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BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Call Number: *Lender's OCLC LDR: 5- 2000-
Title: Journal for the psychoanalysis of culture & society : JPCS.
Imprint: Gardiner, NY : Critical Press, c1996-c2003.
Article: Oberlechner, Fairbairn's theory of object relations
Volume: 7
Number: 2
Date: 2002
Pages: 298-304
Verified: OCLC ISSN: 1088-0763 [Format: Serial]

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Fairbairn's Theory of Object Relations

Thomas Oberlechner

Ronald Fairbairn's writings show that he has very carefully assimilated Freud's classical theory. However, struck by the significance of object relationships in the treatment of schizoid patients, he departs from classical psychoanalytic theory in a number of critical respects. Fairbairn expresses his highly original and intellectually vigorous ideas on human personality in a series of papers from 1940 onward (Sutherland, "Obituary" and "British"). His theory forms the foundation for some of the most significant advancements in contemporary psychoanalysis. The core of Fairbairn's theory is the notion that psychic structure, the self, is based directly on the vicissitudes of object relatedness (Rubens).

The present overview of Fairbairn's theory of object relations focuses on four theoretical cornerstones upon which his psychoanalytical thinking rests. These foundations include (1) Fairbairn's description of the schizoid personality as found in *Schizoid Factors in the Personality*, (2) the psychoanalytic development from classical libido theory to object relations theory, (3) Fairbairn's theory of the development of human object relationships, both described in *A Revised Psychopathology of the Psychoses and Psychoneuroses*, and (4) Fairbairn's revision of the mental apparatus which conceptualizes the basic endopsychic structure as a multiplicity of egos. Fairbairn's views regarding the mental structure are most clearly stated in *Endopsychic Structure Considered in Terms of Object-Relationships*.

The Schizoid Personality

The study of schizoid patients led Fairbairn to the conclusion that their etiology lies in the mother's failure to give the infant an adequate experience of "being loved for himself." Thus Fairbairn sees the basis of healthy development not in the satisfaction of instincts, but in the passing on to the infant that it is a person and that it is loved as such. When deprived of this experience, the child becomes too frightened to make object relations. The child fears that its love will be rejected, and builds up a compensatory world of inner objects and relationships. The unitary ego of the infant, which is present from the beginning, becomes massively split (Guntrip).

Fairbairn's definition of the schizoid is very comprehensive. In fact, he states that everybody, without exception, is schizoid at some level, and that the basic position in the psyche is invariably schizoid. Psychoneurotic symptoms of a hysterical, phobic, obsessional, or anxious nature are seen by Fairbairn as techniques employed to defend against an underlying schizoid position in the personality. The main characteristics of the schizoid are, according to Fairbairn, (1) an attitude of omnipotence, (2) an attitude of isolation or detachment, and (3) preoccupation with inner reality. The fundamental schizoid phenomenon underlying these characteristics is the presence of splits in the ego.[1] Dreams, for example, are universal schizoid phenomena, with different figures of the dream representing different parts of the dreamer's ego.

The ego of the small infant can be described as "mouth ego." According to Fairbairn, in the infant, "the mouth is the chief organ of desire, the chief instrument of activity, the chief medium of satisfaction and frustration, the chief channel of love and hate, and, most important of all, the first means of social contact. The first social relationship established by the individual is that between self and one's mother; and the focus of this relationship is the suckling situation" ("Schizoid" 10). This early oral relationship influences all following relationships as well as one's social attitude in general. "The child's oral relationship with his mother in the situation of suckling represents his first experience of a love relationship, and is, therefore, the

JPCS: Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society, Volume 7, Number 2, Fall 2002
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foundation upon which all his future relationships with love objects are based," writes Fairbairn ("Schizoid" 25).

An unsatisfactory emotional relationship with the mother, in which the mother fails to assure the child "by spontaneous and genuine expression of affection that she herself loves him as a person," leads to a fixation in the early oral attitude. Fairbairn considers four (schizoid) consequences that follow the lack of this fundamental experience, i.e., to be genuinely loved as a person, in light of the characteristics of the early oral phase itself.

1. *The libidinal object assumes the form of a partial object.* The mother's failure to convince the child that she loves the child as a person makes it difficult for the child to maintain a relationship on a personal basis. By way of regression, the child therefore restores the relationship to its earlier form and revives the relationship to the mother's breast as a partial object. The effect is the schizoid tendency to regard other people as less than persons with an intrinsic value of their own.
2. *Predominance of taking over giving in the libidinal attitude.* The oral activity essentially is an attitude of taking. Schizoids have difficulties in expressing emotions since the giving involved in expressing emotion is perceived as losing personal contents. As a defense against this "emotional loss," the schizoid employs repression of affect and makes herself detached. Fairbairn mentions two particular techniques that a schizoid might use in order to avoid emotional giving, or loss. One of such techniques is *playing roles.* Living and relating to others by only playing a part, the schizoid really gives nothing and loses nothing. The other method to avoid emotional giving is the *exhibitionistic technique.* Exhibitionism, according to Fairbairn, substitutes "showing" for true "giving."
3. *The libidinal attitude of internalization or incorporation.* This is another consequence of the child's early experience of not really being loved for oneself as a person by one's mother, and that one's love for one's mother is not really valued. The child then not only experiences its mother as a bad object inasmuch as the mother does not seem to love the child. In addition, the child also comes to regard the expression of its own unvalued love as bad, and retains it inside. The child thus experiences love relationships with outer objects as bad and hazardous. As a result, the child internalizes object relationships, i.e. transfers them to its inside. Fairbairn sees this internalization as a defense mechanism against feelings of frustration, brought about in order to gain control over outer objects.
4. *Feelings of emptying the object.* Early oral deprivations or frustrations make the child feel empty. In addition to experiencing this emptiness, the child also interprets the situation as actually being responsible for having emptied its mother's breast. The child is anxious about being responsible for the disappearance or even destruction of its mother's breast, and of the mother herself.

When a child who is fixated in the early oral phase feels that it is not really loved as a person by its mother, it feels that it has destroyed the mother's affection. It feels that the mother refuses to value its love because its own love is destructive and bad. It feels that *its love has destroyed its mother's affection.* Fairbairn describes the situation where an individual feels that one's love destroys one's libidinal objects as a schizoid position. He explains the schizoid "introversion" as a defensive withdrawal, i.e., as a replacement of external relationships by relations with internal objects (Kernberg). Schizoid individuals keep their love inside for two reasons: they experience the giving of love as loss, and they also feel that their love is dangerous and destructive.[2] Since their own love is bad, they also interpret the love of others as bad. Schizoids thus feel that they must neither love nor be loved. To defend themselves against this destructive love, the schizoid individual "not only substitutes hate for love in his relationships with his objects, but also induces them to hate, instead of loving, him; and he does all this in order to keep his libidinal objects at a distance" (Fairbairn "Schizoid" 26).

From Classical Libido Theory to Object Relations Theory

Freud sees libido as distributed over a number of bodily zones. To him, development consists of the integration of libidinal activity under the mastery of the geni-

tal impulse. Karl Abraham later expanded libido theory by assigning each important libidinal zone a special place in human development. According to Abraham's scheme, neuroses and psychoses can be ascribed to a fixation at a specific phase.

Fairbairn affirms that schizoid conditions can be attributed to a fixation in the early oral phase, and that manic-depressive conditions can be ascribed to a fixation in the later oral phase. But he sees paranoid, obsessional, hysterical, and phobic functioning *not* as fixations at a libidinal phase, but as a technique to defend the ego against a schizoid or depressive state.[3] To him, the very early time, i.e., the early and the late oral phase, is crucial.[4] To Fairbairn, the Oedipus situation is therefore not the "basic situation, but the derivative of a situation which has priority over it not only in the logical, but also in the temporal sense. . . . It is in the setting of the child's relationship to his mother that the basic endopsychic relationship is established" (Fairbairn, "Endopsychic Structure" 120).

Very early in psychoanalytic history, Fairbairn postulates that classical libido theory has to be converted into a theory of development based upon object-relationship. Understanding the erotogenic zones simply as channels, or the "path of least resistance," through which the libido flows, Fairbairn considers the object, not pleasure, as the ultimate goal of the libido! In his own words, "the function of libidinal pleasure is essentially to provide a sign-post to the object," whereas in classical libido theory "the object is regarded as sign-post to libidinal pleasure; and the cart is thus placed before the horse" (Fairbairn, "Revised" 33). In summary, rather than being pleasure-seeking, libido is, in Fairbairn's view, essentially object-seeking.[5]

To exemplify this view, Fairbairn asks: why does a baby suck his thumb? Classical libido theory would answer that because the mouth is an erotogenic zone, sucking provides the child with pleasure. In contrast, Fairbairn, stressing the need for object-relations, answers: because there is no breast to suck. To Fairbairn, thumb sucking, like masturbation, is a technique to deal with an unsatisfactory object-relationship. By sucking its thumb, the baby provides for itself what it cannot get from the object, and provides itself an object which it cannot obtain.

Fairbairn's Theory of Human Development

Fairbairn defines human development in terms of the changing nature of object-relationships. It is "a process whereby infantile dependence upon the object gradually gives place to mature dependence upon the object" ("Revised" 34). The phases of the development of object-relationships defined by Fairbairn are (1) infantile dependence, (2) transition, and (3) stage of mature dependence ("Revised"). In the course of passing through these three developmental stages, an initial object-relationship based upon primary identification is given up, and an object-relationship based upon the differentiation of the object is adopted.

Stage of Infantile Dependence

Infantile dependence is unconditional: infants are completely dependent on their objects in many regards. The infantile object relationship is based upon identification, and focuses upon a single object. Identification and incorporation are the most distinctive features of infantile dependence, as Fairbairn demonstrates by the image of an infant held in its mother's arms, sucking her milk. The object of the *early oral phase* is actually a part-object, i. e., the mother's breast. The child relates to this object by either sucking or rejecting it. The attitude of the early oral child is pre-ambivalent; when the object, i. e., the breast, presents itself as good, its contents are incorporated: the baby sucks. When the object presents itself as bad, it is rejected: the baby does not suck, or spits out. But the baby makes no attempt yet to destroy the object. In the pre-ambivalent phase the baby can, as it were, either love or not love. The schizoid conflict therefore is how to love without destroying by love, and, as we recall, that for a schizoid person one's love seems to destroy. In addition, the schizoid feels that one is not loved because one's own love is bad. The object of the *late oral phase* is a whole-object, i. e., the mother with the breast. The child can now relate to this object by either sucking or biting. The late oral phase is characterized by ambivalence. Now the child can either love or hate. This is also what the depressive conflict is all about: on how to love without destroying by hate. Unlike the schizoid individual fixated in the early oral phase, the

depressive individual fixated in the late oral phase feels that one is unloved because of the destructiveness of one's hate. In contrast to the schizoid, one's love seems good, and in contrast to the schizoid one is therefore capable of relationships with outer objects.

Stage of Transition between Infantile and Mature Dependence

In the stage of transition, the ambivalence of the later oral phase gives way to an attitude of "dichotomy of the object." Fairbairn defines this as "a process whereby the original object, towards which both love and hate have come to be directed, is replaced by two objects—an accepted object, towards which love is directed, and a rejected object, towards which hate is directed[6]" ("Revised" 35). Accordingly, in the Oedipus situation, the single object of the late oral phase is divided into two objects, one accepted and one rejected, identified with one parent respectively.

The conflict of the transitional stage is the conflict over separation from the undifferentiated object of the earlier oral stage. Object-relationships based upon identification are replaced by object-relationships with a differentiated object. This conflict over separation can activate the paranoid, obsessional, hysterical, and phobic defensive techniques. These techniques may also help defend against an underlying schizoid or defensive tendency.

Stage of Mature Dependence

The last developmental stage, the stage of mature dependence, which today we might call "interdependency," is characterized predominantly by an attitude of giving, which replaces the attitude of taking present in the stage of infantile dependence. In this stage the most important need of the child along the "principal developmental line"(Grotstein) from dependency to interdependency is the security that the parents love the child as a person, and that the parents fully accept the child's love. If this security in these object-relationships is missing, too much separation-anxiety to renounce infantile dependence is experienced. Giving up the stage of infantile dependence then threatens all hope of ever satisfying one's emotional needs.

The Endopsychic Situation: A Multiplicity of Egos

Fairbairn contradicts classical psychoanalytic theory, which regards instincts as existing independently. Impulses cannot be considered apart from psychical structures, he explains,[7] and postulates that these impulses "are but the dynamic aspect of endopsychic structures and cannot be said to exist in the absence of such structures" ("Endopsychic Structure" 88).

Viewing impulse and structure as inseparable has far-reaching consequences. For Fairbairn, the old distinction between ego and id does not exist. He sees the ego as present from birth. In contrast to Freud's ego, Fairbairn's ego does not emanate from the id, and it is no longer a passive structure without energy independent of the id. "On the contrary, the 'central ego' is conceived as primary and dynamic structure, from which . . . the other mental structures are subsequently derived" (Fairbairn, "Endopsychic Structure" 106). Thus, Freud's "id" is included in Fairbairn's concept of the ego, and is no longer used. Fairbairn sees libido as a function of the ego, and aggression not as an instinct but as a response to frustration and deprivation.

If the ego is present from birth, then how do the other psychical structures emerge, and how does what Fairbairn calls the "basic endopsychic situation" come into being? As discussed earlier, Fairbairn's view of the development of object-relationships includes the assumption that very early the infant establishes a state of ambivalence toward its object. This ambivalence is due to the frustration and deprivation, which the child experiences in the relationship with its mother. "It is the experience of libidinal frustration that calls forth the infant's aggression in relation to his libidinal object and thus gives rise to a state of ambivalence," writes Fairbairn ("Endopsychic Structure" 110). Under hypothetically perfect conditions ambivalence would not arise. In real life, due to early frustration and deprivation, the mother becomes an ambivalent object to the child, both good and bad.

The child tries to alleviate the situation by splitting the mother into two objects, and by internalizing the "bad" mother in order to gain control over her. The bad, i. e., the unsatisfying, object has two aspects: on the one hand, it attracts and tempts, and on the other,

it frustrates and rejects. It remains unsatisfying after it has been internalized. Again, the child tries to cope by splitting the internal bad object into two objects: (a) the needed or exciting object, and (b) the frustrating or rejecting object.

Both the exciting and rejecting object are repressed by the ego. In order to achieve this "primary repression" against the two internalized bad objects, the ego employs aggression. At the same time, however, the ego still wants to remain libidinally attached to the objects subjected to repression. In order to allow for this continued attachment, two subsidiary egos are split off from the central ego and remain attached to the two repressed bad objects. Fairbairn differentiates between the "libidinal ego" which is attached to the exciting object, and the "internal saboteur," also called the "antilibidinal ego," which is attached to the rejecting object. These two subsidiary egos, the libidinal ego and the internal saboteur, are not only split off from the central ego, but they also become repressed themselves. The process in which the ego splits and rejects parts of itself is called "secondary repression."

As a result of the child's efforts to deal with its ambivalence, a multiplicity of egos arises, and we arrive at an ego-structure which is split into three separate egos: the central ego, the libidinal ego, and the internal saboteur. As mentioned earlier, the central ego is already present at birth. The splitting of the ego, and the emergence of the libidinal ego and the anti-libidinal ego, are the outcome of an ambivalence resulting from the rejection and deprivation in the child's relationship with its mother. First, the mother is split into a good and a bad object. The bad mother object is internalized in an attempt to control it. The internalized bad object is split into the exciting and the rejecting object, and both of these split bad objects are repressed by aggression. Finally, two subsidiary egos are split off from the central ego which remain attached to the repressed bad objects and become repressed by the central ego themselves (Fairbairn, "Endopsychic Structure").

In Freud's conception, repression was directed against painful and unacceptable impulses. Fairbairn's view is that repression is directed against internalized bad objects (primary repression) and against parts of the ego which are attached to these objects (secondary repression). These split-off and repressed sub-systems of the ego are formed as a result of our inability to deal with intolerable experiences in a real relationship. To Fairbairn, "structural differentiation is a defensive and pathological process in human development" (Rubens 161). Fairbairn sees psychopathology as the result of the ego's fragmentation which in turn can be understood as the individual's effort to protect ties to outside objects and to control their unsatisfying aspects (Mitchell).

Let us briefly return to the situation of the child who has established ambivalence due to feeling rejected and unloved by his mother. For this child, both the expression of love (libidinal affect) and hate (aggressive affect) toward its mother becomes a precarious enterprise. The child's expression of love threatens it with the loss of its libido—the child could release it into an emotional vacuum. The child's expression of hate might lead to the loss of her as a good object. The child makes use of internalizing and splitting techniques to avoid these dangers, and a multiplicity of egos comes into being. Once the basic endopsychic situation is established, the child can keep both love and aggression inside itself, in the field of force between the parts of its psychic structure. The child thus avoids the peril which an outside expression of its affects might entail.[8]

Toward a New Psychoanalytic Paradigm

In essence, Fairbairn defines being human as being object-related. The ego, or the self, as we might say more aptly today, is always understood as a self in relation to others. The structure and the development of this self are determined by the nature of the relationships the individual has, remembers, and longs for. Fairbairn's theory of object relations builds on the notion that human beings basically do not strive to attain pleasure, or to reduce tension, but to express themselves in real relationships with real others (Rubens).

In order to comprehend the self, one must understand the vicissitudes of these relationships between the self and others. The self of the infant starts in a state of wholeness, capable of experience and self-expression, seeking for relationships. Inevitable and intolerably unsatisfying experiences in these relationships lead to structural divisions within the self and to new forms of experiencing the self and of relating to others.

Whereas the original self could experience and express itself in a whole and open way, the splitting of the ego limits the scope of conscious experience and distorts the relationships with others. Sadly, the split-off aspects of the self and of its love objects may come to serve as confining templates for relating to the world. At the same time these templates are re-externalized by way of projection and projective identification (Ogden; Modell) and strive to recreate the kind of experience which brought them into being in the first place (Rubens).

The clinical implications of Fairbairn's theory are considerable. Fairbairn's basic endopsychic situation, the notion of the splitting of the ego, can be seen as the basis of a largely improved understanding of victims of trauma, child abuse, and multiple personality disorders. His understanding of schizoid splitting and withdrawal mechanisms has helped define the narcissistic and borderline personality disorder. Today, his concepts are increasingly supported by research in infant development (Grotstein & Rinsley). Lastly, and very importantly, Fairbairn's views on human object-relatedness and the importance to the child of being genuinely loved for himself open doors to a humanistic and existential perspective (Grotstein). Fairbairn himself, although identified with a classical treatment technique, stresses the importance of analysts' reality aspects and of their authentic interest and concern for the patient. For Fairbairn, it is the relationship between patient and analyst which is the decisive therapeutic factor and the basis for all therapy (Kernberg).

Notes

[1]Fairbairn's concept of the splitting of the ego will be explained in some detail in the later section on Fairbairn's conceptualization of the basic endopsychic situation.

[2]Fairbairn describes the resulting affect in the schizoid as a characteristic feeling of futility, which is different to the melancholic depression experienced by the depressive (compare Symington).

[3]Fairbairn describes more precisely why these mechanisms are called into action and how they work. A more detailed account is beyond the scope of this paper.

[4]According to Fairbairn, in the Oedipus complex the child faces two distinct parental objects instead of one. The child thus meets two ambivalent situations and reacts by internalizing both a bad mother figure and a bad father figure. In addition, each of these internalized parental figures is divided into two objects, i. e., an exciting and a rejecting object. The child simplifies the complexity of this internal situation, i. e., two exciting and two rejecting objects, by transforming them into one exciting and one rejecting object. This simplification is achieved by focusing upon the exciting aspect of one parent, and the rejecting aspect of the other. As result, one parent is equated with the exciting object, and the other with the rejecting object. "The child constitutes the oedipus situation for himself," writes Fairbairn ("Endopsychic Structure" 124).

[5]Fairbairn writes that Freud also shared the view that libido is specifically object seeking, but that Freud never undertook a reformulation of his original libido theory. Fairbairn quotes Freud: "Love seeks for objects."

[6]Due to the internalization process, both the accepted object and the rejected object are mainly treated as *internalized* objects—a fact discussed in the next section on the "endopsychic situation."

[7]"Impulses cannot be considered apart from the endopsychic structures which they energize," declares Fairbairn ("Endopsychic Structure" 85).

[8]"The child seeks to circumvent the dangers of expressing both libidinal and aggressive affect towards his object by using a maximum of his aggression to subdue a maximum of his libidinal need. In this way he reduces the volume of affect, both libidinal and aggressive, demanding outward expression," writes Fairbairn ("Endopsychic Structure" 115).

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