



Review of *The Thinking Heart: Three levels of psychoanalytic therapy with disturbed children*, by Anne Alvarez.

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Anne Alvarez's book, *The Thinking Heart*, begins and ends with poetry, and throughout she pays a poet's minute attention to the subtle distinctions of tone, mood and meaning in moments of meeting in the therapeutic process. In it, she teaches us that we do not lose the science for the poetry of psychotherapy; her subtle insight is brought to bear on the forensic calibration of levels of psychotherapeutic work to respond to varying levels of pathology. These are finely distinguished from moment to moment, corresponding not necessarily to different children but to different states of mind.

In her Introduction, she identifies three points on a continuum: the explanatory level, in which the therapist locates feelings and offers alternative meanings; the descriptive level, in which meanings are ascribed and enlarged upon without an insistence on attribution; and thirdly, the intensified level of work in which the therapist insists on meaning, engaged in vitalizing reclamation work.

She has long been associated with this third approach, calling a child towards life and meaning. Here, she makes clear that this is only one tool in the child psychotherapist's toolbox for helping a child build a psychic 'house' to live in, urgently necessary sometimes at the very foundation, where this has never been built. She stresses that analytic work 'needs to be both developmentally and psychopathologically informed' (p8), and describes the need for a flexible and careful calibration of therapeutic response, as child patients move between levels of disturbance, capacity for introjection, and capacity for two-tracked thinking.



The main body of the book outlines each of the three levels of work in turn, from the top down, as it were. In each section, careful attention is paid to the neuroscience of relationship, and to child development studies, revealing the science of the art of the psychotherapeutic relationship. She highlights the experience-dependent nature of the brain/mind, and spells out the implications of this for therapeutic work with children.

In Part 1, focusing on the explanatory level, she extends thinking about the process of thinking and how it comes about. She examines the impact of a sense of abundance, or the lack of it, and then of sequence and of spatial awareness. The process of feeling/thought conception is considered in relation to experience of presence, foreground and background, the transition to distance that happens as faces come close and move away in what she calls 'the looming game' (p60). She suggests that this amplification gives experience 'a dynamic form, a shape in time' (p63).

Part 2, on descriptive level work, also deals with the experience of presence, but in relation to iller patients, who have a more fleeting contact with reality. Alvarez traces psychoanalytic and neuroscientific ideas about the developmental properties of good experience. Notions of overcoming (as opposed to defending against), of moral imperatives, self worth, sexuality and of integration are considered in relation to work with the paranoid-schizoid position. She stresses the vital importance of careful monitoring of the qualities of the present moment, so as not to reinforce perversity, but to be awake to 'ordinary excitements when they finally come', so that we do not 'collude with the despairing patient's view that there are only two choices: the thrill of perversion or the emptiness of a too-sober normality' (p123).

Part 3 discusses the need for an intensified therapeutic response when there is severe deficit not only in the self but in the internal object, so that



introjection is at issue. Alvarez notes that the move from “What can this object do?” to “What can I do with this object?” (p153) is dependent on mutual play and shared imaginative space, and suggests that the object/therapist may need to take quite an active role in some circumstances with some children at some moments in order to become an introjectable object on the ‘right wavelength’ for the child, and so facilitate this move.

In this review, I am aware of leaving out a great deal, and of over-simplifying the rich complexity the book offers, much along the lines of William James’ ‘traditional psychologist’ as quoted in Chapter 9, who says that ‘a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartspotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water’ rather than the flow of free water. The Thinking Heart is a very full and moving book. It repays the careful responsive mindfulness that Alvarez advocates in clinical practice. She warns of the danger of ‘manualizing’ psychotherapy, and urges: ‘We must *aim* to feel and think, preferably at the same time’ (p184). In this book, lyrically synthesizing science and art in examining the process and efficacy of psychotherapy with disturbed children, we can indeed hear her heart beat as we hear her think, as though they were one and the same process.

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