

## On spirituality

A talk by Donald Meltzer originally entitled 'The role of projective identification in the formation of weltanschauung', given at the London Centre for Psychotherapy c.2002, with respondent David Mayers

I will try to stick to this implication that I am going to talk about projective identification, but I can't promise that it will be like that, because what I'm really occupied with these days is the contrast between invention and discovery, which I think is terribly important for psychoanalysis. I'll try to explain why. It is a great consolation to me to read that other people have difficulties with this matter. I was given an article from the Review of Literature called 'On not being able to play the piano'. I thought to myself, I know all about that. But it was very consoling because it was written by somebody who had really obviously broken his heart trying to learn to play the piano well. I thought to myself, if I could play it at all I'd be thrilled. It is the same thing with invention and discovery. In grazing through some mathematical books – which I cannot read but can only graze through – on the subject of negative and imaginary numbers, I realised that I was constantly hearing an equivocation as to whether this was about invention or about discovery. Well I hope it's not so vague in relation to psychoanalysis. I think perhaps a bit heartlessly I would classify Freud as being on the border – being a great discoverer but also a great inventor. The invention has to do really with nomenclature – the names that you give to things, and the fact that names become so concrete and so factual that one does really believe that they mean something. Projective identification is one of these things that you believe in. This raises questions about religion and spirituality – the whole question of belief. Was it Wittgenstein or was it Bertrand Russell who said that the correct linguistic method for expressing something is not 'I can see that cat' but 'I am cat-perceptive'? That seems to me to be quite correct. But to say 'I am cat-perceptive' seems too trivial really for such an effort at correctness. Last night, thinking over what I was going to say this morning, I was reviewing some of the miracles that I have encountered in my life. I thought, I'm not cat-perceptive, I'm miracle-perceptive; and that's something spiritual. The fact that I'm approaching eighty makes it clear really that something has been happening to me that

has to do with miracles. For one thing people are much nicer to me than they used to be. I no longer have a car; instead people get up and offer me a seat on the bus. It is very striking to me that people are very nice to me as I get feebler and feebler. It must be also that I am nicer myself, although I have several patients who tell me that I am terrible – that I am evil, that I am brutal, that I am aggressive. And they're so right that you can't argue about it. Something has happened to my vocabulary that is so pointed, so sharp, that it can leave people bleeding a little. But it is not nice to say to somebody 'you're so egocentric and vain that there's no possibility of...' and so on. It may be true, but it is not polite. And it's not civilised.

So this benefit I've discovered – that people are nicer to me now I'm rather old and feeble – also makes me nicer to them, and ready to listen to people who tell me how nasty and aggressive I am – all of which Mrs Klein knew very well, so it's not a surprise to me. It is a surprise that people don't kill you when you're like that. I have one patient who always seems to be going for my jugular, but somehow she just barks and it doesn't make me bleed; and I look forward to seeing her next time when she comes and barks at me. I can see that she makes some progress. Every once in a while a little bit of softness slips out of her. But to anyone hearing the session from the hall outside my door it must really sound like murder.

To get back to this serious business of invention and discovery, which takes us directly to the differentiation between talent and genius. Talent is one of these miracles which are thrillingly more and more apparent as I grow older. I was looking at a book of drawings by a five and a half year old autistic girl who drew horses better than Piero della Francesca, better than Uccello, and how she could draw these horses was a miracle. They were full of muscle, full of vitality; yet she looked so lacking in vitality herself in the photograph. When I was younger I thought that talent was simply a matter of good teaching and hard work, and that if you persevered you would discover your talents. It took a long time to realise that it didn't work like that. I had good teachers and I worked hard, but nothing happened. What did happen seemed so trivial that it was hardly worth mentioning: I discovered that I was a good reader of dreams, which seems utterly trivial – except that they are marvellous and mysterious and alert you to the fact that the human mind is something about which we actually know nothing. All this business about the double helix is supposed to tell you

exactly about the different mental capacities that are imprinted in every cell of your body. There is something too utterly simplistic about it. One need only think about the Bach family or the Bernoulli family to realise that it is not only about heredity but about culture, and God knows what culture means. I certainly don't know. But you are immersed in your family culture from at least before you were born. The discovery that there are children who never get born is a really important discovery – who do not make the transition from dependence on the placenta to dependence on the breast, with the result that they have no access to the communications that Bion has spelled out in terms of maternal reverie and so on. I certainly think I have seen children who failed to get born. Some of them are the kind of children who are called hyperactive and manifest an absolute incapacity for symbol-formation, thought. But how it comes about I can't say.

About how it *doesn't* come about I could say something. I think I have discovered something about the creativity of small children, and how it is connected with their earliest experiences of defecation: with what an achievement and triumph it is for a small child to produce a firm stool, and how it is required that this achievement be recognised. And most mothers do automatically recognise this achievement. But they don't recognise, as it were, the mechanics of it. What does a child have to do or avoid doing in order to produce a well-formed stool, which also turns out to be a good-smelling stool? One discovers things like: the role of procrastination, in children being incontinent of faeces; where the urge to defecate is not so mandatory that you can't postpone it and postpone it until it is too late, and before you know it you have filled your pants. Not only filled your pants, but it stinks. What the child apparently has to discover is not only not to procrastinate, but its opposite – to be patient, and to wait until his organ is ready to produce a well-formed stool.

Now this brings us really, like Cupid's arrow, back to the problem of identification and, I suppose, to love. To produce a well-formed sweet-smelling stool is a gift of love. And to be unable to do it is a terrible torment for children. It makes me think about my own life experience and what lies behind the one talent that I have discovered in myself, that is the ability to read dreams, and how it came about as the result of falling in love with Melanie Klein and approaching her like an arrow from the bow, determined to have analysis with her. Not a matter of desire – a matter of

life and death. It is an interesting story; I was in the United States air force at that time and had spent several years lying and scheming to be stationed in Great Britain in order to undertake analysis with her. As I stepped on to the plane to come to the United Kingdom, I got a change of orders, shifting me to Germany. Well by the time I reached Germany, I was dying of pneumonia, but also murderous, absolutely murderous, and I only remember getting on the telephone and screaming that I would murder somebody if they didn't shift me back to the UK. I woke up the next morning on the boat from the Hook of Holland, and started my analysis with Mrs Klein the next day. I would have killed somebody – there is no doubt.

<sup>1</sup>That's not the same as discovering something. But it is certainly not an invention – you don't *invent* that you will kill somebody if you don't get your way. There are times when it is so factual that it is not possible to consider it an invention. The analysis with Mrs Klein changed my life. It changed me from a nice American boy to a nasty piece of work. But it was a great relief knowing this fellow that my parents had thought was so nice. And when Mrs Klein wrote a book about my envy, I was thrilled. Now that transformation from being a baseball-playing American boy to being a nasty piece of work released the possibility of my actually learning to read. It was my mother's heartache that I never read a book. My eldest sister read all the books in the house and they belonged to her. Finally though I did begin to learn to read, and discovered how marvellous books are, because through books one can discover one's identifications. To my Cupid's-arrow identification with Melanie Klein, I added a spouse for her, with the wonderful name of Darcy Wentworth Thompson, whose book *Growth and Form* had been a sort of Bible for me during my undergraduate years. This man was the epitome of the naturalist, studying nature and filled with wonder at the miracles of nature, and it was thrilling. Then I discovered people like Gregor Mendeljeff, with his periodic table, still for me a miracle. These real discoverers are very much associated for me with the few lines of poetry that have stuck in my head. Like 'Did he who made the Lamb made thee?' Yes. Or, 'Ravish me... Nor ever chaste except thou ravish me' – Donne's marvellous poem. I just finished a lovely book called *The Shadow of Cervantes* by Wyndham Lewis. Such a nice man. Well along with Darcy

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1 In Mrs Klein's last paper, 'On the sense of loneliness', there is a description of Meltzer's analysis with her (in *Our Adult World and Other Essays*, pp. 107-8). (The following case described in that paper is Arthur Hyatt Williams.)

Wentworth Thompson, I also discovered Alfred North Whitehead, who is for me the exemplar of a man who used language to discover things, while developing a unique language of his own for describing the world as he met it. He called this kind of discovering ‘an adventure’; and it was an adventure. It was lovely to read this book of his, to see the world unfolding before you like a flower.

Well this is one of the benefits of ageing: I discover that reading is endless; there are so many people who write well. I’m not one of them; it is not my talent. But I can tell a good story if a patient will dream it for me.

The problem of spirituality, as it has begun to sort itself out in my mind, is connected with a family culture. There was nothing special about my family culture. Except that my parents were so special, and I deceived them into thinking that I was a nice baseball-playing boy; it is true that that was all I seemed to care about – horses, and playing. I certainly didn’t enjoy school until about age 10 or 11. It didn’t occur to me to enjoy school. I can regret now the opportunities I wasted. But they didn’t appear as opportunities, they just appeared as variations of boredom. It didn’t occur to me – is all that can be said about it. I didn’t begin to get an education until I began to read.

Now as far as the application of this to psychoanalysis is concerned: it seems to me absolutely essential that we concentrate on discovering, and do not yield to the temptation to invent. In Philip Pullman’s wonderful book, his little heroine Lyra learns that her survival has been purely the consequence of her being a liar; and she agrees with the harpy that screams at her ‘liar, liar liar!’ Are Philip Pullman’s books full of inventions? No, I think they are full of discoveries. The great discovery, as far as I can see, is in *The Amber Spyglass* which has to do with how the dust of consciousness is running out, because Will with his ‘subtle knife’ opened windows between the different worlds but didn’t close them, so the dust of consciousness just ran out of these windows. It seems to me to be a piece of optimism, at the end of the book, that Will has to dedicate his life to going back and closing all the windows that he left open. And it parallels the other part of this story: that Lyra has to be a reincarnation of Eve, and to refuse the apple. Well – I don’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. But it certainly is a very imaginative trilogy. It was such a pleasure to read, and so full of optimism. Now whether it is a spiritual book... it is delicately

balanced between invention and discovery. One would be inclined to say there is no possibility of believing in it; but there is also no possibility of not believing in it.

‘Except thou ravish me...’ That couples with the Shakespeare sonnet, which I can never remember... ‘Th’ expense of spirit in a waste of shame/ Is lust in action’. What a nice audience. Thank you.

Respondent: David Mayers

Every time I meet Donald Meltzer in person or in writing I come away with lots to be grateful for. I have this lovely expression, ‘miracle-perceptive’ which seems beautifully to summarise the central aspect of what I wanted to talk about. I start with an apparent impasse and then try to describe a way of trying to avoid the impasse. The impasse is this: if people talk to me about Christian spirituality, or Jewish spirituality, or Islamic spirituality, there is a defined object of worship, and spirituality is a matter of developing one’s relationship with the object of worship. If spirituality is taken outside such a context, I begin to have problems. There are certain concepts – holiness, reverence, sacredness, miracles, wonder, which are essential both to describe and explore aspects of our world. And if that’s what spirituality means, that’s fine. I think quite a lot of people want to take it further though, and to claim that somehow however nebulously there must be some sort of world-mind outside ourselves, because nothing can be explained without that. And I have to say, I feel such a thought to be a wish-fulfilling fantasy. People like Richard Dawkins and Steve Jones in their very different ways, have been eloquent expounders of how marvellous the world is. How infinitely fascinating is the mathematics which one needs to describe and then further to explore the minutiae of the universe. And psychoanalysis I think does the same job for aspects for the psyche. Why do you ever want any more? I sometimes have to say, ‘I just don’t know what to say here. That’s part of the mystery of things – not to be able to bear ‘I don’t know what to say’, and then to throw up a pseudo-explanation. That I think is a sort of dishonesty. Then there are others who want to believe in some sort of mind outside our own who simply say, No I don’t agree, and then we can get into a very sterile ping-pong match.

So let’s take this as a starting place. When he was thinking of the sense

of awe with which we meet the Sublime, Kant thought of two things: the starry heavens above, and the moral law within. And that's a very fruitful pairing, partly I would say because it places the moral law within as a natural phenomenon, not purely as a cultural product as many contemporary people want to do. Kant's exposition of the moral law within is a very cerebral and not very appealing one actually; but there is another tradition, going back to Plato and Aristotle, which tries to describe and thus to expound what it is to live a good life, in terms of what they call the cardinal virtues – which are: courage, justice, temperance, and however we translate *phronesis*. The standard translation used to be prudence, but that has become rather strange in English - practical wisdom is as good a version as I can think of. Now in psychoanalysis it is curious. Justice and temperance have been very thoroughly explored, but by a very negative road. By the very thorough investigation, of which Dr Meltzer has done his share, of phenomena like greed and envy, in so far as greed and envy convene, held and bay, then we do have a move towards justice and temperance. It is very interesting that when the paranoid-schizoid position takes over, very strange things happen to the virtues. You remember the Victorians thought of temperance as not drinking at all, rather than drinking a moderate amount, which is a very paranoid thought. So I am not going to talk this morning about justice and temperance – I think that has been done in its own way. I think courage and practical wisdom haven't been done nearly so thoroughly in psychoanalytic circles. And yet Dr Meltzer has always talked about the importance of introducing the possibility of courage, and indeed it takes a good deal of courage to face one's own nastiness. So let me give a thumbnail sketch of one of my patients, and try to illustrate two points. He came to me and talked a lot about a very imaginative creative father who was absolutely incontinent; whenever he was frustrated he burst into violent rages, and he was often frustrated because he felt very unappreciated by the world. And a very passive mother who was either sweetly saintly passive and mourned the world's awfulness in a quite ineffective way, or was rather disgustingly slobberingly passive – ate chocolate and watched TV and had a filthy kitchen where you couldn't touch anything without getting sticky. These were characters I heard an awful lot of at the beginning. Also a disgusting younger brother who was rude, sullen, dirty, untidy, and whatever else could you do but kick him

whenever you got the chance. And a cousin who was lucky enough to have his father decamp not long after he was born so he had a beautiful sexy mother all to himself. And this combination of the oedipal and the violent was very striking. At the beginning this patient's dreams were full of being in a place that became called in the work the 'shit-kitchen'. It got called that because of a dream in which he found himself in a subterranean kitchen where there was a tribe of brothers going through a blood-letting ceremony, cooking things and eating what they cooked; and they invited him but he was too frightened to do it. Then his mother came in and said, 'There's a pile of shit outside the door, and one of the brother said, Good, let's eat that. This claustrum-space became the 'shit kitchen', and there was lots of it.

As my patient became aware of his own violence, which started happening when he became aware of how horrible he'd been to his kid brother, he came out of the shit kitchen though when he got too frightened he always ran back into it in his dreams, and what took its place was a house on Hampstead Heath which was potentially quite a beautiful house, but there were dirty, disgusting rather frightening tramps camped just outside the garden fence, which was very frightening for those either coming out or going in to the house because they had to run the gauntlet of these awful derelicts. And his coming to understand this dream, and how much he had to sort out – his aggression to his brother, his wish to denigrate his mother, his wish to put all the violence into his father, and the way that the violence and the creativity had got mixed together so he couldn't allow himself to be creative because it felt like an act of violence – all this was sorted out via the tramps dreams. And then he started to dream about the settings of his university, and a time when either he was walking along the very top of a college building, teetering along about to fall into the street, or he was down in the street riding a bicycle very unsteadily and various characters who were me tried to help him to learn to ride more steadily, only he was too frightened to accept the help, so when he saw the helping figure coming he would run away. At the same time in the university dreams two colleges featured very often – neither of them one that he had attended, but one was said to be his and one his mother's, and there were a lot of dreams about congress between these two colleges.

At the end of the therapy, by the time he'd accepted how violent he



could be, but meanwhile had allowed himself to be considerably more creative than he had done, his final dream was like this: he was coming to see me, for lunch (this was the last session), and I lived in a college that was strange to him, but part of the university town. He went past the porter's lodge and into the grounds and saw something like a Greek tomb; this was very beautiful but also sad and when he saw me for lunch he was suffused by the feeling that 'this is not my place; I have to go now', and he went away and walked sadly through the town towards the station through a street of ordinary little terraced houses. He saw a house that had had a For Sale sign that now said Sold, and realised this was his house, that he was going to live in with his father, and it was empty so he could put his own furniture in it. I thought that that scaling down from the grandiosity of the college to this little house, realising he could furnish it himself, was really an act of great courage and achievement. But of course he was going to live there with his father and one wondered where mother had gone, and it came as no surprise to me when a couple of years after he'd finished he asked if he could come back once a week, and that did finally bring mother back in and he established a triangular setup for himself. But he was so frightened; it showed in the dreams so clearly what he was frightened of – not so much the creatures in the shit-kitchen, not so much the raging father, but the fact of his own vulnerability and weakness and his needing help, and how awful it felt to him to accept help. But the need for courage pretty obvious there.

What about practical wisdom? I remember Dr Meltzer saying some years ago, it is easy enough to see projection in the work; but introjection is more mysterious; you realise after it has happened, with hindsight; you don't see it happening in the same way. I think that the internal process which is at the basis of practical wisdom as a virtue is what ever it takes to go through that process of introjection that my patient did – to see what was him what was his parents, what his brothers, and to settle for that little comparatively humble family house. It's very difficult to describe how it happened, except for the projections that he had to take back, but there's surely more to it than that, and whatever there is to it which is miraculous I think, it surely what is at the bottom of *phrenesis*, practical wisdom. That seems to me the miraculousness of the moral law within, as investigated psychoanalytically.

## Questions and comments

**Q:** I was thinking about the first bit of history that Dr Meltzer gave. Is there a bit of miracle-perception in knowing things without knowing how you know them. The bit that intrigued me about the story about Melanie Klein is, how come you knew you wanted analysis with her – if you hadn't read any books, how would you know?

**Meltzer:** Well it's pure fraud to say that I knew. Her name was a piece of poetry to me. I had read her books and not understood anything. It is more successfully stated in terms of my understanding of what is required to produce a well-formed stool. Patience. From that point of view I am really a pagan, not a Christian. But so is Blake.

**Q:** When you say about children's creativity being allowing the organ to tell them when to produce the stool, because they're listening to their organ ... would you say that is really the beginning of adult creativity, or do you think there is a difference between children's and adult creativity?

**Meltzer:** My own guess would be, it is the nature of an endpoint, but full of anxiety. It does require reciprocity. And for a child to produce a well-formed stool and to have a mother who doesn't notice is to my mind real emotional deprivation. My clinical experience tells me that emotional deprivation is the main thing that our patients are suffering from. That is, parental figures who don't realise what it *costs* the child to become civilised. The Christian attitude doesn't take that into account really – what it costs. Ravish me. That's what it costs.

**Mayers:** I was thinking that it might be worth while to draw attention to a very commonly used phrase, 'potty training', and thinking, how much training is a matter of subjecting the child to propaganda, not allowing a natural faculty to be encouraged. It does seem to generate pain. It is wonderful when great philosophers and great analysts say the same thing. Way back in the 1960's, Elizabeth Anscombe, one of Wittgenstein's greatest students and executors, wrote a paper about pleasure and she talked about 'natural pleasures'. One of the examples was, having a really good shit. And yet, the scandal that this caused was amazing – but why should it be?

**Meltzer:** It is an inadequate description.

**Q:** Is there a danger that psychoanalysis itself can become an adult version of potty-training our patients?

**Mayers:** Yes there is a very great danger indeed. Some people have heard me banging on about the deleterious notion of talking about training our students – putting them in a bed of Procrustes, and we have a preconceived notion of what size and shape they should be when they come out of it. I'd much rather talk about education and not have a syllabus for instance.

**Q:** I can remember when I worked with children having endless debates at conferences about training or education etc. It's valid still.

**Q:** I wanted to go to David's last description of the patient and the process which goes beyond his taking back his projections, and his mother comes in. My thoughts went to the writings and ideas of Roger Money-Kyrle. I thought the stage that is very much part of a particular change is what he spoke of as the innate knowledge of the parents' creativity- the facts that are there and are known of, but are distorted continuously, and this distortion gets undone in some mysterious way.

**Mayers:** There is that paper – 'Cognitive Development' – where he just has these three things: the breast as the supremely good object, parental intercourse as the supremely creative activity, and the inevitability of death. Yes, one has to learn however painfully to accept these. You remind me I should have included in my list of qualities like miracle and holiness, is death, because it does bring in the tragic dimension which we ignore at our peril; we become sentimental if we do ignore it.

**Meltzer:** Well David speaks of looking forward to death as a time when you really see God face to face, instead of 'through a glass darkly', as something to look forward to. That's paganism.

**Q:** why is it pagan?

**Meltzer:** Because it welcomes pain, and is interested in pain.

**Q:** When you were talking about the difference between invention and discovery, is it really the difference between rational effort, education, intelligence on the one hand, and discovery fed by something unconscious coming into being?

**Meltzer:** Yes, of course, I am talking about intuition: something certainly beyond the pleasure principle. But it is a great pleasure; and it is a great pleasure to take an interest in the pain.

**Q:** I want to say something about potty training, and whether we do it with our patients. There is a French case, I think called the ‘Dead Father’, in which the wife, the mother, bemoans the fact that the father who is a bit of a ne’er-do-well, comes in occasionally, will go to the cot, pick up his two-year-old daughter, and though her nappy is full, will do a lovely waltz with her. The mother’s reply to that is, you see, he wasn’t a proper father. It seems to me that in fact that is what we should be able to do – dance with a patient while the nappy is full, with the idea that at some point it will be cleaned up, but is accepted at that moment of doing the dance together.

**Meltzer:** That’s pagan.

**Mayers:** Just to be mischievous, yes it is pagan – there are dances and dances, and in some dances, Pentheus gets torn to pieces.

**Q:** This is about discovery and invention again, thinking about how terribly difficult it is to try to discover without using invention as well, and how difficult it is sometimes to tell the difference. I wonder if there would be a way of thinking of invention as being one of the servants of discovery, and not necessarily inimical to it.

**Meltzer:** That’s Bion’s point really about his *Seven Servants*.

**Q:** I think that’s a Yes.

**Meltzer:** It’s a Bion Yes.