

Comments on Adam Phillips' "CONVERSIONB HYSTERIA: BELIEVE IT OR NOT"  
STOLLER MEMORIAL LECTURE, New Center for Psychoanalysis, October 26, 2017

By  
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This is a brilliant paper, evocative, brimming with ideas, full of surprises, illuminating about its main theme of conversion—identification—and ultimately subversive of many received ideas in the psychoanalytic canon. Like the best of Adam Phillips's essays, this one stimulates thought, and provokes self-reflection, promoting conversation.

Adam Phillips privileges surprise and not knowing over conversion and definitive forms of knowing. Psychoanalysis, he argues, ought not to be a conversion therapy. He advances a playful view of skepticism as a way of countering conversion (identification). Psychoanalysis ought to be used by the patient and analyst pragmatically, that is, by making it useful to the patient through promoting experimentation. Skepticism becomes a way of constructively resisting other peoples' definitive beliefs and formulas for how one ought to live. Phillips advances a form of skepticism about one's parents, experts teachers, or other authorities including psychoanalysts who presume to know what is best for us. To read Phillips is to mobilize against uncritical forms of compliance, to mobilize spontaneity and authenticity against automatic pathological accommodation.

Consistent with the essay form, Phillips's paper is strong in asking but not resolving subtle but significant questions. The point is not simply to raise questions

about questions, or within questions, but to open up our systems of thinking, ultimately to stimulate reflection.

Phillips' critique of identification and its vicissitudes could have benefitted from reference to and discussion of Ralph Greenson's seminal 1968 article, "Disidentifying with the Mother."

I read the passages on Socrates as an analogy to understanding the goals and attitudes of the good-enough analyst. The analyst can be an inspiring object of identification, can participate in and co-create with the patient, life-enhancing forms of identifications. The task of analysis, then, is to facilitate a maturational process where the patient becomes himself or herself, encouraging her to become rational, alive, and real in her own way and in her own time and own space. In this sense, the analyst ought not to impinge on the patient in terms of his supposed knowledge of what the patient ought to be, or how the patient ought to change. The figure of Socrates becomes one of the analyst as a transformational object, in ways outlined by Christopher Bollas.

I want to express my gratitude to Adam Phillips for his passages on Arnold Cooper and Robert Stoller. Both authors questioned the normative narratives about sexuality, broadening the scope of psychoanalytic inquiry and treatment. Both understood the role of hostility as part of the deep structure of perversion. Psychoanalysis for Stoller in particular was above all the analysis of conscious and unconscious fantasy, including destructive fantasies of revenge, triumph, and sadistic domination. Tonight's Stoller Lecture is the best way to keep Stoller's work alive, sustaining the vitality of his method. In short, we keep Stoller's work relevant

to the contemporary conversation by reading him carefully and by offering up an intelligent and well-informed critique.

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