

“FIGURING” THE SELF:
UNITY AND MULTIPLICITY IN CLINICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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“Imagination . . . is structuring in that it brings about closure, deconstructing in that it reopens things.” (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 311)

Introduction

In the part of the South where I grew up, the word “figure” was used regularly in colloquial speech, typically in its verb form. My grandmother, in particular, seemed fond of this word, and she used it often. I remember being at her house after school one day, sitting at her kitchen table and doing my math homework. While she was available to check over my work or help me through the more challenging problems, she was most interested in persuading me to close my eyes and to “figure” the numbers in my head. My grandmother was encouraging me to visualize the processes of addition and subtraction, multiplication and division; to develop mental representations of what I could otherwise accomplish with pencil and paper.

In the context of this paper, I use the words “figure” and “figuring” to evoke a variety of meanings. To “figure” is to represent with numbers or to calculate; to portray, as in drawing the outline or contours of an object; to regard, consider or evaluate, as when we try to “figure something out.” Whatever its context or meaning, “figuring” is an imaginative act.

Psychoanalysis, influenced by the postmodernism and the relational “turn” in the field, is presently “figuring” the self: numbering its parts; redrawing and, sometimes, erasing its lines. It is considering and reconsidering the contours of cohesiveness and fragmentation, identity and difference, stability and change, closure and openness. How many selves make a person? Is one self enough? Is multiplicity “normal,” or a symptom of dissociation? Are cohesion and identity illusions, albeit necessary ones? Should we reject the notion of a core, permanent self, opting, instead, for a discourse of subjects and subjectivity? Is health to be found in the ability to stand between our various islands of experience without losing a single one, the ability to *feel* like one self while really *being* many? (see authors 1996, passim)

Theology has its own preoccupation with the “one” and the “many.” Throughout Christian history, the trinitarian imagination has attempted to “figure” the sacred, to

number God's persons and parts, to outline the contours of a holy mystery. Are there three "gods" or one? What does God's triunity communicate about our experience of God, God's inner life, the divine essence, God's "internal object relations" (Ulanov, 1988, pp. 90–91; Ulanov, 2001, pp. 130–31)? Does God have a core? How do cohesion and fragmentation, identity and difference, stability and change play out in divine life? What does the Trinity mean for us?

Re-imagining the Questions

When I first became interested in the topic of unitary versus multiple selves and subjects, as it is being debated in psychoanalysis, my questions had to do with what our unconscious fantasies of unity and multiplicity are, and how they might serve as a defense against the fragmentation so pervasive in us and in our world. If fragmentation is regarded as non-pathological, the disintegration and multiplicity we experience is legitimized. If unity and a core sense of self are valorized, we can then pursue a measure of integration that helps us cope with, if not overcome, the various ways we feel divided within ourselves.¹

I continue to regard these questions as important, even though they prove difficult to explore. Grappling with my own unconscious fantasies about a bounded self, the absence of a "core," the illusion of identity, the possibility of integration . . . all that has been enormously challenging. Still, pursuing this line of inquiry has also been enormously productive, leading me to consider the larger and more fundamental issue of the relationship of unconscious fantasy to theory, with the focus, here, on the issue of unity and multiplicity.

Broadly, my project is to explore the deep structure of unconscious fantasy which, as I see it, promotes and organizes our experiences of the "one" and the "many" and serves as a driving force in the formation of the self.² In this paper, I use Thomas Ogden's reformulation of Melanie Klein's theory of fantasy³ and his vision of the Kleinian subject, alongside Christian trinitarian theology, to propose that unity and multiplicity

¹These questions were inspired, in part, by Susan Fairfield's essay "Analyzing Multiplicity: A Postmodern Perspective on Some Current Psychoanalytic Theories of Subjectivity." In *Bringing the Plague: Toward a Postmodern Psychoanalysis*. New York: Other Press, 2002.

²Ogden, extending Chomsky's notion of linguistic deep structure, writes of psychological deep structure as an inherent system for organizing experience and perception. (see *The Matrix of the Mind*, p. 13). Edgar Levenson links deep structure with "the centrality of metaphor" and "a peculiarly human way of organizing experience and perceiving reality." (see "The Politics of Interpretation," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 1996. p. 647) Psychological deep structure could also be connected, I think, with Jung's idea of the archetypes. My use of the term is linked with all such elaborations.

³Throughout this paper, I will use this spelling of fantasy rather than Klein's "phantasy."

persist in a generative and interpenetrating dynamic—a circular, spiraling, “perichoretic” movement—which I identify as unfolding within a transcendent unity.⁴

Here, in the province of this deep structure where the “one” and the “many” co-exist, psychoanalysis and theology meet. As near neighbors, these disciplines converse across a boundary which both unites and separates them.⁵ However much we participate in and mirror divine life, our participation in God is never complete, and our mirroring can only approximate the divine image. Methodologically, I thus maintain an interpretive space for the movement of convergence and divergence, of identity and difference, of unity and separation which characterizes these neighboring subjects. Psychoanalysis and theology, in the process of their own generative and interpenetrating dynamic, share a relationship of mutual participation and influence. Each discipline stands to affirm, challenge, and critique the other. And something new stands to dawn on their shared horizon (Lamborn, in press).⁶

Deep Structure and the Clinical Imagination: The Kleinian Subject

Klein’s understanding of fantasy, which she defined as the mental representation of instinct, is regarded as a seminal contribution to psychoanalytic theory. Throughout her work, she described fantasy as an activity that occurs in the unconscious depths, pervading all of life.⁷ According to Klein, the work of fantasy begins in earliest stages of life and takes on an increasingly elaborate and extensive role—running the gamut of the lifespan and accompanying all human endeavors, including art, science, and everyday activity (1975, p. 251). The human person is one whose entire being, perceiving, and responding is shaped by an ever-flowing undercurrent of fantasy.

Another of Klein’s contributions to psychoanalytic theory was her positing of two developmental positions, the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive, each structured by

⁴ The Greek term περιχώρησις (from *perichoreuo*, meaning coinherence or interpenetration) has been a longstanding component of Eastern trinitarian theology. My use of the term here, in an adjectival form, is meant to evoke a rhythmic, interpenetrating action. Locating this dynamic movement within a “transcendent unity” is a notion that Klein most certainly would have rejected; it is likely that Ogden would also quibble over the issue of transcendence. My theology of the Trinity is what grounds my theory here.

⁵ Ann Belford Ulanov similarly envisions the relationship between psychology and theology. She notes that “. . . the two disciplines cannot be equated, but each must salute the other as the near neighbor, just on the other side of the frontier they share.” (See *Finding Space*, Louisville: John Knox, 2001, p. 9)

⁶ My focus, in this paper, is to consider the contributions of the pre-modern image of the Trinity for our postmodern theories of unitary and multiple selves and subjects. In another project, I explore the contributions of unity and multiplicity for how we might re-imagine the Trinity.

⁷ For example, the baby who can deal temporarily with her hunger through hallucination (conjuring up the warm and gratifying breast of her mother) is engaged in fantasy. An adult’s choice of a sexual partner, and the relational dynamics which obtain between partners, is influenced by infantile fantasies concerning parental figures.

its own fantasy system. Klein believed that the paranoid-schizoid position commenced with birth, encompassing the most basic anxieties of the infant. This position is characterized by a minimal sense of "I-ness," the splitting of both internal and external objects--including the ego, and part-object relating (p. 253).⁸ The depressive position, inaugurated by the infant's desire to make reparation for the destructive harm done to the "part-object" mother, occurs around the fifth or sixth month of life. There is more coherence of the ego in this position, with a definite sense of "I-ness." There is also, now, a quality of intersubjective awareness and recognition. The mother is perceived as a "whole object," the target of both love and aggression (p. 255).

These concepts, which provide the scaffolding of much of Klein's theory, are familiar enough to those acquainted with psychoanalytic thought. But what may be somewhat less familiar is Ogden's interpretation of Kleinian theory--partly his own creative "riff," a rendering explicit of what is implicit in Klein's work, and an innovative blending of the two. Ogden's vision of the developmental process, for example, is more dialectical and synchronic than Klein's generally linear and diachronic approach. In conceptualizing his vision of the Kleinian subject, Ogden writes, "(The) developmental positions neither follow nor precede one another; rather each co-exists with the other . . ." (1994, p. 34) For Ogden, subjectivity cannot be located in a single hierarchically layered position, or "pole." Instead, he conceives of subjectivity as that which can be located in the dialectical tension generated *between* the positions (p. 34).⁹

Through Ogden, we get an expanded view of the Kleinian subject--a subject which is continually created, negated, and preserved; centered and decentered; dispersed and unified; fragmented and integrated. The "ongoingness" of the dialectic between the developmental positions is seen as necessary for psychic health and growth. Against the backdrop of a tendency to herald the depressive position as a "developmental achievement"--a sure foundation for psychological maturity--Ogden resists

⁸ The degree of integration or coherence in this position is a matter of debate. Helen Segal, a major interpreter of Kleinian theory, describes the early ego as "largely unorganized," but possessive of "a tendency towards integration." (See *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, New York: Basic Books, 1964, pp. 11-12) Michael Fordham, who placed Kleinian theory in dialogue with analytical psychology, observed that "we cannot say there is no ego, though we have evidence that many of the structures are archetypal and result from deintegration." (See *Freud, Jung, and the Fenceless Field*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 73.) I identify in the paranoid-schizoid position a predominate fantasy of fragmentation/disintegration.

⁹Ogden also adds a third position, the autistic-contiguous, to the Kleinian scheme. This mode of experience is one which Ogden sees as more primitive than either of Klein's positions, generative of the most basic forms of human experience. It is sensation-dominated, protosymbolic, rhythmic, linked to a quality of sensory contiguity associated with skin-on-skin. As Ogden puts it, it is a "relationship of shape to a feeling of enclosure, of beat to the feeling of rhythm, of hardness to the feeling of edgedness." (1989, p. 32) Ogden links this mode of experience to Winnicott's state of non-reflective "going on being." It is the floor which grounds all other experiences, holding us together "from below." (p. 45). Ultimately, Ogden's dialectical vision includes all three positions. In another project, I consider the theological implications of this part of Ogden's theory.

pathologizing the paranoid-schizoid position, with its fantasies of fragmentation and disintegration. He rather regards the paranoid-schizoid as one way of organizing experience, offering a critical balance against the depressive position and its integrative strivings (1994, p. 41).

Given Klein's notion that unconscious fantasy influences all creative activity, including artistic and scientific endeavors, her theory (and Ogden's reformulation of it) can itself be understood as permeated by fantasy. Klein's is but one way of mapping the terrain of the unconscious and of the nature of subjectivity. Ogden goes so far as to say that the Kleinian developmental positions are "fictions," non-existent ideals which can never to be encountered in pure form (p. 35) The same could be said of all of our psychoanalytic concepts. Klein's terminology, I think, is best understood as metaphorical, embodying a reflection on lived experience and clinical observation. But some truths are stranger than fiction. And a fundamental truth of the Kleinian subject is the deep structure of unconscious fantasy in which the "one" and the "many" co-exist.

Deep Structure and the Theological Imagination: The Trinity

The co-existence of the "one" and the "many" persists also in the Christian symbol of the Trinity. Through the mysterious logic of this image--the deep structure of unity and multiplicity, so alive and active in unconscious process, locates at the center of divine life. Keeping Klein's theory in mind, we might well consider the many ways unconscious fantasy has permeated the trinitarian imagination throughout the centuries. The unconscious, I think, may be regarded as a vehicle for revelation; a place of encounter with the divine. But the unconscious is not God, nor can God be fully apprehended there or ultimately articulated though its language, our "primary speech."¹⁰ The symbol of the Trinity points toward a "There, there"--a vital, passionate, and fecund Being, ever reaching outward and otherward in relationship (LaCugna, 1991, p. 1).

Paul Tillich's reflection on the Trinity suggests one way that the deep structure of the unity and multiplicity inhabits this image. Tillich described the dynamics of Trinitarian symbolism as inherently dialectical, mirroring lived human experience--the "movement of separation and reunion," the continual process of disintegration and re-integration (1963, p. 284). For Tillich, trinitarian dogma was not a numbers game, a formula whose meaning can be exhausted by such statements as "three is one and one is three." Such, in his thinking, was the deepest distortion of this symbol of ultimate mystery. The essence of the trinitarian imagination, for Tillich, is "the unity in manifoldness of divine self-manifestations." (p. 293)

More recently, theologian David Cunningham has argued that the fundamental trinitarian claim, "these three are one," stands as a critique against the assumption that oneness and multiplicity are mutually exclusive categories. Using the musical concept of polyphony (literally, "many voices/sounds"), Cunningham argues that there is a multiplicity present in divine life--a plurality which, nevertheless, does not diminish God's unity. Each "person" of the Trinity sings out its own distinctive voice, proclaiming and celebrating the divine oneness. Theologically, the notion of polyphony serves as a

¹⁰I owe this phrase Ann and Barry Ulanov and their book *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982.

reminder that multiplicity need not be integrated into a single, homogeneous unity (1998, pp. 127–34).

The sort of theological polyphony Cunningham envisions is particularly evident in one of J.S. Bach's organ masterpieces, the Fugue in E-flat Major, BWV 552, itself an extended musical reverie on the Trinity.¹¹ The piece begins with a musical "subject" announcing a distinct melody, one which is eventually joined by another "subject," introducing its own unique melody. Two melodies, subject and counter-subject, sound with and against one another, building in complexity and intensity. Finally, a third subject appears, announcing yet another melody, one which anchors and completes the intricate counterpoint. Though three distinct melodies are sounded simultaneously, together they form a single musical composition. Through his masterful use of polyphony, Bach succeeded in conveying through music that which can only be approximated by language: the image of the Trinity as life fully shared at the heart of all being, where duality is continually transformed into multiplicity and re-established in unity. Bach's trinitarian imagination itself bears witness to the deep structure of unconscious fantasy in which the "one" and the "many" co-exist.

"Figuring" the Self: Toward an Interdisciplinary Model

How do the clinical imagination and the theological imagination, each in its own way, structure and destructure our understanding of the self? How might the dialectic of mutual influence between psychoanalysis--as embodied in the Kleinian subject, and theology--as expressed in the image of the Trinity, both close and reopen our ways of "figuring" the self? What "something new" stands to dawn on their shared horizon, where the deep structure of the "one" and the "many" resides?

I regard this deep structure of the "one" and the "many" as a driving force for the formation of the self, which I prefer to think of as *the atoning self*.¹² Like the Kleinian subject, the atoning self is formed in the ongoing dialectic of the paranoid-schizoid--with its fantasies of splitting and fragmentation--and the depressive, with its fantasies of repair, integration, and wholeness. The atoning self is always in process, continually

¹¹This piece is commonly known as the "St. Anne's Fugue."

¹² My term is inspired, in part, by Hans Loewald and his influential paper, "The Waning of the Oedipus Complex." There, Loewald wrote of the self as an "atonement structure, a structure of reconciliation. . . ." (see *Papers on Psychoanalysis*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 394) He saw the both the Oedipal and the pre-Oedipal phrases as psychic events which diminish, yet endure, repeating themselves throughout life on different developmental levels (p. 400). The destruction of incestuous object relations, a central feature of the Oedipal drama, thus persists in unconscious fantasy. The accompanying Oedipal guilt, as Loewald saw it, is something other than "a troublesome affect that we might hope to eliminate" but rather "one of the driving forces in the organization of the self" (p. 394). I differentiate my use of the word "atoning" from the various "atonement theories" in Christian theology which valorize suffering and punishment as redemptive. In terms of Kleinian theory, it connects with reparation, with creativity, with the drive for integration. The "atoning self" can be thought of as a "wholling self."

being created and negated, dispersed and unified. It is both single and multiple, stable and in flux, identical and different.

Psychologically, the maintenance of the dialectic between the "one" and the "many" is critical because we need both what the paranoid-schizoid position contributes to the organization of experience—namely, a vital capacity for experiencing our own difference and discontinuity; and what the depressive position offers—the capacity to stake out an identity for ourselves and to pursue integration. In this model, trauma can be understood as anything which disrupts this ongoing dialectic. Trauma, for one person, might mean that the experience of a cohesive sense of self has come undone; that endless splitting and fragmentation prevail. For another, trauma may produce a rigid sense of identity—one that cannot cope with change; that cannot experience flexibility. Integration, in this model, may be defined as the ongoing ability to house our multiplicities within our identities (Aron, 2002, p. 144).¹³

Such a view of the self as both unified and multiple, stable and in flux, identical and different approximates what the image of the Trinity discloses about the life of God, a life in which we participate, however incompletely. The Trinity bears witness to the reality of divine being where the "one" and the "many" co-exist, where sameness and difference are not mutually exclusive, where "otherness" is continually bound up with identity, where the dynamics of separation and reunion eternally unfold. The trinitarian imagination offers something critical to the way we "figure" the self. The central confession of the trinitarian theology is that "these three are one." We can claim a transcendent unity in God, a wholeness in the divine being, a place--however dynamic--where the unity of manifoldness of divine self-manifestations obtains.

The atoning self thus apprehends stability, even in the midst of flux; it claims identity, even as it encounters its own polyphony and fluidity. It is capable of living with multiple, open-ended story lines, yet is possessed of an enduring core—however open to revision, however much in process. Theologically, the atoning self ever moves within and toward a transcendent wholeness, an "at-one-ment," a kind of completeness in which the "many" are continually gathered together, and where there is generous room always to welcome more in. A central practice of the atoning self, as I see it, is discernment, a holy choosing of those strands of acting and relating which are most consistent with the life of the Spirit and the fruit which that Spirit yields.

Transfiguration: Beyond Selves and Subjects

Having offered the tentative beginnings of my own model of the self, I might do well to return to my initial questions about the relationship between unconscious fantasy and the making of theory. My model could be interpreted as stemming from what postmodern psychoanalyst Susan Fairfield describes as "unconscious fantasies of aggressive rupture and repair . . . the possibility of a "highly gratifying cycle of defiance and reassurance." (p. 78) Maybe she is on to something! Still, what the Trinity ultimately points us toward is that "something" which resides beyond dialectical

¹³Aron has also identified a framework for understanding the self as both unitary and multiple in Ogden's reformulation of Kleinian theory. See his essay, referenced above.

movement, beyond interpenetrating modes of experience, beyond imagination and fantasy, beyond selves and subjects.

Theologian Aidan Nichols writes: "That there is an analogy between our being and God's should not make us seek to domesticate God but, on the contrary, lead us to recognize an invitation--inscribed in the very nature of our being--to enter his mystery." (1998, pp. xiii-xiv) Perhaps the deep structure of the "one" and the "many," so alive in the unconscious and so present in the life of the Trinity, can be understood as such an invitation. Beyond the ways we "figure" the self, beyond the ways we "figure" the sacred--calculating their parts, drawing and re-drawing their lines. . .there is mystery. Beyond the dialectic of stasis and change, otherness and identity, unity and multiplicity; beyond the selves and subjects of our experiencing and our theorizing. . .there is mystery. Given such "beyondness," integration could well be re-imagined as the capacity to recognize the invitation which lies deep within us, to consent to its call, and to enter into the holy mystery which, alone, can make us whole.

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