

RESPONSE TO  
COMMENTARIES ON  
"METAPHORS OF AGENCY  
AND MECHANISM  
IN DISSOCIATION"

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I wish to thank Onno van der Hart for his thoughtful response to my paper, and his lucid description of the concepts of primary, secondary, and tertiary dissociation. Dr. van der Hart supposes that the development of "ego centers" in tertiary dissociation is largely an automatic affair, although he believes that "ego centers," once formed, can exhibit voluntary actions. My own view is that even the development of these "ego centers" can have some creative and intentional aspects to it, and that his Janetian metaphor emphasizes the client as a victim-to-whom-things-happen, rather than the client as a creative problem-solver adapting to and struggling to transcend adversity. We can clearly see the differences between a mechanistic and agentic approach when we compare van der Kolk's (1994) attempt to explain traumatic amnesia through neurohumoral effects on the hippocampus, and Freyd's (1994) suggestion that the forgetting of childhood sexual abuse is an adaptive resolution of an attachment dilemma. We do not yet know if either of these speculations is true, but they each suggest not only a different etiologic pathway, but also a different emphasis within treatment.

My paper deals with the presuppositions that underlie all theories of dissociation: In dissociation what exactly is dissociated? Are we talking about a phenomenological experience of internal dividedness that is based on fantasy and pretense? Are we talking about a hypothetical construct, some associational structure, that is dislodged and split off from some other hypothetical construct called the "ego" at the moment of trauma? Are we talking about the inability to integrate a private narrative of emptiness, terror, rage, and self-loathing within a public narrative of a happy childhood and family? Are we talking about the vicissitudes of the evolution of attachment schemata and self schemata within malevolent families? And as diverse self-states evolve, however we construe them, do they take on additional tasks, are they deployed for additional purposes, or are they only reflective of initial automatic responses to trauma?

Dr. van der Hart raises a number of objections to the use of Hermans and Kempen's metaphor of the dialogical self as an aid to understanding DID. First, he suggests that the initially narrativeless quality of traumatic memory makes a narrative-based analysis of dissociation untenable. I agree with Dr. van der Hart that traumatic memories initially resem-

ble sensorimotor and affective happenings rather than verbal narratives, and that the reexperiencing of these memories is often involuntary in nature and triggered by external events. These automatic phenomena mark one important pole of the DID experience, but there is another side to that experience that can better be described as voluntary, creative, and metaphorical. Consider, for example, the phenomenal inner worlds that self-states often claim to inhabit: the plethora of caves, castles and other imaginal structures so often encountered in clinical work. Consider also the self-descriptions of self-states: the variety of persecutors, protectors, function states, children, and animals that tumble out into our consulting rooms, often with their own clothing, hair styles, religious and political convictions, and sexual preferences. Moreover, consider that even "purely narrativeless" trauma memories are not always literal reproductions of past traumata. Flashbacks sometimes include a combination of realistic and fantastical elements, and are even, at times, pure confabulations. Once we move into the territory of the secondary elaboration of traumatic states, narrative and voluntary features become every bit as important as automatic features.

Dr. van der Hart's second objection to Hermans and Kempen's metaphor is that "those of us having some understanding of the dissociative disorders" do not accept the implication that "all of us are multiples." I remain more impressed with the continuities between "normal" behavior and DID pathology than Dr. van der Hart does. I believe that the coexistence of conflicting self-states is our normal lot in life, and that an increasing awareness and integration of these states is a primary developmental task, not only in childhood, but throughout adulthood as well. Seen in this light, DID is a special case of derailed development in the face of adverse circumstances: schemata that would normally have undergone mutual assimilation and accommodation instead undergo increasing differentiation and elaboration along parallel but separate lines.

I wish to thank John Watkins and Etzel Cardeña for their kind words. I wish to assure Dr. Watkins that I am not suggesting that "self-states" as metaphors have no underlying reality to which they refer. I also wish to assure Dr. Cardeña that I agree with his assertion that there is no such thing as a metaphor-free scientific language. I am only suggesting that

our current metaphors are limiting and confusing in ways that are not always readily apparent, often serving to obscure rather than to illuminate the phenomena at hand.

I am sympathetic to Dr. Cardena's critique of my functionalist claim that the process of self-state evocation has an adaptational value. I agree that not every switch promotes adaptation, and think that our evolutionary capacity to override this process through conscious attention and choice confers an even greater advantage to us. Nevertheless, the process does allow for flexibility of response to changing situations, and flexible accommodation to environmental change is part of what we mean by the word "intelligence."

Once again I wish to thank Drs. van der Hart, Watkins, and Cardena for their generous responses to my paper. It is not everyday that one has an opportunity to present one's views before such a distinguished group of readers. I only wish I had more time to consider their responses before replying. As I have further time to reflect on this interchange, it may well be that I will find myself revising some of my opinions. May this exchange of views provide a similar opportunity for all of its readers. ■

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### REFERENCES

- van der Kolk, B. (1994). The body keeps the score: Memory and the evolving psychobiology of post-traumatic stress, *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 1, 253-265.
- Freyd, J.J. (1994). Betrayal Trauma: Traumatic Amnesia as an adaptive response to childhood abuse, *Ethics and Behavior*, 4, 307-329.