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FROM ATTACHMENT TO TRANSCENDENCE

A Study of the Attachment Theory Perspective of 'Secure Attachment' in the Therapeutic Setting and Franco Imoda's Understanding of 'Authentic Self-Transcendence'

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1. Relevance and Purpose of the Study

How can a Christian psychotherapist evaluate the role of secure attachment in the psychotherapeutic context in effecting therapeutic change? This was the question that stimulated the research undertaken in this dissertation. Distinct from many schools of psychology, the attachment theory views the development of secure

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attachment of the client to the therapist as a major change-effecting factor.

Attachment theory was proposed by John Bowlby in his writings of 1958. Different from the psychoanalytic theory, it proposed that the tendency for attachment to the primary caregiver has biologically evolved for the survival and security of the neonate. This central proposition impressed many who were not happy with the Freudian view that considers relationship as serving the primary drives such as food and sex. Understanding the human relationship as a positive and adaptive tendency which has been biologically evolved for the safety of the human infant has many applications in psychotherapy as well¹. As the theory developed, its propositions have been extended to the attachment with peers, romantic partners, mentors, values, institutions, God, and so on.

However, from a Christian perspective, relationship is more than just a psychological development; the mediations implied in a relationship are not limited to psychological ones alone. In order to be faithful to the reality of human relationship, one has to be faithful to an integral anthropology which respects the human mystery. How can the attachment theory be approached with such an integral anthropology? Here Franco Imoda's pedagogical approach opens up some possible pathways. Although Imoda's primary interests centre on an integrated pedagogical approach which respects the mystery dimension of the person, applications to the psychotherapy setting can be derived, since, in the wider meaning, therapy is also a pedagogical situation.²

2. Scope and Limits of the Study

This dissertation attempts to analyse the proposition that secure attachment in the therapeutic setting can help strengthen the process of authentic self-transcendence. The term 'secure attachment' denotes the secure 'attachment pattern' formed as a result of the interactions between the subject and the principal caregiver or attachment figure. 'Secure attachment in the therapeutic setting' refers to the attachment bond formed by the client to the therapist, the attachment figure. 'The process of authentic self-transcendence' points to Imoda's understanding of the mature mode of seeking the real good in relationships which are open to the 'other' and the 'Ultimate Other.' Thus, the dissertation deals with the inquiry into how secure

¹Cf. E. BERANT – J.H. OBEGI, «Attachment-informed Psychotherapy Research», in J.H. OBEGI – E. BERANT, ed., *Attachment Theory and Research in Clinical Work with Adults*, New York 2009, 461-489.

²Cf. F. IMODA, *Human Development. Psychology and Mystery*, Leuven 1998, 4.

attachment with the therapist in the therapeutic setting can strengthen the capacity of the subject or client for an authentic self-transcendence towards the immediate others as well as the Ultimate Other. Although the attachment theory as well as Imoda's pedagogic approach have a wide array of applications, our study aims only at deriving psychotherapeutic applications from their theoretical and pedagogical frameworks, with the aim of engaging in a dialogue between them.

3. Method

This study follows a theoretical and analytical method. It attempts to understand the concept of secure attachment in contemporary attachment theory, analysing the relevant works of Bowlby and Ainsworth, and also of the second generation researchers. To understand Imoda's view of the process of authentic self-transcendence, his major work, *Human Development* is mostly relied on. In order to develop some of his insights, we will turn to other authors who share a similar anthropological basis.

This dissertation contains four chapters. The first chapter aims at analysing the basic tenets of attachment theory, and thereby becoming a background for the further references to 'secure attachment.' The second chapter studies the concept of 'secure attachment in the therapeutic context.' The third chapter attempts to analyse Franco Imoda's understanding of the process of authentic self-transcendence. The fourth chapter, which is the concluding one, seeks to examine whether secure attachment in the therapeutic context facilitates the process of authentic self-transcendence.

4. Conclusions

(1) First of all, secure attachment as conceived by attachment theory, sounds more akin to the basic element of 'presence' as understood by Imoda. Without a basic security, one cannot properly transcend the self. Thus, secure attachment is presented not as something pertaining to an ego-centric survival of the person, but as a basic condition for psychological health. Besides, the secure attachment between the infant and the caregiver is formed even before the emergence of capacities for abstraction and conscious intentionality. Therefore, the secure attachment cannot be considered as totally ego-centric, but a facilitator for genuine self-transcendence.

(2) Secure attachment can facilitate an authentic self-transcendence towards the human other and to the Divine Other. Due to the positive models of the self and the other existing in securely attached individuals, their care-giving system can respond to the needs of the

others in an 'important-in-itself' way. They seem to feel freer with regard to intimacy and autonomy. The insecurely attached persons may compromise such a realistic perception because of their self-distress. This is applicable to the attachment to God also. The securely attached can relate to God as an ideal attachment figure corresponding to their sensitive and religious caregivers, while the insecurely attached may relate to God as means to compensate for their deprivation of attachment resulting in self-distress. In this way, the concept of secure attachment can inform our understanding of the motives with which one transcends to the other, which determines the authenticity of self-transcendence.

(3) In the therapeutic setting, the attachment to the therapist can function as a deliberately formed developmental situation which can be instrumental in correcting the impaired secure base of the individual. The development of secure attachment in the therapeutic setting can even influence the neuro-psychological structures. This results in a change of insecure IWMs into secure ones which leads to a better mentalisation capacity that increases the possibility of a realistic experience regarding the mental processes of the other. This eventually will lead to a coming into contact with the values of the other. Naturally in the therapeutic setting an increase in mentalisation will stimulate the process of this approaching to the values of the therapist and identifying with those values. Here lies the possibility of theocentric self-transcendence. If the client and the therapist do share the theocentric values, such an increase of mentalisation emerging in the context of secure attachment will lead to identification with the therapist's values and the purification of the motives of attachment to God, thereby making those motives more authentic. Thus, attachment theory illuminates the inevitable presence of the other, for example, the therapist, in the process of authentic self-transcendence.

(4) The above conclusions invite our attention to the person of the therapist and his formation. Since psychotherapy is never completely value-neutral, a proper anthropological vision which can address the ethical issues of the problems of the client in the light of the reality of the human mystery becomes important for the therapist. Especially in the human operations of judging and deciding, the values of the therapist hold great influence in orienting the person towards adopting strategies more adaptive to the reality of mystery. Therefore, this study reiterates the need to concentrate more on the anthropological formation of the therapists along with their technical competence.

(5) Imoda's main focus was on pedagogues or guides in formation; this study's focus is on psychotherapists. Rather than the formators or pedagogues becoming therapists, this dissertation deals with therapists assuming certain pedagogical functions. In this line, Bowlby's concept of attachment figures or therapists as 'stronger and wiser' will draw similarities between the roles of 'guides' and 'therapists.' The therapist need not function just as a detached observer or a silent screen, but as a reliable person to whom the client can establish a secure attachment. Besides analyzing the role of the therapist as guide, this study briefly inquired how the attachment styles of the formees and formators interact in the project of formation.

(6) This study brings forth the manifold possibilities of a fruitful dialogue between contemporary psychological theories and Christian anthropology. Although many of these theories do not share the anthropological foundations of Christian faith, an effective dialogue between them reveals the areas of their complementarity. The role of a Christian psychotherapist consists in taking up this dialogue into the psychotherapeutic praxis, rather than compromising the Christian vision of the person to make it fit well into contemporary psychology. A dialogue based on such an anthropological vision can liberate psychology from "a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."³

³RATZINGER, J., *Homily of His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger. Mass «Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice»*, 18.04.2005, AAS 97 (2005), 687.