

An Existential Perspective of Melanie Klein: A Novel Summarized Biographical Frame

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Abstract: *In the present exploration, we probe the existential intricacies of the highly esteemed psychoanalytic thinker, Melanie Klein, born to a Jewish lineage in late 19th - century Austria, who confronted pervasive prejudice and was not afraid to challenge dogmas and mores with which she disagreed with little regard for the consequences. This treatise elucidates Klein's existential challenges, from role dissolution and profound isolation to confronting the abyss of existential crises. Interpreting her life's events, from academic withdrawal to familial complexities and professional labyrinthine nuances, we illuminate them through existential themes of mortality, loneliness, the loss of freedom, and the quest of becoming ourselves. The salience of such an existential framework is emphasized and its use in therapy is presented clearly albeit indirectly. The aim is that this composition will serve to not only conceptualize her life from an existential perspective but to concomitantly examine her many patent existential struggles in shaping she who came to be Melanie Klein.*

Keywords: Melanie Klein, Kleinian, Existential, Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Philosophical Psychology

Existentialism is defined as a “philosophical theory or approach that emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of will.”

- Oxford Dictionary, 2013

1. Introduction

Melanie nee Klein (maiden name: Reizes) was born in Vienna, Austria on 30 March 1882 to a Jewish family of Polish – Hungarian descent (Donaldson, G., 2002; Klein, M., 1959). Being a member of this particular ethno - religious group, during this time, effectively ensured that she would be continually subjugated to, both, institutionalized and non - institutionalized discrimination. Klein’s life was described by herself in her autobiography as being one defined by tragedy and loss. According to her these feelings began when she realized that she was conceived by her parents mistakenly which left her with a feeling of being unwanted (Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A., 1983; Klein, M., 1959). Nevertheless, through the prodding of her parents, particularly her father, she was able to successfully surmount all of these difficulties and attain a position at an esteemed medical school (Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A., 1983).

Her Existential Struggle

Klein, who was, at this point in her life, a 21 year old, newlywed prodigal student, begrudgingly abandoned her pursuit of medical school at the request of her husband Arthur Klein (Donaldson, G., 2002). Her marriage to Arthur Klein was “unhappy” from the beginning as Arthur spent little time with her because he traveled very frequently for his work as a chemical engineer (Klein, M., 1959). Klein reported soon becoming sexually frustrated but she tried to remedy this frustration by forging an increasingly close relationship with her husband’s family but this effort bore only bitter fruits as his family were unempathetic to her dissatisfaction, demanding that she remain stoic and faithful to her husband (Klein, M., 1959). Melanie’s discontentedness, reportedly, widened, and she complained

frequently about having had “thrown herself” into motherhood. After her daughter was born, she confessed to Arthur’s family that she felt “unhappy”; in - fact many writers consider her as having symptoms consistent with Major Depressive Disorder as described by the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Donaldson, G., 2002; Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A., 1983). She was clearly troubled by her thoughts and feelings leading her to seek psychoanalytic treatment (Klein, M., 1959). In pursuit of finding a suitable analyst with whom to work, Klein relocated to Budapest where she started psychoanalysis with one of the most respected practitioners in the history of the field, Sandor Ferenczi who proceeded to make an extremely sizeable impact on Klein’s way of thinking (Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A., 1983).

The dynamics of Ferenczi and Klein’s therapeutic relationship was, in my opinion, fascinating for Ferenczi’s view of psychopathology was that symptoms are a manifestation of an absence of love and, presumably, this would have resonated with Melanie Klein (Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A., 1983). During Klein’s time as Ferenczi’s patient she demonstrated marked symptom reduction; Klein (1959) reported retrospectively that her depressive symptomatology was nearly eliminated. After having experienced, for herself, the nature of analysis and the symptom relief that it provided, she became very interested in practicing analysis even expressing interest in becoming a child - analyst; But, to become a child - analyst, a candidate must attain a very large number of hours of clinical experience in working with children. This was an arduous requirement to fulfill as there were very few people who would subject their kids to a psychoanalysis modality condemned by the dogmatic principal Sigmund Freud who issued strong arguments against the analysis of children. Melanie Klein, in a difficult position to fulfill the obligations, then decided to do something very unorthodox; she opted to analyze her own children. And, to minimize any questions of credulity, she acted as though she was not related to them (Klein, M., 1959). Several years after beginning this analysis

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of her children she formally became a psychoanalyst who was able to practice independently (Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A., 1983).

As a function of time Melanie Klein's marriage continue to deteriorate. When her husband decided to relocate to Sweden in 1921, she refused to go with him. Instead she moved to Berlin with the couple's three children Melitta, Erich and Hans (Klein, M., 1959). The marriage between Melanie Klein and her husband ended with a divorce in 1926 although the couple had been emotionally distant for a much longer period (Donaldson, G., 2002). With this move from Budapest to Berlin, Melanie had to find herself a new analyst and she chose Karl Abraham, another highly esteemed practitioner. Melanie Klein noted in her autobiography (1959) that her relationships with her analysts were always very similar to those of a father – daughter relationship. Relatedly, she found that moving away from her analysts was something that was incredibly difficult. Now living in Berlin she was surrounded by a culture quite different than that to which she was accustomed. For instance, her being a Jewish woman was looked down upon, as a professional she was regarded as being “eccentric”, “too outspoken” and “flamboyant” (Donaldson, G., 2002; Klein, M., 1959). It is worth noting that at the time Germany society was very patriarchal in nature and that many Germans maintained a high - degree of anti - Semitism and as a people they had done so for a very long time, well before Adolf Hitler (Britannica, n. d.). Karl Abraham died just a few months after Melanie Klein had begun analysis with him and his death was very impactful to her (Donaldson, G., 2002; Klein, M., 1959). In 1927, less than one year after relocating to Berlin, Melanie Klein had to move to London, England, because of the political strides made by the National Socialist German Worker's Party, the ‘Nazi Party’ (Donaldson, G., 2002).

Melanie Klein was invited and brought to the English Isles by Ernest Jones who was one of the most well - known psychoanalysts of the early 20th century. It is worth noting that Ernest Jones played a major role in bringing dozens of esteemed analysts from continental Europe to England during the rise of the Nazis, prior to the second world war. Upon Melanie Klein's arrival to London she began espousing her ideas much more freely than she was able to prior as the patriarchal and severely antisemitic biases against her began to loosen. In fact, she had come to find an eager audience in England; But, despite her ardent supporters her ideas were regarded by the Freudian Orthodoxy as “disturbing” (Donaldson, G., 2002). This schism between Melanie Klein and the Freudian Orthodoxy was the driving force in the eventual dismantling of the Freudian Orthodoxy and, in its place, the erection of three distinct analytic pillars (1) the Kleinians, (2) the Freudians and (3) the independent faction (Donaldson, G., 2002). This disruption of the Freudian orthodoxy led to Melanie Klein having many enemies, perhaps, the most notable of which is Anna Freud who believed that Melanie Klein was responsible for “destroying [her] father's work” (Klein, M., 1959; Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A., 1983). Anna Freud maintained such disdain towards Melanie Klein that Anna Freud could not even bear to be in the same city as Melanie Klein (Klein, M., 1959). Melanie Klein became the

main target of a coalition led by Anna composed of highly esteemed analysts. This coalition was led not only by Anna Freud, but also the great theoretician Edward Glover and even Melanie Klein's own daughter, Melitta. It was noted by Donaldson, G. (2002) that Melanie Klein and her daughter would frequently debate in front of large crowds at the London Psychoanalytic Society's meetings and in public. Melanie Klein reportedly argued vehemently against her own daughter, sharply defending her beliefs.

With time, the anti - Klein coalition was able to effectively ban Melanie Klein from the city of London but Melanie Klein was fortunate in that England was experiencing a mass migration of continental Europeans, especially of Jewish descent, and this resulted in a continued increase in the popularity of Melanie Klein's novel theories by those who were less knowledgeable - and therefore less attached - to the Freudian orthodoxy (Britannica, n. d.). As ever more continental Europeans adhered to the new, distinct postulates furnished by Klein, this newfound popularity allowed her to once more return to London with highly esteemed analysts now standing by her side. In addition to the complex drama she enacted with Freud, Melanie Klein arguing with her daughter Melitta in public and at a level that was rather severe was one - but not the only difficulty –that she faced with her children for she also had to cope with the suicide of her son Erich.

Loss

Clearly, Melanie Klein had lost a considerable number of people during her lifetime; many had died or, intentionally, distanced themselves from her as the two great wars, too, passed during her life with lasting effects from each. This theme of loss was evident from her childhood and it continued throughout her life. One cannot begin to imagine the loss of one's daughter, one's son, and several of the analysts with whom one had formed a deep emotional connection even while bearing witness to the death of one's countrymen and the systematic erasure of one's own people following years of overt European antisemitism. Having borne witness to the death and having endured continued emotional separation with people important to her, people who were a literal part of her self (*internalized objects*) clearly led to feelings of enduring guilt, envy, loneliness and even persecution. Nevertheless, she was able to surmount these hardships and become, in the eyes of many, the most famous child analyst of all time. She is widely regarded as being one of the most significant analysts in history with the value of her contributions being undoubtedly priceless. Klein devised a theory of the mind that is still employed in psychotherapy and analysis over a century later (Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A., 1983). Melanie Klein never remarried, and she remained distant from Melitta for the remainder of her life. She died on 22 September 1960 of natural causes at the age of 78 years (Donaldson, G., 2002).

Existential themes abound in a uniquely clear way in the life of Melanie Klein. From birth she was faced with the reality of her parents having had her “as a mistake.” This event may easily have resulted in feelings of isolation as discussed by Irvin Yalom, and, perhaps, the death of a major role occurred at this point, a loss of a not yet crystalized sense of self as the beloved daughter. She experienced critical

existential crises in her action of unenrolling in medical school at the behest of her husband, despite her being a prodigal student perhaps with aims to win the approval of her father or to more generally fill the void that the death of her role imparted. I believe this event in particular strongly relates to Yalom's concepts of Role Death and of the Loss of Freedom but her actions here seem, to me, to have led to an especially pronounced sense of isolation.

Her marriage to Arthur Klein was full of issues that have existential considerations that are worth being pondered and this seems to have been true from the marriage's fore. Arthur, as aforementioned, spent very little time with Melanie and so she became sexually frustrated, these feelings may well have stoked and erected two of Yalom's four ultimate existential concerns namely that of a death of a role and isolation –these two pillars are raised again and buttressed well very likely having significant consequences on her thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Further, with respect to loss, she, in effect, lost not only a piece of herself but actual others both internalized objects and "real" external objects. Having a spouse that does not spend time with you but for whom you abandoned your life goals simply to have "thrown [your]self" into motherhood can easily be seen as leading to a deep well of meaninglessness, isolation and a marked loss of freedom - one then becomes a slave without chains so to speak. Irvin Yalom states that what we fear most about death is the "extinction of our identity", and Melanie Klein's identity was clearly at risk of being extinguished at this point in her life for she had given up her life goals, part of her self, internalized object (*i. e.*, representations of others) only for what was described by her as an miserable marriage (Smith, S. B., 2002). Melanie Klein, despite facing meaninglessness in one area of her life was never without her religion and I believe that the meaning derived there from helped her to cope with the difficulties she faced throughout her life whilst concomitantly adding pressures given the rife antisemitism which eventually led to the rise of the Nazis not just in Berlin but across Europe perhaps weakening her identity but strengthening her ability to cope with ego insults and external pressures.

Death

Klein experienced the existential issue of death a number of times. One particular death that she re-experienced a number of times was the termination of her relationship with her analysts. Klein reported having experienced a "father – daughter like" relationship with each of her male analysts but with each of them she typically spent only a few months before having to relocate (Klein, M., 1959). And, if you, the reader, imagine, feeling so close with someone that you would describe them as a parent and then to simply forever have that relationship end rather suddenly, then I think one can understand fractionally what she went through repeatedly just in that one arena of her life. Moving to Berlin in 1926 further pressured her with the weight of such issues and the constant reminders related thereto. This might have led her to experience many of the same feelings reported by those within the concentration camps, and I hesitate to even say 'to a lesser degree' for she faced the same existential issues as did they but her issues were built upon a

cornerstone of continued crises rooted in loss - loss of others, identity and eventually a loss of the self.

After having experienced the loss of yet another analyst, another father in her eyes, Karl Abraham, that very same year when she moved to Berlin and began working with him, Klein unexpectedly moved to London where her major existential crises were waiting for her, sitting casually at the dock expectingly. Despite her genius, Klein was known to have gone through bouts of severe depression relating to the loss of her mother earlier in life and the crises that awaited her constantly were apparently exponentially weighted by this reality for her mother was a literal piece of Melanie just as Melanie was a literal piece of her mother not just in a literal sense but also in an existential and analytic sense.

Just a few short years later, in 1933, her daughter publicly attacked her beliefs in front of the foremost thinkers in the field but even though her daughter harshly criticized her with impunity, Klein persisted with her ponderings of the human condition. Unfortunately, in 1934 her last living son, Hans, died in a climbing accident. Erich Klein, her other son, had moved with her both to Berlin and to London had killed himself soon thereafter; his mother was so distraught that history was told first by her that it was an accidental death but mystery remains, to the time of my writing, without any clear date, reason or manner of death clearly identified. Melanie was in denial after losing her first son Erich - clearly - but the onslaught of her daughter against her which was to be followed almost immediately after by Hans' climbing accident from which he could not recover appeared to overcome her as she was not able to be present at his funeral. In a very short period upon moving to London, she lost both of her sons and her daughter - it might be better said that she lost an immense and ineffably important aspect of her "self." And although Melitta was not lost to the scythe of death but, instead, to an argument over theory as Melanie and she became embroiled in a very public debate, a battle, which lasted until Melanie died in 1960. Melanie Klein and her daughter's relationship ended promptly and never was it, nor could it, be reestablished.

Loss as a Means to Gain

This loss of her children, this loss of herself piecemeal at times and immensely at others plainly relates to Yalom's existential issue of death on multiple fronts but what strikes me, what struck me hard enough to compose this thesis, is that Melanie Klein, interestingly, was not reported to have experienced a significant degree of melancholia for any extended period. Immediately my mind supposes that Melanie Klein was able to find meaning in her lifelong struggles through the loss of her own identity, her own sense of self for I imagine her enduring and surviving a great void, not just isolation or loneliness, but a diminishing and eventual loss of self which I believe was the impetus that led her to surmount the veritable Mountain Everest that allowed her to become amongst the most renowned analysts in history. When devising her own suppositions in times of wondering about the nature of the human condition, she did not once stop to rest or to return to the comfort of conformity despite being, by so many, including by her own daughter, and by Freud himself, deemed to be embarking upon a laughable, fruitless, and lonesome endeavor. But she

returned bearing only the ripest and tastiest of fruits which she harvested from the trees of thought outside dogma. Aside from the veritable rich harvest she delivered to those who so recently laughed at her, she, too, arrived back with the respect of all those who trivialized her pursuits. Melanie Klein is considered by many today as the first major child analyst and she went on to devise a number of novel theories and her own unique therapeutic modality markedly distinct from Freud's. Melanie Klein went on to invent play therapy, a redesigned psychosexual developmental model, and an entire field of analysis, Object Relations. But, perhaps most importantly, she found her self through loss - through the loss of what in effect was a false self - and in doing she had the opportunity to find her true self - a woman strong enough to single-handedly break apart the established Freudian Orthodoxy. She at that point ushered in a new era of psychology, the one in which we reside, one of competing ideas and liberation from the dogmatism of Freudian theorists.

Without question one can see that the issue of responsibility pervaded the life of Melanie Klein from the separation with her daughter Melitta. One of the many instances that this issue of responsibility is apparent is in the case of Melanie Klein having the freedom to choose her beliefs in the nature, mechanisms and functions of the psyche separated from dogma. She expressed them publicly but there is an, inherent responsibility or perhaps an instinctual reaction which occurs when one becomes their true self. I think it is clear that the issue of responsibility, as it relates to the construct of freedom, was impactful in the life of Melanie Klein, and psychoanalysis generally, for her freedom to choose to challenge the Freudian orthodoxy and, relatedly, her freedom to espouse her ideas in the way that she did despite the cost, despite it distancing her from her last living child, allowed Melanie Klein for the first time to truly be Melanie Klein.

2. Conclusion

I believe that the value of this existential conceptualization of the life of Melanie Klein is great. Melanie Klein endured a number of existential crises which would make a great number of us fall to our knees but she was able to surmount these struggles and provide to the world a theory of analysis that is invaluable, a theory still used today, Object Relations Theory. I think her ability to surmount the aforementioned existential crises played a fundamental role in the great success and prestige she came to attain, despite working in a very male dominated field. My pastor once told me that "each of us has a war that we are fighting" and viewing Melanie Klein's life from an existential perspective highlights the truth to this claim. The existential conceptualization utilized maintains great differences from any other perspective that I can conceive. Specifically, the considerations of Yalom's four ultimate concerns (death, isolation, loss of freedom/responsibility and meaninglessness) sheds new light unto the life of Melanie Klein even in an a discussion as brief as this.

I have come to believe that an existential conceptualization of a patient's life may yield great results in therapy. Prior to my being exposed to the field of existential

psychology/logotherapy I thought not of considering the "death of a role" that Yalom discusses under the umbrella of death (Smith, 2002). The death of a role can clearly, in many cases, be as traumatizing as death itself, consider, for example, the case of Melanie Klein losing her role as a mother when her daughter Melitta became publicly opposed towards what Klein regarded as true - and the implicit choice that goes along with such a situation. Though Melanie's daughter Melitta did not actually die until well after Melanie herself passed away, Melanie Klein did suffer the death of a role, specifically, the role of being Melitta's mother. In addition to considering Yalom's ultimate concerns, I believe that using an existential conceptualization one may have a better understanding of the potential gains one can attain through suffering. This realization of the potential gains that one can attain through suffering and, relatedly, the finding of meaning in suffering, may benefit clients with myriad diagnoses. Admittedly, this may not be ideal for the psychotic patient but in the case of a neurotic patient I believe that there are great gains that can be made from the utilization of an existential perspective coupled with the utilization of logotherapy. One of the most powerful ways to evoke this understanding in meaning, I believe, would be to prescribe Frankl, V. E. (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning*. This book provides one with a great, unparalleled, insight into the experience of Frankl during his time at the concentration camps whilst highlighting the means by which he found meaning in the immense suffering he had endured. Furthermore, the concepts discussed by Frankl V. E. in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959), including Noo - Dynamics, the Existential Vacuum and Noogenic Neurosis, potentially offers therapists a deeper understanding of a patient who may be experiencing an existential crisis of any severity without having previously been aware of it.

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