

COMMENSURABILITY AND INCOMMENSURABILITY OF PARADIGMS AMONG THEORIES AND PERSONS¹

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This article considers the ongoing tension of the presence of two or more seemingly incommensurable worlds that in some way might experientially coexist within the emerging individual who at once is singularly self-regulating as well as systems-contextualized and systems-organized. Can disparate orientations, profoundly discrepant worldviews, be intelligible to each other, or must they remain dissociated, each speaking indecipherable languages? Exploring these questions through the lens of experiential paradox expands upon ways of conceptualizing what it means to be an individual person and the broader developmental potentials for one's emotional world. It is argued that our shared struggle to tolerate both seemingly incommensurable worlds—one of context-determinedness and one of independence, agency, and ownership of one's present and future—leads to positive, developmental trajectories.

Keywords: commensurability; complexity; contextualism; incommensurability; intersubjectivity

We say “inner world” or “outer world,” but actually there is just one whole world. In this limitless world, our throat is like a swinging door. The air comes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. . . . What we call “I” is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale.
—Shunryu Suzuki (2001, p. 11)

Nothing is more important as a defining ingredient in a truly therapeutic system than that the analyst safeguard the extension of the inquiry [and, I would add,

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ways of interacting] into realms of the patient's experience that are threatening to the analyst's sense of self.

—Brandchaft (2002, p. 740)

This article is in part inspired by questions about the commensurability and incommensurability of theories and persons—the landscape for which Maduro (this issue) has quite movingly laid out for us. Here, we consider the ongoing tension and awkwardness of the presence of two or more seemingly incommensurable worlds that might, in some way, coexist: philosophy and science, Freud and Kohut, Cartesianism and contextualism, the iPhone and our search for peace, solitude, and tranquility, just to name a few. It is also inspired by the seeming paradox of the emerging individual who at once is singularly self-regulating, as well as systems-contextualized and systems-organized. Louis Sander (2008)², among many others, took up this question in his seminal paper on “Paradox and Resolution” as it pertained developmentally to the world of the newborn. I wish to pose in this article similar paradoxes and questions in regard to adult persons.

Can theoretical, as well as personal, paradigms interpenetrate and coexist, despite their apparent incommensurability, or are they doomed to be forever segregated, compartmentalized, and, well, incommensurable? Can disparate orientations, profoundly discrepant worldviews, be intelligible to each other, or must they remain dissociated, each speaking indecipherable languages? I believe that exploring these questions, and perhaps formulating a few answers, in addition to being just a whole lot of fun, expands upon ways of conceptualizing what it means to be an individual person and the broader developmental potentials for one's experiential world.

In what way can the isolated, singular, autonomous person make sense of a realm in which individual emotional worlds are not self-generated but instead are emergent properties and products of interconnected, complex relational systems that are unrelenting determiners and organizers of everyone and everything around us? And conversely, in what way can a complex, relational systems perspective step into and make sense of the phenomenology of individuality, singularity, agency, isolation, and autonomy in persons? Manny Ghent (1992, p. 156) once said: “Almost since the beginning, our field has been marked by reductionistic dissension of one sort or another: ‘It's not this; it's that!’ As a result there have been innumerable theoretical divergences, dialectical swings. Now, however, I believe there is a chance for a new outlook, one that is built on the capacity for entertaining paradox.” And I would add, there is a chance for tolerating the perplexity and strangeness of experiencing and living in two radically and apparently separate worlds.

Despite that one's emotional world is quintessentially irreducible, private, and personal, it is hardly an illusion and is more tangible and real than anything I can think of. It is the fabric of our lives and of living our lives—lives that are so inextricably intertwined in what we think of as our world. As Orange (2001) reminds us, we inhabit the

²In particular, Sander's groundbreaking chapter titled “Paradox and Resolution: From The Beginning” from “Living Systems, Evolving Consciousness, and the Emerging Person: A Selection of Papers from the Life Work of Louis Sander” edited by Gherardo Amadei and Ilaria Bianchi (2008).

world just as “the world that I am inhabits me” (p. 94). From an explanatory standpoint, our emotional worlds are not exactly ours, given how context-embedded we are and given that each of us is the property and product of greater, complex systems. However, they often may be felt to be ours, that we own them, and that they are self-created, phenomenologically speaking. And thus, this points us to one of our human conundrums—a most complex paradox: Each of us is, in many senses, separate, individual, and unique, while also systems generated and embedded in contexts far beyond our making or our control. Here, we are handed two radically epistemologically disparate paradigms. In this light, I argue that perhaps it is a developmental step toward greater self-delineation and integration of self and world to tolerate simultaneously a sense of separateness (and perhaps estrangement), autonomy, and personal agency, on the one hand, and a sense of “thrownness” (Heidegger, 1927), a sense of being emergent, situated, and contextualized by life histories, cultures, and circumstances that are out of one’s hands, on the other hand: having one foot in each world, so to speak.

In our initial session, 37-year-old Douglas was quite persuasive and adamant that he had always lived, and continued to live, in a world of shit. Drug abuse, tumultuous relationships, and despite his educational and professional background (a research physician), erratic employment incessantly haunted him. And importantly, he was the responsible party; he was the cause of all his woes. “Could I fix him?” he would ask. After further inquiry, he explained that his anxiety, depression, and generally his life dysfunctions resided in him—he was a defective person. Often he fought with and hated his partner, Joel, who could be a real jerk, but even that was his fault, given that he was the one who chose to be with Joel in the first place. He was the sole author and owner of how his self and world were configured. Listening to Douglas left me feeling a bit dark and hopeless and weighted down. As his narrative washed over me, occasionally I asked whether he ever thought that perhaps there might be additional forces at work that have conspired to shape his life and his experience in the way he now felt, that perhaps he was not the sole determiner of his world of shit. After all, he was influenced by his parents, he had a history, and he lived in an external world that was not of his making and that was highly influential in the shaping of character—in so many words, this was my implicit attitude, these were my preliminary suggestions. In response, he gazed at me, incredulous. Was I crazy? Had I not been listening to him? His problems resided in him, in his defects. “Could I fix him?” was the question.

In contrast, my own emotional world was partly organized around a complexity, contextualist sensibility, in that I believe that there is so much of how and where we find ourselves that is not of our making: We and our emotional lives are an emergent product and property of larger complex, relational systems; our experiences, our choices. We are the products of our socio-historical-cultural-relational contexts. We are the air we breathe, the air that is handed us. We are the first table that is laid before us, and the unique gesture with which it is done. We are the food and wine that we share, just as much as we feel we are choosing what we will eat and drink and experience next. In this

light, we are thrown into life situations that are not entirely of our making, and yet we must strive to take responsibility for where we do find ourselves. It is one thing to feel responsible for one's situatedness, and it is another thing to appreciate the thrownness of it and then be willing to take responsibility for it, moving forward. Despite all the lobster-creatures that hunted and haunted him (Bakewell, 2016), Jean-Paul Sartre (1943) spoke of the enormous burden of being free: Yes, we are handed our life and our fate, but we are pinned even more so, like an insect, under the weight of a far greater burden—that of the personal freedom to shape our lives, moving forward.

In terms of my work with Douglas, I am no stranger to the experience of defectiveness and shame, to feeling utterly and solely responsible for the contours and sometimes disasters of my own life. And thus, it was not so much that I could not think and feel my way into Douglas' emotional world. For me, at the outset of his treatment, I quickly realized that it was more that I did not want to empathize with him: I knew I could; I just didn't want to. His intransigent belief that all things were his fault, based on his defectiveness, irritated me, and this of course impacted his sense of me as misunderstanding and oppositional. At the outset, our personal worlds were fundamentally incommensurable, that is, to the extent that I wanted to dissociate the ways in which I could relate to his particular sense of self and world. He could not imagine stepping into my world, and I did not want to step into his. And there we sat: Douglas the decontextualist and responsible party, and I, the contextualist who appreciates, most of the time anyway, the utter power and influence of culture and context, of history and embeddedness, partly responsible and partly not. How could I enter into a world that I would like to think I had left behind some time ago? And how could he enter a world that was anathema to the dictates of his early life authorities, which he had swallowed, hook, line, and sinker? And why would either of us hold onto our individual, respective self and world constructs so tenaciously?

To that last question, one answer can be found in the works of Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange (2002). We hold steadfast to our personal, uniquely organized worlds of experience in order to (1) maintain a familiar, home-like psychological organization of our sense of self, without which we are rendered destabilized with no firm ground to stand on, and (2) maintain a sense of vital ties to those whom we rely on, or had relied on, for safety, comfort, and reassurance. These are two dimensions of experience that are at stake when we dare to step into another's world that seems so profoundly incommensurable to our own.

The concept of the individual self, with its related attributions of singularity, autonomy, ownership, and agency, has informed our theoretical, philosophical, scientific, and clinical attention for decades—in some respects, for thousands of years. Selves emerged in their nascent form, and with a developmental trajectory of their own. Mature selves somehow became individual, and even sometimes alienated, from their relational context. To employ Charles Taylor's (1989) term, the punctual self was one of "disengagement and rational control" (p. 160). He writes that "[t]he key to this figure is that

it gains control through disengagement” (p. 160). The experience of individuality and the assumption of its aloneness wound its way into various Western philosophies, sciences, and cultures—especially ours—and helped inform what we still experience today as the tradition of individualism—ideas that Frie has taken up at a great length (Frie and Coburn, 2011). However, because we resituated the individual from within a complex systems framework, the seemingly incommensurable world of individuality may pose a challenge to systems oriented clinicians who work within the currency of, well, individual persons. The individual and her emotional world are the product and property of larger complex, relational systems, but she is still a separate individual, yes? Indeed, she is.

With so much relationality, intersubjectivity, contextualism, and complex systems sensibilities now having informed psychoanalysis, how can we enter into a person’s individual world that is organized around the assumption of complete self-responsibility, agency, authorship, ownership, and free will? And similarly, how can a person, thus organized, enter into a world in which it is presumed that we are always and already radically contextualized and relational, systems determined? Many of us are trying to negotiate a complex systems framework while trying to speak to the real individual person who speaks to us and yearns for help, looks to us perhaps for greater self-delineation. Do our contextualist strivings and sensibilities pit us against the person’s sense of individuality, his or his sense of uniqueness? Does holding onto the notion of the individual person, theoretically, experientially, and clinically, clash with our perhaps over-contextualizing, or over-complexifying (Sucharov, 2013), a person’s experiential world? In what way might we live with, and, as Harris (2013) states, “[work] with a complex paradox” (p. 704)? Thinking individuality is one paradigm, and thinking systems is another. Phenomenologically, they are often at odds and are felt to be incommensurable. Explanatorily speaking, our respective emotional worlds are so enmeshed and mutually determining of the other, whereas phenomenologically, each of us resides in a necessarily private and unique experiential world. Is each of these worlds commensurable with the other? How might either person come to inhabit both worlds, perhaps even simultaneously? How might a person transform what feels incommensurable into something that is commensurable? And what are the clinical implications of transforming the incommensurable into the commensurable?

As we shall see, the capacity to hold both in one’s experiential world may be an additional and central feature of human emotional development. Alternatively stated, to be an individual might mean that one is always faced with experiencing and living with this most complex paradox.

Stolorow writes that experiential selfhood comes about through understanding and validating an individual’s personal affectivity, rendering a sense of ownership of one’s emotional world. What is given to me, what is indeed mine, becomes mine, over time, with emotional tolerance and with the integration of previously dissociated self-states. I argue that experiential selfhood also develops through understanding and reflecting upon one’s own context-embeddedness—the emotionally grasping of that which we have

been handed and must come to own as truly ours. This was centrally relevant to my patient, Douglas.

Among other masochistically painful avenues of self-punishment for his defectiveness and his project of keeping such defectiveness hidden, Douglas would self-administer painful enemas and then track how long he could hold them in before dashing to the bathroom. He would also hit himself in the genitals. He came to understand that these activities were admixtures of eroticism and self-punishment, creativity, and aggression—a blending of three otherwise rather distinct motivational systems, if you will. However, over time, Douglas' self-blame, self-punishment, and associated shame states began to loosen their grip, in conjunction with his expanding his awareness of his life contexts. His history of accommodation began to mean something to him. I am reminded of Phillips' comment that "[p]sychoanalysis only begins . . . to work when people begin to be impressed by their symptoms" (2013, p. 121), and I would add, impressed by their life contexts. His having been made to feel responsible for the sequelae of familial sadism, loss, trauma, and the anxiety and depression of those around him, including his own, had coagulated into his sense of inherent corruption, but now he had begun to challenge the notion of personal defect. The individuality of others around him, including his partner Joel, came to life for him—individualities that were out of his control and for which he no longer felt entirely responsible. It's an interesting chicken-egg question, by the way: Did his increasing compassion for himself evolve out of an increasing awareness of how context-determined he actually was, or did his burgeoning awareness of being embedded in contexts larger than himself pave the way for greater understanding and self-compassion?

For Douglas, these changes were hard won, and I believe some of them emerged from our transference-countertransference exchanges. He tolerated my sardonic humor, and insistent attitude, however implicit it may have been at times, that none of us is, in retrospect, entirely responsible for where we find ourselves today—notwithstanding that it behooves us to take responsibility for our current situatedness and act, moving forward, with a greater sense of purpose and freedom. On one day, Douglas was bemoaning his inherent defects and turned his critical eye toward his sexual identity: "Don't you see, even the fact that I'm gay is proof of my defectiveness!" To which I responded, "Yes, I see your point. Perhaps we should consider 'conversion therapy' for you. I've heard that can be quite effective." He glared at me, knowing that I was messing with him, messing with his more fundamental organizing theme of wrongness and defectiveness. Sometimes calling a patient's bluff can be helpful, though sometimes it is challenging to distinguish between a bluff and a deeply ensconced emotional conviction. By bluff I mean . . . more of an inquiry. I felt at this juncture that his bemoaning his sexual preference was more of a broader inquiry posed to me—one not about his sexual identity: Must I remain in the grips of my historical beliefs about inherent defectiveness? Might it be alright, and alright

with me, if he were to consider and to feel other points of view? I tried to answer in the affirmative through retort, and I think he heard me.

Was Douglas' sense of being a contextualized person—one not entirely responsible for his life situatedness—expanding? I believe so. Was I beginning to loosen my reluctance to think and feel into his emotional world? I was trying. What might these shifts look like through the lens of our commensurability/incommensurability question? I believe bridging the commensurability/incommensurability gap, at least as it pertains to unique worlds of experience of persons, involves living with a lively sense of paradox—a complex one in which I experience myself to have been handed my corporeal existence, my history and life circumstances, my surround, not exactly in my control, while also, by coming to know and appreciate my thrownness, I can live in a sense of personal ownership and authorship of my life, even a sense of aloneness, autonomy, and singularity—a finite freedom, as Heidegger (1927) called it. The capacity to experience both realms of this complex paradox, to tolerate and live in them, I argue, is ultimately to experience an expanded sense of experiential selfhood—one that is neither denuded of its context-embeddedness nor remains solely quagmired in it. I can suggest one useful entry point into grappling with and holding in one's experiential world, two seemingly incommensurable domains. I believe it is found in Racker (1968) and then, later, Aron (2006), and others as well, who have emphasized the role of oscillating, complementary roles and dimensions of experience between two people. Aron, for instance, draws upon metaphors of the seesaw and the pendulum in describing how dimensions of self-experience can sometimes rapidly shift back and forth—one in one person complementing that of the other.

“Polarities [can be] 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” (Aron, 2006, p. 353), or one may be entrenched in a paradigm of decontextualization, singularity, and insulation, while the other remains locked into a contextualizing, systems orientation.

Frequently, if Douglas were the singular decontextualizer, I was the systems contextualizer. And at times, accordingly, I found our roles reversing, much in the way Racker or Aron described it. This dynamic can be particularized by thinking of contexts in which the patient, with any sense of agency worn thin, experiences himself at the whims of the movements of the universe, entirely ensconced in the emotional conviction of “I have no say!”—while the analyst remains situated in its opposite pole, insistent on the individual's personal agency, creativity, and unbounded freedom. And, of course pendulum-like, these polarities may reverse at a moment's notice with neither participant capable of holding both positions in mind, holding our complex paradox in consciousness.

The patient nor the analyst may not necessarily always be pulled into these opposing positions—that naturally depends on context and time. But this paradigm does provide us with a useful perspective about how persons tend to reside somewhere on the unbounded freedom/context-fatedness spectrum (Strenger, 1991), and sometimes even at one end or the other of that spectrum. Whether polarized struggles emerge or not, the capacity of either analyst or patient, or both, to hold and tolerate both ends of this spectrum offers an expanded sense of experiential selfhood, rendering two seemingly incommensurable worlds potentially commensurable.

While I invited Douglas, over time, to explore his life contexts, he frequently would argue with corrections that he, indeed, was relentlessly responsible for his struggles, his life distress, and his painful relationships. We certainly argued and we reflected, and we spoke our discrepant points of view, and we were also learning more about the contexts in his life that gave rise to who he was as an individual. This was much of the tenor of our work together and one version of the pendulum complementarity of which Aron writes: sometimes he, the Cartesian and decontextualizer, and sometimes I, the systems contextualizer, each situated in our respective world views, neither of us holding and/or tolerating, at least for quite some time, anything resembling our complex paradox.

On one occasion, early on, Douglas shared that he was just not getting along with Joel. He would try to express his feelings of isolation and loneliness and his wish for a deeper connection, to which Joel, feeling pressured, would oscillate between an icy withdrawal and an angry attack. The attack portion involved blaming Douglas for not getting along in the relationship. It was a problem with Douglas, and obviously with his unresolved father issues. Having read some Freud in college, Joel felt Douglas' essential malfunction was being in the grips of a transference phenomenon that Douglas refused to own up to. And Douglas accepted that, withdrawing into his painfully familiar stance of defectiveness. It was at instances such as this that I had made suggestions of considering in greater depth the contexts in which these disagreements would arise—for example, that perhaps Joel, too, was contributing something to his relationship situation and that perhaps it wasn't just about projection or displacement on Douglas's part. He would rebuke me for such suggestions, reminding me that he was the sole, responsible party.

However, over time, Douglas began considering that perhaps he was not quite as culpable for his sense of defects and flaws as he had come to feel, that indeed there were life situations out of his control that formed a great deal of his emotional world, his perspectives, and his relationships. In addition, we both came to a more conscious, reflective engagement surrounding our opposing perspectives about the sources of our emotional worlds and the ways in which we may or may not be responsible for them.

A more recent exchange between Douglas and me, however, took on a rather different tenor. The content was familiar—that of painful exchanges with Joel—but our respective contrasted epistemological attitudes had shifted in the seesaw manner I alluded to above. This time Douglas was distributing the responsibility for the painful and complicated relationship dynamic between Joel and him to a variety of sources, especially

including Joel's history, culture, personality organization, and essentially the intersubjectivity of the relationship. He appreciated more robustly the variety of forces—past, present, imagined future, and environment—that all gave rise to his emotional experience and attitudes. Unfortunately, on this particular occasion I uncharacteristically experienced Douglas not so much as the contextualist he was becoming, but instead as peevish, whiney, and, in a way, overwhelmed by all the conspiring forces around him. He irritated me, and I wanted him to take some responsibility for the outcome of his interactions. While the irony was not lost on me, my ability to control myself was, and thus, I replied with something like, “don't you think we might take a look at your part in all this?” That went over really well, as you might imagine. And yes, another one of my shining moments as an analyst. I think he may have replied with something like, “What the hell Coburn! Make up your mind!”

And so, in this instance, and in complementary style, we found ourselves with tables turned: Douglas now seeming to appreciate that he was frightened, vulnerable, and not the author and owner of the challenging forces in his life, and I, now, challenging Douglas for feeling at the mercy of the very forces that were shaping his emotional experience. I was having difficulty tolerating his sense of thrownness and vulnerability, and wanted him to be strong, independent, an author and owner of his self and his world—what I want more of for myself. And he rightly called me on it. Ultimately, it proved to be yet another opportunity for deepening our own connection, of which we took advantage. Douglas and I continue to struggle along, sometimes fighting over attitudes and perspectives, but more or less holding and respecting our sometimes complementary and oscillating differences, trying to tolerate our most complex paradox—that we are simultaneously and paradoxically context-determined beings, given into and over to our life-situations, and also unique persons, always with responsibilities, and with possibilities that can be of our own design.

Given that each of us is at once a singular person and a systems-embedded being, quite capable of and subject to interactions with other context-embedded beings, it is advantageous, I believe, to strive toward considering both domains of thinking and feeling and to tolerate the strangeness of it all. Ultimately, it remains our shared struggle to tolerate both seemingly incommensurable worlds—one of context-determinedness and one of independence, agency, and ownership of one's present and future.

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