



Melanie Klein's view of sexuality

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Klein's views on sexuality evolved as she developed her theories. There are in my view roughly three phases:

- the first, **Sex and inhibited curiosity** from about 1919,
- then, the development of early analysis of children in 1923, when she was interested in inhibitions arising from the **Imbalance between aggression and libido**, and formed the core of her book in 1932 (*The Psychoanalysis of Children*),
- and third, subsequently, from, 1935, she moved on to explore what she called 'the deeper layers', or psychotic anxiety and the primitive defence mechanisms, and her resulting **Later theories** of the depressive and paranoid-schizoid positions (Klein 1935, 1946).

Sex and inhibited curiosity

Melanie Klein was seriously committed to Freud's theories, including the sexuality of children. As she said in her unpublished autobiographical notes, she was deeply impressed by Freud who she heard at a meeting of the Austrian and Hungarian societies in 1917. Encouraged by Ferenczi, Klein began to make observations of her own children in the manner in which Max Graf had 'conversations' with his five-year-old son, known in the literature as Little Hans. Freud (1909) had then been seeking evidence of childhood sexuality by direct observation to confirm his inference from adult analyses. Klein was first of all following this same path. She confirmed, again, the phase of infantile sexuality, and its repression.

At this time, in 1918, Freud published his Wolfman analysis. The case again confirmed the infantile phase of sexuality, though in a different way. It turned on a dream at age 4, and, as Freud deduced, the trauma of witnessing the parents in intercourse when the patient was 18 months; but it was evidenced from the analysis of a man of 24 years. In this paper, Freud introduced the idea of the 'primal scene'.

Klein reported her own observations in a paper, for her membership of the Hungarian Psychoanalytical Society, in 1919, and called 'The development of a child'. She described in her paper a boy, Fritz, almost certainly her own youngest child, Erich (Grosskurth 1986). Fritz, in his 5th year, repeatedly asked 'How is a person made?', and asked it in various forms. He was given enlightened answers about mother's body etc. Fritz took this in only slowly, and compared it with a competing explanation that some others gave him, that the storks brought babies. Interestingly, Klein did not mention sexuality directly in this paper, though intimate details of the body, his and mother's, are prominent. Under the influence of the honest answers to his questions, Fritz's curiosity gradually opened up and he repeatedly asked questions on all sorts of topics, moving from bodies to God and to existence.

That paper was published in 1921, but on publication it had a second part. The second part was another paper, also given in 1921; there she described a further



phase of Fritz's development. The success of answering his conscious questions had not lasted, and he became brooding and taciturn. She says

When I compared the strongly stimulated zest in questioning, which followed partial enlightenment and later became partly brooding, partly superficial, with the subsequent distaste for questions and the disinclination even to listen to stories... I became convinced that the child's very powerful impulse for investigation had come into conflict with his equally powerful tendency to repression (Klein 1921, p. 29).

She then enlightened him about the origins of babies in seeds and impregnation. However, he 'interrupted the explanation with another irrelevant question' (p. 30). And on another occasion hearing about the role of a cock when a hen lays eggs, 'He had hardly mentioned the subject, however, before he showed the obvious desire to be quit of it' (p. 30). The conflict between the impulse for investigation and the equally powerful tendency to repression was clear; but eventually he spontaneously began talking, telling phantastical stories. This, for Klein, seemed like the production of material in dreams, and represented a release from inhibition.

But now, in 1921, Klein moved to Berlin, and there she developed her play technique. But there is a third instalment to Fritz's development. This is described in a paper in 1923 (Klein 1923b, 1927), 'The role of school in libidinal development'. Now seven, Fritz had a distaste for school, which was understood by Klein as the considerable effort of sublimating his sexual libido into intellectual functioning. She described how the effort to read is saturated with repressed and sublimated sexual phantasies. For example,

For Fritz, when he was *writing*, the lines meant roads and the letters ride on motor-bicycles – on the pen – upon them. For instance, 'i' and 'e' ride together on a motor-bicycle that is usually driven by the 'i' and they love one another with a tenderness quite unknown in the real world. Because they always ride with one another they became so alike that there is hardly any difference between them, for the beginning and the end... of 'i' and 'e' are the same, only in the middle the 'i' has a little stroke and the 'e' has a little hole... (Klein 1923a, p.64)

She continued

The 'i's' are skilful, distinguished and clever, have many pointed weapons, and live in caves, between which, however, there are also mountains, gardens and harbours (Klein 1923a, p. 64).

As she commented, 'They represent the penis, and their path coitus' p. 64)

This tender account by Fritz, shows Klein as a thoroughly conventional psychoanalyst in interpreting the sexual phantasies in childhood, the parental relationship, repression, and the struggle for sublimation. Her emphasis is on intellectual curiosity as the important sublimation. Intellectual development was a topic of interest at the time, and she referenced, Sadger (1920) and Stekel (1923).

However, she was in process of taking a further step. This was the development of her method of 'early analysis' also called 'play technique'. And as so often, a new technique of investigation results in new findings.



The imbalance between aggression and libido

By 1925, Melanie Klein had developed a form of child psychoanalysis. Instead of free association she instituted free play, and instead of resistance, she noted inhibition. These she decided were the exact equivalents of adult psychoanalysis, and so the analyst's role in both should be similarly equivalent – interpretation of the unconscious, and of that which is repressed, and inhibited. She showed that the impact of interpretation visibly releases the inhibition.

With this method she made, as we know, a number of developments in theory connected with the early stages of the Oedipus complex and the super-ego. However, one really important issue was how inhibition, or resistance, comes about.

She says, in her autobiographical notes,

I have often been asked how it was that I tackled the children I analysed in the way I did, which was entirely unorthodox and, in many cases, in contrast to the rules laid down for the analysis of adults. I still cannot answer what made me feel that it was anxiety that I should touch and why I proceed in this way (Klein 1959, p. 23).

Despite her conformity to the general pattern of adult psychoanalysis, she was unorthodox. She focused on anxiety. She did not reduce everything immediately to defences against the instinctual impulses. She addressed the *felt anxiety*, rather than the inferred concepts of drive theory.

But more is unorthodox than this. In the case of Fritz she described how he had become taciturn and lacked interest and curiosity in one phase because of a repression of the sexual interest and curiosity. However now she believed she saw a new factor at work. This new factor was her realisation of what provoked the anxiety. The child felt anxiety as a reaction to its own aggression. For instance, Rita was one of the earliest cases she treated with her play technique, and not her earlier observation method (Frank 2009); she wrote,

...Rita, aged two and three-quarters. After a ceremonial which was plainly obsessional, her doll was tucked up to go to sleep and an elephant was placed by the doll's bed. The idea was that the elephant should prevent the 'child' from getting up; otherwise the latter would steal into its parents' bedroom and either do them some harm or take something away from them. The elephant (a father-imago) was to act the part of a person who prevents. In Rita's mind her father, by a process of introjection, already filled this rôle, ever since, at the time she was a year and a quarter to two years old, she had wished to usurp her mother's place with him, to steal away the child with which her mother was pregnant and to injure and castrate both parents. The reactions of rage and anxiety which took place when the 'child' was punished in these games showed that in her own mind Rita was enacting both parts: that of the authorities who inflicted punishment and that of the child who received it (Klein 1929, p. 196).



The focus of the play is little Rita's anxiety about stopping the child from stealing and harming the parents; that is to say, Rita was anxious about her aggressive feelings towards her parents

It is conventionally supposed that Klein was interested in aggression rather than sexuality. This is not exactly the case. She did think her little child patients, like Rita, were interested in, and frightened by, their own aggression, but the children were *also* interested in their sexual objects – the parents in intercourse and loved them enough to be seriously occupied with protecting them and their relationship. The problem was to manage the conflict, and the balance of their aggression *in relation to* their love and compassion. This is in a different register from sexuality. And Klein without, I think, realising it was taking a position on this human relatedness. It is not just the satiation which is important in the satisfaction of hunger or of sex, but there is a significance added to the satiation, the gratitude – as she would later call it. Gratitude for being satisfied is as powerful an experience as the satisfaction itself. This does not mean Klein was not interested in sexuality, but that she was interested in something at a more object relational level as well.

During this period she developed the idea of the object. It is not merely the object of a satisfaction. It is personal. The object becomes, *in itself*, a 'good' object. Its goodness is as important as the satisfaction it brings. And the object too feels a satisfaction, a satisfaction at being 'good' and able to satisfy. All very complicated. I haven't seen it better described than by Greenberg and Mitchell (1983):

The drives for Freud are finite amounts of energy; they are treated as physical substances, having specific quantities... [T]he more expended in direct gratification, the less available for sublimation or aim-inhibited activities; the more directed towards one person, the less available for others... Not so with Klein. Without explicitly announcing that she is doing so, she changes all of Freud's basic economic principles. In Klein's system, the energy of the drives is not finite or preset... Love for one object does not limit, but increases love for others (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, p. 143-144).

Klein whether she knew it or not, by focusing on the experience, and not just the drives was making a profound distinction between sex and love.

As an aside, it is of some interest that in Berlin, Abraham, from whom Klein learned so much, showed the way in his own work, towards understanding the object as a sentient being (Abraham 1924). That is, the object can love the subject back, and hence the fate of the object worried the subject. Abraham too made a distinction between what he called whole-object love, conceiving the object as another being, and partial object love, the enjoyment of sex as a simple satiation. And where did Abraham get that distinction from? Well, maybe we don't know – but Abraham learned psychoanalysis when he was at the Burgholzli Hospital in Zurich, and he worked on Jung's medical team; and Jung of course broke from Freud on the very question of the nature of love in relation to simply libidinal sex.

But this digression does not call into question Klein's commitment to Freud. It does not mean that she had no theory of sexuality. Let me now summarise the place that sexuality had at this second stage, during the 1920s when she developed her play technique for child analysis.



Klein engaged with the Oedipus complex, up till 1945. However, it was not the classical version. Klein believed the young child had many versions of the parents in intercourse, and that such ideas and phantasies were inflammatory to the essentially *left-out* infant. It continues in Ron Britton's account as late as 1989, and up to the present day. The emphasis is on the primitiveness of the conception of the parental relations and activities with each other.

At this stage the emphasised was on the primitive quality, and the aggression of the Oedipus complex. For instance, this is a little girl of 4 ¼ who was so anxious and disturbed she would not stay in the same room with the strange analyst, and her sister had to stay in the room with her during the sessions,

One day while Ruth was once again devoting her attention exclusively to her sister, she drew a picture of a glass tumbler with some small round balls inside and a kind of lid on top. I asked her what the lid was for, but she would not answer me. On her sister repeating the question, she said it was 'to prevent the balls from rolling out'. Before this she had gone through her sister's bag and then shut it tightly 'so that nothing should fall out of it'. She had done the same with the purse inside the bag so as to keep the coins safely shut up. Furthermore, the material she was now bringing me had been quite clear even in her previous hours. I now made a venture. I told Ruth that the balls in the tumbler, the bits of money in the purse and the contents of the bag all meant children in her Mummy's inside, and that she wanted to keep them safely shut up so as not to have any more brothers and sisters. The effect of my interpretation was astonishing. For the first time Ruth turned her attention to me and began to play in a different, less constrained, way (Klein 1932, p. 54).

Here the interpretation is about the resentment towards new little brothers and sisters, and Ruth's awareness of the need to bottle them up for good. Of course Klein also showed that mother's body contained father or his penis, and such a consort aroused even more inflamed aggression. Up to 1945, Klein was working out, in detail, the way the Oedipus complex forms, how the boy and girl diverge in their phantasies.

So, in summary, in this second phase, the new observations during a child analysis changed her emphasis. Previously, Klein thought that children were inhibited by thoughts of sexuality itself, perhaps in connection with the adults' embarrassment. Now she is clear that there is a specific aggression against sexuality in the parents, and that creates conflicts for a child who relates to the person of the object and not just its function.

Later theories

Klein's book in 1932, *The Psychoanalysis of Children*, was a summation of the second phase, and though she continued till 1945, from the early 1930s she began to change direction again. She began to tackle the challenge of the more severe mental disturbances. First she wrote about depression and gave a paper at the IPA conference in Lucerne in 1934 (published 1935). It was a mere four months after a



bereavement – her son had died in a climbing accident. The depressive position as she called it, continued the theme of mixed love and hate. It had two additions to Freud's theory of depression in 'Mourning and melancholia'. The first was that the objects which were subjected to love, hate and remorse were those located *inside* the subject – the 'internal objects'. And second, was the increased emphasis on the love, gratitude, generosity, etc, rather than merely the satisfaction of sexual desire.

The coming together of hate and of love, which endangers the Oedipal parents, creates a fear *for* the object, for its protection. Klein described the importance of reparation – making good in some way any damage the infant thinks he might have done to the object/objects which he also loves and cherishes. Klein stressed reparation as a central strategy – the repair of the damage which the infant fears has been done by his own aggression. This entails the infant maximising his loving feelings as the repairing force he has available.

Here sexuality became important in a new and different way. Klein states that one method of maximising love is for the subject is to deploy his genital sexuality; she says 'the sexual act serves to restore the mother's injured body and thus to master anxiety and guilt' (Klein 1932, p. 248). She is not saying that the actual sexual act with mother is employed, but the imagined sexual love is deployed, as it might be in a dream to repair and restore the good Oedipal object. In the stage of genitality the infant has a new opportunity to pursue the inner struggle with himself. Sex is an enhancement of the loving side of the ego. In effect, erotisation is a *defence* against the hating and harming. This turns upside down, as it were, the role of sexuality. It is no longer that love is a secondary add-on component that is felt towards the object that satisfies sexually. Now sexuality is used in a secondary way to restore the primary love for the object.

Klein reached the concept of the paranoid-schizoid position (in 1946), underlying the depressive position, in the course of working with psychiatrists (and analysing some). Whilst the core of the depressive position is a fear for the object, for the loved other, in the paranoid-schizoid position, the core is a fear *for the self*. The subject, the ego, fears it will not survive. Klein thought that this was the essence of psychosis – the struggle to survive, a fear of annihilation, as she called it. Here the problems are not the conflicts about sex, or aggression, not about impulses, sexual or other. Here the problem is the capacity to have a mind that is stable enough to have conflicts in it. These are anxieties about the integrity of the mind, of its survival, and of its fragmentation. It cannot be put better than Bion's remark,

The non-psychotic personality was concerned with a neurotic problem, that is to say a problem that centred on the resolution of a conflict of ideas and emotions to which the operation of the ego had given rise. But the psychotic personality was concerned with the problem of repair of the ego (Bion 1957, p. 272).

Klein has moved a step further away perhaps from the mind which is occupied with sexual impulses, and the resolution of those immense conflicts which the Oedipal phantasies create for the child. Now in this third stage, the anxiety is about surviving sufficiently to maintain the capacity to have these phantasies at all



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At a late stage, within a few years of her death, she formulated the concept of envy – or primary envy as she (Klein 1957) and Rosenfeld (1952) called it. This is the attitude of hate and aggression towards the good object, for the sake of its goodness. We might take as an example, Ruth's phantasies of attacking mother's body. However this poses an interesting question. Ruth's aggression was understood at the time, around 1924-25, as a response to the creativity that produced new siblings, and the rivalry for mother. But even at that point, 30 years before her formal description of envy, she conveyed that Ruth's imagined attacks were more than sexual,

I now interpreted this material in connection with her protest against the big sponge (which represented her father's penis). I showed her in every detail how she envied and hated her mother because the latter had incorporated her father's penis during coitus, and how she wanted to steal his penis and the children out of her mother's inside and kill her mother (Klein 1932, p. 56).

This is much more destructive than a jealousy of the sexual relations of the parents and its products. The theory of envy in 1957 no longer needed a theory of sexuality.

With the alternating depressive and paranoid-schizoid position, and with envy, Klein addressed what she called the deeper layers of the unconscious. And she was pointing the way towards the work of Rosenfeld, Segal and Bion on the treatment of patients with psychotic conditions. It is Bion who most clearly distinguished between the anxieties arising from the sexual Oedipus complex, and the deeper layers of psychotic anxieties arising from a fragile disintegrating ego and identity. Even at this stage, focusing on the survival anxieties, sexuality has an importance parallel to the reparative purpose in the depressive position. In the paranoid-schizoid position, precocious genitality can be used to deny the fears of death with a relentless sexual energy.

Conclusion

It was Bion, too, who found a way back to the classical issues of the Oedipus complex. Briefly he elaborated a theory of the stable coherent mind which resists fragmentation by establishing links between its parts and between its thoughts. Sustained linking is the glue that keeps a mind together. However, he demonstrated that links are not always easy and comfortable to use. In particular such linking, even with this purpose, reminds of the Oedipal linking of the parents, and thus arouses violent and envious reactions that destroy links, even those that compose oneself. Bion (1962) used the Mars-and-Venus symbol to convey successful linking, sexual, relational, and intellectual. This emphasis on the linking of thoughts as the internal equivalent of a creative couple, takes us back to Klein's first and orthodox Freudian phase and the importance of intellectual curiosity and development, and its disruption. It is a return to Freud that has traversed a very wide terrain, and in the process gathered a rich harvest of conceptual thought and experience.

So in summary, Klein's work describes a trajectory from her classical Freudian observations of the Oedipal conflicts at the beginning, through her phase of child analysis where sexuality was, in the mind of the subject, balanced with aggression,



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and a whole-object love was important, to the final years of the major theories when erotisation was an adjunct to the defences against the deeper anxieties.



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