



Identity In Question

The Inner World

Jessica Evans

Can I ask you now what your understanding is of the internal world or inner world – Freud called it psychic reality in the context of Kleinian thought – why is this concept so important?

Margaret Rustin

Perhaps I can say something about the particular inflection in Klein's thinking where I would want to emphasise that her interest in very early development, the experiences of babies and young children, created a tradition of thinking in very bodily metaphor about mental experiences, and also a very special interest in understanding sources of anxiety in human beings. I think that the way in which she saw the inner world being structured was around the relationships that actually were taking place in the external world, but influenced all the time by the particular personal inflection of the baby's, the young child's, and of course this is a process throughout life – we don't stop fantasising as we grow older, it just takes a different form.

Ian Craig

I think the inner world for me is something which somehow diverts what happens outside, it turns it into something else, we're given something from the outside and we turn it, it becomes something else anyway, I think, whether we like it or not.

Jessica Evans

Yes I think that's the important point because I think Kleinians do stress the importance of a richness of an internal world as a sign of being more healthy perhaps and that leads me on to the question: what is the relationship between the inner and the outer world and how much importance is placed on the external world as opposed to the inner world?

Margaret Rustin

Well I find myself thinking about a case discussion I had with a colleague yesterday, who's actually a family therapist, as a way of exploring this issue. She was telling me about a young adolescent boy and his family that she's been working with a colleague. The boy was in really quite a lot of difficulties at school where he'd sort of started off very well in his first year of secondary school and in the second year his behaviour deteriorated massively and he was experienced as very challenging, graffiti all over the school, homework never done, etcetera, etcetera and things had reached quite a pitch with a rather similar pattern at home with a terrific degree of challenge going on. Now my family therapist colleague had various ideas about this but one of the things that I was very struck by is that the family constellation of this boy is that he's the eldest of three, and after him there's another child who was born when he's two and I found myself thinking, listening to her, about this little boy who perhaps had a very good year his first year of life with his mum, like his first year in secondary school, but that in the second year mum becomes pregnant, something else is coming into his world which is really disturbing things and that perhaps that was being revisited in the difficulty in the second year when the new first years come in and are felt to be the privileged babies who get special care, etcetera. This struck me as a kind of interesting example whereby the inner beliefs of this child, that one has a good beginning but it's going to be spoiled, somebody else is going to come along and get the goodies, really was probably was being expressed in part, whatever else may have been going on in these difficulties at this particular point.

Ian Craig

One of the problems I have with object relations theorists, the theory sometimes lends itself too easy to what we call a socio-logistic interpretation, where the inner world just becomes something which is formed by the outer world and goes on to be reproduced in later life in the outer world.

Margaret Rustin

I would want to think of the patterns as much more to do with unconscious beliefs, that these are structures in terms of the person's way of relating to themselves and others.

Ian Craig

I suppose if you think of a deeper level of the internal world as generally chaotic but I guess one of the important things that people can do in psychotherapy is learn to live with that chaos. I think the change that comes, comes out of chaos and part of a job I do in groups is not just to challenge subconscious beliefs but also to challenge the unconscious beliefs as well.

Jessica Evans

To interpret uncertainty?

Ian Craig

Yes.

Jessica Evans

You've stressed how important early life is and of course that's very much part of the Kleinian tradition, but what about other key developmental stages in the lifespan, such as adolescence – can they only ever be interpreted in terms of patterns laid down earlier in childhood?

Margaret.

Margaret Rustin

Well I see something briefly to expand on the case that I just mentioned, which I think brings this point out very neatly. The other thing which was very clearly going on for this boy, 12/13, and this was a Jewish family where that age is of particular importance because he was also approaching his Bar Mitzvah, was the beginnings of puberty and the beginnings of adolescence and I think this position of anxiety about being dislodged is re-opened for him at the point where there's also a kind of enormous transition in his position at school and in his wider community, so that it's partly a revisiting of previous transitions but of course it has a whole new element in it which is to do in this particular instance with a gradual sexual maturing, which introduces quite different sorts, for example, of competition with father, from the kind of competition that a very small boy might feel.

Jessica Evans

So new kinds of anxieties being produced later on?

Margaret Rustin

Absolutely.

Jessica Evans

Ian.

Ian Craig

Yes I agree with that and I think that can happen really at any stage through somebody's life, but it usually involves going back over what's happened for some attempt at reorganisation. What puzzles me constantly is – again I use the word creative link between a childhood and things that happen in later life – you see lots of people who, if you just heard about childhood, you'd think well they'd been raped, they wouldn't get anywhere in life but they turn out to have got stable relationships, brought up their own children lovingly despite the fact that they were abused from the age of three sexually and physically and other people who seem to have had fairly stable, quiet childhoods who make, whose lives are chaotic, and I think you need the inner world between people, people's inner worlds aren't standard equipment.

Jessica Evans

That's a very important point because you're talking about the idiosyncratic nature of unconscious life for every individual, there's no standard one-to-one relationship between behaviour and the internal life.