

Impact of Narcissism

The Errant Therapist on a Chaotic Quest

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Arguing for a return to an appreciation of intrapsychic dynamics, as well as outlining the many faces of narcissism, Dr. Giovacchini has contributed, yet again, to a sober, erudite and intelligent understanding of psychoanalysis. His focus, in this work, is on the vicissitudes of narcissism – its positive and negative manifestations as reflected in current psychoanalytic schools as well as individual pathology.

Giovacchini first turns his gaze to self-psychology. Critical of Kohut's clinical evidence for his model, Giovacchini argues that Kohut's self-analysis, masquerading as the two analyses of Mr. Z, is theoretically weak and flawed. He critiques Kohut's introduction of such terms as *selfobject* or *transmuting internalization* as unnecessary and/or at times confusing. He writes *Regarding structure, Kohut again makes up a new word by plastering two familiar words together and then believes he has expressed something novel. Selfobject is a case in point. (p.61)* Although Giovacchini writes of both personal and collegial friendship with Kohut, his pervasive negative assessment of self-psychology is obvious: *Placing the idealizing and mirroring transference in a preobject phase, that is, primary narcissism, makes no conceptual sense, since transference is a type of object relationship, and as the mind is viewed as a hierarchically ordered continuum, transference would be an element in all object relations. (p.57)*

Giovacchini comments on the idealization rampant in the analytic world. He is as critical of those followers of Freud, for example, as he is of the followers of Kohut who turn admiration into adulation. He singles out Stephen Mitchell for the clarity of his writings; he is, however, dismissive toward the inter-subjectivists, notably Robert Stolorow, and George Atwood, for employing postmodern philosophical language that is arcane and/or has no clinical relevance. In this context Giovacchini writes that: *Changing the lexicon does not create new ideas. It becomes a chore to have to work so hard to come to the realization that what is being expressed is commonplace, even mundane, within a professional purview (p.40)*. Among the many examples he offers, Giovacchini, quoting these two authors, writes ...“*the contents of experience and structures of subjectivity to designate the invariant principles unconsciously and recurrently organizing those contents according to distinctive meanings and themes*”(p.177)...*they seem to be saying something important and profound, but what are they really saying? What are ‘contents of experience?’ (p.40)*

The text is replete with well-crafted case vignettes. The author's style is personal, immediate as well as thoughtful and convincing. Giovacchini's constant emphasis is on the development of psychic structures, which foster the growth of autonomy. Symptom resolution and making the unconscious conscious are subordinate to this goal. His case studies are sensitively drawn, so much so that each vignette seems to speak to the reader immediately.

Giovacchini quotes, in a non-judgmental vein, the work of D.W.Winnicott who might physically hold a patient in an effort to bring about personal integration. He states, however, that he, personally, could not have any physical contact with a patient, based on his own personality and

his psychoanalytic training. Without indicating any physical contact between patient and therapist, he does criticize a colleague for bringing an 18-year-old patient into his house while still conducting analytic treatment, with the tragic consequence that the youth committed suicide. Giovacchini remarks that *The therapist was a certified analyst and should have known that psychodynamically oriented treatment cannot survive without the establishment of professional boundaries. (p154)*

One gets the impression that the author knew the therapist personally and more is being left unsaid than said. This is unfortunate since the reader is left with half information, at best, while an important clinical judgment is expressed. Giovacchini knows, more than most, of the early practices of Freud and Ferenczi, of Sechehaye and Winnicott. His categorical approach, in this instance, is puzzling. If each human being is unique then professional guidelines are just that, i.e., guidelines, a sober reminder of why the practice of psychoanalysis is so delicate and individualized. Professional boundaries ultimately have to do with the quality of relationship in the analytic process, as well as the capacity of both patient and analyst for self-observation. That is to *hover* over that process (Giovacchini's own metaphor) with *utter honesty*, free of excessive personal or professional narcissism. The task of adhering to such utter honesty, outside of any formulas, is the recurrent backdrop for most of Giovacchini's observations.

Throughout the text, Giovacchini evidences a flexibility of mind and a breath of references that is impressive and broadly based. It is surprising, therefore, to read his comments on the philosophy of science. Paralleling the thought of D'Abro, Giovacchini writes: *The investigators of intrapsychic phenomena make two similar assumptions: (1) that there is an inner world (the world of the unconscious); and (2) that it is knowable, and that it also*

functions according to certain laws. I believe this is all the philosophy we need, the philosophy of science. (P31) Perhaps a quote from the physicist Werner Heisenberg will exemplify my concern: *What we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning¹... (p.185).* What we know is not so simply known.

Notwithstanding this reservation, this is a worthwhile text; it is a clarion call back to the intrapsychic as well as a study of some evident trends in the contemporary North American psychoanalytic world. The book ends with an evocative analysis of some of George Bernard Shaw's plays and relates the character development in them to the process of therapy. This is a most enjoyable section, particularly his discussion of *Pygmalion*. Giovacchini is a learned and non-intrusive teacher. Everyone will benefit from reading this work – including self-psychologists.

References:

- D'Abro, A. (1951) *The Rise of the New Physics*. New York: Dover
- Gregory, Bruce. (1988) *Inventing Reality-Physics as Language*. John Wiley & Sons, New York.

¹ As quoted in *Inventing Reality* by Bruce Gregory. Gregory, a scientist himself, goes on to write that *The language we use tells us the kind of a world we can expect to find. (p199)*