THE DEMONS OF
PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONTEXTUALISM:
A Conversation

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Over the course of some 40 years, our work has been centrally devoted to liberating psychoanalytic theory and practice from various forms of Cartesian, isolated-mind thinking (Descartes, 1641/1989) en route to a post-Cartesian psychoanalytic perspective. We would characterize the essence of a post-Cartesian psychoanalytic framework as phenomenological contextualism (Atwood, 2011; Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002). The framework is phenomenological in that it investigates and illuminates organizations or worlds of emotional experience. It is contextual in that it holds that such organizations of emotional experience take form, both developmentally and in the psychoanalytic situation, in constitutive relational or intersubjective contexts.

Why phenomenological contextualism? The way we see it is that our original studies of the subjective origins of personality theories in Faces in a Cloud (Atwood & Stolorow, 1993; Stolorow & Atwood, 1979) put us on a lifelong path of rethinking psychoanalysis phenomenologically, hence our early proposals for a “psychoanalytic phenomenology.” Our unwavering dedication to phenomenological inquiry, in turn, led us inexorably to the context-embeddedness of all emotional experience—hence our contextualism. It strikes us that our path from phenomenology to phenomenological contextualism mirrors that taken in the movement from Husserl’s still-Cartesian phenomenology to Heidegger’s phenomenological contextualism (Stolorow, 2011).

A contextualist viewpoint actually was implicit in our thinking from the beginning, in that we always have tried to under-
stand the theories and philosophies underlying or otherwise relevant to psychoanalysis in the life-historical contexts of their creators. Among the many important thinkers we have examined are Freud, Jung, Reich, Rank, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Sartre, and Heidegger. By exploring the life contexts of the ideas of these contributors to our field, we have sought insight into the particularization of scope associated with their creative visions, and hence into the broader territories lying beyond the horizons of their understanding.

A generalization emerged finally from these various explorations: Each of the theorists/philosophers we studied suffered extreme trauma in his personal world, resulting in lifelong struggles with profound inner conflict. Their thinking, in addition to being brilliant and innovative, also in each instance embodied an effort to master or otherwise come to terms with irresolvable dilemmas and persistent emotional tensions presenting the danger of fragmentation. We found madness in the genius of their works (Atwood, Stolorow, & Orange, 2011), arising from the often tragic, disintegrating, even annihilating conditions dominating their life histories. There were personal demons with which they fought, always ambivalently and with uneven success, and the intellectual journeys for which they are known dramatically reflect and symbolize their battles to bring themselves together and emotionally survive.

The question therefore arises: What are the demons of phenomenological contextualism? Perhaps it too is associated with significant trauma, fragmentation, and other forms of the threat of annihilation. Profound trauma generally gives rise to binary structures in human experience (captured in the phrase worlds apart in Stolorow, 2011, chapter 5, p. 53), dichotomous patterns that subsequently organize the flow of subjective life. One side of such a structure will be alluring, promising delivery from the agonies of the traumatic past, whereas the other side will embody a kind of damnation, an experience of everlasting darkness. What darkness does phenomenological contextualism seek to dispel, and what utopian deliverance does it simultaneously seem to offer? Most importantly, what can an illumination of such hidden patterns contribute in opening up still unexplored domains of human subjectivity?
We have chosen to search for a deeper understanding of our own thinking on these issues through a series of conversations with one another. What follows is the record of that dialogue.

DEMONS

G.E.A.: So, the time has come for us to look into the mirror and see what is reflected. Are we finally, after all these years, ready for such a task? Can we name our own traumas and articulate how they have interacted with one other and become embodied in our great collaborative enterprise over the past 40 years? Let us seek an interpretation of what we have come to call *phenomenological contextualism* in the contexts of our own personal worlds and histories. Let us stare into the faces of our own demons. I suggest we begin this project by briefly reviewing and discussing the evolution of our thinking and identifying the binary structures that thematize its unfolding. We then can pass on to a consideration of the historical sources of these thematic patterns in our respective lives.

R.D.S.: Such an organization would follow the pattern of many of our original psychobiographical studies, which began with explanations of thematic structures in theorists’ or philosophers’ works, and then followed up with explorations of the associated life histories. Our perspective began to appear in studies of the personal, subjective origins of the theoretical systems of Freud, Jung, Reich, and Rank (Stolorow & Atwood, 1979). Closing the distance between theorist and theory was one aspect of our work then, and a second was our idea of fashioning a unifying theory of subjectivity itself, a framework within which disparate approaches could be translated into a common conceptual language and integrated.

G.E.A.: We are already seeing a binary structure underlying our ideas: Theorist and theory are integrated as the thinking in each case became interpreted as an expression of the thinker as a person; second, the dream of a “unifying framework” that accounts both for the phenomena traditionally studied by psychoanalytic theorists and for their “theories themselves” also integrates theory and theorist, thought and thinker. Disconnection and fragmenta-
tion versus connection and unification: Are we already glimpsing the nature of our struggle and beginning to see the faces of our adversaries?

R.D.S.: Yes, I think we are. I also see another possible binary lurking in the phrase “subjectivity itself”—that between objectivity and subjectivity, or between the material and the immaterial. All of this, I am thinking, is suggestive of early, shattering loss.

G.E.A.: Let’s continue, though, with the description of the evolution of our point of view, and with the task of illuminating its thematic structure. Once we have identified the organizing themes, then we can pass on to what happened to us historically. My idea is that we lay out the inner patterns in a fairly abstract way, and then dive into the concrete particularities of our lives that we understand to have been involved in crystallizing those patterns in the first place.

At the end of our first book we outlined a set of proposals that we called “psychoanalytic phenomenology,” a depth psychology purified of the reifications of Freudian metapsychology. Taking the experiential world of the individual as its central construct, we assumed no impersonal psychical agencies or motivational prime movers. Instead, we viewed this world as evolving organically from the person’s critical formative experiences that constitute his or her unique life history.

The talk here of a “unique life history” that is not subject to “impersonal prime movers” again brings forth a theme: unique and personal versus universal and impersonal. Wherever there is an emphasis on the uniquely personal, one sees a revolt against the dominion of a definition of selfhood by collective, external forces: a binary again, whose dark presence alludes to intense struggles for autonomy and validation.

R.D.S.: Your phrase “revolt against the dominion” reminds me of other thoughts that were central to our collaboration. We rebelled against the objectivist epistemology belonging to traditional psychoanalysis, within which one isolated mind, the analyst, is claimed to make objective observations of another isolated mind, the patient. Our phenomenological contextualism, in contrast,
embraces a perspectivalist epistemology, insisting that analytic understanding is always shaped by the organizing principles of the inquirer. Accordingly, there are no objective or neutral analysts, no immaculate perceptions (Nietzsche, 1892), no God’s-eye views (Putnam, 1990) of anyone or anything.

The binary we discern here is that between epistemic authoritarianism and epistemic egalitarianism, and our insistence that the understandings held by both participants in the analytic dialogue are equally perspectival suggests the theme of revolt against epistemic tyranny.

G.E.A.: Another important thread in our long history concerns our efforts to escape the constraining grip on psychoanalytic thinking of the Cartesian doctrine of the isolated mind. If there is a single demon with which we have wrestled in our various books and articles, it almost certainly is this one. We have been positively allergic to this doctrine, again and again crying out against its bifurcation of the experiential world into outer and inner regions, its severing of mind from body and cognition from affect, and its picture of the mind as a quasi-objective entity, a decontextualized “thinking thing” that looks out on an external world from which it is ontologically separated.

“Bifurcations,” “severings,” “separations”—all words pointing to an original unity that has been torn asunder. It is as if the continuing prevalence of the Cartesian view of mind somehow consigns us to a loss of wholeness and to everlasting alienation and fragmentation. The other side of the binary, supplied by entering the beautiful land of phenomenology and intersubjectivity, restores the person to the context of his or her world and allows as well a reclaiming of a lost emotional integrity. The demon removes us from our worlds and from ourselves, even from our subjectivity, as we become “thinking things”; the angel returns our lost unity and respects our sacred status as experiencing persons, defined by our irreducible emotional connection with others and by our irreducible quality of displaying subjective life.

R.D.S.: A final and pivotal theme I want to highlight is our emphasis on the centrality of affectivity and the crucial importance of a
context of human understanding in which emotional experience can be validated, dwelled in, and integrated. We have argued that this shift of focus, locating affect at the motivational center of personal worlds, entails a radical contextualization of virtually all aspects of human psychological life. Painful or frightening affect, for example, may become traumatic when the attunement a child needs to assist in his or her tolerance, containment, and integration is profoundly absent. Living authentically, to take another example, presupposes a capacity to dwell in emotional pain, and this ability, in turn, requires that such pain find a relational home in which it can be held (Stolorow, 2011).

Taken together, these thoughts point to an essential binary constituted in contexts of emotional trauma: emotional annihilation versus aliveness, emotional deadness versus vitality. Emotional experiences—particularly painful ones—felt in a context of annihilating isolation become unendurable, making deadening dissociative defenses necessary. When such feelings encounter the angels of human responsiveness and understanding, by contrast, they can become a deep, grounding source of emotional aliveness and authenticity.

PERSONAL SOURCES

G.E.A.: The analysis developed in the preceding section points toward traumatic experiences in both our lives, challenging events and situations lying deep in the personal background of phenomenological contextualism. Our traumas obviously differed from one another in important respects, yet we have both found pathways that have significantly transformed and softened their impact in our personal relationship and in the ideas we have collaborated on for the past 40 years.

Let me begin an account of my own background by telling about two fantasies that haunted my teen years and very young adulthood. I call the first of these “the myth of the lone pioneer.” It was my deepest conviction that I was destined to be alone for the whole course of my life: no friends, no family, no romantic involvements, no shared activities with anyone. Just isolation. I
thought of becoming a shepherd in the mountains of Montana, or an explorer deep somewhere in Asia. Perhaps there would be a place for me in Antarctica, or near the North Pole. I could trek across the Sahara desert, or throw myself into a lonely swim across distant seas. I pictured somehow purchasing a small shack in Canada, and living out my days as a hermit, having no interactions with anyone. I once read about a man who climbed a tree and did not come down for a whole year. I considered myself to be that man.

The fantasy was not particularly visible in external terms. If someone had looked in upon my life during these years, they would have seen a young man, seemingly functional though mildly depressed, who was attending school, hanging out with a few companions, eventually going to college and even earning a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. At another level, however, I was an individual destined for isolation. What an amazing thing it is that my life has not turned out to be that of the lone pioneer at all! Here I am in my later years, with a wife and beautiful family, incredibly close friends and beloved students, and intellectually part of a richly creative collaboration that has spanned four decades.

The second fantasy involved a longing to become free of objective reality. I imagined that the evolution of humanity would someday, perhaps millions of years hence, eventuate in a breaking free of consciousness from physical embodiment, a transition into pure, floating spiritual or subjective energy, no longer constrained within the physical laws of the universe. I dreamed of catapulting myself over the immense spans of time needed for this development, and achieving it immediately: total emancipation from biological existence, from all dependency and vulnerability, from the limiting conditions of time and space.

r.d.s.: These stories are clearly about the legacy of your mother’s death, when you were an eight-year-old boy, George. They are direct expressions of everlasting separation from the one person whom you loved above all others. The lonely traveler into distant lands is the child for whom growing up and finding a life course that made sense had become a sad journey of solitude. The dream of becoming pure floating energy freed you from the physical
world from which your mother had vanished. It occurs to me that entering a realm beyond time and space takes you into a zone of being in which loss does not and cannot occur. Here we may have a personal source of the binary pertaining to the subjective versus the objective, to subjective truth (Kierkegaard) versus objective truth, with the latter being painfully associated with mortality and grief.

Your myth of the lone pioneer and the isolation it conveys bring to mind my earliest memory, perhaps a screen memory metaphorically representing my own parallel experience of inescapable aloneness: “I am lying in my crib, with the top sheet tucked in so tightly that I cannot move, and my nose is mashed uncomfortably against the hard mattress. I cry out in distress, but no one comes.”

I remember my mother as a very loving woman who was, however, chronically subject to periodic wooden depressions in which she was emotionally inaccessible and unresponsive. The traumatic impact of these depressions on me is captured by the aloneness and the immovable mattress in my memory, depictions of a barren, imprisoning world devoid of human connection. Some four decades later, early in my relationship with my late wife Dede—an angel whose wonderful emotional responsiveness was the absolute antithesis of the unyielding maternal mattress—I had a dream that symbolized the intensely negative, corrosive impact of my mother’s periodic woodenness on my self-experience: “I am a baby attached to a wall, covered with disgusting fungus.”

During that same period I had another dream symbolizing the fulfillment of a deep developmental longing: “I am a wide receiver playing in the last few seconds of a football game. As the buzzer goes off, I catch a ‘hail-Mary’ pass in the end zone, and my team wins the game. I look up into the stands and see my mother, whose name was Mary, looking down with a big smile on her face.”

G.E.A.: Two mothers, Bob: one a smiling, loving parent who takes great pride in her son’s magnificent achievements; the other a hard, blank wall that leaves her child to be consumed by a disintegrating emotional infection. This wall also causes the child to feel
that his emotions and he himself have become disgusting, perhaps, increasingly, to the core as the fungal infection advances. Without question, this is a binary, but one that is also an emotional memory of the chronic duality of your mother. It occurs to me that object relations theorists might be inclined to interpret these contrasting images as the result of a defensive splitting process, to fend off unbearable conflict and ambivalence. I do not see it that way—to me the dichotomous structure is a mirror of the trauma of your mother’s oscillations between two dramatically contrasting states of being.

**R.D.S.:** Your interpretation is spot-on, brother. Where were you when I was looking for an analyst?

**G.E.A.:** That was a long time ago—I was wrapped up at the time with unconscious reenactments of my own history, making myself and others miserable. Where were you when I needed an analyst to help me?

You mentioned earlier that you saw a binary in one of my teenage fantasies about becoming a floating consciousness, disembodied, freed from a world no longer containing my mother. Could your story about the mattress also describe a painful world of emotional isolation from which you needed to escape, a world of crude physicality and objectification? Perhaps we are looking in this opposition at an area of confluence and resonance between us, contributing to our shared enthusiasm for the realm of the subjective.

Let us turn for a moment to my memories of my own mother. Like yours, she also displayed two contrasting states: one of being present and alive, for the first eight years of my life, and one of being absent and dead, having been killed by a malignant brain tumor. In life she was loving, deeply devoted to me and my three siblings. She was the emotional center of our family life, giving herself not only to her children, but to my father as he built his early career as a metallurgical engineer. When she suddenly died it was as if the world became shrouded in darkness. Life went on, the sun and the moon continued to appear in the sky, years passed, but the beating heart of our family had lapsed into the si-
ience of death. My childhood is bifurcated into two parts: before, and after; life, and death; mother, and no mother. This too creates a binary that has become a theme in all my experiences, and it parallels your struggle with the two states of your mother. I had not thought of this connection between us until now.

r.d.s.: I think there may be another parallel in our childhood experiences of what you have called *epistemological trauma*, that is, of massive invalidation. Tell me your thoughts on this matter.

g.e.a.: Such trauma casts the person into the darkness of unknowing. Here is my story. Late in my teenage years, I was depressed and alienated, but had no idea whatever as to what might be troubling me. If anyone had asked me how I was feeling at the time, I might have said that nothing was a problem because nothing even seemed particularly real. I had thoughts that the world in which I lived lacked independent reality, and that who I was, or where I was, in actuality, was completely unknown. I might have been a catatonic schizophrenic locked up in a back ward of some psychiatric hospital, hallucinating my ongoing college career. Or it seemed possible that some unknown force or God-principle was generating a kind of world-story, and I was a mere character in this cosmic fiction with no independent reality of my own. This sense of everything being some kind of illusion was related to my fascination at the time with the Hindu and Buddhist religions, which are predicated on the idea that the world we sense is Maya or Samsara, illusory, something from which we need to emancipate ourselves.

Something had happened to render the world unreal, but at the time I had no awareness of the connection between my derealization experiences and the death of my mother. One day in my ninth year, when I was at school, she had suddenly felt a devastating cranial pain and collapsed into grave, critical condition. When I came home, she was not there. Our neighbors told me she had been hospitalized because of a headache, but that she would be coming home soon and I was not to worry. I had no reason to doubt what I was being told. Days passed, my mother did not return, but I felt confident everything would work out. Mommy would come back maybe tomorrow or next week when she got well, which again the next-door neighbors had promised me. In-
credibly, my father could not face me or my siblings and was absent throughout this short period. Finally, one day at school, another child approached me and began teasing me about the fact that my mother had died. I struck out at him for making this sadistic statement. I was certain she was alive, even if not well, and that she would be coming home. After all, I had been told so, and, anyway, mommies don’t die. They promise they will always be there and they never lie.

That night I was informed of the truth by my family’s minister. It was disclosed as follows. The minister asked me when I thought I would be seeing my mother again. I answered, “I don’t know, maybe next week or something.” He told me I would see her again, but it would be longer and I would have to wait. I asked if it would be a month or more. The minister said no, that I would have to wait longer still. I then asked how long it would be. The reply was: “You see, you will be with her again in Heaven. She has died, but in everlasting life, you and she will be reunited.” My young heart burst at this point as the awful truth rolled in.

The trauma was twofold. On the one hand I had lost the person to whom I was closest in my life, and continuing without her presence was unthinkable. On the other hand I had believed and been led to believe that she would get well and return, and this faith was foundational for me. But this belief had been shattered, and all that I thought I had known had now broken into pieces. It was a trauma of loss, and it was an epistemological trauma of the first magnitude. Even the minister denied the reality and permanence of my devastating loss, attempting to replace it with the illusory promise of everlasting reunion after my own death had occurred.

Recurrent dreams then appeared as I lay sleeping. I dreamed dozens of times that my mother was running up to our house and joyfully shouting to everyone that it had all been a misunderstanding, a case of mistaken identity or somesuch. The dreams were an enormous relief, restoring her to life and reconfirming what I had believed was true with all my heart. Upon awakening, however, my beliefs and my mother were lost once again. As I recall the scene with the minister and the repeating dreams, even now, almost 60 years later, I find myself in tears.
During the weeks following my mother’s death, I also tried to have some contact with her spirit, gradually accepting that she had vanished physically but clinging to the belief she was still somehow present, however invisibly and tenuously. I asked her to give me a sign that she was there. Nothing occurred. I then set up a kind of spiritualistic experiment, taking a tiny, almost weightless wisp of cotton, carefully putting it on the surface of one of my mother’s sewing thimbles turned upside down, and placing a clear glass over the display to keep drafts of air from disturbing the cotton. Then I waited for my mother’s spirit to signal me by moving the wisp, however slightly. The cotton remained still, as motionless as death. Had the experiment worked, I would have known her presence was still real and at least a remnant of all I had believed would have been reconfirmed. Instead, the trauma only continued and deepened.

Within a few months after the tragedy, dissociation set in, and I stopped thinking about my mother’s death and life, throwing myself instead into my schoolwork and the world of my friends. I wrote an autobiography at the age of ten for one of my classes. I still have this little piece of writing. It recounted a series of incidents belonging to my very early childhood, and then another series belonging to the middle childhood years, but there was no mention of my mother’s death, almost as if this part of my history had been excised. I remained aware of the raw physical fact of what had happened, but ceased giving it any thought. Eventually almost all of my memories of my mother’s life and death faded from my recall.

The reason everything eventually began to seem so unreal was because all that I had considered real had been obliterated in the tragedy of my mother’s death. To start with, it had never been conceivable that she could die, so that would be the first blow against what I had believed. Second, I had trusted the reassurances that she would return during those anxious days following her hospitalization. So all that was real had been doubly destroyed, and this constituted an attack on the foundation of my world and on my ability to trust my own perceptions. Looking back, it seems to me that this is a primary reason my mother’s death had to be
dissociated. It was not just the unbearable pain of sadness and missing her that was solved by this adaptation; reality itself was protected against a savage blow, and I was able to continue my boyhood relatively intact. Intact, that is, until my late teen years, when the realness of the world began to be called into question, as everything began to seem increasingly illusory.

As a child, I never had an opportunity to share my experiences of loss and invalidation. Everyone in my family—my father, my brother, my sisters—seemed emotionally to collapse and close in upon themselves. So I became, with the help of dissociation, someone who was unaffected. During my adult years this has completely changed, through the experience of a number of loving relationships in which it was possible to come home to myself. One effect of reclaiming the full scope of my childhood tragedy, by the way, was that the felt reality of the world was restored and my fascination with the religions of the East has receded.

R.D.S.: Your story of twofold childhood trauma is really heart-breaking, brother. My own childhood experiences of epistemological trauma, or, as I prefer to call it, “epistemic tyranny,” seem almost trivial by comparison (I know you won’t let me get away with that). My father was a narcissistically brittle man who reverted to various forms of defensive grandiosity, often punctuated with frightening, raging yelling, when his self-esteem was under siege. One form his grandiosity took that was an ongoing source of invalidation for me was a kind of epistemic arrogance—his point of view was always right, his word was always the last, and there was no room for the correctness of any perspective other than his own. A limerick that I wrote and sent to you many years ago, capturing what I saw as the objectivist presumptions characteristic of the traditional psychoanalytic stance, could easily have been written about my father:

Ode to a Besserwisser
There was a young analyst so fair,
With clear and distinct ideas most rare.
In objectivist zeal,
He knows the real Real,
Being wrapped in a *cordon sanitaire*. 
Fortunately for me, even though my father never conceded the validity of my viewpoint when it was in conflict with his own, he always allowed me to argue with him, sometimes quite vehemently. His epistemic tyranny was not so absolute, so I wasn’t crushed under a requirement to accommodate. Instead, I became quite a good arguer, as you know. And I have remained allergic to epistemic arrogance ever since.

G.E.A.: I don’t think you should minimize the destructive effect, actual and potential, of having so much of your childhood spirit absorbed by a struggle against epistemic tyranny. I would view your development of special skills in argumentation as a heroic battle, in defense of your right to have perceptions and feelings of your own, ultimately to exist as someone autonomous and real. I am all too familiar with family constellations in which such a parental tyranny succeeds in crushing the children’s ability to define themselves and pursue their own authentic destinies. Such situations often enough end in utter catastrophe: psychosis for the sons and daughters, or even suicide as a last, paradoxical defense against succumbing to personal obliteration. You were able, through the development of imposing abilities to think analytically and logically, to hold your own, and this in spite of your father’s insistence on always having the last word. I recall once speaking to someone who had made the mistake of trying to engage you in a public debate at a psychoanalytic conference. He said the experience was one of being run over by an M1 Abrams tank, as you held forth in that debate with compelling arguments and unassailable logic. I am saying that tank may well have saved your life.

Be all that as it may, it is true that your early years did not involve a crushing experience of loss like mine. Life held that in abeyance until later, but when the experience finally came in the death of your beloved wife, Dede, it was devastating in its impact nonetheless. I also know that the trauma you suffered in this loss has had profound effects on the continuing development of phenomenological contextualism over the last two decades. Talk to me about all of this.

R.D.S.: Profound effects, indeed! In the wake of that devastating loss, which shattered my emotional world and threw me back into
the wooden mattress-world of my childhood, I began devoting myself to illuminating the phenomenology of emotional trauma, an endeavor in which studying and reflecting upon my own experience played a central role. In the chapter on trauma in our book *Contexts of Being* (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992), a book that we outlined together at your summer house in Maine, the summer after Dede died, I emphasized the context-embeddedness of emotional trauma, claiming that it takes form when severe emotional pain cannot find a relational home or context of human understanding in which it can be held, dwelled in, and integrated. This claim was an expansion and refinement of a sentence that Dede herself had written in our early joint article, “Affects and Self-objects” (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984/1985): “The tendency for [painful] affective experiences to create a disorganized (i.e., traumatic) self-state is seen to originate from . . . . faulty [affect] attunement, with a lack of mutual sharing and acceptance of affect states” (p. 110). The person whom I would have longed to share in and hold my overwhelming grief was of course the very same person who was gone, and continuing and expanding upon her legacy was a way of making her present for me. I remember that in the immediate aftermath of Dede’s death, you were the only person among my friends and family members who was capable of dwelling with me in my emotional devastation. You said, in your inimitable way, “You are a destroyed human being. You are on a train to nowhere.” I think dwelling in your own experience of traumatic loss enabled you to be an understanding home for mine.

Conceptualizations of two further constitutive features of emotional trauma—its existential significance and its disruptive impact on the experience of temporality (Stolorow, 2007)—developed out of my efforts to comprehend the extreme feelings of isolation and estrangement I felt at a conference in 1992, at which I relived the trauma of awakening one morning 20 months earlier to find Dede lying dead across our bed, four weeks after her metastatic cancer had been diagnosed.

G.E.A.: I think I see another parallel between us, old friend. The thought and even the phrasing of the little quotation from Dede regarding the role of the absence of affect attunement in giving
rise to disorganized, traumatic self-states are continued and end-
lessly elaborated in your writings on trauma. Her interrupted life
is thus itself symbolically continued, and a feeling of her presence
is maintained, even as the shattering truth of her death also con-
tinues to lay you low. In the aftermath of my mother’s death I did
something similar. When my father finally returned to my family,
three days after I had been informed of the disaster, he found me
at home in bed with a respiratory infection. I remember him walk-
ing into my room and standing before me, saying nothing, tears
streaming down his face. I reached up and put my arm around
him, saying: “It’s all right dad, we’re going to be okay.” I had al-
ready begun to adopt the nurturing, comforting role that had
been one of the hallmarks of my mother’s personality, thereby
continuing her presence in a world from which she had vanished.

In your last comment you mentioned how after Dede died I
said things to you like “You are on a train to nowhere,” or “You
are a destroyed human being.” Such statements might sound like
the opposite of reassurance, and certainly contrast with the com-
forting message I gave to my father as he stood there crying so
long ago. Actually, though, I was just giving expression to what I
knew you were feeling, your pain being of such an absolute kind
that only such words could begin to connect to it. Ordinary en-
couraging statements—“Bob, you will be all right, you just need to
get through this difficult time”—I knew created a wall between
you and those seeking to make you feel better, once again resur-
recting the mattress-world.

A final thought about our friendship and the intertwining
themes that underlie our long journey of collaboration: I have
heard you say, on countless occasions, that your own central in-
vARIANT organizing principle—the theme of your life—is captured
in the statement: “No one listens to me!” I know that this formula-
tion came about originally as a joke, in the face of someone at a
conference who insisted on misunderstanding and misrepresent-
ing your views on psychoanalysis. But you repeated the descrip-
tion of yourself so many times in the ensuing years that I began to
believe it contained essential subjective truths. Let me offer an
interpretation of its meaning in terms of the twin challenges of
your early life. “No one listens to me” harks back first of all to the plight of the child crushed against a mattress, whose cries go unheard and who is left in isolation. Second, the statement also applies to the situation of a boy engaged in a long, epistemic struggle to establish the existence and the legitimacy of his own developing vision of the world, fighting with a potentially obliterating father who refuses to listen to what is said to him. Taking our personal life-themes together, it occurs to me that an apt description of our friendship and our intellectual partnership would be The lone pioneer meets the man to whom no one would listen. In you, I found a companion when I had never expected one; in me, you found someone who could listen and understand. All in all I would say we have done pretty well, although life has given us both things that were almost impossible to deal with.

Here is another thought, pertaining to our relationship and its relevance to the content of our ideas. Do you remember the walk in Santa Fe, I think in 1992, where I told you about the reverie that had come to me a few weeks before: a young man, perhaps fifty years from now, concluding a talk he was giving on our work and the psychological meaning some of our ideas? I listened in, as if from beyond the grave, as he concluded: “And so you see, ladies and gentlemen, that the central concept in Robert Stolorow’s and George Atwood’s theoretical contributions—that of the intersubjective field, understood as a system of differently organized, interacting subjective worlds—symbolizes directly the interaction out of which their ideas came into being. In other words, their theory is the mirror of their collaboration.”

R.D.S.: I recall my response to your daydream: “Intersubjectivity theory could never have come about except as a collaborative enterprise.” Then we talked about the possibility that the age of the lonely hero in psychoanalytic personality theory had perhaps come to an end, and that all significant future developments might be destined to be collaborative in nature. Such a view, of course, immodestly casts the two of us as heroes of another kind, figures whose heroically shared efforts constitute the leading edge of the development of our whole area of study.

G.E.A.: I think we have gotten away from the image of a field, which draws on physics and lends itself to a reification and universaliza-
tion, as we suggested in the concluding chapter of the second edition of *Faces in a Cloud* (Atwood & Stolorow, 1993). One can almost visualize the intersubjective field, going in and out of states of conjunction and disjunction, shimmering, with its constituent parts intricately and subtly interweaving with one another, all the while displaying the shifting colors of the rainbow. Such an image, on its way to becoming real and tangible, was a picture of our interaction, a shrine to an intellectual romance and a lasting personal friendship. Now we just speak of “contexts,” which is a more abstract idea, referring to arrays of elements in relation to which something has meaning.

R.D.S.: Yes, paradoxically, the notion of an intersubjective field, generated in a quest for a viewpoint doing justice to the profound embeddedness of human experience in constitutive human contexts, reifies and absolutizes the very idea of a context and is therefore itself an act of decontextualization. Let’s review what we proposed were the specific personal meanings of the idea of the intersubjective field, and then, collaboratively of course, relate that proposal to the binaries/demons we have been discussing in our dialogue here.

**IMPLICATIONS**

We have previously suggested (Atwood & Stolorow, 1993) two important purposes served by the image of the intersubjective field, reifying the notion that all personal experience is embedded in irreducible relational contexts. First, such an idea universalizes and eternalizes relatedness itself, undoing the traumatizing impact of events in our lives that disrupted emotionally important connections and led to devastating feelings of abandonment and isolation. Second, the specific vision of the intersubjective field as a system of interacting, differently organized subjective worlds enshrines at the heart of our theory the hope for a mode of relatedness in which the obliterations of epistemic tyrannies are neutralized and the distinctive structures of individual worlds are respected and preserved. Our long-standing resistance against metapsychological doctrines defining the essential content of all human experience expresses this latter purpose.
Paradoxically, however, both our life experiences and our phenomenological contextualism have led us to something that is both absolute and universal—something that is not a theoretical idea but an existential fact—namely, the experience of human finitude, of death, loss, and other forms of limitedness as inescapable possibilities with which all human beings must come to terms. Yet, we have contended, the extent to which such manifestations of human finitude become lastingly unendurable and traumatic depends on the extent to which they fail to find a context of human understanding in which they can be held, dwelled in, borne, and integrated into the fabric of one’s emotional world.

The dialogue exploring the binary oppositions contained in phenomenological contextualism brought forth contrasts between wholeness and fragmentation, emotional connection and disruptive loss, epistemic egalitarianism and invalidating tyranny, and the realm of the subjective as over against objective physical reality. The utopian world of our thinking appears to seek victory over demonic forces that tear us away from ourselves and from each other, that present us with crushing, authoritarian definitions of what the content of our experiences should be, and that destroy our subjectivity itself with the irresistible power of the physically objective environment.

Do such thoughts have any implications for the future development of phenomenological contextualism? Can such reflections illuminate territories of human experience not yet explored? Our answer comes from efforts to imagine a framework of understanding that is not captive to the binary distinctions arising out of our respective trauma histories. We envision the possibility of a radicalization of the idea of context itself, not only of breaking free of reifying imagery that prescribes universal contents and thereby restricts the scope of what can be studied and understood, but of overcoming as well the ultimate Cartesian binary: that between the mental and the physical, the inner and the outer, the mind and the body, the subjective and the objective. Physical reality is itself a part of the context of human experience, and a contextualism that is encompassing includes the physical world within its purview. Here, perhaps, we arrive at a possible culmination of our personal and intellectual quest for phenomenological unity.
NOTE
1. Conversations between George Atwood and Michael Pariser influenced this formulation of an aftermath of trauma.

REFERENCES