

Metanoia Vs Paranoia – New Existential Position

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Abstract

Comparative analysis of metanoia not only as a psychological but a broader spiritual concept versus the paranoid existential position with the accent on the projection as a primitive defence mechanism. These phenomena were studied from phenomenological, psychodynamic, and theological points of view. The theory of personality of Christian psychotherapy and Transactional Analysis concepts are applied. The ego as a psychological apparatus limits human behaviour and actions by constant activation of defence mechanisms that often lead to psychopathology. In Christian psychotherapy metanoia as the desired level is a state of deep spiritual transformation opposite of the distorted psychological conditions.

Keywords: metanoia, paranoid existential position, ego, projection, christian psychotherapy, transactional analysis

Introduction

The existence of modern man takes place in the limited space of mental functioning. At this level, he acts out his individual life plan and the collective script of his existence.

In defining oneself, others, and the world, it uses the narrow and relative prism of its frame of reference, which is a filter towards reality, and the ego with its defence mechanisms is a device for maintaining the balance between separate elements.

In this paper, we extend the egocentric perspective of interpreting human existence by including the spiritual dimension.

We offer a model that moves the processes from the psychological to the transpersonal level and builds a new existential position as a relationship between

man and God. With this, we raise the ontological questions about human freedom, autonomy, and the ideal vision of his highest self-actualization.

Methodology

This study is descriptive and in addition to the application of psychological concepts from the theory of personality Transactional analysis: *life positions, frame of reference, redefinition, and discount*, we operate with the concept of *metanoia* from the aspect of Christian psychotherapy and perform a comparative analysis between the dynamics of processes at the psychological level and the spiritual level.

A Frame of Reference and Life Positions

According to classical psychology, man positions himself and establishes relationships in relation to three dimensions: himself, other people, and the world in which he exists, and defines them from the prism of his frame of reference. "An overall perceptual, conceptual, affective, and action set" (Schiff & Schiff 1975).

Based on this, he builds his position as a deep and thorough existential experience with its roots in the childhood period, formed on the basis of the complex interplay of interpersonal relationships, primarily within the family in the relationship with parents and other significant adults.

Eric Berne, in an attempt to describe the pattern of psychological power games and the predictability of social transactions, proposed the concept of life positions (Berne, 1962).

To define the classification of life positions, Berne introduced the concept of being "OK", which consisted of being fair with oneself and others, as well as seeing oneself and others as having equal rights.

Stewart and Joines (1987) seemed to define the degree of OKness a person feels as the "essential value" (p. 117) that one perceives in oneself and others. The life position arises as a result of the early life decisions that the child makes about himself and his role in life and among other people. It further becomes a specific way of social interaction, communication, and connection, and in states of distress, a personal automatic pattern of behaviour, action, and social interplay.

According to Berne, the subjects of all positions focus on "I" versus "Others" and their predicates focus on being "OK" versus "not OK." Thus, the basic predicates are:

I am OK

I am not OK

You are OK

You are not OK

These predicates then form the four possible life positions:

I'm OK—You're OK (optimal, healthy)

I'm OK—You're not OK (paranoid)

I'm not OK—You're OK (depressive)

I'm not OK—You're not OK (hopelessness)

These existential positions are a way of perceiving and experiencing the world.

Paranoid life position

We have chosen the paranoid life position for analytical observation while describing it through Bern's concept as a social adaptation and not as a clinical diagnosis.

We consider it to be the most representative in contemporary social dynamics as a reflection of individual psychological development scenario formatting, but also as an often taken existential attitude driven by individual narcissism and self-love, but also the exogenous induction from global mass psychology that encourages and constantly maintains a sense of existential discomfort and feeling of fear.

I'm OK—You're not OK is a position occupied by individuals who have a high opinion of themselves (superior) and criticism and accusation towards others (inferior). This position requires that there be someone to be 'worse than in order to maintain the sense of self as ok. A defence mechanism is a projection, where the person, in order to maintain a good self-image, projects all unacceptable and bad contents and feelings outward onto other objects, which he then perceives as bad and hostile. It is considered to be the most interpersonally destructive and can result in hostility and aggressive behaviour.

Diametrically opposed to the paranoia of modern man or any of these life positions is the state of metanoia. Classical psychological schools observe and describe human existence in relation to three axes: self, other people, and the world, not taking into account the spiritual dimension - the relationship with God. Only by including the spiritual aspect can we talk about a fully realized existence and wholeness of man as a person.

Ego and defence mechanisms

In the domain of psychology, the basic dimension is mental health, which implies the integrated functioning of cognitive functions with emotions and the adequacy of human behaviour. The main role in this is played by the ego as an executive apparatus that enables integration, regulation, and testing with reality. One of the most remarkable achievements in ego psychology is Freud's discovery of the concept of defense mechanisms. He described 17 and classified them according to developmental level (Vaillant, 1992).

They are the basic instruments through which the ego regulates and dampens affects, impulses, and unconscious contents in order to ensure coherent and integrated

functioning and maintenance of psychological equilibrium. "They can be adaptive, but equally maladaptive, these mechanisms can be understood both as building blocks of psychopathology and as potential stepping stones of Ego development" (Vaillant, 1994).

We would add not only in ego development but the same together with ego can be an obstacle in higher spiritual development. The ego with the mechanisms has an adaptive, defensive to the level of the survival function for the integrity of the person. But what is the person really defending against, what are his threats, and in what ways is he threatened? We know that the ego is a mediator between the external and internal world of the individual. Through cognitive functions, it processes the external reality and helps in adopting adequate actions and behaviours. But what about its inner world?

With the formation of the psychoanalytic method and work on the unconscious, Freud discovered that the person actually defends himself from his own unconscious contents, intense affects, aggressive impulses, unaccepted contents, and phantasms, and processes all this successfully or less successfully through defence mechanisms.

He was the first to describe that the person has a tendency to split and separate affects from mental contents, so he described the tendency to dissociate, and disintegrate as a basis for the appearance of symptoms and psychopathology. So the threat to the self lies in the being itself, in its unconscious, and from the aspect of Christian anthropology and psychology in the fallen human nature itself and what it names as passions.

Passions are related to egocentrism and they are in constant connection with the defence mechanisms that are their instruments, with a defensive and self-protective function. Above all, the ego defends itself from the fear of annihilation and constantly strengthens its position, keeping the person in survival mode. The mind functions only with the secondary function through the ego. There are two main mechanisms: suppression as internalization and projection as externalization.

Defence mechanisms, and even less ego with its defensive action, will hardly help in reaching mental health or the goal to which Christian psychotherapy aims - healing of the being.

On the other hand, the modern and imposed model of life with all its challenges aimed at strengthening egocentrism, consumerism, and global and excessive digitalization keep man trapped in the space between two false realities, the virtual one in which he is given power and grandiosity and the external one in which daily is devalued by the mass psychology of fear and global catastrophes. In such a climate, man is isolated and lonely, starved for contact and relationship, in a constant defensive position full of doubt and fear, in a state that the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl describes as an existential vacuum (Frankl, 1992).

Fallen Human Nature and Passions

From the point of view of Christian anthropology, at the base of fallen human nature are passions. They are the main drivers of its action. "Passion is painful - to the point of depravity, a mental force that through repentance should be transformed into a benefactor" (Ilievski, 2022).

"In Christian theology, unlike emotion, passion (pathos) has been defined in morally and theologically engaged ways as a disobedient movement of the soul" (Graiver, 2021).

Our ego self tends to identify with its passions: gluttony, avarice, and glory. In such egocentrism, the main human passion is self-love, which we need to transform into love of God and love of humanity.

In Christian psychotherapy, the main emphasis is placed on the transformation of passions into virtues. This process of profound transformation known as metanoia is a state of radical change of mind by taking on a new perspective and relationship to oneself by radically renouncing the ego.

"This transformative process entailed not only transcendence of the passions and attachments to material things but also transcendence of the ego and the partiality of the perspective out of which it experiences and acts so that one could become genuinely open to others" (Graiver, 2021).

Such self-denial corresponds to the first stage of spiritual development – cleansing the heart of passions. It begins from the moment we repent, confess our sins and begin to live in the Church, under the leadership of a spiritual father - in obedience and lasts until the heart is opened for mind-heart prayer (Ilievski, 2018).

"This inner disposition, which provided the foundation for contemplation, is often described in monastic writings as a state of dispassion (ἀπάθεια) or purity of heart (puritas cordis) – a condition or state (κατάστασις) of deep calm, inner peace, and integration, in which one is no longer under the domination of ever-changing thoughts and negative emotions" (Graiver, 2021).

Our heart, which is our spiritual centre, plays the most important role in this process. In the theological sense, we are talking about the "spiritual heart" (Ilievski and Ilievska, 2017, pp. 96-97) in which the essence of the mind is located, it is, therefore, also the source of the inner word. If we utter the prayer with the inner word, instead of any thoughts, we will make our heart the source of personal prayer.

The Holy Fathers have indicated it as an ideal, which is the gathering of the energy of the mind in its essence in the heart, or the so-called unadorned circular prayer movement of the mind.

Mind and Metanoia

A central theme in Christian psychotherapy is the mind, its dynamics, and its transformation. According to Christian patrology the mind is called the eye of the soul. "The true centre of human identity is the mind (νοῦς) created in the image of God and capable of union with God" Festuguere, A. J. (1960). This distinction is essential for further understanding of spiritual processes.

The ego as the executive apparatus of the human psyche is closely related to the secondary function of the mind and through it, the mind is channelled and diffusely scattered outward into the world. Its energy is used to absolve reality and the material world. It is disseminated through psychological functions, cognitive, emotional and behavioural. Its function is at the soul level.

The primary function of the mind is that used to gather the mind inward and in its contemplative state. It is the function through which man communicates with God through prayer.

According to Christian anthropology and psychology, the primary and basic goal of man is the transformation of his mind, (metanoia/μετάνοια – change of mind), that is, the acquisition of spiritual reason. It implies a process of transformation of the energy of the mind through its primary function - prayer unity with God, that is, with His uncreated energy, so that once already transformed energy behaves in a transformed way in its secondary function - communication with the world (Ilievski and Ilievska 2019, p. 18).

So, basically, metanoia implies a process of transformation, a transformation of the energy of the mind, resulting in an overall transformation of the person with his transformed action in the world. "Rather, in the Eastern monastic tradition it was primarily the mind that needed to be transformed and renewed in the image of Christ" (Graiver, 2021). In the classical Greek translation, it is implied "to change one's mind on reflection".

In the domain of psychology, this concept is often defined and described. According to psychologist P. Clarkson, it simply is a "turning point in life and psychotherapy" (Clarkson, 1989) and according to Jung "mental transformation" (Jung 1956/1986, p. xxvi).

Some authors use this term to denote transformation and offer two models in the definition: "models of a sudden change in the composition of the self, when the self is a passive recipient of the process (for instance, in certain types of religious conversion), and models of gradual transformation based upon an active effort over years of intentional and systematic practice" (Shulman and Stroumsa, 2002).

In this particular case, in this paper, we mean exactly the second model. In this whole process, the ascetic feat has the decisive role as a formative dimension in self-transformation. So it is not about a single moment of magical transformation that

occurs suddenly and without any practice, but on the contrary through a continuous and correct spiritual feat and gradual gradation through the degrees of spiritual development (Ilievski, 2015, pp. 165-173).

The importance of the ascetic dimension in that process of self-transformation is pointed out by other authors who study Christian psychology and monastic practice. "Asceticism belongs to this gradual mode of self-transformation" (Graiver, 2018, pp. 19).

Proposed Model and Description of Dynamics

The usual way of functioning of the ego with the basic mechanisms of suppression and projection is inadequate and insufficient in dealing with the daily challenges and solving the problems of the individual. Defence mechanisms in overcoming cognitive dissonance distort perceptions and prevent the reception of the true picture of reality. "The use of ego mechanisms of defence usually alters perception of both internal and external reality and often, as with hypnosis, the use of such mechanisms compromises other facets of cognition. Defence mechanisms can alter our perception of any or all of the following: subject (self), object (other), idea, or feeling" (Vaillant, 1971).

In this way, other processes described in the Transactional Analysis are activated: discounting and redefining, which maintain the processes at the psychological level without the possibility of further development of the individual and achievement of a higher transpersonal level.

"The person who discounts believes or acts as though some aspects of the self, other people, or reality is less significant than it actually is". This targeted reduction of stimuli maintains the limited frame of reference and maintains the established symbiotic relations, and in addition to the redefinition, a subjective reshaping of reality occurs (Mellor & Schiff, 1975). This purposefully reduction of stimuli maintains the limited frame of reference and maintains the established symbiotic relationships, and in addition, with the redefining, a subjective reshaping of reality occurs. "It is the means by which people defend themselves against stimuli which are inconsistent with their frames of reference, and redefine the stimuli to fit into the frame" (Mellor & Schiff, 1975).

In order to get out of this "circulus vitiösus" and move to a higher spiritual level, it is necessary to practice a personal feat of asceticism and apply the FCP Method (Ilievski and Ilievska, 2017) which is based on the Jesus prayer as a way of building a community with God.

Asceticism in classical psychology is classified in the group of healthy defence mechanisms, "a methodical regulation of the content and scope of all thought and action," thus producing in the individual a conscious, willful, and anti-instinctual control over one's own psychological and physiological processes, in subordination to the religious end (Weber, 1963, p. 161).

In Christian psychotherapy, asceticism is above all a basic spiritual discipline from which the inner spiritual struggle and feat begins. "Although asceticism is as much a process of mental as of physical discipline, Historians of Christianity and theorists of asceticism have tended to focus on the latter" (Graiver, 2021).

Unlike projecting, which is a mechanism of externalization, in ascetic discipline there is a retroflexion of psychological energy inward and the phases are in the reverse direction:

1. Detachment;
2. Decatexis;
3. Retro flexion;
4. Self discernment

In contrast to the psychological process at the level of ego:

1. Externalization;
2. Attachment;
3. Cathexis;
4. Distortion

Discussion

In the Christian anthropology, the trichotomous model for man is presented, according to which he is body, soul and spirit with an aspiration and struggle to overcome the dualism between the soul and spirit (Ilievski, 2015).

In the Christian anthropology such predestination is determined in human nature itself, the archetype of God's image according to which man was created and which waits in each one of us to be actualized. "Theosis – for man to be united with God, not in an external or a sentimental manner but ontologically, in a real way" (Kapsanis, 2006). That would be the ideal vision for the human being.

A transition point in that process is metanoia, but not as a magical moment of transformation, but as a starting point in a feat of spiritual development that has its own hierarchy and degrees described in Christian psychotherapy.

According to Christian patrology holy fathers showed that path, that is, a more perfect way of knowing God, through communion with Him, and by including the primary function of the mind, that is, direct communication with God - person to Person.

"...Those who act like this, who have purified their hearts with holy silence and in an inexpressible way approached Him Who is above all feeling and thought, see God in themselves as in a mirror" (Ilievski, 2022).

Only in this Meta position is the man in a true relationship with God. That state above every feeling, above every thought in which dualism, the split between soul and spirit, is overcome, it is a new spiritual dimension above the psychological level with its existing cognitive and emotional elements.

Conclusion

“As long as we are closed within ourselves–within our ego– we are individuals but not persons” (Kapsanis, 2006). The ego is an obstacle in understanding the true spiritual reality, its function is survival, defence and adaptation within the world that offers a redefined picture of reality.

The basic function of the ego is the external direction of psychological energy, primarily with a protective function and satisfying the needs of the individual. His excessive defensiveness can turn into a state of excessive suspicion and paranoia.

Man lives in a script matrix through which mass culture indoctrinates him daily by limiting his true potential for higher self-actualization and spiritual growth (Ilievska and Ilievski, 2020). The question arises, to what extent is man autonomous? Does he live out his ontological freedom?

Christian psychology and anthropology offer a solid base for expanding this narrow perspective on human nature. Further research should be done on the ascetic practice proposed by the ascetic-hesychastic school sublimated in Christian psychotherapy with the aim of enriching the classical psychological model and overall personal growth and development.

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