

## The recovery of the good object relationship: the conflict with the superego

In her 1937 paper 'Love, guilt and reparation', Melanie Klein stresses the power of hate and destruction. These forces are seen as fundamental and universal. Klein goes on to say that love and reparation are equally powerful. Her work is of course built on Freud's views, which she extends to the earliest beginnings of life. Klein explored the basic internal struggle that occurs with primitive forces of love and hate; this Klein called the paranoid-schizoid position; attachment to an idealised object is sought and the destructive forces are split off and projected. Subsequently this paranoid-schizoid position meets a more humanised realistic understanding, a state she called the depressive position, which in favourable circumstances moderates the primitive forces of splitting and projection. There is regret at the primitive damage done and a wish to initiate reparation. The moderation of the primitive forces is made possible by the establishment of an appreciative good object relationship, which comes to carry more weight than the primitive forces.

It is generally accepted that the constant interaction between love and hate occurs throughout life and the balance between these states of mind shapes the character of a person.

Who or what accompanies or deserts one on this journey through life makes all the difference. The nature of the external and internal objects is, of course, of vital consequence. When there is a breakdown in the good object relationship the superego (which I will discuss later) holds sway. My main object in this paper is to address the task of recapturing the good object relationship that helps in the move from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position, and the modification of the harsh superego.

We are all driven, in varying degrees, by love and hate – feelings which exist in both the patient and the analyst. There is no final resolution between these states, no absolute purity one way or the other. But, crucially, the superego does not recognise this complexity and ambiguity; it maintains that one view is absolutely right and operates like an absolutist monarch (the divine right of kings/gods). No one entirely escapes the force of such superego judgement; it is highly persuasive in its insistence on its own singular 'right minded' judgement. We are all vulnerable and all perpetrators.

The superego is a feared, hated and loved object. It demands blind worship like the god of fundamentalism.

The superego powerfully influences our judgement. It is an internal object/subject, which has a relationship with the ego. However, unlike the internal object one might encounter in the depressive position, which provides help to the ego in making a judgement, which gives food for thought to enable a person to work out what is the best thing to do under the circumstances, the primitive superego is prone to overrule the ego. The power of this superego varies in strength from a nagging sense of guilt, to reproaches of such intensity that a person is left feeling totally worthless and unforgivable, driven to melancholia and even madness. This is usually referred to as the murderous superego.

When Freud first wrote about the superego he differentiated two types of internal objects: the so-called 'good' superego was termed the ego ideal. This contained our idealistic aspirations and yearnings. This 'benign' superego is in my view not so benign, as it is still instilled with the belief that one should live up to 'ideals' rather than helping someone to be a person in their own right and make their own decisions. As Hanna Segal has repeatedly argued, the other side of the coin in idealisation is persecution; idealisation really belongs to the paranoid-schizoid world.<sup>1</sup>

In her somewhat neglected paper 'On the sense of loneliness' (1963), Melanie Klein emphasised that in loneliness the main factor was the crippling of the self in pursuit of the ideal, and having to be the ideal. Her clear message was in the direction of the need for a realistic relationship rather than the relationship with the delusional idealised self and object. Although she did not develop this theme in that paper she ended by making the important observation that the worst kind of superego is one that says

<sup>1</sup> The views that I put forward in this paper rely on Freud and Klein and the 1934 classic paper of James Strachey on the mutative interpretation. However I hope to illustrate these forces as they appear in clinical practice.

that 'it should never have happened in the first place'. I would extend this to include the dictate: 'you were wrong from the start, you should not be you, you ought to be someone else'. Submission to this dictate may result in someone forgoing their own reality and becoming a 'false self' in order to obtain love. This may be felt to be imposed by the superego, whose dictates may be consciously accepted, even whilst grievances are unconsciously nursed; I hope to illustrate this in my clinical example.

We may conceptualise love and hate separately from one another, but Klein invites us to see that there is a constant interaction between them. In our clinical work it is important to see elements of love and hate operating at the same time. Of course in some difficult cases the hate is so strong that awareness of love, even the possibility of love, is destroyed.

In 'Mourning and melancholia' Freud famously described how the mourner comes to know what he has lost; yet the mourner (like the melancholic) may go through mad states of mind before eventually recovering. At the time of his writing that paper, object relations theory was not yet developed, but Freud's move toward his 1923 paper is quite clear. With the discovery and love of the good object, recovery is possible. In fact Freud went further; the object is experienced as giving the mourner permission to say goodbye, and to find a new lease of life on his/her own. Keeping the good object alive, or recapturing it, is the gateway to healthy development. Freud contrasts this with the situation of the melancholic. Here the sufferer has lost the good object but does not know what he has lost and therefore cannot recover in the same way as the mourner. As we know from clinical experience, the good object may be converted and corrupted into hyper-eroticism, mania, drugs, mad idealisations, revenge and so forth, which pervert the capacity for realistic judgement.

The melancholic has destroyed what good object relationships he has had and he has also destroyed, as Bion (in *Learning from Experience*) argued, his perceptual capacity to be aware of the needed good object relationship. Even in less pathological states of mind, something of the relentless superego, derived from the earliest times, remains unmodified by good object relations. Consequently there is always conflict between human object relationships and the superego. Where there is no good object relationship in operation, a powerful superego holds sway.

In the clinical situation, I stress that only a patient with some access to a good object relationship can make use of an interpretation of destructive propensities in a way that helps him/her in the struggle with love and hate. Without sufficient attachment to the good object relationship, interpretations of destructive propensities are experienced as superego reproaches, and as demands that the patient should be ideal and free of hatred. I will

try to illustrate, with a clinical example, the difficulties in trying to establish such a process. If you fail to address the destructive forces in the patient, you endorse his feelings of masochistic victimisation; if you fail to address the circumstances which promote this, you make him unfairly totally responsible, and likewise increase the sense of masochistic victimisation. For reflection and insight to become possible, a degree of a good object relationship must be present. The problem is a knotty one.

It seems to me that the question is how far the good object can modify the destructiveness of the superego; conversely, how powerful is the superego in overruling the good object? This is further complicated by the fact that the powerful superego can itself be viewed, and indeed worshipped, by slavish devotion, as the all-powerful good god (the essence of fundamentalist worship). One way of looking at this is to try to gauge how far the patient is 'devoted' to the superego, and how far to the good object relationship that would help to modify its impact. That is the essence of this paper.

As I wrote in the preface to this book, Freud selected Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Rex*, as a basis for his epoch-making discovery of the universality of the Oedipus complex. The dynamic force of the play depends on the statement in the play that the gods have ordained that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. Why did the Greeks in this play create and worship such gods who had overriding control of destiny? It seems that this primitive force is a fact of life. The drama is the conflict between human intervention and primitive forces.

Similarly in the early Old Testament God is perceived as someone who made the world, demands unconditional worship and human sacrifice together with constant service, whilst at the same time has no concern with the difficulties people have in coping with life. This god threatens catastrophe if he is not obeyed and shows no forgiveness. It is interesting, as I noted in the preface, that Melanie Klein wrote about the *Orestian Trilogy* of Aeschylus; she shows the ever-increasing revenge which takes place. She describes the very delicate balance between the unforgiving vengeance and the human understanding of forgiveness. In this trilogy the gods meet to decide whether Orestes should be forgiven or not for having killed his mother; the goddess Athene casts her vote in favour of forgiveness. In these two plays, *Oedipus Rex* and the *Orestian Trilogy*, we see the operation on the one hand of the unrelenting superego, and on the other hand of human understanding and forgiveness. What a sensitive balance it is with only Athene's casting vote to decide.

### How does the superego come about?

Freud in his 1915 paper 'Instincts and their vicissitudes' considered that hate was a much older force than love; I think that the primitive ruthless superego is one of the earliest organisations in the psyche and that the loving human understanding which moderates it is developed by the interaction of love in the earliest feeding relationship. Many analysts have written of the delusional phantasies of the baby. Freud spoke of His Majesty the Baby, Klein and also Winnicott referred to the baby's belief that he owns the breast, even that he is the breast; that is, that he is being the ideal breast, or at least is fused with the ideal breast. The baby splits off his bad impulses into the 'bad breast' to get rid of disturbing awareness; this is a necessary process for psychic survival. At the same time, as part of the survival kit, the baby realistically seeks the nipple/breast to obtain nourishment. The infant, then, has both the delusional belief as well as some realistic assessment of what is essential for life.

How far does the baby corrupt truth in order to survive? He behaves as though he owns everything and yet has the nous to know what is needed for survival. This conduct of the baby corresponds to the superego which overrides realistic judgement – a superego which, like the baby, demands total service, yet is the god-like creature, which has it all and succeeds in persuading others that that is so. If this is so we might have to consider that this incongruous 'madness' is essential to promote life. In this arrangement, in the case of the infant, the parents and family may agree about the length of time that this 'madness' should be supported. As Abraham suggested, over-indulgence can support the delusional omnipotence and deprivation may leave the infant with no other attachment to counteract this belief. The outcome, of course, will depend on the nature of the interaction between the mother and the baby in the negotiation between a primitive process and truth.<sup>2</sup>

The baby's demands for an ideal object cannot realistically be fulfilled; no more can the mother's infantile narcissistic demand to be the perfect mother with the perfect baby. The mother, who draws strength from her own experience of working through depressive disappointment and her own love and gratitude for the infant, feels supported to tolerate her own hateful narcissistic resentment of the real baby, as well as 'oedipal' resent-

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that fundamentalists, of any colour, believe that they are justifiably right and are entitled to destroy everything in their struggle against an implacable enemy that demands unconditional surrender.

ment of the baby who 'spoils' her coupling. Such a mother, who it is hoped has appropriate tolerance for the infant's rage, and her own disappointment in and hatred at not finding the perfect baby/mother couple, who is respectful of the primitive forces but nevertheless takes in both what the infant needs, and what she needs, is well placed to support the infant to move from imperious demands to human concern and mutual empathy. The introjection of such a mother, if appreciated by the infant, becomes internalised and promotes security in enquiry and development.

This development is always imperfectly achieved and the murderous superego represents the narcissistic element, which relentlessly campaigns for perfection. This part refuses to be humanised and feeds itself with manic moral supremacy.

This of course has been written about, in detail, by Bion, but I would like here to stress two factors: first, that it is not just the mother doing the right thing, but the helpful mother is mindful of the value of the primitive as well as the value of human understanding, and supports a reasonable compromise. I share the view that we have to go through these processes from madness to sanity; for example, to give a simple analogy in later life: if a young man were to propose marriage realistically, and say: 'I overvalue you as a love object', although true, this would be mad. We consider it appropriate that he initially idealises.<sup>3</sup>

The good object is the one that has worked through a fair amount of the paranoid-schizoid-depressive position process and has become more capable of making human judgements. Yet there is always some primitive residue.

For example: in supervising colleagues exposed to attacks by patients out to prove that the analyst is a total fraud, totally useless and has nothing to commend him/her, it is striking how frequently analysts are deeply affected by this onslaught, and do indeed succumb to feeling totally worthless. In 'Mourning and melancholia' (1917) Freud describes the fraudulence and pretensions of the melancholic and adds 'We only wonder why a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind', and quotes from *Hamlet*, 'Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping?'

I think it is extremely important that the analyst allow himself to know of both his pretentious and his real parts; this mixture is often not recognised and tolerated; the analyst then feels 'found out' by the patient, and is overwhelmed by the onslaught; in the process of denying the fraudulent

<sup>3</sup> I am stressing that he has to go through the experience of loving idealisation, hateful disappointment, and subsequently, it is hoped, with maturity, value reality.

part of himself, he has lost contact with the creditable genuine parts of himself. It is also essential that the analyst does not unconsciously convey that he (the analyst) is free of this conflict and can be totally rational. Bion described this succinctly when he said that when we learn something we also learn how ignorant we are and need an apparatus to cope with this. (The spell of 'Eureka' should be short-lived.)

I showed in the previous paper on 'Meaning and meaningfulness' the particular way in which a patient was governed by a murderous fundamentalist superego. If we revisit that paper we are entitled to raise questions. As I said, from early infancy on, this patient, bandaged as he was, going on for over three years, whilst provided with meticulous, devoted medical care, was deprived of intimate personal contact. The effect of this was a failure of provision that might have helped develop security and might have provided an opportunity to work through problems of deprivation, greed and rivalry and secure a bond of good relationships with which to venture into life.

From the first session he conveyed that he was living in a world where ruthless egocentric demands of a murderous kind menaced him. This menace went hand in hand with a murderous superego which threatened to kill him if he expressed his desires. This situation led to an impasse which restricted him and appeared to bring life to a virtual standstill.

For these reasons, finding a retreat in an academic, professional, scientific world seemed to be a reasonable choice, and confining me to such a world was something which was, in his state of mind, to be recommended. I observed, however, that not only did he feel free to dismiss any interpretations of his human need, he also devalued me and felt quite safe to do so. In this way he had a different experience in which apparently he did not feel constricted; indeed it seemed that it might be safe to come alive.

The question thrown up by this account of his history was – if he was deprived of compassionate human intervention why did he not seek it? At first glance one might think that the traumatic experience he had had must certainly exist in his internal world; the dread of repetition would be paramount. I also knew that one of his aims was to find a totally consuming sexual and personal relationship – an 'ideal love' – two hearts that beat as one, thus insulating himself from the vicissitudes of a relationship between separate persons. The fulfilment of these wishes was compulsively sought; in reality it inevitably failed, leading to quite severe depression. These wishes were not, however, evicted from his mind; instead they operated in so powerful a manner that they obliterated learning from experience.

What had happened to his wish to have a containing mother who might take in how he felt, share his plight and help him to work through some of

his problems and mourn what could not be achieved? This, it seemed, was a 'no go' area. During the course of the analysis, an event which had really shaken him was when he realised that he had failed to greet a junior administrator with a 'good morning'; he had been insensitive to her need to find a human home (in my patient). He was shattered, broken and felt that he would be publicly exposed and shamed.

There are two contradictory yet interlocked elements. He was frantic to come to tell me about this; he obviously felt that this was a safe place for this confession. At the same time he was totally convinced, without foundation, that the junior administrator (whom I shall call J) would be mortified at not finding a home in his mind where she would feel that she had a meaningful place. How did it come about that he was so convinced that J would be shattered by this experience and yet he had always maintained that he did not need such provisions from me? His anxieties always seemed to be in the area of what the community or society would think, rather than the personal individual relationship.

He did achieve some intellectual insight from the dream of the events in his home town, which followed upon his learning about his early infancy and childhood. He could see how his home town had been punished for not attending to extremely important matters, and his burning hot reaction. The most telling thing in the dream was that the attempts to extinguish the fires were deemed to be designed to acquire the love of the world, a vainglorious display which was absolutely unhelpful, led by a man who was hollow as a drum – the transference implication was clearly that I was a loveless narcissist.

If the narcissist was able to be appreciative of the love he received, the narcissism might contain the seeds of a potentially loving relationship; this could move through developments from the paranoid-schizoid position. The singularity of simultaneously demanding love and demeaning the provider is a feature very often seen in clinical practice. To some extent it is universal. I referred earlier to Freud's reference in 'Mourning and melancholia' to the fraudulent stealing of love in melancholia, and Freud's question of why a person has to be ill before he can acknowledge his cannibalistic appropriation of all that is good. The true acknowledgement and working through of this cannibalism and the reparative guilt is, of course, the keynote to recovery.

We recall that in his very first session he reported that someone parking his car in the wrong place, or on another occasion jumping the queue, was in danger of retributive murder. Likewise that having his radio on too loud would result in public disgrace, or complaining to a shopkeeper could have lethal consequences. All these, and many other examples, illustrate an

uncontained primitive ruthlessness and unforgiving retribution, unmodified by human intervention. He both steals the love and strips others of their capacity to love and therefore lives in a totally primitive and dangerous world. The danger comes from the destruction of appreciative love. This comes close to Melanie Klein's description of envy of the breast, in which the breast is denuded of goodness, and the tragic consequences of living in a loveless world, where reparation is not efficacious.

The murderous superego is autocratic, does not value others, demands to be worshipped and demands to be considered above the realistic ego. It is given this priority in which it is preferred to reciprocal appreciation, when loving intercourse breaks down, rather than struggling to repair the broken-down relationship. Unfortunately we see these features not only in the consulting room but also on the world stage.

From the outset I was struck by the complete security this patient had when lying on the couch and the terror he felt outside; here he was in a special sanctuary where we both became harmonious scientists away from the perils of personal human intercourse. This was an ostensible good object relationship – not one which helped him to deal with the problems of life, rather a sanitised place where human emotions of want and responsibility did not arise. We were both dedicated to truth.

This case well illustrates Freud's description of melancholia. The patient was the victim of lovelessness and false claims of concern. Yet he did exactly the same to his objects. Plaints or complaints, victim or perpetrator, chicken or egg?

In an unpublished paper (referred to by Elizabeth Bott Spillius in 2004) Melanie Klein emphasises the importance of discovering how a patient becomes the character he/she is and why he/she behaves in that particular way. It is my view that without this understanding one does not understand the patient.

In the case I have illustrated I have tried to show how the recapturing of the good object relationship is vitally necessary to recover from illness and to proceed in creative endeavour. The good object to which I refer is the combined (intimate) relationship of the infant and mother and the subsequent development extending to other object relationships, in which persons give personal meaning to each other. I postulated that nothing could be meaningful without this foundation. However, in certain instances I think that this theory is open to partial question.

### Further exploration of the constituents of the good object

Charles Darwin's mother died when he was 8½ years old and he had no memory of her. When he was 32 years old and already famous for his work, his cousin wrote to him saying that his (the cousin's) wife had died; Darwin replied saying that he did not know what to say as he had never lost anyone close to him. I have taken this information from John Bowlby's biography of Darwin; Bowlby in fact provides numerous further illustrations of Darwin's obliteration of the concept of 'Mother'.

The dedicated pursuit to find the 'Origin of Species' was conducted, then, by someone who was apparently emotionally unaware of the loss of his mother. Many academics have questioned why Darwin called his book *On the Origin of Species* when it was in their view an account of an adaptation to cataclysmic events. Indeed one might consider that Darwin's pursuit was an unconscious adaptation to a cataclysmic happening! He wiped out his awareness of his origins and he could not leave it alone; he was totally governed by this enquiry. We also know how crippled Darwin was by severe bouts of melancholia, a condition which Freud regarded as a negation of the awareness of the loss of a good object as opposed to the sadness of a mourner.

Isaac Newton's father died before he was born; his mother remarried when he was 2 years old and sent the child to his grandmother. Newton was unable to make a stable human relationship and suffered psychotic breakdowns. Yet he spent his life working out in detail the relationship of heavenly bodies, their attractions and repulsions, and produced mathematical laws that explained planetary motion for the first time – discoveries which held sway for 250 years.

Both Newton and Darwin opened up areas of meaningfulness which expanded our awareness and changed our lives. One is hard put to see the operation of a good object relationship derived from personal experience.

Albert Einstein's life also illustrates this combination of pursuing a cosmic truth endlessly with a corresponding impoverishment of the exploration of a personal intimate relationship. In my view this is not based on a choice which is made, but it appears that irreconcilable forces demand satisfaction. Whilst Einstein was careful not to write an autobiography, his writings are revealing about himself. For example, in his lecture on the occasion of Max Planck's 60th birthday Einstein wrote as follows:

I believe with Schopenhauer that one of the strongest motives that lead men to art and science is escape from everyday life with its painful

crudity and hopeless dreariness, from the fetters of one's shifting desires. A finely tempered nature longs to escape from personal life into the world of objective perception and thought. This desire may be compared with the townsman's irresistible longing to escape from his noisy, cramped surroundings into the high mountains, where the eye ranges freely through the still pure air and fondly traces out terrestrial contours apparently for eternity.

With this negative motive there goes a positive one. Man tries to make for himself in the fashion that suits him best, a simplified and intelligible picture of the world; he then tries to some extent to substitute this cosmos of his for the world of experience and thus to overcome it. This is what the painter, the poet, the speculative philosopher and the natural scientist do, each in his own fashion. Each makes this cosmos and its construction the pivot of his emotional life, in order to find in this way the peace and security he cannot find within the all-too-narrow realm of swirling personal experience.

The supreme task of the physicist is to arrive at those universal elementary laws from which the cosmos can be built by pure deduction. There is no logical path to these laws, only intuition, resting on sympathetic understanding, can lead to them. The longing to behold cosmic harmony is the source of the inexhaustible patience and experience to which Planck has devoted himself. The state of mind that enables a man to do work of this kind is akin to that of the religious worshipper or the lover; the daily effort comes from no deliberate intention or programme but straight from the heart.

One may speculate about what love there was and the role of splitting and sublimation. It is obvious that human values do come into Einstein's life, for example his dedicated wish to curtail the use of the atomic bomb (which of course he helped to discover!) and to help his fellow Jews in their plight in Germany – though most of this he believes occurs in terms of the general conscience which he cannot really express in intimate personal relations.

Einstein was aware of this in his later life and wrote:

My passionate sense of social justice and social responsibility has always contrasted oddly with my pronounced lack of need for direct contact with other human beings and human communities. I am truly a 'lone traveller' and have never belonged to my country, my home, my friends or even my immediate family with my whole heart. In the face of all these ties, I have never lost a sense of distance and a need for solitude – feelings that increase with the years.

Einstein also wrote that he was constantly aware when personal love was shown to him that he could not really do justice to it.

He also wrote:

An uneasy feeling comes over me when the inevitable birthday nears. All year long the Sphinx stares at me in reproach and reminds me painfully of the Uncomprehended blotting out the personal aspects of life. Then comes the accursed day when the love shown me by my fellow man reduces me to a state of hopeless helplessness. The Sphinx does not let me free for a moment, and meanwhile I am troubled by a bad conscience, being unable to do justice to all this love because I lack inner freedom and relaxation.

He knew he did not do justice to the personal human love which moved him so greatly.

On one occasion when Hermann Broch gave him a copy of his book on the poet Virgil, Einstein expressed himself in Faustian terms. 'I am fascinated by your Vergil (sic) and I am steadfastly resisting him. The book shows me clearly what I fled from when I sold myself body and soul to Science. The flight from the I and the WE to the IT.'

There seem to be several truths to consider:

- 1 The study of our nature and the influence of the external and internal environment.
- 2 The human factor in which the understanding, under the sway of loving concern and ethical values, includes a sense of responsibility to do right by the others.
- 3 A cosmic truth about the nature of the world and the scientific way, which can lead to a sense of belonging, shared by scientists with their love of the concept of the cosmos, which takes precedence over intimate personal love and getting to know the other deeply.

Whilst Newton and Darwin respectively suffered depression and psychosis, Einstein felt consciously guilty about not giving precedence to personal intimate relationships, from which he admits he ran away. It seems a price is paid whatever we do; there is a gain and loss. It is impossible to fully integrate these forces in personal living. In human affairs there is a delicate balance between our primitive nature and human understanding. This is brilliantly illustrated in Klein's paper on the *Orestian Trilogy*, as I mentioned earlier.

It does seem to me that psychoanalysis itself, like every other study, has at times, proceeded on the lines of scientific enquiry which runs the risk of

neglecting the human condition, and at other times in our clinical work stressing the intricate human relationship; it seems impossible to achieve total integration as a continuous enterprise. We obviously have something to say on this matter; scientists are concerned about these issues. For example, Joseph Rotblatt, who gave up his work on the atomic bomb, said that ultimately scientists have to reckon what they owe to science and what they owe to humanity, and that humanity takes precedence – an issue to which we may contribute from our knowledge of clinical studies.

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