Subjectivity Terminable and Interminable

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Lee Rather Ph.D.

Introduction

To organize this discussion of subjectivity and its ongoing elaborations in psychoanalytic thinking, I would like first to step back and make some broad comments concerning the integration of the Freudian and Winnicottian traditions as reflected in the first 100 years of psychoanalytic history. I will then return more directly to a focus on issues concerning the subjectivity of mother and analyst.

The Romantic & Classical Traditions

When Donald Winnicott (1958, 1972) stepped onto the psychoanalytic stage in the late 1940's and began to offer a counter-perspective to Freud and Klein, he (knowingly or unknowingly) took his place within a cultural dialectic which preceded him by a least several centuries. Western thought is characterized by broad philosophical and intellectual tensions between the classical and romantic visions, two very different perspectives on what it is to be human. These visions were articulated by the turn-of-the century philosopher, T.E. Hulme, and have been more recently discussed in our field by Carlo Strenger (1989, 1998, 2005) to whom I am indebted for this part of my discussion, and whose work I highly recommend.

In the classical vision (grounded in Kant), reason is privileged above all, and the value in human life is felt to lie in the ability to submit our subjective side to scrutiny to transcend our inherent animal nature. Thus, the importance of an individual life lies not in its uniqueness, but in the way it embodies transcendence of the unique and subjective. By contrast, the romantic vision (grounded in Rousseau) holds that the supreme value in human life is not reason, but rather the development and elaboration of all that is individual, unique, and subjective. In the romantic vision, the goal of individual life lies not so much in reason or

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adaptation, as it does in the development and expression of one's own unique experience as a subject.

The tension between these sensibilities is readily apparent in psychoanalytic theory and practice. While Freud has his romantic moments, he is primarily classical in vision. Freud's neurotic is governed by the subjectivity of the pleasure principle rather than the objectivity of the reality principle. Freud takes the side of reason as opposed to the instinctual, infantile, or subjective. While the classical patient comes to analysis hoping his wishes will come true, the classical analyst leads towards renunciation of infantile fantasy and its neurotic miseries for reality and its everyday unhappiness. To quote Strenger: "The ethic is stoic: maturity and mental health depend on the extent to which a person can acknowledge reality as it is and be rational and wise" (1989, p. 601). The classical vision in psychoanalysis includes Freud, the American ego-psychology of Hartmann (1964), the work of Melanie Klein (1935, 1946), and the French school exemplified by Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984). The romantic vision in psychoanalysis begins with Ferenzci (1926), then Balint (1935), and was later exemplified in Britain by the 'Middle School', especially Winnicott (1958, 1972), and in the US by the self-psychology of Kohut (1977). In the romantic ethic, to quote Strenger again: "maturity and mental health consist in the ability to sustain enthusiasm and a sense of meaning" (1989, p. 601). Thus, it could be said that the goal of treatment within the classical sensibility is overcoming the subjective ('dis-illusionment'), while the goal of treatment within the romantic sensibility is the elaboration of the subjective ('illusionment').

Paternal and Maternal Function

The classical and romantic visions correspond well to the concepts of *maternal and paternal function* which have been used in describing the analyst's emotional position vis-à-vis the analysand (Bollas, 1999: Rather, 2001, 2005a, 2005c). The prototypic analyst grounded in paternal function emphasizes an alliance with the rational adult part of the patient's mind and confronts the patient with the task of renouncing subjective desire in the service of coming to terms with objective reality. When we discuss clinical work in terms of confronting, acquiring insight, working-through, renouncing infantile

strivings, and so on, we are acknowledging the need for analyst and analysand to *do something about facing objective reality.* This is the core of paternal function.

The prototypic analyst grounded in maternal function, by contrast, emphasizes an alliance with the "once-and–forever infant" (Grotstein, 2000), acting as a sort of 'infant advocate' (Grotstein, 1990) by providing an environment which allows subjective reality to be articulated, to be elaborated, and to evolve. When we discuss clinical work in terms of containment, reverie, mirroring, holding, and so on, we are acknowledging the need for analyst and analysand *to allow subjective states of being to flourish without undue pressure to do anything about them*. This is the core of maternal function.

To summarize at this point, paternal function may be thought of as upholding the classical sensibility, while maternal function upholds the romantic sensibility. The flag waving of institutional factionalism and the familiar insult: 'that's not *real* psychoanalysis' may well be considered in these terms. As Christopher Bollas (1999) has humorously observed:

> Psychoanalytic conferences or essays often operate around Oedipal divisions of this kind. Indeed, entire regions or cities of the world appear to have marginalized one parent or another. Thus, the breasts seem to have become the intellectual property of the British to be found in London, while the phallus resides in Paris as the intellectual property of the Lacanians. (p. 39)

Hopefully it is becoming clearer to us by now that the developing child and the evolving analysand will need provision of both functions. The contemporary analyst striving toward such an integrative approach will be called upon to do the personal intellectual and emotional work of reuniting this psychic couple within him or herself. It is also useful to remember that in employing the terms *paternal* and *maternal*, we are using shorthand, culturally based metaphors for organizing experience and not implying any essentialist notions concerning the true nature of mother or fathers. Operationally speaking, both parents will optimally provide functions from both registers.

Subjectivity in the Holding Environment

Winnicott is the representative *par excellence* of the maternal-romantic sensibility when contrasted with the paternal-classical sensibility of Freud and Klein. Freud challenges us to enter the reality of 'everyday unhappiness'. Klein challenges us to live more fully in depressive position reality where the separateness of the object confronts us with the everyday anxieties of dependence, hostility, guilt, and reparation. Winnicott, somewhat more happily, invites us to into a soft 'transitional space', a space that exists *between* reality and fantasy, between objectivity and subjectivity. It is in this space where we elaborate and sustain our unique forms of aliveness. Winnicott postulates that the vitality of true self arises out of earliest infancy in the *holding environment* which, under the sway of *primary maternal preoccupation*, allows the infant the luxurious experience of *going-on-being,* before being nudged gradually into encountering the otherness of reality.

In his paper, Meyers examines Winnicott's ideas of the early infant-mother relation, a period in which mother is more environment than object. That means that she is not sensed as a person in her own right, but more 'felt' as an atmosphere which she creates through her emotional attunement. It has been many years now since Winnicott, in describing the state of primary maternal preoccupation, emphasized the absence of the mother's needs, self, and subjectivity. Like most theorists arriving at new models and exciting ideas, he describes a relatively pure state of affairs. Now, years later, Meyers is interested in elaborating something that Winnicott did not; namely that the mother's subjectivity is, of course, not entirely absent, and that in fact its presence is essential to the infant's experience of aliveness in the holding environment. This is the core of his paper: maternal subjectivity is not only inevitable, but essential in primary maternal preoccupation and in the holding environment. The problem that Winnicott emphasized concerns the false-self constructions that arise as a result of too much impingement of the mother's subjectivity. The problem that Meyers wishes to call our attention to is the internal fragmentation and deadness which arise as a result of too little presence of the mother's subjectivity, as illustrated in his case vignettes.

Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity

The ultimate object of interest here is not really the mother *per se*, but rather the analyst as provider of maternal function. The question is how much *should* the analyst's subjectivity color the analytic encounter? Psychoanalysis has had an uneasy relationship with the analyst's subjectivity. In spite of Freud's recommendation to meet free association with equally hovering attention in order for the analyst to "bend his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the emerging unconscious of the patient" (Freud, 1912), the ghosts of 'suggestion' have haunted psychoanalysis. Freud's concern with minimizing suggestion in favor of uncovering psychic truth, contributed to the orthodox ideal of an analyst who tames his or her own subjectivity though the convergent disciplines of abstinence, anonymity, and neutrality. Such an ideal is harmonious with the classical-paternal sensibility articulated earlier. Subjectivity in the analyst is also discordant with the desire to put psychoanalysis on a scientific footing of falsifiable hypotheses and replication of results which would separate the objective reality of the observed from the subjectivity of the observer (Popper, 1959).

However, post-modernist currents swirling around psychoanalysis after Freud have tended to erode this way of thinking. Countertransference, for example, has become increasingly framed not simply as a problematic intrusion, but also as a resonant stirring of the subjective which can be usefully harnessed (i.e., Racker, 1959). Furthermore, the complexities of theoretical pluralism have made it increasingly clear that even if 'interpretation' is to replace 'suggestion, we still must grapple with the ambiguity of the concept of interpretation itself. In both English and in German ('Deutung'), the word 'interpretation' is defined along a continuum from 'explaining' on the one end, to giving a subjective 'take' or translation on the other. In other words, we must recognize that interpretations can be quite suggestive!

Still, even today, our concepts tend to minimize the role of the subjective in the analyst. For example, we may at times forget that in projective identification nothing is projected; this is only the *phantasy* of what is happening. What is actually happening is that a resonant response is *evoked* by the so-called projector in the 'recipient of the projection'. Grotstein (2005) has recently carefully clarified this in his concept of projective *trans-identification*. In projective identification we are *not* feeling what the patient is feeling. What we are feeling is something analogous to it, something which is entirely our own, born of our own depth of

human experience. The potential for such resonance is dependent on the analyst's awareness of, development of, and access to his or her own subjectivity. This is among the reasons why personal analysis is necessary for those who wish to become analysts; not only to work-through subjective personal issues which might affect countertransference, but paradoxically to increase the capacity for countertransference when it is understood as one's resonant subjectivity.

The role of maternal and analytic subjectivity is also largely overlooked in Bion's two most user-friendly concepts: container-contained and alpha function (1962a, 1962b, 1963, 1965, 1970, 1976). In Bion's theory of emotional processing, 'O' (Ultimate Reality) presses in upon the infant and is registered as raw experience, beta elements, which cannot yet be tolerated, symbolized, or processed. Bion uses the term' reverie' to designate the mother's state of receptivity in taking in the infant's raw experience and transforming it into 'alpha' elements, which can be re-ingested by the infant in a more tolerable form. Alpha function, the fundamental relation between container and contained, is essential for non-psychotic states of mind. However, it does not by itself guarantee freedom from neurosis nor the grip of phantasy (Rather, 2005a). Little explicit attention has been given so far to variations in the quality of alpha function itself and it is easy to overlook the fact that alpha function is subjectivity at work (Rather, 2005a, 2005b).

To give an exaggerated, but hopefully illustrative example: a toddler is overwhelmed with unformulated experience when a large hairy creature with big teeth and a long tongue appears out of nowhere, jumps up, licks her face, and runs off. Perhaps, the comforting mother says: "It's alright sweetheart, you were just so surprised and scared because you've never seen a dog before and didn't know that he was just excited and friendly and wanted to give you a big kiss!" This would be good-enough containment and provision of alpha function. Now let us suppose a different mother who responds: "It's alright sweetheart, that was just a creature from Alpha Centauri visiting earth to see which children are good and which children are bad. So far, I think he likes you!" Each has taken in and given subjective meaning to the inchoate emotional response providing a degree of containment and alpha function, but the subjective

element is massive as it must inevitably be in all interpretations and transformations from O to K.

Perhaps the biggest shift in psychoanalysis which has heightened the legitimacy of the analyst's subjectivity is the changing view of the unconscious itself. Many of us have come to consider the unconscious not only as the center of our emotional processing, but of our cognitive processing as well. This perspective reflects an evolution from the traditional idea of the primary unconscious as a seething cauldron of instinctual drives that must be tamed and sublimated. In this revised version of internal psychic politics, the unconscious is recognized as an ally and collaborator (Rather, 2001) offering a second opinion to the conscious mind, rather than as an enemy saboteur seeking to subvert conscious functioning. This point of view has been variously articulated by theorists such as Bion (1962a, 1962b, 1963, 1965, 1970, 1976), Ferro (1999, 2002), Grotstein (1990, 2000), Langs (1976, 2005), and Matte-Blanco (1975, 1988).

Bion, for example, refers to the concept of *binocular vision* (1965, p. 74), a dialectical interaction through which conscious and unconscious mentation inform each other by triangulating the object of emotional perception. Bion even proposes the concept of a *contact barrier* (1962a, 1962b), a semi-permeable membrane separating conscious and unconscious processing, but permitting a weaving of elements from both registers to provide emotional comprehension of depth and resonance. Here it must be emphasized that the contact barrier not only protects conscious from unconscious processes, but also protects unconscious processing from the intrusions of too much reality-based consciousness. Binoculars do not reveal the full dimensionality and depth of the triangulated object unless the lenses are properly separated, spaced, and integrated.

Similarly, Matte-Blanco's (1975, 1988, also Rayner, 1995) theory of bi-logic postulates a graduated barrier between conscious and unconscious operating systems allowing conscious mentation to process according to the logic of asymmetry, and unconscious mentation to process according to the logic of symmetry. The graduated separation maintains the integrity of both systems, while allowing unconscious processes to enrich conscious processes in the

intermediate realms where they flow together. As Matte-Blanco puts it: “A dam represents a protection against flood, but is also useful for purposes of irrigation” (1940, quoted in Rayner, 1995, p. 174). In a useful metaphor, Grotstein (personal communication, 2005) reminds us that it is precisely the opposable thumb, operating in concert with the forefinger, which allow us to grasp things. In this sense, the unconscious is more sympathetically understood as ‘opposable’ rather than ‘oppositional’ with regard to consciousness.

The thought I seem to be arriving at here is that the fuel of unconscious subjectivity is necessary to fire consciousness and aliveness. While the classical ideal is to make the unconscious conscious in order to subject it to reason, we now reckon with the dialectical opposite: that it may be equally necessary to make the conscious more unconscious! This is consistent with the work of Grotstein (2000), and more recently Ogden (2003, 2004), who following Bion, suggest that we do our most important cognitive and emotional processing unconsciously through dreaming. What is being referred to here is not the delimited dreams of REM sleep, but what Bion termed ‘dream-work alpha’ (i.e., 1992, p. 62). This is a form of dreaming that is continuous night and day, awake and asleep. It is the process by which raw emotional experience, having been converted into alpha elements, is unconsciously worked upon. (Bion, 1992, p. 62). To paraphrase and extend Bion, I suggest that dream-work alpha is analogous to the process by which a pure note from the written page in music is brought to life by being constituted with the rich harmonic overtones characteristic of the particular instrument that plays it. Thus, the subjectivity of unconscious processing, in particular the unconscious arranging of overtones composed through the logic of symmetry (Matte-Blanco, 1975, 1988), forms the foundation for the mother to dream the baby, for the analyst to dream the patient, and for each of us to dream ourselves**.**

As analysts, we are aware that we sometimes fall prey to the analytic equivalent of Meyers’ ‘somatic mother’, delivering rote interpretations to our patients which have been run through our theoretical preconceptions, but not through the emotional gauntlet of our conscious and unconscious subjectivity. Patients may experience this it as a deadness in the analytic atmosphere, or a sense that they are being objectively scrutinized under the

analytic microscope. By contrast, when we are able to 'dream the patient' through various levels of our subjective register, the patient senses we have let them under our skin and aliveness flourishes in the analytic encounter.

The 'Transitional' Object-Mother

In the paper presented earlier today, Meyers is implicitly bringing together the concepts of holding and containing. Although often used interchangeably, these two terms designate distinctly different registers of experience. Winnicott's conception of holding implies an experience of 'floating in one's subjectivity' without much awareness of interaction, at least from the infant's point of view. Bion's conception of containing, by contrast, implies a very active relationship between container and contained (i.e., commensal, symbiotic, parasitic). But these are just concepts, not the 'thing-in-itself', and presumably cannot be so neatly separated in the infant's actual experience. I think Meyers 'dreams' Bionic life into Winnicott by positing the importance of the infant sensing mother's subjectivity within her primary maternal preoccupation.

What is the infant's experience? As always when we try to represent the infant's experience, it takes a creative leap to imagine how the environment mother's subjectivity might be felt and registered by the infant. To take this creative leap is to dream the infant, based on one's own subjective experience as analyst and as analysand. What I imagine in dreaming the infant's experience of the environment-mother's subjectivity is as follows. The infant gradually apprehends a sense of 'presence' in the environment itself. Words do not serve well here, but perhaps this could be loosely captured by the phrase 'in the presence of…'. Not 'in the presence of the mother'. (I have in mind here the contrast sometimes drawn between a sense of God as a motivated personage, and a more diffuse sense of communion with something larger than oneself that simply *is*). I then imagine that sensing this presence allows the experience of *going-on-being* to become *going-on-being-in-the-presence-of.* One might say: "alone together, but with no one in particular". I then imagine that the infant develops a sense of something that could be reached for, just as Winnicott described the infant's 'period of hesitation' when presented with the spatula during a pediatric examination. The sense of mother's subjectivity provides the possibility of a 'transitional' object-mother

(not ‘transitional-object’ mother). This mother is transitional in the sense of being neither environment nor object, and it is the arrangement which creates a bridge to the object-mother when the infant feels curious and ready enough to cross. We see this at certain moments in our work, and perhaps we detect it in Meyers’ case vignette when he provides the piece of cloth to his patient. In this instance, one imagines that Meyers is felt neither as pure environment, nor as separate object, but rather as subjective environment ‘dreaming out’ to reach the patient.

Concluding Comments

Noticing the plethora of musical terms I have used in this paper (i.e., harmonious, resonant, attuned, overtones, discordant) I am reminded of a remark that is sometimes made about Western music. It is said that the development of Western music can be characterized as the increasing acceptance of harmonic intervals that were previously considered too dissonant. When integrated into modern music, such intervals have extended the richness of what can be felt and expressed. I think that in the development of psychoanalysis too, we can see that the analyst’s subjectivity, originally considered too discordant with the task of analysis, is now much more harmoniously included in the theories psychoanalysis has of itself. In this spirit, I commend Meyers on further elaborating the role of subjectivity, both in Winnicott’s concept of the environment-mother, and in his consideration of the importance of the analyst’s subjectivity in the analytic process.

> When we dream the patient subjectively, rather than analyze the patient objectively, the feel of analysis is much less that psychic reality is being pinned down, and much more that an expanding internal universe is being opened up. This is consistent with Bion’s perception that in psychoanalysis mental space expands as a result of investigation, and as a result of movement from O to K and back to O again. Remarkably, at the end of such an analysis, one would know more, and be more of oneself than ever before, and yet also (paradoxically) have more to learn and more to become than ever before.

**References for this and all other presentations are listed on a separate PDF*