Relational Psychoanalysis
The Emergence of a Tradition

edited by
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Recognition and Destruction: An Outline of Intersubjectivity
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Jessica Benjamin

Editor's Introduction

No one who takes pleasure in ideas can fail to find the writings of Jessica Benjamin a source of delight, surprise, and reflection. One of the most profound psychoanalytic theoreticians of this generation, she turns concepts upside down and inside out, arranging and rearranging them in relation to each other to expand their possibilities and enrich our experience.

We have chosen this essay from among her many influential writings because in it Benjamin outlines her position on one of the themes that has dominated her work, the problem of how we relate to the fact of the other’s independent consciousness. It is in and through the exhaustive and systematic examination of this question that Benjamin has brought together feminist studies and intersubjectivity theory. Thus, her profound contributions both to a feminist psychoanalysis and to psychoanalytic feminism do not result simply from bringing these two movements into dialogue with each other. Rather, Benjamin’s unique approach evolved from her creative recognition that these two domains were intricately and necessarily connected in solving the problem of understanding how separate subjects can recognize each other as equivalent centers of experience.
Benjamin’s thinking is characterized by her ability to maintain an approach of both/and rather than of either/or. Where we all tend to collapse the tension in an argument toward one side or the other, Benjamin has managed better than most to keep the tension, holding out for a theoretical space that makes room for complexity and paradox. Thus, as seen in this essay, her approach demands that psychoanalysis include the study of both the intrapsychic and the intersubjective. For Benjamin, subjectivity is established through processes of both recognition (affirmation) and destruction (negation), that the child is viewed as moving along a developmental path toward both separation-individuation and connection and mutuality. Never settling for easy resolution of difficult problems, Benjamin draws on her philosophical background in critical theory and insists that simple reversals do not advance our thinking. Instead, only by moving beyond complementarity toward the recognition for both sides of a dialectic can we further the development of our understanding.

In this essay, Benjamin lays out her critique of the traditional developmental assumptions of psychoanalytic ego psychology as they were popularized in Mahler’s (and her colleagues) separation-individuation theory. She shows how classical theory took the perspective of the child’s movement away from the mother toward separation and individuation rather than highlighting the equally important movement toward mutual recognition and attachment. Benjamin links this bias in the theory to its view of the (m)other as an object instead of as a separate subject. Here is where she links the most penetrating findings of feminism with the most important implications of developmental psychoanalysis, namely, that by defensively objectifying the mother of early infancy—by eliminating feminine subjectivity—we confine ourselves to an intrapsychic world in which we can relate only to objects and hence can establish neither our own subjectivity or the subjectivity of others. Benjamin thus shows the essential need to maintain both intrapsychic theory, with its exploration of our relations to objects, and intersubjectivity theory, in which there may be a meeting of minds.

Benjamin credits Stolorow and his colleagues with introducing the term intersubjectivity into psychoanalytic discourse. Stolorow and collaborators define intersubjectivity as the field of intersection of two subjectivities, but theirs is not a developmental theory and they do not distinguish subject-object relations from intersubjective ones, more narrowly defined. Stolorow is referring essentially to the mutual regulation that characterizes all human relationships. In this essay, however, Benjamin distinguishes her version of intersubjectivity theory by emphasizing that she views intersubjectivity as a developmental progression with a series of key moments of transformation. In her model, intersubjectivity is a developmental achievement that entails the only gradually and imperfectly acquired capacity for mutual recognition.

Drawing on Hegel’s master-slave analogy, Benjamin shows that the need for recognition entails the fundamental paradox that, in the very moment of realizing our own independent will, we are dependent on another to recognize it. She then draws heavily on Winnicott’s notions of object relating and object usage to demonstrate the need for both recognition and negation in the establishment of human subjectivity. Benjamin thus succeeds in combining the depth of psychoanalytic developmental observation with contemporary gender studies and feminism to reconstruct the theory and practice of psychoanalysis so that “where objects were, subjects might be.”

Benjamin’s The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination (1988, Pantheon) introduced a powerful and influential approach to the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism by drawing on Hegel’s concept of “recognition” to explore the development of human subjectivity and the themes of domination and submission in the polarities of gender formation. In Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference (1995, Yale), which includes this early essay, Benjamin further developed an integration of various currents of psychoanalytic developmental theory with her own version of intersubjectivity theory. In her recent Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis, (1998, Routledge) Benjamin continues the provocative conversation between critical social theory and intersubjective psychoanalysis by further exploring the paradoxes of gender complementarity and the dialectics of authority in the analytic situation.

Recognition and Destruction: An Outline of Intersubjectivity

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves; Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would

... become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to con-
ceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling ... 
that he had an equivalent center of self, whence the lights and shadows 
must always fall with a certain difference.


In recent years analysts from diverse psychoanalytic schools have 
converged in the effort to formulate relational theories of the self (Eagle, 
1984; Mitchell, 1988). What these approaches share is the belief that 
the human mind is interactive rather than monadic, that the psychoana-
lytic process should be understood as occurring between subjects rather 
than within the individual (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984; Mitchell, 1988).
Mental life is seen from an intersubjective perspective. Although this per-
spective has transformed our theory and our practice in important ways, 
such transformations create new problems. A theory in which the indi-
vidual subject no longer reigns absolute must confront the difficulty that 
each subject has in recognizing the other as an equivalent center of expe-
rience (Benjamin, 1988).

The problem of recognizing the other emerges the moment we con-
sider that troublesome legacy of intrapsychic theory, the term “object.” 
In the original usage, still common in self psychology and object rela-
tions theories, the concept of object relations refers to the psychic inter-
nalization and representation of interactions between self and objects. 
While such theories ascribe a considerable role to the early environment 
and parental objects—“real” others—they have taken us only to the 
point of recognizing that “where ego is, objects must be.” For example, 
neither Fairbairn’s insistence on the need for the whole object nor 
Kohut’s declaration that selfobjects remain important throughout life 
addresses directly the difference between object and other. Perhaps the 
elision between “real” others and their internal representation is so 
widely tolerated because the epistemological question of what is reality 
and what is representation appears to us, in our justifiable humility, too 
ecumenical and lofty for our parochial craft. Or perhaps, because we are 
psychoanalysts, the question of reality does not really trouble us.

But the unfortunate tendency to collapse other subjects into objects 
cannot simply be ascribed to this irresoluteness with regard to reality. 
Nor can it be dismissed as a terminological embarrassment that could 
be dissolved by greater linguistic precision (see Kohut, 1984). It is instead 
a symptom of the very problems in psychoanalysis that a relational the-
ory should aim to cure. An inquiry into the intersubjective dimension of 
the analytic encounter would aim to change our theory and practice so 
that “where objects were, subjects must be.”

What does such a change mean? A beginning has been made with 
the introduction of the term intersubjectivity for the analytic situation 
(Atwood and Stolorow, 1984; Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 1987), 
defining intersubjectivity as the field of intersection between two sub-
jectivities, the interplay between two different subjective worlds. But how 
is the meeting of two subjects different from one in which a subject 
meets object? Once we have acknowledged that the object makes an 
important contribution to the life of the subject, what is added by decid-
ing to call this object another subject? And what are the impediments to 
the meeting of two minds?

To begin our inquiry, we must address this question: what difference 
does the other make, the other who is perceived as truly outside, not 
within our mental field of operations? Isn’t there a dramatic difference 
between the experience with the other perceived as outside the self and 
the subjectively conceived object? Winnicott (1971) formulated the basic 
outlines of this distinction in what may well be considered his most dar-
ing and radical statement, “The Use of an Object and Relating Through 
Identifications.” Since then, with a few exceptions (Eigen, 1981; Modell, 
1984; Ghent, 1989), there has been little effort to elaborate Winnicott’s 
juxtaposition of the two possible relationships of the subject to the 
object. Yet, as I show here, the difference between the other as subject 
and the other as object is crucial for a relational psychoanalysis.

The distinction between the two types of relationships to the other 
can emerge clearly only if we acknowledge that both are endemic to 
psychic experience and hence both valid areas of psychoanalytic inquiry. 
If there is a contradiction between the two modes of experience, 
then we ought to probe it as a condition of knowledge rather than 
assume it to be a fork in the road. Other theoretical grids that have 
 bifurcated psychoanalytic thought—drive theory vs. object rela-
tions theory, ego vs. id psychology, intrapsychic vs. interpersonal the-
ory—insisted on a choice between the two opposing perspectives. I am 
proposing, instead, that the two dimensions of experience with the 
object/other are complementary, even though they sometimes stand in 
an oppositional relationship. By encompassing both dimensions, we 
can fulfill the intention of relational theories: to account both for the 
pervasive effects of human relationships on psychic development and 
for the equally ubiquitous effects of internal psychic mechanisms and 
fantasies in shaping psychological life and interaction.

I refer to the two categories of experience as the intrapsychic and the 
intersubjective dimensions (Benjamin, 1988). The idea of intersubjectiv-
ity, which has been brought into psychoanalysis from philosophy 
(Habermas, 1970, 1971), is useful because it specifically addresses the
problem of defining the other as object. Intersubjectivity was deliberately formulated in contrast to the logic of subject and object that predominates in Western philosophy and science. It refers to that zone of experience or theory in which the other is not merely the object of the ego's need/drive or cognition/perception, but has a separate and equivalent center of self.

Intersubjective theory postulates that the other must be recognized as another subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other's presence. This means, first, that we have a need for recognition and second, a capacity to recognize others in return—mutual recognition. But recognition is a capacity of individual development that is only unevenly realized, in a sense, the point of a relational psychoanalysis is to explain this fact. In Freudian metapsychology the process of recognizing the other "with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling" would appear, at best, as a background effect of the relationship between ego and external reality. Feminist critics of psychoanalysis have suggested that the conceptualization of the first other, the mother, as an object underlies this theoretical lacuna: cultural antithesis between male subject and female object contributed much to the failure to take into account the subjectivity of the other. The denial of the mother's subjectivity, in theory and in practice, profoundly impedes our ability to see the world as inhabited by equal subjects. My purposes are to show that, in fact, the capacity to recognize the mother as a subject is an important part of early development, and to bring the process of recognition into the foreground of our thinking.

I suggest some preliminary outlines of the development of the capacity for recognition. In particular I focus on separation-individuation theory, showing how much more it can reveal when it is viewed through the intersubjective lens, especially in the light of the contributions of both Stern and Winnicott. Because separation-individuation theory is formulated in terms of ego and object, it does not fully realize its own contribution. In the ego-object perspective the child is the individual, seen as moving in a progression toward autonomy and separateness. The telos of this process is the creation of psychic structure through internalization of the object in the service of greater independence.

As a result, separation-individuation theory focuses on the structural residue of the child's interaction with the mother as object; it leaves the aspects of engagement, connection, and active assertion that occur with the mother as other in the unexamined background. This perspective is infantocentric: typical studies of mother-child interaction will formulate the mother's acts of independence as a contribution to the child's self-regulation but not to the child's recognition of her subjectivity. (see, e.g., Settlage et al., 1991). This perspective also misses the pleasure of the evolving relationship with a partner from whom one knows how to elicit a response, but whose responses are not entirely predictable and assimilable to internal fantasy. The idea of pleasure was lost when ego psychology put the id on the backburner, but it might be restored by recognizing the subjectivity of the other.

An intersubjective perspective helps to transcend the infantocentric viewpoint of intrapsychic theory by asking how a person becomes capable of enjoying recognition with an other. Logically, recognizing the parent as subject cannot simply be the result of internalizing the parent as mental object. This is a developmental process that has barely begun to be explicated. How does a child develop into a person who, as a parent, is able to recognize her or his own child? What are the internal processes, the psychic landmarks, of such development? Where is the theory that tracks the development of the child's responsiveness, empathy, and concern, and not just the parent's sufficiency or failure?

It is in regard to these questions that most theories of the self have fallen short. Even self psychology, which has placed such emphasis on attunement and empathy and has focused on the intersubjectivity of the analytic encounter, has been tacitly one-sided in its understanding of the parent-child relationship and the development of intersubjective relatedness. Perhaps in reaction against the oedipal reality principle, Kohut (1977, 1984) defined the necessary confrontation with the other's needs or with limits in a self-referential way—optimal failures in empathy (parallel to analysts' errors)—as if there were nothing for children to learn about the other's rights or feelings. Although the goal of self psychology was to enable individuals to open "new channels of empathy" and "intimacy between self and selfobject" (Kohut, 1984, p. 66), the self was always the recipient, not the giver of empathy. The responsiveness of the selfobject, by definition, serves the function of "shoring up our self" throughout life; but at what point does it become the responsiveness of the outside other whom we love? The occasionally mentioned (perhaps more frequently assumed) "love object," who would presumably hold the place of outside other, has no articulated place in the theory. Thus, once again the pleasure in mutuality between two subjects is reduced to its function of stabilizing the self, not of enlarging our awareness of the outside, nor of recognizing others as animated by independent though similar feelings.

1. My remarks may be more apt for Kohut than for self psychology as a whole, which has recently shown an impetus to correct this one-sidedness and to include the evolution of difference in relation to the other (e.g., Lachmann, 1986) as well as the relationship to the "true" object (Stolorow, 1986).
In this essay I outline some crucial points in the development of recognition. It is certainly true that recognition begins with the other's confirming response that tells us we have created meaning, had an impact, revealed an intention. But very early on we find that recognition between persons—understanding and being understood, being in attunement—begins to be an end in itself. Recognition between persons is essentially mutual. By our very enjoyment of the other's confirming response, we recognize her in return. I think that what the research on mother-infant interaction has uncovered about early reciprocity and mutual influence is best conceptualized as the development of the capacity for mutual recognition. The frame-by-frame studies of face-to-face play at three to four months have given us a kind of early history of recognition.

The pathbreaking work of Stern (1974, 1977, 1985) and the more recent contributions of Beebe (1977, 1985, 1988) have illuminated how crucial the relationship of mutual influence is for early self-development. They have also shown that self-regulation at this point is achieved through regulating the other: I can change my own mental state by causing the other to be more or less stimulating. Mother's recognition is the basis for the baby's sense of agency. Equally important, although less emphasized, is the other side of this play interaction: the mother is dependent to some degree on the baby's recognition. A baby who is less responsive is a less "recognizing" baby, and the mother who reacts to her apathetic or fussy baby by overstimulation or withdrawal is a mother feeling despair that the baby does not recognize her.

In Stern's (1985) view, however, early play does not yet constitute intersubjective relatedness. He instead designates the next phase, when affective attunement develops at eight or nine months, as intersubjectivity proper. This is the moment when we discover "there are other minds out there!" and that separate minds can share a similar state. I would agree that this phase constitutes an advance in recognition of the other, but I think the earlier interaction can be considered an antecedent, in the form of concrete affective sharing. Certainly, from the standpoint of the mother whose infant returns her smile, affective sharing is already the beginning of reciprocal recognition. Therefore, rather than designate the later phase as intersubjective relatedness, I would rather conceptualize a development of intersubjectivity in which there are key moments of transformation.

In this phase, as Stern (1985) emphasizes, the new thing is the sharing of the inner world. The infant begins to check out how the parent feels when he is discovering a new toy and the parent demonstrates attunement by responding in another medium. By translating the same affective level into another modality, for instance, from kinetic to vocal—the adult conveys the crucial fact that it is the inner experience that is congruent. The difference in form makes the element of similarity or sharing clear. I would add that the parent is not literally sharing the same state, since the parent is (usually) excited by the infant's reaction, not the toy itself. The parent is in fact taking pleasure in contacting the child's mind.

Here is a good point to consider the contrast between intersubjective theory and ego psychology, a contrast Stern makes much of. The phase of discovering other minds coincides roughly with Mahler's differentiation and practicing subphases, but there is an important difference in emphasis. In the intersubjective view, the infant's greater separation, which Mahler emphasizes in this period, actually proceeds in tandem with, and enhances the felt connection with, the other. The joy of intersubjective attunement is: This other can share my feeling. According to Mahler (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975), though, the infant of ten months is primarily involved in exploring, in the "love affair with the world." The checking back to look at mother is not about sharing the experience, but about safety/anxiety issues, "refueling." It is a phase in which Mahler sees the mother not as contacting the child's mind, but giving him a push from the nest.

While Stern emphasizes his differences with Mahler, I think the two models are complementary, not mutually exclusive. It seems to me that here intersubjective theory amplifies separation-individuation theory by focusing on the affective exchange between parent and child and by stressing the simultaneity of connection and separation. Instead of opposite endpoints of a longitudinal trajectory, connection and separation form a tension, which requires the equal magnetism of both sides.

Now it is this tension between connection and separation that I suggest we track beyond the period of affective attunement. If we follow it into the second year of life, we can see a tension developing between assertion of self and recognition of the other. Translating Mahler's rapprochement crisis into the terms of intersubjectivity, we can say that in this crisis the tension between asserting self and recognizing the other breaks down and is manifested as a conflict between self and other.

My analysis of this crisis derives, in part, from philosophy, from Hegel's (1807) formulation of the problem of recognition in The Phenomenology of Spirit. In his discussion of the conflict between "the independence and dependence of self-consciousness" Hegel showed how the self's wish for absolute independence conflicts with the self's need for recognition. In trying to establish itself as an independent entity, the self must yet recognize the other as a subject like itself in order to be recognized by the self, immediately compromising the self's absoluteness.
and posing the problem that the other could be equally absolute and independent. Each self wants to be recognized and yet maintain his absolute identity: the self says, I want to affect you, but I want nothing you do or say to affect me, I am who I am. In its encounter with the other, the self wishes to affirm its absolute independence, even though its need for the other and the other's similar wish give the lie to it.

This description of the self's absoluteness covers approximately the same territory as narcissism in Freudian theory, particularly its manifestation as omnipotence: the insistence on being one (everyone is identical to me) and all alone (there is nothing outside of me that I do not control). Freud's (1911, 1915) conception of the earliest ego with its hostility to the outside, or its incorporation of everything good into itself, is not unlike Hegel's absolute self. Hegel's notion of the conflict between independence and dependence meshes with the classic psychoanalytic view in which the self does not wish to give up omnipotence.

But even if we reject the Freudian view of the ego, the confrontation with the other's subjectivity and the limits of self-assertion is a difficult one to negotiate. The need for recognition entails this fundamental paradox: in the very moment of realizing our own independent will, we are dependent upon another to recognize it. At the very moment we come to understand the meaning of I, myself, we are forced to see the limitations of that self. At the moment when we understand that separate minds can share similar feelings, we begin to find out that these minds can also disagree.

Let us return to Mahler and her associates' (1975) description of rapprochement, and see how it illustrates the paradox of recognition and how the infant is supposed to get out of it. Prior to rapprochement, in the self-assertion of the practicing phase, the infant still takes herself for granted, and her mother as well. She does not make a sharp discrimination between doing things with mother's help and without it. She is too excited by what she is doing to reflect on who is doing it. Beginning about 14 months a conflict emerges between the infant's grandiose aspirations and the perceived reality of her or his limitations and dependency. Although now able to do more, the toddler is aware of what she or he can't do and what she or he can't make mother do—for example, stay with her or him instead of going out. Many of the power struggles that begin here (wanting the whole pear, not a slice) can be summed up as a demand: "recognize my intent!" The child will insist that mother share everything, participate in all her or his deeds, acquiesce to all her or his demands. The toddler is also up against the increased awareness of separateness, and, consequently, of vulnerability: she or he can move away from mother—but mother can also move away from him.

If we reframe this description from the intersubjective perspective, the infant now knows that different minds can feel differently, that he or she is dependent as well as independent. In this sense, rapprochement is the crisis of recognizing the other, specifically of confronting mother's independence. It is no accident that mother's leaving becomes a focal point here, for it confronts the child not only with separation but with mother's independent aims. For similar reasons, the mother may experience conflict at this point; the child's demands are now threatening, no longer simply needs, but expressions of his or her independent (tyrannical) will. The child is different from her mental fantasy, no longer her object. He may switch places with her: from passive to active. He, not she, is now the repository of omnipotence once attributed to the "good" all-giving mother. How she responds to her child's and her own aggression depends on her ability to mitigate such fantasies with a sense of real agency and separate selfhood, on her confidence in her child's ability to survive conflict, loss, imperfection. The mother has to be able to both set clear boundaries for her child and to recognize the child's will, to both insist on her own independence and respect that of the child—in short, to balance assertion and recognition. If she cannot do this, omnipotence continues, attributed either to the mother or the self in neither case can we say that the development of mutual recognition has been furthered.

From the standpoint of intersubjective theory, the ideal "resolution" of the paradox of recognition is for it to continue as a constant tension between recognizing the other and asserting the self. However, in Mahler et al.'s (1975) theory the rapprochement conflict appears to be resolved through internalization, the achievement of object constancy—when the child can separate from mother or be angry at her and still be able to contact her presence or goodness. In a sense, this sets the goal of development too low: it is difficult and therefore sufficient for the child to accomplish the realistic integration of good and bad object representations (Kernberg, 1980). The sparse formulation of the end of the rapprochement conflict is, shall we say, anticlimactic, leading us to wonder, is this all? In this picture, the child has only to accept mother's disappointing her; she or he does not begin to shift her or his center of gravity to recognize that mother does this because she has her own center.

The breakdown and recreation of the tension between asserting one's own reality and accepting the other's is a neglected aspect of the crisis, but it is equally important. This aspect emerges when we superimpose Winnicott's (1971) idea of destroying the object over Mahler's rapprochement crisis. It is destruction—negation in Hegel's sense—that enables the subject to go beyond relating to the object through identification,
projection, and other intrapsychic processes having to do with the subjectively conceived object. It enables the transition from relating (intrapsychic) to using the object, carrying on a relationship with an other who is objectively perceived as existing outside the self, an entity in her own right. That is, in the mental act of negating or obliterating the object, which may be expressed in the real effort to attack the other, we find out whether the real other survives. If she survives without retaliating or withdrawing under the attack, then we know her to exist outside ourselves, not just as our mental product.

Winnicott’s scheme can be expanded to postulate not a sequential relationship but rather a basic tension between denial and affirmation of the other (between omnipotence and recognition of reality). Another way to understand the conflicts that occur in rapprochement is through the concept of destruction and survival: the wish to absolutely assert the self and deny everything outside one’s own mental omnipotence must sometimes crash against the implacable reality of the other. The collision Winnicott (1971) has in mind, however, is not one in which aggression occurs “reactive to the encounter with the reality principle,” but one in which aggression “creates the quality of externality” (p. 110). When the destructiveness damages neither the parent nor the self, external reality comes into view as a sharp, distinct contrast to the inner fantasy world. The outcome of this process is not simply reparation or restoration of the good object, but love, the sense of discovering the other (Eigen, 1981; Ghent, 1990).

The flipside of Winnicott’s analysis would be that when destruction is not countered with survival, when the other’s reality does not come into view, a defensive process of internalization takes place. Aggression becomes a problem—how to dispose of the bad feeling. What cannot be worked through and dissolved with the outside other is transposed into a drama of internal objects, shifting from the domain of the intersubjective into the domain of the intrapsychic. In real life, even when the other’s response dissipates aggression, there is no perfect process of destruction and survival; there is always also internalization. All experience is elaborated intrapsychically, we might venture to say, but when the other does not survive and aggression is not dissipated it becomes almost exclusively intrapsychic. It therefore seems to me fallacious to see internalization processes only as breakdown products or defenses; I would see them rather as a kind of underlying substratum of our mental activity—a constant symbolic digestion process that constitutes an important part of the cycle of exchange between the individual and the outside. It is the loss of balance between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective, between fantasy and reality, that is the problem.

Indeed, the problem in psychoanalytic theory has been that internalization—either the defensive or the structure-building aspects (depending on which object relations theory one favors)—has obscured the component of destruction that Winnicott (1964, p. 62) emphasizes: discovering “that fantasy and fact, both important, are nevertheless different from each other.” The complementarily of the intrapsychic and intersubjective modalities is important here: as Winnicott makes clear, it is in contrast to the fantasy of destruction that the reality of survival is so satisfying and authentic.

Winnicott thus offers a notion of a reality that can be loved, something beyond the integration of good and bad. While the intrapsychic ego has reality imposed from the outside, the intersubjective ego discovers reality. This reality principle does not represent a detour to wish fulfillment, a modification of the pleasure principle. Nor is it the acceptance of a false life of adaptation. Rather it is a continuation under more complex conditions of the infant’s original fascination with and love of what is outside, his appreciation of difference and novelty. This appreciation is the element in differentiation that gives separation its positive, rather than simply hostile, coloring: love of the world, not merely leaving or distance from mother. To the extent that mother herself is placed outside, she can be loved; separation is then truly the other side of connection to the other.

It is this appreciation of the other’s reality that completes the picture of separation and explains what is beyond internalization—the establishment of shared reality. First (1988) provided some very germane observations of how the toddler does begin to apprehend mutuality as a concomitant of separateness, specifically in relation to the mother’s leaving. The vehicle of this resolution is, to expand Winnicott’s notion, cross-identification: the capacity to put oneself in the place of the other based on empathic understanding of similarities of inner experience. The two-year-old’s initial role-playing imitation of the departing mother is characterized by the spirit of pure retaliation and reversal—“I’ll do to you what you do to me.” But gradually the child begins to identify with the mother’s subjective experience and realizes that “I could miss you as you miss me,” and, therefore, that “I know that you could wish to have your own life as I wish to have mine.” First shows how, by recognizing such shared experience, the child actually moves from a retaliatory world of control to a world of mutual understanding and shared feeling. This analysis adds to the idea of object constancy, in which the good object survives the bad experience, the idea of recognizing that the leaving mother is not bad but independent, a person like me. By accepting this, the child gains not only her own independence (as traditionally emphasized) but also the pleasure of shared understanding.
Looking backward, we can trace the outlines of a developmental trajectory of intersubjective relatedness up to this point. Its core feature is recognizing similarity of inner experience in tandem with difference. We could say that it begins with “We are feeling this feeling,” and then moves to “I know that you, who are an other mind, share this same feeling.” In rapprochement, however, a crisis occurs as the child begins to confront difference—“you and I don’t want or feel the same thing.” The initial response to this discovery is a breakdown of recognition between self and other: I insist on my way, I refuse to recognize you, I begin to try to coerce you, and therefore I experience your refusal as a reversal: you are coercing me. As in earlier phases, the capacity for mutual recognition must stretch to accommodate the tension of difference, in this case to accept the knowledge of conflicting feelings.

In the third year of life this tension can be expressed in symbolic play. The early play at retaliatory reversal may now be a kind of empowerment in which the child feels “I can do to you what you do to me.” But then the play expands to include the emotional identification with the other’s position, and becomes reflexive so that, as First puts it, “I know you know what I feel.” In this sense, the medium of shared feeling remains as important to intersubjectivity in later phases as in early ones. But it is now extended to symbolic understanding of feeling so that “you know what I feel, even when I want or feel the opposite of what you want or feel.” This advance in differentiation means that “we can share feelings without my fearing that my feelings are simply your feelings.”

The child who can imaginatively entertain both roles—leaving and being left—begins to transcend the complementary form of the mother-child relationship. The complementary structure organizes the relationship of giver and taker, doer and done to, powerful and powerless. It allows one to reverse roles, but not to alter them. In the reversible relationship, each person can play only one role at a time: one person is recognized, the other negated; one subject, the other object. This complementarily does not dissolve omnipotence, but shifts it from one partner to the other. The movement out of the world of complementary power relations into the world of mutual understanding thus shows us an important step in the dismantling of omnipotence: power is dissolved, rather than transferred back and forth in an endless cycle between child and mother. Again, this movement refers not to a one-time sequence or final accomplishment, but an ongoing tension between complementarily and mutuality.

When mutual recognition is not restored, when shared reality does not survive destruction, complementary structures and “relating” to the inner object predominate. Because this occurs commonly enough, the intrapsychic, subjectobject concept of the mind actually fits with the dominant mode of internal experience. This is why—notwithstanding our intersubjective potential—the reversible complementarity of subject and object conceptualized by intrapsychic theory illuminates so much of the internal world. The principles of mind Freud first analyzed—reversal of opposites like active and passive, the exchangeability or displacement of objects—thus remain indispensable guides to the inner world of objects.

But even when the capacity for recognition is well-developed, when the subject can use shared reality and receive the nourishment of “other-than-me substance,” the intrapsychic capacities remain. The mind’s ability to manipulate, to displace, to reverse, to turn one thing into another is not a mere negation of reality, but the source of mental creativity. Furthermore, when things go well, complementarily is a step on the road to mutuality. The toddler’s insistent reciprocity, his or her efforts to reverse the relationship with the mother, to play at feeding, grooming, and leaving her, is one step in the process of identification that ultimately leads to understanding. It is only when this process is disrupted, when the complementary form of the relationship is not balanced by mutual activity, that reversal becomes entrenched and the relationship becomes a struggle for power.

The attempt to reverse the mother’s omnipotence within the context of complementary structures may shed light on the problem of male dominance. One important mental structure that has perpetuated male power is the complementarily in which male = subject and female = object. As feminist theory has repeatedly pointed out, the failure of psychoanalysis to formulate a perspective in which the mother appears as subject limits our understanding of the infant as well. Insofar as the mother-infant relationship postulated by much psychoanalytic thinking was framed in terms of subject-object complementarity, the theory reproduced the prevalent cultural stance toward woman as mother. In other words, there is both a formal fit and a dynamic relationship between subject-object relations and male-female relations. Formally, the reversible, complementary structure of the mother-infant dyad dovetails with later representations of self-other relations as power relationships. Dynamically, the omnipotent mother of this dyad becomes the basis for the dread and retaliation that inform men’s exercise of power over women. Thus the adult relation between men and women becomes the locus of the great reversal, turning the tables on the omnipotent mother of infancy.

The intersubjective view of development offers a contrast that throws this reversal into bold relief. It shows that within the maternal dyad mutuality exists alongside complementarily, and the child engages in the
first struggles for recognition. This is in direct contrast to the implicit assumption, from Freud up to the current work of Chasseguet-Smirgel (1986), that the acceptance of reality and the separation from the mother are brought about through the intervention and internalization of the oedipal father. In this view, the mother remains archaic and omnipotent in the child’s mind and omnipotence must be counteracted by power of the oedipal father. The underlying premise is that the problem of recognition (that is, narcissism) cannot be worked on or resolved within the relationship to the primary other; it requires the intercession of an outside other, a third term, the “Name of the Father” as Lacan (1977) explicitly proposed. In other words, two subjects alone can never confront each other without merging, one being subordinated and assimilated by the other. This position justifies a split in which the mother’s power is displaced onto the father, and he serves as the independent other whom the (boy) child recognizes and with whom he struggles.

But, according to the intersubjective theory of destruction and recognition, differentiation does take place within the maternal dyad. Omnipotence can be counterbalanced and in this sense overcome. For it is not necessary that the fantasy of maternal omnipotence be dispelled, only that it be modified by the existence of another dimension—mutual recognition. From this perspective, the problem lies not in the unconscious fantasy of maternal omnipotence per se. Rather, the dread of the mother that has been linked to domination in the masculine stance toward women (Horney 1932; Stoller, 1975) becomes problematic when not counterbalanced by the development of intersubjectivity.

Horney’s (1932) remarks on male dread of woman illustrate how the loss of intersubjectivity affects the subject as well as the object: “It is not,” he says, “that I dread her; it is that she herself is malignant, capable of any crime, a beast of prey, a vampire, a witch, insatiable in her desires. She is the very personification of what is sinister” (p. 135). The projective power of this fantasy reflects the predominance of the intrapsychic over the intersubjective; “she is that thing I feel.” The lack of intersubjectivity in this psychic situation can be conceptualized as the assimilation of the subject to the object, as the lack of the space in between subjects. As Ogden (1986) puts it, the existence of potential space between mother and child allows the establishment of the distinction between the symbol and the symbolized. The subject who can begin to make this distinction now has access to a triangular field—symbol, symbolized, and interpreting subject. The space between self and other can exist and facilitate the distinction, let us say, between the real mother and the symbolic mother; this triangle is created without a literal third person.2 Lacking that space, the mother becomes the dreaded but tempting object; the subject is overwhelmed by that object since it really is “the thing in itself” (Ogden, 1986). In the denial of the other’s subjectivity the exercise of power begins.

The creation of this space within the relationship between infant and mother is an important dimension of intersubjectivity, a concomitant of mutual understanding. This space is not only a function, as Winnicott emphasized, of the child’s play alone in the presence of the mother, but also of play between mother and child, beginning with the earliest play of mutual gaze. As we see in First’s (1988) analysis of play with identification with the leaving mother, the transitional space also evolves within the communicative interaction between mother and child. Within this play, the mother is simultaneously “related to” in fantasy, but “used” to establish mutual understanding, a pattern that parallels transference play in the analytic situation. In the elaboration of this play the mother can appear as the child’s fantasy object as well as other subject without threatening the child’s subjectivity.

The existence of this space is ultimately what makes the intrapsychic capacities creative rather than destructive; perhaps it is another way of referring to the tension between using and relating. Using, that is recognizing, implies the capacity to transcend complementary structures, but not the absence of them. It does not mean the disappearance of fantasy or of negation but that “destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 111). It means a balance of destruction with recognition. In the broadest sense, internal fantasy is always eating up or negating external reality—“While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) fantasy” (p. 106). The loved one is being continually destroyed but its survival means that we can eat our reality and have it too. From the intersubjective standpoint, all fantasy is the negation of the real other, whether the fantasy’s content is negative or idealized; just as, from the intrapsychic view, external

2. Of course, the satisfactory development of this space may generate or become associated with the intrapsychic representation of the third person, even in children with one parent. The point here is not to disqualify oedipal representations, but to say that the oedipal father is not the way out of an otherwise engulfing maternal dyad. More likely, the traditional formulation of the oedipal relationship, which has emphasized identification with an idealized male power as the payoff for renouncing the mother, represents a fantasy “solution.” But when the symbolic father does substitute for the space between mother and child, the mother’s existence as an object of desire remains terrifying; the oedipal repudiation of femininity, with its disparagement of women, then becomes a further obstacle to the creation of intersubjective space.
reality is simply that which is internalized as fantasy. The ongoing interplay of destruction and recognition is a dialectic between fantasy and external reality.

In the analytic process, the effort to share the productions of fantasy changes the status of fantasy itself, moving it from inner reality to intersubjective communication. The fantasy object who is being related to or destroyed and the usable other who is there to receive the communication and be loved complement each other. What we find in the good hour is a momentary balance between intrapsychic and intersubjective dimensions, a sustained tension or rapid movement between the patient’s experience of us as inner material and as the recognizing other. This suspension of the conflict between the two experiences reflects the successful establishment of a transitional space in which the otherness of the analyst can be ignored as well as recognized. The experience of a space that allows both creative exploration within omnipotence and acknowledgment of an understanding other is, in part, what is therapeutic about the relationship.

The restoration of balance between intrapsychic and intersubjective in the psychoanalytic process should not be construed as an adaptation that reduces fantasy to reality, but rather as practice in the sustaining of contradiction. When the tension of sustaining contradiction breaks down, as it frequently does, the intersubjective structures—mutuality, simultaneity and paradox—are subordinated in favor of complementary structures. The breakdown of tension between self and other in favor of relating as subject and object is a common fact of mental life. For that matter, breakdown is a common feature within intersubjective relatedness—what counts is the ability to restore or repair the relationship. As Beebe and Lachmann (1988) have proposed, one of the main principles of the early dyad is that relatedness is characterized not by continuous harmony but by continuous disruption and repair (Beebe and Lachmann, 1991; Tronick, 1989).

Thus, an intersubjective theory can explore the development of mutual recognition without equating breakdown with pathology. It does not require a normative ideal of balance which decrees that breakdown reflects failure, and that the accompanying phenomena—internalization/fantasy/aggression—are pathological. If the clash of two wills is an inherent part of intersubjective relations, then no perfect environment can take the sting from the encounter with others. The question becomes how the inevitable elements of negation are processed. It is “good enough” that the inward movement of negating reality and creating fantasy should eventually be counterbalanced by an outward movement of recognizing the outside. To claim anything more for intersubjectivity would invite a triumph of the external, a terrifying psychic vacuity, an end to creativity altogether. A relational psychoanalysis should leave room for the messy, intrapsychic side of creativity and aggression; it is the contribution of the intersubjective view that may give these elements a more hopeful cast, showing destruction to be the “other” of recognition.

References


