

The Baby's Earliest Value System of 'Self-Interest': The Paranoid-Schizoid Position

Introduction to the First Task of Infancy:

Infants are born into outside life in a potential 'world of hurt' as the saying goes. They are utterly helpless and dependent, and they understand next to nothing about what is going on. All they have is their genetic predispositions and hopefully, some loving caregivers and ideally, a good mother. They have an enormous task ahead of them, so where to begin?

It seems that infants are born ready to latch on to a nipple to suck on as a result of a genetically based "rooting" reflex. They simultaneously have a capacity to evacuate out anything they don't want by pooping, peeing, spitting up, crying, sneezing, etc. All of this occurs in a universe that is basically made up of the mother. As Kleinian analyst Donald Meltzer said, "The geography of phantasy for the infant is mother's body, both inside and outside." So if the infant evacuated the bad stuff into the same place that he or she has to feed, it would create a big, confusing mess. So the infant quickly needs to bring some semblance of order to the chaos within which he or she could otherwise be swallowed up and drowned.

It turns out that most infants are pretty good at bringing order to the chaos. They do so by trying to hold on to everything that is experienced as good, while expelling and getting rid of everything that is felt to be bad or undesirable. This is roughly equivalent to evacuating out anything that is unpleasurable or painful, and holding on to that which is pleasurable.

The infant needs to keep this good stuff separated from the bad stuff, permanently if possible. So what he does in phantasy, really quite automatically, is put the bad stuff – which includes both the mother who was the source of it and the part of self that experienced it – as far away as possible from the good stuff. In effect, this organization process creates two parallel universes, one that has a good mom in a good relationship with a good part of self, and one that is composed of a bad mom and the part of self that experienced the pain.

Since this process involves getting rid of anything bad, it leaves a purified version behind, one that could be thought of as 'ideal.' The result is not just one of separating things into good and bad, but the good is even refined to the point of being perfect, in other words "idealized." This will turn out to be very important in later development.

While this processes, the separation into ideal and bad brings order initially, but the division cannot be overly wide. If there is excessive anxiety that the bad, for example, will overwhelm the good, then the two will have to be kept much more widely and rigidly apart. It will soon be developmentally necessary to lessen the width of this split in order to integrate the universe into a less magically divided one and thus develop a view that is more realistic.

Whenever I see someone who is too idealizing of everything in life, I immediately have a reaction that he or she must be terrified at a baby level that the "bad" in life is in danger of overwhelming and ruining the good. That bad is most commonly his own unconscious feelings of envious hatred that threaten to ruin all that is felt to be good. Such individuals create an additional problem for themselves in that if they try to create a "perfect" world for themselves, then they are creating idealized objects that will demand perfection of others, a universe in which it is difficult to live.

Regarding the theory of the paranoid-schizoid position, Donald Meltzer described this process of purifying things as "splitting-and-idealization." It is the infant's initial task, and it is necessary to bring order to its world. Now let's think of it from a slightly different angle. In this process, the infant is deciding on a given experience that is pleasurable and good and holding on to it. Simultaneously, if anything in the experience

is unpleasurable and thus bad, his immediate instinct is to evacuate that into the outside world. Meltzer referred to that second half of the paranoid-schizoid position as “splitting-and-projective identification.”

The risk in this situation, of course, is that the bad stuff will come back to get you, and that amounts to a paranoid anxiety. So we have a situation in which the infant is splitting up his world, and the word we could use for this split state of affairs is “schizoid.” The anxiety that the split off bad stuff could come back to get us we could refer to as “paranoid.” So we could call the infant’s first task the “schizoid-paranoid position,” using the chronology of the two tasks to make them follow logical sequence.

Klein probably should have used that name, and I can only speculate as to why she did not. I think the rub may have been that an analyst in Scotland, Ronald Fairbairn had already coined the phrase “schizoid position,” and had she used the term schizoid in naming the process, she would have to give him “first authorship.” If she illogically put her word “paranoid” first, she could own the term.

In any case this first task of “splitting-and-idealization,” which necessarily includes getting rid of the unwanted bad experience by “splitting-and-projective identification” is what is meant by Klein’s term, the “Paranoid-Schizoid Position.”

A World of Good and Bad Objects:

With this organizing principle, the infant divides the world into that which is desirable, pleasurable, and good and creates a second world in which things are undesirable, painful, and bad. This means that his own frustration and the part of self that is capable of having the frustration are purged, along with the version of mother that is associated with the frustration. Two separate universes are created. This is a highly segregated world, the opposite of an integrated world.

The more anxiety that the infant has that the bad will overrun and ruin the good, the more widely and rigidly the two worlds have to be kept apart. It is axiomatic that anyone who needs to idealize things in life is fighting an unconscious anxiety that they will not be able to hold on to the good in life. This is a serious handicap in life because it creates rigid, unrealistic divisions that are more a product of prejudice than proper reality testing. There are many other complications, as well.

[As an aside, it is worth noting that this formulation of idealization as a developmentally necessary part of early infancy, but essentially a defensive maneuver, is at odds with Austrian-American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut’s developmental idea that idealization is a normal lifelong part of development. I am not sufficiently knowledgeable about the current state of that theory to speak to its current status in self-psychology.]

A Value System of “Self-Interest”:

This is a world that is rigid, idealized, and dominated by the infant’s own self-interest. This is a necessary developmental task and phase. It is age appropriate and follows the limited cerebral cortical functioning that exists in the first months of life after birth. But it creates a world that will be untenable as the brain develops and one comes to realize that one does not have two mothers – one good and one bad – but only one toward whom one can have opposite feelings at the same time.

Klein observed that this rigid world seems to naturally give way to development approaching the middle of the first year. I find it clinically useful to imagine that the mental, cortical capacities necessary for the depressive position seem to develop after the fourth or fifth month after birth. This corresponds to the American developmental theorist Margaret Mahler’s phase of “hatching” out of the “symbiotic” aspect of “separation-individuation.”

Because this phase is developmentally necessary and desirable, we should think of it as a period of “healthy” self-interest. If that same attitude of “self at the expense of others” were to continue through life, we would refer to it as pathological narcissism. In that situation, the developmentally appropriate self-interest would have failed to give way to a maturing value system of both healthy self-interest, and a developing capacity for concern for the welfare of others.

Why is it the Paranoid-Schizoid “Position”?

When Klein originally described the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, she was purposefully not calling them “phases.” She wanted to have them viewed as both developmental stages, if you will, as well as postures comprised of a constellation of attitudes. Her thought was that at any age, one could be dominated to a greater or lesser degree by the attitudes and behaviors that would follow from either position.

This would potentially have great clinical relevance because the position of lesser integration could be returned to when the pains of the more integrated depressive position became too great (i.e. a situation of unbearable guilt). On the other hand, the failure to ever grow into the depressive position, with its capacity for concern for others, would leave an individual rigidly self-involved and essentially problematically narcissistic.

In times of stress, I believe Klein imagined that individuals of any age could “regress,” if you will, back to the paranoid-schizoid position. I think there are better models for understanding what one sees with a later developmental regression than to characterize it as a return to the paranoid-schizoid position. I will elaborate on that at the end of the next section on the Depressive Position and speak to it in detail in the section on “Manic Defense.”

Summary:

We have a developmentally necessary and normal phase in which a posture of self-interest, with a task of bringing order to his world, dominates the infant for his first four to six months of life. This gradually gives way to a more balanced concern for both self and other. To achieve order to its world, the infant tries to separate pleasurable/good experience from unpleasurable/bad experience. The good is held onto and the bad gets projected into the outside world, this representing the splitting or “schizoid” element in the name. The result is that the infant imagines two parallel worlds, one purified to the point of being “ideal” and the other “all bad.” Both self and object are divided in this manner in parallel. Since the bad is felt to be outside the self, it could come back to hurt one so the whole process tends to simultaneously create order and generate paranoid anxieties of the bad coming back in retaliation.