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# Reading Melanie Klein

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Edited by Lyndsey Stonebridge  
and John Phillips



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## Chapter 4

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### The question child

J.-B. Pontalis

*Translated by Catherine and Phillip Cullen*

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#### Editor's note:

J.-B. Pontalis focuses on Klein's very earliest writings in this brief section ('Part I') of the essay 'Between Knowledge and Phantasy,' which first appeared in English in *Frontiers of Psychoanalysis* (1981), a translation of *Entre le reve et la douleur* (1977). The suggestion, which comes through very strongly here, that the early writings are of key importance for an understanding of what is at stake in Melanie Klein's work, is supported by other contributions to *Reading Melanie Klein* (see Bersani, Mitchell and Phillips).

In 'Between Knowledge and Phantasy,' Pontalis is concerned to show that a knowledge adequate to the unconscious is one that would be informed by whatever contradicts it from a place that cannot be fixed or assigned by it. It would be a knowledge that is shaped by what it cannot know. So Klein is exemplary insofar as the early writings show her willing to put psychoanalysis to 'the test of the child's speech.' That is, the knowledge of the child and, later, the psychotic, are what psychoanalytic knowledge 'stumbles over.' The fact that the child in this case has more to say than he actually says indicates a difficulty that shapes psychoanalytic knowledge 'to the present day.' Klein is seen here as willing to **engage** with what causes her knowledge to stumble. Pontalis reads Klein's first essay (originally written in two parts) as constituting a reversal or change of tack. She begins with an enlightenment question - 'What holds the child back?' - and assumes at first an enlightenment answer (not uncommon in psychoanalysis); repression is the result of social pressure. But the desire for *Aufklärung*, the wish to 'enlighten' the child with sexual knowledge (or psychoanalytic knowledge), as a way of freeing him from the inhibiting power of myth, has to give way to the fact that the child has an internal resistance to enlightenment. It is at this point

that Klein's own intensification of Freud's shattering of the myth of the innocent child begins, and it is this, according to Pontalis, that makes her descriptions of the child's interior world so difficult to take. The child possesses a kind of knowledge, an unbound sexuality, that is strictly speaking (in Freud's term) 'ineducable.' The truth that one wants one's child to know cannot replace the unconscious.

One of the most telling features of Klein's first essay is, for Pontalis, the fact that the analyst is also the mother. If sexual knowledge reaches its limit, as Freud suggested it did, with the incest taboo, then what happens when it is the mother, both 'natural object of desire' and 'agent of the prohibition,' who transmits the enlightened sexual knowledge? What is revealed is that infantile sexual theory, rather than being a function of the Oedipus complex, is its very mode of expression. More powerful than either fables or enlightened knowledge, it is a resistance to knowledge that 'says more' than knowledge itself can grasp.

Pontalis's subtle yet persistent reading shows Klein at this early stage stumbling over intractable difficulties and, by being attentive to their implications, taking Freud's most radical discoveries about infantile sexuality even further than he did. Pontalis also argues that Klein's theory, the more it becomes a system, manifests her desire to 'know' the unconscious in its deepest and earliest form - to be there, as it were, at its birth and to mother it. But this earliest stumbling block reveals the fantastic adult desire for knowledge in terms of its obverse - the desire to kill the child off. It is this, for Pontalis, that psychoanalysis must perpetually try to resist. OP)

Even today, i.e. more than fifty years after its publication, the first of the essays of Melanie Klein's *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis* (1921-45) remains surprisingly alive and forceful. The author's guiding question, which can be considered as the starting-point for all her subsequent research is: what holds the child back? One should note that this question, whether implicit or explicit, is at the very heart of an educator's desire - from Rousseau, in *Emile*, to Maria Montessori - and may well be the cause of pedagogues' aberrations: in such cases the temptations of pedagogics may find their fulfilment in the pupil's murder, as illustrated by Ionesco's *The Lesson*.

At this initial stage, Melanie Klein's (1921) explicit intention was no different to her vocational wish for *Aufklärung*, based on 'psychoanalytical knowledge': 'We shall let the child acquire as much sexual information as the growth of its desire for knowledge requires, thus depriving sexuality at once of its mystery and of a great part of its danger.' Repression was defined in a very exterior way as the product of social pressure, and the most favourable results were expected

from lifting the 'burden of superfluous suffering': 'We are laying down the foundations for health, mental balance and the favourable development of character.' The immediate results were to affect the individual, particularly his intellectual power and his creativity; the long-term results were to influence the evolution of humanity.

This, then, was the starting point for Melanie Klein, of whom it was later said that her suggestion that envy and guilt were at the heart of the infant was no more than a psychoanalytical transcription of the myth of original sin. Admittedly, the desire to intervene precociously was not original at the time: many psychoanalysts shared this prophylactic illusion, dreaming of kindergartens where the crystallization of neurosis would be avoided. But in her case it was upheld by a very specific preoccupation. If in her first text Melanie Klein's attention was held above all by the child's inhibitions, it was because they assumed an exemplary value for her: the child had more to say for himself than what he actually said. This was why she refused to see this or that 'characteristic' of the child as a deficiency that, as Anna Freud asserted, one should relate to his nature, to his actually dependent situation or to a stage in his evolution. She therefore chose not to define the conditions which should be fulfilled by child analysis, but to submit psychoanalytical theory and methods to the disconcerting test of the child's speech. With her, psychoanalysis was not properly speaking *applied* to the child or, later, to the psychotic: both held it in check and this difficulty could not be dodged or 'adjusted,' which both caused analysis to stumble and is what shaped it, and continues to shape it to the present day. The technical debate opposing Melanie Klein to Anna Freud reflects the confrontation of two ethics: for Anna Freud, in the end, it was a question of making the child find the adult's alleged autonomy; for Melanie Klein it was a matter of coming to meet the child's psychic reality and measuring adult knowledge against it 'in the spirit of free and unprejudiced research.'

Melanie Klein's case study is not an analysis in the proper sense of the term, but a case of education, with an analytical approach. Melanie Klein observed that she had the possibility of seeing the child and talking with him every day. A relatively vague clinical description indicated that this five-year-old boy was behind in the acquisition of language and, on a more general level, he found it difficult to master elementary symbolism (the notions of time and exchange). Melanie Klein also noted a 'feeling of impotence' ('despite proof to the contrary, he was convinced that he could cook, read, write and speak perfect French'). On the whole, however, he seemed to be a lively and intelligent child endowed with an excellent memory. At about four-and-a-half years he started asking questions (on birth, and later on the existence of god and on life in general) and Melanie Klein retraced the history of this case by following these questions' evolution almost exclusively in terms of their content and their mode.

What did Melanie Klein encounter in her dialogue with little Fritz? Apparently, enough material to prove the well-foundedness of her convictions.

Indeed, Fritz was full of questions and the adult, by not eluding them, by not letting herself be overcome by any uneasiness they might create in her, had the possibility of seeing the child acquire the skill to master the symbolic function and to grasp reality. But at the same time, the limits of the act of enlightening, of educational intervention, became manifest, even when carried out with as much subtlety, constancy and understanding of the child's anxiety as Melanie Klein had. If we limit ourselves to education, we cannot but be aware of the device inherent to inculcating what is called objective knowledge in children. First of all, notice that the expression 'sexual education' conceals a condensation already present in the term 'to inform' (to give indications and explanations, but also to give form to), which is considerably intensified here: is not the aim to *educate* rather than to instruct? To let sexuality run 'loose' - in the same sense as thoughts do - to let it become *educable*, to use Freud's term to contrast *ineducable* sexual instincts with instincts of self-preservation, which are easy to educate. One then understands that the resistance to sexual education should be relatively easy to overcome in the adult, who espouses cultural aims of this type, and that it should be resistant in children, in whom it rocks the very organization of the desires.

Freud (1937) had unhesitating opinions about this matter: 'After such enlightenment children know something they did not know before, but they make no use of the new knowledge that has been presented to them ... They behave like primitive races who have had Christianity thrust upon them and who continue to worship their idols in secret.' An observation which deserves the attention of those who expect sexual education at school - and by school they do not mean the playground or toilets but the schoolmasters - to provide the most fitting preparation for future matrimonial harmony? For the benefit of those who denounce today's sexual education as excessively normative, it should be added that to avoid this kind of criticism, it is not enough for the teacher simply to change coats. Certain praises of the child's 'polymorphous perversion' smack of adult monomorphous perversion ... What is at stake here is the right adults assume to *confiscate*, 'for the child's own good' of course, a certain sexuality that knows neither where it is bound nor what it wants. Any discourse *on* the child purporting to speak the child's language *for* him is questionable. Of course, Freud was not always so reserved as to the effects of 'Enlightenment' on the question of sexuality. But it should be noted that the article (for external use only), in which he declared himself strongly in favour of it ('The Sexual Enlightenment of Children,' 1907) was immediately followed by another article, a truly psychoanalytic one this time, on infantile sexual theories (1908), 'theories' of so 'typical' a character that this alone was enough to prove they were based on the truth. There is in fact no contradiction between these two equally Freudian assertions: one must indeed encourage parents and educators not to lie to children, not to answer with 'childish sayings,' in other words with myths concocted by adults for children, but one must not expect such knowledge to replace the unconscious.

Yet Freud's warning was misunderstood by a great number of people, even among psychoanalysts, as if they were convinced that 'infantile sexual theories' were imaginary formations which could not but give way when confronted with positive knowledge. At the most, they could be considered anachronistic relics in that they would only be based on outmoded stages of instinctual organization. That Freud himself may have envisaged things in this restrictive way, I do not deny. But the article's title itself - 'On the Sexual Theories of Children' (1908) - echoing his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), the frequency throughout the text of terms such as 'instinct for research,' 'desire for knowledge,' 'sexual desire for knowledge', etc. which indissolubly linked the strength of the wish to the activity of thinking, and finally the implicit oedipal reference, all clearly demonstrate that Freud saw these sexual theories as active organizers which could not be reduced to partial instincts supplying them with their 'language' or to chance perceptions provided by the outside world.

Very soon - and anyone can check this by considering a child's questions even if they are trivial - one is compelled to arrive at a point where knowledge cannot come up with an answer: the incest taboo. The failings of knowledge on sexuality get worse, at the same time as its original function is revealed, when it is transmitted by the one - the mother - who is both the *natural object of desire* and the *agent of prohibition*. Now this was exactly the case here for Melanie Klein was in fact *the child's mother*. The proof of this can be found in another article published in the same period: 'Der Familienroman in Statu Nascendi' (1920). Part of the same observation figures in it, but this time Melanie Klein clearly states: 'My son Eric,' etc. The parent's answer is necessarily faulty: it cannot justify itself in the same terms as those in which the adult asks the child to get his bearings. Hence the reversal that Melanie Klein had the merit to grasp on the spot: the child's fantasies turned out to be a lot closer to what was actually at stake than the knowledge meted out by the adult.

The case-history comprises two stages and two readings. The first reading: *The influence of sexual enlightenment and relaxation of authority on the intellectual development of children* (1919). The second part, written two years later (1921), is headed: *The child's resistance to enlightenment*. These two statements indicate the reversal I have just mentioned. At first, it was a matter of convincing parents and educators of the necessity of not keeping the child in ignorance, of answering his questions without anticipating them, since repression seemed to be triggered off by exterior imperatives, by the adult's refusal or silence; children were considered to possess a natural, spontaneous curiosity: it was the adult who resisted. But it so happened that during the second stage, the child was seen to resist, whether massively through a refusal to know, or, indirectly, through recourse to this or that compulsive activity. Confronted by certain changes in Freud's behaviour, Melanie Klein wrote: 'I became convinced that the child's very powerful impulse for investigation had come into conflict with his equally powerful tendency to repression ... after he had asked many and

different questions ... he had ... come to the point where he avoided questioning altogether and listening as well, *as the latter might, unasked, provide him with what he refused to have.*'

What, in fact, was happening? After Fritz's 'false' beliefs had been vigorously ousted (there was no shiUy-shallying in *that* home: the maid was dismissed for having told the child the story of the stork); he had been duly taught the reality of the sexual processes (fecundation, pregnancy). and even after this knowledge had apparently been integrated properly, as was evidenced by the disappearance of the most apparent inhibitions and the end of stereotyped questions, there remained a residue: Fritz continued to be 'attached' (although he knew what to believe and despite repeated correction) to the idea that children grew in their mother's stomach. The stomach become, so to speak, an all-purpose signifier ... To a child saying: 'Come to the garden,' Fritz replied: 'Go to your stomach'; to people asking him where some object was, he would answer: 'In your stomach.' If he wanted to see his mother naked, it was so as to 'see her stomach and the picture inside it!'

In other words, little Fritz found it difficult to stomach the explanations given him! To interpret this 'residue' as a survival of a sexual theory which he could not renounce - children are made of food and are identical to faeces - would be to mistake the part for the whole; indeed, one should stress that even if it is true that oral and anal body functions and the pleasure attached to them supply the 'theory' with elements of representation, they still do not account for the former, in that its presence remains necessary in the face of and despite positive knowledge. One certainly moves a step forward, as Melanie Klein invited us to, in seeing in little Fritz's belief an aversion to assimilating an awareness of the role played by his father: the sexual theory is then inserted in the oedipal structure. But this does not go far enough: sexual theory, or more generally the construction of the fantasy, is not just a part of the Oedipus complex, but its mode of expression.

The fact that in Fritz's case fantasy should come to oppose the injection of adult knowledge, in so far as it harbours a truth that reality is incapable of providing, is clearly indicated by a kind of slip of the tongue he made at a time when games and fantasies with an oedipal content abounded. Fritz was playing with lead figures, two soldiers and a nurse. 'He said that these were himself and his brother and his mother ... "The one that has something prickly down there is me." I [M. K.] ask what is there down there that pricks? He, "A wiwi." "And does that prick?" He, "*Not in the game, but really* - no, I am wrong, not really but in the game.'" Here, the mistake stemmed from the truth. For in these circumstances, one cannot invoke the child's difficulty in differentiating the real from the imaginary, a differentiation which would take place progressively and would include moments of failure. He could differentiate perfectly well otherwise, outside the field of human reality involving sexuality - a field which cannot be ascribed any limits: for the child, more than for the adult whose sexual function is truly 'in working order,' nothing is sexual, everything is sexual. For



example: if little Fritz asked how a human being was made, he would be said to have shown sexual curiosity. If he asked 'how much time does tomorrow take to come?' he would be said to be at the metaphysical age. Yet both questions, both 'conceptions' go together.

Infantile sexual theory, which is 'grotesquely misled' (Freud), turns out to be more effective not only than the fables invented by adults for children, but also than the knowledge meted out to them. This is precisely confirmed by the language our little questioner once used ('it is called an oven because it is an oven,' etc.). Melanie Klein saw this, rather too hastily, as a sign of progress in the acquisition of a sense of reality, which was supposed to have followed the true answers supplied to the anxious questions about the difference between the sexes. Fritz was thought to have put a stop to his incessant 'whys' on his own. However, his renunciation revealed a split between a rigorously tautological order of reality - without any differentiation and referring exclusively to himself - and a place of the fantasy where the castration anxiety could expand alone and find an answer.

Earlier on, we mentioned that the enigma concerning the incest taboo was on the horizon of the child's desire for sexual knowledge - or of his sexual desire for knowledge. Little Fritz knew how to lead Melanie Klein to this point, where she could not but stumble. One only has to refer to the answer she gave: she was more than embarrassed, and manifestly caught off her guard. As much in the evocation - if one may call it that - of the sexual act ('Papa can make something with his wiwi that really looks rather like milk ... he makes it Like doing wiwi only not so much') as in the explanation, again if one can call it that, of the mother's prohibition (Every man has only one wife. When you are big your mamma will be old,' etc.). Indeed, what else could one say?

The answer could not but 'ring false' especially as it was proffered at that stage of childhood in which the articulation of desire and prohibition - of desire as a prohibition - was at a prolific period of its development. Only the fantasy's answer can 'ring true,' can offer a space suited to this articulation. Infantile sexual theories, in which one can observe the secondary forms of original fantasies (see Laplanche and Pontalis 1964) constitute a reality homologous to the 'theoretical' character of the oedipal law - a law which 'reality,' that of nature as well as that of social institutions, is incapable of founding.

Was it really, as Ernest Jones (1948) indicated, the shattering of the myth of the innocent child - a myth which is coming back in force nowadays - carried further than by Freud, which ultimately rendered Melanie Klein's descriptions of the child's interior world so difficult to admit? In fact, was precocious sadism, which she brought to the fore as early as 1927, i.e., a few years after her observation of Fritz, in an article straightforwardly titled 'Criminal Tendencies in Normal Children,' a fundamental fact for her? In comparison with her starting-point, so obvious in the initial presupposition of *Aufklärung* and of the 'relaxation of authoritarian relations,' the roles have been reversed: everything seems to emanate from the child given over to his interior demons: his 'development'

depends solely on the result of a completely interior fight, between good and bad objects, between Eros and Thanatos. But the recognition of this reversal of roles gets us no further; the practice of child analysis seems to be always in danger of filling with guilt either the adult or the child.

Ferenczi (1933), who also recognized the 'confusion of tongues' only to denounce it, considered the child as interiorizing adult desires marked by hate, guilt and prohibition. Invoicing his thesis at this point may seem paradoxical as it is already so surprising in itself, inasmuch as it aimed to bring back to life a Freudian conception previous to the discovery of infantile sexuality, by basing itself on seduction: are we not poles apart from Melanie Klein? However, one should not be too hasty to assert that Ferenczi's thesis is no more than a new incarnation of the 'old' Freudian theory of seduction. In the first place, whatever the justified importance he accorded seduction, its value was exclusively illustrative. Other data were taken into account: 'punishments due to passion' and particularly 'the terrorism of suffering,' which makes the child bear the full brunt of the open or secret conflict between family members, thereby assigning him the sole function of bearer and messenger of the parental unconscious. But in Ferenczi's view, seduction raised to its highest pitch the confusion of tongues, the 'premature grafting' of a form of passionate love filled with guilt. Premature grafting: let us bear the image and its body resonance in mind. What Ferenczi further discovered in the privileged example of seduction was a process with far-reaching consequences: identification with the aggressor or, rather, with his introjection. By this he noted a modality of psychism far more fundamental than what, after Anna Freud, was to be described as the defence mechanism (the aggressed becoming the aggressor, the dominated the dominator). Ferenczi spoke of total submission to the aggressor's will induced by fright. The adult's ascendancy, his power to captivate are unlimited. 'A child is being killed,' Ferenczi seemed to be saying, and his entire therapeutic aim was to make him come to life again.

On the contrary, as it seems, Melanie Klein saw the child with sexual and aggressive desires from the outset. But let us note that what allows us to qualify them as such are the *objects* they aim at, not a goal which would be imminent to them. *Envy*, for example, which Melanie Klein finally considered the most primitive perceptible form of the death instinct (to empty the object), is not a 'purely' instinctual force, it cannot be perceived outside its relationship to the object giving rise to it. Whereas even a 'natural' object such as the breast is more than the instinct's correlative - what would satisfy it or not it is caught in an opposition which defines it (good/bad) and, however fantasied it has the autonomy of a 'person.' Finally, the instinctual field itself is split into life instincts and death instincts and if the primary and permanent cause of anxiety is the danger stemming from the internal work of the shattering, death-carrying instinct, primary objects - breast, penis - are those invested by the libido: their power as objects, the symbolic equivalences between them do not derive from the instinct, but from their own, transindividual nature.

When one objects that Melanie Klein introduced complex object relations practically from the start, one is presupposing the existence of a time when the child's life is purely and simply governed by the search for satisfaction, itself defined as the appeasement of internal tension. In short, the child would exist primarily as an individual bio-physical unit which his permutation would render decidedly dependent, but dependent upon a being of the same nature. Melanie Klein stated something quite different; for her too, the child undergoes a 'premature grafting' of the adult. But whereas Ferenczi, in what one might term his original myth of the meeting between child and adult, envisaged a subject already in possession of his own world, an established language - that of tenderness - upon which the adult's language - that of 'passion' - comes to graft itself by violent intrusion, Melanie Klein claimed to perceive this junction at the very start of the ego's constitution. And where Ferenczi metaphorically invoked the introjection of language, she spoke, in almost literal terms, of the incorporation of objects. The unconscious is no longer a system but a body. The unconscious no longer fastens itself upon 'representations' but upon objects or qualities treated as objects: an unceasing repetition of introjections and projections which comes to a temporary halt - for it is not so much a development as an oscillation - only through the victory of the strongest the good object.

By not being evasive with the question-child, by reaching his fantasy life, Melanie Klein thought she could go back to a time previous to what is traditionally referred to as the Unconscious/Conscious division brought about by repression. Her assumption was that by going further back in time, she would go deeper and at best would arrive at a primary unconscious. What is more, by attempting to analyse very young children, she thought she would be able to participate in the 'birth' of an unconscious and, as it were, to mother it. It is noteworthy that the more Kleinian language becomes singular, to the point of appearing to be a system, the more monotonous it becomes: a sign of Melanie Klein's conviction that she had acceded to the fundamental terms, the manipulation of which was to ensure her grasp on the psyche's elementary structures.

The circle is closed: from knowledge to fantasy, from fantasy to knowledge. For a moment, the child of psychoanalysis caused his mother's knowledge to waver, but in the end, mother-psychoanalysis regained her balance and thought she had the last word. But any knowledge of the unconscious can only be effectively established if it stands the test of what contradicts it from another place without an appointed, fixed position: the place, or non-place, of the unconscious.

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