



The Independent Tradition: Play, Object Relations, and the Psychoanalytic Setting

Steven H. Cooper, Ph.D.

The Independent tradition derives from Freud through Ferenczi, emphasizing the quality of the patient's experience and the need for the analyst to be aware of the effect on themselves of the analytic process. The Independent tradition also emphasizes the need for restraint in interpretation for fear of turning the analytic process into a more intellectual process rather than helping patients to feel their experiences of being alive. This tradition has utilized Winnicott's notion of play as the undergirding for all parts of analytic process. As a theory it stresses the use of everyday language to develop both analytic theory and a language with our patients. Independent clinical technique is primarily a way of listening and focuses on the idea that the analyst is an analytic object to be made use of by the patient.

Winnicott was the progenitor of the Independent tradition, though a case can be made that Ferenczi was emphasizing some of these strands in his discussions with Freud and sometimes arguments as Freud's patient. We will do a pretty deep dive into Winnicott's contributions to psychoanalysis and the Independent tradition while trying to keep in focus contemporary ways that Winnicott's ideas have been integrated into much of analytic thinking and practice.

It is really impossible to discuss Winnicott the developmental theorist, Winnicott the theorist of psychoanalysis as play, and Winnicott the setting theorist, as separate strands in his theory. Each of these areas are always in "play" as we learn about his contributions to psychoanalytic theory. And even at that, it is debatable whether Winnicott is best as understood as an object relations theorist or as a whole different kind of theorist. I think that while we often think of both Winnicott and Bion as in the tradition of object relations theory, they are the inventors of a new kind of analysis, inventors of the ontological strain in analytic theory. Winnicott's chief focus is on how to help patients to become alive or to find/inhabit the parts of themselves that are already alive.

A brief list of some of Winnicott's most important ideas would include:: the transitional object; the primary maternal preoccupation; the holding environment; the good enough environment and the good enough mother (elaborating the depressive position by emphasizing the very concept of 'good enough'; potential space; the capacity to be alone; true and false self; hate in the countertransference; the fear of breakdown; the capacity for concern; the anti-social tendency; and the use of the object. He was one of the

first analysts to grasp intergenerational transmission of trauma. He was also one of the first analysts to emphasize the importance of countertransference, particularly negative countertransference. Finally, I believe that his most important contribution in some ways was to establish the notion of play as the undergirding or logic of psychoanalysis.

One of the greatest misunderstandings of Winnicott is to think of the holding environment as a simplistic kind of holding. Winnicott's holding is not only providing a space to help patients to become and be who they are but also to work with and use limits. For Winnicott, the concept of limit was constitutive of play and growth in ways that we will explore.

My goal for our seminar is that you get a sense of the contributions that Winnicott and the Independent School have made to all of psychoanalysis including a wide range of theories (e.g. Contemporary Freudian, Bionian, and relational thinking). My hope is that as we study his theoretical and clinical concepts and those of the Independent tradition, we will discuss how these ideas apply to our clinical work. Please let yourself think of your patients as you read so that we can apply these concepts clinically to your work. I will be thinking of vignettes and hope that you will too. Each seminar, I will begin by spending some time getting you oriented to the ideas that we have read about and contextualizing how these ideas emerged in the history of psychoanalytic thinking. I will especially try to frame Winnicott's ideas in the context of Freud, Fairbairn, Klein, and Bion so that you have a way of thinking about the Independent tradition in the context of other theorists you have studied or are studying.

While the seminar will largely focus on Winnicott's work, we will read some contemporary analytic writing from the Independent tradition especially by Thomas Ogden and Michael Parsons but also including some work by Jessica Benjamin (a relationally oriented analyst who developed Winnicott's ideas) and some of my own work.

Even though an argument can be made to begin our reading with Winnicott's papers on play (since he redefined psychoanalysis around play), I think it makes more sense to begin with some of his developmental thinking. This will hopefully serve as a good foundation for the ways that Winnicott revolutionized our ways of thinking about psychoanalysis. His elaboration of Freud's use of paradox and his introduction of the notion of potential space applies to not only those who create art in literature, poetry, film and on the canvass, but to the analytic process itself. A part of Winnicott's genius was to see the analytic space as ontologically unique, one that creates new psychic possibilities for patient and analyst.

I look forward to working with you all again.

Steven

I: April 14 An Introduction to Winnicott and the Independent Tradition

Winnicott, D. (1945). Primitive emotional development. In: *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, p. 145-156. [Download from the [Reading folder](#) or request from library@bps.org] or [PEP Web Link](#).

Winnicott, D.W. (1974). Fear of Breakdown. *Int. R. Psycho-Anal.*, 1:103-107. [PEP Web Link](#)

Optional Reading

Ogden, T. (2001). Reading Winnicott. *Psychoanal. Q.* 70(2):299-323. [PEP Web Link](#)

Also found in Ogden, T. (2011): *Creative Readings: Essays on Seminal Analytic Works*, p. 76-97. London: The New Library of Psychoanalysis.

Parsons, M. (2009) An Independent Theory of Clinical Technique. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 19:221-236. [PEP Web Link](#)

II. April 21 Transitional Phenomena, the Capacity to be Alone, and the Concept of Potential Space

Winnicott, D. (1953) Transitional objects and transitional phenomena – A study of the first not-me possession. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 34:89-97. [PEP Web Link](#)

Also, In: *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis*. Basic Books, 1975. 1-25.

Winnicott, D. The capacity to be alone. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 39:416-420. [PEP Web Link](#)

Also, In: *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 1965. New York: International Universities Press.

III. April 28 The Relevance of Play for the Psychoanalytic Setting

Winnicott, D. W. (1968) Playing: Its theoretical status in the clinical situation. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 49:591-599. [PEP Web Link](#)

Also In: *Playing and Reality*. New York: Basic Books, p. 38-53

Parsons, M. (1999) The Logic of Play in Psychoanalysis. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 80(5):871-884. [PEP Web Link](#)

IV. May 5 Play (Continued)

Benjamin, J. (2016) From enactment to play: Metacommunication, acknowledgement, and the third of paradox. *Rivista di Psicoanalisi.* 62:565-593. [PEP Web Link](#)

Cooper, S. (2021) Toward an ethic of play. *Psychoanal. Q.*,90(3): 371-390 and in *Playing and Becoming in Psychoanalysis*. London/New York: Routledge (2022). [Download from the [Reading folder](#) or request from library@bps.org]

V. May 12 Interpretation in Winnicott and the Independent Tradition

Winnicott, D. W. (1968) Interpretation in Psycho-Analysis. *The Collected Works of D.W. Winnicott*, ed. L Caldwell and H.T. Robinson, p.207-212. [Download from the [Reading folder](#) or request from library@bps.org]

Ogden, T. H. (2018) How I Talk With My Patients. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 87:399-414. [PEP Web Link](#) or [Download from the [Reading folder](#) or request from library@bps.org]

Optional Reading

Ogden, T. H. (1997) Reverie And Interpretation. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 66:567-595. [PEP Web Link](#)

Ogden, T. H. (1994) The Concept of Interpretive Action. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 63:219-245. [PEP Web Link](#)

VI. May 19 The Use of the Object and Use of the Subject

Winnicott, D. W. (1969) The use of an object. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 50:711-716. [PEP Web Link](#)
Also in *Playing and Reality*, 1971, New York: Basic Books, p. 86-95.

Ogden, T. H. (2016) Destruction reconceived: On Winnicott's 'The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications'. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 97(5):1243-1262. [PEP Web Link](#)

Optional Reading

Cooper, S. H. (2018) Playing in the darkness: Use of the object and use of the subject. *J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn.* 66:743-765. [PEP Web Link](#)

Cooper, S. H. (in press, April, 2022) The limits of intimacy and the intimacy of limits: Play and its relations to the bad object. *J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn.* [Download from the [Reading folder](#) or request from library@bps.org]

VII: May 26 Contemporary Independent Thinking

Parsons, M. (2007). Raiding the Inarticulate: The Internal Analytic Setting and Listening Beyond Countertransference. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 88(6):1441-1456. [PEP Web Link](#)

Parsons, M. (2006). The Analyst's Countertransference to the Psychoanalytic Process. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 87(5):1183-1198. [PEP Web Link](#)

VIII. June 2 Contemporary Independent Thinking (Continued)

Ogden, T. H. (2004). On holding and containing, being and dreaming. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 85(6):1349-1364. [PEP Web Link](#)

Ogden, T. H. (2019). Ontological psychoanalysis or what do you want to be when you grow up? *Psychoanal Q.*, 88(4):661-684. [Download from the [Reading folder](#) or request from library@bpsl.org]