



The Collected Works of D. W. Winnicott: Volume 8, 1967 - 1968

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780190271404.001.0001>

Published: 2016

Online ISBN: 9780190458461

Print ISBN: 9780190271404

CHAPTER

28 The Use of an Object and Relating Through Identifications

Donald W. Winnicott

<https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780190271404.003.0066> Pages 355–364

Published: October 2016

Abstract

In this paper, Winnicott elaborates on a concept that occupied him in various forms and formulations towards the end of his life: the capacity of the self to relate to the object (or other) in such a way that the object (or other) is recognized as having a place outside the subjective experience of self. Winnicott refers to this as a sophisticated use of reality. He elaborates on this subject using his extensive clinical experience with patients in primitive and less primitive stages of emotional development.

Keywords: Winnicott, psychoanalysis, use of the object, object relating, subjective, primitive, identifications

Subject: Clinical Psychology, Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology

Originally published in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1969, 50, 711–716, as ‘The use of an object’. Republished with minor revisions in *Playing and reality* (pp. 86–94). London: Tavistock, 1971; and C. Winnicott, R. Shepherd, & M. Davis (Eds.), *Psycho-analytic explorations* (pp. 218–227). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Based on a paper given to the New York Psychoanalytical Society on 12 November 1968. Winnicott prepared two clinical illustrations for this meeting ([CW 8:2:29], [CW 8:2:30]). His ‘Comments on My Paper “The Use of an Object”’ [CW 8:2:38] and ‘The Use of an Object in the Context of Moses and Monotheism’ [CW 9:1:4] were written in response to its reception.

In ‘The Use of the Word “Use”’ [CW 8:2:5], an earlier paper planned to be published alongside this paper [see CW 12:1:5], Winnicott explained that it was his own use of the phrase ‘being found and used’

in his lecture 'Communication of mother and infant compared and contrasted' [CW 8:2:2] that stimulated him to explore his use of the word 'use'.

Earlier origins of this concept can be found in 'Notes Made in the Train' [CW 7:2:6] and in his 'Dream Related to Reviewing Jung' [CW 6:4:15]. He developed the idea further in 'Breast-feeding as a means of communication' [CW 8:2:26] where he describes the value of breastfeeding to the baby in terms of the survival of the breast, and in 'The Place of the Monarchy' [CW 9:2:6], discussing the value of the monarchy in terms of its survival.

In this chapter I propose to put forward for discussion the idea of the use of an object. The allied subject of relating to objects seems to me to have had our full attention. The idea of the use of an object has not, however, been so much examined, and it may not even have been specifically studied.

p. 356 This work on the use of an object arises out of my clinical experience and is in the direct line of development that is peculiarly mine. I cannot assume, of course, that the way in which my ideas have developed has been followed by others, but I should like to point out that there has been a sequence, and the order that there may be in the sequence belongs to the evolution of my work.

What I have to say in this paper is extremely simple. Although it comes out of my psycho-analytical experience I would not say that it could have come out of my psycho-analytical experience of two decades ago, because I would not then have had the technique to make possible the transference movements that I wish to describe. For instance, it is only in recent years that I have become able to wait and wait for the natural evolution of the transference arising out of the patient's growing trust in the psycho-analytic technique and setting, and to avoid breaking up this natural process by making interpretations. It will be noticed that I am talking about the making of interpretations and not about interpretations as such. It appals me to think how much deep change I have prevented or delayed in patients *in a certain classification category* by my personal need to interpret. If only we can wait, the patient arrives at understanding creatively and with immense joy, and I now enjoy this joy more than I used to enjoy the sense of having been clever. I think I interpret mainly to let the patient know the limits of my understanding. The principle is that it is the patient and only the patient who has the answers. We may or may not enable him or her to encompass what is known or become aware of it with acceptance.

By contrast with this comes the interpretative work that the analyst must do, which distinguishes analysis from self-analysis. This interpreting by the analyst, if it is to have effect, must be related to the patient's ability *to place the analyst outside the area of subjective phenomena*. What is then involved is the patient's ability to use the analyst, which is the subject of this paper. In teaching, as in the feeding of a child, the capacity to use objects is taken for granted, but in our work it is necessary for us to be concerned with the development and establishment of the capacity to use objects and to recognise a patient's inability to use objects, where this is a fact.

It is in the analysis of the borderline type of case that one has the chance to observe the delicate phenomena that give pointers to an understanding of truly schizophrenic states. By the term 'a borderline case' I mean the kind of case in which the core of the patient's disturbance is psychotic, but the patient has enough psycho-neurotic organisation always to be able to present psycho-neurosis or psychosomatic disorder when the central psychotic anxiety threatens to break through in crude form. In such cases the psycho-analyst may collude for years with the patient's need to be psycho-neurotic (as opposed to mad) and to be treated as psycho-neurotic. The analysis goes well, and everyone is pleased. The only drawback is that the

analysis never ends. It can be terminated, and the patient may even mobilise a psycho-neurotic false self for the purpose of finishing and expressing gratitude. But, in fact, the patient knows that there has been no change in the underlying (psychotic) state and that the analyst and the patient have succeeded in colluding to bring about a failure. Even this failure may have value if both analyst and patient acknowledge the failure. The patient is older and the opportunities for death by accident or disease have increased, so that actual suicide *may* be avoided. Moreover, it has been fun while it lasted. If psycho-analysis could be a way of life, then such a treatment might be said to have done what it was supposed to do. But psycho-analysis is no way of life. We all hope that our patients will finish with us and forget us, and that they will find living itself to be the therapy that makes sense. Although we write papers about these borderline cases we are inwardly troubled when the madness that is there remains undiscovered and unmet. I have tried to state this in a broader way in a paper on classification [CW 5:5:5].

It is perhaps necessary to prevaricate a little longer to give my own view on the difference between object-relating and object-usage. In object-relating the subject allows certain alterations in the self to take place, of a kind that has caused us to invent the term 'cathexis'. The object has become meaningful. Projection mechanisms and identifications have been operating, and the subject is depleted to the extent that something of the subject is found in the object, though enriched by feeling. Accompanying these changes is some degree of physical involvement (however slight) towards excitement, in the direction of the functional climax of an orgasm. (In this context I deliberately omit reference to the aspect of relating that is an exercise in cross-identifications. This must be omitted here because it belongs to a phase of development that is subsequent to and not prior to the phase of development with which I am concerned in this paper, that is to say, the move away from self-containment and relating to subjective objects into the realm of object-usage.)

Object-relating is an experience of the subject that can be described in terms of the subject as an isolate. When I speak of the use of an object, however, I take object-relating for granted, and add new features that involve the nature and the behaviour of the object. For instance, the object, if it is to be used, must necessarily be real in the sense of being part of shared reality, not a bundle of projections. It is this, I think, that makes for the world of difference that there is between relating and usage.

If I am right in this, then it follows that discussion of the subject of relating is a much easier exercise for analysts than is the discussion of usage, since relating may be examined as a phenomenon of the subject, and psycho-analysis always likes to be able to eliminate all factors that are environmental, except in so far as the environment can be thought of in terms of projective mechanisms. But in examining usage there is no escape: the analyst must take into account the nature of the object, not as a projection, but as a thing in itself.

For the time being may I leave it at that, that relating can be described in terms of the individual subject, and that usage cannot be described except in terms of acceptance of the object's independent existence, its property of having been there all the time. You will see that it is just these problems that concern us when we look at the area that I have tried to draw attention to in my work on what I have called transitional phenomena.

But this change does not come about automatically, by maturational process alone. It is this detail that I am concerned with.

In clinical terms: two babies are feeding at the breast. One is feeding on the self, since the breast and the baby have not yet become (for the baby) separate phenomena. The other is feeding from an other-than-me source, or an object that can be given cavalier treatment without effect on the baby unless it retaliates. Mothers, like analysts, can be good or not good enough; some can and some cannot carry the baby over from relating to usage.

I should like to put in a reminder here that the essential feature in the concept of transitional objects and phenomena (according to my presentation of the subject) is *the paradox, and the acceptance of the paradox*: the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object. I tried to draw attention to this aspect of transitional phenomena by claiming that in the rules of the game we all know that we will never challenge the baby to elicit an answer to the question: did you create that or did you find it?

I am now ready to go straight to the statement of my thesis. It seems I am afraid to get there, as if I fear that once the thesis is stated the purpose of my communication is at an end, because it is so very simple.

To use an object the subject must have developed a *capacity* to use objects. This is part of the change to the reality principle.

This capacity cannot be said to be inborn, nor can its development in an individual be taken for granted. The development of a capacity to use an object is another example of the maturational process as something that depends on a facilitating environment.¹

In the sequence one can say that first there is object-relating, then in the end there is object-use; in between, however, is the most difficult thing, perhaps, in human development; or the most irksome of all the early failures that come for mending. This thing that there is in between relating and use is the subject's placing of the object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control; that is, the subject's perception of the object as an external phenomenon, not as a projective entity, in fact recognition of it as an entity in its own right.²

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This change (from relating to usage) means that the subject destroys the object. From here it could be argued by an armchair philosopher that there is therefore no such thing in practice as the use of an object: if the object is external, then the object is destroyed by the subject. Should the philosopher come out of his chair and sit on the floor with his patient, however, he will find that there is an intermediate position. In other words, he will find that after 'subject relates to object' comes 'subject destroys object' (as it becomes external); and then may come '*object survives* destruction by the subject'. But there may or may not be survival. A new feature thus arrives in the theory of object-relating. The subject says to the object: 'I destroyed you', and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: 'Hullo object!' 'I destroyed you'. 'I love you'. 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you'. 'While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) *fantasy*'. Here fantasy begins for the individual. The subject can now *use* the object that has survived. It is important to note that it is not only that the subject destroys the object because the object is placed outside the area of omnipotent control. It is equally significant to state this the other way round and to say that it is the destruction of the object that places the object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control. In these ways the object develops its own autonomy and life, and (if it survives) contributes in to the subject, according to its own properties.

In other words, because of the survival of the object, the subject may now have started to live a life in the world of objects, and so the subject stands to gain immeasurably; but the price has to be paid in acceptance of the ongoing destruction in unconscious fantasy relative to object-relating.

Let me repeat. This is a position that can be arrived at by the individual in early stages of emotional growth only through the actual survival of cathected objects that are at the time in process of becoming destroyed because real, becoming real because destroyed (being destructible and expendable).

From now on, this stage having been reached, projective mechanisms assist in the act of *noticing what is there*, but they are not *the reason why the object is there*. In my opinion this is a departure from theory which tends to a conception of external reality only in terms of the individual's projective mechanisms.

I have now nearly made my whole statement. Not quite, however, because it is not possible for me to take for granted an acceptance of the fact that the first impulse in the subject's relation to the object (objectively perceived, not subjective) is destructive. (Earlier I used the word 'cavalier', in an attempt to give the reader a chance to imagine something at that point without too clearly pointing the way.)

The central postulate in this thesis is that, whereas the subject does not destroy the subjective object (projection material), destruction turns up and becomes a central feature so far as the object is objectively perceived, has autonomy, and belongs to 'shared' reality. This is the difficult part of my thesis, at least for me.

It is generally understood that the reality principle involves the individual in anger and reactive destruction, but my thesis is that the destruction plays its part in making the reality, placing the object outside the self. For this to happen, favourable conditions are necessary.

p. 360 This is simply a matter of examining the reality principle under high power. As I see it, we are familiar with the change whereby projection mechanisms enable the subject to take cognizance of the object. This is not the same as claiming that the object exists for the subject because of the operation of the subject's projection mechanisms. At first the observer uses words that seem to apply to both ideas at one and the same time, but under scrutiny we see that the two ideas are by no means identical. It is exactly here that we direct our study.

At the point of development that is under survey the subject is creating the object in the sense of finding externality itself, and it has to be added that this experience depends on the object's capacity to survive. (It is important that 'survive', in this context, means 'not retaliate'.) If it is in an analysis that these matters are taking place, then the analyst, the analytic technique, and the analytic setting all come in as surviving or not surviving the patient's destructive attacks. This destructive activity is the patient's attempt to place the analyst outside the area of omnipotent control, that is, out in the world. Without the experience of maximum destructiveness (object not protected) the subject never places the analyst outside and therefore can never do more than experience a kind of self-analysis, using the analyst as a projection of a part of the self. In terms of feeding, the patient, then, can feed only on the self and cannot use the breast for getting fat. The patient may even enjoy the analytic experience but will not fundamentally change.

And if the analyst is a subjective phenomenon, what about waste-disposal? A further statement is needed in terms of output.³

In psycho-analytic practice the positive changes that come about in this area can be profound. They do not depend on interpretative work. They depend on the analyst's survival of the attacks, which involves and includes the idea of the absence of a quality change to retaliation. These attacks may be very difficult for the analyst to stand,⁴ especially when they are expressed in terms of delusion, or through manipulation which makes the analyst actually do things that are technically bad. (I refer to such a thing as being unreliable at moments when reliability is all that matters, as well as to survival in terms of keeping alive and of absence of the quality of retaliation.)

The analyst feels like interpreting, but this can spoil the process, and for the patient can seem like a kind of self-defence, the analyst parrying the patient's attack. Better to wait till after the phase is over, and then discuss with the patient what has been happening. This is surely legitimate, for as analyst one has one's own needs; but verbal interpretation at this point is not the essential feature and brings its own dangers. The essential feature is the analyst's survival and the intactness of the psycho-analytic technique. Imagine how traumatic can be the actual death of the analyst when this kind of work is in process, although even the actual death of the analyst is not as bad as the development in the analyst of a change of attitude towards retaliation. These ↵ are risks that simply must be taken by the patient. Usually the analyst lives through

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these phases of movement in the transference, and after each phase there comes reward in terms of love, reinforced by the fact of the backcloth of unconscious destruction.

It appears to me that the idea of a developmental phase essentially involving survival of object does affect the theory of the roots of aggression. It is no good saying that a baby of a few days old envies the breast. It is legitimate, however, to say that at whatever age a baby begins to allow the breast an external position (outside the area of projection), then this means that destruction of the breast has become a feature. I mean the actual impulse to destroy. It is an important part of what a mother does, to be the first person to take the baby through this first version of the many that will be encountered, of attack that is survived. This is the right moment in the child's development, because of the child's relative feebleness, so that destruction can fairly easily be survived. However, even so it is a tricky matter; it is only too easy for a mother to react moralistically when her baby bites and hurts.⁵ But this language involving 'the breast' is jargon. The whole area of development and management is involved, in which adaptation is related to dependence.

It will be seen that, although destruction is the word I am using, this actual destruction belongs to the object's failure to survive. Without this failure, destruction remains potential. The word 'destruction' is needed, not because of the baby's impulse to destroy, but because of the object's liability not to survive, which also means to suffer change in quality, in attitude.

The way of looking at things that belongs to my presentation of this chapter makes possible a new approach to the whole subject of the roots of aggression. For instance, it is not necessary to give inborn aggression more than that which is its due in company with everything else that is inborn. Undoubtedly inborn aggression must be variable in a quantitative sense in the same way that everything else that is inherited is variable as between individuals. By contrast, the variations are great that arise out of the differences in the experiences of various newborn babies according to whether they are or are not carried through this very difficult phase. Such variations in the field of experience are indeed immense. Moreover, the babies that have been seen through this phase well are likely to be more aggressive *clinically* than the ones who have not been seen through the phase well, and for whom aggression is something that cannot be encompassed, or something that can be retained only in the form of a liability to be an object of attack.

This involves a rewriting of the theory of the roots of aggression, since most of that which has already been written by analysts has been formulated without reference to that which is being discussed in this chapter. The assumption is always there, in orthodox theory, that aggression is reactive to the encounter with the reality principle, whereas here it is the destructive \downarrow drive that creates the quality of externality. This is central in the structure of my argument.

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Let me look for a moment at the exact place of this attack and survival in the hierarchy of relationships. More primitive and quite different is annihilation. Annihilation means 'no hope'; cathexis withers up because no result completes the reflex to produce conditioning. On the other hand, attack in anger relative to the encounter with the reality principle is a more sophisticated concept, postdating the destruction that I postulate here. *There is no anger* in the destruction of the object to which I am referring, though there could be said to be joy at the object's survival. From this moment, or arising out of this phase, the object is *in fantasy* always being destroyed. This quality of 'always being destroyed' makes the reality of the surviving object felt as such, strengthens the feeling tone, and contributes to object-constancy. The object can now be used.

I wish to conclude with a note on using and usage. By 'use' I do not mean 'exploitation'. As analysts, we know what it is like to be used, which means that we can see the end of the treatment, be it several years away. Many of our patients come with this problem already solved—they can use objects and they can use us and can use analysis, just as they have used their parents and their siblings and their homes. However, there are many patients who need us to be able to give them a capacity to use us. This for them is the analytic task.

In meeting the needs of such patients, we shall need to know what I am saying here about our survival of their destructiveness. A backcloth of unconscious destruction of the analyst is set up and we survive it or, alternatively, here is yet another analysis interminable.

Summary

Object-relating can be described in terms of the experience of the subject. Description of object-usage involves consideration of the nature of the object. I am offering for discussion the reasons why, in my opinion, a capacity to use an object is more sophisticated than a capacity to relate to objects; and relating may be to a subjective object, but usage implies that the object is part of external reality.

This sequence can be observed: (1) Subject *relates* to object. (2) Object is in process of being found instead of placed by the subject in the world. (3) Subject *destroys* object. (4) Object survives destruction. (5) Subject can use object.

The object is always being destroyed. This destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object: that is, an object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control.

Study of this problem involves a statement of the positive value of destructiveness. The destructiveness, plus the object's survival of the destruction, places the object outside the area of objects set up by the subject's projective ↪ mental mechanisms. In this way a world of shared reality is created which the subject can use and which can feed back other-than-me substance into the subject.

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Notes

1. In choosing *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* as the title of my book in the International Psycho-Analytic Library (1965), I was showing how much I was influenced by Dr Phyllis Greenacre (1960) at the Edinburgh Congress. Unfortunately, I failed to put into the book an acknowledgement of this fact.
2. I was influenced in my understanding of this point by W. Clifford M. Scott (personal communication, ca. 1940).
3. The next task for a worker in the field of transitional phenomena is to restate the problem in terms of disposal.
4. When the analyst knows that the patient carries a revolver, then, it seems to me, this work cannot be done.
5. In fact, the baby's development is immensely complicated if he or she should happen to be born with a tooth, so that the gum's attack on the breast can never be tried out.

Appendix I

Also published in Abram, J. (2013), 'D. W. W.'s notes for the Vienna Congress 1971', in *Donald Winnicott Today* (Ed. Abram, J.).

Winnicott sent the following summary of his paper to the New York Psychoanalytic Society a fortnight before the meeting:

Object relating can be described in terms of the experience of the subject. Description of object-usage involves consideration of the nature of the object. I am offering for discussion the reasons why, in my opinion, a capacity to use an object is more sophisticated than a capacity to relate to objects; and relating

may be to a subjective object, but usage implies that the object is part of external reality. This sequence can be observed:

1. Subject relates to object.
2. Object is in process of being found instead of placed by the subject in the world.
3. Subject destroys object.
4. Object survives destruction.
5. Subject can use object.

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The object is always being destroyed. This destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object, that is, an object out-side the area of the subject's omnipotent control. Study of this problem involves a statement of the positive value of destructiveness. The destructiveness plus the object's survival of the destruction places the object outside the area in which projective mental mechanisms operate, so that a world of shared reality is created which the subject can use and which can feed back into the subject. How this usage develops naturally out of play with the object is the theme of this talk.

It would help in my exposition if a reading of the following papers could be taken for granted:

1. (1966) The Location of Cultural Experience. *Int. J. Psa.* 48: 3, 368–72
2. (1962) Hogarth Press, London, 1965. Ego Integration in Child Development, (Chapter 4 in: *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*) N.Y. I.U.P. – 1965, pp. 56–63
3. The Capacity to be Alone. *Int. J. Psa.* 39: 5, 416–20, 1958
4. Playing: Its Theoretical Status in the Clinical Situation. *Int. J. Psa.* V. 49, 1968 – still in press.

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Appendix II

F. R. Rodman (2003, p. 328) reported that the following footnote was found in the files of the New York Psychoanalytic Society. The intended location of the footnote was not recorded.

I am influenced here by my second analyst Joan Riviere who pointed out to me that the mother's failures are of prime importance—at the same time she did not seem to me to be adequately stating the basic fact of the mother's initial success (100% initial adaptation associated with the concept of primary maternal preoccupation).