BOOK REVIEWS

The Social Nature of Persons: One Person is No Person
A.P. Tom Ormay

ISBN: 978-1-85575-772-1
£21.34; €31.99; US$39.95 (also available in Kindle).
Paperback: 214 pages
Available: www.karnacbooks.co.uk

Today's considerations on our social nature, as persons, are, as always, already embedded in a familiar primary scenario, rooted in a tribal community, and need an open mind. Tom Ormay, known to the many readers of this Journal as its sagacious former Editor, has already written in our pages on the social person and culture as creative mirror of our society (2011). He is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, a member of the Institute of Group Analysis, London, where he also serves as a training analyst. Presently living and working in Budapest, the Hungarian edition of this book – which he translated – was the winner of the Hungarian Psychiatric Association prize for the best professional volume published in 2010. It is now proudly published as one of the first eight volumes, in the New International Library of Group Analysis, whose series editor is Earl Hopper, Ph. D., a past Chairman of the Group of Independent Psychoanalysts of the British Psycho-Analytical Society.

One of the central themes of Ormay's book is the simple truth that there are bigger things than just ourselves. One person, without relating to some group, is not a complete person. One human being is no human being. Our individual being is always already shaped, conditioned, and habituated in the sphere of what Ormay calls 'Nos'.

The past president of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy, Dr. Malcolm Pines, states his praise about Ormay as follows: “He has produced a startlingly new concept, that of the ‘social self’, a fundamental property of humankind, which is rooted in instinct. He calls it the ‘nos’, the ‘we’, which co-exists with the ‘I’, the individual ego.” (Amazon review)

Once you pick up this delightfully complex book, I suggest that you first got to look at Chapter Nine, where he offers eight definitions of this core theme concept. Besides a general, developmental, dynamic and structural definition, he pleasingly adds a topographical – ‘Nos’ is the sub-system of the psychic apparatus that has the function of connecting the individual with each other to form bigger units such as families, work groups, any other group, and society. (p. 189); as well as functional, cognitive and finally behavioural definitions.

Ormay’s study comes in three main parts: first, serving the historical background, then pondering on the meaning of ‘Nos’, and finally ending with notes, which, besides rich references and index, include his compatriot, Sandor Ferenczi (1873-1933), who, back in 1932, formulated three main principles for the multitude of interconnected integration of praxis, reflection and universals, which the
author considers to be the main ideas of group analysis.

In any science of persons, there are always at least two opposing forces already within us, the ego and the social, from which we can thoughtfully abstract, if, and only if, we do not forget that the social aspect within us individuals, as member of a species, embedded in the natural habitat and the cultural evolution in this world, dissolves one person into the whole. The personal ego of the universal possibility to say, “I am”, serves membrane-like as a protective boundary from the pulling lure to dissociate in the One-and-All.

The linguistic hint, to be able to describe a feeling of being alone, points to All-in-One, in other words being atonement (at-one-ment) within the personal mutuality of inherited social instincts. This of course brings us back to Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and the first psychology book of modern times. In 1872, he published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animal*. Like Ormay, Darwin illuminates human psychology as an endless quest in habitual, motivational and purposeful experience and behaviour conducted, if you allow me this metaphor, by the ‘shadow’ system of the collective human unconscious, for the conscious benefit to hear and see general principles of emotional expressions.

We all know that when our personal self is mindfully affected, so are the movements of our bodily parts. Besides *nos*, as an expressive habit of our social unconscious, the visual bodily expressions, as social communications, come into play. Ormay offers us to stay with him in an open system, that paradoxically says, “Where I am”; a “we are”, also happens at the same time. When our parents and forbearers pass along to us, the younger generations, the values and habits of their way of living – their specific blend of the philosophy of life and sentences of belief – they thus link our human animal nature to *nos*, deeply immersed in the rich reservoir of languages where you and I are part of the ‘we’, us and them.

In his presentation of the historical background of his measuring up the foundation of Group Analysis, Ormay leads us through the debate of instinct in both psychoanalysis and group analysis, pleasantly summarising his debate at the end of each chapter. That Freud and his colleagues got very close to group analysis in their Wednesday meetings, where feelings soon surfaced alongside their debating thoughts, weaving a new tapestry of a healing art, may cause us no surprise. The group, so one of Ormay’s very compelling theses, is the cultural medium of self-development. Many of us might reflect back to our experiences in the so called ‘sensitivity groups’, initiated by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) with his social field theory informed by Gestalt psychology. Once Siegfried Heinrich Foulkes (1898-1976) entered the scene, with his assumption that the group is the whole, the “we” (Latin “nos”) in the group releases the spirit of knowing where we belong. Grateful for this historical overview, which includes, among other issues, “Freud’s group thinking and its restrictions, Ferenczi’s pre-figuring of aspects of group analysis in the 1930s, Elias’ influence upon Foulkes, and Foulkes’s outline of radical group analytic aspects that had outgrown psychoanalysis’ tripartite theory of mind” (Pines), we now turn to the main body of the book. Here Ormay roams wide. His chapter headings are: Nos and the Social Unconscious; A possible biological metatheory; Will and Nos; Nos in group analysis; and Phenomenology of the Self.

I was very pleased to read, that the way of metaphor is meeting the language of the unconscious. That implies then, if as a psychotherapist I want to talk to the unconscious of the patient or members of the group, I had best use metaphors. Herein lies the insight, that Nos is the social reality we happen to be in. The debate concerning the various concepts of social
unconscious, collective unconscious, and species unconscious, reflects gracefully the various understandings of social conditioning of theory making, using both the language games of metaphor and interpretation of lived experiences. There is no short cut or escape from the argument that "consciousness is a product of nos". We continuously participate in its creation, be this by our biological determinants, called habits of nature in conjunction with our species cultural evolution expressed in the arts, science, street-wisdom, social memory and art of living. Human will and intentional acts are used as resources and resilience factors in the process of healing taking place in therapeutic group settings. “We need to overcome existential anxiety, to experience our selves” (p. 132). Then we are so lucky as to find our own matrix of being on the checkpoint of possibilities on offer in the endless “Here and Now”.

Ormay’s style is sober when he has to succumb to the complexity of the issues under discussions, to make his social phenomenological arguments understood. Nevertheless, in discussing examples from his work and experience in Group Analysis, his expressions are transformed into a double taking the poetic of self-transcending living into the acceptance of the chaos of the unknown. In all a very balanced and open-hearted book to keep on the shelf for valuable consultations.

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Die strukturelle Triade und die Entstehung früher Störungen.
von Hermann Lang

Klett-Cotta Verlag, Stuttgart, 2011
299 Seiten
ISBN: 978-3-608-94721-2

Gebundene Ausgabe und Kindle Im Deutsch
RRP €34.95
