Book Reviews


There is no surprise that in Susan Kavalier-Adler’s most ambitious book to date, she focuses on the two most iconic and influential psychoanalytic developmental theorists of the mid twentieth century in her past work, such as Mourning, Spirituality and Psychic Change: A New Object Relations View of Psychoanalysis (Kavalier-Adler, 2003) and Anatomy of Regret (Kavalier-Adler, 2013), she has established herself as one of the most regarded interpretive psychoanalytic biographical theorists working today. The Klein-Winnicott Dialectic serves up an amalgam of biography, clinical case material, psychoanalytic principles and the powerful interpersonal and inter-psychological encounter of the two great minds of mid twentieth century psychoanalysis, who were locked in a battle that would define no less the future of psychoanalytic theory and practice for generations to come. Further the book reaches new understanding, dissecting the often poignant and turbulent narratives of each theorist, and how their respective psychoanalytic positions emerge from a cauldron of family secrets, strained relationships, culture and personal disposition.

From Freud’s days, the psychoanalytic movement was built on a dialectic which is akin to an argument. I believe that such dialectic, in part, emerges from understanding that psychoanalysis is not a “hard science,” but it is more of a philosophical/healing arts tradition, based on speculative assessment built from observations of countless consultations with patients. Despite his own observations and case work, Freud held fast to a mostly biologically based drive theory of human motivation. The legacy of his model is best exemplified in the work of Karl Abraham, Ernst Jones, Freud’s daughter Anna, and though significantly modified, in the work of Melanie Klein.

If there is a fault in Kavalier-Adler’s work is that it may be too ambitious, couching the interpretive competing biographies with a thorough review of both theorists’ key principles, and then, pivoting to the application of both theorists’ principles while adding Kavalier-Adler’s own theoretical constructs. Although I applaud the effort to encapsulate this large collection of material, I could easily envision this work as three separate, though connected parts, likened to a trilogy. With that said, this book offers the most cohesive presentation of Klein’s often dense and obtuse concepts in a most palatable way. Perhaps, one of the key features in this expansive volume is that the application of the techniques and approaches of both Klein and Winnicott are demonstrated frequently with many case examples offered.
Using Grosskurth’s (1986) extensive biography of Klein, Kavaler-Adler delves into Klein’s personal life deconstructing her relationship with her narcissistic, controlling, omnipresent mother, her failed marriages, and her lost lovers, while she also illustrates how the very heart of Klein’s theorizing emerges from a matrix, which reflects the failure of the environment. Kavaler-Adler revels in the dark homoerotic demon-lover issues, and the oppressive bad object mother elements in Klein’s background, which make their way into Klein’s theory of projective identification, envy, and the death instinct. Kavaler-Adler extends her theoretical perspective, focusing on Klein’s failure to developmentally mourn, giving rise to Klein’s internal object relations theory which patently avoids criticizing the maternal failure. Kavaler-Adler highlights how the marginal recognition of the environmental influence in Klein’s theory has its deep roots in her psyche, as the means to protect her primitive idealization and attachment to an oppressive and destructive narcissistic maternal figure.

The social/environmental aspects of our human motivations found a cold shoulder in Freud’s theory, which Melanie Klein viewed as the basis for her work. Like Freud, Klein’s theorizing resulted in great creative leaps of explanation and descriptive speculation, aimed at capturing the tormented underpinning of human motivation (Klein, 1957, 1975). It is at this crossroad of the nature vs. nurture argument, that Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott meet, and their dialectic begins. We see Klein as the stern Madame of the new instinct theory, based on the earliest internal survival processes of the human infant; and we see Winnicott as the upstart practitioner, both as a student of Klein, and later as her strongest challenger (Kahre, 1996; Rodman, 2004). In this dialectic, these two central figures had formed the foundation of what was to become the very heart of the pre-war and post-war British Psychoanalytic Society. What is remarkable is the degree of contentiousness that existed within the British Society, as each clinician fought for their theoretical position.

The overriding element in the book celebrates, as well as examines, this point in the history of psychoanalysis, since psychoanalysis moved from primarily an internal instinct theory to a theory of internalized object relations, which views the external (caregiving) environment as a central force in the development of human conflict and personality. Essentially, it is a book about how a student confronts and triumphs over his mentor, related to how Winnicott confronts the bad object critical rejecting mother in Klein, reinventing psychoanalysis along the way. Kavaler-Adler demonstrates, time and time again, how Winnicott’s writings were often constructed as a form of debate with Klein, as if Winnicott was arguing with his teacher in an attempt to persuade Klein from her entrenched positions. The truth is, although he failed to convince her, he ended up nearly convincing everyone else. The fact that Winnicott was a pediatrician, experienced with mothers and children, is not lost on Kavaler-Adler, who pointedly illustrates, through the respective experiences of each theorist, how their lives went a long way in shaping their theoretical attitudes about human nature.

Both historically and epigenetically, Klein – after her analysis with Ferenczi in Budapest from 1914 to 1919 – was analyzed by one of Freud’s most ardent protégé, Karl Abraham in Berlin (for less than 18 months, interrupted by Abraham’s
premature death in 1925) (Hernandez-Halton, 2015), completely embraced libido theory. However, she then innovated its core tenets by re-imagining the vicissitudes of instinct theory through the very earliest of psychic mechanisms of infancy, which are expressed through the infant's fantasies. By re-conceptualizing and looking through the lens of the earliest mental structures, Klein establishes bold new ground in psychoanalysis, which is still so valuable today. In concluding her book, Kavaler-Adler writes: "Klein's phenomenological theory, particularly of the paranoid (schizoid) and depressive positions, and of pathological defenses, which disrupt self-integration and psychic development, as well as her theories of envy and reparation...[offer] deep mines of clinical riches..." (p. 261). Here, Kavaler-Adler disavows the fundamental principle of the "death instinct" so prevalent in Klein's work, preferring Winnicott's ideas related to a rupture in the maternal caretaking holding environment, which is at the core of mental illness and the aggressive urge (Winnicott, 1971, 1975, 1986). Although there is a sense of great admiration for Klein and her contribution, Kavaler-Adler clearly identifies with Winnicott's formulations, especially in the clinical sphere, regarding holding, play, potential and transitional space, false self, capacity to be alone, capacity for concern, the use of an object etc., which she readily presents in a extensive case material throughout the book (Winnicott, 1953, 1958, 1960, 1963, 1965, 1967, 1968, 1986).

The Klein-Winnicott Dialectic presents a cornerstone in the ever-expanding writings and clinical research from Susan Kavaler-Adler, and should not be missed. As in her past writings, she extracts from and synthesizes the key concepts of past master clinicians, to create her own contribution to the field of object relations psychoanalysis. In many ways, this book represents not only an expert examination of the technical and personal dialectic between Klein and Winnicott, but also the author's own dialectic with both of these giants of psychoanalysis. By reviewing the respective biographical elements of both Klein and Winnicott, the author makes a strong argument for how each of them, in their own way, failed in their "developmental mourning" (Kavaler-Adler, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2013), and thus she shows how such failure can result in a "demon-lover complex" and other types of defensive ideation (Kavaler-Adler, 1993, 1996). Kavaler-Adler, perhaps the most articulate presenter of Klein's often dense work, captures the essence of her theory of psychic development built on developmental mourning, without comprising Klein's death instinct metapsychology (Kavaler-Adler, 2013). Kavaler-Adler’s book represents a bridge between two great thinkers, while adding the author's own important contribution to the field. Any clinician or interested student will find great insight in these pages that fully articulate and embrace the field of object relations psychoanalysis.

Jack Schwartz PsyD, LCSW, NCPsyA
85 Newark Pompton Turnpike, Riverdale, NJ 07457, USA
e-mail: psyjack@msn.com
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