

7. Shaul Bar-Haim

The child's 'position': the concept of childhood in interwar psychoanalysis

'Education can be described without more ado as an incitement to the conquest of the pleasure principle, and to its replacement by the reality principle; it seeks, that is, to lend its help to the developmental process which affects the ego. To this end it makes use of an offer of love as a reward from the educators; and it therefore fails if a spoilt child thinks that it possesses that love in any case and cannot lose it whatever happens.'

(Freud, 1911: 224)

Sigmund Freud was arguably the first to provide psychoanalytic treatment to a child, by giving the father of 'little Hans' instructions on how to analyse him. This analysis gave Freud an opportunity to examine a clinical situation in which 'the authority of a father and of a physician were united in a single person' (Freud, 1909, SE X:5). While emphasizing the therapeutic role that Hans's father started to play by analysing his own son, Freud overlooked a different dimension of the father's unique situation, i.e., the uniting of the authority of the *physician* (psychoanalyst) and the *educator* in a single person. This was not a coincidence: in the early years of psychoanalysis, it was not unusual to find psychoanalysts treating their own children, including Freud himself who analysed his own daughter, Anna. However, thinking of psychoanalysis as a form of education was always under debate by Freud and his followers. Indeed, Freud, was much more ambivalent about the possibility of integrating child psychoanalysis and education into a single discipline, and thought this vision as problematic (Freud, SE XXII: 150). Nevertheless, he was likewise critical of the idea that 'the analysis of children be a real one, quite independent of any educative measures' (Paskauskas, 1993:641).

Freud's uncertainty regarding the role of education in child psychoanalysis represents a much wider conflict about this question, especially in the interwar period, when child psychoanalysis was still a new discipline. In fact, by the late 1920s, the debate about the usage of child psychoanalysis as an educational tool divided European psychoanalysis into two main camps:

one led by Anna Freud and the other by Melanie Klein.[1] Indeed, although the two women shared important common ground, their public image, which suggests two contrasting ways of thinking of child psychoanalysis, **and thus of 'the child' and 'childhood'**, endures in the collective memory of the psychoanalytical movement and its historiography.

In this chapter, rather than adding new information to this well-documented dispute – first in the 1920s, and then during the Second World War in what was known as the Controversial discussions (e.g., Viner, 1996; King and Steiner, 1991; Steiner, 1985), I would like to locate it in a wider intellectual context, namely a transition in understanding of childhood after the First World War. In addition to their different approaches to child psychoanalysis, **I argue that Anna Freud and Klein** also suggested two different ways of thinking about the figure of the child as such. While Anna Freud located herself in a developmental tradition by which the child is figured as developmental entity, Melanie Klein challenged developmental way of thinking altogether by arguing that some dimension of our mental life are inherently non-developmental and are relevant for the child and the adult equally. Thus, this chapter suggests two competing influential narratives – both drawing on the new discourse of interwar child-psychoanalysis – about the ideal way to portrait the child's mind in early twentieth-century Europe.

The general attempt to define the then newly introduced notion of the super-ego stands at the centre of the interwar debate between mainstream European psychoanalysis and Melanie Klein. Freudians thought that it does not occur before the Oedipus complex, whereas Kleinians believed that it is formed in the early relationship with the mother. However, contrary to the predominant view among psychoanalytic scholars, I claim that the argument was not necessarily over the exact stage at which this entity is constituted in the child's mind, but on the meaning of the gap it creates between adulthood and childhood. Both Anna Freud and Klein accepted Sandor Ferenczi's suggestion that there is a pre-Oedipal stage – what he called the 'sphincter-morality', which serves as a forerunner to the super-ego, and hence all agreed that super-egoistic elements exist in the child's psyche before the Oedipus complex. But while Ferenczi and Anna Freud thought of this stage as a step towards more advanced phases in the child's development, Klein thought of it as *synchronic* mental state that, to some extent, stays with us throughout our life.

'Development' and growth in 19th century society and culture

In 1960, Philippe Ariès published his highly influential book, *Centuries of Childhood*, in which he argues that childhood is a historical category that belongs to the modern era. Hierarchies of age and generation, which play such a major role in our own Western societies, were not relevant in Medieval Europe, he argues. In fact, for Ariès, until the modern age, this category just did not exist. Ariès's thesis has been successfully refuted over and over again in the last few decades (Levene, 2006), but his demand to historicize childhood remained firm. Modern scholars of childhood would agree that the second half of the nineteenth century was a turning point in the history of childhood in the Western world. The reduction in child-mortality rate, the abolition of child labour and the establishment of a state-funded schooling system in Europe and North America created very different perceptions of childhood than the ones that most people had before. Childhood became a sphere where children were expected to study and develop their physical and mental capacities rather than work and contribute to the household economy. Moreover, decent childhood – indeed, a 'happy' one – was more and more perceived as something to which every child was entitled (Cunningham, 1995:134-62).

The regulation of most forms of child labour and the making of the state educational system were part of the same process. In fact, one form of a child's life, schooling, replaced another form of child's life: work. In Britain, this was a radical change mainly for working-class children. The 1870 Education Act brought about a new social situation for many children who were no longer 'wage-earners' but 'school-pupils'. [2] It was this new schooling system that created for the working-class child the right conditions 'to constitute *proper* childhood, namely ignorance, innocence and dependence' (Hendrick, 1997:64). These new criteria for a decent childhood were something to which all children, from all classes, were now entitled. Furthermore, schools also gave working-class children a few more years of childhood, and allowed the transition from childhood to adulthood to become a process rather than a fracture (Castañeda, 2002:26). The condition for the success of this process was *becoming* an adult, which was not only an aim in itself, but a way of confirming one's physical and mental normality. Thinking of childhood as a duration could also enable the state to consider this stage of life – when mind and body are much

more susceptible to changes – as an internship for good citizenship. The education of the child became much more than schooling: it was now perceived as the entire social process through which the state creates a better member of society (Wallace, 1995).

The emergence of a new chronological-developmental perception of childhood was closely related to the increasing interest in ‘growth’, which became, since the mid-nineteenth century, a main subject of study for the natural and social sciences .i.e., paediatric medicine, child-psychiatry, and ‘cell theory’ (Shuttleworth, 2010; Steedman, 1995). The notion of ‘growth’ also played a central role in the above-mentioned new public discourse of childhood and citizenship. Thus, for example, Margaret McMillan (1860-1931), the great reformist of working-class children, based her educational views on the fact that these children were physiologically deprived in comparison with other children. It was precisely the physiology of growing which interested McMillan, since she believed it was the most crucial aspect in the development of children. According to her socialistic views, the physiological conditions of working-class children were not an unchangeable fact, but a political issue. She believed that better material conditions could improve all other aspects of these children’s lives. Children’s growth, however, was for McMillan much more than a biological or psychological issue of the individual, but a symbol of the potential for a better society. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, the child has been not only culturally ‘sacralised’ (Zelizer, 1985), but childhood itself became a political symbol of the promise of a better future.[3]

An even more important key evidence for the influence of these new sciences even beyond the nineteenth-century itself is Freud’s work, in which all these fields of study can be found in one way or another (Makari, 2008). One of the innovative aspects of Freud’s work was his rejection of chronology as a necessarily progressive force in mental life. He was a radical thinker precisely because he suggested that apart from ‘external’ chronological time – that is, age – there is another ‘internal’ form of time operating in our mind: subversive, illogical, *unconscious*. This second form of time refers to all mental phenomena that do not fit any temporal coherency, i.e., dreams, fantasies, slips of the tongue, psychosomatic symptoms, and hallucinations. Freud thought that our struggle to narrate our childhood is a paradigmatic failure of the external ‘social time’ to take hold on our mind.

Freud's work influenced later twentieth-century attempts to challenge the perception of childhood as a chronological process of becoming a 'fully human being', i.e. adult (e.g., Rose, 1984). However, in Freud's understanding of the unconscious, there is a clear distinction between past and present, even when it is sometimes hard to draw a clear line between the two. For Freud, our childhood produces continuous forms of subjectivity throughout our life, but this childhood is always located in the past, and we are always located in the present. It is this distinction between past ('childhood') and present ('adulthood') – so crucial to Freudian thought – that Melanie Klein challenged.

Educational and anti-educational psychoanalysis

The development of child-psychoanalysis as a new discipline in the interwar years should be understood in the context of the emergence of a new child-centred policy and culture more generally after the First World War (Stewart, 2013; Wooldridge, 1994). In the 'psy' sciences, this new preoccupation with childhood was partly related to another major interwar social problem, namely finding political and psycho-social resolutions to the mass traumatized shell-shock soldiers. Many psychiatrists and psychoanalysts observed these patients as suffering from a regression to earlier states of childhood, and thus both regression and childhood became central to the discourse of the 'psy' disciplines in the interwar years: 'The shocks of trench warfare had exposed the anxious child in the soldier, and in so doing, exposed the child in the adult' (Roper, 2016:53).

Post-WWI child-psychoanalysis was a paradigmatic shift as it turned the 'child' – hitherto only a theoretical category in the Freudian-oriented disciplines – into a major subject of clinical scrutiny.^[4] Rather the reconstructed childhoods that adult-patients created with their psychoanalysts in their treatment rooms from their own memories, it was from now the child herself who became the focus of clinical study and treatment (Britzman, 2003). The major debate among the new generation of child psychoanalysts, and indeed between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein, was over whether children could be analysed as if they were adults, or whether it was necessary to create some new different clinical methods, specifically attuned to children's development. Anna Freud did not treat children as if they were completely independent from

their carers, and hence she always thought of the ways in which her treatment could be integrated with all the other educational objectives for each patient. For her, child psychoanalysis was only one dimension of the educational process of the child:

The child analyst – in accordance with the fact that his patient is a child – should in addition to the analytic aspect also have a second outlook: the educational [die pädagogische]. I do not see why we should be frightened of this word, or regard such a combination of two attitudes as a disparagement of analysis (A. Freud, 1974 [1927]: 163).

In order to understand why Anna Freud believed that it is virtually impossible to treat children as if they are adults, we have to look first at the way she understood the concept of the super-ego, which she defined as ‘the continuation of the voice of the parents which is now operative from within instead of, as formerly, from without’ (A. Freud, 1974 [1930]:118). She explained that ‘the child accords to this internalized authority a special place of honour in his own ego, regards it as an ideal, and is prepared to submit to it, often more slavishly than in his younger days he had submitted to his actual parents’(ibid). Thus, for Anna Freud, the parental role is only a paradigm for any other authoritarian relationship, and the super-ego is the representative of authority as such. Therefore, every sort of authoritarian figure that takes part in the child’s life will take part in building his or her super-ego. The psychoanalyst, according to her, will not be able to avoid exerting authoritarian influence on the child patient. Therefore, the main difference between children and adults is that in adult psychoanalysis ‘we are dealing with a situation in which the super-ego has achieved full independence and is no longer subject to external influences’(A. Freud, 1974 [1927]:171), while in the childish mind, the super-ego ‘operates all too clearly for the sake of those from whom it received its commands, the parents and persons in charge of the child’(Ibid:171-72).

The problem of authority will come up with adult patients as well, but with them it will be possible to use ‘transference’: the adult patient *replaces* a formative person from his or her past with his or her psychoanalyst, and this creates the revival of ‘a whole series of psychological experiences’ from his or her own past (Freud, 1905 [1901]:116).This unconscious ‘role-playing’

is the core of the treatment of adults, but according to Anna Freud, when it comes to children, real transference is impossible. In the case of child psychoanalysis, the relationship between the analyst and the patient is not a 'replacement' for other relationships: the analyst *is*, for the child, an authority in his or her own right, and so a complete transference will never take place. In other words, the psychoanalyst of children is an educational agent, whether he or she likes it or not.

Sandor Ferenczi, the Hungarian psychoanalyst and a close associate of Freud, was perhaps the first to address the problem of education from a psychoanalytical perspective: education is at the core of the socializing process in every community, while psychoanalysis reveals the strong anti-social tendencies in each individual, he argued. As early as 1908, he claimed that these anti-social forces cannot just be removed by the educational process: these forces 'remain stored in the unconscious, and organize themselves into a dangerous complex of instincts, anti-social and dangerous to the self' (Ferenczi, 1949 [1908]): 223). Psychoanalysis is politically progressive, he thought, because it has the potential to be an emancipatory, non-repressive and anti-authoritarian, procedure. However, in order to be successful as such it needs to provide also a de-educational process, namely to serve as an antidote to the original training, which has been over-successfully' (Ferenczi, 1925: 377-78).

Anna Freud thought of education very differently, but nevertheless agreed with some of Ferenczi's premises:

Ferenczi added something very interesting which always impressed me. He said that all morality begins as hypocrisy, which is certainly true. He illustrated it in the anal sphere with the child's first liking the smell of its own excrement, and being quite uninterested in the smell of a flower. But then the child learns to imitate and later to identify with the adults who show him a rose and say 'how nice', and who say that the smell of excrement is 'nasty'. And the child imitates hypocritically, but gradually acquires that attitude (Sandler and A. Freud, 1981:258).

However, even though Anna Freud accepted Ferenczi's view that 'all morality begins as hypocrisy', she still believed that a certain amount of hypocrisy is still necessary for maintaining

a civilized society. While Ferenczi did not think that any morality which begins with hypocrisy is necessarily good, or even ‘a lesser evil’, Anna Freud believed that hypocrisy and education were not necessarily in contradiction.

The child’s quest for reality

Early mainstream psychoanalytic theory, which Anna Freud thought herself as representing in her work, was not totally different from other modern psychologies in one main aspect: they all provided, whether implicitly or explicitly, a developmental description of the mental process all humans undergo from infancy to adulthood. By contrast, Klein and her followers in Britain argued that there may be important differences between children and adults in terms of life-experience, but their mind – in the words of Freud (1911) – functions according to the same ‘principles of mental functioning’. By describing people’s mental lives as a set of ‘positions’ rather than a series of chronological ‘phases’, Klein challenged not only some basic principles of Freudian psychoanalysis, but also the popular perception of childhood as a series of psychological and physiological phases in the process of *becoming* a mature adult.[5] In doing so, Klein suggested a new approach to the understanding of ‘growth’, which was – as described earlier – one of the principle subjects of study of the natural sciences since the nineteenth century. Moreover, I argue, Klein challenged the developmental tradition by concentrating on the *synchronic* and timeless elements in the structures of children’s and adults’ minds, **seeing the child as existing in a particular time, without reference neither to its past nor to its future**), in contrast to the *diachronic* perspective **(the child develops and evolves through time)** that dominated developmental way of thinking.[6]

At the beginning of her professional career, Klein’s approach to education was not so different from that of Anna Freud. She, too, believed at first that ‘psycho-analysis would have to serve education as an assistant – as a completion – leaving untouched the foundations hitherto accepted as correct’(Klein, 1923:448). Her own experience of combining the role of the psychoanalyst with the role of the mother came with her first five-year old patient, ‘Erich’ – who was, in fact, her own son (Grosskurth, 1986:75-79). Klein described how the psychoanalyst (i.e., Klein)

insisted on answering Erich's questions about procreation, religion and the existence of God in a rational way. These questions represented for Klein the child's curiosity about sexual matters.

However, her answers did not satisfy Erich, who gradually became 'taciturn, [with a] distaste for play' (Klein, 1923:448) generally bored with his mother, who used to be his main companion. Klein thought that by answering Erich's questions she was able to join him in his resistance to authoritarian repression, which she thought came from the parental role as such. But what she found out was that this authoritarian repression did not come from the external world but from Erich's inner unconscious, phantasies and anxieties, and therefore her 'scientific' answers could not satisfy his curiosity.

Klein now realized that children are not motivated by a wish to achieve scientific knowledge *per se*, but by unresolved questions of their inner world. In this respect, the answers were marginal to the questions. Klein's later writings were much clearer about the inevitable authoritarian relationships between children and their parents as the source for this quest for knowledge. These relationships, she discovered, are grounded in the traumatic situation of the infant when he or she finds him- or herself at the centre of a world full of things from which he or she is isolated, namely, 'surrounded with objects of anxiety, and in this respect excrement, organs, objects, things animate and inanimate are to begin with equivalent to one another' (Klein, 1930:26). Klein realized that anxieties are not only a consequence of the inability to differentiate between things, but are mainly caused by the infant's lack of any language with which to explore these things or to ask questions about them (Klein, 1928: 169). This is why the adult is perceived by the infant as an authority: the adult is the one who knows the answers to the infant's questions, and is therefore the only one who can help her with her lust for knowledge.

Klein, then, started to consider the 'authoritarian gap' between children and the adult world as an unavoidable element in the education of children. In this respect she was not naïve regarding the differences between children and adults, and did not completely abandon developmental theory. On the other hand, she thought that this authoritarian gap between the helpless infant and his or her carer is *not only* a matter of age, and that it is a fundamental experience in one's life even when one grows up. Klein and her followers thought of the infant as always-already in a state of

‘unconscious phantasy’ and much of his or her effort is to come to terms with reality as such (Isaacs, 1948). That is to say that from a very early stage, the child is preoccupied with the question of what exists in the world apart from his or her ‘unconscious phantasy’, and all of his or her curiosity is channelled to clarifying this question. As Stonebridge (1998) noted, in Kleinian thought, ‘the absence of knowledge, the *gap* between drive and object, thus characterizes the infant’s quest for reality’ (44). For Klein, this quest for reality – the epistemological attempt to know what exists in the world beyond one’s ‘unconscious phantasy’ – is an existential condition and not a developmental stage.

Klein and the non-chronological perception of childhood

By now we can see that, in the debate between Klein and the Freudian Orthodoxy, represented by Anna Freud and Ferenczi, the two sides had different perceptions of the importance of chronological phases in the psychology of children. While for Freud it is one’s past that stands at the centre of any research of the psyche, for Klein it is always the present that matters. Juliet Mitchell (1998) argues that Klein’s contribution was ‘to chart an area where present and past are one and time is spatial, not historical’ (27). Moreover, Rather than a developmental theory of growth, Klein suggested a new way of thinking of one’s mental life by describing it as a series of ‘positions’.

R.D. Hinshelwood (1991) defines the Kleinian ‘position’ as ‘a constellation of anxieties, defences, object-relations and impulses’ (393). One’s position is neither a matter of age, nor something which is related to his or her developmental stage, but an assemblage of inner mental forces in a given moment – inner forces which are active in one way or another throughout one’s life (Klein, 1935). The notion of ‘position’ has wider implications than its specific function in Kleinian theory. As Hanna Segal (1980) points out, ‘position’ is a ‘structural concept rather than a chronological one’ (125). In order to understand Kleinian theory in structural terms, it might be useful to distinguish between *diachronic* and *synchronic* structures of childhood, as has been suggested recently by Ivar Frønes (2005). While *diachronic* structures refer to a ‘set of transitions and phases’ in one’s development, *synchronic* structures refer ‘to the structure and dynamics within the more stable phases’ (271). According to this distinction, we might say that

Klein's concept of 'position' expresses a commitment to the study of synchronic structures in children's mind rather than a wish to explore the diachronic elements, that is, children's growth. Although Klein was particularly interested in children, she believed that, to some extent, it does not really matter whether the subject is a child or an adult: in order to understand one's mental position, we need to understand one's psyche synchronically and not diachronically – the particularity of his or her structure of mind rather than the changes he or she undergoes over time.

Conclusion

Drawing on a nineteenth-century scientific and cultural tradition which highlights the qualitative physical and mental differences between children and adults, Sigmund and Anna Freud, as well as Ferenczi, saw the psyche as a developmental entity – the infant becomes a child, then an adolescent and finally an adult. In this process, one's past becomes the material for one's narrative (or one's own history), and thus mental progression and regression become possible. Hence, the notion 'growth', which was so important in *fin de siècle* theories of the child's mind (as we saw for example in the case of Margaret Macmillan) – played also a crucial role in Anna Freud's later writings (e.g., A. Freud, 1958; 1963). It was against this dominant tradition of figuring childhood that Klein developed her concept of 'position'.

Klein's divergence from the Freudian-Ferenczian world led to very different definitions of 'adulthood' and 'childhood'. For Klein, the infantile world exists in a continual oscillation between different positions, which are not stages to be progressed through but are structural dimensions of unconscious phantasy that define *all* forms of one's subjective life. Indeed, it was Klein's refusal to acknowledge some essential differences between children and adults in terms of the structure and functions of the mind that led her to treat children as if they were adults: 'a children's analyst must have the same Ucs [unconscious] attitude as we require in the analyst of adults, if he is to be successful' (Klein, 1927:370).

As noted, Klein's recognition of the inevitable 'authoritarian gap' between children and adults did not lead her to think, like Anna Freud, that child psychoanalysis is an educational procedure.

An educator and a child psychoanalyst were, for her, entirely different occupations. Moreover, because she believed that, despite the ‘authoritarian gap’, children and adults have the same mental structures, Klein insisted that the job of a child psychoanalyst is essentially the same as that of an adult psychoanalyst. She did not deny the fact that children grow up – indeed, develop to become adults; but for her, some major dimensions of the childish mind are always there from the beginning, essentially non-developed and resilient to any change.

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[1] The first child psychoanalyst was actually neither one of them, but Freud's Viennese pupil and colleague, Hermine Hug-Hellmuth (1871-1924). See Geissmann & Geissmann, , 1998: 33-59.

[2] It should be noted, however, that only in the second half of the twentieth-century, child labour was completely outlawed. For the decline of child labour in the West in the nineteenth century see Heywood, 2001:121-144.

[3] There was nothing new in this romanticist image of the child as a symbol of innocence, or in the image of the child as the ‘reclaimer of corrupt adulthood’ (Steedman, 1992:34), but McMillan was one of the first in Britain to extend these cultural images to the children of the lower classes in order to use it as a platform for her socialist politics.

[4] On the history of child-psychoanalysis see Roper (2016); see also Geissmann & Geissmann (1998).

[5] In Kleinian theory there are two major positions about infancy: the *paranoid-schizoid position* which (in normal development) is followed by a *depressive position* (and therefore Klein has a developmental dimension in her theory). In this chapter I focus only on the idea of the position as such, without considering the specific psychoanalytic content of Klein’s theory. See however Hinshelwood (1991).

[6] For Saussure’s distinction between synchronic and diachronic aspects of a linguistic system see Culler (1986).