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Psychoanalysing evil

Book review

Sinason, V (ed) (1994) **Treating survivors of satanist abuse.** London & New York: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-10543-9.

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Of all the phenomena which today invoke the opprobrium and psycho-legal scrutiny of contemporary Westerners, child abuse is regarded as perhaps the most reprehensible. When this abuse includes an occult ritual element the moral revulsion increases exponentially. The reason is not hard to discover. The sadistic abuse of a child by an adult invokes the archetypal polarities of absolute innocence and absolute malevolence. When this emotionally charged moral duality is fuelled by the sinister spectre of satanic ritual involvement, the socio-psychological dimensions of the issue are eclipsed by the apocalyptic supernatural contest of good against evil. The abuser is no longer regarded as a mere social deviant, but in the popular imagination becomes a demonic instrument, no longer a fallen mortal, but rather the very incarnation of supernatural destructiveness.

For this reason, allegations of organised satanic cult worship that involve blasphemous perversion of Christian sacraments, hallucinogenic drug abuse, paedophilia, bestiality, ritual human sacrifice, and cannibalism, confront us with existence at the extreme margins of humanity. In this world, characterised by the assiduous pursuit of moral violation, we can no longer speak of psychic conflict. Psychic conflict, in Freudian terms, assumes a tension between life and death instincts, loving and destructiveness. The real significance of satanic ritual abuse lies in the cultivation of Thanatos (the death instinct) till it swells to the full circumference of psychic life, thereby actualising the almost inconceivable state of instinctual monism. Any residue of life instinct is split off, ceremonially disavowed and abusively corrupted. At these absolute limits of our moral universe psychological language seems to fail, and we find ourselves reaching for the archaic concept of evil.

Psychoanalysis has mapped and navigated madness more successfully than any other psychological discourse. But even if we use the problematic metaphor of exorcism (as the English analyst Ronald Fairbairn did), to describe the analytic encounter with the intrapsychic manifestations of unconscious destructiveness, our

traditional metapsychology does not easily encompass demonic worship and its perverse rituals. I see three reasons for this. Firstly, the moral-theological term evil is foreign to the language of psychoanalysis. The conceptual boundaries of psychoanalytic discourse extend to include the various permutations of lust and rage. The concept of evil does not sit comfortably here amidst a secular catalogue of conflict-defence constellations. Phillips (1994) goes further, saying that psychoanalysis, the "art of the unacceptable", is phobic about the word evil. Freud, in the spirit of post-Enlightenment rationality, felt compelled to speak of the unacceptable without evoking the supernatural. We may say that Freud naturalised the supernatural by interpreting spiritual experience - both good and bad - as the symbolic expression of intrapsychic conflict. In psychoanalytic discourse both gods and demons were humanised by reformulating them as projected mythological embodiments of instinctual forces, unconsciously fused with childhood imagoes of god-like parental figures. Rather than people being created in the image of God, both God and Satan are unconsciously created in the ambivalent image of people, manufactured from the fantasies of young children struggling toward a moral identity amidst the turbulence of oedipal desires and prohibitions. There is an obvious discursive gulf between the Christian mythology of satanic evil, and the secular psychoanalytic mythology of destructive instincts and internal objects, which is not easily spanned.

A second difficulty lies in psychoanalysis' eschewal of the moral divide between childhood innocence and adult culpability, a division which is still presupposed by society in general. According to this view children are asexual exemplars of love and innocence, becoming corrupted only by traumatic exposure to adults who sexually exploit or abuse them. Children are guileless victims and adult abusers are depraved perpetrators. Freud initially subscribed, at least implicitly, to this notion by formulating his early seduction theory of neurosis. He initially attributed adult neurotic symptoms to repressed memories of traumatic childhood sexual seductions by adults. It was, however, Freud's subsequent rejection of this assumption in his theory of instinctual wish-fulfilling fantasy, that established psychoanalysis as a radically distinct theory of psychological development and disturbance. If children entertain both sexual and aggressive fantasies toward adults, and adult recollections of childhood sexual seductions are frequently disguised wish-fulfilling fantasies, then the purported moral chasm between children and adults is untenable.

This introduces a third difficulty, namely that patients' alleged memories of childhood abuse are typically regarded with analytic scepticism. From the psychoanalytic perspective the ubiquitous presence of unconscious fantasy means that recollections are reconstructions, rather than replicas of actual events. Psychoanalysis has never denied the reality of child abuse, but the truth it pursues is narrative rather than literal. The analytic attitude entertains ambiguity because its focus is psychic reality, rather than empirical reality. This is problematic when it comes to evaluating the claims of those who allege that they were ritually abused. The necessary discrimination of actual events and those interpersonal happenings transformed by imagination is alien to the psychoanalytic method of inviting and interpreting fantasy.

Given these defining features of psychoanalysis, it is little wonder that the psychological industry that has emerged around the issue of child abuse detection

and psychotherapy features little contribution from psychoanalytic authors. It is thus extremely interesting that Valerie Sinason, a British psychoanalytic psychotherapist, should edit a book concerned with the psychoanalytic treatment of satanic ritual abuse survivors. The book emerges at a time when Satanism, ritual abuse, and the psychotherapeutic treatment of abuse survivors has generated heated controversy.

In November 1994 **The New York Review of Books** featured a scathing two-part article by Frederick Crews, in which he reviews a number of books on recovered memories of childhood abuse, including ritual abuse. Crews not only scornfully dismisses the evidence for recovered abuse memories, but also trashes psychoanalysis for devising the notion of repression, the concept used to explain why abusive memories are only recalled in psychotherapy. Crews (1994:58) consigns both recovered memory therapy and psychoanalysis to "history's ashcan", and concludes:

"Out in the rough-and-tumble psychotherapeutic marketplace, to which our mental health associations discreetly turn their backs, Freudian clich s are breeding promiscuously with those of religious zealots, self-help evangelists, sociopolitical ideologues, and outright charlatans who trade in the ever seductive currency of guilt and blame. So long as 'Freud's permanent revolution', as Nagel calls it, retains any sway, the voodoo of 'the repressed' can be counted on to return in newly energetic and pernicious forms".

Sinason's book was published in the same year as Crews' article, and these two texts reveal irreconcilable perceptions. While Crews is a sceptical American academic, Sinason is a British psychoanalytic therapist. Her rationale for editing a clinical work on satanic abuse is outlined in a harrowing case study comprising chapter one. Sinason's story begins in 1990 with her long-distance supervision of a Swedish psychotherapist who was treating a 44 year-old mentally retarded woman. Sinason, an authority on the psychotherapy of retarded people, was shocked by the patient's elaborate descriptions of ritual sexual abuse, "material that sounded more like a horror film than therapy sessions with a severely mentally handicapped woman" (p16). Details of abduction, sadomasochism, blood drinking, and sexual abuse emerged. The question of fact versus fantasy was quickly resolved for Sinason: "Ingrid's limited cognitive abilities meant she could not lie or fantasise. She was trying to make sense of something insensible she had actually experienced" (p16).

The book comprises 34 articles, written mainly by British analysts, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists. The articles cover a broad range of topics, from the historical foundations of ritual abuse, to satanic cult practices and therapeutic strategies with satanic abuse survivors. Unlike many self-styled experts in the field of occult ritual abuse Sinason is no religious crusader. She emphasises in her introduction that "the number of children and adults tortured in the name of mainstream religious orthodoxy historically outweighs any onslaught by Satanists" (p3).

As the quote by Crews indicates, a common objection raised by sceptics concerns the question of whether satanic ritual abuse and murder really occurs. In a

historical article, subtitled "an excavation of ancient infanticide", Kahr writes dramatically that the "very foundations of humanity have been constructed upon the charred bones of dead infants" (p53). He goes on to suggest that "the infanticidal urge of fathers and mothers also seeks expression in ritualistic, satanistic and sadistic forms of child abuse"(p53). Chapter six, a review of literature on false allegations of sexual abuse in childhood by Gwen Adshead, is more cautious. Citing child abuse statistics from reputable researchers she dismisses Freud's 1924 theory that most victim accounts of childhood abuse are fantasy. However, she is careful to emphasise that because child sexual abuse is criminal behaviour the truth of the alleged events must necessarily be determined by legal criteria:

"It is not possible for health care professionals to determine such a 'truth'. Not only are they not trained to detect crime ... there is nothing about a health care professional training that enables them to 'know' if someone is telling the truth. History-taking and experience of talking to people as patients is not the same as the dialogue of interrogation, which provides the basis for evidence within a legal framework. The role of the investigator is quite different from that of the therapist" (p63).

This does not mean, however, that the therapist can suspend judgement as to the truthfulness of ritually abused patients' accounts. Sinason and Hale emphatically assert in chapter 32, "Internal and external reality", that:

"it is crucial to discover as near to the historic truth as possible and have it confirmed .... Whilst psychotherapists are usually primarily concerned with the patient's emotional truth regardless of whether it is corroborated by external reality, for ritual abuse survivors this is not adequate. We see the survivor's need to establish what happened with us as a way of making such experiences thinkable" (p274).

Obviously this kind of clinical work involves liaisons with a number of other institutions and professionals, many of whom may disbelieve and denigrate the therapist's claims, a countertransference taste of the general response which typically meets the abuse survivor's revelations. Work of this kind necessitates a close support network to safely contain therapists' own emotional responses to their patients' experiences.

The second and third parts of the book, the most interesting part for this reviewer, concern clinical work with child and adult ritual abuse survivors. Here the reader is confronted, albeit from a textual distance, with experiential accounts of events that are so grotesque and horrifying as to be almost unthinkable. And if the reader struggles to hold these events in mind, how much more difficult must it be for therapists to hear and contain first-hand testimony of unbearable acts of cruelty? The case studies document the material of children and adults who have been subject to rape, bondage, physical pain and mutilation, sodomy, bestiality, forced blood-drinking, excrement ingestion and the witnessing of ritual sacrifice. In her introduction Sinason quotes Macbeth:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears
I have supped full with horrors.

While this initially strikes the reader as perhaps overly dramatic the later clinical case material dispels any thought of sensationalist excess. Mollon, in an article titled "The impact of evil", identifies what is unique about ritually abused patients. They have

"experienced concrete enactments of primitive and very violent scenarios of murder, dismemberment and cannibalism, which for other people are merely phantasies. This leads to a blurring of the distinction between phantasy and reality. For these people, the external world has mirrored extremely primitive levels of the paranoid-schizoid position" (p145).

Ironside's article, "Psychotherapy with a ritually abused 3-year old", details the extreme symptomatic consequences of ritual abuse: "He fluctuated between withdrawn or violent moods, could go into a trance state and pass out at times of stress. He also exhibited disturbing sexualised behaviour, self-mutilation and sexual and violent attacks on children and pets" (p87).

Extreme experiences require extreme defensive measures, the most notable of which is extreme dissociation. But as Conway, in a chapter called "Trance-formations of abuse", notes, "this adaptation has its price - while dissociation may help the individual defend against the experience of physical helplessness, it does so at the risk of eventual psychological helplessness, of being taken over by spontaneous episodes of reliving the event, or by dissociated personalities and, in the extreme case, of multiple personality disorder" (p255). In clinical work of this nature, which involves details of unspeakable trauma, therapists are not only confronted with the task of hearing their patients' experiences, but also with entertaining, processing, and staying with their own revulsion, horror, and fear. Mollon notes that the therapist's countertransference "will involve a sense of disorientation and loss of bearings - a fear for one's own sanity and grasp of reality" (p146).

The book has a number of useful chapters dealing with ritual abuse assessment, identification, and treatment. It is clear that classical analytic technique needs to be substantially modified in order to adequately treat these extraordinary patients. Only by amassing rigorous clinical case study detail will refined strategies for treating ritual abuse survivors emerge. Sinason's book represents a valuable beginning in this regard.

Not only are therapists (and readers) forced to imagine the psychic experience and consequences of such depravity for the victims/survivors; they must also try and enter the minds of the perpetrators. Mollon puts this succinctly: "There is something about the existence of evil that is difficult to grasp and comprehend. It is the idea that someone may be not just a *bit* bad, dishonest or cruel, not just psychopathic, but *dedicated* to being bad" (p136). It is, however, the experiences of the ritual abuse survivors that linger long and disagreeably in the reader's mind. Aspects of this book are difficult to digest. Psychoanalysis has long devoted itself to understanding the fantastical transformation of historical experience by

unconscious distortion and elaboration. Can alleged satanic abuse survivors' accounts really be true?

Mollon's conclusion to his article provides a humane and eloquent answer: "I would rather risk being deluded by my patients - rather risk appearing a fool - than risk abandoning the terrified traumatised child within the patient who is attempting to tell their story" (p147).

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Phillips, A (1994) Besides good and evil, in **On flirtation.** London: Faber & Faber.

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