

Neoliberalism's Eschewal of Dependency: Putting the Work of Ann Ulanov in Conversation with Economic Theory

JESSICA VAN DENEND

The elections of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in England were important markers for the rise of a conceptual framework that continues to dominate economic policy today in the United States and around the world. Neoliberalism, defined by the anthropologist David Harvey as an attitude that advocates dismantling of the welfare state, deregulation, and weakening of trade unions in the name of a free market society¹ (2005), has grown from a set of somewhat obscure economic principles into a hegemonic force. A far cry from its somewhat obscure origins, it is now incorporated into the “common-sense” of many of the world’s leaders and thinkers to the point that its basic assumptions are taken for granted and unquestioned.²

In the rhetoric and principles surrounding its expansion and use, Harvey observes how neoliberalism appeals to the ideal of freedom, even as it limits and links social freedom to the freedom of the market to exist without regulations. The concept of freedom is reduced to being defined as free enterprise. As such, Aihwa Ong writes, achievement of a free-market is considered a value above all others, considered crucial to achieving democracy and social stability and trumping other systems of government and citizenship.³ In foreign policy terms, we see this type of reasoning exemplified in verbiage concerning bringing “freedom to Iraq” used in 2002 around the inception of military intervention.⁴

Harvey also notes that within the vision of those who have espoused neoliberalism “all forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favour of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values.”⁵ The individual (and by extension the corporation) must be free to operate in a market without hindrance or regulation; the rights of individuals trump those connected to other forms of social belonging. Margaret Thatcher famously declares: there is to be “no such thing as society, only individual men and women” (and their families,

1 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2 This is true, it has been argued, for leaders on both sides of the political spectrum. The current Obama administration, for example, has left creation of jobs almost exclusively to the private sector.

3 Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism's Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

4 Although at times differing in outlook or agenda, it is safe to say that neoliberalism has effectively allied itself with neoconservatism (notions of national pride, military might, family values etc), an alliance especially pronounced in the rhetoric supporting the war in Iraq.

5 Harvey, 23.

she will later add).⁶ Combined with shifts in labor markets that offer little to no security to the workforce (i.e. the end of defined pensions, the increase of part-time and temporary work without benefits or security, the decline of union power to negotiate collective contracts), this dissolution of social safety nets has created the largest gap between rich and poor since the beginning of the 20th century.

As a conceptual apparatus, neoliberalism has transcended simple economic theory and become an ideology with claims and influences on our spirits and psyches. It tells us what we should value and how we should live, what is morally correct and how to be in the world in relation with others and in relation to ourselves. Lynne Layton, using psychological terms, sees the impact of neoliberalism in the production of what she calls a “neoliberal version of subjectivity” which corresponds with “intensified individualism and thus an intensified version of narcissism.”⁷ In a theological framework, David Loy and others consider the faith and trust placed in the ethic of market exchange as a type of religious commitment and sentimentality. Viewed on functionalist terms, the market, Loy argues, has “already become the most successful religion of all time, winning more converts more quickly than any previous belief system or value-system in human history.”⁸ As such, while the place and efficacy of market freedom are concepts that can and must be debated in the domain of economics, the impact of neoliberalism also calls for response and engagement from theological and psychological perspectives.

This paper takes up that latter task in relation to the concept of dependency. Keeping with Layton’s description but also enlarging it to include a spiritual dimension, we see how a crucial element of a neoliberal subjectivity is its overvaluation of self-reliance and autonomy at the expense of the vulnerable and needy parts of the self. Dependency, in a neoliberal framework, has become a dirty word. Although both psychology and religion have been complicit in the creation and continuation of such a configuration, I argue here that they both also contain resources for criticism and constructive alternatives.

In particular, the work of Ann Ulanov makes a critical case for dependency as a vital component to both our spiritual and psychological well-being. Dependency, she shows, is at the heart of Christianity—and sin is its denial—as well as a fundamental ingredient to aliveness. Although she grounds this view in a historical Christian tradition extending back centuries, her use of and insistence on the concept emerges in our present time in sharp contrast and as a counterbalance to neoliberalism’s denial and denigration of dependency. Because her insights emerge out of her deep encounters with human psyche, Ulanov’s work can offer us perspective in what might seem the least likely of places: in evaluation of contemporary economic configurations and philosophies and their alternatives, particularly

6 Quoted by Harvey, *ibid.*

7 Lynne Layton, “Irrational exuberance: Neoliberal subjectivity and the perversion of truth.” *Subjectivity*: 2010 (3): 303–322.

8 David Loy, “The Religion of the Market” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1997 65 (2):275–290.

in relation to the ramifications such social and economic systems have on our souls and spirits.

Critical theorist Nancy Fraser gives an overview of the usage of the term dependency in political and social discourse.⁹ Originally the term was used as a descriptor of a social situation: in preindustrial times dependency meant one's life and livelihood were subservient to and as such dependent on another. Servant, laborer, serf, and slave were all social positions which fell under this category. With the rise of industrial capitalism the term shifted to refer to an individual character trait that preexisted and even sanctioned such subordination. Summarizing this point in relation to colonialism Fraser writes: "In earlier usage colonials were dependent because they had been conquered; in nineteenth century imperialist culture, they were conquered because they were dependent."¹⁰ It is, she writes, "as if the social relations of dependency were being absorbed into personality."¹¹

As the term enters this moral/psychological register, Fraser notes that it moves from a general-purpose term that encompassed all types of social subordination towards a term reserved for specific groups, particularly women and people of color. It is generally not applied, for example, as a descriptor of situations of economic inequality among white men. Looking at the American context, she notes that "welfare dependency" was a term initially introduced to classify and destigmatize persons, principally children, receiving aid in the New Deal. As time went on, however, the term began to accumulate an increasingly pejorative connotation, which was fixed after World War II.¹² Increasingly, there was a division between the perception of New Deal recipients who were perceived to be "getting back what they put in" and perception of true welfare recipients that were "getting something for nothing." As Fraser notes: "Hardly anyone today calls recipients of Social Security retirement insurance 'dependents'. Similarly, persons receiving unemployment insurance, agriculture loans, and home mortgage assistance are excluded from that categorization, as indeed are defense contractors and the beneficiaries of corporate bailouts and regressive taxation."¹³ This stands in contrast to "dependents" seen as deviant or incompetent, conning the system or helplessly needy. Fraser writes that the concept has become "hypostatized in a veritable portrait gallery of dependent personalities: first, housewives, paupers, natives and slaves; then poor black teenage solo mothers."¹⁴

It is worth asking whether and how the split in usage of this term might reflect a corresponding split within the spiritual and psychological levels. Perhaps it is our desire to rebuke any complicity or commonality we might have in relation to the situations of such "dependents" that fuels our repudiation of the concept on a spiritual and psychological level. Perhaps the disavowal of these dependent

9 Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 121-149.

10 Ibid., 129.

11 Ibid., 143.

12 Ibid., 132.

13 Ibid., 134.

14 Ibid., 143.

persons reflects a discomfort with our own dependency needs. As Lynne Layton writes, “Gender, class, racial, sexual, and national collective identities are mobilized to mask vulnerability and to perform the psychological and cultural work of distinguishing ourselves in whatever ways possible from those more vulnerable than ourselves.”¹⁵

This repudiation of dependency continues and increases in tandem with contemporary neoliberal economic practices that seek to maximize personal profit and have less accountability for negative outcomes on workers or citizens at large. Neoliberalism’s lack of regulation has allowed for corporations and their leaders to amass large amounts of profit while the average worker’s salaries and securities become ever more in question. In the individualist meritocracy of neoliberalism, all corporate or social blame for economic insecurity is explained through personal or moral failing. “The untalented masses come to feel that they have only themselves to blame for being not special,” Layton writes.¹⁶ Again, dependency is cast as a problematic personal issue or characteristic rather than a state of being or social configuration. The result is an untenable situation, psychologically, and I would add spiritually and morally in which, Layton tells us:

[M]ost of us in the US professional middle class have dutifully shaped our subjectivities in accord with dominant individualistic norms that, even more so than in past eras, unlink the social from the individual...And so we consistently rail against ourselves when, for example, our small businesses fail or when we are unable to balance career and child care. We imagine that there are stronger, special others who can do it all and that if only we weren’t weak, inferior beings, we, too, would succeed.¹⁷

Under neoliberalism, we deem the individual fully responsible for his or her so-called successes or failures; poverty, for example, is deemed the result of moral failing resulting in poor decision making. While certainly personal decisions, or issues like drug abuse, female-headed families, decisions to not stay in school do affect economic outcomes, it is inaccurate to say that mass poverty can be reduced to these factors and that structural realities have no impact. But yet we are left with the explanation that these failures are our fault.

Those that have not fallen through the holes in the safety net may exhibit, Layton writes, a defense against vulnerability and dependency. Layton writes that “those who strive to make it in this system become in certain ways overly responsible and self-reliant, defending against shameful need with the manic activity necessary to deny how very close we all are in the U.S. to falling through what is

15 Layton, 106.

16 Ibid., 107.

17 Ibid., 312.

left of the safety net.”¹⁸ She quotes Richard Sennett, a sociologist writing about labor and culture:

The consultant, Sennett argued, is the new ideal worker. The consultant model discourages long-term attachments, rewards risk taking and shaking things up, has little regard for the historical knowledge older workers might have, and valorizes knowing things superficially rather than in depth. In this system, the idealized self, Sennett wrote, “publicly eschews long-term dependency on others.”¹⁹

Layton gives a clinical example of work with a female executive in a heavily male dominated, high-paying field. Layton writes:

[She] has mentioned several times that she does not read the news because it makes her feel as though she’d have to do something. A good representative of how the painful issues that emerge from the individualist/citizen split are lived, this patient already feels overwhelmed by responsibilities, many of which were imposed on her by parents who, we have discovered in treatment, repeatedly put their children in difficult or even dangerous situations. This very highly paid patient feels that if she were more aware of the injustices in the world, she actually might be able to do something about them. Her choice until recently has been not to know. “I’m so tired,” she often says.²⁰

Layton remarks that in a therapeutic session with this woman, they look at why she is so tired, at what the toll is taking on her. They look at her expectations in regards to work, both why she feels like she has to work, and what she expects of those under her. The woman reflects on the ways she feels like she needs to “distance” herself in order to make money. She feels ambivalence towards her manic work schedule, aware that on one hand it is depleting her and, Layton remarks, “might be contributing to what seemed an inexplicable sadness.” But on the other hand, she feels judgmental of herself and of the workers she manages when they do not “power through” and work “24/7.”

Layton’s argument is that the subjectivities created by economic policies of neoliberalism tend to envision a world where the making of money is the bottom line, a value in and of itself. They also allow for distance and rationalization of the means necessary to extract profit, even when the means necessary includes inflicting suffering on self and other. This woman experiences inertia and passivity when encountering the suffering other (such that she cannot watch the news or feels

18 Ibid., 108.

19 Ibid., 106.

20 Ibid., 109–110.

trapped demanding impossibly high standards for her work and the work of those she manages).

There is something immensely tragic in this women's, and by extension many Americans', affective complexes surrounding the idea of dependency. David Eng and Shinhee Han have offered a reconceptualization of Freud's concept of melancholia in relation to the Asian immigrant experience.²¹ Depathologizing melancholia, they suggest it may be linked to the feeling and response when an immigrant's experience is unable to be completely assimilated to standards of "whiteness."²² The result is a "residue" a "contamination" on a larger social level, a "repetitive national haunting."²³ To use Eng and Han's theory, we might speculate that dependency is another type of spectre haunting our society. We have sought to do away with it, but it continues to haunt us in its residues.

Like Layton's patient's inexplicable sadness, perhaps our neoliberal fantasies of self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship, and autonomy remain haunted by the emptiness, hollowness, and disconnect they invoke. We hear growing murmurs of discontent over the lack of connection and community felt among Americans today, and a laundry-list of who or what is to blame: technology, speed, over-stimulation, patterns of translocation, opportunities for personal connection. We feel increasing panic and restlessness; perhaps we even envy the cultural groups in which we have manically displaced our repudiated vulnerability. Dependency remains a half-alive, half-dead ghoul, as we cannot fully revoke it, and we cannot surrender to it either. In my thesis work I argue that certain contemporary uses of empathy exist in this space of longing for connection yet refusing to admit vulnerability in our search for it.

In contrast with the rhetoric that suggests that dependency is either an indication or a precondition to social subordination, the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin argues that social hierarchy emerges from our inability to accept dependency, rather than dependency itself. Beginning, as many analysts do, with our earliest experience of dependency within the parent-child dyad, Benjamin argues that infants live in a reality in which they need recognition and care from another person.²⁴ And, for Benjamin, ideally this parenting one is in fact an "other"—a tangible living and loving person whose center of being is outside of the child, what she calls an independent subject.²⁵ This initial frame mirrors and configures later social relationship: throughout life we continue to seek mutual recognition from another in a way that both protects our autonomy but seeks recognition and love from an other.

21 David Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 10(4):667–700, 2000.

22 *Ibid.*, 673.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

25 *Ibid.*, 23.

Domination, Benjamin writes, starts out of an inability to accept this dependency on the other; it forces and compels recognition.²⁶ “Since the subject cannot accept his dependency on someone he cannot control, the solution is to subjugate and enslave the other - to make him give that recognition without recognizing him in return,” Benjamin writes.²⁷ Benjamin utilizes her argument principally to describe domination within intimate relationship, but might be easily extended to, for example, Layton’s patient whose loneliness emerges from his/her repudiation of vulnerability. It might further be extrapolated to describe a social reality in which inequality and economic vulnerability continue to increase as social safety nets are dissolved and individual merit is lauded as the exemplary method of achieving stability. For all of those situations, the curative work involves a toleration of dependency.

It is around this therapeutic and social goal that Ann Ulanov’s invocation of religion is tremendously helpful. Psychological theory will generally root its consideration of dependency in our earliest experiences of life and their reverberations, as we saw with Benjamin’s theory. For, however, Ulanov writes, the fact of our dependency is a central truth throughout life; the recognition of this truth does not occur solely through revisiting our childhood experiences, but as a spiritual accomplishment and goal at any life stage. Acceptance of such is an “achievement” she writes, which “does not mean regression but advance.”²⁸ As such: “It does not threaten breakdown but an appropriate turning around (metanoia) to see the true center.”²⁹ Dependency is given; we can only choose whether to recognize it or not. Ulanov writes,

We are always dependent, and absolutely so in the sense that none of us knows when our health might suddenly fail, when a car might hit us, when a loved one might die, when war might break up the world, when an earthquake might heave up the very ground upon which we stand. We shield ourselves from this dependence that the child shows us so clearly. Religion tells us that it is our actual, natural state, not a developmental phase that we grow beyond.³⁰

For Ulanov, as a Christian, it is God upon whom we are ultimately dependent, and our true self is ushered in through the newness that emerges from accepting and embracing this dependency.³¹ Like Jung, though, Ulanov is less interested in defining or describing this God than she is in exploring the impact an

26 Ibid., 52.

27 Ibid., 54.

28 Ann Belford Ulanov, *Finding Space: Winnicott, God, and Psychic Reality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 63.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 19.

31 Ibid.

encounter with the transcendent—what she calls the “advent of reality,”³²—has on our lived experience. At its inception, our acceptance of this dependency involves the surrender and offering up of our ego control and mastery. Religious traditions speak of this experience, Ulanov writes, “as breakthrough to the zero point (Zen Buddhism), as becoming like a little child (New Testament). We advance to the true sense of dependency on the transcendent, having lost our old mind based on the ego, and enter a new knowing where ego is offered, and we are supported in a new community of believers.”³³

In other words, the frameworks and standards by which we judge our lives are radically altered. The experience of this “zero point” does not just occur at the boundaries or limits of our self-sufficiency; it is not as if we carry on independently and dip into our dependency needs from time to time, at a point of crisis or weakness. Rather, a new system of understanding and being emerges which radically reorients the values we had ascribed to self-sufficiency and to need, to strength and weakness, and to autonomy and relying-on-others. What was once rejected has now become the cornerstone. From a therapeutic perspective, “religion gives us a container to help us reach into all the gaps in our personal beginnings and explore them as places whose very weakness enables us to see more clearly our dependence on a power and meaning beyond ourselves.”³⁴

In relation to the social/economic theories discussed earlier, this reorientation might engender a certain humility in our practices of relating with others. In encountering others with economic or spiritual lacks, we start not from a sense of security or superiority, but by embracing the recognition that we too have places of and are persons that need. Rather than offering solutions or implementing agendas out of our independent strengths or unquenchable goodness, we listen first, and honor the ways in which the struggles and solutions of those affected by social conditions like poverty may have something to offer to those of us who might have once deemed ourselves above the fray. It is an inversion of where we look for expertise, both in others and in ourselves.

This humility goes hand in hand with an awareness about and concern for the body. As Ulanov and Benjamin both tell us, it is from our bodies that our dependency needs and our first experiences of dependency originate. In a social register, how are bodies, bodies of all race and gender and class and social status, acknowledged, supported, and sustained? Amidst our attempts to build up our fortresses of self-sufficiency, stagnating wages, contingent labor, and unemployment continue to increase the vulnerability of the majority of Americans, even those who might imagine their situation or fates somehow sacrosanct. A market ethic of productivity and capital accumulation has deemed millions of bodies as disposable.³⁵ Considering these bodies may bring us home to our own bodies

32 Ibid., 120.

33 Ann Belford Ulanov, *Spiritual Aspects of Clinical Work* (Einsiedeln: Daimon, 2004), 33.

34 Ulanov, *Finding Space*, 120–121.

35 Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2012).

in ways that are uncomfortable or startling—we are forced to reflect, as Ulanov writes, on our own createdness and creatureliness. But for Ulanov this connects to the heart of our faith: our experience of being held by a transcendent other, of “[coming] home to our true creaturely reliance on the One who created us.”³⁶

Seen in such a light, the freedom promised by autonomy and pursuit of individual gains now seems a farce and an impediment to spiritual fullness. We notice that neoliberalism speaks of, to use Nicholas Berdyaev’s words, a “freedom *from* rather than a freedom *for*”³⁷ and as such is always “negative and empty.”³⁸ If the ultimate goal is for the individual to be cast free, released from all fetters, then it is robbed of what Berdyaev considers the elixir of aliveness: creativity. In essence, we as creatures are robbed of our referents, we have no content, object, or purpose for which that creativity can unfold.³⁹ The negative freedom of individualism relies on the “disunion of the human individuality from the universe; it is self-idolization.”⁴⁰ More bluntly, as it denies and substitutes for dependency, Ulanov tells us, it is sin.⁴¹

David Harvey’s final paragraph in his text on neoliberalism reads: “There is a far, far nobler prospect of freedom to be won than that which neoliberalism preaches.”⁴²

What would an economic and social system based in a *freedom for* as opposed to a *freedom from* look like? A freedom for life together. A freedom for creativity and contribution. Berdyaev writes that a freedom for “[accepts] the universal responsibility of everyone for all [persons] and all things.”⁴³ Ulanov writes that our acceptance of dependency ushers in “the higher development of interdependence, symbolized by the offering of self to God and other in response to God’s offering to us.”⁴⁴ We must acknowledge the dependency inherent in freedom, and that the true freedom we seek cannot happen without interdependence. The honoring of dependency needs (our own and others) reconnects social wholeness with our spiritual and psychological wholeness. “Acceptance of the fact of our dependence overflows into every social action, every move to find justice, from a new and different motive for doing good or to achieve power. We overflow into an ethical action that is already there, instead of originating it in ourselves.”⁴⁵

I have a memory of sitting in the upholstered chair in Ann Ulanov’s office, surrounded by her shelves of dusty texts and intriguing postcards. We were con-

36 Ulanov, *Finding Space*, 63.

37 Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 136–137.

38 Ibid., 143.

39 Ibid., 142.

40 Ibid., 143.

41 Ulanov, *Finding Space*, 50.

42 Harvey, 206.

43 Berdyaev, 145.

44 Ulanov *Finding Space*, 63.

45 Ibid., 12.

ferencing about my doctoral thesis. On that day, I was swept up in anxiety around how my work would be received by various professional audiences and authority figures. She told me: "Don't forget: the first audience you are writing to is yourself." And as such, I will close this paper by acknowledging that the balm I present to a suffering world is the same grace that I hope for and want to continue accepting for myself. To this day, I battle with my self-sufficient individualistic self who is determined to perform a multitude of tasks admirably, and to always appear competent and capable. At times I work manically to ensure that small errors or breakdowns aren't evident. (They appear anyway, whether in the form of typos in my academic papers or breaks in my ability to provide perfect care as a teacher, parent, chaplain). Worst, at times I choose this appearance of invulnerability over the risk of being known. Although early childhood experiences certainly lent their color to these struggles, I also place them in the context of a neoliberal subjectivity's isolating effects, and its message that we should manage by ourselves.

The writings, the teachings, and the person of Ann Ulanov have served and continue to serve as a beacon as I allow myself to open to my dependency needs. As she describes, the reality of such interdependence was never in doubt, the question simply remained as to how I would respond and recognize it. As I strive for greater capacity for honesty with, trust in, and need for the God upon which I am dependent and others upon which I am interdependent, I find that I am also opened and configured to my particular responsibilities, vocations, and energies in a new way. By understanding my limits, I am given freedom to become myself. I find my place in a greater whole, a movement towards ethical and just living in the world. Even as the struggle continues, I will always be grateful for the ways in which Ann helped midwife those new possibilities in and for me.