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The illusion of contact: Insights from Winnicott's 1952 letter to Klein

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Abstract:

Using Winnicott's theory, the article produces an account of the individual's relation to a *given conceptual framework*. Whereas Winnicott's ideas have been almost exclusively discussed in developmental and psychopathological contexts, the present article extends Winnicott's theory and applies it to the problem of *interpersonal understanding*. Taking lead from one of Winnicott's letters to Klein, the article investigates the problem of expressing one's idiosyncratic insights in the confines of a given conceptual framework. The article examines Winnicott's theory of compliance and creativity, discusses the plea that Winnicott makes to Klein, analyses the encounter with a "dead language", and investigates the asymmetric structure of interpersonal understanding. Cashing out the latter in terms of an "illusion of contact", the article enhances our interpretation of the successes and shortcomings of interpersonal encounters – both in everyday life, in clinical settings, and in the historical community of researchers. By focusing on the lastly mentioned in particular, the article brings forth neglected aspects of Winnicott's thinking and uses these to assess the conditions of an open dialogue within the psychoanalytic community.

Keywords: Winnicott, Klein, interpersonal understanding, psychoanalytic tradition, creativity, compliance, illusion, psychoanalytic language, dead language, dead mother, playing, sharing, mutuality, asymmetry, communication, conceptual framework, expression, individual, community, dialogue.

The illusion of contact: Insights from Winnicott's 1952 letter to Klein

"The individual only communicates with a self-created world and the people in the environment only communicate with the individual in so far as they can create him or her. Nevertheless in health there is the illusion of contact and it is this which provides the high spots of human life"

– Donald W. Winnicott

Introduction

When contributing to a particular scientific discussion, the individual contributor is expected to use concepts, categorizations, distinctions and ways of articulation that are comprehensible

to the participants. To some degree, meeting such expectations is necessary for interpersonal dialogue in general. After all, unless we speak the other's "language", our contribution will not be understood; and unless we accept the basic hypotheses underlying the debate, our contribution will be easily ignored. Yet, the expectations can also feel excessive. The more fully and minutely we are required to stick to a particular conceptual framework or a way of expression, the more extensively will our expressive potentialities feel restricted. The issue is particularly burning in respect to scientific discussions, whose vitality largely depends on an openness to the unforeseen. In extreme cases, expectations posed on the individual contributor altogether exclude the possibility of unorthodox ways of thinking, novel discoveries, and hence the vital renewal of the respective tradition.

Maintaining personal creativity and originality notwithstanding the expectations of the scholarly community is particularly demanding for disciplines like psychoanalysis that combine a rich variety of rivalling approaches. As David Tuckett puts it, psychoanalysis is a discipline with "insecure foundations": its core theories are constantly being challenged from within, its methodological and theoretical consensus is narrow and constantly debated, and it has been largely built on personal interpretations (Tuckett 1998, 431-432). Moreover, the history of the discipline has been burdened by questions of authority, and psychoanalytic research has been scattered into a heterogeneous field of conceptualizations that do not always communicate with one another. While heterogeneity as such is a richness, the lack of communication is a threat to the future of psychoanalysis as a research discipline. For instance, if the evaluation of scholarly papers in psychoanalysis is to be something else than arbitrary and based on subjective-contingent preferences of the reviewer, there has to be a consensus over the *general parameters* of what kinds of thought are worth expressing and publishing. On the other hand, if the required parameters are too narrow or rigid, there is, as Tuckett puts it, the danger of "creating the monster of an internationally homogenized style that would numb creativity and original thought" (ibid., 433). The challenge is to *balance* between a shared framework of thinking and the idiosyncratic insights of individual scholars.

In the present article, I will approach this issue from the point of view of Winnicott's theory of creativity and compliance. This theory has mostly been discussed in the context of infancy, whereas Winnicott's contribution to questions of mature interaction has received considerably less attention. Illustrating the value of Winnicott's theory of compliance in this context, the present article focuses on the question of how the psychoanalytic tradition can remain open to new insights and idiosyncratic creativity regardless of the necessity of manoeuvring within a pre-established conceptual framework. My approach will be theoretical: instead of providing clinical or empirical material, my examination will be built around Winnicott's stormy letter to Melanie Klein in 1952, which discusses the possibility of dialogue within the psychoanalytic tradition. I expect this analysis to prove useful also in respect to research on clinical interaction, but building such bridges will be a matter of further studies. My research question concerns the conditions of interpersonal understanding, and I

will argue that these can be understood in terms of Winnicott's above-quoted concept of the "illusion of contact".

The structure of the article is the following. Section 1 elaborates on Winnicott's central insights on compliance and creativity. This initial conceptual clarification will be needed in order to make the point that I want to make, and it will also enable me to give a more detailed formulation of my research question. In Section 2, I will introduce Winnicott's letter to Klein, and examine the basic ingredients of the plea that it conveys. In Section 3, I will analyse Winnicott's notes on what he calls a "dead language", also linking this notion with the concept of "dead mother". Finally, in Section 4, I will analyse the asymmetric structure of reciprocal understanding and assess the sense in which the psychoanalytic tradition can, according to Winnicott, serve as a shared space of thinking.

1. Making it personal

In Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory, the individual's experience of the environment unfolds as a tension between two poles. The first pole is *the environment as it is subjectively conceived of* – an idiosyncratic realm portrayed or "created" by one's unique experiential set-up.¹ The second pole is *the environment perceived "objectively", i.e., environment in the eyes of anyone*. This realm is experienced as offering itself from the outside: it is a common sphere, the organization of which is not conditioned by one's needs and wishes. Instead of two distinct environments, however, we are dealing with two experiential emphases (e.g., Winnicott 1971, 87ff.). Moreover, there is *a felt tension* between the two. Both poles exert a gravitational pull on our experience, as it were – there is pull towards experiencing the world in personal way, and an opposite pull towards considering the world "objectively". This tension may be settled either in favor of subjective *creativity*, thereby casting a strong idiosyncratic lighting upon the experienced environment, or in favor of *compliance*, thus yielding to what offers itself from the outside. In maturity, the way that the tension unfolds and makes itself felt flexibly depends on the nature of the situation, but the tension can also be fixed in a rigid manner and thus give rise to pathology (Winnicott 1971, 90; see also Fonagy & Target 1996; Target & Fonagy 1996; Fonagy & Target 2000; Fonagy & Target 2007).²

¹ In Winnicott's thinking the subjectively perceived environment is not "in here", in contrast to external reality "out there". To avoid this confusion, I will in this context avoid using the concept of "inner", and favor the term "idiosyncratic" instead.

² Whereas problems related to the heightened role of psychic reality have been traditionally acknowledged, Winnicott equally underlines problems of the opposite end: "To balance this one would have to state that there are others who are so firmly anchored in objectively perceived reality that they are ill in the opposite direction of being out of touch with the subjective world and with the creative approach to fact. [...] These two groups of people come to us for psychotherapy because in the one case they do not want to spend their lives irrevocably out of touch with the facts of life, and in the other case because they feel estranged from dream" (Winnicott 1971, 90, cf. 119-120).

The balance between the idiosyncratically organized environment and the environment objectively perceived busied Winnicott throughout his life. In favorable cases, Winnicott argues, we have a *foothold* in both realms, so that the mentioned tension is not settled once and for all. That is to say, mature adults are able to refer to "objects in their own right" without losing touch with the idiosyncratically outlined "subjective objects", and *vice versa*.

The individual's quest for a balance between the two poles is set into motion early on and initially depends on the facilitating environment (Winnicott 1971, 119-120). Winnicott's related developmental insights are well known to the psychoanalytic community. To illustrate, when the infant is starting to feel hungry, and hence "ready to create the breast" (Winnicott 1971, 15), the good-enough caregiver provides the actual breast (or care), and so the actual, fulfilling care is experienced by the infant as if being created out of her need: "In health the infant creates what is in fact lying around waiting to be found. But in health *the object is created, not found*" (Winnicott 1965, 181). Naturally, *from the viewpoint of an observer*, this primal sense of creativity is a false impression: the caregiver is an autonomous agent who willfully reacts to her infant's expressions, and this merely facilitates the *misconception* in the infant that his or her needs and wants directly *cause* the arrival of care. Yet, *from the viewpoint of the infant*, what is at stake is not a misinterpretation but an *experience* (Winnicott 1988, 106; cf. Winnicott 1971, 7):

"Experience is a constant trafficking in illusion, a repeated reaching to the interplay between creativity and that which the world has to offer. Experience is an achievement of ego maturity to which the environment supplies an essential ingredient. It is not by any means always achieved" (Winnicott [1952] 1987b, 43; cf. Winnicott 1971, 3).

The need or wish of the infant amounts to an act of *reaching out creatively* – Freud spoke of sensory "hallucinations" in this context (Freud 1966, 325). *If* the facilitating environment actually meets the infant's needs and wishes frequently enough and without too vast delays, the infant comes to consolidate the impression that his or her felt impulses, needs and desires *matter*: they actually "have an effect" (*wirken*) in the world. Rather than something merely subjective and imaginary, then, the infant's creative gestures appear "effective", and, in this literal sense, something "real" (*Wirklich*):³ the actual facilitating environment appears not *as if* self-created, but *as* self-created. Differently put, for the infant, the illusion is not initially present *as* an illusion.

Moreover, while the individual is gradually disillusioned in respect to the omnipotence of his or her needs and wants, countless experiences have already consolidated the expectation of the mentioned "interplay" between the child's creative impulses and the actual external

³ The play of German words relates to the Freudian concepts; Winnicott, of course, wrote in English.

environment (Winnicott 1965, 180). Consequently, the external environment is experienced as *personally significant* (Winnicott 1971, 136). This subjective significance is not a minor and inconsequential addition, or a superfluous topping, to the external environment. On the contrary, encountering the external environment as a realm that is receptive and supportive to one's creative impulses is what makes one *feel at home* in it – it is what makes the environment "alive", "cathected", and hence worth relating to. Conversely put, without an idiosyncratic colouring, the environment cannot feel "mine": if unreceptive and ignorant to one's subjective efforts and creative impulses, the environment is bound to feel *dead* or *lifeless*. To rephrase Winnicott, the idiosyncratically organized, and in this sense "self-created", experiential environment is the one and only environment in which we *live* (Winnicott 1971, 140ff.; cf. Winnicott 1965, 184). That is to say, personal significance is something *fundamental*: it not only makes one cherish and value one's relation with the external environment, but facilitates one's access to it in the first place. Objective perception thus builds on, and presupposes, an idiosyncratically colored perception.

This last bit is worth emphasizing. Our foothold in the objective environment is qualitatively different from our foothold in the self-created environment. We can phrase this in the following manner: we *live in* the idiosyncratic environment, whereas we *refer to* the environment as it is objectively perceived. To be sure, we may pay attention to the fact that the environment appeared differently to us when our experiential circumstances were different (say, when we were hungry or tired earlier), and we may realize that other people simultaneously view the environment in the light of their particular experiential circumstances that may largely differ from our own (say, our companion may be tired or hungry whereas we are not, or *vice versa*). By entertaining such considerations, we can *remind ourselves* of the subjective-idiosyncratic "coloring" of our current experience. Just as the appearance of colors is contingent on the given lighting, so too the "affective color" of an object or an environment depends not only on the intrinsic features of the latter but also on our current experiential circumstances – even if our insights in this respect tend to be hindsight. I find the color analogy particularly useful for two reasons: on the one hand, because the appearance of colors is *dependent* on lighting (in this sense, there are no objective colors, but only colors in different lighting, some of which are favoured over others), and, on the other hand, because lighting does not altogether *determine* or *dictate* the appearance of colors, as this also depends on the features of the actual object itself. That is to say, an idiosyncratic lighting or coloring is a *necessary but not a sufficient condition* for the appearance of personally significant (i.e., affectively "colored" or "cathected") objects.

However, even when we manage to glance beyond our subjective idiosyncracies, as it were, and consider the environment in a more objective manner, the realm that we thereby glance into is not a place where we can *settle down*. To fleetingly contemplate the environment as it exists in itself, without the subjective coloring, builds on an abstraction by which the environment is temporarily stripped of its subjective coloring, and hence from everything that

makes it *significant to us*. To permanently consider our experiences as "merely subjective" and contingent would amount to devaluing our idiosyncratic experiences, and hence that which makes the environment significant to us in the first place. This is why the "foothold" in our psychic reality is structurally and qualitatively different from the "foothold" that we have in objective environment or "environment-for-anyone" – which really is just a more inclusive way to say "environment-for-no-one-in-particular". The capacity to remind ourselves of the subjective and relative nature of our idiosyncratic world-experience is more *like the starry sky that we can use for orientation and navigation, while sailing or drifting in a volatile sea*. Differently put, an objective perception of the environment is a *regulative idea*, something we can *refer to*, something we can *use*, but not where we *live*.

These preliminary remarks enable specifying the problem to be addressed in this article. Namely, I will develop Winnicott's ideas of an individual's contact with "external environment" by considering the latter in terms of the "given conceptual framework". I will argue that the readily available conceptual framework can be taken as *one's own* only insofar as one manages to establish a personally significant approach to it. As I will show, Winnicott's letter to Klein from 1952 is a particularly interesting source in this respect, given that here Winnicott explicitly links his general theory of compliance with the question of the possibility of dialogue within the psychoanalytic community.

2. Reaching out

On November 5, 1952, Winnicott presented a paper at the *British Psychoanalytic Society*. The short but dense paper was titled "Anxiety related to insecurity", and it underlined, in a Winnicottian fashion, the developmental role of the facilitating environment (see Winnicott 1958, 97-100). Klein was in the audience, and so were many of her closest colleagues. Around 1952, Kleinian thinking had established a strong position at the Society: Klein had released many of her most influential publications, her ideas were frequently discussed at the meetings, she had numerous devoted followers, and her conceptualizations and theorizations were increasingly becoming *the* language that the presenters at the Society were expected to be using when conveying their thoughts to the audience. Joan Riviere had recently stated that Klein's psychoanalytic theory "takes account of all psychical manifestations, normal and abnormal, from birth to death, and leaves no unbridgeable gulfs and no phenomena outstanding without intelligible relation to the rest" (Riviere 1952, 11). This was the atmosphere into which Winnicott entered when presenting his paper.

During the discussion, Winnicott found himself facing the demand that, in order to make his claims receptive to the audience, he should *restate* his idiosyncratic thoughts and

conceptualizations in the Kleinian idiom. Reluctant to comply, Winnicott underlined the importance of expressing one's thoughts in one's own way. On November 17, he wrote a letter in which he expressed and explained his worries to Klein:

"I can see how annoying it is that when something develops in me out of my own growth and out of my analytic experience I want to put it in my own language. This is annoying because I suppose everyone wants to do the same thing, and in a scientific society one of our aims is to find a common language. This language must, however, be kept alive as there is nothing worse than a dead language. [...] What I was wanting [...] was that there should be some move from your direction towards the gesture that I make in this paper. It is a creative gesture and I cannot make any relationship through this gesture except if someone come to meet it. [...] I feel that corresponding to my wish to say things my way there is something from your end, namely a need to have everything that is new restated in your own terms" (Letter to Klein⁴).

The setting is analogous to Winnicott's life-long research interest, and, ironically, one that he was also discussing in his presentation. Winnicott made a statement in his own way, hoping that the scholarly environment would play along, as it were, but instead he was advised to curb, moderate, and modify his creative impulses and to comply to what was there already.

There are many reasons why Winnicott was reluctant to go along with Klein's request of adopting her language. To be sure, this was partly motivated by certain substantial disagreements between the two. While an in-depth comparison between the two thinkers would exceed the confines of the present article, it is worth noting that one of the main substantial disagreements between the two thinkers concerns the role of the actual mother in the establishment of good and bad internal objects. Klein underlines the endogenous origins of these objects, whereas Winnicott insists that the formation and organization of internal objects initially depends on the actual facilitating environment. Later on, Winnicott argued for his view in the following manner:

"It is true that people spend their lives holding up the lamp-post that they are leaning against, but somewhere at the beginning there has to be a lamp-post on its own, otherwise, there is no introjection of dependability. [...] If, however, the dependability of the internal figures does not derive from actual experience in early infantile life then one can say also that it does not matter whether the analyst is dependable or lacks dependability, and I feel that we cannot hold this

⁴ For purposes of clarity, when referring to this particular letter, I will use the abbreviation "Letter to Klein". In contrast, in referring to other letters (Winnicott 1987b), I will provide a standard reference and insert the date [year] of the letter in square brackets. References to Winnicott's other publications will not include square brackets.

view" (Winnicott 1987b [1966], 158; cf. Winnicott 1971, 13; Winnicott 1987b [1952], 38).

The disagreement was quite fundamental, and Winnicott felt that his point *could not* be made intelligible within the confines of the Kleinian doctrine.

Besides substantial disagreements, however, Winnicott's insistence on expressing his thoughts in his own way was owing to more fundamental reasons. These include the general worry about the expectation of compliance vis-a-vis the dominant framework of thinking and the related worry concerning the atrophy of the psychoanalytic tradition – spelled out by Winnicott in terms of "dead language".

Winnicott's worries about compliance were not particularly directed at Klein. His insistence on a personal approach to the available psychoanalytic language was repeated throughout his writings, and one frequently finds Winnicott making an explicit remark that he will be using his "own language" (e.g., Winnicott 1971, 129; 1989, 262, 284, 488; 1965, 9). The beginning of "Primitive emotional development" (1945) is particularly revealing:

"I have chosen a very wide subject. All I can attempt to do is to make a preliminary personal statement [...]. I shall not first give an historical survey and show the development of my ideas from the theories of others, because my mind does not work that way. What happens is that I gather this and that, here and there, settle down to clinical experience, form my own theories and then, last of all, interest myself in looking to see where I stole what. Perhaps this is as good a method as any" (Winnicott 1958, 145).⁵

While the last sentence strikes as somewhat defensive, it also provokes thinking. In the world of academic peer-review journals, we are well-trained in making clear what our predecessors and contemporaries have written about our respective research topic, in situating our theoretical insights into a pre-existing theoretical tradition, and in thus underlining the novelties of our contribution. There are obvious grounds for this requirement: it prevents us from reinventing the wheel, as it were, and thus furthers the general progress of science. Yet, if one wants to avoid taking the available insights, theorizations, and conceptualizations of earlier thinkers for granted, and build on standard interpretations, one would first have to carefully re-interpret the available achievements. Winnicott's way was to first form his personal view, and later on "bring it in line with other work" (Winnicott 1987b [1953], 53-54). His jesting response to a reading suggestion by a colleague is telling: "It is no use [...] asking

⁵ In a letter to David Rapaport, Winnicott expresses this in the following manner: "I am one of those people who feel compelled to work in my own way and to express myself in my own language first; by a struggle I sometimes come around to rewording what I am saying to bring it in line with other work, in which case I usually find that my own 'original' ideas were not so original as I had to think they were when they were emerging. I suppose other people are like this too" (Winnicott 1987b [1953], 53-54).

me to read anything! If it bores me I shall 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" (quoted in Khan 1958, xvi).

The need to "personally re-write" whatever is provided to him from the outside was part of Winnicott's idiosyncratic way of communicating. Moreover, he insisted that each individual ought to be allowed this. Accordingly, Winnicott did not have a problem with Klein's idiosyncratic conceptualizations *per se*. On the contrary, as he writes to Klein: "the work is your own personal work and everyone is pleased that you have your own way of stating it" (Letter to Klein). Despite their substantial disagreements, Winnicott openly appreciates Klein's theoretical, creative, and clinical brilliance: "I have no difficulty whatever in telling anyone who asks me, from the bottom of my heart, that you are the best analyst as well as the most creative in the analytic movement" (Letter to Klein; cf. Winnicott 1987b [1956], 94). Commenting on his "annoying" reluctance to adopt the available vocabulary, Winnicott notes: "This matter touches the very root of my own personal difficulty [...] [which] can always be dismissed as Winnicott's illness, but if you dismiss it in this way you may miss something which is in the end a positive contribution" (ibid). As he explains, the task of finding a personal approach to the given conceptual framework reflects an "inherent difficulty in regard to human contact with external reality" (ibid).

More than Klein, Winnicott was worried about the people who were fiercely promoting Klein's articulations at the Society. In a letter to Hanna Segal, one of Klein's devoted followers, Winnicott writes: "There is a saying that good wine needs no bush. In a similar way the good in Melanie's contribution need not be pushed forward at Scientific Meetings. It can be expressed and discussed" (Winnicott 1987b [1952], 26). To Klein, Winnicott writes:

"[T]his set-up which might be called Kleinian [is] the real danger to the diffusion of your work. [...] It is of course necessary for you to have a group in which you can feel at home. Every original worker requires a coterie in which there can be a resting place from controversy and in which one can feel cosy. The danger is, however, that the coterie develops a system based on the defence of the position gained by the original worker. [...] I feel that you are so well surrounded by those who are fond of you and who value your work and who try to put it into practice that you are liable to get out of touch with others who are doing good work but who do not happen to have come under your influence" (Letter to Klein).

Given Winnicott's worries, one might expect that he would have welcomed the situation in which the Kleinian hegemony was posed a challenge by the psychoanalytic movement led by Anna Freud. Yet, Winnicott was equally troubled by this, and, later on, he made a rather similar plea to Anna Freud (see Winnicott 1987b [1954], 71-74). Clearly, Winnicott was *not* suggesting that, rather than Klein's, the psychoanalytic community ought to adopt someone else's

terminology instead. Neither was he promoting his own terminology. What troubled him instead was that *a particular* conceptual framework and form of expression had increasingly stabilized itself as *the default language* at the Society. It was less relevant that this language happened to be Klein's: "I suppose this is a phenomenon which (...) may be expected to recur whenever there is a really big original thinker; there arises an 'ism' which becomes a nuisance" (Letter to Klein).

Winnicott is accordingly issuing a general warning of what he considers as a real threat to the psychoanalytic tradition – both in theory and in practice. He insists that individuals ought to be allowed to express themselves in their own way, without being led on reformulating their expressions in the conceptual scheme of the scholarly audience or the analyst. Winnicott is indeed worried about rise of "Kleinism" and considers it "as much a barrier to the growth of scientific thought in the Society as Darwinism was to the growth in biology so greatly stimulated by the work of Darwin himself" (Letter to Klein). Yet, any other "ism" is equally worrisome to him. What Winnicott fears is that once the psychoanalytic tradition declares a particular conceptual-theoretical framework as an all-compassing and hence "closed system" (quoted in Roazen 2001, 179-189), like Riviere had done, the tradition turns into a dimension of repetition and imitation, instead of opening into a realm of dialogue and renewal. In his view, the only way to prevent the psychoanalytic tradition from withering, atrophying, and dying, is to have the basic insights constantly rethought and rearticulated:

"[Y]our work should be restated by people discovering in their own way and presenting what they discover in their own language. It is only in this way that the language will be kept alive. If you make the stipulation that in future only your language shall be used for the statement of other people's discoveries then the language becomes a dead language, as it has already become in the Society" (Letter to Klein).

Winnicott's strong-worded letter did not induce a response from Klein.⁶

3. Dead language and the resurrection of the mother

Compliantly adjusting one's idiosyncratic thoughts to an allegedly all-encompassing conceptual framework comes with three problematic consequences: (A) it *pre-figures* the individual's scope of thinking, (B) it induces a *false sense of clarity*, and (C) it *distances* the individual from the shared space of thinking.

⁶ Personal communication with Jane Milton, Klein Archives, May 2020.

(A) To acquiesce to a ready-made framework of thinking is to prefigure the scope of possible thoughts and to narrow the range of acceptable idiosyncratically organized ideas into those that fit the given framework. Winnicott compares the process of fitting one's nascent thoughts into a pre-established rigid system of thinking with a pursuit of "making the daffodil out of a bulb instead of enabling the bulb to develop into a daffodil by good enough nurture" (Letter to Klein). If the bulbs (i.e., nascent thoughts) are expected to develop in a certain manner and to ultimately receive a particular expressive guise and articulation that is set by the prefigured framework of thinking, then thoughts that develop in an unexpected way and divert from the default curve tend to be either viewed as something *immature* or overlooked as *anomalies*. This attitude curtails the scope of possible criticism, narrows the range of expression, and discourages attempts of "thinking outside of the box". What could be an open-minded and fruitful exchange of heterogeneous viewpoints thus laments into a homogeneous endeavor of *completing a system*. Questioning the impression of the Kleinian doctrine as a "jigsaw of which all the pieces exist", Winnicott claims:

"further understanding such as you have been able to bring through your work does not bring us towards a narrowing of the field of investigation; as you know, any advance in scientific work achieves an arrival at a new platform from which a wider range of the unknown can be sensed" (Letter to Klein).

Considering a particular framework of thinking as all-encompassing is to *hinder the possibility of discovering anything new and unexpected*. Looking at the history of psychoanalysis, Winnicott has a strong point: we can only wonder what would have happened to psychoanalytic thinking if there had been no psychoanalytic "dissidents" who refused to obediently consider Freud's theoretical and conceptual framework as an all-compassing system to be merely complemented piece by piece.

(B) Second, moving within a framework of thought that is considered fixed and "ready" is accompanied by a false sense of clarity. Winnicott notes this explicitly in a letter to Anna Freud, while again underlining his "annoying" personal trait:

"I have an irritating way of saying things in my own language instead of learning how to use the terms of psycho-analytic metapsychology. [...] I am so deeply suspicious of these terms [...] because they can give the appearance of a common understanding when such understanding does not exist" (Winnicott 1987b [1954], 58).

The problem is that we can (and often do) use words *mechanically*: having gotten used to particular technical terms, we tend to rely on our habitualized understanding of them and hence do not have to carefully ponder on their meaning each time we utter them. While this capacity supports (and even enables) smooth everyday interaction, it poses a problem for

science where conceptual precision and clarity are a virtue. The frequent use of well-established concepts promotes the false impression that one is well aware of their meaning and their conceptual implications – and yet it often turns out that the detailed meaning had remained unclear or ambiguous, or that the theoretical and metaphysical commitments underlying the choice of words had not been considered (see Winnicott 1989, 233; cf. Winnicott 1987b [1954], 72). Constant reconsideration is particularly crucial with respect to central theoretical concepts and implicit hypotheses, forming the foundation of the respective theory. To get a bit ahead of things, the “illusion of contact”, to be examined later on, does *not* refer to this false sense of shared clarity. To be sure, moving within a fixed a conceptual framework, allegedly shared by “everyone”, promotes the impression of a *joint* endeavor of thinking. Yet, what this really amounts to is a blind and uncritical repetition of past insights, entailing no closer interconnection between individuals than between two ships that navigate under the same stars.

(C) Third, besides narrowing the discussants’ expressive means and promoting a false impression of clarity, compliance to a pre-given framework of thinking also *distances* the involved individuals from the common endeavor of thinking. This is somewhat paradoxical since compliance is precisely what is supposed give access to the public domain or shared language. Yet, while it in a way grants this access and promotes a feeling of togetherness, this is done with the expense of a personal approach. By adjusting one’s idiosyncratic thoughts to the pre-given framework, the individual finds him or herself on a ground pertaining to *someone else* or to *no one*, as it were. And, in order to contribute, the individual is required to dispense with his or her idiosyncracies and hence gradually become one of *anyone*, and hence *no one in particular*. In this manner, compliance grants access to the “common” domain with the expense of personal approach: it alienates the individual from the shared environment by way of absorbing him or her into it. In the absence of personal, idiosyncratic take, the “shared language” is bound to feel superficial, numb, and “uncathected”: instead of bulbs of thought that feel “real” and full of potentiality, one is led to consider one’s thoughts as unfinished daffodils. And so, one may have a phoney feeling *as if* one was making a contribution to an ongoing scientific discussion, but there remains a sense of unreality or “falsity” to this contribution (see Winnicott 1965, 140-152, 180, 184). Whenever the personal and idiosyncratic element is missing, “common language” does not feel *one’s own*; despite one’s capacity to successfully operate in it, this language feels *dead*.

These three issues – the prefiguration of the scope of possible thinking, the false sense of clarity, and individual estrangement – have now brought us back to the issue of a “dead language”, a notion mentioned in Winnicott’s letter to Klein: “in a scientific society one of our aims is to find a common language. This language must, however, be kept alive as there is nothing worse than a dead language”. Elsewhere Winnicott clarifies: “Deadness here means simply lack of aliveness and of all the features which characterise the state of being alive” (Winnicott 1987b [1958], 123; see Winnicott 1965, 191-2). In his developmental theory,

Winnicott links "deadness" with the psychological absence of the caregiver and speaks of "the death of the mother when she is present" (Winnicott 1971, 29; cf. Winnicott 1965, 20). Like a caregiver – the child's initial *environment* – who is psychologically absent or preoccupied with something else feels "dead" and "useless" (Winnicott 1964, 27), so too the individual contributor of a discussion is expecting an acknowledgement of his or her personal statements, and, in the lack thereof, encounters a "dead" environment. Accordingly, by "dead language", Winnicott is referring to a conceptual environment that is imposed on the individual from the outside, that is unresponsive to the individual's personal approach to it, and to which the individual is forced to adjust his or her expression in order to be understood and communicated with.

This characterization reminds us of the infant's relation to a depressed, self-absorbed, and in this sense "dead" mother. Andre Green's famous characterization of the "dead mother" is interesting here: "The object is 'dead' (in the sense of not alive, even though real death has not come about); hence it draws the ego towards a deathly, deserted universe" (Green 2001, 195). While the context of Green's conceptualization is rather different, the similarities are too pronounced to be ignored. The object – namely the given conceptual environment – does not feel "alive". Yet, it is not "really dead" either – after all, one can hear people talk, one can read texts and understand them, and in this sense the conceptual environment is *there*. But it is not there *for me, for my idiosyncratic thoughts and bulbs* in particular. Like a mirror that reflects back the self only insofar as it behaves in a wanted manner, a fixed conceptual environment facilitates the individual's self-expression rather selectively. By narrowing one's insights into what is tolerated by the environment, the individual is drained into a realm where one's idiosyncratic impulses have been held back or "deserted". In this sense, complying to a dead language is "deathly" to oneself as well. Namely, standing in front of such a mirror, one only sees a public facade or tolerated shadow of oneself, while the vital core of one's self remains irrelevant (cf. Winnicott 1965, 184). With respect to a fixed and unresponsive conceptual environment, an individual is prone to assume a submissive attitude; to avoid losing one's face, one compliantly puts on a mask and "fits in with a role of a dead object" (Winnicott 1965, 191; Winnicott 1987a, 103). An alternative defence here would be "to look alive and to communicate being alive", thus "counteracting" the object's unresponsiveness (Winnicott 1965, 192) – a way that Winnicott himself followed.

The comparison between a given conceptual framework and the early facilitating environment is worth developing in another respect as well. As Winnicott puts it in a letter to Segal, in his eyes Klein was being increasingly declared as the "good breast" for the psychoanalytic community (Winnicott 1987b [1952], 26). Being wary of any kind of "idol worship", which he considered to be lethal for a tradition of thought (Winnicott 1987b [1954], 72), Winnicott argued that the "good" breast – or "good" environment – is an *idealization* that does not exist in reality (e.g., Winnicott 1987b [1952], 38; Winnicott 1989, 461). For this reason, as is well known, he instead favors the term "good-enough": "It is important to me that in my writings

I always say good-enough rather than good. I think that the words good-enough help to steer the reader away from sentimentality and idealisation" (Winnicott 1987b [1969], 195; see also Winnicott 1989, 461). Likewise, when it comes to an encounter with a *conceptual* environment, we can assert that the particular conceptual framework in which one operates can be, at best, *a good-enough vehicle for the facilitation of personal expression* – it cannot actually be perfect, ideal, or "all-good" system that "covers everything" that one might want to express (cf. Winnicott 1987b [1956], 97). Winnicott's sensitivity toward the idealization of Klein was undoubtedly influenced by their complex background. As his long-time mentor and supervisor, Klein was for Winnicott a kind of mother-figure, whose acceptance, appreciation, and reaction he kept seeking for (see, e.g., Winnicott 1987b [1956], 96). Moreover, knowing that Winnicott's own mother suffered from depression (Rodman 2003, 13-14), it is possible that, in his recurring attempt to *animate* the given (familiar but dead) conceptual environment and his frequent emphasis on the *imperfect* nature of the facilitating environment, Winnicott was unconsciously struggling to simultaneously *reanimate* and *forgive* his own "dead mother".

To sum up, with his idiosyncratic way of expressing himself Winnicott is pursuing to establish his "academic mother language" as a personally significant or cathected vehicle for expressing his idiosyncratic insights. Now, how is this endeavor reflected in the structure of interpersonal understanding? Winnicott is hoping that Klein would "meet" his gesture, and he underlines that this "meeting" is crucial for establishing a "relationship" or "contact" with her thinking. Now, what exactly did Winnicott thereby suggest to Klein? What would have a successful "meeting" amounted to? In what follows, I will argue that the plea that Winnicott addressed to Klein was an invitation to "play along". As I will show, this would have established what Winnicott calls an "illusion of contact".

4. Playing along – establishing an "illusion of contact"

When it comes to interpersonal understanding, Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory harbors a noteworthy logical consequence. As said, according to him, each of us lives in our own idiosyncratic version of the environment, as it were, and refers to the objective environment from this basis. There is always an idiosyncratic coloring to the environment – and *this coloring is different in the case of each individual*.

This heterogeneity complicates the structure of interpersonal understanding. The expressions of an individual harbor an infinitely complex wealth of idiosyncratic connotations, imageries, associations, cathexes, metaphoric constructs, and so on, which are "personal and individual even though the words and phrases used are not the speaker's coinage" (Sharpe 1950, 159). That is to say, each of us *makes use* of the available conceptual framework in a unique way.

On the other hand, such differences tend to be ignored. For example, while engaged in an intense debate with a friend or colleague, we are every now and then elevated by the feeling of grasping the other's point ("I definitely share your worry here!"; "I completely agree with you on that!"). What we then take ourselves to be grasping is something more than the *general meaning* of the other's words: we feel that we have an insight not only into *what* the other thinks, but into *how* he or she thinks it. The same holds, *vice versa*, for the way in which we find *our* expressed thoughts and insights being understood by the other: when feeling that our companion *sees what we mean*, we feel that the other captures *our point as it unfolds to us in our subjective life*. In such cases, an expressed thought that Individual 1 takes to be "shared" with Individual 2 is *an idiosyncratic experiential content* – and hence, paradoxically, something that is not really shareable as such.

In terms of a reciprocal encounter, the logically awkward conclusion to be drawn here is the following: the experiential content that Individual 1 considers to be shared with Individual 2 is *not identical* with the experiential content that Individual 2 considers to be shared with Individual 1. This peculiar *asymmetry* brings us back to the opening quote of the article:

"The individual only communicates with a self-created world and the people in the environment only communicate with the individual in so far as they can create him or her. Nevertheless in health there is the illusion of contact and it is this which provides the high spots of human life" (Winnicott 1987b [1952], 43).

As I will show, the "illusion of contact" amounts to the experience of a *match* between one's own idiosyncratic grasp and that of the other, an experience that *supersedes* or *outweighs* the factual asymmetry of interpersonal experience. Clarifying this claim enables revising Winnicott's plea to Klein.

In psychoanalytic scholarship, the asymmetric structure of interpersonal encounters has been mainly examined in reference to cases where this structure is *pronounced* – the usual examples being the infant/caregiver and the analyst/analysand relationship. As for the former, Winnicott underlines that the infant's and the caregiver's capacities in understanding one another are remarkably different, and that they hence enter to the "space of mutuality" from very different standpoints:

"The mother has of course herself been a baby. It is all in her somewhere. [...] [S]he has played at being a baby, as well as at mothers and fathers; she has regressed to baby ways during illnesses; she has perhaps watched her mother caring for younger siblings. She may have had instruction in baby-care, and perhaps she has read books, and she may have formed her own ideas of right and wrong in baby-management. She is of course deeply affected by local

custom, complying or reacting, or striking out as an independent or a pioneer. But the baby has never been a mother. The baby has not even been a baby before. It is all a first experience. There are no yardsticks. Time is not measured by clocks or by sunrise and sunset so much as by the maternal heart and breathing rates, by the rise and fall of instinct tensions, and other essentially non-mechanical devices. *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.*” (Winnicott 1987a, 94-95, *my italics*).

In this case, asymmetry is rather obvious. Importantly, it is not just that the two individuals relate to a shared space *differently*, but each has one’s own idiosyncratically outlined grasp of *what is shared* with the other in the first place. Yet, insofar as the mother identifies and attunes with her infant in her state of “primary maternal preoccupation” (Winnicott 1958, 302; cf. Stern 1985, 138-140), she goes along with *what she finds* her baby to be feeling, wanting and needing, and in this absorbed state she *temporarily overlooks* the factual asymmetry. Similar remarks have been made vis-à-vis the analytic situation. Riitta Tähkä notes that, while the “unevenness” of the analytic relationship “is true from the standpoint of the present reality and a necessary prerequisite for the analytic process”, during moments of sharing, “this ‘unevenness’ loses its significance and does not exist for the moment” (Tähkä 2000, 84). Conversely, whenever the factual unevenness of the analytic situation is underlined or thematized, the illusion of a shared space is shattered.

What has not been sufficiently emphasized is that the asymmetry in question is a *general structural feature of interpersonal understanding*. In cases of infant/caregiver and analyst/analysand relationship, the feature is *pronounced*, but asymmetry structurally pertains to *all* interpersonal relationships. Winnicott does not explicitly make this point, but it implicitly follows from his theory. Regardless of how similar, equal or “even” two persons are, their experiences of *what is shared* differ from one another. And if so, intense moments of sharing must refer to experiences where asymmetry does not make itself felt. Here we come to the “illusion of contact”: this concept refers to the occasional feeling that one’s idiosyncratic grasp of a discussed matter *matches* with that of the other – a feeling that is maintained as long as it *outweighs* the awareness of asymmetry.

The issue of “outweighing” can be illustrated in reference to Winnicott’s theory of *playing*. While immersed in playing, a child is not interested in whether his or her idiosyncratically created world *matches* with the world as it is perceived by others. This, quite literally, is *out of the question*: “The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated” (Winnicott 1971, 17; cf. 119). Either by a *silent approval* or by *playing along*, the adult allows the child to maintain his or her personal idiosyncratic relation with the given environment, without underlining its obvious *mismatch* with the world

as perceived by him or her. Moreover, in the case of two children playing together, this active ignorance concerning the mismatch becomes a *reciprocal* issue. The space of playing necessarily appears differently to both, yet, when lost in play, asymmetry does not stand out. To be sure, harmony is often temporarily interrupted: we find children "negotiating" in the middle of a play, as if pausing and assuming a meta-position with respect to playing – e.g., "could this here be the father?", "could this be a friend of this one?", "could this here have a birthday party coming up?". Once an agreement is reached over these *general parameters*, children may again lose themselves into the world of play, each creating the "father", the "friend", and the "birthday party" *in their own idiosyncratic way*. In this absorbed state, they neither *believe* that the other actually perceives what they do, nor do they *underline* the difference of their personal approaches – the whole issue is out of the question. Once the asymmetry makes itself felt, the "illusion of contact" is compromised, and the need to "negotiate" arises once again.

While negotiation is motivated by the sense of asymmetry, it also aims at *undoing* the latter. As long as asymmetry does not make itself felt, there is an unchallenged sense of a match; once asymmetry stands out, the shared space is compromised, and there arises a pursuit to retain the latter – yet not in the earlier form where asymmetry was pronounced. The prominence of asymmetry marks the "destruction" of the shared space (see Winnicott 1989, 222ff.), and negotiation over the *general parameters* aims at enabling both individuals to "re-create" the shared space in their *own idiosyncratic way*. That is to say, not only is there a need to retain what has been destroyed, but also a need to destroy *in order* to re-create. Negotiation serves the vital purpose of *integrating* the other's idiosyncratic creation *into one's own idiosyncratic approach* to the playworld. Objectively speaking, one's personal approach is indeed modified by what factually originates in the other child, but once integrated it feels as *one's own* creation – and there is a truth to this feeling. What each child – after such negotiation – grasps as "shared" with the other is his or her *own* idiosyncratic approach to the playworld. *The individual integrates by re-creating*, and hence the factual external origin of what is integrated does not pose a narcissistic threat – what is in fact created together feels *mine* (see Winnicott 1971, 126-127).

Similarly, the experience of interpersonal understanding *overrides* the factual asymmetry and unfolds as *re-creative exchange*. Like in playing together, the two discussing individuals hold on to their own idiosyncratic approaches, re-create each other's insights in their own way, and thus enjoy the feeling of building something new. Asymmetry remains neither *refuted* nor *granted*: once the other's expressions have been endowed with a personal significance, they are re-created and integrated into one's own thinking. Nonetheless, the shared space of thinking is built on factually *asymmetric idiosyncracies*, and while re-creative exchange may run smoothly for some time, "negotiation" is soon needed. Like with playing (see Winnicott 1964, 146; Winnicott 1971, 70), the conversing individuals are constantly *on the verge* of being reminded of the asymmetry between their idiosyncratic experiences, which threatens to

shatter the illusion of matching. Therefore, here too we find a dynamic oscillation between the illusion of a match and the negotiation of what is to be created "together". As soon as asymmetry makes itself felt, this means that the sense of a shared space is *destroyed* and needs to be *re-created*. Negotiations over the *general meaning* of concepts is needed, but in order for the individuals to experience the conceptual framework as their *own*, each must be allowed to re-create the concepts in their own idiosyncratic fashion.

In this manner, what I have called a *re-creative exchange* enables "feeding back other-than-me substance into the subject" (Winnicott 1971, 127). Part of the immense delight of communicating, thinking together, and thinking within a tradition, is that *what factually is a joint achievement genuinely feels as one's own creation*. And, again, there is a truth to this feeling. Once the asymmetry makes itself felt, the personal insights and idiosyncratic conceptualizations of others – the "other-than-me substance" – are "destroyed" *as such*, personally re-created, and hence they come to feel one's *own*. The above-discussed "false sense of clarity" is accordingly a cheap replacement for the illusion of contact: what it lacks is precisely this sense of *personal significance*. The available conceptual framework can indeed be mimetically consumed without destroying and personally re-creating it. Compliantly adopting handed-down concepts is not to *use* them but, at best, to *imitate their usage*. As said, while this might involve a vague feeling of thinking together with "everyone", compliant use of terms is also accompanied by a sense of estrangement – the shared conceptual framework does not feel *mine*.

As Winnicott puts it, the object of destruction must *survive* the destruction (Winnicott 1971, 120). Accordingly, the point is not to invent a new language but to *use* the available one. In fact, as Winnicott puts it, "in any cultural field it is not possible to be original except on a basis of tradition" (Winnicott 1971, 134). Just as the playworld is not created *ex nihilo*, but by way of *creatively making use* of what is in fact offered from the outside, so too a personal approach to language refers to the way in which one can *make use* of the available concepts. Indeed, occasionally a new term needs to be coined in order to capture a particular neglected aspect of a particular phenomenon, but this is not the point, and Winnicott's own case illustrates this: while constantly underlining the importance using his "own language", he is nonetheless constantly operating in *English* and frequently employing various *traditional psychoanalytic concepts* – including also some from Klein. Instead of creating a *private language*, the point is rather the creative *use* what is already available. It is only through a dynamic oscillation between destruction and re-creation – a movement that has here been called a *re-creative exchange* – that a shared conceptual framework can come to feel personally significant. In other words, mere "negotiation" is not enough. Without destruction there is not personal re-creation, and without the latter there can be no "illusion of contact" – and if this is lacking, communication just cannot feel worth while.

So what actually was the plea that Winnicott presented to Klein? Insofar as theoretical-conceptual thinking can be compared with playing with possibilities, categorizations, and conceptualizations, Winnicott was hoping that Klein would both *let him play* and *play along*. As should be clear by now, the latter does not amount to a wish that Klein would *adopt* Winnicott's conceptualizations – quite on the contrary, it implies the request that Klein would constructively *destroy* Winnicott's insights, *re-create* them in her own way, and thus *use* them. In a way, Winnicott was asking Klein to *playfully try out* his thinking, and to open-mindedly see where her idiosyncratic version of it leads – before pondering on whether or not his way of thinking *matches* with her own. Playing along would have meant "meeting" Winnicott's expressive gesture; it would have established the "illusion of contact" and re-creative exchange. Yet, from Winnicott's viewpoint, Klein's unresponsiveness was a way to decline his invitation to *play along*. Moreover, by being asked to embrace Klein's conceptual framework, Winnicott must have felt that his idiosyncratic way of playing was not *allowed*: he was being asked to *play differently* in order to be played together with. The asymmetry between their personal approaches thus being disturbingly emphatic, Winnicott and Klein were stuck in the area of "negotiation".

Asking the other to play along is a lot to ask. After all, the flipside of Winnicott's request was an implicit request that Klein would tolerate his act to "destroy" her way of expression. To be sure, given the link between "dead language" and "dead mother", and given Winnicott's overall relation with Klein, one could also consider the psychodynamic dimensions of this request. Be that as it may, in any case it takes a good degree of tolerance to allow one's own insights be destroyed in their original idiosyncratic guise, to allow them to be re-created by others in their own way, and hence to allow oneself to be used. Curiously, finding one's insights being re-articulated or developed by someone else is both rewarding and troubling: while the feeling that the other has found one's insights *useful* is a pleasant one, the feeling that one's insights *as they initially emerged* have been destroyed is not. Yet, allowing usage and allowing destruction are two sides of one coin – one cannot allow the former without allowing the latter. Moreover, in playfully trying out someone else's way of thinking sometimes leads to laborious revision of one's own thinking. No wonder, then, that playing or talking by oneself is *easier* than playing or thinking together with someone – but it is also much less rewarding. The fleeting narcissistic joy of *being right, unchallenged, or indestructible* is a cold comfort on the face of the wonder of creating something that was initially *unforeseen* to both individuals (see Winnicott 1971, 68). To allow oneself to play with the possible, to open-mindedly try alternative ways of thinking that are suggested by others, is to remain open to *the new and the unexpected*, and to possibly surprise oneself. If Winnicott is right, such moments provide the "high spots of human life". Moreover, the re-creative exchange of lending one's thoughts for the other to use, using the thoughts of others, and passing these on for others to re-create and use – this is Winnicott's recipe for a healthy community of thought.

Conclusion

I have here underlined the potentiality of Winnicott's theory of compliance with respect to questions of interpersonal understanding and joint endeavor of thinking. Approaching the topic via his letter to Klein, I have attempted to illustrate the crucial and yet often neglected elements in interpersonal understanding that must be taken into account in order to keep a tradition alive. In reference to the conceptual analysis provided in the first section, I argued that the experiential environment can be significant for the individual only insofar as the individual can maintain the feeling of having created it. Narrowing my approach to the environment qua the given conceptual environment, I explained what Winnicott means by his claim that "[t]he individual only communicates with a self-created world and the people in the environment only communicate with the individual in so far as they can create him or her". I cashed this out in terms of an *asymmetry* that becomes outweighed by the feeling of a *match* between the idiosyncratic viewpoints. Each participant of a dialogue has his or her own idiosyncratic approach to what he or she takes to be shared with the other, and the same holds vice versa. Yet, as I have hopefully made clear, while the feeling of a match is *illusory* given the factual asymmetry, it is a valuable and indispensable illusion, and a necessary, structural condition for interpersonal understanding. As Winnicott puts it, this illusion is a matter of "health", and it "provides the high spots of human life". As pointed out, the illusion is established and maintained by reciprocally playing along with the other's way of thinking. If a tradition boils down to a negotiation of the general meaning of concepts, it becomes a dead tradition: something that poorly facilitates the growth and cultivation of unforeseen discoveries. For the life of a tradition, therefore, it is crucial that the individual members *facilitate* the possibility of playing together, open-mindedly going along with each other's thinking, while nonetheless struggling to maintain a personal approach.

One could ask whether personal idiosyncratic conceptual reformulation is particularly crucial for disciplines like psychoanalysis, and correspondingly less relevant for disciplines that are more formal, exact, or statistical-inductive. This might be true, and the difference between different disciplines might be a matter of emphasis. To be sure, one issue that makes the demand of lively articulation particularly important for psychoanalysis is that it strives to make justice to the idiosyncratic experiential structures of an individual, regardless of how common, statistically frequent, or generalizable they happen to be, while at the same time seeking to articulate mental structures that are not just idiosyncratic, even if not universal either. What might make the requirement for personal rearticulation particularly relevant for psychoanalysis is this constant task of balancing between generalization and idiosyncratic contingency, avoiding both ends as it were – an issue that brings us back to Tuckett's claim of psychoanalysis as a discipline of "insecure foundations" (Tuckett 1998). Without going into this matter in more detail in the present context, let me note that from the basis of what has

been explicated here it seems plausible that the requirement in question is *formally same* in all cases where an individual enters into, or orients him or herself within, a conceptual space that is already there. And, indeed, in all fields, scientific revolutions are usually set forth by way of an individual posing a challenge to the prevailing conceptual-theoretical framework, thus suggesting a new way of thinking about the old concepts.

The analysis provided here may prove useful for considerations of the clinical setting, but this – as said – will be left for further studies to decide. The issues discussed here in reference to the question of dialogue within the psychoanalytic tradition bear relevance to research on interpersonal understanding more generally. In particular, my Winnicottian analysis may open new insights on the *expectations* that people generally have vis-a-vis successful interpersonal understanding. I am thinking of cases of feeling that one is not *really* being understood by others. This failure is often noted and explained in reference to a *mismatch* or *gap* between one's way of thinking and the other's grasp thereof, whereby it is tacitly presupposed that *proper* understanding between people entails a match of idiosyncratic contents. Approaching the searched-for match in terms of an *illusion* might be helpful here. To become aware of the fact that the other only *seems* to grasp the way I feel or think about things, but in fact does not, might not be a sign of the other not understanding me, but a sign of a heightened sensitivity to the discussed asymmetry – for one reason or another. In any case, as long as the illusory element in interpersonal communication, the scotomization of asymmetry, remains unthought, we might easily harbor unrealistic and even infantile expectations concerning the requirements of successful understanding. It might be interesting to consider such cases from the viewpoint that interpersonal understanding *never* entails a match between my thoughts and the thoughts of the other. The illusion of contact that we keep searching for, without wanting to know that it is an illusion, is crucial for interpersonal understanding in all cases, from everyday social encounters and clinical practices to scholarly discussions. As such, it is at once one of the ingredients of a healthy tradition.⁷

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