

THE SOCIOLOGICAL MEANING OF CODEPENDENCE

Womanisers often have qualities which correlate closely with common traits of the romantic love complex – here are men who will sweep women off their feet, or woo them with particular fervour, and perhaps have become very skilled in so doing. Some women – to whom all those things are by now very familiar – might very well opt for a short-term sexual liaison in the pursuit of transitory excitement or pleasure. For such women the appeal of the lady-killer fades quickly or is deliberately kept in check.

Most lady-killers' ladies are not like this at all.¹ On the contrary, they are likely quite quickly to become deeply involved once any relationship starts up. Such women's lives are strewn with disastrous romances, or long, painful involvements with men who in some way or another abuse them. These women, in short, are codependent, and it has become a commonplace of the therapeutic literature that codependence – although by no means limited to females – is a term that in some ways describes what was once called the 'female role' in general.²

Codependent women are carers, who need to give nurturance to others but, partly or almost entirely on an unconscious level, anticipate that their devotion will be rebuffed.

What a painful irony this is! The codependent woman is quite likely to become embroiled in a relationship precisely with a philanderer. She is prepared and perhaps even anxious to 'rescue' him; he requires such tolerance because, unless he is wholly duplicitous, and keeps his real attitudes completely concealed, other women will reject him.

The nature of codependence

The term 'codependent' is an example of that 'reverse reflexivity' so common in the current era. Instead of being coined by professionals, codependence came from the work of individuals struggling with their own alcoholism. In the early alcoholic self-help groups, alcoholism was understood as a weakness of the person affected. It was supposed that the alcoholic recovered best in the company of others suffering from the same problem, away from a family context. Later it came to be recognised that alcoholism affects others with whom the alcoholic is regularly in contact; but most still believed that the alcoholic would have to be cured before being successfully reintegrated into a domestic context. Eventually, however, it became clear that alcoholics have little chance of staying sober if they return to relationships or families where all else remains the same; usually those entire relationships revolve around the alcoholic's addiction.

Others' lives, often in subtle, sometimes in highly damaging, ways, are thus dependent upon the dependency of the addict. One of the first terms coined to interpret this situation was the 'enabler' – the person, usually the sexual partner or spouse, and most commonly a woman, who consciously or unconsciously supports the individual's drinking. The idea of the 'codependent' came to replace that of enabler as it became apparent that such an individual

might be suffering as much as, or more than, the person with the chemical dependency.³

Once it had become thus generalised, the term 'codependence' was somewhat misleading. It was developed in a context in which there was a clear-cut 'addict', to whose behaviour the other responds. The notion tends to imply a priority in who becomes dependent upon whom; it refers, as it were, to a secondary addiction, the enabler facing the alcoholic. As used in this way, the concept mixes two things: the refraction of an addiction on to another, who builds his or her behaviour around it, and the interactional quality of a relationship. To complicate things further, codependence is quite often linked, not to a specific relationship, but to a type of personality. As one author puts it:

The codependent seeks approval from practically everyone with whom she comes into contact. Instead of building a life around one person, she may have several 'golden calves' around whom she dances – perhaps her mother and father, her women friends, her boss, and the clerk at the supermarket, in addition to her lover. She lives her life around the needs of others.⁴

Let me formulate the concepts at issue in the following way. A codependent *person* is someone who, in order to sustain a sense of ontological security, requires another individual, or set of individuals, to define her (or his) wants; she or he cannot feel self-confident without being devoted to the needs of others. A codependent *relationship* is one in which an individual is tied psychologically to a partner whose activities are governed by compulsiveness of some sort. I shall term a *fixated* relationship one in which the relationship itself is the object of addiction. In fixated relationships, individuals do not build their lives around the pre-existing addictions of others; rather, they need the relationship to cater to a sense of security which they cannot

otherwise meet. In their most benign form, fixated relationships are those entrenched in habit. Such relationships are much more fractious when those concerned are linked through modes of mutual antagonism, from which they are unable to extricate themselves.

We may suppose that fixated relationships are more widespread than codependency in any of its principal forms. A fixated relationship is built around compulsive dependence rather than codependence. Neither party is distinctively an addict, yet both are dependent upon a tie which is either a matter of routinised obligation or actually destructive for the parties concerned. Fixated relationships usually presume role separation. Each person depends upon an 'alterity' which the partner provides; but neither is able fully to recognise, or come to terms with, the nature of his or her dependence upon the other. Men tend to be in fixated relationships in so far as they are with others to whom they are deeply bound, but where that bondedness is either not understood or is actively disclaimed. In the case of women, compulsive dependence is more often associated with a domestic role that has become a fetish – a ritual involvement, for example, with domestic chores and the demands of children.

The work of those who, on the level of therapy, seek to help individuals escape from addictive relationships again provides clues about the structural transformations influencing such relationships. Here once more we encounter the emerging centrality of the pure relationship, as well as its close connections with the reflexive project of self and with a model of confluent love. Addictive ties: 1. do not allow for the monitoring of self and other so vital to the pure relationship; 2. submerge self-identity either in the other or in fixed routines; 3. prevent that opening out to the other which is the precondition of intimacy; 4. tend to preserve inegalitarian gender differences and sexual practices.

The first injunction of all therapy programmes is a reflex-

ive one: recognise that you have a problem and, by dint of that recognition, begin to do something about it! In alcoholic self-help groups, 'bottoming out' is the term often used to describe the state of mind of those who say, 'Enough is enough: I am going to change.' 'Even after the decision has been made at some level, you may still need a jolt to get you to take action. It could be a rejection, a car accident, getting abused by a sexual partner, losing sobriety, or an onslaught of anxiety attacks. Harmful consequences are like a shot of energy to the healthy side.'⁵ The decision to take action normally involves securing the help of others outside the addictive relationship itself, for this is a key mode of achieving initial distance as well as support.

The development of reflexive attention entails, as a basic beginning point, the recognition of choice. Choice, it is emphasised, means an appraisal of one's limits and the constraints to which one is subject: this is the way to assess opportunities. The reflexive moment is called by one author 'self talk'. Self talk is a reprogramming, a way of considering how far established routines should be thought of in a new way or, if possible, discarded. Recognition of choice means overcoming 'negative programmes' that support addictive patterns. The following are what addictive programming sounds like:

'I just can't do it';
 'I just know it won't work';
 'I'm not cut out for that';
 'I'm not creative enough';
 'I'll never have enough money';
 'I can't get along with my boss';
 'I never seem to have the time I need to get everything done' . . . and so forth.⁶

We should stand back from the naive, almost totalitarian, ring of the injunction to avoid all such thoughts: for, rather

obviously, 'I just can't do it', 'I just know it won't work' and the rest can often be realistic appraisals of one's opportunities in any given context. Reflexivity is a necessary condition for emancipation from addiction, not a sufficient one. None the less, the behavioural importance of such programming is evident enough.

Choice, it is made clear, reflects directly upon the nature of the self. What a person wants helps define who that person is; and finding a secure self-identity is fundamental to identifying wants. 'There may be a thousand little choices in a day. All of them count.'⁷ But some of them count more than others. Compulsive relationships, as the therapeutic literature repeatedly states, although not always in so many words, preclude the reflexive exploration of self-identity. Thus a codependent individual is seen by Kasl precisely as 'someone whose core identity is undeveloped or unknown, and who maintains a false identity built from dependent attachments to external sources'.⁸

Addiction and the question of intimacy

Codependent individuals are accustomed to finding their identity through the actions or needs of others; but in any addictive relationship the self tends to become merged with the other, because the addiction is a prime source of ontological security. One of the aims often suggested in the early phases of therapy or self-help groups is that of 'letting go' – releasing the attempt to control others characteristic of codependence. The individual is encouraged to try to free him- or herself from her 'unspoken contract' to put the other to rights. The process is an extremely difficult one to go through, although its surface markers are apparent: her conversations no longer so continually focus upon what 'he' thinks or does, what 'they' say, 'my husband' or 'my lover'

says. In support groups for the partners of alcoholics, letting go is labelled Loving Detachment, a banal enough phrase for a very real phenomenon – the emerging capability of the codependent to sustain care for the other without shouldering the burden of his or her addiction.⁹

What seems at first blush an encouragement of egoism, even narcissism, should rather be understood as an essential starting-point for the possibility of developing confluent love. It is a prerequisite for recognising the other as an independent being, who can be loved for her or his specific traits and qualities; and also it offers the chance of release from an obsessive involvement with a broken or dying relationship. These are some characteristics, as listed by one therapist, of new habits that might replace the older, more compulsive ones:

You can listen to a friend's problem – just listen – and not try to rescue him or her.

Instead of being focused solely on one person, you are interested in many people.

Instead of returning to the 'scene of the crime' – where your ex-lover lives, or special places the two of you went to – you find more interesting places to visit.

If you desire something or someone who is not available, you enjoy something or someone who is.

Instead of putting up with abuse, you say no to the relationship.

If you have just broken up with a lover, and he always called at a certain time, you find another pleasurable pursuit to do at that time.¹⁰

Defining personal boundaries is regarded as fundamental for a non-addictive relationship. Why? The answer again directly concerns the self and its reflexivity. Boundaries

establish what belongs to whom, psychologically speaking, and thereby counteract the effects of projective identification. Clear boundaries within a relationship are obviously important for confluent love and the sustaining of intimacy. Intimacy is not being absorbed by the other, but knowing his or her characteristics and making available one's own. Opening out to the other, paradoxically, requires personal boundaries, because it is a communicative phenomenon; it also requires sensitivity and tact, since it is not the same as living with no private thoughts at all. The balance of openness, vulnerability and trust developed in a relationship governs whether or not personal boundaries become divisions which obstruct rather than encourage such communication.¹¹

This balance also presumes a balance of power – which is why the pure relationship, with its promise of intimacy, depends both upon the increasing autonomy of women and upon plastic sexuality, no longer harnessed to the double standard. The same therapist mentioned above provides a chart identifying characteristics of addictive versus intimate relationships:

<i>Addictive</i>	<i>Intimate</i>
Obsession with finding 'someone to love'	Development of self as a first priority
Need for immediate gratification	Desire for long-term contentment; relationship develops step by step
Pressuring partner for sex or commitment	Freedom of choice
Imbalance of power	Balance and mutuality in the relationship
Power plays for control	Compromise, negotiation or taking turns at leading
No-talk rule, especially if things are not working out	Sharing wants, feelings, and appreciation of what your partner means to you

Manipulation	Directness
Lack of trust	Appropriate trust (that is, knowing that your partner will probably behave according to his or her fundamental nature)
Attempts to change partner to meet one's needs	Embracing of each other's individuality
Relationship is based on delusion and avoidance of the unpleasant	Relationship deals with all aspects of reality
Relationship is always the same	Relationship is always changing
Expectation that one partner will fix and rescue the other	Self-care by both partners
Fusion (being obsessed with each other's problems and feelings)	Loving detachment (healthy concern about partner's well-being and growth, while letting go)
Passion confused with fear	Sex grows out of friendship and caring
Blaming self or partner for problems	Problem-solving together
Cycle of pain and despair	Cycle of comfort and contentment ¹²

Pious psychobabble? Perhaps, at least to some degree. Self-contradictory, in respect of some of the claims made in the right-hand column? Undoubtedly – although to some extent these express real contradictions of personal life. Yet I do not think the possibilities listed are mere wishful thinking; they reflect some of the tendential characteristics of the transformation of intimacy which I seek to document throughout the book. Who could fail to see in them evidence of, and a programme for, the democratisation of daily life? Comparing the list on the left-hand side with that on the right reveals a picture of emancipation. This is not just a

'freeing from': as portrayed here intimacy has a substantive content. We begin to see what a liberated personal domain might look like.

Intimacy, kinship, parenthood

The transformation of intimacy is about sex and gender, but it is not limited to them – a fact which supports the thesis, which I shall develop in some detail later, that what is at issue here is a basic transition in the ethics of personal life as a whole. Like gender, kinship was once seen as naturally given, a series of rights and obligations which biological and marriage ties created. Kinship relations, it has been widely argued, have been largely destroyed with the development of modern institutions, which have left the nuclear family standing in splendid isolation. Without taking up the question in any detail, it can be seen that this view is mistaken, or at least misleading. In the separating and divorcing society, the nuclear family generates a diversity of new kin ties associated, for example, with so-called recombinant families. However, the nature of these ties changes as they are subject to greater negotiation than before. Kinship relations often used to be a taken for granted basis of trust; now trust has to be negotiated and bargained for, and commitment is as much of an issue as in sexual relationships.

Janet Finch speaks of a process of 'working out' when analysing kinship relations today.¹³ People have to work out how to treat relatives and, in so doing, construct novel ethics of day-to-day life. She treats this process explicitly in terms of a language of commitment. People tend to organise their kinship connections through 'negotiated commitment', whereby they work out the 'proper thing to do' for their relatives in a specific range of contexts. For instance, an

individual does not decide to lend money to a brother-in-law because this is defined in the family or wider society as an obligation; rather the money is lent because the person has developed a series of commitments to the other which defines it as the right thing to do.

How far do the relations between parents and children differ from this situation? Evidently in adult-child interaction there is a marked imbalance of power, especially in the early years of the life of the child. In the light of this fact, one might suppose that the quality of the relationship has little bearing upon the care provided, since there are pre-given social obligations of a binding kind on both sides. Yet there is good reason to doubt how strong such obligations are among many groups today. The best way to demonstrate this is to work 'backwards' from parent-child ties that are clearly negotiated to those characteristic of early childhood. Many parents are now step-parents as well as biological mothers and fathers. Step-parents usually accept some obligations towards, and rights over, children, but these are today generally 'negotiated commitments' in Finch's sense, from the side of the children as well as the adults. Or take the case of the obligations adult children assume towards ageing parents. In some circumstances and cultural contexts it is more or less taken for granted that the parents can count on their children for material and social support. But the clear trend of development is for such support to depend upon the quality of relationships forged.

The determining influence seems to be what could be described as the forming of cumulative commitments.¹⁴ In a study of mothers and daughters, for example, one respondent says, 'My mother and I lived together because we chose to, we liked each other . . . we shared a common home, we could laugh together . . . I was an independent person, so was my mother. We were living together, I wasn't just looking after her.'¹⁵ She felt a commitment to care for her mother, as a result of their long history together; but the

element of mutual liking was important. As Finch points out, the notion of cumulative commitments helps us to understand how, over a period of time, it becomes 'obvious' to one sibling that various forms of care should be provided for one or both parents, whereas another might feel quite differently.¹⁶

The picture is more complex in the case of the relation of parents to younger children. Not only are parents much more powerful than very young children; their attitudes and conduct shape the child's personality and dispositions. Yet it would certainly not be right to suppose that childhood has remained unaffected by the world of pure relationships. The social invention of motherhood presaged, and gave concrete form to, the idea that the mother should develop an affectionate relationship with the child, one that gives specific weight to the child's needs. Child-rearing manuals published in the early part of the current century advised parents not to become too friendly with their children on the grounds that their authority would become weakened. Later the view developed that parents should seek to foster close emotional ties with their children, but also give due recognition to the child's autonomy.¹⁷ Just as some have spoken of narcissism to refer to the position of the self in modern society, others have suggested that parent-child interaction has moved towards greater 'permissiveness'. But this is an inadequate label to refer to the endeavour to develop alternative child-rearing strategies to those of the past. It is the quality of the relationship which comes to the fore, with a stress upon intimacy replacing that of parental authoritativeness. Sensitivity and understanding are asked for on both sides.¹⁸

Parents and children

In therapeutic discussions of codependent or fixated relationships, almost without exception, individuals who wish to develop close personal ties with others are advised to 'heal the child within'. The relations between parents and young children here reappear in a fundamental way as relevant to the pure relationship and the model of confluent love. Why is a 'release from the past' so important for the attainment of intimacy? Since so many forms of therapy, beginning with psychoanalysis, are oriented to childhood experience, answering this question might very well provide further clues to the significance of therapy and counselling in modern culture in general.

We can again start out with a therapeutic guide, in this instance Susan Forward, as she gives advice about how to 'heal the past'.¹⁹ Her discussion concentrates upon the case of Nicki, a young woman who was experiencing difficulties in her marriage. She was unable to stand up for herself in the relationship, and when her husband was angry with her she felt humiliated and defenceless. The therapist asked her to recall incidents in her childhood that had made her feel a similar way, and came up with a particular example – one of those incidents that sticks permanently in the mind. Her father always wanted her to learn to play the piano well, and although she herself wasn't very interested, she tried hard in order to please him. When she played in front of other people, she became anxious and the level of her performance deteriorated. At one recital she was so nervous that she left out a whole section of the piece she was asked to play. On the way home from the recital her father told her that, after her débâcle, he didn't know how he would ever be able to look any of the audience in the face again. She had disgraced him in front of everyone, was thoughtless, careless and too lazy to practise.

She had felt utterly crushed, having wanted so much to please him. In her words, 'I just felt like dying.' The therapist perceived that in her marriage she was re-enacting scenes from her childhood and 'losing her adult self'.²⁰ She asked Nicki to bring in a picture of herself as a little girl, and when they looked at the photo together Nicki remembered many other circumstances in which her father had shamed her in a similar way. Forward then suggested that she go down to the local school and spot a girl who reminded her of herself at the same age. The idea was that she should imagine that girl being humiliated in the same manner as she felt she had been; in such a way she could realise how small and defenceless she was at the time when the original event happened. It was this 'child within' who became so fearful and timid when her husband criticised her.

Nicki was later asked by the therapist to imagine that her father was sitting in an empty chair in front of her, and to say to him the things she'd always wanted to say, but was never able to do. Trembling with anger, she shouted:

How dare you treat me like that! How dare you humiliate me the way you did! Who the hell did you think you were? I always looked up to you. I worshipped you. Couldn't you tell how much you were hurting me? Nothing I ever did was good enough for you. You made me feel like a total failure, you bastard. I would have done anything for you, just to get you to love me a little.²¹

Unfair to fathers, the reader – or at least the male reader – might be tempted to say. For perhaps, after all, he was doing his best. Yet this is not the point, for whatever he intended, she felt an enduring shame. According to Forward, this and other therapeutic exercises were of great value in siphoning off the accumulated rage Nicki harboured against her father.

She was asked to make an inventory of all the negative

things her father, in her eyes, had felt about her. She came up with a long list:

- I am inconsiderate
- I am selfish
- I am thoughtless
- I am talentless
- I am inadequate
- I am an embarrassment to my family
- I am disappointing
- I am ungrateful
- I am a bad person
- I am a failure
- I am shiftless
- I am lazy and will never amount to anything.

She immediately saw that she had taken over many of these opinions about herself; and she went back to the list she had written out and wrote in a bold hand, 'It wasn't true then and it isn't true now!' In contrast to her views of her father, she felt that her mother had always been loving and supportive. This is a list of what she saw as her mother's positive opinions of her:

- I am intelligent
- I am sweet
- I am charming
- I am generous
- I am talented
- I am a hard worker
- I am good-natured
- I am full of energy
- I am lovable
- I am a joy to have around.²²

After she had written this list, Nicki scrawled across it: 'This is true and it always has been.' She later came to accept that her parents' views of her had not been as polarised as she had always assumed. Her father, for example, had quite often complimented her on her intelligence, looks and athletic abilities. She gradually learned to 'reparent the little child within her' and dispel the internal image of the critical father. Whether Nicki was able effectively to improve her relationship with her father, whom she saw infrequently, Forward does not say. She came eventually to abandon her fantasy that her father would ever be 'the father I always wanted'. There was 'grief and mourning' in so doing, but 'also a great deal of freedom. All the energy she had spent in a fruitless search for her father's love could now be used in the pursuit of activities that were positive and meaningful to her.'²³

I am not concerned with how far these particular techniques of therapy are effective compared with, say, classical psychoanalysis or other therapies which focus in a more subtle way on the unconscious. Fostering the 'child within' means retrieving the past – a process of going back, and recapturing half-remembered or repressed childhood experiences – but only in order to release it. The emphasis is upon the present and the future, and the severity of the break with the past is indicated by the fact that a mourning process is required to give it up. Are we talking here of yet another addiction which needs to be broken? In a looser sense of the term than that discussed previously, I think we are. The therapist is encouraging Nicki to 'let go' of traits which, destructive as they were, had something of a compulsive grip upon her attitudes and actions.

The significance of mourning pervades a great deal of the therapeutic literature. Consider, for instance, the analysis of 'loveshock' offered by Stephen Gullo and Connie Church.²⁴ Gullo developed the idea of loveshock from therapeutic work he carried out with Vietnam veterans suffering from

battle fatigue, often more popularly known as shell-shock.²⁵ Soldiers returning from Vietnam suffered from psychological disorientation, numbness of feelings and an incapacity to form close relationships with anyone save their old battlefield comrades. Gullo noticed parallels between the experiences of the soldiers and the reactions of people when serious love relationships ended. The comparison might seem to trivialise the distress produced by battle fatigue, but in fact the intensity of the reactions to the breakup of an established relationship is sometimes almost as great, and recovery as prolonged.

When a relationship ends, even for one who is the 'rejector' rather than the person abandoned, an image of the other, habits associated with the other and the expectation that a reconciliation may take place may persist for many years afterwards. Mourning is the condition of letting go of habits which otherwise translate themselves into addictive traits in the present. Loveshock has a 'psychological travelling time', which may take a period of many months to work through, although how long it lasts varies according to the degree of emotional involvement with the memories which the individual must rework. Becoming resigned to the break, 'bidding goodbye', is normally only achieved in the later stages of withdrawal, once grief and blame have substantially been dealt with.

It is not fanciful to compare letting go in dissolved adult relationships with the effort to free an adult, such as Nicki, from a compulsive involvement with childhood events and traumas. In each case there is a cognitive and emotional coming to terms with the psychological past, and a rewriting of the narrative of self. In both instances a failure to 'break away' is likely to mean the repetition of similar patterns of behaviour, forming a cycle rather than a path of autonomous self-development. 'Confronting your loveshock experience and learning from what went wrong in the relationship can turn the pain into a growth experience and provide you

with insights and coping skills that can enhance your next relationship.²⁶

In speaking of the relations between adult children and their parents, it needs an effort of the imagination to think in terms of 'recovery' in the way which comes quite naturally when one considers the situation of someone getting over the loss of a loved partner. Childhood seems to be something that prepares one for later, more autonomous, participation in an adult world rather than a phase of life from which, as an adult, one must seek to escape. Yet the parent-child relationship, like others, is one from which the individual has to break free, although not normally because it disintegrates in the same way as an adult love relationship. Suppose we took the unusual step of treating parent-child involvement as just one relationship among others which individuals form and from which they move out. It immediately becomes apparent that many parent-child relationships would be regarded, from a therapeutic point of view, as severely defective - if the children were not intrinsically dependent upon their parents, one would expect them to leave. As I shall try to indicate, some interesting conclusions follow if we see 'badly behaved' parents in the same way as we would spouses who regularly trample on the other's needs.

Toxic parents?

Let me follow through further the therapeutic work of Susan Forward as she generalises her concerns with Nicki to offer a full-blown account of the conditions under which parents can prove 'toxic' for their children.²⁷ What is a toxic parent? There is a well-known saying to the effect that however parents behave towards their children it will be wrong; no parent can discern all of a child's needs or adequately

respond to them. Yet there are many parents who consistently treat their children in a manner that damages their sense of personal worth – and might cause them to engage in life-long battles with the memories and figures of their childhood. Toxic parents

tend to see rebellion or even individual differences as a personal attack. They defend themselves by reinforcing their child's dependence and helplessness. Instead of promoting healthy development, they unconsciously undermine it, often with the belief that they are acting in their child's best interest. They may use such phrases as 'it builds character' or 'she needs to learn right from wrong', but their arsenals of negativity really harm their child's self-esteem, sabotaging any budding independence . . . At the core of every formerly mistreated adult – even high achievers – is a little child who feels powerless and afraid.²⁸

Forward identifies a whole variety of toxic parents. There are parents who are simply 'emotionally inadequate'. They are not 'there' for their children, who may as a result feel they have to protect them, or may strive endlessly to find tokens of their love. These are parents who, whether intentionally or not, have abdicated their responsibilities to their children. A different category of toxic parents are controllers. The feelings and needs of the children are subordinated to those of the parents. The typical reaction of children brought up in this way is, 'Why can't they let me live my own life?'

These types of parental toxicity are relatively subtle; others are more directly brutalising. Alcoholism again features in an important way. In most families in which one or both parents are addicted to alcohol, a systematic cover-up of that fact is made, with which the children are in effect asked to collude, often producing crippling effects on their own personal development. 'No one in this family is alcoholic'

is the image offered to the outside world, but inside the family group the pressures placed on the children can be overwhelming.

Then there are verbal and physical abusers. All parents at times say things which their children find hurtful; but if that hurt is visible perhaps most will try to repair the damage with kindness or an apology. Yet some parents assail their children with more or less constant sarcasm, insults or name-calling. 'If someone turned you inside out, they'd see stink coming out of every pore in your body', the father of one of Forward's clients said to his daughter; he made a point of often telling her how badly she smelled.²⁹

Regular verbal abuse quite frequently goes along with the physical beating of children. Physical abuse is defined in US federal law as 'the infliction of physical injuries such as bruises, burns, welts, cuts, bone and skull fractures; these are caused by kicking, punching, biting, beating, knifing, strapping, paddling, etc.'. Legal provisions against the physical punishment of children, in the United States as in other countries, are usually only invoked in extreme cases of parental violence, and many such instances never come to the attention of the police. Children whose parents are indifferent to them might batter them as a means of expressing other frustrations; but of course the injunction 'don't spare the rod' is often followed by parents who believe that physical discipline is a necessary part of inducing respect for authority.

Finally, there is parental sexual abuse, that phenomenon which, as we now know, in its various guises affects substantial proportions of children, both female and male. Incest has come to be understood not just as a secret wish, but as a reality in very many families, stretching across all social classes. Even when defined quite narrowly, to exclude visual and verbal sexual harassment, and include only the direct stimulation of the erogenous zones of the body, incest is vastly more common than once was generally thought by

welfare professionals and specialists in the study of the family. Research suggests that some 5 per cent of all children under the age of eighteen have at some point been sexually molested by one or other parent (including step-parents).³⁰ The level of sexual abuse if other family members are taken into account is much higher. Most, but not all, is carried out by men; unlike rape, sexual abuse of children is not exclusively a male crime. Boys seem almost as often the victims of incest as girls; father-son incest is easily the most frequently found type, but the sexual molesting of sons by mothers is not uncommon.

Toxic parents: aren't we speaking here of ways in which many parents have long behaved towards their children, especially if we have in mind the less extreme and invasive forms of abuse? In some substantial part I think such is the case. The period during which family size declined, and children became more 'valued' by parents, was one in which the idea that children should obey their elders and betters took root. Yet even at its inception this was a notion ready to be subverted by the creation of an expanding sphere of intimacy – and it was also largely a male doctrine, upheld by the rule of the father. The discipline of the father tied the child to tradition, to a particular interpretation of the past; authority in this situation remained largely dogmatic assertion, backed in many instances by physical punishment. Partly as a result of the 'creation of motherhood', a softer and more egalitarian form of child-rearing emerged, in which more autonomy was accorded to the child. The stage today is set for a further transition: the translation of the child's ties to its parents – as well as to others in the family – into a relationship in the contemporary sense of that term.

Consider some of the advice Forward gives for those who wish to rework their involvements with toxic parents. Even though this may take a lengthy period of therapy, the person has to come to learn two overriding principles: 'You are *not* responsible for what was done to you as a defenceless child!'

and 'You *are* responsible for taking positive steps to do something about it now!' How might these things be achieved? The individual is recommended first of all to seek to attain a measure of emotional independence from his or her parents. She or he must learn to 'respond' rather than merely 'react' in an automatic way to parental behaviour – even where the interaction is with memories of a parent or parents rather than with living beings. As part of this process, the therapist advises that the person starts to say 'I can't', 'I won't' in relation to real or hypothetical parental demands – as a way of asserting autonomy. Subsequently, the aim is to re-evaluate the terms upon which the parent-child interaction is based, such that all parties can as far as possible treat each other as equals. 'I can't', 'I won't', then becomes, not just a blocking-off device, but a negotiated standpoint in terms of which the individual is able to exercise choice. For 'lack of choice is directly connected to enmeshment'.³¹

At this point we can pull together some threads running through this entire chapter. The issue of toxic parents allows clear insight into the connections between the reflexive project of self, the pure relationship and the emergence of new ethical programmes for the restructuring of personal life. Declaring 'emotional independence' from one's parents is a means of simultaneously beginning to reform the narrative of self and making an assertion about one's rights (as well as leading to a reasoned acceptance of responsibilities). The individual's behaviour is no longer organised in terms of a compulsive re-enactment of childhood routines. There is a direct parallel here with the overcoming of addictions formed in later life, which themselves ordinarily stem from habits established at a much earlier stage.

A toxic parental background prevents the individual from developing a narrative of self understood as a 'biographical accounting' with which she or he feels emotionally comfortable. Lack of self-esteem, which usually takes the form of unconscious or unacknowledged shame, is one important

consequence; even more basic is the individual's incapacity to approach other adults as emotional equals. Escaping from toxic parental backgrounds is inseparable from the assertion of certain ethical principles or rights. Individuals who seek to alter their relationship to their parents by means of looking back to childhood experience are in effect claiming rights. Children have rights not just to be fed, clothed and protected but rights to be cared for emotionally, to have their feelings respected and their views and feelings taken into account. In short, the characteristics of confluent love appropriate to adult relationships are no less relevant to relations between adults and children.

For people when they *are* children, especially tiny children not yet able verbally to articulate needs, assertions of rights are counterfactual. They have to be made by adults, on the level of ethical arguments. This observation helps illuminate the issue of authority. As parent-child ties approximate more and more to the pure relationship, it might seem that the outlook of the parent has no primacy over the inclinations of the child – resulting in a 'permissiveness' run riot. But this does not follow at all. A liberalising of the personal sphere would not mean the disappearance of authority; rather, coercive power gives way to authority relations which can be defended in a principled fashion. This issue I shall discuss at greater length in the concluding chapter.

NOTES

- 1 Peter Trachtenberg: *The Casanova Complex*, New York: Pocket Books, 1988, pp. 244–8.
- 2 Cf., for example, Colette Dowling: *The Cinderella Complex*, New York: Pocket Books, 1981, p. 34.
- 3 Anne Wilson Schaeff: *Codependence. Misunderstood-Mistreated*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986, p. 11.

- 4 Jody Hayes: *Smart Love*, London: Arrow, 1990, p. 31.
- 5 Charlotte Kasl: *Women, Sex and Addiction*, London: Mandarin, 1990, p. 340.
- 6 Shad Helmstetter: *Choices*, New York: Pocket Books, 1989, p. 47.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 8 Kasl: *Women, Sex and Addiction*, p. 36.
- 9 Hayes: *Smart Love*, pp. 63-4.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 11 C. Edward Crowther: *Intimacy. Strategies for Successful Relationships*, New York: Dell, 1988, pp. 156-8.
- 12 Hayes: *Smart Love*, pp. 174-5.
- 13 Janet Finch: *Family Obligations and Social Change*, Cambridge: Polity, 1989, pp. 194-211.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 204-5.
- 15 J. Lewis and B. Meredith: *Daughters Who Care*, London: Routledge, 1988, p. 54.
- 16 Finch: *Family Obligations and Social Change*, p. 205.
- 17 H. Gadlin: 'Child discipline and the pursuit of the self: an historical interpretation', *Advances in Child Development and Behaviour*, vol. 12, 1978.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 75-82.
- 19 Susan Forward: *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them*, New York: Bantam, 1988.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 198-9.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- 24 Stephen Gullo and Connie Church: *Loveshock. How to Recover from a Broken Heart and Love Again*, London: Simon and Schuster, 1989.
- 25 For the classical study of the psychological implications of battle fatigue, see William Sargant: *Battle for the Mind*, London: Pan, 1959.
- 26 Gullo and Church: *Loveshock*, p. 28.
- 27 Susan Forward: *Toxic Parents. Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life*, New York: Bantam, 1990.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.
- 30 David Finkelhor et al.: *The Dark Side of Families*, Beverley Hills: Sage, 1983.
- 31 Forward: *Toxic Parents*, p. 211.