***Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics***

**Number 90, December 2023 ISSN: 2047-0622**

**URL:** [**http://www.freeassociations.org.uk/**](http://www.freeassociations.org.uk/)



**The Dialectics of Trauma and the Need for a New Narrative**

Cajsa Lindholm

Based on our relationship with the sea, Isabella Lövin speaks in her latest book *Oceankänslan. Om behovet av en ny berättelse* (2022) about the impending environmental disaster we live with and the destruction of our ecosystem. She has been working on issues related to the sea for twenty years as a Swedish journalist and author, as a Member of the European Parliament and, in recent years, as a Green Party minister. Her experiences from her political work in trying to change fisheries policy led to a need to put into words the illusions that she has encountered in people and that have pushed on the catastrophic development; the illusion that we are acting rationally and that we have the best interests of humanity at heart, while we are rapidly sawing off the branch we are sitting on and handing ourselves over to blind market forces at the expense of ecosystems and spiritual values.

Water is the prerequisite for all life; the sea is the rule on our planet - it makes up 70 per cent of the earth's surface - the earth is the exception. We look out over the infinity and we are filled with a sense of life. The feeling of the ocean, which Lövin is convinced is present in most of us - a fleeting but strong sense of belonging to nature and all of creation that can be experienced in front of the sea, in encounters with animals and people, or under an endless starry sky - is the starting point for the need for a new story. It is the story she wants to tell about us as planetary citizens, stewards of a lonely blue planet in an infinite and cold space. A story of our responsibility and of our blessing to be here.

A new ethical framework for our relationship with nature needs to replace the human-centered narrative of human superiority, domination, exploitation and growth for growth's sake. We know this because deep down we are good, Lövin writes. The door is open. Why this prison?

But do we really know and are we good at heart? Goodness is a problematic word. Goodness is arbitrary, as the Swedish author Willy Kyrklund writes. In whose eyes is the good good? Lövin herself addresses the problem when she describes people as rational, driven by the illusion of doing good while being blind to the consequences of their own actions. In other words, the new narrative needs to provide a realistic view of who we are and how we come to be as human beings. How do we preserve the oceanic feeling - the feeling of being part of all living things? And how is it lost?

Hannah Arendt, in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964) provides a fascinating and interesting portrait of a person who lacked a moral

compass and stubbornly asserted his good intentions and his unawareness of the opposite, despite being one of the main designers and orchestrators of the Holocaust. Arendt, of course, did not mean that Adolf Eichmann's destructiveness was banal, quite the contrary, but that the platitudes that concealed its meaning were. In her book, a picture emerges of a totally closed-off and obedient person. In her description of Eichmann, Arendt missed other aspects of him that were not evident during the trial in Jerusalem in 1961 - and which have been the subject of the debate about her book over the last sixty years - but despite the legitimate objection, she points to something extremely important: Eichmann's total lack of emotional empathy and ability to reflect, both on himself and his victims. The capacity for empathy plays an important role in Arendt's account, where she de-demonizes evil. From the empathic ability to recognize another person's feelings also comes reflection, mobility and the ability to feel responsibility. The lack of empathy leads to its opposite.

 In her search for foundations for a new narrative, Lövin discusses the theory that has had the greatest impact in the last century, psychoanalytic theory. To illustrate how the "oceanic feeling" was lost in the theory, she highlights the correspondence between the author and Nobel Prize winner Romain Rolland and Sigmund Freud (Lövin, 2022: 228-29).

 The contradiction between Rolland and Freud - and the conflict that is evident within Freud - is interesting to read because it concerns the oceanic feeling and its disappearance. In analyzing and attempting to explain it, I will start from an essay I wrote in the nineties (Carlssons, 1999).

 Rolland writes that in Freud's book *En illusion och dess framtid*/*The Future of an Illusion (1928/1991)* he missed what he called a special oceanic feeling that never left him and which he assumed existed in millions of people. This sense of the eternal, the unbounded, the infinite and the oceanic, Freud could not detect in himself, when discussing Rolland's remark in his book *Vi vantrivs i kulturen*/*Civilization and Its Discontents (1962/1991),* but assumed that it was synonymous with the religious energy captured by various churches and belief systems Freud could not deny that these feelings existed in people and interpreted them as belonging to the blurred ego boundaries of a small child in relation to his mother: "Initially the self contains everything, but later it separates itself from the world. Our present sense of self, then, is only a shrunken remnant of a certain more comprehensive, indeed all-encompassing sense, corresponding to a more intimate relationship between self and world." (Freud, 1962: 9). But instead of reflecting on these early feelings, Freud came to dismiss them as expressions of the child's helplessness and the resulting longing for the father's protection.

 It is not difficult to sense the conflict in Freud, but in the face of this Freud stopped and took a truly patriarchal position; the infinity feelings were detached from their early origins in relation to the mother and reduced to a defense against giving up the illusion of a way out of helplessness and dependence. With the help of drive dualism, the struggle between the life and death drives, the meaning of life appeared clear to Freud in the extreme pessimism he expressed in *Civilization and Its Discontents.*

 To understand the Freudian conflict, it is important to understand its historical background. Given that Freud had already abandoned the so-called 'seduction theory' early in his career, it is not surprising that psychoanalytic theory tended to become more and more closed and pessimistic. The vivid and clinically very convincing lecture on eighteen sexually abused patients, which Freud gave in 1896 to his colleagues - and rightly expected to be recognized for - received an icy reception. As the expert audience abandoned Freud, so he abandoned his beliefs - and his patients. The helpless and abandoned children, exploited by unscrupulous adults and their demands for sexual performance, were sacrificed in the theory that eventually emerged. By focusing on the child's inner world of incestuous fantasies and desires directed at parents, it tended to conceal and legitimize abuse. The way the Oedipus complex is constructed. The disastrous implication of the new theory was that the line between victim and perpetrator was blurred and that external reality and the traumas and their consequences that Freud so vividly and sensitively described were ignored or reinterpreted at the expense of the child's experiences.

 The case of Dora provides an insight into Freud's disdain, blaming and sexualization of a fourteen-year-old girl's physical disgust at being sexually assaulted by one of her father's friends. Freud turns the tables. The disgust was in fact evidence of its opposite: a young girl's hysterical reaction to her repressed sexual arousal. A particular culture of silence with scientific pretensions and devastating impact has been provided by orthodox psychoanalytic theory in dealing with traumatized children.

 A contemporary example of a culture of silence from literary and influential circles in France is provided by Vanessa Springora in her book *Consent. A Memoir (2021).* A well-known author and also a known pedophile for decades abused her at the age of 14, without anyone intervening or reacting. Ms Springora's book is a good illustration of the French establishment's approach to child exploitation. It also highlights the need for a narrative that provides us with a moral compass to see and recognize abuse and exploitation.

 It may seem like a detour to describe a theory presented by Freud in the late nineteenth century, but his importance as a creative thinker cannot be denied. His theory and clinical observations have occupied and fertilized people's thinking for over 100 years. At the same time, it is also undeniable that the orthodox Freudian theory, with its blaming of the child, has played an important role, not only in the view of sexual trauma, but of traumatic experiences and vulnerability in a broader sense. The dependence and vulnerability of the child is not covered by the theory. Instead, it stopped at internal splitting and the struggle between powerful urges. Fortunately, the theory, with its complex view of the human being and its emphasis on the unconscious and the inner world, has also inspired further developments, spin-offs and schools that are much closer to the child's reality and that also better answer the question Rolland posed about the origins of the oceanic feeling.

 As a young psychology student in Sweden in the early seventies, I could choose between two specializations: psychoanalysis or behavioral therapy. Neither of these attracted or concerned me. It was only when, after completing my studies, I became familiar with the pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's further development of psychoanalytic theory, that I began to sense a direction and meaning with my choice of profession. Based on his view of human nature (and a handful of other theorists with a similar orientation), my work with traumatized patients for over forty years has provided an insight into how an inner mobility has been lost in their lives. Trauma confines and forces the victim to oscillate between helplessness and submission - and destructive or self-destructive behavior. This inner dialectic tends to be expressed and repeated in relation to other people.

 Based on his encounters with tens of thousands of children and their mothers, mainly as a consultant pediatrician for forty years at Paddington Green Hospital in London, Winnicott has made an unparalleled contribution to important insights into the processes of child development. As one of his biographers writes: "What Freud put in a footnote, Winnicott made his life work to explicate." (Goldman, 1993: 170).

 "There is no such thing as an infant". The famous sentence was uttered by Winnicott during a meeting of the British Psycho-Analytical Society in the forties. Surprised by his own assertion, he added, "meaning, of course, that whenever one finds an infant one finds maternal care, and without maternal care there would be no infant." (Winnicott, 1958: xxxvii).

 Each child is born with the potential for a unique and personal starting point. A true self takes shape in relation to a 'good-enough mother', according to Winnicott. The starting point of a true self is crucial to Winnicott's view of humanity. If something is true, something can also be false. The true self is of course a fiction and a concept that cannot be evidence-based, but perhaps it can still enrich our thinking about the early processes of the child. Creative and moral (referred to by Winnicott as the 'capacity for concern') development in the child is possible, provided the child is allowed to develop. Empathy follows from good relationships.

 Winnicott interestingly broadens the meaning of trauma and sees it primarily as an intrusion by the environment into the child's 'being', a break in the child's continuous experience. The degree of traumatization determines the consequences for the child's life. Experiences of 'unthinkable anxiety' threaten a child who lacks parental support, whether through physical offences or abandonment. A child cannot hold itself together without contact, but risks disintegration and fragmentation. To escape the threat of loneliness, anxious fear and emptiness, the child develops a 'false self', an adaptation and submission to external conditions in order not to lose the relationship with their parents at all costs.

 Winnicott attaches great importance to early processes, and the smaller the child, the greater the vulnerability and dependence. But it should also be remembered that perfection is not what parents need to strive for. "A 'good enough' mum/parent is enough.

 The perspective represented by D.W. Winnicott is conspicuous by its absence in the medicalized age we live in. The hegemony of rationality and science, combined with reason-based cognitive methods, leaves no room for questions about the foundations of morality and empathy or the question of how a coherent creative self emerges. The answers to the more profound questions must, in my opinion, be sought in developmental psychology and psychoanalytic theory.

 In autumn 2022 the Swedish neurologist and researcher David Bäckström*´s book Fantasi w*as published. It provides a fascinating insight into the incredible complexity of our brains and the importance of imagination in our lives. We live 80 per cent of our lives within ourselves and not in reality. With our imagination, we fertilize and bring to life what is both inside and outside of us. But in Bäckström's book, he hardly asks any questions about who synthesizes and why we are synthesized and become reasonably cohesive and integrated people. What is it that synthesizes our experiences and shapes us into the people we are? Or to put it another way, with the help of Hannah Arendt: Where are we when we think?

 How do good fantasies arise that enrich our lives? And how do evil fantasies arise? In her description of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt stopped at the surface that Eichmann presented, but she missed what may have been going on inside him. What role did fantasies play in his destructiveness? How did he balance his outwardly extreme obedience and conformity? As Erich Fromm writes in his discussion of the death drive in *Människohjärtat/The Heart of Man, its Genius for Good and Evil (1964: 147)* "... the potential of evil is so much greater as man is endowed with an imagination that enables him to imagine all the possibilities of evil ... to nourish his evil imagination".

 In today's newspaper (*Arbman, Dagens Nyheter 2023)*, I read that more than a million people in Sweden take antidepressants. A depressing statistic that indicates a serious systemic failure in Swedish psychiatry. My view is that the medical and cognitive disciplines are insufficient and need to be combined with knowledge of the vulnerable processes that take place in the interaction between a young child and its environment. What makes life worth living? Linking physiology/neurology with knowledge of the child's development in relation to its carers is necessary to answer this question. As the title of one of Winnicott's books indicates: *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment (1979).* The biologically given processes need to be completed in interaction with a facilitating environment.

 Winnicott wrote a large number of books that were widely circulated and, together with a series of BBC lectures, he reached ever wider circles of people in bringing the world of the child to life. The role he played in the middle of the last century in England ties in with Isabella Lövin and the need for a new narrative that brings to life not only our relationship with our children, but also with nature. That narrative needs to be true and tell the story of our vulnerability and dependence on each other and on the nature that surrounds us. We are surrounded by and born from anonymous nature. On the way out of the womb, we transform and adapt to our terrestrial life. These early vulnerable processes need to be carried out in respect and contact with the needs of the child. This is how we preserve our sense of the ocean and develop our capacity for empathy and care - and our wonder at nature.

 How do we realize our place in an ecosystem that transcends us and to which we need to submit? How do we realize that we are planetary citizens, stewards of a blue planet? The door is open, Isabella Lövin writes. But what does the awakening look like?

 One of the most beautiful and thought-provoking answers to this question is given by the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant (2003). In the last part of his architectural work on humans, in the section on the sublime, he connects us with the impact of nature. The overwhelming sense of infinity confronts us with ourselves and connects us with our morality. In the encounter with the nature that transcends us and of which we are a part, we experience our finiteness and vulnerability. Morality originates here, in the encounter with that which is greater than ourselves. Kant grew up in a pietistic environment. Reason played a major role and interpretations of him and his relationship to the moral law within us vary. But the essence remains: the encounter with the unlimited, infinite makes us responsible.

**References**

Arbman, Hans. (2023). "Åsa Nilssone: Antidepressiva dämpar även positiva känslor". Dagens Nyheter, 5 January.

Arendt, Hannah. (1965). Eichmann in Jerusalem - A Report on the Banality of Evil. The Viking Press. Pennsylvania State University

Bäckström, David. (2022). Fantasi. INFO@FREE THOUGHT.

Freud, Sigmund. (1928). En illusion och dess framtid. Stockholm: Bonnier förlag.

Freud, Sigmund. (1962). Vi vantrivs i kulturen. Stockholm: Bokförlaget Röda rummet.

Fromm, Erich. (1964). Människohjärtat. Stockholm:Natur & Kultur.

Goldman, David. (1993) In Search of the Real. The Origins and Originality of D.W. Winnicott. Jason Aronson Inc.

Kant, Immanuel. (1790/2003). Critik der Urteilskraft/Kritik av omdömeskraften. Stockholm: Thales.

Lindholm, Cajsa. (1999). Den Andres Blick. Included in: Ett rum att leva i. Om djupgående psykoterapeutiska processer och objektrelationsteori.

 Andersson, Britt. et al. Stockholm: Carlssons.

Lövin, Isabella. (2022). Oceankänslan. Om behovet av en ny berättelse. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.

Springora, Vanessa. (2021). Consent. A Memoir. HarperVia.

Winnicott, D. W. (1958) Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalyses. The Hogarth Press.

Winnicott, D. W. (1979). The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment. The Hogarth Press.

**Cajsa Lindholm** has worked as a psychologist, psychotherapist and supervisor for almost forty years in private practice. Prior to that she worked with antisocial young people as a therapist. In 1999 she co-authored an anthology: *A Room to Live in. Psychotherapeutic Processes and Object Relations Theory*. In 2018 she published a bookabout the case of “Thomas Quick”*: I denna kusliga tomhet. En analys av Thomas Quicks tankevärld, dess uppkomst och gestaltning/ In this Terrifying Void. An Analysis of Thomas Quicks World of Thought, it´s Origin and Reenactment*. Thomas Quick/Sture Bergwall was known as a Swedish serial killer during the nineties, convicted of eight murders, but later freed.