

# Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory

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Jay R. Greenberg  
and  
Stephen A. Mitchell



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## **Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory**

*To Olga and Margaret*

## Preface

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The idea for this book grew out of our experiences in teaching aspects of the historical development of psychoanalytic ideas. Both of us had taught courses organized along conventional lines—Freud, the American “ego psychologists,” Sullivan, the “British school” of object relations, and so on. Although this way of dividing the material has merit—particularly in maintaining boundaries between systems that operate on the basis of incompatible and potentially confusing fundamental assumptions—it also has limitations. We had struggled to help students grasp something of the larger context from which various traditions of psychoanalytic theorizing have emerged and understand the common conceptual problems for which adherents of each tradition have fashioned unique solutions. This required us to venture outside the framework of a specific theory to draw comparisons with other approaches.

Many discussions of the challenge of teaching theory revealed that we were reacting to the problems in quite similar ways. On the one hand, we had concluded that it was impossible to teach Sullivan as if his approach was entirely *sui generis*, having nothing to do with his complex and often ambivalent reaction to Freud. On the other hand, the intricate theoretical emendations introduced by Freud’s loyal followers could not be understood fully without realizing that they had been created at a time when the basic premises of Freud’s original model were under attack by the interpersonalists, the culturalists, and the object relations theorists. A full appreciation of the evolution of Freud’s thinking—a

sense of *why* the theory changed *when* it changed — requires careful evaluation of the provocative role of his early adherents who eventually became opponents of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Out of these considerations came our decision to write this book. We needed an organizing principle through which the dialectic tension between competing theories could be understood, and we found it in the currently popular concept of “object relations,” the general term encompassing people’s relationships with others. These relationships are and always have been central to the *clinical practice* of psychoanalysis, but assigning them a theoretical role remains controversial. We believe that understanding different approaches to object relations contributes to understanding the various trends in the evolution of psychoanalytic thinking in the different schools.

The organization of the book follows naturally from its purpose. Part One explores the troublesome term “object relations” and takes up general considerations of the place and nature of theory in psychoanalysis. We then turn to the work of the two men who, more than any others, are responsible for the initiation of the two conceptual models that have dominated the field. We examine Freud’s creation of psychoanalysis in terms of his early decision to build his theory on a vision of man emphasizing the internal workings of a psychic apparatus fueled by the energy of instinctual drive. We follow his later work as he moved toward integrating forces derived from relations with external reality into a psychic apparatus that is still essentially governed by the operation of the drives. We then consider the innovative significance of Sullivan’s alternative framework of the interpersonal field and his study of the development of the self. We demonstrate that Sullivan’s radical departure from the drive model constitutes a fundamentally different approach to the problem of object relations, with vastly different implications for theory-construction.

Part Two examines the major figures within the British tradition of object relations theory. Each of the authors included has chosen to reject significant aspects of Freud’s drive theory. The seminal work of Melanie Klein, with her altered meaning of the concept of drive, serves as a transition from drive theory to subsequent approaches. Fairbairn’s “object relations theory of the personality” is considered in detail, with emphasis on his divergence from both classical drive theory and the Kleinian approach, leading to a model which is quite compatible with Sullivan’s. Turning to the rich and innovative writings of Winnicott, we attempt to clarify his subtle blend of language derived from the Freudian and Kleinian traditions with the object relational concepts developed from

his study of mother-infant interactions. We evaluate the extent to which Guntrip's extensions of Fairbairn's theoretical system are an emendation of the latter's work or a new and radically different approach to psychopathology.

Part Three presents the work of theorists who approach object relations through the conceptual model of Freud's drive theory. Each author considered retains drive at the center of the theory but attempts to modify the theory to account for the data derived from the study of object relations. We review the work of Heinz Hartmann, the most elegant and comprehensive drive theorist after Freud himself, in terms of his attempt to make psychoanalysis a general psychology and to integrate into the theory considerations derived from man's need to adapt to and live in a world of other people. We turn next to the mutually complementary contributions of Edith Jacobson and Margaret Mahler, each of whom attempts to reconcile drive theory with data generated by the study of the early relationship between mother and child. Jacobson stresses aspects of fantasy inferred from clinical work with severely disturbed adult patients, while Mahler draws primarily on the study of very ill children and on direct observation of the behavior of normal children and their mothers. We consider the attempt of Otto Kernberg to retain his lineage with Freud by integrating the approach of Jacobson and Mahler with concepts imported from the work of Klein and Fairbairn.

Part Four is a broader consideration of strategies of psychoanalytic theory-construction. Some authors have attempted to reconcile their concern for continuity with their interest in innovation by mixing different conceptual models. We examine the various strategies of Heinz Kohut, the most important recent proponent of such an approach. His effort, like that of Joseph Sandler, who pursues the same theoretical strategy in a very different way, runs into difficulties that suggest an ultimate incompatibility between the two major models which have dominated psychoanalytic thought. In the final chapter, we explore the influence, durability, and fundamental divergence between the two models by considering them as manifestations of two alternative currents within the larger tradition of Western social philosophy.

This book has been a richly rewarding collaborative effort. It was four years ago that we discovered that we were planning to write the same book, and the ensuing development, dialogue, and integration have resulted in one that well expresses a confluence of our interests and understanding. Many people have made important contributions to our work. First among these has been Dr. Earl Witenberg, Director of the William Alanson White Institute. Dr. Witenberg was aware of our proj-

ect from the outset, and his generous encouragement was largely responsible for its getting beyond the early planning stages. Even where his perspective differed from our own, he was consistently supportive and helpful.

Of those who have read all or parts of the manuscript, Drs. Merton Gill and Philip Bromberg deserve special mention. Each devoted a great deal of time to thinking through the issues we have addressed, and has offered most useful and incisive suggestion. Others who made helpful comments include Ms. Ruth Gruenthal and Drs. James Grotstein, David Halle, Jay Kwawer, Linda Marcus, James Meltzer, Richard Rubens, Robert Shapiro, and Brenda Tepper.

Arthur Rosenthal, Director of Harvard University Press, has been a tremendous source of support throughout our work. More recently, Ann Louise McLaughlin has edited the manuscript with unfailing good humor and a sharp eye for the clumsy sentence. We gratefully acknowledge their crucial role in turning an idea into a book.

In addition to these acknowledgments, which we share equally, each of us would like to mention individually those who have been closest to us personally during our work.

I would like to give special thanks to Drs. John Schmerler and Rona Bank, whose painstaking, thoughtful, and challenging reading of various drafts improved their quality considerably, and to Dr. Joseph Newirth, whose encouragement and counsel throughout the long process of producing the book has been deeply appreciated. I would also like to express my gratitude to my wife, Margaret Black, whose impact on my contribution to the book is difficult to delineate because it has been deeply pervasive. So many of my ideas have been born and shaped in dialogue with her that attribution is impossible beyond an expression of deep thankfulness for the opportunity to share with her so much of my fascination with the intricacies and richness of the psychoanalytic process and psychodynamic theorizing. S.M.

I owe a tremendous debt to my wife, Dr. Olga Cheselka, who has contributed both personally and professionally to everything I have done here. Her critical listening to ideas as they took shape, her thoughtful and always kind comments on them, and the personal support for the often preoccupying nature of the task made my work on the book possible. J.G.

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*It is just this confrontation of object and subject, their mingling and identification, the resultant insight into the mysterious unity of ego and actuality, destiny and character, doing and happening, and thus into the mystery of reality as an operation of the psyche — it is just this confrontation that is the alpha and omega of all psychoanalytical knowledge.*

—THOMAS MANN, "Freud and the Future"

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## Introduction

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For student and practitioner alike, the current state of psychoanalytic theory, with its complexity and heterogeneity, often seems overwhelming. Psychoanalytic therapy has become the treatment of choice for a far wider range of patients than had been thought possible until recently. New patients lead to new clinical data, and in turn to new theories. As a result, a broad spectrum of theoretical positions, each with a distinct line of conceptual development and its own idiosyncratic language, beckons the analyst. Communication among the various "schools" is minimal. Their adherents often attempt to bring order to conceptual complexity by declaring one position to be the only "true psychoanalysis," rendering unnecessary any attempt at integration, synthesis, or comparison with other points of view. This leads to a costly clarity.

To collapse psychoanalysis around a particular approach or a specific mode of interpreting psychodynamic content is to lose the diversity that has made it a vital if difficult discipline. The resulting confusion among theories and premature closure within them has led many clinicians to abandon formal theories altogether, concentrating instead on what they consider the uniqueness of each analytic encounter and on pragmatic technical advice for dealing with their patients. This threatens to deprive psychoanalysis of the exciting interplay between theory and practice that has sustained it over the ninety years of its history.

We believe that a less reductionistic, more synthetic approach is needed. This approach, something on the order of what Roy Schafer

(1979) has termed a "comparative psychoanalysis," will provide a conceptual framework within which the confusion among competing theories can be clarified. A comparative psychoanalysis will aid the theorist and the student of theory by illuminating significant areas of convergence and divergence obscured by the isolation of various psychoanalytic schools from each other and by the internal complexities of each. It will aid the practitioner by drawing out the implications of different theoretical perspectives for a wide range of clinical issues, thus offering a structure for the integration of theory and practice. It is to these goals that our volume is dedicated.

The current diversity of psychoanalytic schools of thought has a long history. In the fifty years following Freud's first major theoretical statements, the most important movement within the field may be described as centrifugal. Freud's theory of instinctual drive served as a focus from which spun one after another divergent movement, each in its own particular direction. These include the early theoretical departures of Jung and Adler, the attempts at revising classical technique by Rank and Ferenczi in the 1920s, and the establishment and elaboration of the major so-called neo-Freudian schools by Fromm, Sullivan, and Horney during the 1930s and 1940s. Those who retained the designation "Freudian" underwent a three-way split. Some adhered to Freud's theory as he had developed it during his own life, refusing to accept any alteration. Among those inclined toward modification, a major ideological schism developed during the 1930s between the followers of Melanie Klein and those who embraced the approach which has become known as American ego psychology (initiated in the work of Anna Freud and Heinz Hartmann). These major divergences were interspersed with innumerable additional revisions and alterations which attracted less notice and smaller followings.

In the last twenty years there has been a reversal of this centrifugal movement. Underlying the apparent diversity of contemporary psychoanalytic theory there is a convergence of basic concerns. Comparing the works of today's theorists is like looking at different paintings of the same landscape by painters from varying stylistic and aesthetic traditions. What first meets the eye are the distinctions in sensibility, palette, and tone. On closer examination, however, features of the common landscape emerge—the same village, the same mountain, the same trees. The common "landscape" of psychoanalysis today consists of an increasing focus on people's interactions with others, that is, on the problem of object relations. We refer to object relations as a common "problem" because there is no consensus within the current psycho-

analytic literature concerning their origins, their meanings, or the major patterns of their transformations. Although the clinical centrality of object relations is accepted by virtually all current psychoanalytic schools, there are vast differences in the ways in which this importance is understood. In fact, the approach to the problem of object relations sets the framework for any particular theory, determines the cast of that theory, and fixes its place vis-à-vis other psychoanalytic theories.

Why does the clinical centrality of relations with others pose a problem for psychoanalytic theorizing? The early development of psychoanalytic theory was built around the concept of drive. Freud's research took him into what he regarded as the "depths" of human experience, the impulses that were manifestations of man's biological nature, demands generated by the body which provide the energy for, and the goals of, all mental activity. He did not consider relations with the external world and other people unimportant, but his investigation of drives and their vicissitudes seemed more important, more pressing. In later works, when Freud did take up the problem of the "ego" and its relations to the external world and other people, it was by no means apparent how to position, how to set those processes and issues within his theory of drives. Object relations had to be accounted for; their origins, significance, and fate were by no means automatically provided for and encompassed within the earlier drive theory.

There have been two major strategies for dealing with the problem of object relations. The first, employed originally by Freud, has been essentially preservative and consists of stretching and adapting his original conceptual model based on drive to accommodate later clinical emphases on object relations. Within Freud's drive theory all facets of personality and psychopathology are understood essentially as a function, a derivative, of drives and their transformations. Thus, to solve the problem of object relations while preserving drive theory intact requires the derivation of relations with others (and of the individual's inner representations of those relations) as vicissitudes of the drives themselves. Freud and subsequent theorists employing this first strategy understand the role of objects largely in relation to the discharge of drive: they may inhibit discharge, facilitate it, or serve as its target. The second, more radical strategy for dealing with object relations has been to replace the drive theory model with a fundamentally different conceptual framework in which relations with others constitute the fundamental building blocks of mental life. The creation, or re-creation, of specific modes of relatedness with others replaces drive discharge as the force motivating human behavior. The clearest expression of this strategy came during the 1940s in the work of Harry Stack Sullivan and W. R. D.

Fairbairn. We regard the conceptual approaches of these two theorists as fundamentally compatible and able to be integrated, and, taken together, as the major systematic alternative to drive theory.

Much of the heterogeneity and complexity of current psychoanalytic theory is clarified by an approach that takes as its starting point the dialectical tension between these competing strategies for understanding object relations, one preserving the original drive model and the other replacing it with a fundamentally different model. The contribution of any given theorist is best understood in terms of his basic stance with regard to these models; salient similarities and differences among theories become clear when approached from this perspective. Our purpose is to articulate the principles underlying each model and to place the major theorists within the history of psychoanalytic ideas with respect to the models. *Accounting for the enormous clinical significance of object relations has been the central conceptual problem within the history of psychoanalytic ideas. Every major psychoanalytic author has had to address himself to this issue, and his manner of resolving it determines the basic approach and sets the foundation for subsequent theorizing.* An understanding of the most significant strategies for dealing with this issue and the two very different conceptual models that underlie them makes it possible to position major psychoanalytic theorists vis-à-vis each other in a fashion that illuminates their basic similarities and differences, often obscured by lesser issues, psychoanalytic politics, and differences in the use of language.

The approach to the history of psychoanalytic ideas and the problem of object relations developed within this book is different in perspective and broader in scope than existing commentaries on object relations theories, which tend to operate from within one model or the other. Adherents of the drive theory model and the strategy of accommodation (Modell, 1968) tend to minimize the contributions of more radical theorists who have abandoned the drive theory; adherents of more purely innovative models and the strategy of radical departure (Guntrip, 1971) tend to minimize the contributions of those object relations theorists who have remained within the drive theory framework. Both lines of theory-construction have been significant, fruitful, and can be understood as struggling in different ways with the same problems.

In order to avoid misunderstandings of our purposes, let us clarify at the outset what we are *not* doing. We are not providing a comprehensive history of all psychoanalytic ideas or a model for understanding the nature and structure of all psychoanalytic theories; we are not considering the complex question of validity and verifiability within scientific theories in general and psychoanalytic theories in particular (see Suppe,

1977, for a discussion of the vast range of views within the philosophy of science concerning these issues). Our purposes are descriptive and analytic. We hope to provide, through critical analysis of different approaches to a common conceptual problem, a thread which can be followed through the labyrinth of psychoanalytic ideas, so that the reader may better understand their underlying structure and more easily make his way through them.

A comparative psychoanalysis is not undertaken without risk. Different schools of psychoanalytic theory have developed out of different intellectual traditions, are based on vastly divergent philosophical and methodological assumptions, and employ different languages. Each theory is an intricate network of concepts which has developed through an internal progression particular to that theory, often in isolation from other psychoanalytic schools of thought. Therefore, it has been argued, psychoanalytic theories cannot be meaningfully compared without doing violence to the integrity of each. Surely the dangers to which this line of reasoning points, of forced and misleading comparisons and of reductionistic collapsing of distinct theoretical systems, must be kept in mind.

Careful and respectful comparisons of theories are, however, not only possible but necessary. The disavowal of synthetic and integrative approaches has its own dangers, perhaps even more troublesome. Without such approaches, psychoanalysis may become a discipline fragmented into semi-isolated and insulated schools, separated not by substantive conceptual differences but by political and fraternal traditions. Such a process would transform psychoanalytic formulations from a growing set of clinical and theoretical inquiries and hypotheses into a series of cultish islands of thought.

Moreover, we believe that an argument against comparing and integrating different theories ignores the facts of psychoanalytic life. Every analyst, even the most rigidly atheoretical, is at least implicitly a theorist. What one hears from a patient is informed by what one knows about living; it is shaped by a theory which the analyst may or may not articulate (even to himself) and which is derived from what he has read (within and without the technical literature), seen, and lived. With the exception only of the most doctrinaire, each analyst's clinical practice rests on a theory which is already a synthesis of information derived from many sources. It is our hope that our explicit comparative psychoanalysis will aid the clinician in doing what he has in fact done all along, by sharpening his perspective on the approaches of those who have consigned their particular theory to the written word.

