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The Striving for Unboundedness and Its Impact on Psychoanalytic Treatment

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Abstract: Particularly due to technical innovations, we are witnessing an unbounding of reality that increasingly is reflected in an inner striving to get rid of the limitations and boundaries of our own personality by reconstructing it anew. This pursuit of delimitation, dissolution and blurring of boundaries is seen as a central character trait of the Ego-oriented social character. Such a fabrication of a limitless personality doubtless results in a weakening of such psychic abilities as experiencing one's self as a consistent and ambiguous entity, being emotionally attached to oneself and to others, feeling one's own strivings, affects and emotions, and being guided by one's internalized norms and values. Lastly, the impact of this character formation is discussed in regard to clinical and therapeutic issues.

1. The new pursuit of self-determination

More and more people are unhappy with their own personality. They want to leave it behind and reinvent themselves. Even when no pathogenic experiences or developments make them suffer emotionally, they feel limited and other-directed by their familiar and social development and hence by a psychic structure that naturally accompanies this development. They want to be completely free and self-determined and therefore strive to reinvent a personality that has more or less--nothing to do with their previous one.

The attempt to trace this understanding of freedom and wish for autonomy immediately leads only to the realization that the common psychodynamic explanations do not apply: these people do not strive for autonomy to free themselves from repressive claims to power from external or internal authorities; an authoritarian impulse is generally not to be detected. Their pursuit for autonomy does not emanate from a narcissistic self-inflation that devalues everything that does not reinforce their own grandiosity or excludes it from their own per-



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ception. It is also hard to make out evidence for delusional thinking, that would lead to a conclusion of a pathological perception of reality.

This new pursuit for autonomy seems neither to be insane nor does it show a fixation on oneself, nor does it rebel against something. It is rather a completely plausible reaction to digital technology and electronic media, through which the surrounding reality can not only be newly and differently developed, but also constructed and perceived in a new way. Why should this fascinating possibility to construct reality in a new, different way, not apply to one's own personhood, one's own personality and psychic structuring? People's pursuit for freedom changed with the digital revolution such that everyone wants to decide on his or her own what actuality is.

I have called the corresponding character orientation "Ego Orientation" (Funk 2005; 2010), because everyone--without consideration for prescriptions or requirements from the environment--wants to determine on his or her own what reality is and with which reality he/she wants to deal. The right to this kind of self-determination is thereby acknowledged for everyone. Consequently, new forms of togetherness are created in the interpersonal space and in the social structure, that measure up to this wish for self determination. An empirical investigation from 2005 into the incidence of the Ego Orientation showed that back then, as much as 20 percent of Germany's adult population were dominantly ego oriented in their character structure (see Frankenberger 2007).

The specific pursuit of autonomy of ego oriented people can be captured best from a psychological perspective as the pursuit for de-limitation or boundlessness. The words "de-limitation" and "unboundedness" are used to translate the word "Entgrenzung" which represents a very specific interaction with limits or boundaries. "Entgrenzung" always means that former limits are abolished. It is not about a violation of limits, or a contestation of limits, or a transgression of limits, in which a limit is left behind, but about an elimination of limits through a new construction of reality. This means that in the newly constructed reality, these limits really no longer exist or subjectively no longer exist, because they are no longer observed or repudiated.

First will be sketched out which developments promote the formation of the pursuit for "Entgrenzung", that is, unboundedness resp. de-limitation, and in which way it results in character formation. A subsequent section will be about the enactment and formation of reality and its application to the new construction of personality. Finally, it will be shown how this personality has an impact on the psychic structure and therapeutic practice.



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2. Reasons for the pursuit of unboundedness

The reasons for the significant increase in the pursuit of unboundedness can be found first in the current technical possibilities for de-limitation; secondly, they can be found in the demand for unboundedness of the economy, business and society that more and more people have to make their own if they don't want to fall into the professional or social void.

a) The new possibilities for unboundedness

The overwhelming achievements in the area of digital technology and electronic media as well as networking have begun a dynamic of de-limitation that was, until recently, hard to imagine, and that has since changed numerous research and life domains—think just of imaging procedures or the decryption of the genetic code that would be impossible without computers or electronic media.

To illustrate this a bit more with an example of the possibilities of de-limitation: Almost completely space- and timeless data transfer brought and continues to bring us to a revolutionized acquisition of information and knowledge. Information, purchases, advice of all kinds and the many other treasures of lost know-how can be found in a mobile phone, iPad or tablet hybrid, without having to change location, be mindful of business hours or have to consider waiting times. With the exception of acquiring foreign languages, most of what we are still learning at school consists of memorizing facts and specialized knowledge. But to have this knowledge to hand the only thing we need is a smartphone with a good search engine.

Given the fascinating possibilities of de-limitation, it is not surprising that unboundedness becomes a keyword to the solution of all economic, social, research and human problems and that technology that dissolves boundaries is regarded at the level of universal remedies. For example, de-limitation allows for the flexibilization of the working world, although here it is already showing that not every dissolution of boundaries is beneficial for the person.

b) De-limitation in the working world

If in many industrialized nations the professional world was characterized by long-term careers and lasting employment relationships in stable enterprises and social security systems, this protective external grounding is increasingly breaking away. Here, de-limitation does not mean only being able to enjoy more flexible working hours, part-time work or working from home. Everything that gives protection and bearing, which provides grounding, is also unbounded.



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The threat is of atypical employment relationships such as temporary positions and the deficiency of open-ended contracts. Shiftwork, night, weekend and Sunday work are widely gaining ground—despite the overwhelming data on the negative health impacts and about the potential for familial and social conflict that accompany these dissolved limits. The most impactful dissolution of boundaries in the professional sphere is the establishment of the "self-employer"; for him, work turns from something prescribed to something one must "give", steer and control oneself. Instead of enjoying the provision, care, advance payments, and direction of an employer; the entrepreneurial activities are to be contributed by the worker himself. The consequence is an increase in self-exploitation of the employed.

The employer has to identify himself with the requirement of de-limitation in the economic arena so that he himself develops a wish to deal according to today's more unbounded professional activities. As the methods of de-limitation are internalized, rationalization, economization and controlling are no longer perceived as something foreign but as something of innate.

This "subjectivization" of work is reached through corporate achievement primarily in that the work organization becomes more flexible and working relationships are destabilized. It suggests itself that such pressure to perform will lead to an excessive demand on oneself and finally to a "burn out".

De-limitation is, and here I come to the third reason for the formation of a desire for de-limitation, not just a promotion in the organization of work but also the recipe for success, with respect to the question of what the economy really produces. Next to the production of goods and services, indeed, realities are also increasingly produced.

c) Dissolution of boundaries through the enactment of reality

Successful economic enterprises have transitioned in the last decade more and more to investing all energy into the production of environment and desired realities. Of course goods and services also continue to be produced but that which is offered and sold are realities in the form of emotional worlds, states of arousal, experiences, emotions, passions, environments and lifestyles. Whoever wants to have commercial success today must bank on emotionalization and sell feelings and experiences. The production of sentimentality and events is particularly noticeable in the ever-growing cultural industry.

The production of emotional realities is supposed to give certain target groups the possibility to feel alive, full of feeling, active, creative, dependent, stimulated, secure or full of passion. The endpoint of such a development is a world in



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which practically every activity becomes a produced or acquired experience. Life, and especially emotional life with its feelings, wishes, likes, and dislikes, becomes a commodity. Communication and culture industries produce it for us, and we buy from them life experiences and feelings in that we pay for admission to the world of experience offered to us.

The mention of these reasons—the fascinating technical possibilities for de-limitation, the more flexible professional world and the current success model of the capitalist economy to sell reality—should suffice to justify why more and more people are driven in their thinking, feeling and acting by the dissolution of boundaries.

3. The internalization of the pursuit for the dissolution of boundaries

Because de-limitation is experienced both as fascinating and threatening psychologically, two ways of internalization can be made out: one, an identification with the means to dissolve boundaries, the other, a reaction formation against the demands of boundary dissolution.

In internalization by identification, one defines oneself in relation to one's own being by the ability of these technical wonders: I am and define my feelings of self esteem by my access to the media that facilitate de-limitation.

Those identified to such an extent with the means of boundary dissolution identify themselves through an excitement for unbounded realities, although also through an existential dependency: If their do-everything phone is stolen or if their hard-drive gives out, then they feel lost, worthless, and totally powerless, because they no longer possess their means of unboundedness, that is, their access to and connectivity with the unbounded realities are called into dispute.

A pursuit of boundlessness can also result from reaction formation. Especially if one is confronted with a demand for boundlessness in a professional capacity, a demand to let go of everything valued, secured, orientating, and grounding, and instead, to reinvent oneself as the means of production, then de-limitation becomes experienced as a threat and results in psychological strain. But both the resulting anger and sorrow cannot be acknowledged or acted upon, because they are perceived as weakness, as an inability to work under pressure, and as lacking motivation and inspiration—as one says today—and would push one even more into a losing position.

In this psychically unbearable situation, there are two psychological escapes: the one leads to a build-up of symptoms and psychic illness, to anxiety disorders, depressive moods and depressions complete with somatic equivalents such as backaches or heart complaints. With the expression "burned out", the



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burn-out syndrome already discussed today makes these symptoms more graphic. The suffering at the exploitative demands of unboundedness uproots several energy resources.

Next to the formation of a symptom, which is the expression of an inadequate internalization of the pursuit of unboundedness, character formation also offers a way out. In this, those mentioned identify with that which threatens them. Such a reaction formation leads to ego-syntonic behavior: One does not feel anger towards the dissolution of boundaries, but is excited for it; one doesn't suffer anymore from the lack of boundaries but seeks it out.

As different as the mechanisms to internalize the pursuit of unboundedness may be, the result is always that one gladly and passionately promotes that which the current economy and society needs to function and therefore also strives for unboundedness. On principal, there is nothing negative in this, because every person is always a social being, and has to strive to conform for the success of society, if he does not want to completely isolate himself socially.

We will ask in another segment about the possibilities of unbounding one's own personality, knowing that it's not about crossing boundaries through developmental steps (through the process of learning, training, practicing, parting and mourning etc.) that borders of human possibility let themselves be crossed. Instead, it is about means and ways that borders of one's own personhood can be eliminated.

4. Methods of dissolving bounds of one's own personality

There have always been methods in which an unbounded personality could be constructed. Some of these are regression (which we use in therapy), the dissolution of boundaries through psychotropic substances or excessive behaviors, or the enactment of reality. The enactment of reality, of particular interest here, existed before, for instance in closed societies or in psychiatric illnesses, but today, digitalization and electronic media allow for the construction of tailored virtual realities for all eventualities, in which anyone can afford to immerse oneself.

Because the problem of unboundedness through psychotropic substances and excessive behaviors is known to us from substance dependency, there will be a short discussion of the enactment of reality and a more thorough discussion of virtualization through simulation.



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a) Unboundedness through enactment

De-limitation through enactment is about a fleeting identification with a different personality. Enactment takes place in art, in literature, in rituals, but also in courtly society or, today, in popular fantasy. Except for a few exceptions, most people are capable of telling the imagined, (enacted reality, the unbounded reality) from the factual and external reality.

The only new thing is that thanks to technical innovation, everyone can enjoy such enactment of reality anytime, almost anywhere. There is no dependency on specific people, places, situations, institutions, and mediumistic abilities, just those of electronic media.

Enacted realities have very different contents and want to establish access to realities and parallel worlds that are either contained in everyday experiences or bring a fantasy world into being. Even if they are completely fantastic and unreal, their character as enacted reality remains conserved and conscious to the consumer.

b) Unbounding through simulation and virtualization

Unlike enactment, the dissolution of boundaries through simulation typically aims at disabling the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy, wishes and actuality, illusion and reality. What is true of a good flight simulator, namely that the ability of controlling reality is obscured, is also a precondition for every plunge into a virtual world. The more perfect the simulation, the less significant is the control over reality—and also the confrontation with a burdensome reality.

The virtualization of reality resulting from today's simulation techniques aims at an experience of reality that is no longer subject to any controls. This is already evident from the definitions of the words "virtual", "virtuality", and "virtual reality". By virtual reality, we understand something that does not exist in the same form in reality in which it appears to exist, but nevertheless shows all of the functioning and effects of such a reality. The opposite of virtual is therefore not "real" but "physical": the virtual doesn't exist "in reality" but has (as far as possible) all signs and identifying markers of reality in a person's perception. Science fiction writer William Gibson therefore is right in saying that "cyberspace presupposes a consensual hallucination" (Gibson 1984).

Going by everything we know today about the risks of a life in virtual worlds, the question is first and foremost what motivates people to want to unbound their perception of reality, that they want to submerge in virtual realities in order to



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feel more at home there than in physical reality. The neurobiological answer is that through virtual worlds (such as in shooter games) the reward centers of the brain are efficiently activated so that the body's naturally produced opiates such as dopamine are released and cause an intoxication-like state.

This clear definition also implies that other possibilities for the unbounding of reality such as 'augmented reality' and 'enhanced reality' could cause an expansion of the perception of reality with the support of computers or help of 'cognitive enhancers' such as Modafenil ('brain doping'), but are not a phenomenon of virtual reality. (In contrast, terms like 'hyperreality' and 'surplus reality' also seem to be useful to describe virtual de-limitations, while the term 'Fiction' can be used to describe enacted reality as well as virtual reality).

Irrespective of one's own mental state, and the personal imposition of life—but also independent of innate real possibilities—virtual reality therefore offers a great "advantage": to experience happiness and luck, in order to transfer oneself into an intoxication-like state. This can be repeated as often as one seeks out virtual reality for this purpose—with the result that it leads to an ever greater reinforcement of these activated nerve connections, while other synapses are deconstructed. This means nothing than that a certain use of virtual reality has similar effects as the unhinging of control over reality through drugs or excessive behavior and doesn't just afford an escape from reality but also has a high potential for substance dependency.

The escape into a virtual parallel world is really problematic not only when certain states of suffering are avoided or feelings of joy are targetedly sought out, but when one's personality is to be newly invented and constructed through simulation. One's own thinking, one's own feeling, one's own wanting, one's own judgment comes from a simulated virtual personality, so that this person or those in his or her environment cannot recognize that the personal has the properties of a virtual personality. More than producing a personality, virtualization leads to a de-activation of important ego functionality and abilities, which are the result of psychic structure formation. This will be the subject of the conclusion—even if just by insinuation (for further elaboration, see Funk 2011, pp. 166-187).

5. Results of the pursuit for unboundedness on the psychic condition

a) De-activation of innate striving

A first effect concerns innate psychic strivings. That which drives, motivates, enlivens, and interests a person barely has a chance anymore against the intoxicat-



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ing, inspiring and stimulating effects of the offerings of produced and virtual experience. This de-activation of inner impulses is recognizable for instance in that one can feel a personal interest only when one is offered something interesting or tells oneself, "Yes, that is very interesting to me." After all, one learned over the course of personality training how important it is for successful communication to simulate and to show interest independent of whether something is actually interesting or not. What was first seen in American language use has now become conventional in other languages. One no longer wishes oneself to "be inspired" but to "get inspired!" The activity is ever less dependent on the inner strivings resulting from our psychic structure.

b) Deprivation of an authentic experience of self

Whoever really wants to experience himself has to leave the experience of an identity familiar to him behind and forgo a defined—limited—self ("defined" contains the latin word "finis" = boundary/limit). Moreover, depending on cause, situation, and desire, the self must be replaced by a newly invented self and by a simulated personality. When an unbounded person therefore talks of self-realization, he means something completely different than realization of an unmistakable innate self. For him, it's about the unboundedness of the self through a reinvention, a situationally staged or simulated experience of self. This no longer has anything to do with internalized self-representations. The requirement remains to be himself, however he chooses to re-invent himself. The same is true for the understanding of authenticity. He who cannot do anything but be how he is, is no longer authentic. He who is able to produce his self such that he perceives it as his own is authentic, though what he sees as his "own" has nothing to do with his internal self. Tomorrow he will perceive something totally different as his own.

c) Unbounded Relationship

If unboundedness implies the abolition of constraints, then being bound to others is as much at stake as being bound to himself. Unbounded people search among their interpersonal contacts for an unbounded relationship. They want to be free and unbounded and yet be connected by networking and social media.

Instead of feeling and practicing individual emotional relational ties such as tenderness, trust, yearning, remembering or missing, and building relationships with their help, one cares only about contact, feeling the enacted or simulated feelings offered by the media, or trying to simulate them from a situation on his



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own. In this way, a relatedness with others lets itself be constructed and realized, without feeling a bond or a dependency on such a connectedness.

d) Inner emptiness of feeling

What has already been said about the de-activation of individual emotional bonding force is true in general for the emotionality and experience of feelings in unbounded people. In reality, they characterize themselves through an emotional emptiness, even if feelings are "in" again and they are "totally into emotions". They re-invent feeling, and this by enacting feelings themselves or simulating them, or they share in a world of emotions, generated and offered constantly by an economy betting on emotionalization.

To share in orchestrated emotions instead of feeling one's own is advantageous for two other reasons: first, one can act out affects that one would never dare to feel—vengeful, destructive, envious, jealous, murderous feelings. Secondly, one can better repudiate one's own, seemingly unbearable feelings by sharing feelings that are not one's own.

More effective is the simulation of positive feelings. One wants and feels only the positive for oneself and others, so that in oneself and more so in others, only the neuronal reward centers are addressed and the corresponding neuronal networks are reinforced. All feelings and self-perceptions that are perceived negatively (that is, hurtful or painful) seem to have disappeared.

The fact is nevertheless: one can only really appreciate and love oneself and others when one does not obscure one's own and other's drawbacks—the difficult and critical—but is capable of accepting and appreciating and perhaps even loving them. Everything else is an idealization and allows positive thinking to become an ideology, as Barbara Ehrenreich convincingly portrayed in her book "Smile or Die" (2010).

e) Threatening loss of orientation

Finally, the internalized bodies of control stand in the way of a reconstruction of personality. What happens to the superego, the ego ideal and the conscience? As part of one's psychic facilities, they represent a requirement and measure from which the unbounded person has to release himself if he wants to live an unbounded life without permanent feeling of anxiety, guilt and shame. As with all points named so far, here too, one's own capabilities that accompany a mature psychic structure are replaced by something that comes from outside and are supposed to stop an imminent loss of orientation.



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In the place of an internal regulatory system steps an all-encompassing external orientation. If today a cry is raised everywhere for regulations, for new and old values, for ethics in science and medicine, for occupational and professional ethics, for political and managerial correctness, then this need for role models, advisors, therapists, consultants and coaches has to do with the separation from internalized moral concept and orientation in unbounded people. The external orientation moreover requires a permanent review of the consultation or presence of guidelines or guiding concepts.

Doubtless the reconstruction of one's identity enables more self-determination and more subjectively experienced freedom. Equally doubtless is that the unbounding of one's identity leads to a withering of such abilities and competencies that have their base in our grown psychic structure. Their extensive deactivation necessarily leads to a stronger external orientation. The dependence on Id-surrogates in the form of "borrowed passions" (Allebrand 2012, pp. 57-74) and affects is also increasing, like that of auxiliary egos and auxiliary superegos. These, however, are not sought in other people, but in stimulating media and technical marvels, in personality training and suggestive applied therapy and in orientating communication offerings.

6. The unbounded self as a challenge for Psychoanalysis

As beneficial as today's possibilities to surpass limits in science and technology, its use for the reconstruction of personality holds first, high risks for mental health of unbounded people; second, it makes the public recognition and plausibility of the psychoanalytic idea of man and psychoanalytic methods of therapy more difficult. Because details about the risks to mental health have already been given, just a few more aspects should be mentioned here for why unbounded people have difficulties with psychoanalysis.

- Unbounded people recoil from everything that could limit them in their self-determination. A psychology that sees experience and action of people fundamentally determined by their internal representations and impulses, particularly of those, that have been constructed in childhood and should still be unconscious for the most part--such a psychodynamic psychology is difficult for unbounded people to accept and obsolete in their eyes. The pursuit of boundlessness aimed at their own personality wants to reinvent the self by replacing all structural requirements with self-determined beliefs and impulses and comes to bearing with the help of enactments, simulations and suggestive techniques. That's why they are neither interested in a change of internal structures, nor working on



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- structurally determined anxieties, conflicts, or fantasies and react with resistance when they are brought close to their boundaries.
- The psychoanalytic concept of a coherent self or of a definable experience of identity, but also the conception of an unconscious or repressed reality is not comprehensible for unbounded people, because those concepts are relics of theoretical paternalism, that are not covered by their experience of self.
 - Therapeutic work with regression does not evoke resistance on principal because every regression is a form of de-limitation. The same is true for hypnotherapeutic processes. In some conditions, therapy is perceived as a pleasant virtual reality. However, if regression leads to transference relationships and emotional dependencies, then escape from the therapeutic relationship remains the only recourse.
 - Because the process of psychoanalytic therapy is first and foremost interested in emotional perception of relationship (in transference and countertransference), unbounded people lean more strongly to transferential resistances.
 - In therapeutic regard, unbounded people also prefer "technical solutions" with which they can distract from certain affects, depressive moods and from states of fear or pain. Moreover they are interested in techniques of suggestion, imagination, staging or simulation in order to psychically "re-align".

These points already suggested that the social acceptance of psychoanalysis will dwindle more in unbounded people. This does not mean, however, that psychoanalysis does not have a future; just the opposite, in view of the psychic deficits and dependencies that accompany the reconstruction of personality, it is more important than ever and finds itself, from a social perspective in a similar misunderstood position as at the beginning of its history.

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