

Jessica Benjamin Book Study Group Orienting Questions #2

“Paradox and play: The uses of enactment”

This piece of Benjamin’s work speaks much more directly to clinical practice. In “Paradox and play,” Benjamin expands upon the concept of enactments, proposing that they be considered in terms of moving toward “play,” both as a spatial concept (that is “play” as the room that allows for movement, a kind of “wobble room” rather than the closeness that limits motion and leaves you “stuck”) and as an activity and attitude that involves a sense of collaboration and ease along with an assumption of shared intention that is represented by Ringstrom’s concept of the “Yes/And” of improvisation. The structure of paradox presents another way of thinking about resolving complementarity speaking to it from the “outside.” The introduction of paradox also offers a way of rethinking the dynamics of transference and the psychoanalytic process more generally, allowing Benjamin to claim, “The tension of paradox is essential to psychoanalysis, indeed a formal condition of its way of working between illusion and reality.”(p.146)

The position presented in the essay is that paradox, psychoanalysis, and play share structural similarities. In all three of these constructs there is a relationship of give and take. In the cases of psychoanalysis and play this relationship occurs on both a structural and a relational level. In other words, both psychoanalysis and play require that there be a dialogue between structural categories: past and present, real and imagined or “make believe,” thought and reality, “nip and bite.” Additionally, psychoanalysis and play, as Benjamin presents them, also require two active participants (i.e. a distinct set of relational categories) where both participants have “skin in the game” (so to speak). In this way, Benjamin appears to be making the argument that a relational approach is especially suited for using the concepts of paradox and play when thinking about the analytic relationship generally and the working through of enactments specifically.

QUESTIONS

1. Benjamin suggests that “play” constructs another possibility for the Third by “containing the Either/Or poles within a larger movement.”(p. 144) Does this differ from other versions of “thirdness” that Benjamin has suggested? In what way or ways is it different?
2. Is it possible to “play” at “complementarity”? Is this what Benjamin means when she suggests, “We allow ourselves to become part of a complementary opposition that serves to expose the ‘truth’ of a hidden self — perhaps in us”? (p. 147) Can you imagine how this would be set-up in the analytic dyad so that it *doesn’t* promote a recapitulation of conventional power dynamics?
3. Benjamin presents “the nip” and “the bite” as an example of sameness with a difference. How do you distinguish a “nip” from a “bite”? (Are they distinguished by intention? Intensity? Pain inflicted?) Who determines the parameters of the distinction? What happens to “play” if the distinction cannot clearly separate “thoughts/feelings from reality”? Are the consequences the same when the patient bites the analyst as when the

analyst bites the patient? How do differences in the consequences for “biting” effect our ideas about mutual recognition?

4. Is “recoupling” different that “repair”?
5. Benajmin marks a theoretical distinction between the BCPSG and relational thinkers as follows: “[T]he relational perspective holds that such recognition [created by “the sharing of inner states”] might actually heal shame and lead to a greater tolerance of vulnerability; the aim of learning something new about ourselves and our patients functions as part of our collective Third.” How do you imagine this emerging in the clinical setting?
6. Does “mutual knowing,” which Benjamin introduces at the end of the essay, differ from “mutual recognition”?