

# Omnipotence or Fusion? A Conversation between Axel Honneth and Joel Whitebook

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**Joel Whitebook:** This discussion has a long history. In fact, it's almost twenty years old now. It goes back to the academic year of 1995–1996, when I was teaching in the philosophy department in the psychoanalytic studies program at the New School, and Axel [Honneth] was the Theodor Heuss Professor for the year. Axel's book *The Struggle for Recognition* had been translated into English and was being widely discussed. And in psychoanalysis, this was the heyday of the relational movement. "Relationality" had become the hot topic. Steve Mitchell and Jay Greenberg's text had become something of a basic text of psychoanalysis which everybody was using. In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Axel drew on material from the relational psychoanalysts, from infant research, and from Donald Winnicott, and tried to integrate that into his analysis of the young Hegel and Aristotle. But the use he was making of analysis, the analysis he was appropriating at the time, was from this very lively world of relational psychoanalysis and infant research. Jessica Benjamin had tried to do something similar before that with her synthesis of Winnicott and Hegel around the theory of recognition.

Now, I had serious reservations about the relational turn, and I still do. While I think it made an important contribution, and while it helped to open up the dogmatically enclosed world of American psychoanalysis, there are some real problems with it. The things that made me uncomfortable about relational psychoanalysis in general applied *mutatis mutandis* to Axel's appropriation of it. We decided to have a debate, or a discussion — an *Auseinandersetzen*. I therefore taught a course on narcissism, and Axel taught a course on recognition. We attended each other's classes and then tried to formulate a written debate afterwards, which appeared in the journal *Psyche*.<sup>1</sup> But I think both of us were dissatisfied with the result. We felt that the issues really never became clearly defined. And we've never seriously gone back to it in the intervening years.

I want to make it clear I think Steve Mitchell, perhaps the leading figure in the relational turn, made an enormous contribution to the development of psychoanalysis and was a very creative person both theoretically and politically. At the same time, however, I think, in some ways, relational psychoanalysis became a new dogma. Kristeva observed that after what she called Freud's intervention into the history of Western rationality, things have never been the same. It was some sort of break,

some sort of caesura, which one can't really go back behind. I am tempted to borrow a term from Jan Assmann, where he talked about the Mosaic divide, I would talk about the Freudian divide. What that divide involved were certain ideas about the nature of the subject, about the nature of rationality, about the nature of childhood, about the nature of the anthropological sociability of the human animal, and so forth. My concern with the relational turn was that that divide, that break was being lost. However you want to characterize it — and you can characterize it in many ways — however the world was radically different after the Freudian intervention, I had a feeling that that radical difference was being flattened out and lost.

Even before we began this discussion, I had already criticized Habermas for what I thought was his domestication of psychoanalytic theory, his losing sight of the break. In my view, Habermas was determined to show the sociability of the human subject all the way down, which meant he was determined to show that the self is linguistic all the way down. In technical terms, this resulted in his *ex cathedra* denial of a pre-linguistic unconscious. He flatly denied Freud's distinction between "thing representations" and "word representations" believing he had demonstrated that the self was linguistic all the way down.

At the time, I wanted to articulate what it was about the Freudian Divide that should be preserved, what it was that I feared was in danger of being lost. But because I didn't have a very good way to articulate it, I borrowed the term from Andre Green, which he had taken from Hegel, namely "the work of the negative." This became a catch phrase that I employed to try and capture what I thought was being lost in Habermas's appropriation of psychoanalysis, in the relational turn, and in Axel's work. The problem is that "the work of the negative" remained very abstract. And I feel like in my criticisms of Axel, I employed this idea, but didn't give it much content.

From the beginning of psychoanalysis, there has always been a spectrum of opinion, moving from conservative Freudianism on one side, to I'll say what on the other side. The spectrum is roughly similar to the spectrum of left to right, but not exactly, because one finds a radical analyst like Marcuse or Castoriadis very close to the conservative Freudian end of the spectrum. I would say that the opinions line up around the question of how

sociable, or how mutualistic, or how reality-oriented one believes that the human animal is, beginning with the human infant. Freud's pessimistic anthropology begins with the very strong claim, which he articulated mainly in *Civilization and its Discontents*, that humans are antisocial. He refers to a primary mutual hostility between individuals, and maintains that the program of the pleasure principle, which governs the psyche, is at loggerheads with the reality principle. Because of its intrinsic anti-sociability, one can refer to this pessimistic anthropology as Hobbesian. Throughout the history of the discipline, there have been many debates over this question. In the early days, before the Second World War, it was basically fought out over the question of the death drive, innate destructiveness and primary masochism. On one side you have the orthodox Freudians, and on the other, the interpersonalists, the culturalist psychoanalysts, relational psychoanalysts and the intersubjective psychoanalysts, and that was sort of the spectrum. Then after the War—with the pre-oedipal turn in psychoanalysis and the new emphasis on the early stages of development—the debate has been fought out over the questions of primary narcissism, symbiosis, the omnipotence of thoughts and how to characterize the initial stages of development.

Concerning the debates about what Freud called the "original psychological situation," Marcia Cavell observed that every major analyst has a narrative which she entitles "in the beginning," and which correlates with their views on human nature. Cavell argues, and I think she's right, that to a significant degree these debates are more about *Weltanschauung* than about scientifically decidable questions. They are infused with prescientific intuitions, prejudices, what have you, about *Weltanschauung*, and to that extent aren't that amenable to being adjudicated by more demonstrable scientific arguments.

I think the way I posed my criticisms of Axel were too much in terms of *Weltanschauung*, too much in terms of the goodness or badness of the human animal. I think we do have different views about those questions of worldview—I'm closer to a Freudian pessimist, and he's much closer to a more sociable view—but that is something we should discuss over a bottle of wine in a Frankfurt *Weinstube* some night and not in public. Therefore, in an effort to make our debate more productive, I'd like to formulate some more concrete points—both within and outside of psychoanalysis—which aren't these global assertions about *Weltanschauung* and abstract claims about "the work of the negative."

The points I want to make are these. First, Freud's theory of primary narcissism must be criticized. The critique, or better yet, the rejection of primary narcissism was tied very much to the question of the sociability or the degree of the infant's orientation to reality, owing to the fact that Freud's theory of the omnipotence

of thoughts was predicated on his theory of primary narcissism. The more socially-oriented analysts—the analysts who wanted to demonstrate more mutuality, more sociality, more object-relatedness in the infant—went after the theory of primary narcissism because they also wanted to undercut his theory of the omnipotence of thoughts. If your strategy was to refute the idea of the omnipotence of thoughts, the reality-denying nature of the infant, then you seek to refute the theory of primary narcissism and to demonstrate that the baby is already object-related as the English put it. I'll come back to this in a very important way, but for now I want to point out that the hidden assumption of this strategy is that interaction equals mutuality. In other words, if you demonstrate that the self is generated through interaction, then *ipso facto* you've demonstrated the mutuality or sociability of the infant.

The *locus classicus* of the critique of primary narcissism is Winnicott. He keys in on a footnote from "two principles of mental functioning" where Freud uses the model of the chicken and the egg to describe primary narcissism, and demolishes it. That is where Winnicott famously asserts that there's no baby without a mother, which means, you cannot talk about a monadic, self-enclosed infant without a mother. On a more theoretical level, Laplanche argues that Freud's theory of primary narcissism is exactly analogous to the Cartesian cogito. That is, if you begin with the self-enclosed monadic starting point, and construct it the way Descartes or Freud do, then there's no escape, no way out, unless you bring in God as a *deus ex machina*. In terms of Freud, there's no way to explain the turn to reality, if you accept the presuppositions of primary narcissism as he characterizes it.

Let me be clear: With one exception, I don't know of anybody today who defends the notion of primary narcissism as Freud originally formulated it. The exception is Castoriadis who stuck to it with notion of the monadic core of the psyche. Therefore, the first point to be made is that Freud's theory of primary narcissism has been rejected.

The second development I want to call attention to, which came from the clinical realm, is the full acknowledgment of the ubiquity and the force of countertransference. It took Freud a while to acknowledge "transference" (he finally does it in 1905 with "Dora"), but it took psychoanalysts a remarkably long time to acknowledge the existence, the ubiquity, and the power of countertransference; it really didn't happen until the 240s and the 250s, and to do so was much more of a threat because it undermined psychoanalytic claims to neutrality and objectivity. The acknowledgment of countertransference has dangerous consequences: it throws the asymmetrical model of the clinical setup—where the analyst is a neutral observer in a privileged

position, whose unconscious instinctual fantasy life is not impinging on him so that he can make objective observations about the patient's inner psychic life — into question. But once you acknowledge the power of countertransference, it is difficult to maintain that privileged position.

With Winnicott you get the idea that early development involves interaction. And with the acknowledgment of countertransference you get clinical practice as also involving interaction. And there are many theorists who have tried to understand the clinical process insofar as it is interactional in terms of mother/infant interaction.

Then, in addition to the refutation of primary narcissism, the admission of countertransference, one had infant research, which really started in a serious way in the 60s. Perhaps the main figure in this regard is Daniel Stern. Stern wanted to demonstrate that the baby is reality-oriented from the get-go. In order to do that, he criticized the theory of Margaret Mahler on separation/individuation, which was very influential in the 60s and 70s, though she's hardly discussed today. More specifically, he contested her notion of an autistic and symbiotic stage. But I would argue that he rejected in general terms, neglecting some technical details, the undifferentiated symbiotic stage at the beginning of development. Mahler was very old at the time that Stern launched his critique of her; and Stern was very attractive, narcissistic, and charming — with matinee idol looks — and sort of seduced her; she never really was able to take him on and died shortly after she had become enthralled with him. But another analyst, Fred Pine, a colleague of Mahler's, wrote a critique of Stern, of which I won't go into the details, but which I think carries a lot of force. Stern acknowledges Pine's critique in a footnote, but more or less brushes it off en passant. He never really addressed the challenge I would maintain that the claim that the idea of symbiosis has been refuted is one of the current dogmas in the psychoanalytic world today. It's taken as a given; as Freud would say, it's treated as "Holy Writ."

And it's one of the dogmatic axioms of the relational turn. Nobody has addressed Pine's arguments. Strikingly one of the members of the Fonagy research group which was committed to demonstrating that the infant was reality-oriented, György Gergely — a Hungarian, who was actually trained as a research psychologist at Columbia and then went back to Hungary to be an analyst — has presented very interesting experimental evidence supporting the idea of a symbiotic phase. In a very honest, self-reflective, self-critical piece of work, Gergely went against the thrust of the whole Fonagy project. I can only sketch his argument as follows. Gergely examined some of the experiments having to do with what's called the contingency between the infant

and the image, and he reinterpreted them. He showed that on the evidence of that, there was something that one could maintain that approximated a symbiotic or undifferentiated phase at the beginning. To be sure, it's not conclusive, but it's very interesting work, and the fact that it came out of the Fonagy group, which had considerable influence on the psychoanalytic world, is quite interesting. My point is that while the denial of symbiosis has become a dogma of the relational turn, there are good reasons to question it.

There is generally a ten year lag between what goes on in philosophy and what goes on in psychoanalysis. Different representatives of the relational movement, in addition to people like Roy Schafer and other more mainstream analysts, took up the theories of intersubjectivity, social constructionism, and the hermeneutical critique of positivism, and tried to use them to elucidate and defend their psychoanalytic positions. There were borrowings from the linguistic turn, hermeneutics, the post-Kuhnian philosophy of science, Hegel's theory of recognition, and George Herbert Mead's theory of the self, which were adopted in one way or another to try and articulate and defend the relational turn.

Mitchell was very good in this regard here and did us an important service. He appropriated the Kuhnian, post-empiricist philosophy of science and critique of positivism, and directed it against the reigning New York Ego Psychology establishment. The *ancien régime* based its authority on the claim that they had strict scientific foundations of the work they were doing, but in fact they had very weak shaky scientific foundations. Mitchell and his colleagues mobilized the arguments from philosophy to subvert their claims to scientific legitimacy, and thereby to subvert their authority. Politically, that really opened things up in analysis. There had been a theoretical logjam for a long time. The hegemony of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and New York Ego Psychology had cast a pall on things, and Mitchell's intervention, which was quite intentional, served a very important function.

Add to this, the theories of intersubjectivism, constructivism, and so on, were used in an attempt to elucidate and defend an interactive conception of the mother-infant and the analyst-analysand relationship. People also drew on George Herbert Mead's theory of the development of the self in this context, and in fact, the statement "the self is a product of interaction," became something of a slogan, which like the rejection of symbiosis, became one of the dogmas of the relational turn.

Given this historical sketch, these are the loosely connected points, problems, questions that I would like to suggest that Axel and I discuss. There are three points we should be clear about: First, there is nobody today who defends the notion of primary narcissism in Freud's sense (although they do defend symbiosis, and

we can come back to the difference). Today, to attack primary narcissism is to really beat a dead horse. Second, there is a consensus about the ubiquity, importance and inescapability of countertransference. There is nobody who is taken seriously who holds the position that the analyst is this well analyzed, well-analyzing machine who is (completely) neutral and has mastered all of his conflicts. Third, in general, everybody accepts the Meadian dictum that the self is a product of interaction. At that level of generalization, no one is going to disagree. The question is, how should it be interpreted concretely? What are its details? And what are its implications? These are three points about which there is consensus, and that I think are off the table for debate.

There is one point where the relational analysts' misuse – distortion – of Winnicott is particularly apparent. They take Winnicott's critique of primary narcissism as a point of departure and his slogan that there is no baby without a mother as a rallying cry, but they totally ignore another side of his theory that is equally important. *Winnicott was a theorist of omnipotence every bit as much as Freud*. The baby is omnipotent and dependent at the outset, and the task of the first three years of development is what he calls "reality acceptance." In fact, he says the mother's job is to reinforce the baby's illusion in the beginning, to increase the sense of omnipotence, because that's the only way illusion and omnipotence can be overcome. The really pertinent point is that Winnicott's great discovery of transitional phenomena, and the transitional object, only makes sense given the presupposition of omnipotence. The whole function of the transitional object is to make overcoming omnipotence, to make relinquishing narcissism, tolerable. So the relational appropriation of Winnicott only goes half way, and the second half of him is ignored.

Now I want to come back to a point I mentioned en passant before. Beatrice Beebe, who is a famous infant researcher and is more or less part of the relational movement, made a very astute observation, which made many of her relational colleagues uncomfortable: that interaction does not guarantee mutuality and sociability. In other words, by demonstrating that the development of the self takes place through interaction, one hasn't *eo ipso* demonstrated that the baby is sociable, mutualistic, and reality-oriented. On the contrary, we are familiar with many forms of malignant mother-infant interaction that lead to very severe forms of psychopathology. As Joyce McDougall put it, we not only acquire our images of heaven at the mother's breast, but also our images of hell.

Just to state it clearly: I reject the idea that the symbiotic phase has been disproven. We can discuss its nature and how to interpret its significance. But this *donnée* of relational psychoanalysis—that Mahler has been refuted once and for all—in my opinion, is simply wrong.

Turning to a more philosophical point. In spite of its enormous and productive contribution, the linguistic turn was carried too far both in philosophy and then in psychoanalysis. And I would say it has revealed its limits. It had many productive consequences, especially concerning the critique of positivism, but again, insights were turned into slogans—for example, that the philosophy of the subject has been superseded by the linguistic turn, by intersubjectivity. For example, we see this in philosophy with the return to philosophy of mind and the problem of consciousness, on the one hand, and the questions of realism and reference on the other. Philosophy of the subject, philosophy of mind, was not left behind once and for all, it was suppressed for a period.

Within psychoanalysis, Ricoeur in a very important article, argued that what he calls the linguistic reformulators of analysis – which would include Lacan, Habermas, Schafer, Marcia Cavell – cannot do justice to the nature of psychoanalysis. The application of the linguistic model, whether in French structuralism, German hermeneutics, or Wittgensteinian ordinary language philosophy, can't capture the uniqueness of psychoanalysis' "mixed discourse." In fact, Hyppolite stood up in one of Lacan's seminars and made precisely this point, namely, that Lacan was ignoring Freud's claim that the unconscious consisted in thing-representations. Similarly, in Marcia Cavell's attempt to use the work of Davidson to explicate psychoanalysis, she gets herself in a trap when she takes the very strong position that mind is linguistic as such and that there is no such thing as non-linguistic or pre-linguistic mind. For then she is confronted with the dilemma of how to characterize the first 18 to 24 months of life, before language comes on the scene. She can't do it.

I would suggest that the following point is one that Axel and I could fruitfully take up. It has become clear that linguistic intersubjectivity, linguistic interaction, is only one strata of interaction in the self. I would propose that rather than using intersubjectivity, we take interaction as the overarching term, and then identify different types of interaction and different layers of interaction and attempt to understand the way they get structured in the strata of the psyche. Intersubjectivity is perhaps obviously, enormously important and the highest layer, but it's not clear how far down it goes. Here I think Stern is right, when he argues that interaffectivity is prior to linguistic intersubjectivity, and what's exchanged in mother-infant interaction, what's communicated, the object of communication, are affects. What is transmitted back and forth between them are affects. And more than that, the linguists, and the researchers into language acquisition have demonstrated that the mother-infant affective dialogue, the preverbal dialogue, the facial gaze dialogue, is where the infant originally gets a sense of communicative competence,

dialogical competence. And this is the strong point: gaining that sort of dialogical competence, preverbal dialogical competence, is a precondition for actually entering into language. The infant, so it is argued, can't enter into the world of language as such, if it hasn't acquired these dialogical skills beforehand. Then, from neuroscience, Damasio argues that the narrative self again is just the uppermost layer of the self, and there are many stratas of selfhood below it, having to do ultimately with core bodily and affective representations. Again, no matter how important the narrative self is, it is far from the whole story.

To conclude, to return to Mead's slogan, that the self is a product of interaction, stated at that level of abstraction and generality, raises several serious problems. Although, in principle, Mead talks about the I and the me, and that the me is formed through the internalization of the other, the idea of the I is almost a cipher in his theory, it is just gestured at, but never really developed with sufficient content. First, this raises a purely logical problem: if there isn't some sort of I precursor, some kernel of the I at the outset, how is the infant going to recognize itself in the mirror, in the other, its mother's face, or the visual mirror, or the auditory mirror? There has to be some prereflective intuition of the self – which Habermas wants to completely deny – there has to be some prereflective intuition of the self just to get the whole process of reflection going. That is, there must be some prereflective intuition of the self that can recognize itself in the other, and then internalize it.

Second, Tugendhat has criticized Mead for the conventionalist implications of his position. If the self is primarily formed through the internalization of the other, he asks, how does one account for individuation and difference? Tugendhat goes so far as to say that Mead's theory points in the direction of Heidegger's *das Man*, and that we would all be indistinguishable ciphers. Habermas in one of his usual clever moves – sophisticated, I would say – in an attempt to try and circumvent the Freudian opposition of the individual and the group, the individual and the collective, instinctually embodied, driven individual who has to submit to the requirements of civilized social life — takes the slogan from Mead that individuation is socialization, and socialization is individuation. There is a certain truth-content to that, but it leaves out the whole intrinsic opposition between the embodied, driven biological individual, and the demands of the collective. The first generation of the Frankfurt school clung to Freud's instinct theory, even though it may have had reactionary implications, because they thought it presented a limit to how far socialization, administration, assimilation could go, that it placed some limits that could be seen as a safeguard, a preserve of individuality.

**Axel Honneth:** Thank you. There are many points, and I don't know whether I can go into all of them. Let me make one general remark at the beginning, and then I would like to come to two main points, because I think some of the other points are connected with these two central points. The general remark is that I completely agree with what you pointed out at the beginning about the Freudian divide, and that means that the only reason we have to keep returning to psychoanalysis, and to the Freudian program (if not in its original form), has to do with the fact of certain elements of unsociability between human beings, or with certain elements of negativity within human life. I think it wouldn't make any sense to go back to Freud if I would not be driven by the intent to explain and to gain certain access to the conditions of such a negativity, or such an unsociability. This seems to me to speak heavily against the overly optimistic revisionist movement within psychoanalysis, which probably unintentionally somewhat got rid of all that. This general remark means that this is also true for me. The reason I believe that within critical theory there should be a permanent rethinking of the Freudian program, has to do with skepticism against a too easy kind of rationalism within our social theory.

We should be skeptical of a too easy rationalism for at least two reasons. First, I think critical theory has very good reasons to be skeptical about the assumption of a rational moral self. It should be interested in a more complex moral psychology because we have sufficient good reasons to believe that the moral agent is also always driven by some not completely conceivable and therefore probably unconscious drives. So our moral psychology should be much more complex than that kind of moral psychology that is normally offered within courses on ethics and moral theory. So this is one reason.

The second reason is a simple reason, namely, that when you try to explain social reality, and when you try to explain social action, it is in my view undeniable that a lot of those actions cannot be sufficiently explained without recourse to some kind of unconscious motives. And I'm not even sure whether somebody who is half a well-oriented social theorist would deny that. It is so undeniable that people don't act simply out of rational reasons, but are very often driven by motives, wishes, needs that they are not conscious of, that it needs some kind of explanatory strategy to get a more detailed picture of the origins of these unconscious motives. And I believe that for that job, the psychoanalytic tradition is still the best alternative. And therefore I think we have to come back again and again to the Freudian program, and try to rearticulate it and to reactualize it with the empirical research of our time in view.

I think we both probably agree about that. We can't simply take on the Freudian project while ignoring what has gone in infant research, for example, over the last

thirty years. There are a lot of observations and indications, which make it very difficult to defend all Freudian hypotheses. So there is not only a permanent need to go back to Freud, but there is probably also a permanent need to reform Freud, and to correct Freud. And this is simply because research is ongoing. Today, we know probably much more about the infant than Freud ever could know. For example, we know there is a very early competence or ability of the very young child to differentiate between not only itself and the surrounding world, but also to identify within that surrounding world intentional subjects. Which implies that the baby has the capacity from very early on – Stern says the third month, or something like that<sup>2</sup> – to differentiate the core self from other intentional subjects. The baby can identify the primary caretaker, is probably even able to identify other intentional subjects in its surrounding, and can demarcate even the intentional subjects from the world. I even read research which was incredibly interesting – but which is probably not very helpful for our discussion – that babies at the age of three months can differentiate between an animal and a human being, which means they make differences between degrees of intentionality, which is unbelievable. If you have a dog in your household, a baby at the age of three months can distinguish between levels of intentionality and segments of non-intentional reality.

OK, we have learned all this, which has a lot of implications for Freud's reconstruction of the development of unconscious drives. This remark simply means that I think we are under both injunctions, namely, on the one hand, to go back to Freud endlessly, because of this divide, because of this huge insight in the importance and unavoidability of the unconscious and connected with it the insight into a certain unsociability of the human being, and, on the other hand, permanently to revise Freud because of the progress in infant research. This is simply a very general remark.

Let me readdress the question in the following way: How can we keep the Freudian idea of an unsociability, or even an antisociability within the human being when we have to take into consideration the empirical research about the very early competences of the young child to be able to make differentiations within social reality and within its environment, which doesn't allow us any longer to keep to the original Freudian idea of primary narcissism. What does that change, and how can we preserve an idea of the unsociability when we on the other side have to accept that the classical idea that the driving motor for this unsociability is primary narcissism. So that seems to me to be the task. And this is how I understand what we are confronted with. So let me come to the in my view two main points, where there are certain differences between us.

I would call it first the question of the antisocial self, and the second the prelinguistic self. I think we agree more about the second than about the first. So the antisocial self, which means now the task to explain given all the empirical research today on the table, the possibility of a certain antisocial temptation, drive, antisocial impulse in human beings. So I take it that, or I agree with you that the critique of Freud's concept of primary narcissism does not require from us to give up the idea of very early stages of fusion, or periods of fusion. So with respect to that I am on the side of Fred Pine, and always try to stick to Pine's wonderful criticism of Stern.<sup>3</sup> Which means roughly, even when we accept all of what I just said about the very early infant, we can't exclude – and there is no good empirical evidence that we should – that this young infant and even the primary caretaker are going through episodes of affective moments of fusion. This means that in the very early beginning there are obviously moments of enormous importance for the emotional development of the infant, where it is experiencing – as Hegel would put it – being one with the primary caretaker. I guess that there is, at least when you take Pine and others, very good empirical confirmation of believing that the child is going through such moments, which indicate, in my view, that even when there is a core self from the beginning able to differentiate, that beside that core self must be a kind of fusion self. I mean that there must also be momentarily and over episodes a self, which is experiencing the other as not an independent being but as a being with which it is completely fused or merged.

These two developments and these two stages can go together, though they probably have different cognitive and affective importance for the development of the child. The substantial question with regard to these periods or episodes of fusion is how exactly to describe them and how to understand their ongoing importance for the further development not only of the child but also for our existential situation. My guess at that point is probably different from yours [Whitebook's] because I would avoid using the concept of omnipotence to describe these moments or episodes of fusion. I don't see really why that notion should be of any help. I think it is much better to use concepts like fusion, which means the experience of being completely sheltered, held, taken care of by a primary object, with which therefore you are so fused that you don't see any resistance and independence in the other. It's the absence of independence of the other which makes these moments of fusion so important. They are so important because that means that the experience of separation or of loss of that fused primary object is accompanied by feelings of anxiety, sorrow, panic, which are therefore refused.

So there is a first, let's say, initiative, drive for the refusal of the independent other, and that goes back

to the momentary, episodic experiences of being fused with the other. This is how I see things at the moment. It all depends on how you understand Winnicott, but I think I am in agreement with Winnicott even if Winnicott has a tendency to use the term omnipotence to describe these moments. I would avoid that terminology and then say that his enormously important insight into the internal relevance of transitional objects not only for the child in the very early stages, not only for the adolescent, which is now clearly shown by other research on adolescence, but also for us as adults can best be explained by reference to it because the transitional object is exactly that kind of ontological experience on which we are dependent in order to solve the panic experience of the independence of the other. We are somewhat driven along – I mean, our whole life – to somewhat fall back into that early experience of fusion in order to cope with the independent other. This would be for me the best way to explain the relevance of the transitional object: the anxiety which plays an enormous role for most of irrationally driven actions within society.

I would therefore replace some of the Freudian notions by two or three other central concepts, of which he was aware. I still take Freud's article of 1926 on inhibition, symptoms, and anxiety as the one of highest importance because that is already an indication of the possibility of object-relation theory. That article is his way of finding out about the importance of interaction between – in his terms – mother and child, and anxiety is there: anxiety at the loss of the loved object and the anxiety of being confronted with an independent, no longer fused object. So I would replace primary narcissism not with an early stage of fusion, but rather with the experience of the infant of momentary affective stages of being fused with the other. This is the driving force behind avoiding the independent other. The infant is afraid of losing the illusion of fusion, and therefore of being confronted with the other as no longer the completely resistless, and therefore completely the other as the one with which I am fused. So much about the antisocial self, it practically comes down to the idea that all that there is of antisocial drives in us and the many many different forms it takes, and the many reminiscences this has for the life of the adult can be best explained in my view – when we take all the empirical research about early development into consideration – by these early experiences of being fused with, and the anxiety stemming from being confronted with the experience of the independent other, be it now the primary caretaker or other persons with which the early infant, and probably even the growing infant, feels him or herself fused in specific moments.

The other question about the prelinguistic self is in my view completely independent of that, and I don't see how these two concepts are related. Let's put it this way,

I can bring in recognition later, when we discuss this, but with regard to recognition what I just said means that the social patterns of recognition, those forms of institutionalized recognition in which we grow up, are always something which we, in certain moments of life, can't experience as fully satisfying. They all equally fall short of that quality of fusion. All patterns of recognition are patterns of relationships between independent subjects, and therefore there is probably a certain drive for rebellion against the existing forms of recognition, which also can explain why we are never fully content with even the highly-developed forms of differentiated patterns of recognition. There is an uneasiness with recognition because it is a relationship between independent subjects, and these are not models of fusion between subjects, these are patterns of relationships between independent subjects. So the prelinguistic self, I think this is an enormously complicated question, I have to say, so let's put it that – and I don't want to speak about Habermas because I'm not sure whether you have presented him correctly, but I don't want to go into Habermas exegesis now – I think what we simply have to accept, and I think there is nobody who would deny it, that there is a prelinguistic self.

How to deny it, when all empirical research is demonstrating that there is something like a core self – and core self means now – what does it exactly mean? – it means that the early infant has the capacity at its disposal to experience itself being differentiated from the outside world. This means that the infant has a certain capacity to differentiate between self and the world. The infant even has the capacity to differentiate in that world between different types of entities: things, animals, human beings – degrees of living, degrees of life.

This must mean and must include that there is a prelinguistic self. This is not the same as the presocial self because the idea of a presocial self is a little bit hard to understand, especially when you accept the empirical research, which shows that the infant is already capable of identifying intentional human actors, and therefore has a certain very early impression of its relation to other subjects. I mean, the smile, the smile of the primary caretaker. If we accept Stern's descriptions, and if we accept therefore the idea of a core self, then the infant or baby is capable of having the idea already of an interaction, an affective interaction, an emotional interaction, between itself and the other. And the episodes of fusion are accompanying these experiences of a core self and these counter-tendencies within this early period, obviously. So there is a prelinguistic self, which is probably already from quite early on a social self, because it places itself within the social world. I mean it is obviously able to identify others as others. In specific moments not accepting their independence, which is something else. There is in that sense clearly a prelinguistic self.

So what does that imply for all the rest? It probably indicates that there is from quite early on a very primitive I-perspective, the perspective of an I differentiated from a we, or a they, or a you. That can help to explain why all developed forms of intersubjectivity and of interaction are, or have, one of their moments in that I-perspective. And that I, the prelinguistic self, which is a very primitive perspective of the self, is developing and the question is what are the central mechanisms of that development. I think that the whole idea that linguistification is one of the central mechanisms of the growth of that self is still the most plausible one. As far as I can see not even philosophers of mind deny that language takes over a lot of the task to socialize that self.

That kind of linguistic socialization, or the integration into shared language contributes to the development of a lot of further capacities of the growing infant—for example, probably reflexivity, and definitely rational argumentations. Reflexivity because – if you follow Wittgenstein and others – it is only by being part or becoming part of a linguistic life form, that we can have a kind of reflexive responsiveness to our own needs. The articulation of our needs is dependent on being integrated into a linguistic life form. So that means that it is only the reflexive self, or the rational self – rational now meaning that self, even when it is driven by some unconscious drives, born in anxiety – is a linguistic self. This means I would accept the idea of the existence of a prelinguistic self, but I would deny that that prelinguistic self outroots or diminishes the importance of language because language then is the medium by which that prelinguistic self develops certain further competences, capacities, by which it becomes a full member of the social world. That would mean that the acceptance of the core prelinguistic self, and therefore of an early developed I-perspective, is something we can't get rid of – which means there is always an undeniable, unavoidable I-perspective on everything I experience within interaction. So, that prelinguistic self doesn't exclude in any way the enormous role of language for the formation of the mind.

**JW:** There are I think two points I'd like to respond to. In some ways, it seems like ours is just a terminological disagreement, but I think there are more substantial consequences at stake. I just want to key in on one point. Axel agrees with Pine, and I agree with Pine, that what the infant researchers have shown is, as Pine put it, the baby is far more reality-oriented than the Freudian picture had ever imagined. But what Pine argues, and Axel and I agree with this too, is that alongside these moments of reality-orientedness, there are also moments of fusion.<sup>4</sup> In fact, he makes the point that the baby has to be in a non-excited state of reality-orientedness in order to run the experiments on them that determine their reality-relatedness. That is the *petitio principii* of

infant research. And they're only in those states for a small part of the day. For a major part of the day they are either sleeping or in more stuporous states. One analyst made the clever remark that real infant research would be to try to get into the infant's mind when they're in these non-reality-oriented states. But that's not that main point.

So we agree there are fusional experiences. Pine suggests seeing a baby, satiated at the mother's breast, and falling asleep, and the bodies molding together, and the boundaries pushing together – we can't prove it, but there's reason to assume there's something like the experience of fusion in those moments. So, we agree that the baby is more reality-oriented than the Freudian picture had it, but we also agree that that doesn't rule out the existence of fusional states. The important question becomes: How much importance to attach to them? Now I want to key in on Axel's claim that we shouldn't use the term "omnipotence" to characterize these fusional states. I think what he's done is in fact described omnipotence, but not named it. If I understand him properly, we have these very, very powerful fusional states, and when they break down, when separation occurs, that produces anxiety and distress. When the baby recognizes the independence of the object, recognizes that the object can be frustrating as well as satisfying, that produces what Kleinians call primitive anxieties concerning the independence of the object. At that point, the infant, in an attempt to deal with those intense anxieties, mobilizes what the Kleinians call primitive or manic defenses. Now, to me, that's omnipotence. The baby's task is to learn to accept the independence of the object. The unfolding of the process consists in the experience that every time it gets a hint, a taste, of the independence of the objects, according to the Kleinians – and I think they're right – the baby mobilizes manic defenses: splitting, dissociation, projection, projective identification, and so forth. All of these defenses are designed to deny the independence of the object, and I would call that omnipotence. I would call them omnipotent defenses. One way to conceptualize omnipotence is the attempt to deny the independence of the object, to think that the object is not independent, but that it is governed by my wishes, by my needs, by my desires. I think maybe whatever we call it, where we might differ here, and where this might affect our views on sociability, and where I might be influenced more by my experience as a clinician, I think it is the prevalence and the use of those omnipotent defenses that is one way to explain our antisocial tendencies, that throughout life the acceptance of the independent object is a problem –

**AH:** We agree on that, but we don't agree about how to describe the experiences which explain that unwillingness to accept the independent other. And I think there is a slight difference between describing these



moments, or the reason for the cause for the fear and anxiety at the loss of omnipotence, whether you describe it as loss of fusion. Simply because loss of fusions mean the child is afraid, like the adult, of being no longer secured, held, cared, because the other has become independent, or is at risk of becoming independent. So the driving force is probably the wish for fusion, not the wish for omnipotence. There is a difference in your [Whitebook's] account between using the notion of the wish for fusion, or the wish or need for omnipotence. Even if it's a slight difference, it has another touch. The two notions are indicating another way to explain it. For me it is, let's say, it is the – you can put it differently – it is the original experience to be so fully loved that the other is resistless and not independent, so that all your wishes, ambitions, intentions, are experienced somewhat automatically, in a kind of fusional process, fulfilled. This is, if you want, the experience of fusion, and the anxiety, which develops very early on, is to lose that, and to have to become an independent subject, by the experience that the other is independent. And by saying the other is independent we mean he is suddenly no longer resistless. He or she is a resistant element to your own wishes, intuitions, and intentions.

**JW:** Axel, I grant you that the primary experience is fusional perfection, plenum, presence – as our French friends would say – no privation, and that's the state of perfection that Freud describes in "On Narcissism." And when that begins to break down, when the child experiences anxiety, privation, deprivation, and so on, it's at that point – I'm not saying that omnipotence is original; I'm agreeing with you that the fusional experience is original – but when that starts to break down, the primitive anxiety that that creates mobilizes attempts to deny, disavow the independence of the object, through different omnipotent defenses. Omnipotence is the attempt, the manic attempt to try to deny the independence of the object. So omnipotence is not primary, I'm granting you that the wish to preserve the fusional state is primary, but in the face of the anxiety when the fusional state breaks down, the child mobilizes different omnipotent defenses to deny the independence of the object.

**AH:** I could say something, but I won't say something now. I would love to say something [*laughter*], but I repress myself.

**JW:** I think what's interesting – I thought of it as you were saying it – there's a paradox here. Because the whole struggle – if we believe the Kleinians, and Winnicottians, and so on – the whole struggle to accept the independence of the object is so monumental, and so difficult in early development, and – it occurred to me as you were talking – recognition, in a way, really assumes that sort of acceptance of the independence of the other, the independence of the object. In a way, it presupposes a very sophisticated state of subject-object differentiation.

But there's a way. When Loewald talked about it he got in a lot of trouble, but I think he was right. He says when we really understand our patients, recognize and accept them in their own rights, that's when we love them the most. And he quotes several scientists, who say that when they finally solve a mathematical formula for example, when they grasp the object in its own right, that's when they love it the most.

**AH:** I would like to come back to the question of omnipotence. I try to avoid that notion, and the reasons for why I try to avoid it are because it describes the mechanisms by which the infant tries to avoid or cope with the expectation of loss in a too-self-centered way, as if what this is all about is gaining control, of gaining power over the world. But this is not what is after these mechanisms the infant tries to apply in order to avoid separation, in order to avoid separation, to avoid the loss of the fused object. I would much more prefer to describe them with the notions I think Winnicott very often used for these defense mechanisms when he describes the transitional object. The transitional object is the exploration of an ontological sphere where the separation between independence and dependent world is not existing. That is the definition Winnicott gives. It is an ontologically specific place. For us, listening to music, for the adult, that is what Winnicott is saying. When we are listening to music, that is a transitional object for us. What makes it so specific is that it doesn't allow a distinction between the independent world and, let's say, my world. I would much prefer to describe the different defense mechanisms along these lines, namely that these defense mechanisms are not about regaining some omnipotence or some kind of power over the world, which then is at my disposal, this is too-self-centered. I think that these defense mechanisms are about avoiding the experience of separatedness and independence. And the transitional object exactly does this.

**JW:** Yeah, but here you're really, I think, exemplifying my worries about the use of Winnicott. Because there are transitional phenomena that allow the child to negotiate separation and independence in a felicitous way, they allow us to continue negotiating separation and independence as adults – that's fantastic. But you're really leaving out the dark side of Winnicott. Because he talks about control of the object, he talks about aggression – even destruction of the object.

**AH:** Sure, I mean there is room for aggression, aggression is not a defense mechanism – with aggression the child tests the independence of the world. By beating the mother, he tries to test whether there is an independent world. That's where aggression is coming into play –

**JW:** to control the mother, to block her independence . . . under the use of the object –

**AH:** I read him differently, but I would say the aggression comes in because it is that instrument, aggressive acts, are that instrument by which the infant tests, in order to avoid the experience, tests the independent reality, by beating –

**JW:** I would say that – I mean you see this really in his clinical writings, what the patient does with the analyst – is not so much to test the independence of the object, but is to control the object in order that it won't become independent, to exert its power over the object to disallow its independence.

**AH:** That would make a big difference in the description.

4. "Moments" is Pine's technical term; see Pine, *Drive, Ego, Object, and Self*, chapter 11.

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#### NOTES

1. Joel Whitebook, "Die Grenzen des 'intersubjective turn'. Eine Erwiderung auf Axel Honneth," 57 *Psyche* 250 (2003).

2. Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

3. Fred Pine, "The "symbiotic phase" in light of current infancy research," *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 50 (1986): 564–569. See also Fred Pine, *Drive, Ego, Object, and Self: A Synthesis for Clinical Work* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), chapter 11.