

Becoming a Person

by Kenneth Kaye

BABIES AND THEIR MOTHERS. D.W. Winnicott (Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madeleine Davis, eds.). 1987. 109 pp. \$14.95 (\$8.95, paper). Addison Wesley, Reading, Mass.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BEHAVIORAL STATES AND THE EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS IN EARLY INFANCY: NEW PROPOSALS FOR INVESTIGATION. Peter H. Wolff. 1987. 266 pp. \$32.50. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

THE WORLD OF THE NEWBORN. Daphne Maurer and Charles Maurer. 1988. 304 pp. \$20.95. Basic Books, New York.

BORN DANCING: HOW INTUITIVE PARENTS UNDERSTAND THEIR BABY'S UNSPOKEN LANGUAGE AND NATURAL RHYTHMS. Evelyn B. Thoman and Sue Browder. 1987. 204 pp. \$15.95. Harper and Row, New York.

Perhaps, as Mark Twain suggested, we rejoice at a birth mainly because we are not the one being born. But there must be other reasons for our fascination as well, because in philosophy, art, folk literature, and religion, the newborn has always, everywhere, had special significance. From the Babylonian-Assyrian-Greek birth omens, to the miraculous, painless birth of the Buddha, to Moses in the bullrushes, to the nativity of Christ, all the way to the current rash of popular films in the "Oh my God, what am I going to do with this baby?" genre, infants are not only objects of adoration, they are metaphors, oracles, peacemakers, messengers from heaven.

Psychologists, too, from John Locke to Jerome Bruner, have appealed to the newborn babe for answers to some of humankind's oldest questions. The occasion for this essay is the publication of a new collection of D.W. Winnicott's writings on human infancy. Although these articles from the 1960s are not significantly different from the earlier work in previous collections, their succinctness may win new readers. Winnicott's vision of the mothering process should stimulate debate. Thus, this slender volume presents a framework within which to comment upon a

trio of other recent books about babies.

It is a remarkably varied lot, each author viewing the mystery through a different sort of monocle. What they have in common is the unexpressed motive, not merely to elucidate the earliest weeks of human life, but to reveal broader truths about our nature; not just to understand where babies come from and how they get their individual qualities, but to use what we know or believe about their origins to explain deeper mysteries: things we wonder about ourselves. What *is* a baby? What are we?

The miracle of birth, and then of transformation into a member of the human circle, has become a projective card upon which each observer's interpretations reflect his or her personal agenda. Probably for that very reason, it is hard to think of another area of science that combines such genuine profundity with such a propensity for nonsense.

Inevitably, we address the creature like the proverbial blind sages examining the elephant. One analyzes its cognitive apparatus, another the unfolding of emotions and attachments, a third the individual personality, another sees a "language acquisition device," yet an-

other the phenotypic expression of genetically heritable traits. To B.F. Skinner, a baby was a technological challenge. He built a better crib for his infant daughter, essentially just a device for controlling temperature and air flow, a combined bed and playpen with a glass side instead of bars. As he described it for the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1945,* it had nothing to do with operant conditioning or (not yet invented) behavior modification. Yet it quickly came to be called a "Skinner box," confused with the pigeon-conditioning cells of Skinner's laboratory, so that for at least thirty years most people outside the field of experimental psychology who knew Skinner's name believed that he advocated rearing children in *Brave New World*-like boxes without human contact. His innocent magazine article contained no such proposition.** But there was, of course, a set of assumptions implied by those hermetic walls he put around the baby.

Donald Winnicott's blinders were as large as anyone's. He, too, saw what he was prepared to see in the dilemma of baby and mother (distortions originating, no doubt, as much in his own infancy as in his professional biases). But in one way he refused to let his vision be narrowed. Uncommonly for a pediatrician of his generation, he

* Skinner, B.F. (1945, October). Baby in a box. *Ladies Home Journal*, 62, 30-31+.

** This confusion occurred upon a cultural substrate that included Jean-Jacques Rousseau's abandonment of all his infants to a foundling home; J.B. Watson's famous behaviorist bravado, child-abuse charges, and disappearance from academe amidst sexual scandal in the 1920s; Aldous Huxley's vision of assembly-line people production; and the newly-revealed horrors of Fascism as well as Communism.



insisted upon trying, at least, to encompass the larger system.

To Winnicott, there was no such thing as a baby, only a nursing couple. He foreran Benjamin Spock (who acknowledges direct influence in a historically interesting Foreword to this edition) and, especially, T. Berry Brazelton, who has heightened the sensitivities of so many research psychologists over the past twenty years.

Winnicott's is a mixture of three minds. As a psychoanalyst, he takes certain arguments on faith (though selectively). For example, he cites a patient whose mother's interrupted labor (because, following the unnatural medical wisdom of her day, she was kept flat on her back) left the baby trapped so long in the birth canal that he suffered lifelong claustrophobia. This etiology came to light, apparently, in his analysis (flat on his back, coincidentally, following a different wisdom). I shall return to Winnicott the psychoanalyst shortly. The second mind at work is that of the sensitive pediatrician, caring, learning

from his patients, and always placing himself as *consultant to the mother*. He stresses—against the great weight of his profession at the time—that mothers' instinctive responses are more than likely to be well tuned to their infants' innate behavior, and should not be outweighed by any "expert" authority. Finally, there is Winnicott the keen scientific observer, skeptical of others' theories. In the latter role, he anticipated our later research on the behavioral interaction of infants and parents. For he clearly saw that infants only gradually *become* persons. When he describes the baby as "an armful of anatomy and physiology, and added to this a potential for development into a human personality," he is taking a position that still raises eyebrows today.

What the human infant comes into the world *as* has grave political/philosophical implications. I am not thinking of the racially sensitive nature-nurture question—Arthur Jensen's challenge to the Head Start idealists—as much as the broader question that divides traditional

American individualism from the "insidious" assumptions of socialism: Whether we are autonomous, self-controlling persons who come, through socialization, to live together as confederates or whether, on the contrary, our very minds and selves are born and nurtured in the social matrix from the start.

Winnicott was one of those who strongly held the latter view (as do I). Individuality is acquired. Children discover themselves within, normally, their mothers' care. Yet this is a delicate enterprise. How does one extricate oneself from a mother? How can one be seen and felt as a vital resource to her and to others, without being exploited? On the other hand, how can one develop and preserve a separate personhood without becoming isolated?

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As an object relations theorist in the 1940s, Winnicott must also have asked himself the same questions vis-à-vis his own relationship to Freud's writings: How can I extricate my work from his? How can I develop and preserve a separate identity as a theorist without becoming isolated? Thus, Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell* were led to complain that:

Winnicott preserves tradition in a curious fashion, largely by distorting it. His interpretation of Freudian and Kleinian concepts is so idiosyncratic and so unrepresentative of their original formulation and intent as to make them at times unrecognizable. He recounts the history of psychoanalytic ideas not so much as it developed, but as he would like it to have been, rewriting Freud to make him a clearer and smoother predecessor of Winnicott's own vision. (p. 189)

Winnicott once told Masud Khan, his editor and disciple, that he found it nearly impossible to read anything. If it bored him, he would fall asleep in the middle of the first page, "and if it interests me I will start re-writing it by the end of that page." Reading Winnicott has the latter effect on me, having encountered him after my own mind was largely made up on the subject of infancy. I cannot paraphrase him without recasting his cryptic prose to make him a clearer and smoother forerunner.

Object relations theory originated with Freud himself, in his later work, but his was still an "inside out" theory: progressing from innate functions intrinsic to the organism, to secondary relations with other people. Drives were the real determinants of object relationships. To Winnicott, on the contrary, a mother's devotion, her "primary maternal preoccupation," provides a "holding," or "facilitating environment." The relations are as primary as any drive.

Like his fellow British psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and John Bowlby, Winnicott started looking at preoedipal children in reality, rather than through retrospective adult memories. In context, one cannot help but see the extrinsic functions of caregiver as partners to the infant's intrinsic drives and

behavior. The course of development is not from drives to objects but from drives + objects to *person* or, in Kohut's terms, from selfobject to self.

One of Winnicott's observations has to do with the young infant's "moments of illusion." The breast appears just when he has been wishing for precisely such an object. This creates the experience of infantile omnipotence, which is healthy. Soon enough will it end in the discovery that the parent is frustratingly human:

Human beings fail and fail; and in the course of ordinary care a mother is all the time mending her failures. These relative failures with immediate remedy undoubtedly add up eventually to a communication, so that the baby comes to know about success.

Winnicott refers here to how the baby's omnipotence attenuates into a proper sense of the finite self. But that comment might just as well describe the rise and fall of a *parent's* omnipotence. Elsewhere he asks, "Is it not from *being God* that human beings arrive at the humility proper to human individuality?" For parents, as for children, life is a come-down.

And yet, at the same time, it is a bringing-up. Winnicott concentrates upon the adult's role in the infant's apprenticeship:

In describing communication between baby and mother, then, there is this essential dichotomy—the mother can shrink to infantile modes of experience, but the baby cannot blow up to adult sophistication.

Not that the mother regresses, but that she understands where the baby is coming from because she has been there—whereas he has only primitive ideas of where he is going. So she can backtrack to where he is, and help bridge the gap for him.

Gratifying the infant's instinctual drives is relatively minor. It can even be a seduction. The "good enough mother" who tries, fails, tries again, and ultimately induces self-caring is far more successful than a too-good provider. Skinner's air crib, perfected with 1990s robotics, would be an awful environment for the infant Winnicott wrote about—not because it would try to shape the baby rather than nurture her, but because its creator would wind up nurturing his daughter too well, giving

an unrealistic, ultimately terrifying degree of control to her. Human caregivers are good enough.

Peter Wolff's *The Development of Behavioral States and Emotional Expression in Infancy*, although recently published, apparently reports home and hospital observations he made in the late 1960s. Wolff doesn't directly say so, as though it should make no difference; but it does matter, because scientific observations are made in the context of theories and of other investigators' work. I remember him as a lone explorer, two decades ago, outside the big grantsman circles at Harvard. A stimulating guest lecturer crossing the river from the medical school, he inspired a number of us entrants to the field in which he had long been doing painstaking work. Twenty years later, his reflections appear on the scene Robinson Crusoe-like, with both the strength and weakness of one who has been somewhat out of touch and, in the technology of behavioral recording and coding, unsophisticated. He claims to have embraced the methods of ethology more than other investigators, though most of his observations, actually using Piaget's "clinical method," have little to do with mother-infant interaction or with the expectable environment for which the species evolved. At the same time, he disassociates himself from ethological theories, wrongly equating them with notions of developmental invariance (nativism). He is thinking of Tinbergen and Lorenz, not of contemporary ethologists who study other primate species in the wild as well as in the laboratory, and who take a lively interest in the induction of behavioral forms from one generation to the next—a topic that Wolff himself identifies as central to the study of human biology, but on which he has little to say.

Wolff also shows only a sketchy acquaintance with the vast infancy literature accumulated in the intervening years. But this is because his vision has little to do with infants, more with deep theoretical questions about psychobiological development (a field in which he is both erudite and lucid).

To Wolff, the concept of behavioral states is not just a convenient abstraction

* Greenberg, J.R., & Mitchell, S.A. (1983). *Object relations in psychoanalytic theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

or operational categorization. It is a fascinating and important set of questions about the nervous system, the relationship between muscular response, exteroceptive stimulation, and endogenous neuronal firing patterns. He discovered with his infant subjects, for example, that instead of a clear difference between forms of motor behavior that are responses to environmental stimuli and those that are "spontaneous" or endogenously emitted,

... motor patterns occurring most frequently as spontaneous phenomena in one behavioral state can also be elicited in that state as responses to the relatively lowest stimulus intensity, whereas greater stimulus intensities of the same kind are required to elicit the same motor pattern in other behavioral states where such motor patterns rarely or never occur spontaneously.

Clearly, this is not for the lay reader; and not for most infant specialists either. The newborn infant, whose nervous system is uncomplicated by myelin (a fatty sheath that speeds transmission along nerve cells) and undominated by the cerebral cortex, is merely a handy specimen for neurological investigations. Wolff suggests that endogenous temporally organized patterns are more likely the "building blocks" of behavior than are reflexes (as the behaviorists claimed).

Emotional "expression" in the young infant can be explained by stochastic models—theories that show how systematic patterns can be built from sequences of random events with influenceable probabilities of occurrence, rather than either reflexive or intentional stimulus-response connections. Wolff succeeds in both supporting his arguments and telling the reader why they matter. The "open systems" to which we clinicians give lip service, because we find the metaphors useful in defining our philosophical positions,* here become objects of empirical investigation.

Brief references to the phenomena of imitation are entirely inadequate, since this topic—still shrouded in mystery and question-begging—goes to the heart of the problems of self-organization Wolff refers to when, for example, he points out that we only have between 10,000

and 30,000 genes to regulate at least 1,000,000,000,000,000 degrees of freedom in the neuronal connections of the adult brain. He seems to wish he had devoted as much attention to imitation, in his data-gathering days, as he did to the changes in behavioral state.

It is impressive to read an author still grappling with the same questions he proposed in 1960, relating Piaget's theory of sensorimotor development to psychoanalytic ideas of infancy.** Behavioral biologists will find Wolff's ideas challenging, though speculative. At the same time, his actual research adds up to one of the narrowest views of infancy imaginable.

Picking up a book like Daphne Maurer's *The World of the Newborn* (written with her photojournalist husband), one hardly seems to be reading about the same animal Wolff studied. Where he sees a bundle of motor patterns, under the internal control of endogenous rhythms and stochastic processes and under the external control of stimulus contexts, Maurer sees a bundle of sensory systems and developing discriminative powers, as indicated by behavioral responses.

The author is a respected experimental psychologist who (with her collaborator) knows how to describe both the findings in her field and the reasons they were worth finding. A reader who wonders what the newborn "sees" (i.e., discriminates out of what William James called "the booming, buzzing confusion") and what babies can smell, hear, and recognize as familiar, will find this book an excellent source.

One of the generalizations Maurer makes, convincingly, is that the more stressful the labor, delivery, and postpartum handling of babies, the better (within a reasonable range). For example, squeezing the infant through the birth canal clears its lungs of fluid and thus makes for a better-oxygenated newborn than elective Caesarean babies who are spared that travail. Despite the contrast to Winnicott's anecdote of the claustrophobic long labor, the point

here is similar: the good enough mother provides a less than cushy environment.

Winnicott would complain, however, that Maurer says too little about mothers. Her forté is the experimental method, not the observational. She gives a clear and compelling account when she describes the use to which infant subjects have been put, for example, as informants about the human acoustic apparatus before and after exposure to the phonemic markers of a particular language. It is a fascinating business: You bore the baby into a stupor with *pa*, *pa*, *pa*, *pa*, then slip a *ba* into the sequence and the child perks up. Infants in the first month of life have shown they make such phonemic discriminations not only when those discriminations are used in the language spoken around them (as *ba* and *pa* happen to be used in English), but for any discrimination used by any human language—most of which, by the age of one or two, we begin to tune out. We adults speak foreign languages with horrendous accents because we literally cannot hear the differences every baby can.

Thus, only the newborn can answer linguists' questions about the physical basis of language learning, and about why natural languages make use of the set of phonemic contrasts linguists have found. Unfortunately, as far as this answer is taken by the Maurers, it would seem to be only a cognitive matter. How clever babies are. The unit of analysis here (as with Wolff) is the organism, and the aspect of that organism under examination is what the baby sees, hears, thinks. Even the emotional and affective life are analyzed essentially from the cognitive point of view: What is going on in a baby's mind?

A generalist's mind might object that the story doesn't really make sense, at the broader level, until we fill in the context: These discriminations only lead to language learning because of the frames all parents instinctively build around their infants. That, at any rate, is what Winnicott would say.

Another collaboration between a first-rate scientist and a journalist, more clearly aimed at nonscholars, is Evelyn Thoman's *Born Dancing*, written with

* Kaye, K. (1985). Toward a developmental psychology of the family. In L. L'Abate (Ed.), *Handbook of family psychology and therapy*, Vol. 1. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.

** Wolff, P.H. (1960). *The developmental psychologies of Jean Piaget and psychoanalysis*. (Psychological Issues Monograph Series, Vol. 2, No. 1.) New York: International Universities Press.

Sue Browder: It disappoints even more than the Maurers' attempt, though its heart is in the right place. Where Maurer and Maurer focus squarely on the organism and especially its information-processing capacity, Thoman and Browder look at the nursing couple; in fact, they include the father, too, in the dance. And by "dancing" (a word similarly used by Daniel Stern and others) they mean the full interplay of attention, action, and emotion.

Just as Winnicott tried to do, Thoman reassures parents that they should follow their own instincts and not be taken in by the "experts," especially those pushing flash cards or mental aerobics. Here is the voice, one supposes, mainly of her journalist collaborator:

If you haven't heard of critical periods, don't worry about them.

If you have, let's talk.

... so you'd better watch every step you take. If you don't, anxiety-provoking experts warn, your baby will never be as successful, bright, witty, learned, or talented as he *could* have become. Such experts then often go on to give you a rigid teaching program to follow to stimulate your baby just so at just the right times, so you won't screw him up.

Does your baby have critical periods, during which you have to teach him specific skills, facts, or concepts or it will be forever too late?

No.

What Thoman and Browder are up to is a worthwhile endeavor. Unfortunately, when they refer to the infancy research that they don't find disagreeable, they distill it all down to the cute, the Ripley's *Believe It or Not*, and the meaningless. They reach so far to debunk the charlatans as to imply antagonism toward science itself.

Maurer and Maurer wrote their book for a more intelligent reader, capable of acquiring some knowledge of the field. It, however, is likely to fall into the crack between the trade and professional markets. They offer what may be too much intellectual content, not enough application for the lay reader (or even for the professional whose interest in babies is on the practical side). Yet, because the authors avoid the style of a textbook, it's unlikely to be used in an infancy course.

In her later chapters, Maurer proposes a cockamamie theory of the newborn's

mind as inhabiting a "looking glass" world, where slow is fast and (less clearly) fast is slow. Not only is our stable world one of chaos to the newborn, she suggests, but chaos is order. This is all a conceit out of Douglas Hofstadter: intriguing ideas for an undergraduate lecture, perhaps, but mere nonsense in this context. Thoman, on the other hand, is guilty of no such bold nonsense. She's just superficial.

One of my friends and two couples who are patients gave birth during the time I was working on this essay; I didn't recommend any of the four books to them; not even to the couple who are both mental health professionals. I gave them, instead, the first of Brazelton's books,* which comes closer to succeeding at what Winnicott was trying to do—because Brazelton concentrates on describing real babies and real parents as role models coping with the real changes of every day. He says nothing about theories, one way or the other.

No one, I think, has yet managed to convey to parents what's really going on in babies' hearts and minds without either talking down to them or over their heads. Winnicott didn't succeed any better than Thoman does. His radio talks may have reassured some mothers, but he must have left many convinced that they had already committed a dozen narcissistic injuries.

Spock did and does a wonderful job of telling parents what they need to know, while allaying anxiety. (Penelope Leach succeeds at that, too.) But whenever scientists in this field have tried to convey the fascination of their subject matter—as Konrad Lorenz was able to do on the subject of cats and dogs, or Asimov for the physical sciences—they have fallen far short of the mark. This is not because our knowledge is too advanced and sophisticated to explain to laymen, but rather because we know so little. The fascination is in the questions, and our esoteric answers are only the bare outlines of theories. But those theories are about ourselves, so we like to think we have the answers. Trying to

* Brazelton, T.B. (1970). *Infants and mothers*. New York: Delacorte Press.

show what a compelling object of study the baby is, the authors lapse into unsupported assertions, adultomorphisms, and rhapsodic fantasies. Winnicott's prose has often been called cryptic, elusive. The code he was looking for, I think, continues to elude us.

One of Winnicott's best known observations is that all infants use "transitional objects" (the favorite blanket, stuffed animal, or thumb), crossing the time barrier between the neonate's solipsistically subjective internal world and the objective world of separate, independent others. Becoming a person is also the crossing of a barrier, the boundary between biology and psychology.

Of all the questions that have perplexed mankind, the one that has resisted scientific answers the longest has to do with that boundary: the uniqueness of our species as against all others. It is voiced in Psalm 8:

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast Thou founded strength . . . What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that Thou thinkest of him? Yet Thou hast made him but little lower than the angels . . .

The naked newborn is not a very impressive organism at first inspection, but that is what makes it so remarkable. How does this extremely dependent animal come to have dominion over "the beasts of the field, the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea"?

Although I came to the question much more from the direction of Wolff and Thoman than that of Winnicott, I reached an answer much like his. The baby *becomes* a person. Human infants become persons as they differentiate out of parental frames. Parents stand ready to create a social context, and the organism's innate behavior allows them to do it. Mind, language, and self follow only gradually, but as a determined result. That we have arrived at so much of the answer is a far from trivial accomplishment. It can have all sorts of clinical, political, philosophical, even spiritual consequences if one wants it to. It is still not a whole explanation. But at least we can go beyond begging the question.