

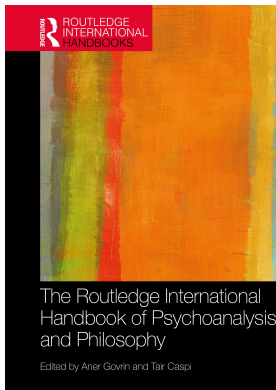
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### **The Foundations of the Psychoanalytic Theories of Freud, Klein and Bion Compared**

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## 10

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE  
PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES  
OF FREUD, KLEIN AND BION  
COMPARED

*Michael Rustin*<sup>1</sup>

The paradigm of psychoanalysis, invented by Freud early in the twentieth century, has undergone considerable development and evolution since its beginnings. Some of this took place within Freud's own work, during his long lifetime. In this article, I am going to focus on psychoanalytic work which has taken place mainly in Britain, in a tradition which has emphasised its consistency and continuity with Freud's ideas while nevertheless making some significant new departures from them. This is the tradition whose foremost figures were Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion, but which has been elaborated by a considerable circle of practising psychoanalysts influenced by and associated with them. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the essential features of this field of work, taking note of its aspects of consistency with Freud's original insights, its divergences from Freud's initial assumptions, and its theoretical developments of these. We shall be defending the theoretical and clinical fertility of this tradition, and will seek to show how large and coherent its scope has become over the century or so of its existence, since Klein first began her development of Freud's ideas in the 1920s.

There have of course been several other significant and distinctive developments of Freud's original paradigm, each of them influenced by the cultural context in which they have occurred. We will here mention two in particular. The first is the tradition of "ego psychology" which developed from the 1930s onwards, mainly in the United States, but which gained its greatest influence after the Second World War.

This body of work, initially accomplished by exiles to America from Nazi Europe, remained attached to Anna Freud's conception of Freudian orthodoxy,<sup>2</sup> evolved in part in opposition to the theoretical and technical innovations proposed by Melanie Klein when she came to work in England, and by her followers there. The second is a different psychoanalytic tradition, which termed itself "relational psychoanalysis" (a founding text is Greenberg and Mitchell 1984). This emerged in the later decades of the twentieth century, in part in reaction to the domination of psychoanalysis in post-war America by the ego psychologists. There are some affinities between this relational tradition and the ideas of "object relations" which were developed in Britain, each arguing for a model of the mind centred less on its innate instinctual drives, and instead attaching greater importance to the self's formative relation to others. The primary "objects" of British object-relations theory are those to which the infant becomes related in early life, and

whose presence in the mind is therefore substantially unconscious. The main focus of “relational psychoanalysis” has by contrast been the “objects” whom individuals become identified with and related to not merely in infancy, but throughout their lives. “Relational psychoanalysis” has been a discourse through which psychoanalysts can take account of the many kinds of diversity and difference (e.g., of gendered, sexual, and ethnic identity) which exist in contemporary society, and through which such differences can be explored and negotiated in the contexts of psychoanalytic clinical work. This movement was in part a reaction to the normative assumptions concerning middle-class family life in America in the period of greatest influence of psychoanalysis, and to the undermining of these in a later period of cultural dissent, conflict and pluralism. Encountering these fields of cultural difference led relational psychoanalysts to repudiate some of the tacit assumptions of scientific objectivity and authority which had been Freud’s aspiration for psychoanalysis, and to propose that in the psychoanalytic encounter analysts’ own cultural and normative beliefs might need to be explored and made explicit. By contrast, the “object-relations” tradition has been much less interested than “relational psychoanalysis” in issues of cultural diversity and social conflict. It has correspondingly remained more committed to the specific focus of psychoanalysis on unconscious mental life, and to the idea that analysts can bring a distinctive kind of capability and even authority to this kind of understanding.

The third important development from Freud’s foundational work which we wish to mention here is that which was created by Lacan in France (Roudinesco 1997). Lacan positioned this development against what he saw as the weakened recognition of the force of the unconscious in the ego psychologists’ development of Freud’s ideas in the United States. He recognised some affinity with Klein’s committed attention to unconscious mental life, although their understanding of the nature of this was different. Lacan’s primary interest was in the disruptive and challenging nature of desire and its transformations. He believed that the exploration of this in all its difficulties was the essential task of psychoanalysis. Language was the vital and unavoidable resource for conducting this exploration in analysis, as it revealed, concealed and misrepresented the vicissitudes of human desire, both in individuals’ specific experience and in the larger symbolic structures whose effect was to define identities (e.g., of gender or race) within larger cultures. An idea of the ultimate “impossibility” of finding satisfaction of human desires, through a primordial experience of “lack”, seems to characterise the Lacanian world-view. This perhaps corresponds to one latently anti-social current in French social thought, which has found expression in both its existentialist and revolutionary traditions. There is little space to be found within this conception of identity between extreme assertions of individual autonomy and a utopian concept of group harmony, as originally in Rousseau’s idea of a “general will”. As we will see, the Klein-Bion development of Freud’s ideas has been more sympathetic to the idea that “good enough” solutions to the problems of human lives may be found, and that psychoanalysis can contribute to the project of finding them, both for individuals and in the larger context of culture and society.

We have suggested that all of these “post-Freudian” developments have been shaped by a particular societal and cultural context, including the specific “British” development we will be describing here.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Freud<sup>4</sup>**

Although in the writing of Freud’s two most important successors in the tradition we are considering there are both developments of and differences with Freud, it is essential to see how many of the ideas which have come to constitute this tradition have their origin in Freud’s own writing. This is the case even for ideas of, for example, our relations with internal objects and

the place of the epistemophilic instinct, whose main development took place in his successors' work. In our section on Freud's ideas, we will summarise some key elements of Freud's paradigm and identify elements in his work which were the location of developments and of divergences.

### *The Unconscious*

The most fundamental psychoanalytic idea, both in Freud's work and that of his successors, is that of the unconscious mind, and that of unconscious desires. Freud understood these to be both sexual and aggressive in nature, from this essential duality arising his conception of the life and the death instinct. From the idea of primary libidinal desires, and of its earliest object in the maternal figure, arose the central importance of the Oedipus complex in Freud's theory. The male infant's libidinal desire for its mother set up an unavoidable conflict with mother's sexual partner, father, for the sole possession of mother. Freud believed that male infants were obliged, if normal sexual development was to be achieved, to renounce their desire to possess mother, in rivalry with father, and that this developmental stage was normally achieved through the infant's becoming identified with father, and recognising that with maturity he would come to emulate father's role in his own generation. Freud's understanding of the early development of the female was much less secure than his understanding of the male child – he acknowledged his uncertainty about the psychology of the female. On the one hand, there was an element of symmetry in the experience of male and female infants, in so far as both of them were believed to form, and were then obliged to renounce, libidinal attachments to their opposite-sex parent. The process through which these desires and attachments were formed, and were then transcended by identification and through the sublimation and externalisation of desires, was often stressful. Freud located many developmental difficulties, and the origin of several psychopathologies in this early experience of the Oedipal situation. But on the other hand, Freud postulated a deep asymmetry in the psychological formation of males and females, believing that female infants believed themselves to be suffering from a deficiency in comparison with the male child – namely the absence of a penis. This necessarily implied that adult females suffer from this lack as well, thus instituting at the heart of Freud's psychoanalytic theory a postulate of female deficit and inferiority.

One of the most important evolutions in psychoanalytic theory after Freud was in the understanding of female development. Klein attended much more closely than Freud to the experiences of the first months of life, and to the early relations of mother and infant. She, and subsequently Bion, held that this relationship between mother and infant was formative for the development of the self, and that this was prior to Oedipal rivalry for libidinal possession of the parent, which was central to Freud's account of development. Klein did not discount or minimise the importance of Oedipal conflicts, holding instead that they emerged much earlier, in the first year of life, than Freud believed, even before the constituting of a desiring ego and the onset of repression. But there is a corresponding significant change in Klein's understanding of the Oedipal situation. In her view, the anxieties it gives rise to are not only concerned with libidinal desires and the fear of paternal retribution for these, expressed in Freud's view as "castration anxiety". Klein accepted, and found in her clinical work with young children, that such anxieties existed. But in her view, the issue for the infant was not merely that he could not be the sole possessor of his opposite-sex parent, but also involved anxieties about what the parents' sexual coupling might produce, in the form of new babies who threatened the displacement of the infant from its privilege of exclusive parental care and preoccupation. (Klein suggested that the experience of weaning induced this anxiety.) Thus, Klein's version of this early development story brings a partial shift of focus from experiences of libidinal desires and their prohibition,

to anxieties about the security and care of the infant.<sup>5</sup> This is one aspect in a larger shift in this tradition from desires to relationships as central issues in psychoanalytical theory.

### *Transference*

A second concept central to Freud's psychoanalytic theory is that of transference. Freud discovered the phenomenon of transference in his treatment of Dora, the human subject of his paper "Fragment of a Case of Hysteria – (Dora)" published in 1905, but based on work conducted five years earlier. Dora had consulted Freud after her father had become involved in an affair, and after the deceived husband, Herr K, had, it seemed, attempted to seduce Dora, who had been shocked and pushed him away. She was disturbed by the episode, and felt disgust whenever she was in male company. Freud came to understand the symptoms she revealed in her work with him as hysterical in nature, with underlying sexual meanings which involved multiple unconscious attractions to Herr K, to her father, and to her mother. Freud came to believe that this real attempt at seduction was so disturbing to his patient in part because it evoked an unconscious phantasy of childhood seduction by her father. Freud's discovery of transference came when he understood that it was because of Dora's transference to him that she had unexpectedly withdrawn from her analysis after only three months. Freud came to believe that if he had recognised her transference to him at the time, he might have been able to sustain the analysis.

The idea of the transference became, following Freud's discovery, one of the fundamental building blocks of psychoanalytic theory and method. However, its full development as a source of understanding of patients, and of the relationship between patients and analysts, came from Freud's successors. Freud for the most part saw himself as engaged in investigations of his patients' unconscious minds, undertaken from as detached and objective a position as he could find in relation to them. They would tell him what was in their minds, according to the desired but difficult-to-follow principle of free association, and he in the role of psychoanalyst would seek to unravel and to reveal to them the unconscious meaning of their desires. Freud did not work solely in the mode of an investigator of the meanings of the thoughts his patients disclosed to him through their dreams and associations. His writings sometimes show him to have been aware of the complexity of his patients' feelings for him, and of his feelings for them. But what is now called the "here and now" of the transference relationship was very different from Freud's own practice.

It was Sándor Ferenczi, among his close group of followers, who came to understand that the psychoanalyst should have an emotionally engaged and expressive relationship with his patients and who urged this on Freud. Ferenczi was also keenly aware of the intensity of the relationships which existed within Freud's own circle, and the jealousies and antipathies which they generated. However, Freud retained his preference to see himself in the role of an objective investigator of the new field of the unconscious (his own mind included), and this inhibited him from developing a fuller interest in the nature of the transference relationship as an essential resource of psychoanalytic understanding and change, as it became in the British object-relations tradition.

Melanie Klein, whose first analyst in Budapest was Ferenczi, and whose clinical approach was influenced by him (Likierman 2002), was one of those who developed the greater understanding of the centrality of the transference relationship to psychoanalytic practice, through her analytic treatment of young children from the early 1920s. She found in this work that the intensity of the transference of her patients to her, and the ways in which through this they gave expression to their inner world of phantasy, was unmistakable. Among young children, transferences of feeling between parental figures and other adults with whom they come into significant contact are quite normal – how often do small children find themselves even explicitly addressing their

grandmothers or nursery teachers as “mummy” before recognising and correcting their mistakes. It was in 1934 that James Strachey, who was one of Klein’s supporters in the British psychoanalytic movement (Alix and James Strachey in 1925 first invited Klein to lecture in London), gave in a classic paper what has become the canonical expression of the understanding of the role of the transference in making possible psychoanalytic understanding and change (Strachey 1934). Later, in the work of Paula Heimann (1950), then a member of Klein’s close circle, came the recognition of the significance of the counter-transference – the nature and experience of the analyst’s transference to her patient – as a further crucial development of the understanding of the significance of this relationship. This perspective became still broader and deeper in the work of the next generation of Kleinian analysts, for example in Betty Joseph’s (1985) focus on the “total transference situation” – originally a concept of Klein’s – as an essential technique of psychoanalytic inquiry and treatment.

### ***The Theory of Drives and Freud’s Individualism***

Freud began his career as a neurologist whose initial interest was in the brain and the nervous system and in the biophysical origins of the functions of the mind. His development of a psychoanalytic perspective involved a shift from the functions of the brain to the phenomena of the mind.<sup>6</sup> These are parallel ontologies and fields of explanation which remain distinct and irreducible to one another even to this day. It is an aspiration of neuroscience to be able to explain the phenomena of the mind, and to be able to correct its pathologies by reference to the phenomena of the brain, with consciousness understood as an effect of physical and chemical processes. A great deal of progress has been made by neuroscientists in correlating events in these spheres, for example establishing a topography in which different functions of mind have been shown to be located in specific regions of the brain. A therapeutic ambition which follows from these investigations is to be able to influence mental states through interventions, principally pharmacological, which impact “directly” on brain functions. Considerable successes of this kind have been achieved, enabling different kinds of mental pathology – depressive and psychotic illnesses, for example – and their accompanying kinds of pain and distress to be alleviated. However, it is rare that such interventions achieve all of their purposes, and the idea that mental states should need to be regulated through dependence on drugs arouses disquiet. This is from the perspective that human beings should be self-determining through their capacity for understanding of themselves and for free choice. This resistance has roots in philosophical and cultural beliefs about how human lives should be lived, but it is also one shared in everyday life – most individuals would prefer not to be dependent on medically prescribed drugs for their well-being, at least for any length of time.

The model of the brain and its functions on which Freud’s neurological work was based gave great importance to flows of energy, which were managed by the human organism to maintain a state of equilibrium. This model of the mind was influenced by the “psychological materialism” of the English empiricist philosophical tradition.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651) sought to understand the “laws of motion” governing human lives. (Newton stated the three universal laws of motion later in 1687 in his *Principia*.) Hobbes, and the utilitarian philosophers who followed him, understood the human mind as organised through its aversion to pain and its desire for pleasure. Pleasure was achieved through the satisfaction of appetites. Human beings were constructed in effect as desiring machines (Deleuze and Guattari 1977 [1972], 1987 [1980]). Modern times have made a great deal of this model, whose minds had the role of estimating how pleasures and pains could respectively be achieved and avoided.

In 1905, Freud followed *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) with *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905a) and *Fragment of a Case of Hysteria – [Dora]* (1905b). In the second of these works, Freud set out in a succinct way his “libido theory”, analysing libidinal desires as the principal motivating force of the mind and differentiating between their impulses, objects and aims. This text integrates several fields of inquiry into a single psychological model of the mind, giving prominence to Freud’s core conception of unconscious mental conflict but drawing on both Newtonian and Darwinian presuppositions. Darwin’s theory of natural selection gave a scientific legitimacy to Freud’s belief in the central role of sexuality in human life.

There is an affinity between the theory of libidinal desires seeking gratification and the utilitarian philosopher’s model of pleasure-seeking as the fundamental human motivation. Freud’s interest in utilitarian philosophy, and its probable implicit role in the framing of this thinking, is attested by the fact that he made his own translation of four works by John Stuart Mill. This framing of human motivation is inherently “individualistic” or self-regarding. Since fundamental desires and appetites arise from within the individual organism, there is the innate probability – indeed certainty – of conflict and competition between individuals for their satisfaction. The utilitarian tradition sought to elaborate regulatory norms and principles by which individuals might be persuaded in their own and others’ interest to restrain their own appetites and allow a common human interest – “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” in Bentham’s terms – to be served. They thus superimposed a moral principle onto their central theory of self-regarding motivation. (The superego had similar function in Freud’s theory.) This “problem of order”, as it came to be described later in influential sociological writing (Parsons 1937), is quite closely related to the problems of reconciling conflicting human desires and impulses which Freud had discussed in a somewhat pessimistic spirit in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* in 1930. In the second utilitarian generation, Mill – some of whose writing Freud translated into German – proposed a more complex idea of pleasures, differentiating between those of a higher and lower kind (Wollheim 1993, pp. 22–38) and creating philosophical space for the psychoanalytic idea of the sublimation of pleasure-seeking impulses into higher-order satisfactions.

Freud’s first psychoanalytic theory of the mind came to be called the “topographical” model, postulating conscious, preconscious and unconscious levels of mental functioning. The unconscious, in Freud’s account, arose from the repression of libidinal and aggressive desires within the Oedipal situation through the conflicts to which they gave rise with parental figures. Later, in Freud’s subsequent “structural” theory of mind, in which a different tripartite structure of id, ego and superego had primacy, the unconscious was understood to be the location of desires themselves, in their original polymorphous and unregulated form. In Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, this division of the mind, and the function of repression in bringing it about, was the (imperfect) solution to the “problem of order” to which his account of self-gratifying libidinal and aggressive desires at the core of human nature gave rise.

A further aspect of the “individualism” of Freud’s foundational model of the mind was his belief that human lives began in a state of what came to be called “primary narcissism”.<sup>8</sup> In the first instance, that is to say, human infants are without a conception of the existence of others, but they imagine or fantasise that their appetites are being satisfied by their own actions. Recognition of the existence of others, and of their entire dependence on them, comes at a later stage of development, according to Freud, who did not psychoanalyse children and gave little attention to the experiences of infants. Klein, who was herself a mother, and who psychoanalysed children from under three years of age onwards, took a different view. Her insistence that human beings were “object related” from the moment of birth – that is to say they had an innate awareness of the existence of the maternal breast – was perhaps the most fundamental of her

disagreements with Freud, and it was foundational for the development of the object-relations tradition in psychoanalysis.

Freud seems to have been unaware of, or uninterested in, the parallel but diverging tradition of English empiricist philosophy which had a greater recognition of the innate “social” nature of humankind. This was set out in the philosophy of David Hume and Adam Smith, among others, in the more peaceful climate of eighteenth-century Scotland and England, which had succeeded the preceding period of religious and civil conflict. Its central idea was that human beings had an innate capacity for sympathy with one another’s states of feeling and could be motivated by responses to others’ sufferings and pleasures. Freud’s focus on the aims and objects of desires, and on their inhibition and repression and its psychological consequences, led him to give little attention to affects – states of feeling (as distinct from the aims and objects of desire) – as constitutive of mental life.

Janet Sayers (1991) has argued that greater attention to states of feeling, including those involved in the sufferings of others, emerged with the participation of women analysts in the psychoanalytic movement (these included Helen Deutsch, Anna Freud, Karen Horney and Melanie Klein). Male analysts central to the development of the object-relations tradition, such as Bowlby, Winnicott and Bion, were also keenly interested in the role of mothers in human development, more than Freud had been. One can thus see the growth of object-relations psychoanalysis as the outcome of a partial “feminisation” of psychoanalysis.

Freud’s work was, of course, shaped by influences other than the empiricism of the British empiricist/scientific tradition and its model of desires and energies seeking discharge. Carl Schorske (1980) refers to Freud’s dual attachments to the “passion” of French and the “reason” of British culture, and we can add to this an affinity with an idealist tradition which gives central importance to the change which can arise from the understanding of meanings. While Freud saw the function of interpretation, so central to psychoanalysis, in part as the identification of mental chains of cause and effect, its role is just as much one of making connections in conceptual and emotional terms. (We can say in terms of Max Weber’s *Methodology of the Social Sciences* [1949] at the level of meaning *and* cause.). This is fully evident in Freud’s own writing – and is inherent in his appreciation and love of literature – even if its implications do not fully find their way into his scientific theory of the mind. Freud’s later writing, notably *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), gives emphasis to the role of identification with others in the formation of identity and was foundational for the conception, in the object-relations tradition, of a self that was more “social” in its essence than it had been in Freud’s earlier writing. The full development of the idea of a personality or self that was formed by love and hatred of others, rather than mainly by a need or wish to gratify appetites through relations with them, came with work in the object-relations tradition.

### Klein<sup>9</sup>

In her psychoanalytic treatment of children, from the early 1920s, Klein adopted Freud’s own understanding of the personality as initially dominated by its bodily appetites and needs. Through her technique of play therapy and her interpretation of the meaning of patients’ play with the toys she provided, she developed an understanding of infants’ mental lives as dominated by intense preoccupation with mothers’ bodies and with their physical interactions with them. Freud’s postulated states of successive oral, anal and genital preoccupation provided a framework for her – a bodyscape – through which she inferred the infant’s way of experiencing the main elements of its relationship with mother. She believed this relationship to be dominated by intense feelings of both love and hate, in which its bodily functions (feeding, biting, urinating,



excreting) were made use of as forms of action and expression. As we have said, Klein believed that the Oedipal situation and the feelings aroused by it became part of the infant's mental world in the first year of life, and not after the age of three, related to the onset of repression, as Freud believed.

Thus, although we argue that Klein had a major role in recognising the importance of relationships between the self and its objects from the beginning of life and achieved a crucial understanding of the emergence of a form of love and care for another which were not merely an expression of libidinal desire, it is important to see what else is essential to her theory of development. What has remained contentious in Klein's theoretical system is the extent to which she recognises the power of destructive and aggressive feelings in early infantile experience. What was challenging in her therapeutic technique was the directness, even starkness, with which she sought to understand and interpret the phantasies about the bodies and body parts of infants and parents, and their interactions, giving a highly concrete dimension in her psychoanalytic work with children to some of Freud's beliefs about early development. She also took into her work with children his belief that interpretation, and the recognition of the transference relationship between patient and analyst, was the crucial therapeutic resource of psychoanalysis. This was contrary to the belief of Anna Freud that the transference and interpretation could only have an important role in child analysis once a sufficiently developed ego had developed, once the child became capable of establishing an emotionally intense relationship – a transference relationship – with someone outside of their immediate family,

We will be arguing that Klein's discoveries made possible a more "relational" conception of human life. But for a perspective to be "relational" does not imply that it is inherently benign, or that aggression and destructiveness becomes a significant issue only where nurturing and early development have failed in some way. Indeed, this issue of an innate potential for aggression has constituted an important line of division within the object-relations tradition.<sup>10</sup> The dualism of instincts and feelings that characterises Freud's way of thinking – between life and death instincts, and dispositions to love and hate – was fully endorsed by Klein. There are different interpretations of the meaning of the "death instinct" even within the Kleinian tradition – some seeing it as primary motivational force, others as a form of aggression turned on the self in response to terror and threats of annihilation. Nevertheless, a primordial dualism of dispositions to love and to hate, and the crucial significance of the balance that is achieved in the mind between these two kinds of impulses, is central to the Kleinian perspective.

### ***The Psychoanalysis of Children***

Klein's invention and development of her distinctive version of the psychoanalysis of children was in itself a major extension of the scope and value of the psychoanalytic project. It took place in the same period as the development of a somewhat different view of child analysis by Anna Freud and her colleagues, which was more educationally and environmentally focused than Klein's insistently psychoanalytic view. In an alliance that was at times somewhat tense, the two approaches led to a significant expansion of the psychoanalytic profession (whether under the designations of child analysts or psychoanalytic child psychotherapists) in work with children and families. In Britain, the field of child and adolescent psychotherapy has been able to achieve broader support from the public health system (the National Health Service) than has been generally the case for the psychoanalytic treatment of adults, who have been more often subject to stigma and neglect from society. A profession of psychoanalytically trained child psychotherapists has become well established in Britain, and its membership is now far larger than that of the British Psychoanalytical Society.<sup>11</sup> This has been an aspect of the development of the British

welfare state which was distinctively oriented towards the needs of children, since in the post-war period they were believed to carry the promise of a better society.

We have noted how psychoanalysis became more focused on the experience of mothers and infants as a consequence of Klein's work and that of other women analysts. The intense passions of the mother-infant relationship brought emotions of both love and hatred into the centre of psychoanalytic awareness, in a register of feelings somewhat distinct from Freud's formulations of instinctual and libidinal desires. The latter arose from his focus on the Oedipal situation rather than from the earlier two-person relationship between mother and infant. One could say that the phenomena of affect, or feeling, gained their full place in the psychoanalytic discourse not in Freud's writing (which is still influenced by a neurologically derived focus on the discharge of energy) but when analysts gave full attention to mothers and babies, and indeed to children more generally. The experience of female analysts as themselves sometimes mothers was also significant in this development. It seems likely that the conflictual aspects of mother-infant relationships which feature in Klein's writing were in part a reflection of Klein's own maternal experience, which seems not to have been the easiest. In Freud's lifetime, and for some decades beyond, the intimate care of infants was not something with which fathers were usually deeply involved.

The differences between the Freudian and the Kleinian (and Winnicottian) eras of psychoanalysis are thus substantially shaped by cultural changes in Britain, to which issues of gender were central.

### ***Klein's Theoretical Developments: The Paranoid-Schizoid and Depressive Positions***

The greater "relational" focus of psychoanalysis in Britain emerges not only from the substantial extension of its practice into the sphere of childhood, but also through the theoretical and technical advances which accompanied this. The crucial step was Klein's recognition of what she termed the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions as key moments in the development of infants (Klein 1940, 1946). She found it necessary to explain how it was that the most angry and hate-filled feelings of the infant were a normal element in its development, which did not usually give rise to disastrous breakdowns in relationships with parents. She came to believe that a "mechanism of defence" (to use Anna Freud's term) became operative earlier than the repression theorised by Freud, because at this early stage of development the ego or integrated self was not sufficiently well formed for repression to be possible. This defence was described by Klein as "splitting", the separation of the infant's feelings of love from those of hate, and the division in the infant's mind of its image of the loving, good mother from the hateful mother who sometimes left it in a painful state of need. (She had in mind the unavoidable normal moments of deprivation in every infant's life, not extreme conditions of neglect or abuse.) This paranoid-schizoid state enabled the infant to preserve an idea or image of a good mother even when it was also consumed by moments of hatred for her (which we may observe, for example, in states of screaming rage in infants). Klein believed that the paranoid-schizoid position was itself a necessary aspect of development. It was not merely a stage experienced and then surpassed, but remained a configuration of mind, capable of later reactivation especially in times of anxiety. It is important to see that Klein's focus on the unavoidable place of hatred and destructiveness in the mind (a reason for some to have rejected Klein's ideas) arises because of her desire to see how hateful impulses were usually successfully contained, in normal development, rather than how they were not. The early function of paranoid-schizoid splitting was to achieve this containment of hateful

feelings and to keep feelings of love separate from them and their destructive and fragmenting effects on the growth of the mind.

Klein saw this paranoid-schizoid state being followed, during normal development, by a further stage, what she called the “depressive position”. This emerges when the infant becomes capable of observing or imagining the harm that its aggression may be causing to mother. He becomes aware that his mother, as well as himself, can suffer pain, and that the “hated mother” is one and the same person as the beloved one. It is at this point that the infant comes to have feelings for mother’s well-being, as well as his own. We can say that it is in this state of mind that the infant comes to feel love for his mother as an object of value in herself, and not merely as an object which is valued as the provider for its own needs. Klein went on to argue that the impulse to make reparation for the harm he may have done or wished for this mother arises from this “depressive” state of mind. Various kinds of reciprocity in the mother-infant relationship are linked to the infant’s recognition of mother’s own feelings. It is important to note that “depressive” in the Kleinian lexicon is not a synonym for “depression” or “depressed” (an easy elision of meanings), although states of despair and loss of capacity for love may come about where depressive pain and its attendant guilt is unbearably intense. Klein is here postulated an innate “moral” propensity, this being conceived not merely as the imposition of a prohibition by the superego but as a natural propensity for love and care of the other.<sup>12</sup>

Klein and her interpreters, such as Hanna Segal (1957), believed that the recognition that the infant’s feelings of love and hatred were focused on the same maternal object, who was both loved and hated, was a crucial step in the integration of the personality, involving recognition of both the loving and hating aspects of the self. She and Klein believed that this integration was a precondition for the development of mind. Klein believed that the “depressive position” involved the capacity to bear mental pain arising from the suffering of the other and the feelings of guilt that might arise from this. One can see in these ideas Klein’s response to Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), where he described the complex feelings evoked by the loss of a loved object. These could include attacks on the object for its desertion, guilt for harm caused in fantasy to the object, and reparative desires to restore it. From the experience of mourning, the object’s loss could be accepted and the self then become free to find new objects to love.

Klein’s concepts of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions were her most important development of Freud’s ideas. They encompass the recognition of a fully relational conception of human identity, which Freud’s mostly individual-centred model of the mind did not achieve. Other formulations in Klein’s work, from early on, can be seen to fill out her belief in the fundamental object-relatedness of human beings. For example, she disputed Freud’s theory of “primary narcissism”, arguing that relationship to an “object” was present in the infant’s mind from birth. Klein wrote:

The analysis of very young children has taught me that there is no instinctual urge, no anxiety situation, no mental process, which does not involve objects, external or internal; in other words, object-relations are at the centre of emotional life. Furthermore, love and hatred, phantasies, anxieties, and defences are also operative from the beginning and are ab initio indivisibly linked with object relations. This insight showed me many phenomena in a new light.”

(Klein 1952, p. 53)

Klein also asserted the existence of a primary “epistemophilic instinct” (taking up a suggestion in Freud’s work; Klein 1930, 1931). This was an idea of an innate desire for knowledge (initially, she thought, directed towards mother and mother’s body) which she thought was parallel

in its importance to the primary impulses to love and hate. The idea of symbol formation and its relevance to development, which was further elaborated by Hanna Segal, followed from the recognition of the desire for understanding, and it became important to the psychoanalytic understanding of art and literature. The therapeutic possibility of interpretation and self-understanding depends on this capability in human subjects. Klein's idea of the epistemophilic instinct was further developed in Bion's work, giving rise to his investigation of the development of the mind and of the importance of space for thought and thus development in both individual lives and in society.

### Wilfred Bion<sup>13</sup>

Klein had described in her writing the intense projections which occurred in infants' relationship to their mothers, principally identifying these by inference from the meaning of what she observes in the play of her child analytic patients.<sup>14</sup> She had developed a concept of projective identification, which she understood as the unconscious placing in the other of intolerable aspects of the self. Paula Heimann, in a crucial paper in 1950,<sup>15</sup> had explored the disturbing effect of such projections on herself as a psychoanalyst. She proposed that the analyst's responses to these (her "counter-transference") could be understood as unconscious communications from patients and be recognised as material for interpretation. Klein was sceptical of this extension of her idea, but the "countertransference" has nevertheless since become a widely used element in psychoanalytic practice.

Bion's distinctive interest was in the emotional and mental work which mothers undertook in their experience of receiving their infant's intense projections. He proposed that the mother's crucial role was to mentally "process" her infant's projective communications, recognise their meaning (e.g., the nature of the infant's suffering) and make this meaning accessible to her infant through her understanding, and in the care of the infant which was shaped by this. Bion termed this the relation of "container" (the maternal function) and "contained" (the chaotic impulses and desires which the infant was projecting). This mental function had various bodily equivalents (e.g., the relations in reality or phantasy of mouth and nipple). Bion remained committed to Freud's and Klein's understanding of infant development. He believed that the mother's function in containing the chaotic instinctual impulses of her infant was crucial to the development of the infant's mind, or "mental apparatus". Klein saw infant development as, in benign circumstances, achieving progression to a more or less integrated personality. However, Bion also gave attention to the more extreme outcomes that could occur, to the disintegrated states of mind which he observed in the psychotic patients work with whom he described in the seminal essays published as *Second Thoughts* (1967). He describes in this work his experience of the fragmented and hallucinatory minds of his patients, who had not been able to accomplish in their development the relatively well-ordered paranoid-schizoid forms of splitting theorised by Klein. The conjunction in Bion's work between the investigation of the mental states of infants and mothers, and those of patients suffering from psychotic disintegration, is a remarkable one.<sup>16</sup>

Understanding the mechanisms of splitting and of projective identification became essential in the extension of psychoanalytic practice to the treatment of more extreme (psychotic) forms of mental illness which Freud believed were beyond the capacity of psychoanalysts to treat. The recognition by analysts that the pain and distress which was inflicted on them by some patients could be understood as unconscious communications from them, or evacuations of states of mind intolerable to them, provided a means by which analysts could understand the extremity of their patients' states of mind, and the functions of "containment" in managing and treating

them. This has been helpful in the understanding of clinical work with autistic and psychotic patients, and has been a significant although still limited advance in psychoanalytic practice.

Bion's contribution to psychoanalytic theory in this tradition gave great importance to thinking as a mental function. He understood this to be the central role of "containment", which he saw as a process of "thinking for" the infant before it was able to think for itself, but through this process enabling its own mental capacity. He also drew on Klein's idea of the epistemophilic instinct in giving this additional foundation for psychoanalytic thought. In his view, human nature was composed not only of the two essential instincts or drives first formulated by Freud (love and hate) but three: love, hate, and the desire for understanding or knowledge, which he formulated in an algebraic notation as L, H and K.

A focus on the existence or otherwise of the capacity for thought, K, or symbol formation in patients, has become an important resource for contemporary psychoanalysts in this tradition, enabling new discriminations to be made regarding where patients' (and analysts') principal difficulties may lie.<sup>17</sup> The idea that the presence or absence of "thinking space" may be an important indicator of institutional and societal health has also been an outcome of Bion's influence on psychoanalysis.<sup>18</sup>

I will conclude with a brief reference to one another contribution to this psychoanalytic tradition, which has further enlarged its scope of understanding. This is the work of John Steiner (1993), Ronald Britton (1998), Michael Feldman (2009) and Edna O'Shaughnessy (2014), which can be understood as a response by mainly male analysts to the somewhat female and maternal focus of Klein and her colleagues' work, but also to Bion's discoveries about the nature and importance of mental function. These analysts were responding to the emergence in their clinical practice of a previously unrecognised – perhaps less common – psychopathology, which they termed "narcissism". Herbert Rosenfeld's (1971) recognition that narcissism could take two somewhat different forms, one dominated by libidinal (self-loving) impulses and the other by destructive (other-hating) impulses, gave an important foundation to these ideas. Here were patients who seemed to lack fully "depressive" capabilities for attachment to or love for others, but who were not wholly in the grip of paranoid-schizoid states of mind. They seemed, as these analysts saw it, to exist in a kind of "borderline state" and to have developed what Steiner described as a pathological organisation of their personalities of a fairly stable and, within limits, serviceable kind. But they nevertheless existed in a kind of emotional limbo, aware of the limitations of their relationship with their objects.

These analysts developed the view that what had failed in the development of these patients was a resolution of their Oedipal experience (Britton et al. 1989). This failure manifested itself in the extreme intolerance, enacted within in the analytic situation, of any relationship other than one of exclusive possession of a single "object". Actual relationships were therefore liable to be wrecked by excessive and jealous claims on others and were feared and avoided for pain they brought. Britton proposed that inability to tolerate the existence of "third" or "multiple" objects inhibited the capacity to think or understand. In the psychoanalytic situation, Britton reported, even the patient's perception of the analyst's dialogue with themselves would be liable to evoke to evoke anger or despair.

These analysts' insistence on the recognition of the Oedipal situation and its primordial "facts of life" (Money-Kyrle 1968) represents on the one hand a return within the Kleinian tradition to one of Freud's most fundamental ideas. In the context of the earlier Kleinian focus on the earliest relationship between mothers and infants, it proposed the return of fathers to the centre of the narrative.<sup>19</sup>

I have shown in this chapter the important developments of Freud's original ideas which were achieved in the Klein-Bion version of the object-relations tradition. I have also argued that

fundamental problems of human life, which Freud confronted in his work, have remained the central topics of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Neither an acceptable balance between the impulses to love and to hate, nor the capacity to resolve the dilemmas and conflicts of mental and social life through thinking and symbolic activity (“sublimation”, as Freud termed it), can thus be achieved without difficulty. In this work, psychoanalysis continues to have a necessary place.

## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Margaret Rustin for her help with the preparation of this paper.
- 2 Makari’s excellent history of psychoanalysis (2008) describes Anna Freud’s *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1936) as one of its central texts, together with the work of Heinz Hartmann (1939).
- 3 Another development in the United States, which preceded in the 1960s in Chicago that of relational psychology, is the “self-psychology” of Heinz Kohut, which was also a departure from classical Freudian ideas. It is not possible to discuss that development in this article.
- 4 Jean-Michel Quinodoz, *Reading Freud* (2005), provides an admirably clear and detailed exposition of Freud’s writings.
- 5 Sarah Hrdy’s work of evolutionary psychology, *Mother Nature* (1999), explored the origins in early hunter-gatherer societies for the realistic anxieties that infants might have that births of additional children might threaten them with abandonment given scarce resources in precarious environments. This provides an evolutionary and thus ultimately a genetic explanation for some of the infantile anxieties postulated by psychoanalysts. Jim Hopkins (2003) has written further on connections between evolutionary psychology and psychoanalytic theory.
- 6 Although Freud abandoned the approach of his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), the emergence of a field of neuropsychology has brought a return of interest to it. (See *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* (1998), DOI:10.1111/(ISSN)1749-6632.
- 7 A comparable influence on Freud’s early thinking came from the Helmholtzian school of biophysics in Germany, of which one of Freud’s teachers, Brücke, was a leading member. On this see Whitebrook (2020).
- 8 Freud wrote: “Recent investigations have directed our attention to a stage in the development of the libido which it passes through on the way from auto-erotism to object-love. This stage has been given the name of narcissism. What happens is this. There comes a time in the development of the individual at which he unifies his sexual instincts (which have hitherto been engaged in auto-erotic activities) in order to obtain a love-object; and he begins by taking himself, his own body, as a love-object and only subsequently proceeds from this to the choice of some person other than himself as his object” (Freud 1911, pp. 60–61). And earlier: “Narcissistic or ego-libido seems to be the great reservoir from which the object-cathexes are sent out and into which they are withdrawn once more; the narcissistic libidinal cathexis of the ego is the original state of things, realised in earliest childhood, and is merely covered by the later extrusions of libido, but in essentials persists behind them” (Freud 1905a, p. 219).
- 9 *Reading Klein* (2017), by Margaret and Michael Rustin, is an exposition of Klein’s ideas and their development. The Melanie Klein Trust website (<https://melanie-klein-trust.org.uk/>) provides substantial material.
- 10 The existence of innate aggression is a principle axis of disagreement between the Kleinian and “Independent” components of the object-relations tradition in Britain, in which Winnicott is perhaps the most significant psychoanalyst for the Independents. This is not withstanding the fact that, for example, Winnicott’s paper “Hate in the Counter-Transference” (1949) is highly esteemed across the entire object-relations tradition. However, the present chapter is wholly focussed on the Kleinian and post-Kleinian development, and it would require another article to explore the similarities and differences between the Kleinian and Independent traditions.
- 11 Closely linked with this profession, and with the influence of Kleinian ideas, has been the growth, on a worldwide basis, of the practice of psychoanalytic infant observation, as a method of experience-based psychoanalytical education, taking place outside the context of the clinic (Miller et al. 1989; Reid 1997; Briggs 2002).
- 12 There is a connection between the object-relations tradition and a more other-regarding aspect of Darwinian thinking than the “survival of the fittest”. Animals and human beings frequently display strong attachments to their kin and are thus, within the limits of their own “kinds”, capable of altruism and “sympathies”. John Bowlby’s attachment theory was strongly influenced by Darwinian ideas, and his

- work and object-relations psychoanalysis have affinities in this respect. The problem for human societies is how social attachments can be extended beyond circumscribed social groups defined narrowly as “us” to human beings and species more broadly.
- 13 Donald Meltzer’s *The Kleinian Development* (1978) reviews the work of Freud, Klein and Bion, although it discusses only *The Narrative of a Child Analysis* among Klein’s works. *Bion Today* (2011) edited by Chris Mawson, contains informative essays on Bion.
  - 14 The fullest description of these is given in her *Narrative of a Child Analysis* (1961), in which late in her career she wrote up in detail a child analytic case she had undertaken in 1941 at the time when her most original discoveries were being made.
  - 15 Heinrich Racker (1953) in Buenos Aires set out a similar idea.
  - 16 Margaret Rustin has conjectured that Bion’s knowledge of the contemporaneous work of Esther Bick, the pioneer of psychoanalytic infant observation, may well have influenced his close attention to the experiences of infancy.
  - 17 O’Shaughnessy (1981) has provided an exceptionally clear account of how Bion’s notation of L, H and K can be made use of in psychoanalytic clinical practice.
  - 18 I have focused on the many continuities between the work of Freud, Klein and Bion in their clinical context. There is an aspect of Bion’s later writing which is more philosophical, even mystical, in character which is concerned with the unknowable – or “noumenal”, in Kant’s terms – which I have not considered. On this see his Californian interpreter, James Grotstein (2007).
  - 19 My view, set out in Rustin (2019), is that virtually all the theoretical developments in this tradition have been achieved in this tradition through psychoanalysts’ reflections on their experiences with patients in the consulting room. In this respect, I believe this tradition to have been empiricist in its commitment.

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