

The versatility of the Kleinian model. Melanie Klein's theory and formulations of morality and forgiveness

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to outline Melanie Klein's basic concepts through a detailed investigation of her viewpoints on the nature and origins of "objects." Above all, it will be the burden of argument to document and chronicle how Klein gives powerful insights into notions of morality, forgiveness and love, which are particularly illuminating for ethical or philosophical studies. Famous for having given the death instinct a prominent, centre-stage position, Klein's real achievement, however, in Emilia Steuerman's opinion, "is her understanding of love as reparation (*caritas*)," (*The Bounds of Reason* 27) intrinsically linked to the reality of the death instinct. The elaboration on the two basic positions of Melanie Klein's theory will show them to be related to two distinct formulations of morality. The concept of reparation, which represents one of the most interesting nodal points of her theoretical writings, will be construed to overlap, psychoanalytically, the concept of forgiveness put forth by philosophers such as Hannah Arendt or Jacques Derrida. Klein's astute inclusion of an intolerance towards appreciation and admiration in her theorization of envy will be shown to have rendered the counterbalancing concept of gratitude equally impressive. Closely related to reparation, gratitude possesses the same redemptive quality, serving to mitigate the burden of aggression. It is a measure of the versatility of the Kleinian model that it enables her readers to extrapolate from her theorization of key psychoanalytical concepts to the dynamics of notions pertaining to fields such as ethics or philosophy.

Keywords: object-relations, reparation, forgiveness, projective identification, envy, gratitude

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Introduction

A change in emphasis from drives and their transformations, to relations with others has been brought about by an important school of thought in the history of psychoanalytic theory in fairly recent decades. Roughly, this change hinges on the assumption that the key motivational force within human experience is not searching for pleasure through drive gratification, but establishing and maintaining relations with others, past and present, real or fictitious. Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, Ronald Fairbairn are prominent representatives of this school of psychoanalytic thought.

Object relations theory has become, as Juhani Lindell¹ remarks, "one of the *ubiquitous* phrases within contemporary psychoanalytic literature" (*The Rupture* 5), being employed, diversely, to indicate theorists who diverged from the classical tradition, such as Klein, Winnicott and Fairbairn, or theorists who kept in line with the tradition yet challenged its limits, like Margaret Mahler, Edith Jacobson and Otto Kernberg and "all the others who have acknowledged the importance of (human) objects in psychic life" (*The Rupture* 5).

Melanie Klein's (1882–1960) impact on contemporary psychoanalysis has been higher than that of any other psychoanalytic theorist since Freud, although her intent, constantly declared throughout her career, was to merely legitimize and broaden Freud's hypotheses. Yet her findings prompted a vision of mind that is "strikingly different" – according to Stephen Mitchell² and Margaret Black – from Freud's in many basic respects. (*Freud and Beyond* 85)

The notion of psychic "object" is placed front and centre in the theoretical system devised by Klein, and the increased significance assigned to it lies at the basis of her departure from classical Freudian metapsychology. "Object" was the concept Freud chose to refer to the aim of the drives, the 'other,' real or fictitious, toward whom the drive is directed. It is the most accidental, least intrinsic feature of his theory regarding the nature of the drives. The particular "aim,"

"impetus" and "source" constitute *a priori*, intrinsic elements of the drive; "the particular object is serendipitously tacked on through experience" (*Origin and Nature* Mitchell 14). As a whole, the most important psychic processes originate in the deficiencies or excesses of gratification, with the object being only the medium via which satisfaction may be either secured or rebuffed. Thus, for Freud, external objects are channels for regulation and drive gratification.

The "Object" in Klein's system of thought

Melanie Klein refined the concept of internal objects, to the point that they took central role in her theory. The nature and content of relations with objects, namely actual individuals in the external world, alongside phantasised images of others envisioned as inner presences, constitute, for Klein, determining causes for all significant psychic operations. Freud's "narcissistic libido" was thus argued to reflect not "a cathexis of the ego itself, but of internal objects," and consequently, the discrimination made by Freud between narcissistic libido and object libido was replaced with the differentiation between relations to inner versus relations to outer objects.³

Briefly, Klein is an object relations theorist. Even though her theory makes use of the concept of drives, her use of it is, in contrast to Freud, "oriented toward others, toward reality, and contain information concerning the objects from whom they seek gratification".⁴ Actually, St. Clair alleges, Klein's concepts of *libido* and *aggression* reference affections of fondness and abhorrence, entailing that "the drives are essentially psychological forces, which utilize the body as a means of expression" (*ibidem* 139). Hence, Klein thoroughly modifies Freud's model of somatically-based drives which seek gratification via the use of objects. Objects are primary for her, with drives representing emotions attached to them.

No relation to an external object is possible, without its concomitant phantasy relation: "[T]here is no instinctual urge, no anxiety situation, no mental process which does not involve objects, external or

internal; in other words, object-relations are at the centre of emotional life".⁵ For every relation to an "external" object, the subject forms a phantasy relation to a phantastically-distorted "internal" object in the mind. Freud's concept of fantasy is also broadened, with a consequent departure from his understanding of it as a defensive process whereby imagined satisfaction is secured. As far as Freud is concerned, "if real gratification is available, no fantasy takes place".⁶ Conversely, for Klein, "phantasy [sic!] is not merely an escape from reality, but a constant and unavoidable accompaniment of real experiences, constantly interacting with them",⁷ entailing that "unconscious phantasies are ubiquitous and always active in every individual" (12). Klein considers all subjects to be establishing, through operations of introjection and projection, a dimension where inner objects interrelate with their ego and their other objects. It must be said that these objects don't constitute stable images, they are liable to alteration, "both by the subject's own efforts and as a result of changes in the behaviour of their external correlates. An individual's health, by and large, hinges on the state of his phantasied object world."⁸

Whereas for Freud a fantasy is the expression of a frustrated wish, for Klein phantasy is ubiquitous, and as such unlocatable: it informs and structures every object-relation. From the moment the first object-relation is formed, a correlate is formed in the internal world of the psyche.

From the very beginning, objects are coloured 'good' if they are felt to gratify and 'bad' if they are perceived as frustrating. The good undergoes introjection, the bad undergoes splitting, followed by projection into the object, with the latter becoming, at this point, or being conceived as frightening and dangerous. Consequently, another concept pivotal to Kleinian psychoanalysis, the mechanism of splitting into a very good or very bad object is a strategy developed by the ego in order to cope with aggression, which is phantasied as attack on the internalised bad object: it is a defence designed for the preservation of the good object from the subject's own ambivalence.

Splitting "leads to the formation of strong boundaries around the self".⁹ The other, perceived as bad is idealised, considered threatening and destructive and, thereafter, destructiveness and exclusion emerge to defend the self against this other. No good can be seen when the perceived threat becomes demonised in society. Phantasy itself engenders a concrete hazard to borders, which amounts to a warped understanding of otherness, where elements that fit together are separated in defence of the self. Destructiveness is disowned by projecting it onto others.

Klein's theorisation of the phenomena of fragmentation, splitting and projecting the split-off bits – insufferable because despised or desired – makes these mechanisms part of coherent, albeit damaged, object relations.

The concept of positions

When overwhelmed by the aggressive impulses, the subject projects his hostility onto a bad object, which is subsequently felt to mount an assault from the outside and, after it is introjected, also from the inside. The perception of being assaulted manifests as persecutory anxiety that the bad object will obliterate the subject's ego. Klein names the organizing of experience into good and bad objects, and a split ego, plagued by persecutory anxiety, the paranoid-schizoid position. Janet Sayers explains, in her book on Kleinian theorists, the provenance of the terms involved in this concept. *Paranoid* designates the fear of invasive malevolence, the core persecutory anxiety. *Schizoid* designates *splitting*, which is the central defense, namely the cautious separation from the hating and hated, of the loving and

loved. Idealization and splitting, together with fragmentation and persecution, thus constitute what Klein calls the 'paranoid-schizoid position'.¹⁰

This position, said Klein, includes identifying with others through exporting into them loved and hated figures from inside us. It was the dynamics of this process that prompted her to put forth the theory of what she called 'projective identification', predicated not so much on projecting instincts from within us onto others, as they had been described by Freud, but identifying with others and thrusting onto them loved and hated figures from within us.

Kleinian work can be considered to hinge on the notion of the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions. According to Klein's definition of it, the depressive position represents the stage of development where the subject becomes apt to perceive a whole object, by which Klein means various interrelated facts. To begin with, there is no split within a whole object into an ideal and a persecutory one, nor into parts, it becomes *whole*. With this, the awareness of separateness is conjoined. A process of reality testing sets in which eventually prompts the distinction between the subject's perception of outer reality and the phantasy world (which is its inner reality). The great issue here becomes ambivalence. The loved mother is hated and destroyed by the infant in its phantasy. An experience of terrible loss and guilt hits him then, which replaces, gradually, the dread of being persecuted by bad object(s).

The mechanism mobilised by the depressive position to counter this situation is that of reparation. Whenever the subject recognises that the needed and loved object has been shattered by its hatred, the wish arises to mend and retrieve it. "It is not strictly speaking a mechanism of defence," as Segal proposes, "since the defence protects one from recognising one's anxiety and guilt, while in reparation there is a sense of inner reality which is not denied but in need of being restored".⁷

In the depressive position, a relation is established with a whole object that may be forfeited. Having a loving object is no longer sufficient; acknowledging the relation with it becomes necessary, thus entailing a "conflictive acceptance of dependency, which comes from various sources, including the own contribution to the object relation".¹¹

According to Forster and Carveth, Klein perceives psychic development "as a non-linear process" (*Christianity* 200). In Freud's view, natural development amounted to going through a succession of phases to eventually attain, unless regression intervenes, a somewhat stable condition of mental balance. Klein posits a swinging back and forth between distinct modes of ordering experience. And this prompts the conclusion that the crucial mission of the depressive position, namely that of forming uninjured, good, internal objects, is without end, since everyone "slip[s] back into paranoid-schizoid constellations over and over again".⁸

Klein concurs with Freud that development works towards a maximization of reality-testing. But she sees this coming about through altering and not eliminating, phantasy. Maturity is not attained through recognizing and renouncing drives of aggression, but via an internalization of a good, secure, whole object, which brings about a diminishing of anxiety, sequentially allowing for a decrease in defensive warping of the real objects. Whereas the paranoid schizoid position is characterised by the splitting of difference, the depressive position may, arguably, be interpreted as a reconciliation of difference. "It involves not only a reduced need to split and project and an increased integration of good and bad objects, but also a move

from perceiving a part-object to perceiving a whole object".⁹ Conflicts within the self are no longer splintered and thrust onto others, instead, there is a recognising of both good and bad within the self, which grants an equal recognising of this in others. It follows that the depressive position may be conceived as recognising the plurality of difference, where the subject abhors the hating self and attempts to repair the harm caused.

Klein, Winnicott, Wilfred Bion – all have looked into the vicissitudes of the processes of splitting, fragmentation, projective identification. We have damaged objects, part-objects and failed primary-object relations; we have transitional spaces and transitional phenomena – indeed, Winnicott claims that all of culture exists in a transitional space – “but they all, even the most regressed and primitive and crazy, retain contact with the object and presuppose it,” according to Robert Young’s interpretation, in *Postmodernism and the Subject*.¹²

The depressive position presupposes anxiety about and fear of the capacity to repair that which was annihilated in phantasy: while striving for a restoration of the destroyed object, the generated anxiety could prove so great that it pushes towards employing paranoid-schizoid defences. Klein considers that identification with the repaired internal object prompts a diminishing of anxiety, allowing, sequentially, for a diminishing in projective and introjective processes, whose end result is a better sense of reality. For further clarification, Segal describes how “reality testing is increased when reparative drives are in the ascendant: the infant watches with concern and anxiety the effect of his phantasies on external objects: and an important part of his reparation is learning to give up omnipotent control of his object and accept it as it really is” (*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* 93).⁷ In other words, the internal object acts as a mediator between the ego and the external object.

In the depressive position, there is a strive towards recognizing the object more as a whole, good and bad, in an attempt to reintegrate parts of oneself which had been split off and rejected. The depressive position, “which in spite of its name is actually the position where there is a larger degree of freedom from more destructive aspects,” is the recognition of the others that form our world.¹³ The paranoid position is the annihilating rejection of the existence of the world of intersubjective relations, and the manic attempt to restore the fiction of an omnipotent, albeit isolated subject (the subject itself, all good), who perceives the other as a distinct kind of being (bad and utterly different from the subject’s real self).

Steuerman makes the interesting point that the two basic positions of Melanie Klein’s theory could be related to two distinct formulations of morality. In the more primitive ‘talion’ morality (an eye for an eye), every act of aggression (fantasized or not) is returned in kind, a way of thinking and interacting specific to the paranoid-schizoid position. Whereas, in the depressive position, the individual is more capable of identifying with the other’s pain, leading in some way to what Steuerman calls a ‘reparative’ morality (*The Bounds of Reason* 27-9).¹³

In an article on subjectivity, Rheta Keylor¹⁴ identifies some similarities between Melanie Klein’s concept of positions and Jacques Lacan’s concept of ‘order’. According to the author, “common to Klein’s paranoid-schizoid dialectic of projection and introjection and Lacan’s imaginary order is a fluidity between self- and object representations and the belief that sensory experience and perception are identical to reality” (*Subjectivity* 222). She goes on to say that Klein’s idealised self- and object imagos are hazardously premised on omnipotence, denial and a split ego held together by illusory forces.

At this point, I will summarise my Kleinian excursus so far. It was Klein’s view that from birth the subject has a rudimentary ego. Her theory stemmed not only out of her clinical work, but also, in a way not usually recognised, from a consistency with Freud’s views about the death instinct and the fate of life. Freud presumed that the ‘organism’ diverts the death instinct outwards, with the ego being, by implication, the seat of anxiety.

As stated by Klein, the ego is capable of perception from birth, and able to perceive anxiety and to deploy defences against it. From the start, this ego establishes object relationships, because instinct has, besides a source, also objects. The rudimentary ego is not initially capable of distinguishing between external stimuli and internal needs. It functions in an elementary way, described by Freud as,¹⁵ ‘This I shall take in; that I shall spit out’. Step by step, the subject comes out of the condition of chaos through splitting, projection and idealisation. Pressured by anxieties, the ego sets its sights on projecting everything that is bad outside and on taking everything that is good inside itself. Its goal is keeping, holding inside and idealising a phantasised all-good, while projecting outside everything that is bad, including its own impulses.

Projective identification

Klein only devoted a few lines, in her 1946 paper, to the notion which gained a greater significance in her later work. Not only impulses are projected by the subject in projective identification, but a phantasy of literally discarding fragments of the ego, specifically those fragments experiencing anxiety and situating them in its objects.

Projective identification is, therefore, envisaged as a mechanism of defence against anxiety, while simultaneously being a wish-fulfilling phantasy. As regards identification, Rosemary Gordon has recently defined it as: “the assimilative process occurring after the ego has been formed and object cathexes have been established...it causes alterations in the ego, in the self-representation or in the self. Identification is important to the complex concept of identity”.¹⁶

Seemingly, projective identification is a more primitive process than either identification or projection. The both of them presuppose the subjective experience of otherness, and, assumedly, it is this that projective identification seeks to avoid or undo. Projective identification could be perceived as “a kind of fusion which involves the mixing and muddling up of the subject and object, of inner world and outer world” (Gordon 129),¹⁷ thus involving an elimination of the confines and hence fostering the exact opposite intentions of those of projection.

In “On Identification”, Melanie Klein interprets a story by Julien Green in the light of her theorization of projective and introjective processes, and, above all, of projective identification. Her insights here – the rendering of which is, though, beyond the scope of the present undertaking – are of considerable value to literary studies, and serve to deepen our understanding of the subtle workings of projective identification, a strategy whereby the ego splits off bad parts of the self and projects them into the object, subsequently re-introjecting them.

I will, nevertheless reproduce Klein’s theoretical conclusions after her interpretation of Julien Green’s novel *If I Were You*. Drives are an eventuality configured through socially interacting with others. Construed as a strategy for dealing with anxiety, splitting prompts the shaping of reinforced boundaries around the self, to the point where there is a conspicuous difference between good and bad in which the other becomes idealised, destructive and threatening, larger than life.¹⁷

The notion helps to understand the way hatred originates in fear, fear of otherness.¹⁸ Projective identification is the key defensive

mechanism in the paranoid schizoid position, underpinning paranoid anxiety. Sometimes, projection as such goes undetected, with individuals blithely ignorant of the process. However, projective identification presupposes thrusting paranoid phantasy not onto, but into some other. And this entails that, as an interdependent event, the one on the receiving end of the projection might act or feel in ways that actually have their origin in the one who projects. As a consequence, projective identification “becomes a lived experience”.⁹ The receiver of the projection becomes abhorrent, a medium through which feelings are cleansed.

Reparation and forgiveness. Klein and the philosophers of forgiveness

Klein's invention of the concept of reparation represents one of the most interesting nodal points of her theoretical writings, theorizing the desire to repair, to sew up the object damaged through the subject's phantasied aggressive attacks. According to Klein, everyone is prone, “in unconscious (and sometimes conscious) phantasy, to intense rageful destructiveness toward others, whom we experience as the source of all frustration, disappointment, physical and psychic pain. That perpetual destructiveness toward loved others represents a continual source of depressive anxiety and guilt and an unending need to make reparation”.¹⁹ Klein considers guilt to be stimulating efforts to reconcile with the object: “The urge to undo or repair this harm results from the feeling that the subject has caused it, i.e., from guilt. The reparative tendency can, therefore, be considered as a consequence of guilt”.⁸

Reparation, which occurs only in the depressive position, has to do with the need to reverse the bad situation that has been created by the bad impulses. In reparation proper, Henri Rey observes, (also using the terms repair and reconstruction), derivatives of love appear (forgiveness, hope, and gratitude) and take over certain functions as well as the establishment of a good inner object, while the “[use of] the law of talion and its inverse in reparative attempts diminish in intensity”.²⁰

In “Some Reflections on *The Oresteia*”, her posthumously published paper, Klein interprets the characters of Aeschylus' trilogy as symbolizing internal processes and injured internal objects, and *Oresteia* in terms of “the divided and embattled psyche's struggle to free itself from the cycle of past suffering and vengeance, and to learn from experience”.²¹

Klein dwells significantly on *The Eumenides*, the third and final section of the play, which sees the end of Orestes' persecution by the unforgiving Furies. To her, the afflicting Furies represent the unforgiving, tortured and persecutory parts of the *self*. There is a characteristic of the Furies, connected with dread of misbehaving, that she reinscribes in the order where justice and forgiveness are reconciled in the closing scenes. Mary Jacobus considers that Klein essentially associates literature with symbolic action, along with psychic integration: “Literature enacts the integration that is ultimately unachievable in the ordinary span of human life, serving as a counterforce to the Kleinian emphasis on destructiveness. Envy, aggression, and the death instinct do not have things entirely their own way in the furious *psychomachia* waged within unconscious phantasy.”²¹

Klein's considerations on the *Oresteia* reflect her viewpoint that, once the ego's own destructiveness has been acknowledged, it becomes more understanding, tolerant and forgiving. Mary Jacobus contends that the dispensation Orestes himself was granted in the end legitimately allows for a comparison between Klein and another twentieth century woman scholar whose accomplishments may be recognised alongside Klein's: Hannah Arendt.²²

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt rests her redemptive scaffolding on the notion of human making or fabrication (*homo faber*) and in the chapter entitled “Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive”, she makes reference to “the interrelated faculties of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories as naturally as fabrication produces use objects”.²³ Given that it is impossible to take back what has been blighted, the single approach that can compensate for action is ‘the faculty of forgiving’. (idem)

Arendt's concept of forgiveness seems to overlap, philosophically, the Kleinian concept of psychoanalytical reparation – the only action that could be undertaken in order to be extricated from the endless loop of revenge. To fall back on Arendt, forgiving and being forgiven extricates us from consequences that we can never escape, and fends off the menace of a transgenerational sword of Damocles. Philosophers of forgiveness, Arendt, Derrida and Kristeva, have established, each in their different way, that forgiveness is a “threshold of humanity: to be human is to forgive”.²⁴ Dissimilar to vengeance, binding the subject to the original misdemeanour in an endless and relentless process, forgiveness fosters new beginnings, becoming the only reaction without a re-action, one that “acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it” (*The Human Condition* 63).²³

Kristeva's²⁵ formulation of forgiveness is similar to Arendt's: “Forgiveness is ahistorical. It breaks the concatenation of causes and effects, crimes and punishment, it stays the time of actions” (*Powers of Horror* 84). For Kristeva, too, forgiveness has the potential to break the endless loop of vengeance, the spontaneous retort to transgression.²⁰

In *On Forgiveness*, Derrida²⁶ discussed forgiveness as a gift whose inherent feature is ambiguity: “Sometimes, forgiveness (given by God, or inspired by divine prescription) must be a gracious gift, without exchange and without condition; sometimes it requires, as its minimal condition, the repentance and transformation of the sinner” (Derrida 40). His claims are made within the context of the heritage which has imparted us our notion of forgiveness, a heritage he terms Abrahamitic, “in order to bring together Judaism, the Christianities, and the Islams.” (ibidem 41)

Although clearly distinct from one another, forgiveness and reparation, share a common feature, a desire to make good again, which lifts the subject out of the endless repetitions of paranoid-schizoid defence mechanism and renders a renewal of creative energy possible. It could be argued that reparation, like Arendt's formulation of forgiveness, interrupts the sequence of aggression and fear.

Envy and gratitude

For the knowledge of a whole object to be kept in an integrated way in the mind, a lack of splitting or of automatic projections of the displeasing aspects, good or bad, is needed, which constitutes, alone, a fixed and loving attachment. The precise and sustained interpretation of the envious attacks to this object relation makes conscious the price paid because of envy – another Kleinian concept which I will dwell on presently. The diminishing of the self is manifold: it is deprived of a connection with the good object and likewise deprived of those prized elements of itself which were placed in the object by projective identification.

One of Klein's most radical theoretical formulations is her theorization of envy as all-pervasive, an essential constitutive component of object-relations. Envy had always played a significant role in Klein's theorization, but it only reached its full theoretical maturity with the publication of the article “Envy and Gratitude”, in

which she drew attention to ways in which this process of internalizing what is loved and good may be disrupted. She noted that it may be disrupted by phantasies of greedily expropriating and emptying, and of enviously spoiling what is good in others. Or this good is idealized, thus mobilizing envy still further. The choice to include an intolerance towards appreciation and admiration equates with a modification in the interpretation of idealisation, conceived merely as a defence towards envy, as Horatio Etchegoyen and Clara Nemas contend.¹¹

Klein's theory of envy is profoundly disturbing, because it reaches to the roots of the subject's fractured relations to objects. Nothing is safe, since envy aims to destroy that which it feels it cannot have.

Envy, seeking only destruction, is "part of the affective account of the explanation and interrelation between structural and psychological facilitants of hatred".⁸ Klein clearly differentiates between envy, jealousy, and greed. Jealousy denies the good to another, with destructiveness a side-effect of this debarring. Greed works in a similar fashion, by taking the good wholly, in utter disregard of any damage others might sustain, and once more destructiveness becomes the side-effect. Envy, though, "seeks to destroy the good itself" (Clarke 36) and it is connected to anxiety in that both of them mount a blockade against reconciling the good and the bad in the depressive position. It could even be argued that envy heightens the anxiety accompanying reparation in the depressive position.

As if to assuage the destructive power of envy, Klein elaborates the notion of gratitude, which is balanced against envy. Closely related to reparation, gratitude possesses the same redemptive quality; it serves to mitigate the burden of aggression: "Gratitude includes belief in good objects and trust in them. It includes also the ability to assimilate the loved object and to love it without envy interfering".²⁷

Coda

Famous for having given the death instinct a prominent, centre-stage position, Klein's real achievement, however, in Emilia Steurman's opinion, "is her understanding of love as reparation (*caritas*)," (*The Bounds of Reason* 27)¹³ intrinsically linked to the reality of the death instinct. "Thus, it is not the death instinct but the battle between life and death that takes centre-stage. It is not envy but envy and gratitude, Eros and Thanatos that concern Klein," Steurman concludes.

Klein's system of thought proves particularly well suited to explaining the commerce carried on meaning through processes of introjection and projection. I believe the outlining of her vision has shown that hers is a theory full of conflicting energies: fierce destructive impulses, paranoid mechanisms, envy, but also desire for reparation, gratitude, germane to notions of morality, forgiveness and love, an excess of death and life instincts bubbling away that mirrors the very dynamics of existence.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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