Retro Review Interview

Steiner meets Winnicott: The 'Mind Object' and the case against prematurity

Paul Atkinson, Independent practice, London, UK in interview-conversation with
Richard House, Educational Consultant and Campaigner, Stroud, UK

Richard House [RH]: Paul, in a conversation last year, we stumbled across a shared admiration for a little-known book published 21 years ago as we start this conversation (Corrigan and Gordon, 1995) – *The Mind Object: Precocity and pathology of self-sufficiency*. For me, this book was a dramatic clinical confirmation of a campaigning position, informed by Steiner Waldorf education, that I'd been taking for some years as an early-childhood writer, academic and early-years teacher (House, 2009a). Put succinctly, a century ago educationalist and spiritual seer Rudolf Steiner argued that if young children's consciousness is 'woken up' (his term) into conscious *intellectual* awareness at too young, developmentally inappropriate an age (House, 2009b), it can, and typically does, cause life-long health damage. Very few academic developmental psychologists and early-years theorists would take this insight at all seriously, especially in our Anglo-Saxon culture which uncritically assumes it to be advantageous to drive young children into quasi-formal learning at ever-earlier ages (an ethos traceable right back to John Locke and English rationalism).

Yet compelling longitudinal evidence from the US Longevity Project (http://www.howardsfriedman.com/longevityproject/) has yielded strong statistical corroboration of Steiner's insight, showing conclusively that the earlier young children start formal schooling (and therefore intellectual learning), the far greater likelihood of both physical and mental negative health-effects – and even, incredibly, earlier mortality (as the Longevity Project researchers' book chapter poignantly has it, 'Head Start, Early Finish' – see Friedman and Martin, 2011; see also Kern and Friedman, 2008).

And so coming across the 'Mind Object' notion, and Donald Winnicott's typically brilliant notion of the 'mind-psyche' (Winnicott, 1949) from which it was derived, was a further corroborating revelation to me. Here, at last, was compelling *clinical* evidence of exactly what Steiner had laid out in such detail a century earlier based on his spiritual insights.

Paul, can you say something of how you came across this path-breaking book, and how it elided with your own professional concerns and interests when you first discovered it?

Paul Atkinson [PA]: Richard, yes – I can see the connection the Mind Object idea opened up for you between Steiner, early years education and your reading of the book.

For me, the book struck two experiential chords simultaneously. The first was a recognition through the book of my own mind's strenuous and futile efforts over several decades to make the world feel safe for me. The second was the fabulous insight it gave me into a piece of work a young client and me were doing together, which felt to me like us manically running numinous and intellectual rings around each other, passionately duelling mind on mind, or perhaps more accurately desperately shooting dice down the craps table of mystical precocity and psychic short-circuits, as Michael Eigen has it in his contribution to the book.

RH: That's an impeccably left-field way into our conversation, Paul! I find your first experiential chord most intriguing – i.e. 'my own mind's strenuous and futile efforts over several decades to make the world feel safe for me'. If it's not too intrusive a question, could you say more about that, and perhaps something about your own biographical relationship to the mind-object notion. I ask this because my strong hunch is that the mind-object phenomenon might well be far more 'pathologically' pervasive in late-modern culture than perhaps Winnicott and the contributors to *The Mind Object* have realised – and I think you might be able to throw some light on that contention from your own experience as intimated above.

PA: As far as my own experience is concerned, I am thinking about the fascination of the intellectual, the abstract, and its power of possession.

I grew up in a working-class family during the 1950s and went to a plate-glass university via grammar school. I was rather severely introverted as a kid. I lived inside my own troubled mind, I would say until my early teens. A therapist friend years ago came up with the notion of having an autistic core, which seemed to name something pretty well for me at the time. In my family – I have two younger brothers – I always felt like a stranger, an alien observer. In my 30s I asked my dad how he saw me in the early years. He said I was quiet and seemed to be all right, so he left me to it. He wasn't right.

At school, from the beginning it seemed to be 'straight A's' in everything. Over the last few weeks I've been downsizing my collection of personal history memorabilia and have dug up school reports – primary and secondary. A glowing picture of the perfect, hard-working, bright, well-mannered school boy. The education system was a sort of conveyor belt into adult life. Trouble was that from most points of view that matter to me now, I didn't really have a mind; an institutional mind had me.

In a way, getting involved with Marxism, the esoteric, and then psychoanalysis constituted a continuation of the same experience, even though, of course, the balance of different ways of being has been changing over the decades. Sometime, maybe ten years ago, I finally stopped struggling with what philosophy calls the 'epistemological' question – how do I know I know anything about me and the world? What a relief.

I wouldn't call this pathological – not these days, anyway. My guess is that it's a pretty common experience. If I were to be grandiose, I'd say versions of it are the common lot of what used to be called Western individualism. I like Lancelot Whyte's lovely little book, *The Unconscious before Freud*, on the frenzied madness of the Western self. More prosaically, I imagine it's a story shared by a lot of working-class grammar school kids – maybe men, mainly – growing up after the war and post-Robbins.

RH: '...an institutional mind had me'; that's very powerful and evocative, Paul; and thank you for being so open and insightful about your own biography. I think you and me actually have many biographical parallels, which I hadn't quite realised before – we must speak about this sometime. And

I'd never considered a *class* perspective in relation to the mind-object notion – that adds yet another layer of fascination and explanatory power to Winnicott's brilliant insight.

But I agree that there's something about 'Western individualism' to factor in here, too – perhaps through the lens of Iain McGilchrist's perspective of the evolutionary 'war' between the brain's left and right hemispheres (McGilchrist, 2009; Hooper Hansen, 2016). But the story then starts to get very complex indeed – and what just came to me is (borrowing from Basil Fawlty) – 'There's enough material for a whole conference here!' (and more...) in this extraordinarily rich 'mind object' notion. But alas, all we can do here is whet the readers' appetite so they follow up and read the book.

Paul, alas again, we only have space for one more question from me to you. I sense that we both think that this book is a hugely neglected work that deserves far more exposure and recognition than it has attracted since 1995. What's the most convincing rationale you can offer in a few paragraphs to make the case for this book being high on the list of therapists' (and perhaps educators') reading-lists?

PA: I constantly recommend *The Mind Object* to psychotherapy students and supervisees, and it's a bit shocking how few people have heard of it and how few training libraries stock it.

First off, the book is describing and analysing a relatively common experience in our clinical work – the phenomenon of a precocious and colonizing mind defending against traumatic early experience and therefore trust of relationship. To one degree or another, the grip of powerful, solipsistic enclosures of thinking over embodied feeling is surely part of every therapist's practice, especially so in that many therapists are bringing professional versions of 'mind object' non-relating from their trainings into their consulting rooms. Reading *The Mind Object*, we immediately recognize our clients and ourselves.

In more extreme cases, we can find ourselves working with clients whose apparently subtle, agile, brilliant or rigorous capacities to reflect and make connections gradually drive us and themselves into a despair of arid, deadening circularity. Developing the traumatized 'wise' or 'clever' baby of Sandor Ferenczi's writing in the 1920s and 1930s, the underpinning of the mind-object concept in Winnicott's world of false-self phenomena, failures in the early environment and continuity of being immediately opens us to the depth of the client's suffering and fear, and the consequent renewal of feeling and empathy.

This is an accessible book, for a number of reasons. Corrigan and Gordon's introduction is beautifully clear and powerful. The reader knows that they have got hold of something that not only makes sense to them but they have found so helpful in their own clinical work. And the wide range of writings from across the psychoanalytic family suggests the same. Fourteen contributors bring a range of different perspectives on the mind object, all with clinical examples at the centre of their essays that bring the ideas to life. As a practitioner you are immediately thrown into the world of your own consulting room. As a non-practitioner, you are just as likely to recognize yourself, your children, your school pupils, your partners and friends.

As someone influenced by Jung's understanding of psyche, perhaps I could end by noting a parallel between *The Mind Object* and Kalsched's classic post-Jungian reworking of Winnicott through his concept of the archetypal self-care system. Both to me suggest the centrality and ubiquity of trauma in all forms of entrenched defensiveness.

RH: What a beautiful ending, Paul. Perhaps there'll be a collective (and appropriate) *ouuuccch* when readers (and trainers) read your contention that 'many therapists are bringing professional versions of "mind object" non-relating from their trainings

into their consulting rooms'. What a wake-up call that should be for all of us in the psy field.

I've also lent or recommended this book to many people over the years (clients, early-years colleagues, friends), and I also see it as a potentially life-changing book for many of us – clients and practitioners alike. And as to your list of people who might recognize themselves in the book, I'd like to add managerialist politicians steeped in a rationalist discourse, who believe there to be a technological-rational fix to any and every problem. I'm reminded of Maslow's (1966:15-16) wonderful quotation – "When your only tool is a hammer, the world becomes a nail". Or, re-framed in mind-object parlance, 'When your only tool is the intellect, the world becomes a desert'.

Thank you, Paul, for your great insights into this marvellous book!

Paul Atkinson has been a counsellor and psychotherapist for four decades, working in private practice in London. He has taught, supervised and chaired for psychoanalytic trainings. He helps run a men's therapy group, and is a member of the Free Psychotherapy Network, Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility and the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Recently Paul has been working with therapists and mental health activists campaigning against the collaboration of psy professionals and the UK Department for Work and Pensions' work-cure policies. He has four grandchildren.

Richard House is former co-editor of *Self & Society*, a recovering psychotherapist and university senior lecturer, and now an educational consultant, editor and political activist in Stroud, UK. His latest book is *Humanistic Psychology: Current trends and future prospects* (co-edited with David Kalisch and Jennifer Maidman, Routledge, 2018).

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