BOOK REVIEWS


Even to the paediatrician who has acquired an adequate veneer of psychological understanding, the language of Freud is not always acceptable or at times even understandable. Yet most of these 18 lectures were delivered, over the course of the past decade, to various non-medical people concerned in some way with mothers and infants and families generally: and they read amazingly well. The writing is beautifully simple and easily understood and thereby gains immeasurably in its impact. Dr. Winnicott has profound respect for mothers and a deep instinctive understanding of the psychological and emotional situations that motivate and guide, and sometimes impede, the infant’s development and growth, and it is this, rather than his avowed adherence to the psycho-analytical school, that makes what he says convincing. It is also important since, as he points out, doctors and nurses have so often to interfere with the mother-child relationship, and they ought to know what they are interfering with. But Freudian he is, and so ‘emotional development starts at the beginning . . . and it is not possible to ignore the events of the first few days and hours . . . and even birth experience may be significant’.

Dr. Winnicott takes his reader through the story of human emotional development, from infancy to childhood and adolescence, into adult life, and delineates some of the pitfalls that may overtake the child on the way. The utterly dependent infant gradually acquires an awareness of his dependence and the capacity for letting the environment know when attention is needed. The environment is at first the mother, for whom Dr. Winnicott has such respect. During pregnancy, he says, she has gradually acquired a ‘primary maternal preoccupation’, almost like an illness, which gives her a special ability to do the right thing.

The environment extends to the father and the family circle and through them all to society. Gradually out of dependence emerges the beginnings of independence and by 5 years the child is ‘emerging from an enclosure’ into which it becomes increasingly difficult to return. Here the benefits of widening experience are discussed and the need for school, where more extensive facilities may exist than in the home, but where still ‘someone is always present to supervise the child’s first experiments in social life such as bashing the next child on the head with a spade’.

Several chapters are devoted to the integrative and disruptive factors at work in the family which, Dr. Winnicott points out, may work both ways. The child may himself ‘contribute in’ to the family situation or, if he is anti-social, may become a disrupting element even to the extent of having to be removed for the sake of the integrity of the family circle.

There is a delightful and, to worried parents, illuminating chapter on adolescence—‘struggling through the doldrums’—for which Dr. Winnicott rightly says there exists no real cure other than the ‘passage of time and the gradual maturation process’, and here he makes some perhaps surprising remarks on what he considers to be the three main social developments that have altered the whole climate for adolescents: venereal disease, which is no longer a bogey and deterrent; the development of contraceptive techniques, which allows the adolescent to explore ‘if she or he has a mind to the whole area of sensuous living without suffering the mental agony that accidental conception involves’; and the atom bomb which, he maintains, ‘because we have to carry on now on the basis that there is not going to be another war’ has profoundly altered the relationship between adult society and the everflowing adolescent tide. Dr. Winnicott does not develop this theme and leaves the reader frustrated and wanting to have it out with him.

The final chapter ‘Some thoughts on the meaning of democracy’ is perhaps less convincing than the rest, and Dr. Winnicott himself admits he is stepping outside his own speciality in attempting to equate what he has said about the family and individual development with the political state of the society within which families are situated and individuals develop. Nevertheless it is an interesting attempt to integrate political thought with developmental psychology. These essays are packed with the author’s very personal wisdom, humanity, and charm, and will illuminate the understanding of any adult who reads them. If one had half a dozen copies to whom would one give them? to a Sister in charge of a children’s ward, a health visitor, a married couple embarking on a family, a children’s officer, a midwife perhaps, and certainly to a paediatrician.