central feature of what it means to be an individual.*

Returning to our background literature for a moment, a variety of others have contributed much to conceptualizing individuality as well and continue to grapple with it in light of all our contextualizing and complexifying. One rendition of Robert Stolorow’s vision of the individual person, for example, can be found in his reply to Jon Mills’ critique of intersubjective and relational theory. In this exchange, Mills felt that these theories “[dissolve] the centrality of the self . . . decomposes personal identity . . . [and] annuls individuality, distinctiveness, and otherness” (Mills, 2005, p. 169). Stolorow and his collaborator’s (Atwood and Orange) response, which resonates with my own discussion of the vital phenomenological/explanatory distinction, hinges on what he felt was Mills’ collapsing of this distinction. They write: “As subject matter investigated by the psychoanalytic method, phenomena such as . . . enduring selfhood, personal identity, individuality, distinctiveness, and otherness are always and only grasped as *dimensions of personal experiencing.* Explanations of these dimensions, or of disturbances in them, in terms of their taking form within intersubjective systems do not in any way imply a neglect or annulment of them. . . Contextualizing is not nullifying” (2006, p. 187). Comparing three distinct conceptual renditions of “the self”—*the*

Kantian self, the narrative self, and experiential selfhood—Stolorow finds most useful, as do I, the adoption of the third, the idea of “experiential selfhood.” Central to this definition of selfhood, which was previously articulated by Zahavi (2005) from whom Stolorow draws, is that it is, first and foremost, quintessentially *experiential*, and second, that it contains the essential element of ownership, or the sense of *mineness*. As Stolorow states, “all of my experiences are given to me as *mine*, as experiences that I am undergoing or living through” (2009, p. 407). For Zahavi, and for Stolorow, this pivotal facet of human experiencing, that of the experience of mineness of my emotional life, is fundamental to what we think of and define as individuality or individual selfhood. In contrast, the Kantian self endures throughout time—a “selfsame subject”—and stands relatively apart and separate from its experiences upon which it can reflect. And likewise in contrast, the narrative self is “assumed to be an interpretive construction—an evolving narrative or story about one’s life and personality that reflects one’s developmental and relational history and one’s values, ideals, aims, and aspirations. . . . Whereas the Kantian self is the inferred subject or agent of reflection, the narrative self is an object or product of reflection” (p. 407). For Stolorow, and for Zahavi, both are eschewed in favor of the more experience-near sense of mineness that is potentially embedded in all human experiencing. I say *potentially* because disturbances in emotional and relational life can, for some, denude this precious sense of mineness of one’s experiential world. This is seen perhaps most dramatically in many of the individuals and patients who inspired the work of Bernard Brandchaft and his conceptualization of systems of pathological accommodation. Other glaring instances of the disturbance in a sense of mineness can be found in the not-me experiences about which Philip Bromberg and, from a complexity theory perspective, Craig Piers have written.

And thus, for purposes of our exploration today, I wish to include this sense of mineness of one’s experiential world, admittedly not always present but potentially graspable and realized, in how I am thinking about individuality. I certainly agree with Stolorow that an experiential selfhood—the individual—emerges through understanding and validating his or her distinctive affectivity, rendering that precious sense of mineness or ownership of one’s experiential world. What has been given me, what I have been thrown into, indeed is mine, or becomes mine, over time, with much affect tolerance and with the integration of previously dissociated, not-me states. I wish to add that *experiential selfhood* also emerges through the investigation, understanding, and articulation of one’s own context-embeddedness—what I think of as making increasingly conscious our prereflective systems consciousness: that background sense, that we may come to know to one degree or another, of the vast array of complex, sociocultural/historical/relational systems that give rise to who we are and who we might become—in other words, that which we have been handed and must come to own as truly ours. Just as Brandchaft has averred that a sense of mineness of one’s own life can in instances be coopted and compromised by early caregivers, so can, I would argue, a sense of being a contextualized and contextualizing person. This frequently occurs in instances in which young people are held accountable, blamed, and shamed for how they feel and behave with no awareness and consideration for the contexts in which they are embedded and from which their emotional worlds and concomitant behaviors have emerged—something akin to being blamed for the cards we have been dealt, despite that we must take ownership of them and then think about, and then, how to play them. This was certainly the case with my patient Clarice, whom I’ve written about previously and about whom I will share shortly.

And so, thus far we are playing with the idea of conceptualizing individuality or individual selfhood as quintessentially and radically *experiential* (i.e., not something directly observable by an outside party), as having a sense of expanded affectivity and its concomitant loosening of dissociations, as imbued with the quality of personal ownership or *mineness*, and as having an expanded sense of the systemic contexts that have given rise, and continue to give rise, to our

emotional worlds. And now, I wish to consider including one additional and, I believe, vital element into the mix of how we might reconceptualize individuality—*that of the capacity to live in and to hold our complex paradox itself in our experiential world.*

How we think of individuality, or *experiential selfhood*, with effort can be extended into realms in which one consciously lives with a lively sense of personal paradox—a complex one in which I experience myself to have been, and to be, handed my body, my history, my life context and circumstances, and my surround, largely out of my control, while also, by knowing and appreciating my thrownness, I experience personal ownership and authorship of my life, even a sense of singularity, aloneness, and autonomy—a finite freedom. To draw from Heidegger, the capacity to experience both sides of this complex paradox, to hold them and live in them, I would argue, is ultimately to experience a greater sense of experiential selfhood—one that is neither stripped of its context-embeddedness nor remains solely quagmired in it. The individual, as I am redefining the term here, is one who can appreciate and live in this most complex paradox, never fixable, never resolvable.

One felicitous point of departure and a robust way of conceptualizing this additional facet of individual selfhood can be found in Jessica Benjamin's concept of the third, of which by now there have been posited a variety of permutations and which Lew Aron (2006) has underscored and particularized in his paper on analytic impasse and the third. Aron writes: "...dyads, couples, and systems tend to get stuck in complementary relations. This complementarity is characterized by a variety of splitting in which one side takes a position complementary to—the polar opposite of—the other side. If one is experienced as the doer, then the other becomes the done to (Benjamin, 2004a); . . . if one is the victim, then the other becomes the victimizer; . . . if one is active, then the other becomes passive. [And parenthetically I would add: If one becomes the contextualizer and complexifier, the other becomes the Cartesian and decontextualizer.] Polarities are split between the two members, and the more each one locks into a singular position, the more rigidly the other is locked into the opposing, complementary position, thus heightening the splitting and tightening the polarization. At any time, the split may be reversed without significantly changing the structure of the complementarity. The active member may suddenly become passive while the passive member becomes active, thus their surface roles are switched, but the dyadic structure remains split between activity and passivity" (p. 353).

In complexity theory terminology, this type of complementarity is beautifully illustrated by the concept of the limit cycle attractor about which Craig Piers has written in relation to understanding the dynamics of self states. Piers briefly defines "limit cycle attractors . . . [as] systems that settle into a repeating sequence of states" (2013, p. 443). We might think of the seesaw of which Aron speaks, or of a clock pendulum of which Harris (2005) speaks, moving back and forth, defining a bilateral and predictable arc in space.

Aron elaborates this type of complementarity: "Another image that metaphorically captures the rigidity of complementarity is the fixed pendulum. In describing chaos theory as a model for a relational developmental theory, Harris (2005) utilizes the fixed pendulum as a model of a rigid attractor. She contrasts the rigid, change-resistant qualities of the pendulum to the less predictable strange attractor which is always on the edge of chaos, a state that can be disequilibrated and then reorganized in unexpected ways. The image of the fixed pendulum is similar to the seesaw and it captures the experience of therapeutic impasse and reversible complementarity described by Benjamin in that it only moves from one side to the other, back and forth, without any of the freedom, flexibility, and unpredictability needed for a relationship of two autonomous individuals interacting in a system of mutual recognition of independent subjectivities" (p. 354).

This dynamic can be particularized for our purposes by considering contexts in which the patient, with any sense of agency and finite freedom obliterated, experiences himself solely as a pawn of the universe, entirely determined by context and embedded in an emotional conviction of “I have no say!”—while the analyst remains fixated on its opposite pole, insisting that the patient is an individual person with agency, unbounded freedom, and creativity. And, of course pendulum-like, these roles may reverse at any moment with neither participant capable of holding a third position of which Benjamin and Aron speak—in this context, of holding our complex paradox in consciousness.

And so, Aron rightly asks: “So how does one move from the structure of complementary relations to a more flexible arrangement? The two participants must find a way to go from being positioned along a line toward opening up space. I am referring, of course, to psychic space, transitional space, space to think, space to breathe, to live, to move spontaneously in relation to each other interpersonally. [And parenthetically I would add: Perhaps the “open space” of Winnicott and of Sander.] The conceptualization of the third attempts to model this state in that a line has no space, whereas a triangle does. Britton (1989) spoke about being able to free himself to think to himself while with a patient, to take a step to the side within his own mind so as to create mental space. Picture this literally in terms of geometric space. While on a seesaw, one literally cannot take a step to the side; moving sideways is just not an option. As soon as one can take a step to the side, one has transformed a line into a triangular space with room to think and to relate. One has created options enabling the two members of the dyad to position themselves with some degree of flexibility and freedom of movement. One’s position within triangular space does not completely determine the position of the other as it does on a seesaw” (pp. 354-355).

Whereas the complementarity and hoped-for triangular resolution of which Aron writes doubtless are found throughout many dyadic relationships and throughout much of our clinical work, the more obviously dramatic complementarity, role-reversing battle may not always be so evident or so central phenomenologically: The analyst or the patient may not necessarily always be drawn into a polarized position—that would depend on a variety of factors. But this paradigm does provide us with a useful analogy to how we humans tend to reside somewhere on the context-fatedness/unbounded freedom spectrum, and sometimes even at one end or the other of that spectrum. Whether polarized battles emerge or not, the ability of either patient or analyst, or both, to hold both ends of this spectrum—a kind of a third, if you will—offers a greater sense of experiential selfhood. This presumption is arguably a kind of attitude, which, if adopted, will necessarily impact the clinical surround. To quote Sander once again: “What would it mean for caregivers to think in terms of systems instead of individuals; in terms of process instead of structure; in terms of a flow of sequence, recurrence, and expectancy within the recurring exchanges between themselves and their charges instead of thinking in terms of isolated events?”—and, I would add, what would it mean to live as, paradoxically, systemically-determined beings, screens and filters *thrown* into our life-situatedness, while also as individual persons, always with potentialities and possibilities that *can* be of our own making?

Clinically we can imagine how this particular *attitude* might inform therapeutic action for some of our patients. This attitude may emerge in the form of our interpretations and responses that oscillate, depending on the clinical moment, between speaking to and living as the individual person who is efficacious, has agency, desire, dreams, goals, and autonomy, and to and as the person who is context-embedded, who has been and is thrown, and who remains inextricably intertwined with and related to other complex, relational systems that were not of his or her or our making.

[*Clinical material*]