

Easing into Klein

Book review

Segal, J (1992) **Melanie Klein**. London: Sage Publications.
ISBN 0-8039-8477-4.

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Melanie Klein (1882-1960) has arguably influenced the direction of psychoanalysis more than any other individual after Freud. She was the first European psychoanalyst to become a member of the British Psycho-Analytical Society and, such was the impact of her work, that she soon became its dominant influence. Significantly, whereas most students and professional psychologists have a rudimentary, if distorted, understanding of Freudian psychoanalysis - gleaned mainly from glossy American texts - very few are familiar with Kleinian theory, let alone its clinical and social implications. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, understanding Klein presupposes a thorough knowledge of Freudian theory, upon which Klein builds an entirely new discourse without ever discarding the old. Those not conceptually comfortable with classical psychoanalysis soon become lost upon encountering Kleinian concepts. The fact that the psychology courses, particularly post-graduate courses, taught at our universities do not intellectually equip our students to understand Freud, never mind post-Freudian developments, is an indictment of our superficially eclectic psychological education.

However, while this educational deficit is obviously important, I believe there is a second, more significant factor contributing to the general ignorance of Klein's work in the broader psychological community. This is the emotional response that Klein tends to elicit in each new reader who suddenly finds him/herself propelled into a disturbing subterranean world of unconscious phantasy, a world uncomfortably far removed from the familiar landscape of waking consciousness. Having taught Klein to post-graduate students for a number of years, I am constantly impressed by the fact that when students start reading Klein they manifest the same emotional resistance as patients do to the psychotherapeutic process. This is not surprising given the content of her work. Whereas Freud explored the childhood roots of adult psychic life, Klein penetrates even further to

show that these roots are anchored in the primitive substrate of unconscious infantile phantasy, an irrational realm starkly contrasting with the surface world of reason, logic, and emotional balance. Freud only analysed neurotic adult patients and argued that all individuals, no matter how well adjusted, exhibit the neurotic residue of psychic conflicts largely dating back to the age of four or five. Klein analysed very young children and psychotic adults and, struck by the commonalities in their unconscious processes, argued that each of us sees the world refracted through the prism of archaic phantasy dating back to the first year of life. This world before words does indeed strike us as bizarre. It is a hot, wet, visceral world of body parts and processes, primitive polarised emotions, paranoid anxiety, destructive sadism, cannibalistic desire, abandonment and fusion, death and resurrection. Klein's contention that our psychic life is fashioned from fantasies of our own and others' bodily interiors, that our primary experience of the world is mediated by images of digestion and excretion, of milk, urine and faeces, disembodied breasts and penises, greedily consumed and fearfully disgorged, viciously destroyed and omnipotently resurrected. Little wonder that most people react with discomfort, hostility and scepticism to this portrayal of their psychological foundations. Only by inviting and understanding these gut-level reactions, often spontaneously phrased in bodily metaphors - "Gives me the shits"; "I can't swallow that"; "Its difficult to digest", etc - can these emotional resistances be confronted and the reluctant readers tempted to bite, chew and tentatively swallow Kleinian theory. Those who persevere, and successfully digest the material without spitting, shitting, or vomiting it out are usually nourished by a rich understanding of unconscious individual and group dynamics.

The third factor that has hampered the dissemination of Kleinian thought has been the relative lack of accessible introductory commentaries on her work. The Kleinian analyst Hanna Segal's *Introduction to the work of Melanie Klein* (1978) and Klein (1979: Fontana Modern Masters Series) have traditionally been the only introductory texts. This brings me to the topic of this review, Julia Segal's *Melanie Klein* (1992), part of Sage Publications' Key Figures in Counselling and Psychotherapy series. Julia Segal, I suspect, is the daughter of Hanna Segal. If so, her lineage makes her ideally placed to write about Klein and the impact that Kleinian thought has had on contemporary psychoanalysis. Her previous book, *Phantasy in everyday life* (1985: Penguin Books), is a highly readable, unacademic Kleinian account of the role that unconscious phantasy plays in personal and professional relationships. I was curious to see if her latest book would do justice to the complexity of Klein's thought, while retaining the clarity and stylistic accessibility of *Phantasy in everyday life*.

Any recent commentary on Klein has to be viewed in the light of Phyllis Grosskurth's comprehensive (1986) biography, *Melanie Klein: Her world and her work*. In writing this biography Grosskurth obtained access to previously unreleased archival material, thereby locating Klein's work in the personal context of her often emotionally turbulent and eventful life. To Segal's credit she begins her book with a concise biographical chapter, drawing on Grosskurth's work, thereby acknowledging the close tie between personal history and intellectual creativity, while stating that she "disagrees with many of Grosskurth's interpretations" (p3).

Klein was born in Vienna in 1882, the youngest of four children. She was four when her sister died, eighteen when her father died, and her closest brother died two years later. Despite an early desire to study psychiatry Klein entered a loveless marriage a few months later, and had three children over a ten-year period. She began a series of affairs from the first years of marriage, and was constantly anxious and depressed. The Kleins moved from town to town in Austria-Hungary, before settling in Budapest in 1914. During this year the war broke out, her third child was born, and her mother died. Klein was 32 years old. She began an analysis with Sandor Ferenczi, a famous first generation analyst, and read Freud's **Interpretation of dreams**. She had suddenly discovered a purpose in life and, with Ferenczi's encouragement, began analysing the behaviour of her five-year old son, Erich, wanting him to grow up without that generation's distorted perspectives on truth, religion, and sexuality. She presented her findings to the Budapest Psychoanalytical Society in 1919 and, on the strength of her obvious talents, became a full member. Segal discusses Klein's observations of her son in some detail, indicating the importance of this for launching her career as a child analyst at a time when no-one else was analysing children.

Five years later she left her husband, and went to Berlin to continue her psychoanalytic studies at the same time that Anna Freud became a member of the Berlin Psychoanalytical Society, and too began analysing children. Klein began a second analysis with Karl Abraham, which ended a year later with Abraham's sudden death. She felt lonely, isolated, and undermined by her colleagues in Berlin and in 1926, aged 38, moved to London where her work found an enthusiastic reception in the British Psychoanalytical Society. Between this time and 1938, when the Freuds arrived in London, Klein struggled to accommodate her analytic observations of children to Freud's classical framework. This poor fit between classical psychoanalytic theory and Klein's observations led her to formulate a set of assumptions that initiated a revolutionary shift in psychoanalytic thought, referred to today as object relations theory. The central thesis of object relations theory is that the infant phantasies about orally incorporating its parents and, having done so "feels them to be live people inside his body in the concrete way in which deep unconscious phantasies are experienced - they are, in his mind, 'internal' or 'inner' objects ... Thus an inner world is being built up in the child's unconscious mind, corresponding to his actual experiences and the impressions he gains from people and the external world, and yet altered by his own phantasies and impulses" (Klein, in Segal, 1992:15).

The significance of this was that Klein had replaced Freud's drive theory, and its emphasis on instinctual gratification and frustration by external objects, with a theory that privileged the quality of relationship with internalised parental figures, which formed the nucleus of the child's developing psychic life. Whereas Freud regarded phantasy as a compensatory activity in response to instinctual frustration, Klein regarded unconscious phantasy as the primary mode of experiencing the world. Therefore the nature of these phantasized internal objects, whether loving and soothing, or attacking and hating, determined subsequent personality formation and psychopathology.

Freud focused on the movement of libidinal energy from one body zone to the next, and the psychic expression of this in the concept of psychosexual stages. Klein

found this notion too restricting and replaced it with the concept of developmental positions. Positions refer to chronologically sequential developmental constellations of object relations, instinctual impulses, unconscious phantasies, and defences which together define the individual in relation to external and internal reality. She identified two positions between which individuals oscillate in the course of establishing an integrated sense of self. Although chronologically sequential, these two modes of organising experience co-exist, and the dialectical relationship between them creates the richness and complexity of psychological life. Klein termed the first the *paranoid-schizoid position* because the infant initially splits experiences of self and other into bipolar extremes of good and bad, based on the projection of loving /constructive or hating/destructive instinctual impulses (Klein embraced Freud's dual instinct theory and refused to discard the notion of the death instinct, as she saw this as the foundation for destructive and self-destructive phantasy and behaviour). Destructive self aspects are projected into parental figures (and later others) in order to preserve the good internal object - the nucleus of the infantile ego - from annihilation by the destructive impulses and the objects with which these are identified. However, once good and bad are defensively dissociated and others become the repositories of the destructive aspects, these other people become the focus of persecutory anxiety. The developmental need to split self and other into polarised good and bad aspects, and to protect the internalised good objects from destruction by defensively externalising bad objects, may persist into adulthood where it manifests in various forms of psychotic experience. This insight into the primitive mental dynamics of infants and psychotics allowed Kleinians to conduct psychoanalysis with young children and schizophrenics, two populations the Freudians believed could not be analysed.

The second developmental position Klein called the *depressive position*, because it is based on the concern that the good internal object will be destroyed by the destructive aspects of the self, resulting in feelings of guilt and loss, the hallmark of depression. The attainment of this position indicates that the infant is beginning to integrate good and bad self and object aspects, rather than splitting and projecting them. If the infant feels hopeful that the good internal object will survive his/her phantasised attacks on it, then the loving and hating self aspects can be brought together and integrated into a complex, differentiated experience of self which includes both good and bad aspects. However, if the infant senses that the destructive aspects are too strong and will destroy the good object then splitting and other primitive defences are maintained, resulting in an impoverished sense of self. Klein's concept of developmental positions provided psychoanalysis with the means of understanding and treating a wide spectrum of disorders that could not be adequately comprehended and treated from the Freudian perspective.

At this time, when she felt forced to revise traditional psychoanalytic assumptions, her analyst daughter Melitta, who Klein had taken to psychoanalytic meetings since the age of nine, began openly attacking her mother's work. Indeed, Klein's personal life was sufficiently dramatic to inspire a biographical play by South African born Nicholas Wright: *Mrs Klein* (1988: Nick Hern Books). Six months later, in 1934, Klein's older son Hans fell to his death on a mountain walk. This was the fifth immediate family member to die and Klein became deeply depressed. Drawing on her own experience of personal loss she began writing a series of

papers on the relationship between loss, mourning, and depressive illness. In detail derived from both her clinical work with children and her own emotional reaction to Hans's death, Klein illustrated the manner in which the death of a loved one activates a far earlier sense of loss related to phantasised attacks on internal objects. The sense of destruction, guilt, abandonment, and persecutory fears of retaliation by bad internal objects vividly showed the significance of this inner world for the adult's experience of external reality. But if Klein's work emphasised the enormous power of destructive phantasy in psychopathology, it also stressed the compensatory influence of *reparation*. In the depressive position the infant begins to realise that the previously good and bad objects are in fact polarised experiences of a single maternal object. The subsequent guilt s/he feels at having in phantasy injured or destroyed the loved internal object (the dynamics of depression), mobilises phantasies of repairing, resurrecting and healing the object. In this way, healthy mourning is accomplished, the good object is restored as a benign internal presence, and depression yields to the experience of well-being, which reflects an internal state of aliveness and gratitude towards our objects for having survived our phantasised attacks on them.

The importance of this concept of reparation cannot be overestimated because of its moral and social implications. Freud portrayed humankind as inherently individualistic, selfish and driven by the desire for instinctual gratification. Klein's model of mind is inherently relational, and the destructive impulses that are part of the human condition are balanced by the innate desire to revive, repair, heal and make good the harm we do to others, in both our external and internal worlds. The implication is that human beings are essentially moral creatures, no matter how destructive their phantasies and actions may be.

With the evolution of Klein's theory and her increasing stature in the British Psychoanalytical Society, a political schism between the supporters of Klein and those of Anna Freud was developing. The conflict between the two groups was intense and acrimonious, and it split the society in two. In 1942 the aptly labelled "Controversial Discussions" ensued as a means of settling the conflict. A working arrangement was established, but the differences between Freudians and Kleinians continues to this day. A third grouping of analysts who refused allegiance to either side emerged. This "Middle Group" or "Independent Tradition" still exists. Klein saw herself as Freud's natural successor, and was hurt by his lack of support for her. However, an eminent grouping of analysts committed themselves to her style of psychoanalysis and promoted it. When she died of cancer in 1960 she had obtained some of the recognition she had sought.

Segal manages to cover the entire opus of Klein's work in less than 150 pages. Furthermore, each of the five chapters is structured in terms of multiple sub-headings under which specific topics are covered. This makes it easy to read and to find information on specific topics. Segal also separates Klein's theoretical and practical contributions and, in the latter section, gives a vivid account of how Kleinian child and adult psychotherapy is conducted. She also addresses issues which most Kleinian theorists avoid, such as the role of the father in infant development. This is refreshing because Klein's focus was on the role of the breast/mother in psychic development, and so the father's place and influence was never really adequately considered in her work. What makes Segal's book unique

as an introductory text, however, is that it has an entire chapter devoted to criticisms of Klein's work and rebuttals of these criticisms. Owing to the radical and controversial nature of her approach to theory and therapy, Klein is often attacked from both within and without the psychoanalytic community. Segal addresses common criticisms and, without being defensive, counters these from the Kleinian perspective.

One problem I have with the book is that by presenting an overview of Klein in less than 150 pages Segal has had to sacrifice depth and thoroughness. At times the discussion is far too sketchy and this may irritate readers who are already familiar with Klein's work. This, however, is a problem common to all introductory texts and anyone having read Segal's highly accessible introduction will be well-primed to explore Klein's own writing. A good place to begin is **Envy and gratitude** (1957). Published shortly before her death, this series of articles represents Klein's mature work, which in earlier years had still been evolving from classical psychoanalysis. Two indispensable texts for those interested in Klein's work are Greenberg & Mitchell's superb **Object relations in psychoanalytic theory** (1983: Harvard University Press), and Hinshelwood's comprehensive **Dictionary of Kleinian thought** (1989: Free Association Books). Other highly recommended texts are Salberger-Wittenberg's **Psycho-analytic insight and relationships** (1970: Routledge), and Ogden's **The matrix of the mind: Object relations and the psychoanalytic dialogue** (1990: Jason Aronson). Those interested in exploring the social and political implications of Klein's work should consult Alford's **Melanie Klein and critical social theory** (1990: Yale University Press), and Michael Rustin's **The good society and the inner world** (1991: Verso).