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CHAPTER

18 'Yes, But How Do We Know It's True?'

Donald W. Winnicott

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Abstract

In this talk for psychology and social work students, Winnicott describes why it is no wonder that it is so difficult to learn about psychology. At first students learn about psychology the same way they learn about other things, that is, with no contribution from oneself. In the second stage they ask, 'Yes, but how do we know this is true?' While most types of teaching take the student out of themselves, psychology that matters tends to throw the student back into themselves. We are all human beings ourselves, and if we learn about others we learn about ourselves. Winnicott describes the problem of learning about dynamic psychology based on knowledge, rather than dealing with children, or indeed with people at all.

Keywords: Winnicott, psychology, learning, knowledge, education, social work

Subject: Clinical Psychology, Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology

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A talk to students of psychology and social work at the London School of Economics, 1950.

Students who are for the first time meeting instruction of a psychological nature rather regularly pass through two stages. In the first stage, they learn what is being taught about psychology just as they learn the other things. In the second stage, they begin to wonder yes but is it true, is it real, how do we know? In the second stage, the psychological teaching begins to separate out from the other as something that can't just be learnt. It has to be felt as real, or else it is irritating and even maddening.

It is not difficult to see that there must be a difference between the effects of one kind of teaching and another. For instance, you are being instructed in administration. You read the Child Care and Protection

Act, and trace the social development that led up to the Curtis Report.ⁱ Or you find out about the workings of Juvenile Courts, the use made of probation officers, and so on. You form your own ideas from reading and from actual visits to the Courts.

Contrast this with what happens when you learn psychology. The old academic psychology has died a natural death, and this is a loss to you because you could have learnt it just as you learned about Acts of Parliament and about the procedure of courts, without trouble but without value. Psychology is now a matter of *feelings, of live people, of emotions and instincts*, and also it deals with the unconscious, and conflicts in the unconscious that cause symptoms because they are not available to consciousness.

p. 424 Do you see? Whereas most types of teaching take you out of yourself, psychology, the psychology that matters, tends to throw you back into yourself. For we are all human beings ourselves, and if we learn about another we learn about ourselves. We can try to be objective and we can make every effort to learn about people without developing morbid introspection, but this requires effort, and you notice this effort, and you feel disturbed; this psychology is not going to behave itself properly as the other subjects in the curriculum do.

Indeed, psychology is not going to help eventually in the same way as the other subjects help, and the result of what you learn will always be the recognition that the care of human beings is more complex than you thought. You can be taught how to proceed in a Juvenile Court case, but you cannot be taught how to cope with a child who is unhappy in a foster-home. In the latter case, you can only be given more and more insight into the factors involved, so that in coping with the trouble you can do what you feel like doing with more and more understanding of the reasons.

Here I have introduced a new idea, and I want to follow it up.

When you learn ordinary things you make no contribution from your own person, you just learn what is taught. The past tense of 'je suis' is 'j'étais'; the way to address a magistrate is 'yer 'onor' (or whatever it is), and that's that. When you learn psychology, however, you never learn anything cut and dried. There is no instruction that can be carried out as such. In the end it will always be you acting as you feel. The only thing is that you can be enriched by knowing of other situations similar to the one you find yourself in, and also you can be enabled to have the power to see more and more clearly what you are doing and why.

Let me give a homely illustration. A friend of yours goes into a mild depression. She rings you up and you agree to go round to her flat, but you don't know what to do. You first take a book on psychiatry and look up 'depression', and after a brief glance at the clinical description you rush on to the paragraph on treatment. You get no help. You are bewildered. 'Keep the patient from suicide' is not applicable, because your friend is not so ill as all that.

Psychology has so far not helped you much.

Let us say, however, that your friend had the good sense to have 'flu or sciatica. She is alone in her flat and you are feeling unwell yourself, and so you fly round and you do all the necessaries. You know exactly what to do. You serve an appropriate meal, you make the bed comfortable, slipping in a hot-water bottle, you go around and get the rations, and when you leave you put some water or milk within easy reach, and tell your friend exactly at what time tomorrow she may expect you.

To do this, you certainly did not have to consult a psychiatry textbook.

p. 425 The fact is that you knew exactly what to do for a friend with a mild depression. It was easy because in this case the patient had a physical complaint that made it all seem sensible. (She probably had a depression too; most people are ready with a depression if only they can find someone to cherish them, and why waste the opportunity provided by the 'flu, and your response?)

Psychology does not try to teach you what to do when your friend needs your help. It can do a lot, however, towards enabling you to be more sure of yourself, to understand what is going on, to grow on experiences, to see where mistakes might have been made, to prevent distress and disasters.

Take another example. It is possible to talk to mothers about the management of their children and to give instructions based on our knowledge. In the matter of physical health and the prevention of disease, there is plenty of room for instruction, and this corresponds with what I have referred to as your gaining instruction in such things as the Children's Act.ⁱⁱ When it comes to telling mothers about mothering, however, psychological instruction can easily be harmful. Mothers either turn a deaf ear or else they get muddled, and feel hopeless, and the extreme is expressed in the cartoon of the parent smacking her child's bottom with one hand and holding in the other a book on child psychology which she is feverishly reading with the aid of strong glasses.

To talk to mothers usefully, I think it is necessary to discover and strengthen what comes naturally to them. This will be enough for many, perhaps for the majority. Some will want to go further and learn more about what they do and why they do it. Mothers who have actually done their job well can stand very deep instruction indeed, because they are not afraid to discover what tremendous forces were at work, and what a lot depended on just that being done just that way, just then. They know they did not do what they did by chance, or by cleverness, but by deeply rooted intuitive or instinctive feeling, strengthened by the self-confidence that belongs to health.

The reason why I am going into all this about mothering is that I think it is relevant.

The trouble is that you are being taught dynamic *psychology at a time when you are not in fact dealing with children*, or with people for that matter. For the time being, although you are experienced men and women, you are *in statu pupillari*, you are divorced from just those things that make you feel confident in your power to draw on intuition.

p. 426 Perhaps you have been teachers, or you have actually been parents, or you have had charge of people in an office or a factory. Every day you found yourselves surprising yourselves, acting or not acting in a way that exactly fitted the situation, as much as Hamlet's speech 'To be or not to be' fits into the exposition of the theme of the play exactly. When you were so placed you could have stood a great deal of digging down into the psychology of your fellow human beings and of yourselves.

Here, in the temporary state of being learners, you can easily develop that lack of self-confidence that makes dynamic psychology seem dangerous. Telling an expectant mother that 'her baby can never make a satisfactory contact with the world unless she knows how to introduce external reality to her infant in small doses' may alarm her, and even make her have a miscarriage, for she becomes alarmed at her own lack of conscious knowledge. Yet, if left to it, she will do just this thing perfectly, simply because of her devotion to her baby.

Similarly, if I tell you that a baby's whole future depends on your knowing that a certain foster-mother has an unconscious revenge feeling against her own mother that renders her unfit for the job of fostering, you may recoil. How can you ever know these things? If, however, you were on the job, you would be finding yourselves suspicious here, and doubtful there, and you would be asking to have a chance to discuss the hidden aspects of the case.

And now, what about the teaching that tremendous forces are at work in the infant from the word 'go!'; that the foundations of the mental health of the adult are laid down in infancy and childhood, that the little boy of 2, 3, 4 years has instincts that make him in his dreams just like an adult, so that he is (in that sense) a sexual rival of his father; that infants who are bandied about from one minder to another do not develop a capacity to believe in the effectiveness of their own love impulses what about all this kind of thing that you

will meet during the year's course? You see, if you believe all these things, you are believing that these things were true of you, and yet you obviously can't get at these same things by remembering. Also, if these things are true things, you and I and all who have come through in a satisfactory way at all owe a debt to someone. Someone saw us through the early stages. In fact we couldn't have done without the care we received at the start. We were dependent, and as we think further and further back so we must admit we were more and more dependent, and at the time of birth and for a few months the degree of this dependence is alarming to contemplate. It must remain alarming to everyone always.

No wonder it is difficult to learn about psychology.

What is the answer? One thing is to go slow.

p. 427 Another is to get relief from the fact that some of what is taught is bound to be wrong, although psychology can teach a good deal about human nature that is true as far as it goes. Also, whenever you can, travel from experiences ↪ you have had, from things you have done, towards the insight that psychology may be able to provide; the reverse direction from psychology to experience is no good at all.

p. 428 Lastly, here is a half-way house. You can lodge there while you are growing. I refer to intelligence tests. These valuable tests have one foot in the academic psychology of the past, and therefore they are restful. Fortunately, they also have a foot in the dynamic psychology of the present, and therefore, if you go in for I.Q. estimations thoroughly, you will eventually find yourselves in the deep waters of feeling and unconscious conflicts. However, testing for I.Q. provides a very neutral territory and can be recommended interim. ↪

Notes

Editorial Home Office Report of the Care of Children Committee. London: HMSO, 1946.

Note i

Editorial The Children's Act, 1948. London: HMSO, 1948.

Note ii

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