

Donald Winnicott's vision of health. Creative processes as defence mechanisms against anxiety and trauma

Abstract

It could be said that Winnicott's entire opus revolves around a central issue: the relation between the self and the outside world, between illusion and reality. For Winnicott, the key process is the establishment of a sense of the self experienced as real. The perfect accommodation to the subject's wish creates what Winnicott terms the "moment of illusion." In the earliest months of life, Winnicott's so-called "good enough mother" is invisible, and it is precisely her invisibility which allows the infant the crucial megalomaniacal, solipsistic experience which Winnicott characterizes as the state of "subjective omnipotence." In his view, a relatively prolonged experience of subjective omnipotence is the foundation upon which a healthy self develops.

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Introduction

In this article, I use the theory of Donald Winnicott to examine how satisfaction and the relative richness of life are heavily predicated upon the balance between discontinuity and continuity, upon the dialectic between multiplicity and integrity in the experience of self. With reference to the contributions of contemporary object relations theorists, I will briefly review Donald Winnicott's concepts of transitional phenomena, potential space, true/ false self, and his views on creativity.

Sigmund Freud's structural model, introduced in 1923 portrayed the relation between the ego and the superego as the primordial blueprint, where much current psychoanalytic theorizing derives from. In order to underscore the connection with later developments, I will make cursory references to the structural model. The paradigm shift from structuralist to poststructuralist psychoanalytic views of the self came about when theorists started to conceptualize the id differently, as structured and not formless, as directed and not explosive. By way of consequence, the repressed began to be conceptualized not as impulsive, disorganized splinters, but as clusters of meaning organized around relationships. Thus, the id was envisioned as presupposing a sense of self, a way of being, thus resembling more the way Freud portrayed the ego and superego.

Jacques Lacan, Melanie Klein,¹ Hans Loewald, Ronald Fairbairn, Otto Kernberg portray, all in their own language and in their own ways the id as a person in intense relationships to other persons. The Freudian structural model has been vastly replaced (sometimes not terminologically, only conceptually) by relational models. Freud relegated conflict to the contentious relationship between the impulses of the id, the regulatory functions of the ego, and the moral prohibitions of the superego. Contemporary psychoanalytic schools (frequently referred to as object relations theories), often locate the hinges of the mind at the intersection of disparate versions of self, as Stephen Mitchell demonstrates throughout his book *Hope and Dread*. With relational psychoanalysts, he holds, "conflict is envisioned as the clash between contrasting and often incompatible self-organizations and self-other relationships."²

The model of self advanced by object relations theories, with an emphasis on discontinuity and multiplicity presents experiences of self as unavoidably lodged within particular relational contexts. "Because we learn to become a person through interactions with different others and through different kinds of interactions with the same other, our experience of self is discontinuous, composed of different configurations, different selves with different others" (idem). The terms pivotal to Winnicott's thought epitomize his psychoanalytic aesthetics. The best-known concept, that of *transitional objects*, (theorised in 1953) references ubiquitous first possessions of young subjects – a doll, a teddy bear or a blanket – belonging at once to them and to the outside world. Transitional objects, which act as intermediaries between fantasy and reality foreshadow creative works, which similarly partake simultaneously of reality and illusion.

In *The Location of Cultural Experience* (1967), Winnicott termed the space between utter subjectivity and utter objectivity, where aesthetic experience and play can occur, potential space. Although he always speaks of potential space in the singular, since it constitutes a conceptual rather than an empirical realm, Peter Rudnytsky deliberately employs – as he himself declares in the introduction to his book *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces*³ – the plural form to evoke the uniqueness of every relationship between two human beings or between a work of art and its critics. (Introduction xii) The last of Winnicott's concepts (advanced not earlier than 1969) is the *use of an object*. By "use", he means the discharge of destructive impulses, hence a person (or an object) must be able to survive destructive attacks if it is to be placed in the sphere of external reality. This difficult idea attests to the abiding influence on Winnicott's thinking of Melanie Klein, to whose party in the British Psychoanalytical Society he belonged before joining what became known as the Middle Group.

It could be said that Winnicott's entire opus revolves around a central issue: the relationship between illusion and reality, between the self and the outside world. For Winnicott, the key process is the establishment of a sense of the self experienced as real. The perfect accommodation to the subject's wish creates what Winnicott terms the "moment of illusion." In the earliest months of life, Winnicott's so-called "good enough mother" is invisible, and it is precisely her

invisibility which allows the infant the crucial megalomaniacal, solipsistic experience which Winnicott characterizes as the state of “subjective omnipotence.” In his view, a relatively prolonged experience of subjective omnipotence is the foundation upon which a healthy self develops. Winnicott’s vision of health (easily equatable with the capacity for play), implies freedom to alternate between “the harsh light of objective reality to the soothing ambiguities of lofty self-absorption and grandeur in subjective omnipotence.”⁴ Actually, Winnicott considers the reimmersion into subjective omnipotence as the condition of possibility for creativity, enabling the development of one’s illusions to the fullest, in utter disregard for external reality.

Psychoanalysis seems to have always been captivated by the arcana of the creative process. In “Creative writers and day-dreaming,”⁵ Sigmund Freud wonders “[f]rom what sources does that strange being [the creative writer] draw his material?” (143), going on to suggest that children at play display the same behaviour as a writer, inasmuch as they create a world of their own. Nevertheless, farther into this essay, he states, quite surprisingly: “as people grow up they cease to play”, and realise that they are expected “not to go on playing or phantasizing any longer” (145, 147). Psychoanalytic exploration into the creative processes continued with Winnicott’s more confident vision of play, creativity, and fantasy. Winnicott started his exploration into this area of human experience by postulating what he termed “primary creativity”: a mother not immediately complying with baby’s wants or being absent, which entails bafflement and pain, followed by fearfulness and anger.

As Winnicott proposed, this is precisely when “infants get a first inkling of the knowledge that they and the maternal source of life are not one and indivisible.”⁶ Joyce McDougall understands this to be the early origin of becoming an “individual” in Winnicott’s theory – someone “who can no longer be divided into two fused parts of himself and the Other” (idem). The forlorn melding with the maternal universe is recreated, in hallucinatory fashion, by the infant, on its way to individuation. This is designated by Winnicott as the “infant’s earliest creative activity.” Consequently, creation “has always an aura of hallucination and illusion to fill what might otherwise be a frightening void” (ibidem). The phenomenon that Winnicott conceptualised and called the “transitional space” (1971) implies the participation from both the outer and the inner world. He draws attention to the fact that this potential space “widens out into that of play, of artistic creativity and appreciation.”⁷ Accordingly, among the various elements that favour creativity, the creator (regardless of the creative field) could be deemed to be also *playing*. McDougall holds that, for all their dissimilarities, this is where Winnicott shares a similar vision to Freud’s.

Winnicott’s transitional objects

According to Winnicott, creative activity originates in an imaginary potential space that is found between the person’s inner reality and the real world. Early in life, if needs are met, the subject is seldom compelled to recognize the reality of others, the separation of inner from outer, or the distinction between fantasy and reality. The child subject then develops psychological structures that will help bear frustration and maintain the sense of continuity, their function being only a symbolic one, as Michael Craig Miller holds in his *Winnicott Unbound* (446).⁸ Melanie Klein had also described the child’s process of symbolization in its fantasies, whereby part-objects and a source of anxiety are transformed into, and hence symbolized by, new objects which themselves become a source of anxiety and must then be symbolized. The concept of anxiety is clearly needed in considering the dynamics of the process. Melanie Klein strongly emphasized that

the loss of the original object, together with the dread of it, is what prompts the search for a substitute.

The process continues, creating a constant need for new external objects to act as such symbols: “Thus, not only does symbolism come to be the foundation of all phantasy and sublimation but, more than that, upon it is built up the subject’s relation to the outside world and to reality in general” (*The Selected MK* 238).

Winnicott uses the terms “transitional objects” and “transitional phenomena” to designate “the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected” (2). It is the time when the child begins to take an external object, a piece of a blanket or cloth, for example, to hold as a replacement for the mother’s body. Winnicott’s next point about transitional phenomena is significant:

Its fate is to be gradually allowed to be decathected, so that in the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo. It loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between “inner psychic reality” and “the external world as perceived by two persons in common,” that is to say, over the whole cultural field.⁷

Ira Konisberg, discussing transitional phenomena, claims that there is always a strain in our relating inner and outer reality, but it is this intermediate area that gives relief from this strain.⁹ The term *transitional object*, disambiguated for rookies in psychoanalysis by Stephen Mitchell and Margaret Black in *Freud and Beyond*,¹⁰ does not imply the transition from dependence to independence, but “the transition between two different modes of organising experience, two different patterns of positioning the self in relation to others” (128). The teddy bear is not a mere substitute for the mother, instead it becomes a unique appendage to the child’s self. Paradoxically ambiguous, the transitional object “cushions the fall from a world where the desires omnipotently actualise their objects to one where desires require accommodation to and collaboration of others to be fulfilled” (idem).

Transitional objects and phenomena, as described by Winnicott, are thought to be the first “not me” possession. To the extent that the transitional object is an initial other-than-me, it is so “without any sharp sense of exteriority.”¹¹ It is, Michael Eigen hypothesises, otherness in the process of being born, an incipient other. This otherness testifies to the fact that a primary creative process lies at the origin of symbolic experience and is thus “a vehicle for creative experiencing. As neither wholly self nor other, nor wholly outside these terms, it is itself symbolizing experiencing emerging as such” (416). In Abbott Bronstein’s interpretation, the transitional phase is conceived as a “normative and desired step toward more complete psychological development in both emotional and cognitive spheres”, because the “object” is often characterized by its touch, smell, texture, and durability.¹² The child uses the object for comfort and imbues it with special value, particularly when there is an increase in anxiety, like in times of transition. Thus, the subject fends off, according to Winnicott, the unbearable anxieties of annihilation and disintegration that accompany the separation anxieties.

Winnicott stressed that the articles used as transitional objects are “selected” or “created” to aid particularly in the containment and modulation of annihilation and separation anxieties, with the underlying purpose of preserving a sense of healthy self.

Human space/ Maternal space

Pervasive in Donald Winnicott's theoretical scaffolding is the fact that human space begins to take shape in the early relationship with the mother. The object most closely associated with the mother is the "vessel". Its psychoanalytic counterpart is the "container", which will form an important theoretical term in Wilfred Bion's thinking. Bion thinks of the container as "the mother's reverie, processing and containing the infant's chaotic feelings, especially hatred."¹³

That the concept 'container' means essentially 'container of meaning' makes a link to Melanie Klein's concept of spaces, in a way that enriches the concreteness which Donald Meltzer considered to have been her greatest contribution to the model of the mind, the concreteness of psychic reality.¹⁴ Not only are internal objects concrete in their existence as structures of the mind, but this concreteness is necessary in order for them to be able to function as containers of meaning.

There are various ways to conceive the vessel's function. We can view it positively as "containing" something, for instance, fragmentary experience. The word "contain" also suggests a barrier "against the centripetal force of overflow and bits flying apart", in Teresa Hooke and Salman Akhtar's terms.¹⁵ It thus allows an unstable mass to somehow hold together. But we can also view the vessel, along the lines of the authors mentioned above, negatively as preserving the emptiness within it. In other words, it is precisely the empty space inside that is preserved from impingements from without. Indeed, we could take the step of saying that the vessel *is* this emptiness – the essence of its container function.

In *The Geography of Meanings*, Hooke and Akhtar reach the conclusion that human psychic space is not static, but has an inherent sense of movement and energy. This dynamic quality suggests the element of time, which is considered to be "the repressed dimension of space": "There is always a hidden reference to time in human/psychic space (the clock on the wall?)"

Winnicott's potential space

A widely entertained psychoanalytic belief of Winnicott's time, which he accepted, was that in the beginning, "the infant is the environment and the environment is the infant."¹⁷ There was no outer or inner reality in that state, since the infant was believed to be yet unable to make such differentiations. There was no experience and perception of separation from the mother, no recognition of external objects, during the primary narcissistic phase of development.

Winnicott formulates his very original concept of space – the intermediate or potential space concept, in part, as an alternative to Melanie Klein's internal world.¹⁶ "It was already becoming fashionable to speak of the child's internal or representational world as constituting the area of the psyche – the stage where conflicts and antagonisms played themselves out."¹⁵ What then is potential space? Ogden reviews this concept in clear detail in *The Matrix of the Mind*. Parallel to the transition from concrete to abstract symbols, there is a transition from the unity of mother-infant to the separation of mother *and* infant. In that transition, a potential space is required, a potential space which is a "state of mind that embodies the paradox that is never challenged: the infant and mother are one, and the infant and mother are two."¹⁷

Winnicott called this area between objectivity and subjectivity a potential space, meaning that we can freely engage in interplay with the external world of persons and objects. Potential space, the

transitional area between last stops on the line of relatedness "is an area," Winnicott says, "that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated."¹⁸ In Peter Rudnytsky's interpretation, "in this area we relate to the world of other people and objects by using symbols," what Winnicott calls "transitional objects," "that mix *and* distinguish inner and outer realities."¹³

Potential space came to depict an "area that exists between the subject and the object during the phase of the repudiation of the object as not-me, that is, at the end of being merged with the object" (CP 107). Space is quasi-interchangeable with location, therefore Winnicott deemed it in need of further clarification:

Potential space is not inside by any use of the word. Nor is it outside, that is to say, it is not part of the repudiated world, the not-me, that which the individual has decided to recognize as truly external.¹⁹ Prone to paradox, Winnicott sought out a solution to this obvious dilemma by designating this space as "an intermediate area of experiencing that lies between the inner psychic world and external reality" (PR 3).

Potential space, for Winnicott, included creation as well as aggression. In this intermediate area, the subject omnipotently "creates the object, but the object was there to be created" (CP 89). The subject fabricates and destroys, by way of illusory omnipotence, the external object. The latter is part of external reality, despite the subject's omnipotent destructions and creations, and it resists absolute omnipotence, like any object. This intermediate area of experience is a place where objects are destroyed and then resurrected, created and found, an area where the confines between the made and the given are fluid. The object created in this intermediate area of experience is a not-me and a me-object object, at that same time, which Winnicott termed a subjective object. In Ryan LaMothe's understanding, the transitional object is often interchangeable with the subjective object, and, like the potential space, it signifies both union with and separation from the object.²⁰ Ideally, the transitional object can be considered to revive the experiences of comfort, satisfaction and validation.

Summarizing at this point, this intermediate area of experiencing called potential space points to a particular phase of transition between omnipotence and handing it over to "an external reality or God principle", between acceptance/ use of and merger with external reality, between belief in, familiarity with omnipotence (which is, actually, a definition of primary creativity) and "object perception based on reality-testing", between merger and shared reality, between the object objectively perceived and subjective construction of the object.⁷

Departing from his observations, Winnicott made the connection with the capacity to dream, advancing that an absence of a "transitional space" (implying the inability to differentiate between the non-self and the self) also suppresses the ability to create dreams. This research eventually steered him to discover that every child experiences the vital need to have a "transitional object" (sometimes a little piece of the mother's clothing or a teddy bear). The transitional object represents the essence of protection and care, but is also an imaginative creation of the child itself.

I would now like to make a brief excursus into the way trauma is lodged within the Winnicottian psychoanalytical structures. Trauma constitutes "the collapse of the dialectical tension between generating and surrendering to experience."²⁰

In the moment of trauma, LaMothe believes, “the victimizer actively and omnipotently generates experience such that the victim is forced to submit to the reality of the victimizer, and in so doing, the victim’s subjectivity is negated.”²⁰ The victimizer wishes to absolutely deny difference, sees the victim as an absolute other. Likeness is rebuffed, with the victimizer likewise attempting to compel the victim into a recognition of his/her totalitarian and constructed reality. Jessica Benjamin reinforces this view on violence, which she construes as the outer perimeter of the less dramatic tendency of the subject to force the other to either be or want what it wants, to assimilate the other to itself or make it a threat. It is the extension of reducing difference to sameness, the inability to recognize the other without dissolving his/her otherness.²¹

The interrelated, dialectical pairs of potential space, “loosened from the focus on the vicissitudes of reality and illusion, represent attributes of complex relational interactions.” Severe trauma, according to LaMothe, represents the succumbing to the other’s constructed representations, the utter disintegration of potential space. This implies the lack of acknowledgement of one’s affirmations and the simultaneous repudiation of one’s needs and desires, together with shattering experiences of hopelessness, betrayal and distrust, which accompany associated hopelessness of repair and chaotic disruption. Trauma “simplifies,” by annihilating the paradox, the richness, complexity, and dialectical tension of potential space in human life.

True/ False self

Winnicott’s probing into the transitional space steered him to the notion of a “true self”, that dimension within an individual, which enables him/her to feel in close contact with his/her own and someone else’s reality, alive, renewed. He also insisted on what he called “unintegration”, meaning the capacity of an individual to drift or float, without fear, into nothingness and formlessness, to have “time to be”, with an emphasis on *being*. Winnicott emphasized his differentiation from gestalt psychology in a letter to a gestalt colleague: “gestalt psychology (seems to me) to be taking the pattern-making as a primary state, whereas for the psychoanalyst, the pattern-making is a secondary phenomenon related to primary unintegration”.²⁰

Within psychoanalysis, Stephen Mitchell, Arnold Modell, and Roy Schafer are among those who have comprehensively fleshed out the notion of the narrative construction of the self. Schafer, for example understands the experiential self “as a set of varied narratives that seem to be told by and about a cast of varied selves. And yet, like the dream, which has one dreamer, the entire tale is told by one narrator.”²² Elsewhere, he also states that “the so-called self may be considered to be a set of narrative strategies or storylines each person follows in trying to develop an emotionally coherent account of his/her life among people.”²²

From a philosophical standpoint on the self as narrative, Alasdair MacIntyre advanced, in *After Virtue*,²³ the concept of narrativity as the form through which we make sense of the actions of others and, ultimately, of our lives. Beatriz Priel also contends, in *Bakhtin and Winnicott*,²⁴ that the true and false selves, “being distinct dialogical and temporal configurations, can be seen as different narrative forms of the self – that is, as two genres of the self”.²⁴ True self processes seem to Priel to suggest novelistic narratives of the self which are multivocal, dialogical, open to creative meaning and change. Conversely, the false self configures a unitary, monological, reasonably stable delineation of the meaning imposed by the other.²⁵

Conclusion

Winnicott proposed an optimistic view of fantasy, play, and creativity. He began his research in this area of human experience with the postulate of what he called “primary creativity”: when a mother is absent or does not immediately comply with what her baby wants, there is pain and puzzlement, then anger and fear. Winnicott’s transitional phase is conceived as a “normative and desired step toward more complete psychological development in both emotional and cognitive spheres”. The child imbues the object with special value and uses it for comfort, particularly at times of transition in which there is an increase in anxiety. According to Winnicott, the subject thus keeps at bay the dread-filled dimension of experience that Harry Sullivan (1981) termed the ‘not me’, the unthinkable anxieties of annihilation and disintegration that precede the separation anxieties. To a very large extent, satisfaction and the relative richness of life are heavily predicated upon the balance between discontinuity and continuity, upon the dialectic between multiplicity and integrity in the experience of self. Where there is too much discontinuity, there is a dread of dislocation, splitting, fragmentation, or dissolution.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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