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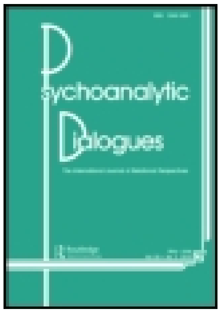

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Review Essay: Constructivism with a Human Face

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Review Essay

Constructivism with a Human Face

Malcolm Owen Slavin, Ph.D.

Ritual and Spontaneity in the Psychoanalytic Process: A Dialectical-Constructivist View by Irwin Z. Hoffman. (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1999, 344 pp.)

Irwin Hoffman's book *Ritual and Spontaneity* includes, but goes well beyond, his series of seminal papers—written over the past several decades—developing a psychoanalytic, constructivist perspective. A new, existential framework depicts what Hoffman calls the "psychobiological bedrock" at the core of the human process of constructing meaning—the lifelong effort to create a livable, subjective world in face of our ever present sense of loss, suffering, and, ultimately, mortality.

This review describes Hoffman's encompassing, existential perspective and discusses how, within this framework, he uses his dialectical sensibility to frame our understanding of both parenting and analysis as "semisacred" activities. The "dialectic of ritual and spontaneity"—the vital clash between disciplined adherence to the analytic frame and personally expressive deviations from it—represents the creative tension between the "magical" dimension of analytic authority and the healing influence of a genuinely expressive human relationship. Hoffman's perspective on the self-interested, "dark side" of the analytic relationship is compared with Winnicott's views on the vital, therapeutic role of "hate" and the paradoxical process by which the patient comes to "use" the analyst.

Unlike most postmodernist "constructivists," Hoffman openly reveals his underlying belief in certain "transcultural, transhistorical universals"—his "psychobiological bedrock." In acknowledging these

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"essentials" (assumptions about human nature) that in some form are integral, yet often hidden, elements of any system of thought, Hoffman saves his own dialectical constructivism from falling into dichotomous (constructivist *vs.* essentialist) thinking.

> To be an analyst means . . . accepting one's daunting responsibility as the inheritor of functions that used to be reserved for the omniscient parents, for "the gods," at the same time that one interprets and participates in a spirit of mutuality with the patient, a spirit that exposes one's personal vulnerability, fallibility and even one's possible exploitativeness.
>
> —Irwin Z. Hoffman, *Ritual and Spontaneity*

> Any radical constructionism can only be built on the foundations of a hidden essentialism.
>
> —Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*

MANY OF US PROBABLY THINK WE ARE AWARE OF IRWIN HOFFMAN'S seminal contributions to contemporary psychoanalysis. More than almost any other theorist, he has repeatedly lifted the veil, as it were, and exposed the hidden underside of concepts and analytic stances. Once unmasked by Hoffman, an issue could never be seen in the same way again.

- In the early 1980s, he exposed classically inspired (asocial) conceptions of transference—and especially of what he called "conservative critiques" of the classical position by *both* traditional and contemporary theorists—that had served to obscure the contribution of the analyst and the importance of the patient's experience of the analyst's human participation.
- In the early 1990s, he used a constructivist sensibility as a double-edged sword, again cutting into both classical and relational theory, revealing an (often hidden) proclivity in both paradigms to assume the analyst's privileged access to an unambiguous "reality" that is not accessible to the patient.
- Later in the 1990s, he unmasked how the personally expressive responsiveness of the relational analyst—vital as it is—may ironically fall into a dichotomous (vs. dialectical) way of thinking about the analytic frame and become a new form of scripted, collective ritual.

Ritual and Spontaneity includes all these major contributions. Many of its essays incorporate much of Hoffman's postmodern taste for inversions and paradoxes—with a major difference. With Hoffman, in my view, we always know that there is a deeply held worldview lying beneath his ironic, deconstructive unmasking of so many of our familiar ideals—an affirmative, analytic understanding that goes well beyond postmodernist, constructivist ideology. Two decades of Hoffman's unique ways of "lifting the veil" on sacred positions and trenchant theorizing are powerfully organized to build cumulatively and cohesively through the middle section—chapters 3 through 8—of this volume.

Yet, *Ritual and Spontaneity* as a whole goes well beyond anything Hoffman has done before. Not only does he pull back the veil still further on the basic human process of constructing meaning in the face of our mortality, but, more significant, in so doing Hoffman reveals what I believe have long been the deeper roots of his own constructivist perspective—the beliefs about the human universals, some version of which underlie his (and all other) constructivist models. If the book is read, now, as a continuous whole (and I think this is how it's best approached), we move directly into Hoffman's expressive disclosure of his worldview—"the dialectic of meaning and mortality"—in which he anchors his constructivist views, extending and deepening their reach to reframe basic aspects of the analytic process. This new, existential context—developed in chapters 1 and 2 of this book and then elaborated in chapters 9 and 10—sort of sandwiches the more familiar relational and constructivist meat in the middle and infuses the whole opus with many new and interesting flavors.

To give you a taste, as it were, of Hoffman's current broad perspective, I have organized my comments around a picture of what Hoffman means by the "dialectic *of meaning and mortality.*" I move through the steps by which basic existential tensions (and our absurd, ironic, yet vital human efforts to deal with them) are inevitably recreated—and in many ways *aggravated*—by the analytic situation. In this existential-relational context, I discuss Hoffman's heroic effort to help us find an authentic way of navigating the inevitable contradictions, struggling to find a creative way of grasping the universal principle of "ritual and spontaneity"—the eponymous, overarching dynamic that, in Hoffman's current view, continuously embraces and renews the lived analytic process.

The Dialectic of Meaning and Mortality

Hoffman's overall paradigm starts with the recognition that we are born into a finite existence in a world in which ongoing suffering, disappointment, and loss are an inevitable part of our experience. For Hoffman—like Kierkegaard—a sense of the brevity and ultimate insignificance of our lives forms the ineluctable background awareness, the context, in which many of us, simultaneously, construct lives filled with meaning, love, and purpose. As I read him, following Becker, Nagel, Tillich, Nussbaum, and others, Hoffman sees the challenge of constructing and maintaining this relatively warm, ordered, lived-in subjective world as lying in the complex need to simultaneously (a) construct meaning and value not from discoverable givens but from wrestling in a continuing process of creation/discovery with the ambiguous leads and clues wrested from human experience (Gentile, 1998 (b) manage the ever present tension emanating from our irreducible, "objective" sense of ultimate meaninglessness and annihilation.

In Hoffman's incredibly expressive voice:

> We, the Slaves—that is humankind—will take what we can from the Mistress-Master, that is from Nature, even though we know that Nature, ultimately, brutally disregards our needs and wishes, ravages us with illness and old age, abuses us, forces on our bodies the most grotesque kinds of physical deterioration, kills us in unspeakably horrifying and unexpected ways. We are not all, to be sure, adult survivors of childhood sexual, physical, or psychological abuse; but we are all adult endurers of the ongoing abuse of the human condition [p. 14].

He continues:

> And yet, we feel, most of us, emphatically, that it's worth it. Although the whole challenge of living might be described as the challenge of making the best of poor substitutes, "the best" after all can be something quite wonderful, inspiring, and miraculous, even if also quite terrible. . . . This perspective requires of mature love that it withstand and encompass the self-love of the other, along with the inevitability of death and loss [p. 14].

Psychobiological Bedrock

By 1996, Hoffman had openly declared his differences with a certain purist, postmodernist, hermeneutic position regarding theory. Referring to a fellow social constructivist, Philip Cushman—with whom, I think, he shares much of his sensibility—Hoffman nevertheless alluded to his differences with constructivists who deny the useful, perhaps inevitable role of explicit or implied universals in social thought: "To search for possible universals underlying the activities and role of healing figures . . . seems quite useful to me . . . and is implicit in Cushman's own approach (p. 87).

Hoffman's own search for universals, it turns out, seems to have taken him back to his own past (as I guess it usually does)—in this case to an early essay, "Death Anxiety and Adaptation to Mortality in Psychoanalytic Theory." This essay was published in 1979, before he wrote any of the other major works for which he is known, and is woven into *Ritual and Spontaneity* as chapter 2 of this book. My sense is that this updated essay points Hoffman back, as T. S. Eliot said, to "return to where we started/ And know the place for the first time." Hoffman now "knows," 20 years later, in *Ritual and Spontaneity*—that "what emerges as a kind of 'psychobiological bedrock,' as the *immmutable transcultural, transhistorical truth*, is that human beings create their worlds, and their sense of meaning in the teeth of the constant threat of nonbeing and meaninglessness" (p. 16, italics added).

The essentially tragic tension in the meaning-and-mortality dialectic—between building up and breaking down, between affirmation and paralyzing doubt, between hope and dread (Mitchell, 1993)—demands an ongoing set of life choices, a never ending story of sustaining a sense of agency and purpose through construction and reconstruction of our subjective world. This is the all-embracing "dialectic of meaning and mortality" in which, for Hoffman, the universal human proclivity and capacity to construct meaning basically take shape. It is what is "primary"—in Greenberg and Mitchell's (1983) terms—in Hoffman's worldview and, in turn, largely undergirds his paradigm of psychological development as well as analytic process and change. It is what the poet Kuznitz, at age 95, recently put so matter-of-factly: "One of my primary thoughts through the years has been that I am living and dying at once. It began long before I was an ageing man. It's continuing. Perhaps the mix gets a bit different" (quoted by Smith, 2000, p. B1).

Although his worldview is every bit as "tragic" as Freud's—in its sense of life as defined by an inescapable clash of human strivings in face of immutable limits—Hoffman breaks decisively with Freud's effort to recast our tragic dividedness as rooted in the *body's* clash with the realities of the civilized social world. Hoffman essentially incorporates Becker's (1973) view that Freud fled from the primordial terror of human mortality by focusing his theory on the presumed primacy of tensions generated by the body (libidinal instinctuality). Further, when the limits of the explanatory power of conflict with bodily drives became apparent, Freud realized he needed to invent a more encompassing motive to understand the persistance of painful, maladaptive repetitions in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud further distanced himself from a direct recognition of the terror of death by inventing the idea that death itself was actually an inherent, deeply desired, organismic goal: the newly minted death "instinct." Freud was aware, as Hoffman notes (p. 40), that the very idea of a death instinct might serve the "defensive" purpose of transforming our simple helplessness in the face of life's finite limits into the active workings of Thanatos, a lofty, purposive longing. I wonder if Freud was perhaps less aware of the intellectually defensive functions of his use of the death instinct to shore up and, he hoped, ultimately preserve his own libidinal drive theory.

Hoffman's move toward an existential view maintains Freud's overarching sense of tragic opposition—of the need to face up to painful, universal truths—as attempting, at the same time, to maintain a central commitment to his own form of relational (and, of course, constructivist) perspective. From birth onward, social interactions—especially ritualized ones—are seen as the central means of creating and maintaining a (shared) subjective sense that life has meaning. In Hoffman's narrative, the relational world seems to be organized to respond to the primary human need to create and maintain antidotes to the ever present background of mortal dread. Although the existential dialectic—meaning and mortality—has become "bedrock" for Hoffman, I think that, in fact, there is a unique mixture of the three paradigms (existential, relational, and constructivist) in his thinking. This background of multiplicity sits well with me. But I think that some analysts who are more devoted to a purer relational and/or constructivist approach may find the competing resonances in Hoffman's tale harder to bear.

It seems to me as though Hoffman's narrative now depicts us as creatures who are organized by existential (death) anxiety *and*, in close second place, our relational nature. The universal tension that, for Freud and the classical analytic tradition, ultimately emanates from the our body's visceral clash with civilization now emerges directly from the clash of our longing for survival and our innate knowledge that we and our loved ones will, in fact, not survive. I believe it is fair to say that the body, the sensual, sexual body—its desires, seductions, imperatives—is not, as far as Hoffman has presently developed his views, a major player in his narrative The vicissitudes of the body seem to be largely subsumed within our experience of our mortality—the pain and vulnerability of the flesh—a dimension of the superordinate tension of meaningful life in face of loss and death.

How are we humans basically designed psychologically to create and maintain a livable subjective world? What roles do parents play in its construction? Where does analysis fit on this perpetual construction–reconstruction site? And, what difference does it make to approach our patients' lives, our own life, our task as analysts, with a Hoffmanesque sensibility that emanates from this *weltanschauung*?

Meaning, Magic, and Parental Power

As I read it, what I'd call Hoffman's "developmental constructivism" seems to rest in large part on the view that it would be inconceivable for humans to create meaning without a major, formative, magically authoritative experience of powerful Others—others who live in their own subjective universes and communicate their worldviews to us in deeply felt ways, through symbolic and nonsymbolic interaction.

The interaction of child and parent is thus redefined functionally as the first experience—built into the life cycle—of this sacred, authoritative presence. For Hoffman, parents are, first and foremost, the "gods of infancy and childhood"—semideities in the child's experience. Parents' subjectivities are powerful enough to enable the child to create an inner stage on which the lifelong construction of meaning—through choice, action, and reflection—will be played out. "Parents, the 'gods' of infancy and childhood, have the power to give children a sense of being 'chosen,' that is, of being valued as creative centers of experience and choice in their own right" (p. 11).

As Hoffman notes (p. 11), his view resembles Winnicott's (1969) depiction of the mother who holds the child in a protective world of omnipotence until the child has built enough inner hope and strength to face disillusionment and frustration more directly. I think the process also resembles the child's creation of a "transitional space" (Winnicott, 1951) in which the world of subjective (cultural) meanings comes to exist as a synthesis, a bridge, between inner and outer experience. Hoffman's child, as it were, also echoes the Kohutian (1977) child who builds the resiliency of its self, in good part, around powerfully idealized objects.

Yet, I think it's crucial that Hoffman, unlike Winnicott or Kohut, places this whole parenting drama against the ever present backdrop of the parent's central function as a forceful, loving, wise *antidote,* as it were, to the lifelong pull of mortality and meaninglessness—an antidote to the omnipresent potential for despair inevitably faced by the child. Hoffman's parental "gods" (his version of Winnicott's parental "holding" and Kohut's "idealization") represent the first experience of a much larger, continuing lifelong need and quest for powerful, authoritative, in part magical attachments to figures, symbols, and institutions—the "gods" of adult life of which the first parental deities are simply an early version. I think that putting the parental holding and the selfobject functions of idealization into the broad, existential context of mortal anxiety—as partially magical antidotes to such anxiety—substantially reframes our basic take on what developmental relationships are about.

Of course, many of the serious problems that people face in constructing meaning and making life choices emerge, equally, from this very same preparatory, magical, authoritative relating that constitutes human parenting. First, it is destined that, to varying degrees, parents will fail in their desire and capacity to serve fully as the idealizable demigods their children need: "Even the best parents are never caregivers whose love, in terms of quality and power, is so perfect and permanent as to escape the fate of the child's disillusionment. The parents are ultimately exposed as poor substitutes for 'the gods'" (pp. 13–14).

Moreover, intertwined with this particular (archetypal) parental role failure are the multiple, complex ways that parents, as particular human beings, are inevitably "self-interested" creatures. They provide our first experience of exchange with an Other, of negotiating with people who largely share many of our needs and views yet at the same time have distinct, sometimes competing, needs and identities of their own. An encounter with parents who are especially *unable* to serve sufficiently as authoritative, loving demigods and/or who negotiate areas of competing needs in especially exploitative ways will jeopardize the child's capacity to construct a personally useful and satisfying subjective universe. The child will not have a hopeful enough stance and a usable enough relational map—a good enough foundation for a subjective world that holds up to the inexorable, annihilating pull of life's pain, disappointment, and intrinsic ambiguity. To make things worse, ill-timed early failures, lack of recognition, and exploitation may make it more difficult to choose (and effectively "use") later objects, later forms of authority, institutional and personal, that might shore up the capacity to create a meaningful subjective buffer to the omnipresent existential dread.

Analyst as Archetypal Authority and Fellow Sufferer

Enter analysis. "The analytic situation," Hoffman says, "is an arrangement conducive, among other things, to addressing and at least partially repairing the cracks in that foundation" (p. 12). Where does the reparative potential in analysis come from? How does the analytic arrangement fit in the larger existential/relational picture? First, for Hoffman, analysis is actually set up—designed in part to serve as a "magnet for the universal human appetite to re-establish the earliest conditions for the absorption of love. That appetite, as Freud argued, is the great generator of religious, theistic, belief systems" (p. 12).

This "primordial appetite," in Hoffman's view, seems to crave two kinds of healing, two kinds of relating—first, a kind of transcendent relationship with a godlike presence ("an anchor, a source of meaning, a powerful source of affirmation") and second, an "intimate, mutual relationship" that provides a new, direct experience of loving, human relating that, unlike magical authority, provides an experience of recognition, negotiation, and mutual risk-taking that serves to disconfirm some of the "toxic" internalized expectations rooted in relational interactions of the past. As Hoffman says:

> To be an analyst means . . . accepting one's daunting responsibility as the inheritor of functions that used to be reserved for the omniscient parents, for "the gods," at the same time that one interprets and participates in a spirit of mutuality with the patient, a spirit that exposes one's personal vulnerability, fallibility and even one's possible exploitativeness [p. 30].

The cultivated ambiguity in the analytic setting; the relative hiddenness of large aspects of the analyst's ordinary, human side; the ritualized repetition of sessions set apart from the everyday disorder of life—all these enhance what Hoffman believes is essentially the transcendent (some would say archetypal) dimension of the analytic process, the replication of the sense of parental semidivinity. Indeed, Hoffman believes that, if the analytic process is to marshal enough real power to influence long-established, internal conclusions about life, if it is to make a real dent in "repairing cracks in the foundation," the process must conjure enough of this more magical experience to compete with the strength of patterns established early on with the parental "gods." "Only with that magical increment of power does the analyst stand a chance of doing battle with the pathogenic object relations that were absorbed before the patient was old enough to think, or most importantly, think critically" (p. 233).

Somehow, analysis must simultaneously fulfill the need for hierarchical magical power and the equally powerful need for a more symmetrical, mutual, reciprocal relationship in which the analyst is open to, and capable of, spontaneous human interaction.

The Dark Side of the Analytic Process

Yet, as I read him, Hoffman wants to make sure we don't let ourselves get too carried away with our illusions and simple ideals about either of these analytic poles: the sacred, transformative potentials of analytic space *or* the potentials for relating in new, genuine ways. Once again, he lifts the veil on each of these dimensions, and we are confronted with some basic, built-in contradictions in the analytic frame.

First, I think, paradoxically, there is the inevitable tension introduced by the constructivist analyst's own sensibility: his or her sensitivity to the intrinsic ambiguities of meaning; the uncertainty in life choices; openness to his or her own fallibility, vulnerability, and awareness of the objective meaninglessness that inevitably lurks behind the subjective world of values and constructed meanings. All this vital skepticism and doubt clash, to some degree, with the demigodlike features of the analyst—his or her capacity to evoke a magical potential space as the omnipotent heir to the parents' magical power and authority.

Second, there is the matter of the analyst's irreducible "otherness," or what Hoffman calls the "dark side of the analytic situation"—namely, the asymmetrical, impersonal, and naturally self-interested side of the analytic setup that includes its limited, scheduled hours, lack of touch, little reciprocal vulnerability (but a regular payment for service), and an ending when the "work" is done. The palpably impersonal aspects of the analytic role are inevitably sensed as such by the patient and clash with the patient's (and sometimes with the analyst's) need for and expectation of an intimate, mutual, reciprocal relationship. Moreover, as I have also discussed (Slavin and Kriegman, 1998), the analyst's attachment to the frame as well as to other naturally self-interested aspects of the analyst's needs and motives will almost invariably evoke aspects of earlier "bad objects"—toxic versions of "otherness" in early caregivers whose own needs and attachments to objects other than the patient may have in fact significantly precluded a recognition of the patient's experience.

If analysis is an all-too-human situation destined to repeat early disappointments in the quest for a supremely powerful, transformative parental figure, and if its intimacy is inevitably compromised by the self-interestedness of the analyst, can we still believe in its value? Does Hoffman get us out of this point of desperate contradiction? Invariably, it is *precisely* in response to such potential arenas of contradiction and potential despair that Hoffman has the most to say. Most of the rhythm—the music—of his book can be read as a detailed articulation of, and creative response to, these paradoxical dilemmas.

The Dialectic of Ritual and Spontaneity[1]

I think that, for Hoffman, contradictions, ironies, and absurdities are the inescapable crucible, the living field, in which the analyst and patient are destined to approach their work. The multiple tensions between all these crucial, yet at least partly contradictory, dimensions of the analytic process generate the overarching therapeutic dynamic that Hoffman calls the "dialectic of ritual and spontaneity." They constitute the lived, human reality in analysis that gives meaning to the abstract, philosophical term *dialectic*, which has so many historical/philosophical connotations. Analysis, for Hoffman, is first and foremost a replica of the tensions over meaning and meaninglessness, loving devotion and self-interestedness, improvisation and disciplined reflection, that constitute the human condition.

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[1] Hoffman does not imply that there is a dialectical movement toward a synthesis of polarities (as in Hegelian or Marxian versions) of the term *dialectic*. I believe he uses the term because nothing else seems to capture as well the way in which certain seemingly opposed ideas, types of action, or subjective experiences seem to imply, even necessitate, each other. The tensions between paradoxically related dimensions of experience may certainly propel a kind of dialectical change process. Yet, given Hoffman's view of their universal, existential nature, the poles in the dialectic are not seen as ultimately resolved or transcended.

In my view, one of the most unique features of Hoffman's approach is the way he delineates how it is precisely in recognizing and working with the ubiquitous dialectical tensions intrinsic to the analytic situation—both what analysis shares with the human condition and what is the uniquely analytic version of larger human dilemmas—that hope for some degree of therapeutic success exists. I think that his embracing the notion of a dialectic between ritual and spontaneity is as close as he wants to get to the formulation of a technique, an institutionalization of his thinking about analytic process. This dialectic is really a metatechnique, an attitude, a codified sensibility that brings Hoffman with us, as it were, into the analytic maelstrom—a maelstrom that he has helped to stir up by unveiling the perpetually recreated analytic illusions of safety that lurk in dichotomous thinking about theory and practice.

The Dialectic, Paradox, and the "Single-Minded Bad Object"

I find myself using Hoffman's dialectical voice less as a guideline for specific types of intervention than as a persuasive call to engage continuously in a particular kind of self-observation and reflection. Sometimes the dialectical sensibility is a reminder to observe paradoxical, unanticipated aspects of analytic interactions. Most centrally, I find myself more aware of how my expressive participation with a given patient—my "spontaneous deviations, from the frame"—does not simply balance my analytic role by addressing relational needs and process, but actually enhances and deepens the meaning (for my patient and me) of the analytic role and frame itself. At other moments, my adherence to certain traditional aspects of the frame feels like it is the indispensable backdrop that enables some of those "deviations" actually to be "spontaneous" in substance rather than simple in style; my expressive participation itself becomes coconstructed, emerging from the real tensions between my patient and me, as opposed to being a new alternative script, a new ritual in which, as Hoffman astutely notes (chapter 8), throwing out the book becomes the book.

Hoffman reminds me that there is something in the intrinsic tensions of the analytic process itself—over and above what emanates from me and my patients as individuals—that doesn't like these dialectical relationships. It pushes them apart, compels both of us to polarize our thinking into more dichotomous terms—or, alternatively, tries to tempt me to condense inevitable contradictions into a simplified, presumably "inclusive" analytic stance with the promise of a more unified and less tension-packed analytic process.

The point is that, quite apart from any specific, individual countertransferences, we all feel this pervasive universal pull of what Hoffman calls "the 'single-minded' bad object" (p. 217). This universal "bad object" is not created by our individual idiosyncratic histories but rather by a very human longing to construct safer analytic dichotomies in which, for example, the analytic rules are experienced in a linear fashion as simply opposed to, rather than paradoxically defined by, the deviations from them. The tendency to dichotomize structured rules and spontaneous expressions—or trying to balance them while still *understanding* them in dichotomizing ways—operates in opposition to the Hoffmanesque, dialectical sense of their mutual relevance and misses their paradoxical tensions. We end up doing justice neither to the manifestly disciplined and containing aspects of the analytic process nor to our overtly expressive, freer participation.

The Dialectic, Hate, and the "Use" of the Analytic Frame

Yet, the implications of the dialectic go beyond its value as a concept that promotes a particular kind of openness to tension and self-reflection. Hoffman repeatedly draws on Winnicott, with whom he clearly shares an unusual sensitivity to paradox. Indeed, Hoffman's "dialectic of ritual and spontaneity" may represent a dimension of the analytic process that perhaps parallels Winnicott's (1969) views about the "use of an object" as well as Benjamin's (1988) related view of the development of intersubjectivity.

Winnicott held that, in order to make an object (developmentally) usable, in order to know the object, in order to more fully experience it (and oneself) as real, one must destroy a certain existing internal version of the object. And the object must somehow both allow this psychological destruction to take place and vigorously survive it.

Hoffman (p. 212) suggests that, in the analytic situation, an analogous process of survival and destruction may take the form of the dialectical interplay of the analyst's maintenance of the analytic frame and his or her readiness to allow its momentary overthrow by a more direct responsiveness to the patient's needs. In this sense, the frame is regularly "destroyed" by the spontaneous deviations and regularly survives the attack. Thus, we might think of the dialectic of ritual and spontaneity as representing Hoffman's effort to represent the Winnicottean view of the creative tensions between destruction and survival in more fully two-person, reciprocal, relational terms. What emerges over time through the dialectic of ritual and spontaneity is a more real and usable analytic relationship. As analyst and patient become more capable of recognizing the "otherness" of each other, Hoffman notes, "the tolerance of the tension within each participant goes hand-in-hand with tolerating and nourishing the creative potentials of the tension in the other (cf Benjamin, 1988)" (p. 216).

I think the analytic process itself comes to include a more real and usable version of the ritualized frame as well as—intertwined with it—a greater capacity for genuinely spontaneous expression.

Winnicott (1945, 1947) characterized the ritualized dimension of analytic relating—"the end of the hour, the end of the analysis, the rules and regulations"—as expressions of what he called the analyst's "hate." Such hate was not ultimately harmful to the patient's real interests; it was seen as inextricable from the analyst's love and an indispensable aspect of the patient's experience of the analyst's realness. Indeed, "the patient needs," Winnicott wrote, "to be able to see the analyst's undisplaced and coincident love and hate of him." However, in characterizing the analytic frame as an expression of the analyst's hate, Winnicott may lead us into what Hoffman would see as a tendency to dichotomize the meanings of the frame. For instance, if adherence to the frame is seen as a covert expression of the analyst's hate, are we apt to overlook the ways in which, equally, hate may be covertly expressed through deviations from the frame? Moreover, is not the analyst's capacity to live within the limits, to maintain the "rules and regulations," sometimes an important way of expressing the analyst's love?

Indeed, I think Hoffman draws on Winnicott's exquisitely paradoxical sense of the multiple, sometimes contradictory, tensions involved in analytic relating yet spells out some of the relational complexity of the issues in a more even-handed, systematic way. Patient and analyst want to both destroy and preserve, ignore and value, the separateness and multiplicity of each other. The analyst's adherence to a relatively less personal, formal role relationship painfully conflicts with many of the patient's desires and yet is also aligned with the patient's need for the analyst to avoid "excessive suffocating personal involvement" (p. 216). Yet the analyst's personally expressive deviations from the frame are often deeply aligned with and responsive to the patient's needs. So, too, the analyst's own personal interests and needs lie both in wrapping oneself within the protection and power of the analytic role as well as in having freedom to selectively leave that role in response to the unique needs of a particular patient at a particular time. Analytic relating, for Hoffman, is a constantly shifting—yes, mind-boggling—configuration of these multiple individual meanings of analytic formality and expressive intimacy. Finally, whatever convictions may (necessarily) dominate the analyst's engagement at a given moment, "the attitude that is most integrative and authentic must be an alloy of doubt and openness" (p. 216).

The Dialectic and Oedipal (Triangular) Issues

I think Hoffman sees these mutual ambivalences about the ritualized analytic role as an intrinsic aspect of all analytic relating—that is, as significantly independent of the specific transference dynamics that emerge in any particular analytic couple or around any particular developmental issue. In this broad, generic sense, he also delineates the conspicuously oedipal resonances of two people struggling over the analyst's attachment and loyalty to analytic principles on one hand and to the patient's diverse individual needs on the other. In challenging the analyst's attachment to analytically prescribed limits and principles, Hoffman recognizes that the patient may, in part, want to compete with those other relationships and perhaps topple or destroy that part of the analyst's identity that is "wedded" to psychoanalysis (p. 215). Yet, simultaneously, Hoffman notes, "the patient has an investment in my remaining 'wedded' to the Institute, to the Book, and to analytic principles including the principle of abstinence that helps protect my capacity to subordinate my own personal responsiveness and immediate desire to the patient's long term interests in the course of the work" (p. 215).

Hoffman's delineation of the dialectical nature of oedipal dynamics in the analytic situation emphasizes how the relatively longer term interests of both patient and analyst (like those of child and parent) are usually protected and enhanced by the maintenance of certain boundaries in face of the shorter term experience of rejection and frustration these boundaries simultaneously represent. Yet I think that one implication of Hoffman's dialectical view of the oedipal meanings of the analytic situation is that, though both parties benefit from the analyst's "marriage" to his or her principles, so too both parties must at times also allow themselves and each other to be emotionally moved (seduce and be seduced) into forms of more direct personal communication—communication that from a narrower, "single-minded" perspective might look "incestuous" in nature. Indeed, when viewed dialectically, the rigid adherence to the frame—in ways that permit no selective, spontaneous responsiveness outside it—might actually engender a sense of the underlying vulnerability of the analyst's "marriage" to analytic principles. A rigid relationship with analytic ritual might connote an attachment to principles that seems to revolve more around safety and magical authority than around understanding and love.

Hoffman says that, in the throws of oedipal competition with his analytic principles, his patient "would like to win a few battles, perhaps, but not the war" (p. 215). And Hoffman is clearly concerned about the potentially "treacherous going" that can result from the introduction of heightened mutuality in the analytic relationship (p. 272). Judging from Hoffman's numerous clinical examples (that he rarely frames directly in oedipal terms), I read the patient's winning a "few battles" as signifying the patient's role in influencing the analyst's selective openness to the risk of leaving the predictable safety and magic of the frame at those vital moments when there needs to be a clear sign that the patient's real needs take precedence over a relatively scripted performance of the analytic role.

In contrast, certain Kleinians (e.g., Britton, 1989) have interpreted the oedipal meanings of the analyst's attachment to analytic ritual in what I think Hoffman would call a "single-minded" way—namely, as simply intrapsychic projections by the patient whose pathology engenders a competitive desire to destroy the analyst's relationship with his or her role—and, sooner or later, must be interpreted as such. Equally, in contrast to some of the connotations of the "slippery slope" sensibility about boundary choices, I read the dialectical-constructivist view as consistent with a position that is selectively open to, indeed occasionally requires, an affirmation of the emotional attachment and desire between analyst and patient because it may be the way in which, ironically, respect for the institution of analysis (symbolically, the parents' marriage and love for each other) is, in fact, more convincingly shown. When the capacity for open, intimate exchange emerges in the context of careful, ongoing reflection about the patient's needs, it may often be *less* likely to be experienced as a transgressive act that must be hidden from the analyst's "marriage to principle." Instead, it may signify the kind of "secure attachment to principle" that permits the analyst to reciprocate some of the openness that analysis regularly demands of the patient (see, e.g., Davies, 1994, 1998).

Analytic Illusion, Deception, and the Dialectic of Negotiated Change

The dialectic between attachment to the analytic frame and personal expressiveness embodies never-ending universal tensions in human relationships, of which the oedipal and the preoedipal are particular developmental variants. Yet, in my experience, the nature of the specific analytic frame that comes to characterize a particular analytic relationship typically has to change substantially over time. I think that, like a family and a marriage, the norms that guide a particular analysis usually have to change away from their initially generic, socially given, ritualized character—away from the inevitable professional biases and ideals that make them up—toward a form that is much more closely aligned with the realities of a particular patient's life, needs, and interests (Slavin, 1998, 2000a). Hoffman's dialectic helps explain how this change works.

What I mean is that the ritual of the analytic frame is, after all, a social construction—a discourse, if you will—that the analytic profession has designed in order to capture and protect the interests of both the patient and the analyst. But, since the frame is integrally linked to the analyst's identity and professional loyalties, it is always likely—as any human belief system or institution—to start out somewhat tilted, or, really, interpreted in ways that are tilted—toward some version of the analyst's customary beliefs and interests (Slavin and Kriegman, 1992, 1998). In conjunction with this potential for bias is an inevitable tendency for analytic rituals and beliefs to take on a certain magical and sacred quality—not simply in the positive, existential sense that Hoffman holds as essential to counter our powerlessness in face of death and loss. In addition, as Renik (2000) observed, ritual and magic may entail a deceptive, "hocus-pocus" quality—the religious conjuring of "miracle, mystery and authority"—in order to enhance analytic power in ways that are often not openly visible to our patients (and ourselves). The style, values, goals of one's analytic school are always in some complex tension with the interests of the patient in the analyst's subjective experience. In every "good enough" analysis, it is natural that the balance is likely to start out in some respects tilted a bit more toward familiar analytic attachments than to the particular interests of the patient. Arguably, this tendency for ritual, institutions, and authority to entail a certain deceptive (and self-deceptive) side may be what generates the adaptive side of the "oedipal" strivings to provoke and challenge the analyst to emotionally scrutinize his or her loyalty to principle, tradition—the analytic "book" (Slavin, 1999, 2000b).

I often wonder if the "spontaneous deviations from the frame," in Hoffman's dialectic—in addition to all their other functions—represent a dynamic by which the patient probes for signs of what may in fact be hidden and ambiguously entwined in the analyst's ritual and magical role. As Hoffman (chapter 4) implies in his description of "the patient as interpreter of the analyst's experience," the patient tries to ferret out how much deception may lie in the analyst's conjuring of the unique, special features of the analytic relationship. In face of the "dark side" of the analytic relationship—its asymmetry and connection to the analyst's self-interest—how much *should* the patient typically trust in the deliberately ambiguous, mysterious side of ritual analytic forms? Where does deception end and useful, transformative illusion begin? How can they be separated?

My point is not to question Hoffman's view of the role of magical fantasy and ritual drama as a vital dimension of the analytic dialectic. Rather, it is precisely because illusion is an integral dimension of the analytic process that it must often be probed, seen through, taken apart, renegotiated, rebuilt. The goal is for the patient (and also, potentially, the analyst) to discern and disentangle the inevitable deceptions (and self-deceptions) from useful, transformative illusions, both of which find their most fertile ground in the ritual side of the dialectic. I think this is what Hoffman refers to when he writes, "In a manner that echoes the dialectic of repetition and new experience . . . the exploitative potentials of the analytic process can be partially transcended and transformed through the analyst's owning of those features of the frame while still doing his or her best to overcome them" (p. 29).

Although Hoffman describes the analyst's "owning" of the "exploitative" (and, I would add, "deceptive") potentials of the analytic process in a way that seems to emphasize its voluntary, deliberate, conscious character, I think he would be the first to see the analysts' capacity to see this self-interested side of the process (and of themselves) as emerging in part from the patient's transferential "investigation" and "adaptive skepticism," which press for a renegotiation of the ritual elements of the frame. The "transcendence" and "transformation" Hoffman refers to do not simply signify the transformation of the meanings of the dark (exploitative) side of the frame—but a transformation of the realities of the broader analytic relationship as it is lived, over time, by the two participants. Through the dialectic, the analysis becomes a far more novel, idiosyncratic relationship coconstructed, created in its unique form, by its participants (Slavin and Kriegman, 1998; Slavin, 2000a).

The Patient's Experience of the Analyst's Inner Struggle

To know Hoffman's work, in this book and elsewhere, is to see an analyst living out a kind of continuing struggle with the pull of objective realities, real choices—the tolling bells, the crossroads, the roads not taken in a finite human lifetime.

In the book, what emerges over and over is an overwhelmingly powerful current of clinical examples in which Hoffman's patients are faced with crucial, real-life choices and Hoffman, after some struggle, recognizes that he has no choice but to chose to "accompan[y] the patient through and in some measure becom[e] implicated in, the patient's choices as they emerge and are wrestled with over time" (p. 82).

For this reader, at least, what often stands out, over and above the specific choices Hoffman makes, is the heartfelt, inner struggle that Hoffman allows himself to feel and eventually comes to communicate to his patients from the own depths of his own being. It is inconceivable to me that Hoffman's patients are less than deeply affected by the *process* of his struggle—the way it moves him, in his restrained way, palpably closer to them. Listening to these moments, I often feel that, as important as the particular way we hear Hoffman frame the struggle—as a wrestling with time and mortality—is the fact that it *is* a struggle, a struggle between a mighty array of conflicting currents and perceptions that tug on Hoffman's soul. I think he suffers with, and in a sense for, his patients—suffers not as a subjugation of self but through his mighty effort, in Benjamin's (1988) sense, to embrace both them and himself.

> It's not simply that the patient learns that we are better than the "bad objects" of the past, although maybe it comes around to that in the end. Rather, the patient finds a way to forgive us for the ways in which we really *are* bad and unworthy. If those aspects of our being as analysts can be forgiven, then the good we have to offer can be assimilated, the patient can change, and we can feel that we've redeemed ourselves [Hoffman, pp. 270–271].

"Thinking dialectically,“ Hoffman says, "can be a powerful expression, in itself, of the analyst's struggle to come to grips with complexity of patient's multiple aims and potentials as they interface with analyst's own" (p. 217).

In my experience (Slavin, 1999, 2000a), analysts like Hoffman are, by and large, exceptionally willing, even compelled, to open up, in themselves, their own *versions* of the same human conflicts with which their patients are struggling.

Constructivism: Practicing the Expressiveness He Preaches

In my view, the greatest and most enduring strength of this book emerges when we step back and view it as a whole—beyond the rich compendium of subtle clinical wisdom in its parts. What emerges is the fact that, in describing the dialectic of meaning and mortality, Hoffman candidly expresses his deepest awareness of what is "essential" in his constructivist universe. As Fuss (1985), the feminist literary scholar, brilliantly observed, "any radical constructionism can only be built on the foundations of a hidden essentialism." Fuss went on to point out that it is far more productive to discover and reveal what is the inevitable level of "assumed universals" in any constructivism than to avoid or minimize them out of an ideological aversion to, or fear of, their presence and role in theory. Indeed, Fuss implied that the main thing that differentiates a self-contradictory constructivism (one caught in a tendency to exempt its own thinking from the scrutiny it prescribes for others) from a self-reflective constructivism (that can stand in its own critical light) is its capacity to "risk" the acknowledgment of the essentials that are integral elements of any system of thought. Taking this risk can transform a constructivist perspective from one that perpetuates dichotomous thinking (essences versus constructs) into one that gets us closer to the harder-to-capture dialectical tensions in human thought and action. A reactionary ideological essential*ism* is transformed into that aspect of theory building that simply appreciates the necessary category of essence.

I think that Hoffman takes precisely this self-exposing risk in delineating his underlying beliefs about the objective and essential dialectic of meaning and mortality. He moves out of the relatively superficial dichotomy of "constructivist versus essentialist" that characterizes so much contemporary postmodernist (and anti-postmodernist) theorizing (Slavin, 1998).

For me, what is even more striking is the fact that, in its very form, Hoffman's book practices, in a sense, what he preaches about the analytic process: It conveys both his formal constructivist system and expresses his clearly heartfelt personal vision about the human anxiety about death that generates the urgency, the persistence, and the ultimate undoing of our primordial need to construct meaning. That Hoffman lays out his belief in the "transcultural, transhistorical universals"—what he calls the "psychobiological bedrock" at the root of his constructivism—is, paradoxically, what most deeply validates his central claim that he "approaches constructivism with a constructivist attitude" (p. 20).

Thus, the "middle position" Hoffman claims he occupies (between radical relativist and objectivist poles) has a solid feel to it—more than an attitude, an intellectual position, on an epistemological question. His "critical constructivism" feels deeply grounded by its frankly articulated worldview. Stark and disquieting as his existential vision may be to some readers, like his candid clinical expressiveness, it ultimately warms and validates his whole constructivist enterprise. It gives it a human face.

Some Things Are More Ambiguous Than Others

This is not to say that Hoffman's system is without some cracks. I think Hoffman is aware that his choice to give the awareness of death, loss, and suffering an "objective" status is not, in at least a narrow sense, consistent with the ambiguity that he sees as intrinsic to virtually every other aspect of our experience. From some perspectives, including Freud's, death is, in many ways, perhaps the *most* ambiguous thing of all; and much of the meaning we give to loss and suffering is constructed like everything else. Indeed, by placing death "beyond the horizon" of our constructed universe and giving it the power to motivate and organize virtually everything else, Hoffman may end up rendering death as having precisely the uniquely absolute, transcendent status that theological systems give to the *divine*. Is this, irony of ironies, where "god" actually lurks in Hoffman's system?

It's very interesting and odd to me that, though I believe that Hoffman's view of death is, indeed, one of the cracks in the system, it is not one that seriously bothers me. In fact, the reason that I cite it as a philosophical problem emerged from discussions with a colleague, Dr. Bill Fortier, a theologian-analyst, who teaches an analytic theory course with me. Yet for Bill—who immensely appreciates Hoffman's work (and perhaps for many other analysts of different cultural orientations)—Hoffman's unquestioned assumptions about the objective finality of death and ultimate insignificance of life can represent a more significant problem.

Multiple Psychobiologic Bedrocks

For me, if there is a significant direction that Hoffman does not pursue, it is not a concern with his objective certainty, per se, about death anxiety and its centrality in the human psyche. Rather, it's the need to open further the question of what is, as he calls it, "psychobiological bedrock" to the range of other, equally innate, central organizing principles, primary motives, that may shape human experience and behavior at the same bedrock level (Lichtenberg, 1989).

For instance, from an evolutionary biological point of view, it may be that during the huge shift over the last few million years—in the course of which we in fact *became* a species that is capable of a truly reflective awareness about our own anticipated mortality—we did not lose many other innate motivational currents that pushed and pulled us in our earlier, ancestral life. This ancestral context probably bears on what evolved to be the central motives and themes around which our experience and behavior are organized.

For example, the crucial importance of human attachments to our survival has probably selected for a complex "need and capacity to relate" as a part of our psychological design that is perhaps an equally central, equally primary, "bedrock" organizer of our experience as is the awareness and terror of our mortality. The complex need for attachment may actually *generate* a significant part of our fear of loss—and ultimate loss in the form of death. Or death anxiety may be a ubiquitous backdrop that intertwines with the workings of various other motives, coloring experience strikingly but not, strictly speaking, centrally organizing and motivating it as much as the meaning–mortality dialectic might seem to imply.

For example, perhaps when we evolved into our present form as animals that need to be (are *capable* of being) profoundly socially constructed (which after all is a biologically based adaptive capacity with major adaptive advantages), we may have simultaneously evolved a certain haunting background awareness of the "made up" nature of the self (the "lie that is the self," as Kierkegaard (1844) said, and the Buddhists might claim). And, once this constructed, subjective quality of the self became a fundamental human characteristic, might it be that a sense of the precariousness of the self (and its meanings) also became a central, intrinsic human vulnerability? Might this normal, vulnerability of the maturing human self be ubiquitously symbolized as a physical death? Is one ironic implication, perhaps, that, as individuals, only when we "achieve" a capacity for genuine mortal dread (death anxiety) that we signal, as Stolorow (1974) suggested, that we have attained a relatively cohesive self in childhood or in the analytic process?

None of these other contenders for a piece of "psychobiological bedrock"—particularly, the innate relational dread of object loss and the innate terror of the loss of self-cohesion—seems to me to be fundamentally alien to, or, in the long run, incompatible with Hoffman's overall perspective. I hope that his theoretical emphasis on death anxiety—in my view, one among several interesting "bedrock" organizing principles—does not mean that the extraordinary humanity and breath of Hoffman's encompassing psychoanalytic vision are given less than the full justice they are due. It is obvious that Hoffman deeply appreciates the centrality of relational motives. And, more than many relational analysts—in his references to the "dark side" of parenting, the analytic situation, and the analyst's motives—he appreciates and actually takes into account the ubiquitous role of conflicting interests as a normal aspect of human affairs. Indeed, there is not much in the way of a profound clinical sensitivity to the multiple dimensions of the human heart that is missing here. It is here, as it were, in spades.

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