Markers of Psychosocial Maturation
A Dialectically-Informed Approach

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This project began with a basic existential question: *what does it mean to be or become a psychosocially mature person?* In my deep desire to answer this question, I immersed myself in maturation-relevant scholarly sources, primarily derived from psychoanalytic and humanistic-existential-phenomenological psychologies and philosophies. Brief biographies, autobiographies, and fictional references were also utilized. I emerged from my re-search, utilizing a dialectically informed hermeneutic approach, with *thirty markers or meanings of maturity*. These constituents or manifestations of maturity were then subsumed under *ten thematic clusters*.

The other side of the basic existential question posed above is *what kind of person do I desire to be?* This question is also an existential inquiry into one’s calling. Psychosocial growth is a complex developmental life task. It involves progressions and regressions, setbacks, and slippages. Although it is never fully completed, we are born with the organismic desire to heed the call of maturation, made possible by maturational conditions facilitative of psychosocial growth. Responding resolutely to the call of maturation, however, requires living a life of rigorous self-understanding, self-regulation, and self-cultivation, always in a supportive relational context. Individual maturation and communal maturation are correlative phenomena. In a relatively mature communal context, members help each other become their truer selves, thus becoming more mature. Still, becoming mature requires an ever-renewed and renewable passionate decision on the part of each person to respond to the call of maturation responsibly.
This book reflects my passion, as a psychologist, educator, and who I am as a person, to understand the meanings of psychosocial maturation and to share this provisional learning with others, as I learn about my own maturational journey. It is my hope that the reader will find it a rewarding journey too.

Rosemont, PA, USA

Mufid James Hannush
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Introduction

The Work’s Aim

The aim of this work is to comprehend (grasp together) the constituents of the phenomenon of psychosocial maturation. It is to provide a portrait of the relatively mature person, for maturation comes in degrees and is never complete. The process is dynamic, experiential, and open-ended. More specifically, the goal is to gain insight into the markers or meanings of psychosocial maturation. These markers or meanings are interdependent. They are co-meanings. These co-meanings of maturity are in dialogue with one another. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) puts it, there is always a “communion … a coition, so to speak, of our body [bodily self] with things [meanings]” (p. 320). Meanings of maturity, therefore, intersect, overlap, interact with, and are transformed into one another to form the whole experience of relative maturity. They are indispensable ingredients of an integrated experience of relative wholeness. This relative integration is itself an essential expression of our level of maturation. I say “relative” because this sense of integrated wholeness, which is the lived experience of maturity, is always in a tension-tinged dialogue with not only our own immaturity, but also the immaturity of others and the unpredictable contingencies of our everyday life. Yet, there is a significant difference between how this tension is endured by the mostly mature person in contrast to how it is poorly endured by the mostly immature person. When our maturity outweighs our immaturity, the dark, daunting, and difficult vicissitudes of life are better endured.

This text aims at advancing an integrative approach to understanding the complex phenomenon of psychosocial maturity. It proposes to do this via the
introduction of markers or meanings of psychosocial maturity. The primary mechanism utilized in the application of this approach is dialectical hermeneutics. It is a way of interpreting texts that views psychosocial maturation as a dialectical movement between meaning-polarities of existence – such as the need for connectedness and separation or the need for dependence and independence, toward relative balance or integration (see Hannush, 2007, for the application of this dialectical approach to understanding cultural value-polarities – such as overvaluing independence and undervaluing dependence or vice versa, and its implications for multicultural therapeutic practice).

Lived meanings can be viewed as ways of being-in-the-world-with-others. “What does it mean for me to be close to and separate from essential others?” “What does it mean for me to be dependent on and independent from essential others?” “How do I embody and enact these meanings?” “How do I integrate or find a balance between these lived, polar meanings?” Relatively mature persons actualize themselves in all these universal (existential) dimensions of life (existence) while adapting them to their own individual, familial, and sociocultural contexts. For we are all like all others, like some others, and like no other even when it comes to the actualization of our own meanings of maturity. It is the unique and dynamic confluence of these lived meanings that constitutes the essential structure of maturity. Again, these lived meanings are interdependent, overlapping, and polymorphous. Maturation as a whole syndrome manifests itself in these partial ways of being mature, which, together, make up mature Being as a whole. Yet, maturity as a kaleidoscopic whole, while manifesting itself in an oscillating variety of different ways of being-in-the-world-with-others, remains essentially finite, limited, and incomplete.

The Work’s Dialectical Approach

The “only way to arrive at a well-founded understanding of the criteria of maturity,” believes Boelen (1978), “is in a living dialogue between philosophical and psychological ways of thinking and researching” (p. 192). In this text I take a fresh look at data from various psychoanalytic and humanistic-existential-phenomenological sources that are both qualitatively and experientially oriented and will focus on lived meanings of maturity in order to derive a conceptual, theoretical model of psychosocial maturity. The psychoanalytic sources, though diverse, can be subsumed under attachment theory, object relations theory, intersubjective-relational theory, and self-psychology. I will be selectively attuned to psychoanalytic readings that are, at least in part,
implicitly existential, humanistic, or phenomenological. The case of Erik Erikson serves as an example.

I believe that Erikson’s psychodynamic model of human development is incipiently dialectical, existential, and phenomenological – an experience-near description and depiction of human development. Jerome Bruner describes Erikson’s approach as “‘literary-phenomenological’” and Erikson as a “‘self-styled phenomenologist,’ the artist with an eye to life at the borderlines” (quoted in Wallulis, 1990, p. 6). Robert Coles contends that Erikson’s “‘method’ could be called contrapuntal – or in a way, Hegelian, in as much as it displays a certain dialectic, a certain progressive momentum” (quoted in Wallulis, 1990, p. 73). Knowles (1986) provides a creative interpretation of Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development from a Heideggerian perspective. Wallulis (1990) describes Erikson’s work as a “hermeneutics of life history” whereby the central organizing aim of psychosocial development (maturation) involves seeking and finding a “balance” between “personal [identity] achievement” and “historical belonging.” Hoare (2002) is of the conviction that Erikson’s writings are not only philosophically dialectical, but also progressively existential in orientation, with their allusions to “existential paradoxes” and “existential conflict[s]” (pp. 102–103). For Erikson, a maturation movement is set in motion “when the adult is most open to the untapped opposite” (p. 103). Here is Hoare describing the affinity between Erikson’s “philosophical” orientation and that of Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl:

To the extent that Erikson wrote philosophically one finds Blake and Hegel in his work. The dialectics of thesis and antithesis, of conflicting polarities in the self-same stage of development, and life as a series of tensions and contradictions are systematic Hegelian notions. All three of these thinkers – Blake, Hegel, and Erikson – held that life is an evolution of oppositional contraries. As to claims that Erikson was a phenomenologist, if by such a label is meant that he observed and described attributes without bothering to explain them, the criticism is unfounded. His thought does resemble that of the German phenomenologists Heidegger and Husserl … Yet his closeness to them, just as of his similarity to Goethe and Hegel, is due more to a spiritual brotherhood of thought and style than to content. (pp. 216–217)

Our own dialectical model differs from that of Erikson’s in three respects. First, Erikson’s theory adopts a primarily stage approach to understanding human development. Even though the attainment of basic trust is a pivotal maturational step in the earliest stage of life, the theme of trust and the
accompanying hope are paramount throughout life. The later Erikson begins
to see the significance of the triad of trust-hope-faith in the last stage of life,
the stage of integrality.

Second, according to our dialectical model, the interactive tension is not
between absolute opposites that are antithetical to each other but are rather
seemingly oppositional and ultimately complementary. For Erikson, trust, for
instance, is the syntonic (harmonious) element and mistrust is the dystonic
(disruptive) element in the interaction of opposites, even though Erikson
acknowledges that mistrust, as a relational tendency or orientation, is impor-
tant for adaptation. From the perspective of the dialectical model presented
here, both (optimal) trust and (optimal) caution are syntonic (harmonious)
and complementary. Trust, as a relational orientation, can go awry and become
excessive, naïve trust that inevitably results in relational betrayals, difficulties,
and disappointments. Analogously, caution, as a relational orientation, may
go awry and become excessive, suspicious caution that inevitably results in
relational difficulties or even paranoia.

Third, trust, and its accompanying hope, is part of an inborn trusting (hope-
ful) openness, a wholehearted directedness (intentionality) toward lifeworld’s
possibilities. I call this primary predisposition of openness toward lifeworld’s
possibilities existential trust. Correlatively, the totality of the lifeworld – all
that is, manifests itself as trustworthy. Our capacity for identificatory resonance,
which in turn makes our abilities to mentalize, sympathize, and empathize
with others possible, is a manifestation of our original or primordial trusting
openness to the lifeworld of which we are a part. In its ecstatic modality, this
openness is characterized by a sense of awe and wonderment. Think con-
cretely of an infant’s awe-and-wonder-filled gaze at the mesmerizingly beauti-
ful face of his mother. Complementarily, think of the awe-and-wonder-filled
loving gaze of the mother as she enthrallingly looks at her beautiful child.
They are both passionate participants in the synchronized dance of mutual
openness toward each other, a dance of aesthetic reciprocity.

Marcus (2010, 2013) creatively fuses insights from psychoanalysis and the
hermeneutic phenomenology of Emanuel Levinas and Gabriel Marcel.
Orange (2011) offers a hermeneutics for everyday clinical practice integrating
insights from psychoanalysis and the writings of, among others, Hans-Georg
Gadamer and Emanuel Levinas. Here is what Orange says about
D. W. Winnicott, whose work is made use of in this text: his trust-based spon-
taneous therapeutic interventions “bring out important emotional truth from
dialogic engagement [which] provides the best … example possible of
Gadamerian hermeneutics” (p. 138) or of “a hermeneutics of development”
(p. 145). Moreover, she refers to Heinz Kohut’s self-psychology, which we also
utilize in our work, as a “phenomenologically informed psychology of the self” (p. 176). As his work develops, Kohut, Orange tells us, relies less and less on interpretation (explanation) and more and more on empathic understanding and on the guiding sense that understanding is developmental. Kahn (1997) sees a significant convergence between the humanistic psychotherapy of Carl Rogers and the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut, particularly in their emphasis on empathic understanding. Thompson (1994) describes a convergence between Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger’s conceptions of truth and untruth. Leffert (2017) draws on phenomenology – including explanations of “the phenomenology of meaning,” “the phenomenological self,” “the phenomenology of aesthetics,” and “the phenomenology of desire” to carve out an understanding of the meaning of “subjective well-being,” with intermittent slippages into dualistic and reductionistic explanations derived from neuroscience.

The dialectical approach is present in the psychoanalytic writings of Ogden (1986), Johnson (1994), and, extensively utilized by, Carveth (2018). Ogden (1986) has this to say about the dialectical process as a movement toward integration:

A dialectic is a process in which each of two opposing concepts creates, informs, preserves, and negates the other, each standing in a dynamic (ever-changing) relationship with the other … The dialectical process moves toward integration, but integration is never complete. Each integration creates a new dialectical opposition and a new dynamic tension. (p. 208)

Ogden goes on to describe how the “dialectical process is centrally involved in the creation of subjectivity” (p. 208), which involves not only the capacity for self-awareness but also one’s sense of “I-ness” “the quality [of experience] that one is thinking one’s thoughts and feeling one’s feelings as opposed to living in a state of reflexive reactivity” (p. 209). The dialectical process is additionally involved in the capacity for wishing (desiring) and meaning making. Paradoxically, the sense of “I-ness” is itself created in the context of an interpersonal dialectic where “I-ness” (of the infant) is made possible in dialogue with the “otherness” of the mother.

Although Johnson (1994) does not even mention the term “dialectic,” his approach to understanding “character styles” is incipiently, though not rigorously or systematically, dialectical and “existential” (a term he does use).

In the development of our character style, says Johnson (1994), we all have to face and come to terms with existential life issues expressed in such polarities as “presence-absence,” “seeking dependency gratification-providing dependency
gratification,” “autonomy-enmeshment,” “worthlessness-grandiosity,” “controlled-controlling,” and “sexual-asexual” (Table 1, pp. 12–13). It is in the chapter on the narcissistic character, however, that Johnson focuses on two interrelated “basic human polarities” which the developing person must gradually integrate:

These polarities are (1) unity-individuation and (2) grandiosity-vulnerability. Even under the best of circumstances this integration is not simple. Significant human psychopathology arises out of those familial situations in which any part of either polarity cannot be freely experienced and then integrated. (p. 158)

The enmeshment-seeking symbiotic character comes about as a consequence of blocking the integration of the unity-individuation polarity. The grandiosity-seeking (“grandiosity” here is used in its unnatural, unhealthy, compensatory sense in contradistinction to the child’s original natural and healthy grandiosity) narcissistic character emerges out of blocking the integration of the grandiosity-vulnerability polarity. The healthy character arises from a good-enough relational context that allows the developing person to integrate both polarities. Maturely loving parents accept, prize, and unconditionally regard their loveable child for “all its magnificence and vulnerability” (p. 160). Good-enough parents allow themselves to be “used” by their individuating and separating child while the child remains securely attached to them. They extend empathic “understanding, respect, mirroring, echoing, and love,” toward their child while at the same time setting proper limits (p. 159). Simply stated, maturely loving parents are able to attach to their child as a real, separate person. They appreciate their child’s magnificence (or what I would prefer to call “wondrousness”) while remaining empathically attuned to his or her accepted vulnerabilities. This kind of “love, respect, echoing, and mirroring” is “required for him to discover, accept, develop, and love his true self” (p. 161).

Carveth (2018) describes himself as an existentialist and a Freudian-Kleinian psychoanalyst. He applies a Hegelian dialectical approach to revisioning Melanie Klein’s developmental-therapeutic theory. Conflict, though not exclusively, is of the essence of our psychic and relational lives. In every human conflict there is a thesis and an antithesis that beckon compromise or resolution through a third higher-order, elevating synthesis. In almost every either/or conflictual situation there exists the possibility of a higher-order both/and creative compromise or integrative resolution. Almost every human conflict can be subjected to a “dialectical deconstruction” (p. 67). Carveth (2018) elaborates:
In dialectical thinking … conflict is recognized as a necessary but intermediate stage in a three-step developmental process in which an initial monism gives way to a dualistic clash of opposites, which is then transcended, however momentarily, in a higher synthesis of some type. … the figure three [the third stands for synthesis] is fundamental in dialectical thought …

In dialectical thinking, development through differentiation and integration is also a reality; [a progressive] evolution [toward an ultimately incompletely knowable whole] is real.

The dialectician’s favored image of living systems is the spiral, which in health ascends, but in illness yields to fixation, stasis or premature decline.

… a defining feature of regressive [non-dialectical] mental functioning is the privileging of one or the other pole of … binary oppositions, affirming thesis over antithesis or vice versa.

… the psychoanalytic method may be conceptualized as, in part, a process of dialectical deconstruction … in which the repressed complementarity and mutual dependence of the opposing terms is exposed.

… the mark of mature mental functioning is the capacity to achieve and hold the synthesis in which neither pole is concretized or absolutized. (pp. 104–107)

Carveth (2018) then applies his dialectical thinking to re-visioning Klein’s well-known developmental “positions.” “Dialectical thinking,” Carveth informs us, “is essentially allied to Klein’s … depressive position in which the either/or thinking (splitting) characterizing the paranoid-schizoid position is transcended” (p. 105). Carveth, however, does not stop at the point of demarcating the paranoid-schizoid (P-S) position as developmentally deficient (bad) and the depressive (or what Carveth labels as “reparative”) position as developmentally mature (good), as mainstream Kleinian psychoanalysts have done.

Developmentally, the paranoid-schizoid position is our first natural or normal position in Kleinian developmental theory. It describes our early infantile state of mind. Because of its utter vulnerability, dependency, and helplessness in infancy and due to being born with a primitive and fragile sense of self (ego), the infant is easily threatened by destructive drives from within or threatening forces from without experienced in consequence of the absence of immediate ministration to its basic needs. The infant is left with no recourse but to make use of primitive defenses such as projection, introjection, and, above all, splitting. This results in an experience of a split in the intentional world structure of the developing child. In an organismic effort to keep itself, more or less, protected, safe, and secure, the infant splits her or his world into a good self-world and a bad self-world. In Kleinian language, the infant experiences the “object” (breast or, later, mother) as either good (loved) or bad (hated). Correlative feelings are experienced in reference to the emerging
sense of self. The good-and-loved object must not be contaminated by feelings of hate for the bad object. This alleviates, to some degree, the child’s feelings of persecutory anxiety. It precipitates for the child an ordered and less vertiginously chaotic world.

The depressive-reparative (D-R) position is not only a developmental stage that follows the paranoid-schizoid position, but also, similar to the paranoid-schizoid position, a state of mind, a way of organizing experience, a positioning of oneself toward one’s intrapersonal and interpersonal world. It is a more mature position because, to a considerable degree, it resolves the either/or splitting stance of the paranoid-schizoid child. It more or less integrates the bipolar or split love-and-hate feelings toward the same essential other who is now perceived as a whole and separate person. Loving and hateful feelings are brought into a relationship with one another. The depressive-reparative child is now capable of contemplating her or his ambivalence toward the same important other. She or he realizes that one can have ambivalent feelings not only toward others but also toward the self. Additionally, the depressive-reparative child begins to experience the damage that she or he can perpetrate or has inflicted upon the loved other through her or his own destructive actions that can result in real loss. As a consequence, the now concerned child is motivated to undo the damage through acts of creative reparation or “atone-ment,” as Hans Loewald (1988) prefers to call it, which in itself is a creative act of “sublimation.”

Placing oneself in a position of being persecuted by part-objects who are perceived one-dimensionally and handled defensively highlights the Paranoid-Schizoid’s (P-S) central mode of functioning in the world. Placing oneself in a position of being sensitively attuned to the impact of one’s behavior on whole and separate objects who are perceived multidimensionally and handled with care, concern, and with a spirit of confidence in one’s preparedness for efficacious reparation highlights the Depressive-Reparative’s (D-R) central mode of functioning in the world. Whereas the P-S person has a strong tendency to splitting others or oneself into opposites – for example, people or the self are either all good (caring) or all bad (selfish) – the D-R person is able to manage the tensions involved in bringing opposites together – for example, people or self and can be both good (caring) and bad (selfish). The D-R person is able to acknowledge that she or he can both love and hate oneself or the other person. The D-R person is able to manage the dialectical tensions involved in bringing seemingly polar experiences (meanings) together. These are the signs of psychological maturity. Achieving and maintaining the D-R position is the mature way of being-in-the-world-with-self-and-others.
Mainstream Kleinians have viewed the movement between the P-S position and the D-R position as being linear, with allowances made for temporary regressive oscillations. In applying his dialectical thinking to Klein’s theory of development, Carveth (2018) re-visions the movement between P-S and D-R as being circular rather than linear. More importantly, in line with our own dialectical approach, Carveth posits good-and-bad aspects to both the P-S and D-R positions.

The P-S person, Carveth (2018) informs us, is in a position whereby she or he can use the defense mechanism of splitting as an adaptive necessity to defend herself or himself against the imminent transgressions of predators. We can only defend ourselves against a genocidal Hitler by adopting the P-S position. We fall madly in love only when we are captivated by the overpowering passion of the P-S position. All this is an illustration of the positive aspect of the P-S position. “This is where excitement, intensity, passion, falling in love and resolute commitment in a struggle are to be found” (p. 196).

The D-R person, Carveth (2018) continues, is simply too rational and too empathic to the point of rendering her or him in a frozen position, a position of inaction. If I begin thinking of how Hitler was violently traumatized by his father’s harsh discipline as a child and of how he loved dogs, then I will end up either appeasing Hitler or being killed as a consequence of his genocidal orders. And if I begin to rationally contemplate the merits and demerits of my fiancée, I will end up unable to resolutely commit myself to marrying her.

Carveth (2018) concludes in stating that out of the conflict between the P-S and D-R positions a creative synthesis of these two polar stances elevates one to a higher level of integration:

\[
\text{instead of valuing one and devaluing the other, both the merits and demerits of both positions are recognized and a creative synthesis that unites what is valuable and life-enhancing in each is worked out. Here, for example, we might find the passion and intensity of P$s$ creatively combined with the care and responsibility of D (a synthesis symbolized here as $P$sD). (p. 201)}
\]

We need to “find a way to love, hate, cherish and use more or less simultaneously … this is what appears … to be necessary to be both responsible [in the “I-Thou” mode of relating to others] and exciting [in the “I-it” mode of relating to others]” (p. 203).

Something needs to be said about the concept of ambivalence in general and the capacity for ambivalence as a maturational achievement that is central to the D-R position in particular. For the early Freud, Carveth tells us, ambivalence meant diffusion or splitting, as in splitting the life-affirming drive
(Eros) from the death or destructive drive (Thanatos). For the later Freud, as well as for Klein, ambivalence came to mean fusion or the overcoming of splitting. Merleau-Ponty (1964), however, re-visions the views of Melanie Klein, a re-vision with which we concur. Whereas for Klein the capacity for ambivalence is a maturational achievement, Merleau-Ponty links ambivalence to psychological rigidity while connecting psychological maturity to the capacity for ambiguity.

As opposed to ambivalence, ambiguity is an adult phenomenon, a phenomenon of maturity, which has nothing pathological about it. It consists in admitting that the same being who is good and generous can also be annoying and imperfect. … ambiguity is ambivalence that one dares to look at face to face. What is missing in rigid subjects is the capacity to confront squarely the contradictions that exist in their attitudes toward others. (p. 103)

Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty, “emotional ambivalence is what demands the denial of intellectual ambiguity. In subjects whose intellectual ambiguity is strong, it often happens that the emotional foundation is much more subtle than in other subjects” (p. 105). Lastly, Merleau-Ponty brings to our awareness – and this is my own extrapolation – the fact that the degree of ambivalence in early childhood and the extent of openness to future tolerance of ambiguity are highly context sensitive. In an “authoritarian atmosphere,” which is highly conducive to the acquisition of psychological rigidity, Merleau-Ponty points out, the child is sensitized to “having two alternative images of the same object, the same person, without making any effort to connect them or to notice that in reality they relate to the same object and the same person” (p. 103). In a more benign and authoritative atmosphere, which is highly conducive to the progressive acquisition of psychological fluidity or flexibility, the degree of ambivalence is attenuated and the movement toward the tolerance of ambiguity is enhanced. By viewing ambivalence on a continuum from high-to-low in degree of intensity that is contingent upon the relational context in which it develops, the contradiction in the views of the early and later Freud is eliminated. As simplistically dualistic feelings of ambivalence become attenuated and modulated, they become absorbed, elevated, and integrated into a more complexly mature tolerance of ambiguity – the capacity for ambiguity.

Although somewhat differently utilized than our model, Deurzen-Smith (1997) is an existential psychotherapist who has incorporated “dialogue as dialectics” into her therapeutic approach. “The art of dialectics,” says Deurzen-Smith, “requires the therapist to be very steady and sure-footed, able to
consider the opposite view of whatever the client asserts, and to systematically look for the missing and shadow side of an issue – the things that are not being said and the things that need considering still” (pp. 229–230). Existential therapy, explicates Deurzen-Smith, aims at helping clients “tackle” both sides of an issue – their “original position” and the opposite, shadowy position. Clients need to learn to “include” both positions in order to achieve “the positive outcome of existential psychotherapy” (p. 230). “The objective,” she continues, “is never simply to reach some sort of middle-way compromise, or dilute the tension implied in living [in paradox], but rather to maximize one’s ability to stand them, and allow them to span one’s life from one end of the range to the other” (p. 230). Deurzen-Smith describes her dialectical “map of the world” this way:

The four dimensions of our existence [bodily, social, personal, and ideological] are each spanned and dominated by polar oppositions. Life can be defined as the activity of movement between these opposites. People find themselves moved and motivated by the forces created in the tension between these extremes … Existence [for instance] is the tension between life and death and the lay of forces in-between. (p. 99)

We all typically try to stay near the polar side that offers us a sense of comfort, familiarity, and security. I can, for example, become preoccupied with the hassles and minutiae of everyday life that I become forgetful of my mortality.

There are, however, also balancing mechanisms built in to life tending to redress the equilibrium and exposing one to the previously neglected side of existence. When the body has engaged in a lot of strenuous effort, it tires and aims for rest. When we have been intensely involved with other people for a significant period of time, we seek peace and quiet. When we have been resolute and self-assertive for long enough, we crave a phase of letting our guard down. When we have been consistently virtuous and good, we are ripe for self-indulgence. (p. 99)

We tend to live on the assumption that our way of living is right (positive), only to find out that it has a negative side. Analogously, we discover that what we thought of as wrong (negative) turns out to have a positive element in it. Deurzen-Smith concludes her chapter on dialectics by providing examples of polarities in the different domains of existence (existential dimensions) by subsuming them under a Positive pole and a Negative pole: life (+) versus death (−), representing the physical dimension; belonging (+) versus isolation (−),
and love (+) versus hate (−), representing the social dimension; integrity (+) versus disintegration (−) and confidence (+) versus doubt (−), representing the personal dimension; and good (+) versus evil or destructiveness (−), representing the ideological/spiritual dimension. In our dialectical model, each pole can be positively (+) and negatively (−) valenced.

There is a double sense in which dialectics is used in our work: (1) it is used as an integrative and interpretive tool for uncovering the essential markers, meanings, or constituents of psychosocial maturation gleaned from both psychodynamic and existential-humanistic-phenomenological sources; and (2) it is described as an essential feature of self-world experience, whereby the self is viewed as being directed to tension-producing polar meanings in its lifeworld and is thus motivated to seek balance in its effort to find better (articulated and individuated) meanings that, under relatively optimal conditions, serve the ultimate purpose of increased psychosocial maturation. Ironically and paradoxically, this dual use, which is akin to the demarcation between dialectical thinking (reflecting, interpreting, insight-seeking) and dialectical living (acting, doing), is a spurious distinction. With psychosocial maturation, the distinction dissolves regarding concernful involvements that matter. Our concernful way of being-in-the-world-with-others manifests itself in the way we think-about-and-do-things. Living authentically involves a dialectical interplay between reflection and action. Existential-dialectical-dialogical thinking is the kind of thinking that illuminates and keeps lighted before us, especially during dark times, what is most important in life. “Authentic thinking,” states Boelen (1978), “is the creative process of man’s articulated or dialectical self-disclosure as Being-in-the-world … Thinking cannot be defined in opposition to being. It is essentially an integral constituent of our being-in-the-world” (pp. 45–46). Just as we have to pass through maturational levels to achieve authenticity, so too our thinking has to undergo the same levels of maturational development. Different ways of thinking parallel different ways of being-in-the-world-with-others. They correspond to different intentionalities. And “intentionality,” May (1969) reminds us, is “the structure by which experience becomes meaningful” (p. 299). “With maturity,” adds Deurzen-Smith (1997), “comes the ability to transpose one form of [meaningful] experience to another” (p. 220). Achieving a higher level of thinking entails the emergence of a new way of being-in-the-world, a new way of meaning making, where meanings are not only thought-meanings and emotion-meanings, but also action-meanings. Lest we forget the relational context in which meaning making occurs, Holmes (2010) brings to the fore of our attention that “it is the mutuality of meaning-making that matters” (p. 53).
The Work’s Implications

Positive psychology, though seemingly inspired by humanistic psychology, has moved the research into “character strengths and virtues” back to the forefront of mainstream psychology (see Bolt & Dunn, 2016). However, what qualifies it to belong to mainstream psychology and distances it from humanistic psychology is its adoption of a quantitative, natural scientific methodological approach to studying “character strengths and virtues” such as commitment, empathy, friendship, flourishing, happiness, hope, humility, love, meaning, self-control, self-respect, and wisdom (Bolt & Dunn, 2016). Let us see how the character or “human strength” of meaning making is handled from a quantitative, natural scientific perspective. Readers, like random subjects have done before them, are invited by Bolt and Dunn (2016) to complete the “Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ).” “The MLQ,” we are told, “has two subscales, the Presence [of Meaning] subscale and the Search [for Meaning] subscale” (p. 224). Presence of Meaning is weighted, on a seven-point scale, through the way respondents answer questions, such as “My life has or does not have a clear sense of purpose.” Search for Meanings is weighted, on a seven-point scale, through the way respondents answer questions, such as “I am searching for meaning in my life.” We are then instructed to calculate our Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning scores.

Something deeply valuable about having and pursuing a meaning in life is lost from the above quantitative and confusingly disjointed approach to understanding such a critical “character strength” as Meaning in Life. For one thing, it escapes the constructors of the MLQ that meaning can be discovered not only through a sense of purpose but also, at a minimum, though a sense of efficacy, through appreciation of beauty, through loving relations, and through knowing that one is a good person. Moreover, forcing the answerer to
quantify her or his response to the meaning-tapping questioning does not allow the subject to describe what the question means to her or him in light of the answer (marked number). Let us contrast this quantitative approach with a descriptive, qualitative, and phenomenological approach to understanding the phenomenon of *lifeworld meaning*.

“Phenomenological psychology,” states Fuller (1990), “begins with the premise that *lifeworld meaning*, which conventional [mainstream] psychology is simply unable to calculate, comes into its *truth*, with an integrity of its own, in existential [lived, not objective] space” (p. 79). “Phenomenological psychology,” he continues, “is a [human] science that is dedicated to *understanding* behavior in its total everyday [meaningful] context rather than *explaining* in terms of objective conditions; precisely therein lies its hermeneutic character” (p. 33). It is lived meanings that co-organize our experience. We commune and engage in dialogue with these emotion-and-value-laden and action-packed meanings. Our bodily selves are always already directed to lifeworld meanings – the things and people we deal with in our everyday lives. Others, as variations on ourselves, are also meanings for us – as loveable or despicable, for instance. In a sense, *we are our lifeworld meanings*. We make meanings and meanings make us. Psychosocial maturation on the bodily self side is mirrored in maturation on the meanings side. Meanings grow (differentiate and individuate) as we grow as human *beings*.

Positive psychology is oblivious to this rich phenomenological *understanding* of lifeworld meaning. It only provides us with a simplistic and superficial *explanation* of the meaning of *Meaning of Life*. “*Positive psychology,*” state Bolt and Dunn (2016), lifting the definition from the “Positive Psychology Center,” “*is the [natural] scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play*” (p. 3). Something is sacrificed in what is learned about “human strengths” when approached from a calculative or quantitative point of view, let alone applying such learning to helping individuals and communities live meaningful lives whereby their capacities for *love*, *work*, and *play* are enhanced – three capacities that emerge as part of thirty essential meanings of psychosocial maturation in our present project.

*Contemporary psychoanalysis* tends to have one foot grounded in a descriptive approach and another foot grounded in natural scientific approach to understanding important human phenomena. “The cutting edge of contemporary psychoanalytic therapy,” holds Holmes (2010), “rests in the combination of accurate phenomenological accounts of what happens in the consulting room with emerging findings from neuroimaging, genetics and child
development” (pp. 177–178). “Together,” he surmises, “these offer the possibility of psychoanalytic therapy as a [natural] science of intimate relations” (p. 178). Yet, the same Holmes holds that “meaning-making is intrinsic to all therapy,” that such meaning-oriented framework brings “order to the intrinsically inchoate experience of [mental] illness,” and that “meaning,” which can be developmental, relational, and unconscious (implicit), “transcends mere cognition and ultimately derives from bodily experience” (p. 43). Meaning can become our “secure base” (p. 45). Although he does not explicitly make mention of it, Holmes is here saying that some value-and-feeling-laden meanings we hold allow us to belong to the lifeworld, whereby bodily self and lifeworld meanings are bound together as one. Moreover, shared meanings or mutual meaning making can be a source of soothing and comfort, joy and exuberance, consensual validation of social reality, and an impetus to exploring and acquiring knowledge about self-and-other and co-constructing a coherent life narrative. Our bodies, says Holmes, let us know if we are “finding the right meaning” (p. 50). To find the right meaning, I need to (1) be attuned to my own “affective and corporeal sensory-affective world”; (2) describe such sensation in words, thus transforming my “preconceptions’ into conceptions’”; and (3) give full expression to what I mean by taking into account my own affective reactions, my knowledge of my essential other’s internal world. Ultimately, “it is the mutuality of meaning-making that matters” (p. 53). The “capacity to find/make shared meanings” is a hallmark of mental health. This I believe is a rich phenomenological description of the process of mutual meaning making.

If contemporary psychoanalysis is to be a human science, then it has to consistently refrain from succumbing to dualistic and reductionistic thinking. Instead, it needs to make consistent use of hermeneutic and dialectical thinking. It needs to utilize rigorous descriptive methods that aim at capturing the essential meanings of human phenomena, such as love and loss, without slipping into dualism or reductionism. It needs to adopt more rigorous “phenomenological psychological methods” of investigation (see the pioneering work of phenomenological psychologist Amedeo Giorgi, 2018). Psychoanalysis and phenomenology can both be enriched through a cross-fertilizing dialogue. Similarly, a “communion” between psychoanalysis, in its various forms, and existential-humanistic-phenomenological psychologies can result in the enhancement of our human understanding. This present project is one such endeavor that aims at understanding the phenomenon of psychosocial maturation. In this qualitative re-search project I have immersed myself into the maturation-relevant literature of existential-phenomenological psychology and philosophy and the psychoanalytic or psychodynamic literature that is
incipiently dialectical-dialogical or existential-phenomenological and emerged with thirty *essential meanings or markers of psychosocial maturity*.

Why re-search the phenomenon of psychosocial maturation? What does it mean to be an emotionally, psychologically, or psychosocially mature human being? What are the *core characteristics* of the psychosocially mature person? What are the *meanings* or *markers* of psychosocial maturity? How can we describe the process of *becoming* a mature individual? The provisional answer to this question, which is the goal of our project, is important because the impulse that beckons us toward development, growth, and maturation is an existential given. In line with humanistic and existential psychologists, such as Viktor Frankl, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, and Carl Rogers, I hold to the principle that we humans have the potential within us to better ourselves and become more than we are. Moreover, society is made up of individuals who in turn make it up. The more mature we become as individuals the more mature our society becomes. Following the example of Habermas (1971), who maintains that we humans have a fundamental interest in communicating, being understood, and gaining knowledge about ourselves and others, I hold to the assumption that we humans have a fundamental interest in psychosocial maturation. Should the reader concur with this assumption, she or he will hopefully find experiential validation and resonance in her or his own personal quest for psychosocial maturation as she or he journeys with me in my search for the essential structure of psychosocial maturation.

Additionally, all psychotherapeutic approaches aim at contributing to the psychosocial maturation of clients or patients. Implicitly or explicitly, “psychotherapy provides an image of the well-functioning, well-adjusted, healthy, happy person and a method designed to help one to approximate the ideal” (Deurzen-Smith, 1997, p. 124). Psychotherapists themselves need to have acquired a significant level of psychosocial maturation before they embark on assisting clients or patients, even if obliquely, in their personal journey toward emotional, psychological, and relational maturity. A therapeutically helping relationship, says Rogers (1989), is one “in which at least one of the parties has the intent of promoting the growth, development, maturity, improved functioning, improved coping with life of the other” (p. 108). The “optimal helping relationship,” continues Rogers, “is the kind of relationship created by a person who is psychologically mature. Or to put it in another way, the degree to which I can create relationships which facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved in myself” (pp. 124–125).
“A mature practitioner,” states Jacobs (2010) in his text on psychodynamic psychotherapy, will show, selectively:

– a mature sense of judgment …
– the ability to think … while containing anxious situations …
– the ability to learn from errors and mistakes through non-defensive reflection …
– ongoing openness to learning …
– ease with not knowing … together with the confidence in one’s competence …
– a genuine sense of humility …
– self-acceptance …, consistent commitment …
– ongoing personal development and self-knowledge from a variety of experiences. (pp. 72–73)

What are the indicators of more mature development in the patient? Here are, according to Jacobs (1998), some of these indicators of psychosocial maturation:

– Basic sense of trust and faith in others, the environment and the self; basic sense of the ‘world’ as good.
– Healthy mistrust …
– … recognition of ambivalence [‘without the negative destroying the positive’], and concern [and care] for others … receiving care from others …
– Containing and working through bad experiences and feelings without being overwhelmed by them in the long run.
– Healthy self-respect and self-regard, while still able to accept one’s shortcomings, own mortality, and weaknesses.
– A separate identity: able to own thoughts and feelings …
– Identifying through empathy and concern for and with others.
– … depending appropriately upon others.
– Capacity to be alone – inner harmony and self-esteem.
– Putting experiences in perspective, retaining a sense of hope even in adversity.
– Expressing appropriate anger or assertiveness when frustrated or disconcerted without (fear of) being destructive.

The internalization of the positive features of others, in the course of relating to them, particularly as part of the grief process after loss or bereavement. (pp. 213–214)
The point to be made here is that psychotherapists need to not only serve as models of maturity but also have a map of maturity in their efforts to be instrumental in helping others in their maturational journey. Among other goals, this book will aim to provide such as a provisional guiding map of maturity. In addition, it not only will hopefully contribute to furthering our understanding of the meaning of maturity, but will serve as a guiding light to the existential project of becoming more mature that beckons every one of us. If psychotherapy is to provide an “image” of the psychosocially mature person and a “method” for approximating this “ideal,” then this present project attempts to make this implicit “image,” explicit, while inviting future researchers, doing “qualitative” research, to refine this provisional picture.

The Work’s Organization

Guided by my prior research and writings utilizing the dialectical approach, I immersed myself in psychodynamic and existential-humanistic-phenomenological literature of relevance to the phenomenon of psychosocial maturation. I took a fresh look at these qualitatively and experientially oriented sources, focusing on lived meanings of maturation. I searched for markers, meanings, principles, themes, essences, and examples of psychosocial maturation. Utilizing a hermeneutic-dialectical process, I aimed at discovering, synthesizing, and portraying the essential constituents of psychosocial maturation. From this qualitative analysis emerged thirty markers, meanings, or constituents of psychosocial maturity. Thereafter, I distilled these thirty “markers” into ten thematic clusters.

The reader will discover, as I have, that the thirty core characteristics are constituent parts of the whole phenomenon of psychosocial maturation. Just as the parts are manifestations of the whole, the whole will be manifested in each part. Described differently, these core characteristics of psychosocial maturation partake of one another. They overlap and are not isolated from one another. There is a dynamic interaction and interdependence between them.

The Special Case of Love as a Superordinate Integrative Marker of Maturity

Ultimately, emotional or psychological maturity can be fostered only in a loving relational context that is characterized by “co-wonder” (a concept that I owe to Boelen, 1978, p. 103) – a shared co-presence to the awe-inspiring
miracle that is Life itself. Of all the overlapping markers of maturity, I single out the capacity for love as a superordinate integrative marker of maturity. Cultivating the capacity to love maturely or wisely is one of life’s ultimate achievements. Maroda (2010) describes the capacity to love as “the final competence” … one is competent only to the extent and to the degree that one can love” (p. 234). The inability to love maturely is one of life’s ultimate failures. Quoting Freud, Carveth (2018) echoes that “in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if … we are unable to love” (p. 10).

Love is the source of true integrality (with its double ethical and integrative connotations), stability, solidity-producing solidarity, harmony, happiness, fulfillment, creativity, and self-and-relational actualization. Love is the most fundamental integrating force in human existence. Still, Boelen (1978), thinking dialectically, reminds us that:

mature love cannot be achieved without the pain of its primal conflict with indifference, hatred, alienation, egoism, fixation, prejudice, etc. A mature person can have integrity even though he stumbles. Mature … love can only be attained at the cost of a lifetime of self-discipline, constant struggle, arduous effort, and even occasional failure. (p. 168)

Mature love enables us to maintain a life-affirming stance in spite of the ugliness, destructiveness, and deception in human existence.

In a chapter on psychoanalyst “Harold Searles’ ‘Oedipal Love in the Countertransference’ and ‘Unconscious Identification,’” Ogden (2012) has this to say:

Though Searles does not discuss the theoretical underpinnings of his findings, it seems that the therapeutic effect of the expression of the therapist’s love for the patient is the meeting of a developmental need for recognition of who the patient is (as opposed to the satisfying of an erotic desire). The latter would lead to increased sexual excitement; the former fosters psychological maturation, including the consolidation of a self that is experienced as both loved and loving. Searles is implicitly, and only implicitly, positing a human developmental need to love and be loved and to be recognized as a separate person whose love is valued. (p. 162)

What both Searles and Ogden are saying here about love in therapy applies to love outside therapeutic settings – what I call natural therapeutic environments, such as parent-child relationships, relations between partners or friends, and
so on. We all have a universal (existential) need to love and be loved as separate individuals. The capacity to love maturely results in the fostering of “psychological maturation,” which includes the “consolidation [or integration] of a self that is experienced as both loved and loving.”

The capacity to love, viewed developmentally, can serve as a superordinate integrator. When as children we are properly or maturely (non-possessively or non-narcissistically) loved, we are granted the creative space to separate, individualize, and differentiate, while maintaining our close ties to our essential others. In other words, relatively speaking, we are enabled to transcend the tension-producing dichotomy of subject versus object or the “I” versus the “we.” We are able to achieve relative balance between our emerging sense of agency and our felt communion with our significant others. At the same time, we are also able to achieve a relative balance between relating to the Other as a co-subject and relating to the Other as a use object, with the former outweighing the latter in the resulting optimal ratio. To use Buberian language – after existential philosopher Martin Buber (1970), the “I-Thou” (subject-to-subject) relationship outweighs the “I-It” (subject-to-object) relationship – a relationship that is based on use and not encounter. In fact, in a mature loving relationship, be it between loving partners, parent and child, or friends, the participants allow themselves to be used, a benign allowance lovingly accepted while having its boundaries and limits.

References