

“Among the most influential and most widely read of psychoanalytic writers, Benjamin in her latest work perfects her brilliant, trail-blazing articulation of intersubjective recognition theory. In *Beyond Doer and Done To* she elucidates the relations of complementarity, acknowledgment, rhythmicity, the Third, mutual vulnerability, doer-done to relations, trauma, dissociation and witnessing. She has provided a theory of recognition and its vicissitudes, recognition between mothers and infants, therapeutic healing recognition, and recognition relations among couples, families, and even the warring peoples of the world. This magnificent interdisciplinary synthesis breaks through intellectual barriers and will inspire generations of psychotherapists, psychologists, philosophers, feminists, social theorists, and activists.”

—Lewis Aron, Ph.D., Director of the New York University
Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy & Psychoanalysis

Beyond Doer and Done To

Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third

Jessica Benjamin

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or at least symbolic process of repair. The shift out of disconnection and dissociation requires acknowledgment by the subject of his *own* suffering incurred by this loss of the other. In turn, this disconnection separates us from a greater source of inspiration and linking—of self with other, mind with heart, shared suffering in the past and compassionate healing in our present action and imagined future. What I have elsewhere referred to as the movement of “many into one” (Benjamin, 2005). As I conclude this book, I will return to reflecting on how this process appears in the analytic relationship and witnessing dialogues in relation to traumatic memory and historical violence; how we move from the position of “failed witness” or bystander to acknowledging witness and how we become able to experience our own vulnerable humanity in a different way when we recognize the other’s, through this action coming closer to realizing the sense of our interconnectedness and responsibility for one another.

In closing, let me say that writing these words in early 2017, at a moment when our political and social world is upended, the ability to recognize others and accept our interdependence has become a matter of greater urgency. It is my hope that as we are called upon to actively resist the infliction of harm, indeed resist the attempt to take our whole society into the mode of doer and done to, there will be some good use put to these efforts to grasp how we may step out of that complementarity into the position of the Third, from one living at the expense of the other into shared, responsible living together. At the moment, we are witnessing millions of people joining together with an inspiring will to resist and struggle against lawlessness without being drawn into violence or lapsing into despair. May this will prevail.

Beyond doer and done to

An intersubjective view of thirdness

This chapter is the second version of a paper originally written for a volume on the concept of the Third for Psychoanalytic Quarterly, then rewritten for Relational Psychoanalysis Volume IV (Aron & Harris, 2011). It emerged from developing an idea I had initially when thinking about Ghent’s (1990) concept of surrender, written for a conference honoring his work in 2000. I began originally to think of the Third as related to an original sense of harmony that exists both in the world and self, an idea one might find in neo-Platonic mysticism (see Benjamin, 2005). But I had already begun to consider with Aron (Aron & Benjamin, 1999) how the shared, intersubjective Third could be differentiated from that of more classical theories in which the Third appears as something in the mind of the analyst alone. It represented an effort to think through the idea of recognition from the ground up in terms of an orientation to a principle, a relationship, or even love, which we refer to in order to step out of the doer done to complementarity. I realized, as I wrote in a separate Afterword to the reprinted version, that my thinking about the Third in this way replicated an idea of Kierkegaard, (brought to my attention by Hoffman in her 2010 book): surrender to the Third, which “is love itself” can be maintained even when the other fails, as the one who remains committed can hold onto the Third “and then the break has no power over him” (Kierkegaard cited in Hoffman, 2010, p. 204). The essence of the third position is that we use it to step out of complementary power relations in which we might feel done to by keeping faith with the intention of our connection. In this paper I tried to ground analytic work based on the intersubjective view of two participating subjectivities by understanding the developmental conditions of thirdness, both the early form of thirdness at the implicit level involving union experiences and accommodation, here called the rhythmic Third, as well as later explicit, symbolic forms of thirdness that recognize one’s own and others’ distinct perceptions, intentions or feelings, the differentiating Third.¹ Here, in this first

¹ Because readers found my terminology in previous works confusing, I have adapted this terminology with the help of Aron’s elaboration of my work. Previously I referred to *the One in the Third and the Third in the One*. Aron suggested, based on my discussion (Benjamin, 1998) of Sander, using the term *rhythmic Third* for the former, and I have introduced the term *the differentiating Third* to rename the latter.

foray, I tried to show how clinically, the concept of a co-created or shared intersubjective thirdness helps to elucidate the breakdown into the twoness of complementarity in impasses and enactments and suggest how recognition is restored through surrender. This includes accepting moments of disruption and the need to acknowledge them to the patient as a surrender to “what is.”

The introduction of the idea of intersubjectivity into psychoanalysis has many important consequences and has been understood in a variety of ways. The position I will develop in this paper defines intersubjectivity in terms of a relationship of mutual recognition—a relation in which each person experiences the other as a “like subject,” another mind who can be “felt with” yet has a distinct, separate center of feeling and perception. The antecedents of my perspective on intersubjectivity lie on the one hand with Hegel (Hegel, 1807; Kojève, 1969), and on the other with the developmentally oriented thinkers Winnicott (1971b) and Stern (1985)—quite different in their own ways—who try to specify the process by which we become able to grasp the other as having a separate yet similar mind.

In contrast to the notion of the intersubjective as a “system of reciprocal mutual influence”—referring to “any psychological field formed by interacting worlds of experience” (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, p. 3)—adumbrated by intersubjective systems theorists Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange (Orange, Atwood & Stolorow, 1997),² I emphasize, both developmentally and clinically, how we actually come to the felt experience of the other as a separate yet connected being with whom we are acting reciprocally. How do we get a sense that “there are other minds out there” (see Stern, 1985)?

In highlighting this phenomenological experience of other minds, I—like other intersubjective critics of Freud’s Cartesianism—emphasize the reciprocal, mutually influencing quality of interaction between subjects, the confusing traffic of two-way streets (Benjamin, 1977, 1988). But this theoretical recognition of

2 Stolorow and Atwood (1992) point out that they coined the term *intersubjective* independently and do not think of it as presupposing a developmental attainment, as Stern (1985) does. I (Benjamin, 1977; 1978) have made use of the term as introduced into philosophy by Habermas (1968), and then carried forward into psychology by Trevarthen (1977; 1980), in order to focus on the exchange between different minds. Like Stern, I consider the recognition of other minds (the other’s subjectivity) to be a crucial developmental attainment. Unlike Stern, however, I (Benjamin, 1988) have considered all aspects of co-creating interaction with the other, from early mutual gazing to conflicts around recognition, as part of the trajectory of intersubjective development. The major difference between the theorizing of Orange, Atwood and Stolorow (1997) and my own is not, as they believe (see Stolorow, Atwood & Orange, 2002; Orange, 2010), that I think the analyst should focus clinically on helping the patient to recognize the analyst’s (or other’s) subjectivity at the expense of the patient’s own. It is rather that I see such engagement in reciprocal recognition of the other as growing naturally out of the experience of being recognized by the other, as a crucial component of attachment responses that require mutual regulation and attunement, and, therefore, as ultimately a pleasure and not merely a chore (Benjamin, 2010).

intersubjective influence should not blind us to the power of actual psychic experience, which all too often is that of the one-way street—in which we feel as if one person is the doer, the other done to. One person is subject, the other object—as our theory of object relations all too readily portrays. To recognize that the object of our feelings, needs, actions and thoughts is actually another subject, an equivalent center of being (Benjamin, 1988; 1995b), is the real difficulty.

The place of the Third

To the degree that we ever manage to grasp two-way directionality, we do so only from the place of the *Third*, a vantage point outside the two.³ However, the intersubjective position that I refer to as *thirdness* consists of more than this vantage point of observation. The concept of the Third means a wide variety of things to different thinkers, and has been used to refer to the profession, the community, the theory one works with—anything one holds in mind that creates another point of reference outside the dyad (Britton, 1988; Aron, 1999; Crastopol, 1999). My interest is not in which “thing” we use, but in the process of creating thirdness—that is, in how we build relational systems and how we develop the intersubjective capacities for such co-creation. I think in terms of thirdness as a quality or experience of intersubjective relatedness that has as its correlate a certain kind of internal mental space; it is closely related to Winnicott’s idea of potential or transitional space. One of the first relational formulations of thirdness was Pizer’s (1998) idea of negotiation, originally formulated in 1990, in which analyst and patient each build, as in a squiggle drawing, a construction of their separate experiences together. Pizer analyzed transference not in terms of static, projective contents, but as an intersubjective process: “No, you can’t make this of me, but you can make that of me.”

Thus, I consider it crucial not to reify the Third, but to consider it primarily as a principle, function, or relationship (as in Ogden’s (1994) view), rather than as a “thing” in the way that theory or rules of technique are things. My aim is to distinguish it from superego maxims or ideals that the analyst holds onto with her ego, often clutching them as a drowning person clutches a straw. For in the space of thirdness, we are not *holding onto* a Third; we are, in Ghent’s (1990) felicitous usage, *surrendering to it*.⁴

Elaborating this idea, we might say that the Third is that to which we surrender, and thirdness is the intersubjective mental space that facilitates or results from surrender. In my thinking, the term *surrender* refers to a certain letting go of the

3 I am greatly indebted to Aron with whom I formulated important portions of this paper and descriptions of the Third in a jointly authored paper (Aron & Benjamin, 1999); Aron emphasizes the observing function, but modified by identification, which he has formulated more recently in Aron (2006).

4 Ghent’s work on surrender was the inspiration for my first formulations of some of these thoughts, which were presented at a conference in his honor sponsored by New York University Postdoctoral Psychology Program, May 2000.

self, and thus also implies the ability to take in the other's point of view or reality. Thus, surrender refers us to recognition—being able to sustain connectedness to the other's mind while accepting his separateness and difference. Surrender implies freedom from any intent to control or coerce.

Ghent's essay articulated a distinction between surrender and its ever-ready look-alike, submission. The crucial point was that surrender is not *to someone*. From this point follows a distinction between *giving in* or *over* to someone, an idealized person or thing, and letting go into *being with* them. I take this to mean that surrender requires a Third, that we follow some principle or process that mediates between self and other.

Whereas in Ghent's seminal essay, surrender was considered primarily as something the patient needs to do, my aim is to consider, above all, the analyst's surrender. I wish to see how we facilitate our own and the patient's surrender by consciously working to build a shared Third—or, to put it differently, how our recognition of mutual influence allows us to create thirdness together. Thus, I expand Ghent's contrast between submission and surrender to formulate a distinction between complementarity and thirdness, an orientation to a Third that mediates "I and Thou."

Complementarity: doer and done to

Considering the causes and remedies for the breakdown of recognition (Benjamin, 1988), and the way in which breakdown and renewal alternate in the psychoanalytic process (Benjamin, 1988), led me to formulate the contrast between the twoness of complementarity and the potential space of thirdness. In the complementary structure, dependency becomes coercive; and indeed, coercive dependence that draws each into the orbit of the other's escalating reactivity is a salient characteristic of the impasse (Mendelsohn, 2003). Conflict cannot be processed, observed, held, mediated, or played with. Instead, it emerges at the procedural level as an unresolved opposition between us, even tit for tat, based on each partner's use of splitting.

In my view, theories of splitting—for instance, the idea of the paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1946; 1952)—though essential, do not address this intersubjective dynamic of the two-person relationship and its crucial manifestations at the level of procedural interaction. The idea of complementary relations (Benjamin, 1988; 1998) aims to describe those push-me/pull-you, doer/done-to dynamics that we find in most impasses, which generally appear to be one-way—that is, each person feels *done to*, and not like an agent helping to shape a co-created reality. The question of how to get out of complementary twoness, which is the formal or structural pattern of all impasses between two partners, is where intersubjective theory finds its real challenge. Racker (1968) was, I believe, the first to identify this phenomenon as complementarity, formulating it in contrast to concordance in the countertransference. Symington (1983) first described this as an interlocking, dyadic pattern, a corporate entity based on the meeting of analyst's and patient's superegos.

Ogden (1994) developed his own perspective on this structural pattern in the notion of the *subjugating Third*. He used the term *analytic Third* differently than I do, to denote the relationship as that of an other to both selves, an entity created by the two participants in the dyad, a kind of co-created subject-object. This pattern or relational dynamic, which appears to form outside our conscious will, can be experienced either as a vehicle of recognition or something from which we cannot extricate ourselves. Taking on a life of its own, this negative of the Third may be carefully attuned, like the chase-and-dodge pattern between mother and infant. From my point of view, it is somewhat confusing to call this a Third because, rather than creating space, it sucks it up. With this negative of the Third (perhaps it could be called "the negative Third"), there is an erasure of the in-between—an inverse mirror relation, a complementary dyad concealing an unconscious symmetry.

Symmetry is a crucial part of what unites the pair in complementarity, generating the takes-one-to-know-one recognition feature of the doer/done-to relation (Benjamin, 1998). In effect, it builds on the deep structure of mirroring and affective matching that operate—largely procedurally and out of awareness—in any dyad, as when both partners glare at each other or interrupt in unison. As we pay more attention to this procedural level of interaction we come to discern the underlying symmetry that characterizes the apparent opposition of power relations: each feels unable to gain the other's recognition, and each feels in the other's power. Or, as Davies (2004; see also Davies & Frawley, 1994) has powerfully illustrated, each feels the other to be the abuser-seducer; each perceives the other as "doing to me."

It is as if the essence of complementary relations—the relation of twoness—is that there appear to be only two choices: either submission or resistance to the other's demand, as Ogden put it (1994). Characteristically, in complementary relations, each partner feels that her perspective on how this is happening is the only right one (Hoffman, 2002)—or at least that the two are irreconcilable, as in "Either I'm crazy or you are." "If what you say is true, I must be very wrong—perhaps shamefully wrong, in the sense that everyone can see what is wrong with me, and I don't know what it is and can't stop it" (see Russell, 1998).

As clinicians, when we are caught in such interactions, we may tell ourselves that some reciprocal dynamic is at work, although we may actually be full of self-blame. In such cases, our apparent acceptance of responsibility fails to truly help in extricating us from the feeling that the other person is controlling us, or leaving us no option except to be either reactive or impotent. Attributing blame to the self actually weakens one's sense of being a responsible agent.

In the doer/done-to mode, being the one who is actively hurtful feels involuntary, a position of helplessness. In any true sense of the word, our sense of self as subject is eviscerated when we are with our "victim," who is also experienced as a victimizing object. An important relational idea for resolving impasses is that the recovery of subjectivity requires the recognition of our own participation. Crucially, this usually involves surrendering our resistance to responsibility, a resistance arising from reactivity to blame. When we as analysts resist the

inevitability of hurting the other—when we dissociate bumping into their bruises or jabbing them while stitching them up, and, of course, when we deny locking into their projective processes with the unfailing accuracy of our own—we are bound to get stuck in complementary twoness.

Once we have deeply accepted our own contribution—and its inevitability—the fact of two-way participation becomes a vivid experience, something we can understand and use to feel less helpless and more effective. In this sense, we surrender to the principle of reciprocal influence in interaction, which makes possible both responsible action and freely given recognition. This action is what allows the outside, different other to come into view (Winnicott, 1971a). It opens the space of thirdness, enabling us to negotiate differences and to connect. The experience of surviving breakdown into complementarity, or twoness, and subsequently of communicating and restoring dialogue—each person (not just the analyst) surviving for the other—is crucial to therapeutic action. This principle of rupture and repair (Tronick, 1989) has become essential to our thinking. From it emerges a more advanced form of thirdness, based on a sense of shared communication about reality that tolerates or embraces difference, one which is interpersonally realized as both partners feel freer to think about and comment on themselves and each other.

The idea of the Third

Initially, the idea of the Third passed in to psychoanalysis through Lacan (1975), whose view of intersubjectivity derived from Hegel's theory of recognition and its popularization by the French Hegelian writer Kojève (1969). Lacan, as can best be seen in Book I of his seminars, saw the Third as that which keeps the relationship between two persons from collapsing. This collapse can take the form of merger (oneness), eliminating difference, or of a twoness that splits the differences—the polarized opposition of the power struggle. Lacan thought that the intersubjective Third was constituted by recognition through speech, which allows a difference of viewpoints and of interests, saving us from the kill-or-be-killed power struggle in which there is only one right way.

In many analytic writings, theory or interpretation is seen as the symbolic father with whom the mother analyst has intercourse (Britton, 1988; Feldman, 1997). Not only in Lacanian theory, but also in Kleinian, this may lead to a privileging of the analyst's relation to the Third as theory and of the analyst's authority as knower (despite Lacan's warning against seeing the analyst as the one supposed to know), as well as to an overemphasis on the oedipal content of the Third. Unfortunately, Lacan's oedipal view equated the Third with the father (Benjamin, 1995c), contending that the father's "no," his prohibition or "castration," constitutes the symbolic Third (Lacan, 1977). Lacan equated the distinction between thirdness and twoness with the division between a paternal *symbolic*, or law, and a maternal *imaginary*. The paternal Third in the mother's mind opens up the sane world of symbolic thirdness (Lacan, 1977).

I agree that in some cases we might speak of someone's letting go and accepting the full blow of the reality that mother has her own desire and has chosen father, and this might indeed constitute one kind of surrender to the Third (Kristeva, 1987). I respect Britton's (1988; 1998) idea, and its adaptation by Aron (1995), that the triangular relation of a child and two others (not necessarily father and mother) organizes the intersubjective position of one subject who observes the other two in interaction. But unless there is already space in the dyad, unless the third person is also dyadically connected to the child, he cannot function as a true Third. He becomes a persecutory invader, rather than a representative of symbolic functioning, as well as a figure of identification and an other whom mother and child both love and share.

The only usable Third, by definition, is one that is **shared**. Thus, I contend that thirdness is not literally instituted by a father (or other) as the third person; it cannot originate in the Freudian oedipal relation in which the father appears as prohibitor and castrator. And, most crucially, the mother or primary parent must create that space by being able to hold in tension her subjectivity/desire/awareness and the needs of the child. I will say more about this form of maternal awareness as a form of subjectivity that helps to create a different relation between two subjects with different needs.

The problem of oneness

The issue of maternal subjectivity, as we have known for some time, is relevant to critiquing developmental theories that postulate an initial state of oneness between mother and baby (Benjamin, 1995c). A fascinating point can be found in Lacan's (1975) critique of object relations theory. Regarding Balint's idea of primary love, Lacan objected that, if the intersubjective Third were not there from the beginning, if the mother-baby couple were simply a relation of oneness, then mother could nurse unstintingly in total identification with baby, but there would then be nothing to stop her, when she was starving, from turning the tables and eating the baby.⁵

Thus, the child is actually safeguarded by the parental ability to maintain aspects of subjectivity, enabling her to suspend her own need in favor of the child's immediate need without obliterating the difference between *I* and *thou* (Buber, 1923). In a related vein, Slochower (1996) argues that we must consciously bear the knowledge of pain in giving over to the patient, who cannot bear our subjectivity.

This ability to maintain internal awareness, to sustain the tension of difference between my needs and yours while still being attuned to you, forms the basis of the *differentiating Third*—the interactive principle that incarnates recognition and respect for the other's common humanity without submission or control. This

5 Shockingly for us today, Lacan (1975) alleged that Alice Balint portrayed certain aborigines as doing just that.

differentiating Third is also the basis of the *moral Third*—the principle whereby we create relationships in accord with ethical values—and the *symbolic thirdness* which includes narration, self-reflection and observation of self and other. The *differentiating Third* is analogous to the ability to project the child's future development (in other words, her independence as a separate center of initiative), which Loewald (1951) considers a parental function in his famous paper on therapeutic action. The sustained tension of difference helps create the explicit symbolic level of thirdness in which we recognize others and ourselves as having distinct intentions or feelings, separate centers of initiative and perception. This *differentiating Third* is exemplified by the mother's ability to maintain awareness that the distressed child's pain (e.g., over separation) will pass, alongside her empathy with that pain; that is, she is able to hold the tension between her perspective and her child's, her identification with him and the adult's observational function. This mental space of thirdness in the caretaker must, I believe, in some way be palpable to the child. As a function, in both its symbolic and soothing aspects, it can be recognized and identified with, then made use of by the child or patient.

The analyst is only able to soothe—that is, help regulate the patient's arousal level—to the extent that she is maintaining this position of thirdness (not overwhelmed by identification with the patient's state, in the sense understood by the theory of projective identification). In this sense, oneness needs to be modified by thirdness. However, this thirdness needs to be close and accessible enough, conveying a sense of a shared potential to the patient, so that the analyst is not giving empathy from a position of pure complementarity (the one who knows, heals, remains in charge). Otherwise, the patient will feel that because of what the analyst has given him, the analyst owns him; in other words, the analyst can “eat,” that is shape, him in return. The patient will feel he must suppress his differences, spare the analyst, participate in pseudomutuality or react with envious defiance of the analyst's power. Lacking the sense of a shared differentiating Third, the patient has nothing to give back, no impact or insight that will change the analyst.

The flip side of this absence of thirdness is that the analyst, like a mother, may feel that her separate aims, her being a person with her own needs, will “kill” the patient. She then cannot distinguish between when she is holding the frame in a way that is conducive to the patient's growth and when she is being hurtful to the patient. How can she then bear in mind the patient's need to safely depend on her, and yet extricate herself from feeling that she must choose between the patient's needs and her own? Such a conflict may occur when an anxious patient repeatedly calls on weekends, or when the analyst goes away.

Clinical vignette I: Rob

Let me illustrate the dynamic that is instituted when the patient's world is organized by the choice between submitting to being eaten by or “killing” the other.

Rob, a patient in his forties, grew up as his mother's favorite, the one who existed to fulfil her expectations, her perfectionist demands, her unfulfilled ambition—in short, to live for her desire. Rob married a woman who is committed to being a perfect, self-sacrificing mother, but who refuses sex; thus, Rob can never fulfil his own desire as a separate person, nor can the couple come together as two bodies in the oneness of attunement.

Rob forms a deeply passionate attachment to a woman at his work, and while considering leaving his wife, takes his own apartment. But his wife demands that he swear on the Bible that he will not contact this woman for 6 weeks while he is considering the situation; otherwise, she will never take him back. Rob has submitted to this demand, but is confused. In effect, he does not know a real Third and cannot distinguish a moral principle from a power move. He feels bound to his promise, but also coerced, and at the same time frightened of losing either his wife or his lover. He tells his analyst he feels suicidal.

At this juncture, Rob's analyst, a candidate in supervision, is gripped with terrible urgency as well, feeling that she must protect and save her patient. But she is about to leave for a long-planned week's vacation and finds herself fearing that her leaving might kill the patient. Separation means murder. She feels divided: coerced, but bound to her patient, deeply concerned and afraid to leave, but aware she is caught in an enactment. She cannot get to that feeling of the mother who knows her baby's distress will pass. She wants to be the good mother, available and healing, but can find no way to do this without complying in some way with Rob's notion that he can only stand alone by abjuring all dependency. She will be coerced by Rob as he is by his wife.

Patient and analyst are thus replaying the relationship in which the child must submit to the mother who devours; yet the mother who leaves destroys the child. The Third here is perverted, turned from a commitment to truth or freely agreed-upon shared principle (*moral Third*) such as “We need to give our marriage a chance,” into a promise extracted, “Give in to me or else.” The wife threatens the patient that he will go to hell for leaving her, thus giving expression to a moral world in which goodness/God is opposed to freedom, where freedom is only possible in a world of moral chaos ruled by the devil. The perversion of the moral Third accompanies the kill-or-be-killed complementarity and marks the absence of recognition of the other's separateness, the space that permits desire, the acceptance of loss.

In consultation, the analyst realizes she must bear her guilt for wanting to be separate and to have her own life, just as the patient must bear his. She has to find a way to distinguish between her deep empathy with the patient's fear of abandonment, on the one hand, and submission to him in his urgent, extracting behavior, his demand that she give her life, on the other. In the observational position provided by supervision, it becomes clearer how the interaction is informed by the belief that separating and having one's own independent subjectivity and desire are tantamount to killing, while staying means letting oneself be killed.

The analyst is inspired in the following hour to find a way to talk to Rob about how she has to bear the guilt of leaving him, as he must bear his own guilt. This dispels the sense of do-or-die urgency in the session, the intense twoness in which someone must do wrong, or hurt or destroy the other.

The one in the Third

One of the important questions I want to address here is how we think about the way human beings actually develop this differentiating Third. Here I part company with Lacan (1975). The deeper problem with the oedipal view of the father as representative of the Third is that it misses the early origins of the Third in the maternal dyad. Lacan tells us that the thirdness of speech is an antidote to murder, to “your reality” versus “my reality,” but his idea of speech misses the first part of the conversation. This is the part that baby watchers have made an indelible part of our thinking. In my view of thirdness, recognition is not first constituted by verbal speech; rather, it begins with the early nonverbal experience of sharing a pattern, a dance, with another person. I (Benjamin, 2002) have therefore proposed a nascent, energetic form of the Third—as distinct from the one in the mother’s mind. It is present in the earliest exchange of gestures between mother and child, in the relationship that has been called *oneness*. I consider this early exchange to be a form of thirdness, and suggest that we use the term *rhythmic Third* for the principle of affective attunement and accommodation to share patterning that informs such exchanges. (I previously called “the One in the Third,” which meant that part of the Third that is constituted by our felt experience of being one with the other.)

For the observing, critical functions of the differentiating Third to actually work as a true Third—rather than as a set of perverse or persecutory demands, as we saw in the case of Rob—requires integration of the capacity for accommodation/attunement to a mutually created set of expectations. The primal form this accommodation assumes is the creation of, alignment with, and repair of patterns, the participation in connections based on affect resonance. Sander (2002), in his discussion of infancy research, calls this resonance *rhythmicity*, which he considers one of the two fundamental principles of all human interaction (the other being specificity). Hence the name *rhythmic Third* is inspired by his work. Rhythmic experiences help constitute the capacity for thirdness, and rhythmicity may be seen as a metaphor for the model principle of lawfulness underlying the creation of shared patterns. Rhythm constitutes the basis for coherence in interaction between persons, as well as coordination between the internal parts of the organism.

Sander (2002) illustrated the value of specific recognition and of accommodation by studying how neonates who were fed on demand adapted more rapidly to the circadian rhythm than those fed on schedule. When the significant other is a recognizing one who surrenders to the rhythm of the baby, a co-created rhythm

can begin to evolve. As the caregiver accommodates, so does the baby. The basis for this mutual accommodation is probably the inbuilt tendency to respond symmetrically, to match and mirror; in effect, the baby matches the mother’s matching, much as one person’s letting go releases the other.

This might be seen as the beginning of interaction in accord with the principle of mutual accommodation, which entails not imitation, but a hard-wired pull to get the two organisms into alignment, to mirror, match, or be in sync. Sander’s study showed that once such a coherent, dyadic system gets going, it seems to move naturally in the direction of orienting to a deeper law of reality—in this case, the law of night and day. In using this notion of lawfulness, I am trying to capture, at least metaphorically, the harmonic or musical dimension of the Third in its transpersonal or energetic aspect (Knoblauch, 2000). I have also referred to it as the *energetic Third*.

Again, this aspect of lawfulness was missed by oedipal theory, which privileges law as boundary, prohibition and separation, thus frequently missing the element of symmetry or harmony in lawfulness. Such theorizing fails to grasp the origins of the Third in the nascent or primordial experience that has been called oneness, union, resonance—but really consists of two beings aligning to a third pattern. Research on mother—infant face-to-face play (Beebe & Lachmann, 1994) shows how adult and infant align with a third, establishing a co-created rhythm that is not reducible to a model of action-reaction, with one active and the other passive or one leading and the other following. Action-reaction characterizes our experience of complementary twoness, the one-way direction; by contrast, a *shared Third* is experienced as a cooperative endeavour.

As I have stated previously (Benjamin, 1999; 2002), the thirdness of attuned play resembles musical improvisation, in which both partners follow a structure or pattern that both of them simultaneously create and surrender to, a structure enhanced by our capacity to receive and transmit at the same time in nonverbal interaction. The co-created Third has the transitional quality of being both invented and discovered. To the question of “Who created this pattern, you or I?,” the paradoxical answer is “Both and neither.”

I suggest that, as with early rhythms of sleeping and nursing, it is initially the adult’s accommodation that permits the creation of an organized system with a rhythm of its own, marked by a quality of lawfulness and attunement to some deeper structure—“the groove.” In “intersubjectivity proper,” that is, by the age of ten months, the partners’ alignment—as Stern (1985) proposed—becomes a “direct subject in its own right” (Beebe et al., 2003b). In other words the quality of our mutual recognition, our thirdness, becomes the source of pleasure or despair. The basis for appreciating this *intention* to align and to accommodate seems to lie in our “mirror-neurons” (Gallese, 2009; Ammanti & Gallese, 2014). Beebe and Lachmann (1994; 2002) have described how, in performing the actions of the other, we replicate their intentions within ourselves—thus, in the deepest sense, we learn to accommodate to accommodation itself (we fall in love with love).

The shared Third

If we grasp the creation of thirdness as an intersubjective process that is constituted in early, presymbolic experiences of accommodation, mutuality, and the intention to recognize and be recognized by the other, we can understand how important it is to think in terms of building a shared Third. In shifting to an intersubjective concept of the Third, we ground a very different view of the clinical process from the one espoused by those who use the concept of the Third to refer to observing capacities and the analyst's relation to his own theory or thinking.

Contemporary Kleinians view the Third as an oedipal construct, an observing function, conceiving the analyst's Third as a relation to theory rather than a shared, co-created experience with the patient. Britton (1988; 1998) theorized the Third in terms of the oedipal link between the parents, explaining that the patient has difficulty tolerating the Third as an observational stance taken by the analyst because theory represents the father in the analyst's mind. The father, with whom the analyst is mentally conversing—actually having intercourse—intrudes on an already shaky mother-child dyad. Indeed, one patient yelled at Britton, “Stop that fucking thinking!”

In discussing Britton's approach, Aron (Aron & Benjamin, 1999) pointed out that his description of how he worked with the patient shows a modulation of responses, an attunement that accords with the notion of creating the identificatory aspect of the rhythmic Third. The safe shelter that Britton (1998) thinks the patient must find in the analyst's mind may rely on the analyst's differentiating Third, the connection to an observing position outside the dyad. But it is experienced by the patient as the accommodating asymmetry of the mother (who also has a differentiating Third) with her baby, a point I shall return to when I consider how the two thirds are interrelated. For now my point is that this accommodation allows or invites the patient into a shared rhythmic Third based primarily on his need for affect attunement and recognition.

In seeing the Third as essentially an intersubjective co-creation, the analyst offers an alternative to the asymmetrical complementarity of knower and known, giver and given to. *By contrast, when the analyst sees the Third as something the analyst relates to internally, the central couple may become the one the patient is excluded from, rather than the one that analyst and patient build together.* I suggest that there is an iatrogenic component to the view of the Third as something the patient attacks because she feels excluded. It inheres in the view of the Third as *the other person or theory*—although I take Britton's point that because of the lack of a good maternal container, the analyst's relation to an other may symbolize, or may even feel like, a threat to the patient's connection.

But I think that, most frequently, the other with whom the analyst is conversing may be another part of the patient, the co-parent or developed aspect of the patient in contrast to the child part (Pizer, 2002)—the adult part that has often collaborated and joined the analyst and his thinking. As the more traumatized, abandoned, or hated parts of the self-arise, this collaborator is experienced by the betrayed child

as a sellout, a “good-girl” or “good-boy” false self, who must be repudiated along with the part of the analyst whom the patient loves. Thus creating a shared Third requires constant attention to the multiplicity of our part selves.

An example from the literature

The effects of the usage of the Third as an observing function from which the patient feels excluded, and therefore attacks, are especially well illustrated in a description of impasse by Feldman (1993). He described a case in which the patient was speaking of an incident from childhood in which he had bought his mother a tub of ice cream for her birthday, choosing his own favorite flavor:

When he offered it to her, she said she supposed he expected her to give him some of it. He saw it as an example of the way she never wholeheartedly welcomed what he did for her and always distrusted his motives.

(p. 321)

Feldman apparently did not investigate what in that moment might have caused the patient to repeat a story that implicated his mother “habitually responded . . . *without thinking, and without giving any space to what he himself was thinking or feeling*” (p. 323, italics in original). Feldman argued that the patient's motive was to regain reassurance, to reestablish his psychic equilibrium—seen as non-analytic needs—and that, when the patient failed to receive reassurance, he needed to emphasize how hurtful the episode had been. Feldman noted that the patient withdrew, feeling hurt and angry. I would speculate that the patient was trying to communicate something (for instance the shame produced by the rejection of his need for soothing) that the analyst had missed in assuming that he already understood.

What the analyst understood and proposed to the patient was that the patient could not tolerate the mother's having her own independent observations (much as he, the analyst, felt not allowed to have them; note the mirror effect here). The mother was instead thinking about her son in her own way by using her connection to an internal Third. Feldman maintained that he neither “fit in with” nor criticized the patient, but rather showed that he had been able to maintain, under pressure, his own capacity for observing and his way of thinking, and this, he believed, was primarily what disturbed the patient. The patient had “sometimes been able to acknowledge he hates being aware that I am thinking for myself” (p. 324). As is symptomatic of complementary breakdown, Feldman found himself unable to maintain his own thinking except by resisting “the pressure to enact a benign tolerant relationship” (p. 325) or to otherwise fit in—in other words, to soothe and regulate the patient.

It is notable that Feldman was insightful in recognizing that insisting on “the version of his own role that the analyst finds reassuring may put pressure on the patient to accept a view of himself that he finds intolerable” (p. 326). Feldman

accurately described the impasse in which the patient was “then driven to redress the situation” (p. 326) and assert counterpressure.⁶ What he did not recognize was how his view of the Third—in my terms, a *Third without the oneness of rhythmicity*—contributed to this enactment. His case narrative demonstrates that thirdness cannot reside simply in the analyst’s independent observation, nor can it be maintained in a posture of resisting the patient’s pressure, rather than responding to it: that is, without recognizing and soothing distress related to shame, rejection and so on. In effect, this is an illustration of the complementary situation, in which the analyst’s resistance—his effort to maintain internal, theoretically informed observation, as though that were sufficient to make a Third—led to the breakdown of the intersubjective thirdness between analyst and patient.

My way of analyzing this case would be rather different than Feldman’s, by which I do not mean that in the live moment, I might not feel something like the pressure and resistance that he felt, but rather, that I would see the situation differently in retrospective self-supervision. The patient, in response to Feldman’s prioritization of “observing” or “thinking,” insisted that the analyst was behaving like his mother; in other words, he correctly read Feldman’s refusal to mold, to accommodate, to show understanding and give space to what he himself was feeling. The ice cream was a metaphor for the intersubjective Third, part of the patient’s effort to communicate about what he wanted in treatment—and had wanted in childhood—to share, most likely his perception of emotional reality. The mother (or analyst) was unable to see the ice cream as a shareable entity—in her mental world, everything was either *for her child* or *for herself*; it was not a gift if it was shared, but was so only if it were relinquished.

How might this dynamic have affected the mother’s envy and sense of depletion each time she gave to the patient? How much could she have enjoyed sharing anything with her child? In a world without shared Thirds, without a space of collaboration and sharing, everything is mine or yours, including especially the perception of reality. Only one person can eat; only one person can be right.

The analytic task in such a case is to help the patient create (or repair) a system of sharing and mutuality, in which now you have a bite, now I have one, as when you eat a cracker with your toddler. The toddler may have to insist at times on “all mine,” but the delight of letting Mommy take a bite, or letting her pretend to, as well as of playfully pulling the cracker away, is often an even greater pleasure. Feldman’s patient was trying to tell him that in their co-created system, the Third was a negative one; there was no intersubjective thirdness in which they could both eat, taste and spit out interpretations of what is going on as a shared project. In order to repair ruptures such as Feldman described, the analyst and patient must be able to share their perceptions and observation, rather than simply opposing each other.

6 In a later work, Feldman (1997) discussed how the analyst may unconsciously foster impasse by becoming involved in projection and enactments.

In my understanding of such complementary oppositions, if the analyst feels compelled to protect his internal, observing Third from the patient’s reality, this generally is a sign of a breakdown already occurring in the system of collaborative understanding and attunement. The analyst needs the differentiating aspect, but this “independent thinking” cannot be achieved by, in effect, “refusing to fit in,” refusing accommodation. In order to receive the patient’s intention and to reestablish shared reality, the analyst needs to find a way to fit, to accommodate, that does not feel coerced—bringing together his ability to reflect with the identificatory impulse of the rhythmic Third. The clinical emphasis on building the shared Third is, in my view, a useful antidote to earlier, often persecutory idealizations of interpretation—even those modified ones, such as in Steiner’s (1993) position, which recognizes the necessity of the analyst’s accommodation to the patient’s need to feel understood, yet considers it less contributory to psychic change than acquiring understanding.

Rather than viewing understanding—that is, the Third—as a thing to be acquired, a relational view sees it as an interactive process that creates a dialogic structure: a shared Third, an opportunity to experience mutual recognition. This shared Third, the dialogue, creates mental space for thinking as an internal conversation with the other (Spezzano, 1996).

Integration: differentiation with oneness or the moral Third

To construct the idea of the shared, intersubjective Third, I have brought together two experiences of thirdness: the differentiating aspect that needs to inform even the oneness of accommodation, empathy and resonance and the rhythmic aspect that informs shared reflection, negotiating and repair of ruptures. I now want to suggest briefly how we can understand these in terms of what we have observed developmentally in the parent-child relation. We need to distinguish the rhythmic Third in the One, the principle of accommodation, from the Third in the mother’s mind, which is more like the principle of differentiation.

I have suggested that, while it is crucial for the mother to identify with the baby’s need—for instance, in adjusting the feeding rhythm—there is the inevitable moment when twoness arises in the form of the mother’s need for sleep, for the claims of her own separate existence. For many a mother, this is experienced as the moment of truth, rather like Lacan’s kill-or-be-killed moment. Here the function of the Third is to help transcend this threatening twoness not by fostering the illusion that mother and baby are one or by self-abnegation; rather, at this point, the principle of asymmetrical accommodation should arise from the sense of surrender to necessity. The mother needs to feel that this is acceptance of the baby’s nature, not a submission to a tyrannical demand or an overwhelming task.

If a mother resorts to priding herself on how overworked and self-denying she is, she may undermine knowledge of her own limits and the ability to distinguish necessary asymmetry from masochism. Likewise, the mother needs to hold in mind

the knowledge that much infant distress is natural and ephemeral, in order for her to be able to soothe her child's distress without dissolving into anxious oneness with it.

An important contribution of infancy research, as Fonagy et al. (2002) have emphasized, is an explanation of how the mother can demonstrate her empathy for the baby's negative emotion, and yet by a "marker"—exaggerated mirroring—make clear to the baby that it is not her own fear or distress that she is displaying. Fonagy et al. propose that mothers are driven to saliently mark their affect-mirroring displays to differentiate them from realistic emotional expressions. The baby is soothed by the fact that mother is not herself distressed, but is reflecting and understanding *his* feeling. This behavior, the contrast between the mother's gesture and her affective tension level, is perceived by the child. I would suggest that this kind of interaction constitutes a form of protosymbolic communication and thus is an important basis for later symbolic communication about one another's minds (e.g., "I know you are upset by this but I think it will turn out okay.")

The study of marking shows how the feeling about behavior and sharing/communicating about it are not identical. Such an incipient differentiation between the gestural representation and the thing/feeling helps build a shared symbolic Third. It relies on the mother's relation to a differentiating Third—her ability to represent her distress as distinct from her child's, and so as a necessary part of the relationship rather than a disregulating urgency in her mind. It is the place where self-regulation and mutual regulation meet, enabling differentiation with empathy, rather than projective confusion. Thus, we see the synergy of the attunement function, the rhythmic Third, with the containing function of the differentiating Third. I emphasize that this is not only a matter of differentiation because the mother needs the identification of the rhythmic Third, and not merely an abstract idea of what is right. The Third degenerates into mere duty if there is no identificatory oneness of feeling the child's urgency and relief, pleasure and joy in connection.

Let me give an example written by someone who was himself a parent and was writing about a parental experience, which is an important point, but even more important to me personally, it was written by Stephen Mitchell, whose subsequent death was a great loss. It represents a statement by a founding relational theorist about the importance of the principle of accommodation to the other's rhythm in creating a shared Third. Mitchell (1993) underscored the distinction between submission to duty and surrender to the differentiating Third, what I am calling the Third in the One:

When my older daughter was about two or so, I remember my excitement at the prospect of taking walks with her, given her new ambulatory skills and her intense interest in being outdoors. However, I soon found these walks agonizingly slow. My idea of a walk entailed brisk movement along a road or path. Her idea was quite different. The implications of this difference hit me one day when we encountered a fallen tree on the side of the road. . . .

the rest of the "walk" was spent exploring the fungal and insect life on, under, and around the tree. I remember my sudden realization that these walks would be no fun for me, merely a parental duty, if I held onto my idea of walks. As I was able to give that up and surrender to my daughter's rhythm and focus, a different type of experience opened up to me. . . . If I had simply restrained myself out of duty, I would have experienced the walk as a compliance. But I was able to become my daughter's version of a good companion and to find in that another way for me to be that took on great personal meaning for me. (p. 147)

The parent thus accepts the principle of necessary asymmetry, accommodating to the other as a way of generating thirdness, and is transformed by the experience of opening to mutual pleasure. Mitchell asked how we distinguish inauthentic submission to another's demand from authentic change, another way of questioning how we distinguish the compliance of twoness from the transformational learning of thirdness. To me, it seems clear that in this case, the internal parental Third, which takes the form of reflections on what will create connection in this relationship, allows surrender and transformation. This intention to connect and the resulting self-observation and acceptance of what is lawful, in accordance with "how it is," produce a sense of the *moral Third*: the orientation to a larger principle of lawfulness, necessity, rightness or goodness.

It would be simple (and not untrue) to say that the space of thirdness opens up through surrender, the acceptance of simply being, stopping to watch the fungi grow. But I have been trying to show how important it is to distinguish this from *submission*—to clear up a common confusion between surrender and an ideal of pure empathy, whereby merger or oneness can tend towards inauthenticity and the denial of self, leading ultimately to the complementary alternative of "eat or be eaten." For instance, some authors have warned against the idea of the analyst's authenticity as if it meant imposing the analyst's view in a reversal of the old reluctance to disclose and impose (see Bromberg's 2006 critique) and a consequent failure of empathy. This opposition of empathy and authenticity splits oneness and thirdness, identification and differentiation, and constitutes the analytic dyad as a complementarity in which there is room for only one subject.

I have found that analysts who have worked deeply with patients in a style that emphasizes empathic attunement frequently come for help with stalemates based on the exclusion of the observing Third, which now appears as a destructive outside force, a killer that threatens the treatment. This issue is crucial because submission to the ideal of being an all-giving, all-understanding mother can gradually shift into a persecutory experience of being depleted, losing empathy, being devoured. As one supervisee put it, she began to feel so immobilized that she imagined herself cocooned in a condom-like sheath, "shrink-wrapped."

The relational perspective is not that the analyst should demand that the patient recognize the analyst's subjectivity—a misunderstanding of the relational position on intersubjectivity by those like Stolorow and Orange (Stolorow, Atwood &

Orange, 2002; Orange, 2010) who emphasize the important part played by decentering from one's own subjectivity. It is rather that the analyst learn to distinguish true thirdness from the self-immolating ideal of oneness that the analyst suffers as a persecutory simulacrum of the Third, blocking real self-observation. The analyst needs to work through her fear of blame, badness, and hurtfulness, which is tying both the patient and herself in knots.

As a supervisor, I often find myself helping the analyst create a space in which it is possible to accept the inevitability of causing or suffering pain, being "bad," without destroying the Third. I observe how both members of the dyad become involved in a symmetrical dance, each trying not to be the bad one, the one who eats rather than being eaten. Yet whichever side the analyst takes in this dance, taking sides itself simply perpetuates complementary relations.

The concept of thirdness formulates an alternative to this dance, by adding the differentiating Third to the rhythmic aspects of accommodation and empathy Third. It aims to distinguish compliance to a needed other from the acceptance of necessary asymmetry (Aron, 1996). However, such necessary asymmetry does not imply a view of the maternal bond as involving only one-way recognition of the child's subjectivity by the parent. Such a view is incompatible with an intersubjective theory of development, which recognizes the joys and the necessity of reaching mutual understanding with the other. One-way recognition misses the mutuality of identification by which an other's intention is known to us. To separate or oppose being understood from self-reflective insight or understanding the other misses the process of creating a shared Third as a vehicle of mutual understanding.

My contention is, then, that we need the differentiating Third even when we aim for oneness, that is, that oneness is dangerous without the Third—but it does not work properly without the flip side, the rhythmic joining in a shared Third. We (Aron & Benjamin, 1999) have talked about the need for a deep identificatory sense of joining the other as a prerequisite for developing the positive aspects of the observing Third. Without this identificatory underpinning, without the nascent thirdness of emotional attunement, the more elaborate forms of self-observation based on triangular relations become mere simulacrum of the Third. In other words, if the patient does not feel safely taken into the analyst's mind, the observing position of the Third is experienced as a barrier to getting in, leading to compliance, hopeless dejection, or hurt anger. As Schore (2003) has proposed, we might think of this in terms of brain hemispheres: the analyst's shutting down the right-brain contact with her own pain also cuts off affective communication with the patient's pain. Moving dissociatively into a left-brain modality of observation and judgement, the analyst "switches off" and is reduced to interpreting "resistance" (Spezzano, 1993).

Typically, observing thirds that lack the music of the rhythmic Third, of reciprocal identification, cannot create enough symmetry or equality to prevent idealization from deteriorating into submission to a person or ideal (Benjamin, 1995d). Such submission may be countered by defiance and self-destructive acts.

Analysts in the past were particularly prone to conflating compliant submission on the patient's part with self-observation or achievement of insight and defiance with resistance. One of the most common difficulties in all psychotherapeutic encounters is that the patient can feel "done to" by the therapist's observation or interpretation; such interventions trigger self-blame and shame, which used to be called by the misnomer "resistance" (although they may indeed reflect intersubjective resistance to the analyst's projection of her shame or guilt at hurting the patient). In other words, without compassionate acceptance, which the patient may have seldom experienced and never have internalized (as opposed to what ought to be), observation becomes judgement.

Analysts, of course, turn this same beam of critical scrutiny on themselves, and what should be a self-reflexive function turns into the self-flagellating, "bad-analyst" feeling. They fantasize, in effect, being shamed and blamed in front of their colleagues; the community and its ideals become persecutory rather than supportive.

Breakdown and repair

There may be no tenet more important to overcoming this shame and blame in analytic work than the idea that recognition continually breaks down, that thirdness always collapses into twoness, that we are always losing and recovering the intersubjective view. We have to keep reminding ourselves that breakdown and repair are part of a larger process, a concomitant of the imperatives of participating in a two-way interaction. This is because, as Mitchell (1997) said, becoming part of the problem is how we become part of the solution. In this sense, the analyst's surrender means a deep acceptance of the necessity of becoming involved in enactments and impasses. This acceptance becomes the basis for a new version of thirdness that encourages us to honestly confront our feelings of shame, inadequacy and guilt, to tolerate the symmetrical relation we may enter into with our patients, without giving up negative capability—in short, a different kind of *moral Third*.

Until the relational turn, it seems, many analysts were content to think of interpretation as the primary means of instituting the Third. The notion of resolving difficulties remained some version of the analyst's holding onto the observing position, supported by theory, and hence formulating and interpreting in the face of impasse. Relational analysts are inclined to see interpretation as action, and to recognize, as Mitchell (1997) pointed out, that holding onto interpretation could perpetuate the very problems the interpretation is designed to address. An example is when an analyst interprets a power struggle, and the patient experiences this, too, as a power move.

Relational analysts have explored a variety of ways to collaborate with the patient in exploring or exchanging perceptions. For instance, the analyst might call for the patient's help in figuring out what is going on, in order to open up the space of thirdness, rather than simply putting forward his own interpretation of

what has just gone wrong (Ehrenberg, 1992). The latter can appear to be a defensive insistence on one's own thinking as the necessary version of reality.

Britton (1988; 1998) explicitly considers the way the complementary opposition of my reality and your reality gets activated within the analytic relationship when the presence of an observing Third is felt to be intolerable or persecutory. It feels, Britton remarked, as though there is room for only one psychic reality. I have been trying to highlight the two-way direction of effects in this complementary dynamic, the symmetry wherein both partners experience the impossibility of acknowledging the other's reality without abandoning one's own. The analyst may also be overwhelmed by how destructive the patient's image of her is to her own sense of self. For instance, when the patient's reality is that "You are toxic and have made me ill, mad and unable to function," the analyst will typically find it nearly impossible to take that in without losing her own reality.

I believe that the analyst's feeling of being invaded by the other's malignant emotional reality might mirror the patient's early experiences of having his own feelings denied and supplanted by the parent's reality. The parental response that the child's needs for independence or nurturance are "bad" not only invalidates needs, and not only repels the child from the parent's mind; equally important, as Davies (2004) has shown, the parent is also subjecting the child to an invasion of the parent's shame and badness, which also endangers the child's mind.

Where this kind of malignant complementarity takes hold, the ping-pong of projective identification—the exchange of blame—is often too rapid to halt or even to observe. The analyst cannot function empathically, because attunement to the patient now feels like submission to extortion, and it is partly through this involuntary response on the analyst's part to the patient's dissociated self-experience that trauma is reenacted. Neither patient nor analyst can have a grip on reality at this point—what Russell (1998) called "the crunch," often signalled by the feeling expressed in the question, "Am I crazy or is it you?"

The analyst caught in the crunch feels unable to respond authentically, and against her own will, she feels compelled, unconsciously or consciously, to defend herself against the patient's reality. When the analyst feels, implies or says, "You are doing something to *me*," she involuntarily mirrors the *you* who feels that the other is bad and doing something to you. Therefore, the more each *I* insists that it is *you*, the more each *I* becomes *you*, and the more our boundaries are blurred. My effort to save my sanity mirrors your effort to save your sanity. Sometimes, this self-protective reaction shows itself in subtle ways: the analyst's refusal to accommodate; the occurrence of a painful silence; a disjunctive comment, conveying the analyst's withdrawal from the rhythm of mutual emotional exchange, from the One in the Third. This reaction is registered in turn by the patient, who thinks, "The analyst has chosen her own sanity over mine. She would rather that I feel crazy than that she be the one who is in the wrong."

This deterioration of the interaction cannot yet be represented or contained in dialogue. The symbolic Third—interpretation—simply appears as the analyst's effort to be the sane one, and so talking about it does not seem to help. Certain

kinds of observation seem to amplify the patient's shame at being desperate and guilt over raging at the analyst. As Bromberg (2000) pointed out, the effort to represent verbally what is going on, to engage the symbolic, can further the analyst's dissociative avoidance of the abyss the patient is threatened by. In reviewing such sessions in supervision, we find that it is precisely by "catching" a moment of the analyst's dissociation—visible, perhaps, in a subtly disjunctive focus that shifts the tone or direction of the session—that the character of the enactment comes into relief and can be productively unravelled.

Britton (2000) has described the restoration of thirdness in terms of the analyst's recovery of self-observation, such that "we stop doing something that we are probably not aware of doing in our interaction with the patient." One way to characterize this, in accordance with Schore (2003), is as the analyst's regaining self-regulation and becoming able to move out of dissociation and back into affectively resonant containment. Another way to describe it is that the *analyst needs to change*, as Slavin and Kriegman (1998) put it, and in many cases this is what first leads the patient to believe that change is possible. While there is no recipe for this change, I suggest that the idea of surrendering rather than submitting is a way of evoking and sanctioning this process of letting go of our determination to make our reality operative. To do this—and I think this has been clarified only recently, and insufficiently remarked upon prior to recent relational and intersubjectively informed literature⁷—is to find a different way to regulate ourselves, one in which we accept loss, failure, mistakes, our own vulnerability. And, if not always (as Renik (1998a) contends), we must certainly often feel free to communicate about this to the patient.

Perhaps most crucial to replacing our ideal of the knowing analyst with an intersubjective view of the analyst as responsible participant is the acknowledgment of our own struggles (Mitchell, 1997). The analyst who can acknowledge missing or failing, who can feel and express regret, helps create a system based on acknowledgment of what has been missed, both in the past and the present. There are cases in which the patient's confrontation and the analyst's subsequent acknowledgment of a mistake, a preoccupation, misattunement or an emotion of his own is the crucial turning point (Renik, 1998a; Jacobs, 2001). As Davies (2004) illustrated, the patient may need the analyst to assume the burden of badness, to show her willingness to tolerate it in order to protect the patient. The analyst shoulders responsibility for hurting, even though her action represented an unavoidable piece of enactment. A dyadic system that creates a safe space for such acknowledgment of responsibility provides the basis for a secure attachment in which understanding is no longer persecutory, outside observation, suspected of being in the service of blame. This sense of mutual respect and identification contributes to the development of a differentiating Third.

7 See Bromberg, 2000; Davies, 2002, 2003; Renik, 1998a, 1998b; Ringstrom, 1998; Slavin and Kriegman, 1998; Schore, 2003; and Stochower, 1996.

As analysts, we strive to create a dyad that enables both partners to step out of the symmetrical exchange of blame, thus relieving ourselves of the need for self-justification. In effect, we tell ourselves, whatever we have done that has gotten us into the position of being in the wrong is not so horribly shameful that we cannot own it. It stops being submission to the patient's reality because, as we free ourselves from shame and blame, the patient's accusation no longer persecutes us, and hence, we are no longer in the grip of helplessness. If it is no longer a matter of which person is sane, right, healthy, knows best or the like, and if the analyst is able to acknowledge the patient's suffering without stepping into the position of badness, then the intersubjective space of thirdness may be restored. My point is that this step out of helplessness usually involves more than an internal process; it involves direct or transitionally framed communication about one's own reactivity, misattunement or misunderstanding. By making a claim on the potential space of thirdness, we call upon it, and so call it into being.

This ameliorative action may be thought of as a practice that strengthens the differentiating Third—not only the simple, affective resonance of the rhythmic Third, but also the maternal Third in the One, wherein the parent can contain catastrophic feelings because she knows they are not all there is. I also think of this as the *moral Third*—reachable only through this experience of taking responsibility for bearing pain and shame. In taking such responsibility, the analyst is putting an end to the buck passing the patient has always experienced—that is, to the game of ping-pong wherein each member of the dyad tries to put the bad into the other. The analyst says, in effect, “I’ll go first.”⁸ In orienting to the moral Third of responsibility, the analyst is also demonstrating the route out of helplessness.

In calling this the *moral Third*, I am suggesting that clinical practice may ultimately be founded in certain values, such as the acceptance of uncertainty, humility and compassion that form the basis of a democratic or egalitarian view of psychoanalytic process. I am also hoping to correct our understanding of *self-disclosure*, a concept that developed reactively to counter ideas about anonymity. In my view, much of what is misunderstood as disclosure is more properly considered in terms of its function, which is to acknowledge the analyst's contribution (generally sensed by the patient) to the intersubjective process, thus fostering a dyadic system based on taking responsibility, rather than disowning it or evading it under the guise of neutrality.

Let me briefly illustrate with an example presented by Steiner (1993), which touches on the analyst's difficulties with feeling blamed. Steiner cites an interaction in which he “went too far” in his interpretation, adding a comment with a “somewhat critical tone to it which I suspected arose from my difficulty in containing feelings . . . *anxiety about her and possibly my annoyance that she made me feel responsible, guilty, and helpless*” (p. 137, italics added). In supervising and

reading, I have seen numerous examples of this kind of going too far, when the analyst thinks he has managed the discomfort of suppressing his own reality and reacts by dissociatively trying to insert it after all (Ringstrom, 1998). Despite this aside to us, his colleagues, in the actual event, Steiner (1993) dismissed the patient's response to him as projection, because he felt that “I was being made responsible for the patient's problems as well as my own” (p. 144). He does not seem to consider the symmetry between his reaction and her reaction, in which she tended to feel persecuted because she felt that Steiner “implied that she” (that is, she alone) “was responsible for what happened between us” (p. 144). So, rather than “disclosing” that indeed *he was feeling responsible* and that he had gone too far, he rejects the possibility of confirming her observation that “over the question of responsibility, she felt I sometimes adopted a righteous tone which made her feel I was refusing to examine my own contribution . . . to accept responsibility myself” (p. 144).

While Steiner accepts the tendency to be caught in enactment, and the necessity for the analyst to be open minded and inquiring in order to be helped by the patient's feedback, he insists that the analyst must cope by relying on his own understanding, just as he insists that the patient is ultimately helped only by understanding rather than by being understood. Both analyst and patient are held to a standard of relying on individual insight, the Third without the one, rather than making use of mutual, albeit asymmetrical, containment (Cooper, 2000). Steiner's definition of containment excludes the possibility of a shared Third, of creating a dyadic system that contains by virtue of mutual reflection on the interaction. Thus, he rejects use of the intersubjective field to transform the conflict around responsibility into a shared Third, an object of joint reflection. And he dismisses the value of acknowledging his own responsibility because he assumes that the patient will take such openness as a sign of the analyst's inability to contain; the analyst must engage neither in “a confession which simply makes the patient anxious, nor a denial, which the patient sees as defensive and false” (Steiner, 1993, p. 145).

But what is the basis for assuming that the patient would be made anxious or perceive this as weakness rather than as strength (Renik, 1998a)? Why would it not relieve her to know that the analyst is able to contain knowledge of his own weaknesses, and thus strong enough to apologize and recognize his responsibility for her feeling hurt? It seems to me that it is the analytic community that must change its attitude: accepting the analyst's inevitable participation in such enactments, as Steiner seems to do, also implies the need for participatory solutions. The surrender to the inevitable can be the basis of initiating mutual accommodation and a symmetrical relation to the moral Third—in this case, the principle of bearing responsibility (“I’ll take the hit if you’ll take the hit”).

Accommodation, co-creation and repair

I will illustrate this creation of shared responsibility in a case of breakdown into complementarity, a prolonged impasse in which any Third seemed to destroy the life-giving oneness.

8 Drucilla Cornell (2003) has explicated the principle of *Ubuntu*, crucial in the South African reconciliation process, as meaning “I’ll go first.”

Clinical vignette II: Aliza

A patient whose early years in analysis provided an experience of being understood and safely held, began to shift into trauma-related states of fearing that any misunderstanding—that is, any interpretation—would be so malignant that it would catapult her into illness, despair and desolation. Aliza, a successful musicologist, had fled Eastern Europe as a child and had suffered a series of catastrophes with which her family had been nearly unable to cope; among them was Aliza's having been left by her mother with strange relatives who barely spoke her language. After several years on the couch during which Aliza experienced me as deeply holding and musically attuning, a series of misfortunes catalyzed the appearance of catastrophic anxieties, and my presence began to seem unreliable, dangerous and even toxic. Of course any analysis as it deepens will expose areas of shame that are dealt with projectively, dramatize failures by and traumas with early others that must be enacted to be addressed, and thus disrupt the attunement of the rhythmic Third. But in this case, external events added to the frightening quality of these ruptures and posed a greater threat to our jointly constructed container. Aliza needed me more, but thus also feared me more—her disorganized attachment experiences were reenacted such that misattunements on my part destabilized both of us. It was as if I had simply lost the score, our Third, which once guided me.

My efforts to reflect on this turn appeared to Aliza as “thinking,” as denial of her desperation, as dangerous self-protection, evasion of blame (in effect, repelling rather than containing her projections). My adherence to the traditional Third, the rules of analytic encounter, began to seem (even to me) a misuse of the professional role to distance myself from her agonies and to withdraw as a person, in effect dissociatively shutting the patient out of my mind. Any effort to explain this awful turn, often when Aliza urgently asked it of me, could turn into a means of shifting the blame onto her, or clumsy intellectualization that broke the symphonic attunement of our early relationship (an example of the right-to-left brain shift described by Schore (2003)). This problem was exacerbated because Aliza often countered her shame by trying to prove she could be an intact adult in talking competently to me about her traumatized child self, but then that self then felt angry and excluded. What had been a subjectively helpful Third now seemed to be a dynamic built on a dissociative or blaming form of observation, rather than on emotional resonance and inclusion.

I began to be overcome by classic feelings of complementary breakdown: feeling helpless, feeling the pull to defend my reality, my own integrity of feeling and thinking, in order to protect myself from shame; in turn, I felt the corresponding fear that this shame would lead me to blame and so destroy my patient. When Aliza objected to my formulations as too intellectual, I was reminded of Britton's (1988, 1998) descriptions of how the shaky maternal container is threatened by thinking. But it did not seem to me to be the “father” who broke into the previously soothing maternal dyad, but rather a sanity-robbing and terrifying denial that represented the dissociated, disowned, “violent innocence” of Aliza's mother

(Bollas, 1992, p. 165), who responded to any crisis or need with chaos and impermeability. It was this mother whom neither of us could tolerate having to be. Our complementary twoness was a dance in which each of us tried to avoid being her—each feeling done to, each refusing to be the one to blame for hurting the other.

At the same time, from Aliza's point of view, the feeling of blame was *my* issue; her concern was that she literally felt as if she were dying and that I did not care. I began to fear that she would leave and we would thus recapitulate a long history of breaking attachments. In consultation with a colleague, I concluded that I would tell her that what she wanted me to give her was not wrong or demanding, but that I might not be *able* to give it to her. In the event, I surprised myself. I had prepared for the session by trying to accept the loss of Aliza as a person I cared about, as well as my failure as an analyst. I thought that our hopeful beginning, when we had created a deeply attuned dyad, would be at best overshadowed by our ending. I knew we both felt love for each other and that I could identify with the pain she was experiencing—alongside my feelings of frustration, impotence, and failure.

As planned, I began by telling Aliza that her needs were not wrong, yet I might be unable to fulfil them, and I would assist her in seeking help elsewhere if she wished. But I also found myself telling her spontaneously that no matter what she did, she would always have a place in my heart, that she could not break our attachment or destroy my loving feelings. This reassertion of the indestructibility of my love and my willingness to bear responsibility dramatically shifted Aliza's view of me. But it also shifted my receptivity to her because, paradoxically, my acceptance of my inability to find a solution alleviated my sense of helplessness. It enabled me to return to the analytic commitment not to “do” anything, but rather to contact my deep connection to her. She responded by recovering her side of the connection and feeling, with me, the meaning of the shared loss of my value for her. This shift allowed us to open the door to the dissociated states of terror and aloneness that the patient had felt I could not bear with her, and she recovered memories and scenes of childhood we had never reached before. Yet we were still haunted by the specter of the destroying mother, and after a period of this heightened reliving, Aliza said that she would never fully regain her trust in me. She chose to leave in order to protect our relationship, a Third she could not imagine would survive.

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Aliza returned for a number of sessions, having worked in the interim with another therapist. She reported that she had become aware of anger and the feeling of being surrounded by others who refused to acknowledge their own relation to the disaster. Believing that she was commenting on my relation to her and linking this to the way in which she had experienced me in the past, I noted the following:

Everything I said seemed to be my distancing myself, another experience of the blank faces in your family. When disaster struck, they acted as though

nothing bad had happened at all. Whenever I told you anything I saw, it wasn't my having a subjective reaction to the same disaster as you—it was my seeing something shameful in the intensity of your reaction.

Aliza then spoke of guilt at having “battered” me, and I replied that she was troubled by this at the time, but could not help doing it. She said that she had “tricked” me by eliciting formulations and explanations from me that felt distancing and had so angered her. Likewise, she had often demanded that I tell her what I felt, but had been angry if I did so because then it was “about you.”

I acknowledged that in being drawn into these interactions, I often did feel very bad and as though I was failing. I said that in my view, what was important was that, even though she knew this was happening, it felt to her that she had to accept the onus, all the blame, if she let herself acknowledge any responsibility—a “loser-takes-all” situation. This seemed to me related to why she had left when she did. I raised the question of whether she felt that I, too, could not bear the onus, that whatever I would have to admit to for us to continue would be more than I could bear; that I was not willing to take that on in order for her not to be crazy. I suggested, “You couldn't rely on me to care enough about your sanity to bear blame for you.”

Aliza replied, “Yes, I saw you as being like the parent who won't do that, would rather sacrifice the child.” We considered how every effort I had made to acknowledge my role in our interaction was tainted by Aliza's sense that she was required to reassure the other. She was sure she had to bear the unbearable for her mother (or other), while reassuring her that she was “good” for her. It seemed there had been no way for me to assume responsibility without demanding exoneration—thus, the limits of any form of disclosure or acknowledgment became clear to both of us.

In later sessions, we explicated this impossibility as we arrived at a dramatic picture of Aliza's mother's way of behaving during the horrifying events of the patient's early childhood. I was able to say what could not be said earlier: how impossibly painful it was for Aliza to feel that she, with her own daughter in the present, in some way replicated her mother's actions. But it was likewise impossible for me to bear the burden of being that mother, because then I would pose a terrifying threat to her.

Aliza responded to this description of her dilemma with shocked recognition of how true it felt, and also how it foreclosed any action on my part, any move towards understanding. She was amazed that I had been able to tolerate being in such a frightening situation with her. Again, I was able to reiterate my sadness about having been unable to avoid evoking the feeling of being with a dangerous mother who denies what she is doing. Aliza's response was to spontaneously reach an intense conviction that she must, at all costs, assume the burden of having a sanity-destroying mother inside her. She was aware of a sense of deep sorrow for how difficult it had been for me to stay with her through that time.

Indeed, her response was so intense that I felt a moment of concern—was I forcing something into my patient? However, when she returned after a 2-month summer break and throughout the following year, Aliza spoke of how transformed she felt, so much stronger after that session that she often had to marvel at herself and wonder if she were the same person. Now she had the experience that *her* love survived the destructiveness of our interaction, my mistakes and limitations.

As the process of shared retrospection and reparation continued, Aliza and I re-created an earlier mode of accommodation, which brought into play our previous experiences of being in harmony. She was able to reintegrate experiences of reverence and beauty in which my presence evoked her childhood love of her mother's face, the ecstasy and joy that had confirmed her sense of my and her own inner goodness. We created a thirdness, a symmetrical dialogue, in which each of us responded from a position of forgiveness and generosity, making a safe place between us and in each of our minds for taking responsibility. The transformation of our shared Third had allowed both of us to transcend shame, to walk through disillusion and to accept the limits of my analytic subjectivity.

I hope this vignette is suggestive enough of the complexity of such a process of shared transformation as to make plain the risks as well as the possibilities of this work. I have tried to make clear that disclosure is not a panacea, that the analyst's acknowledgment of responsibility can take place only by working through deep anguish around feelings of destructiveness and loss.

The notion of the moral Third is thus linked to the acceptance of inevitable breakdown and repair, which allows us to situate our responsibility to our patients and the process in the context of a witnessing compassion. This notion seems to me intrinsic to embracing the intersubjective necessity, the relational imperative to participate in a two-way interaction. If involvement in the interaction cannot be avoided, then it is all the more necessary that we be oriented to certain principles of responsibility. This is what I mean by the moral Third: acceptance (hopefully within our community) of certain principles as a foundation for analytic thirdness—an attitude towards interaction in which analysts honestly confront the feelings of shame, inadequacy and guilt that enactments and impasses arouse. In this sense, the analyst's surrender means accepting the necessity of becoming involved in a process that is often outside our control and understanding—thus, there is an intrinsic necessity for this surrender; it does not come from a demand or requirement posed by the other. This principle of necessity becomes our Third in a process that we can actively shape only according to certain “lawful” forms, to the extent that we also align and accommodate ourselves to the other.

In recent decades, the relational or intersubjective approach has moved towards overthrowing the old orthodoxy that opposed efforts to use our own subjectivity with theories of one-way action and encapsulated minds. It is now necessary to focus more on protecting and refining the use of analytic subjectivity by providing outlines in the context of a viable discipline. As Mitchell (1997) contended, transformation occurs when the analyst *stops trying* to live up to a generic, uncontaminated solution, and finds instead the custom-fitted solution for a particular

patient. This is the approach that works because, as Goldner (2003) put it, it reveals “the transparency of the analyst’s own working process . . . his genuine struggle between the necessity for analytic discipline and need for authenticity” (p. 143). Thus, the patient sees in the analyst a vision of what it means to struggle internally in a therapeutic way. The patient needs to see his own efforts reflected in the analyst’s similar but different subjectivity, which, like the cross-modal response to the infant, constitutes a translation or metabolizing digestion. The patient checks out whether the analyst is truly metabolizing or just resting on internalized thirds, superego contents, analytic dictums.

I experienced a particularly dramatic instance of this need to contact and be mirrored by the authentic subjective responses of the analyst with a patient whose highly dissociated experiences of her parents’ homicidal attacks materialized as a death threat towards me. After I told her that there were certain things she absolutely could not do for both of us to safely continue the process, she left me a phone message saying that she had actually wanted me to confront her with limits, as she never had been before. In effect, she was searching for the symbolic Third, what Lacan (1975) saw as the speech that keeps us from killing. This Third had to be backed up by a demonstration that I could participate emotionally, that is, could identify with her feeling of sheer terror and survive it.

The patient added in her message that she needed me to do this from my own instincts, not out of adherence to therapeutic rules. I came to realize that she meant that I needed to act as a real person, with my own subjective relationship to rules and limits. And that this had to be demonstrably based on a personal confrontation of the reality of terror and abuse, not on dissociative denial of it. She needed to feel the Third not as emanating from an impersonal, professional identity or a reliance on authority, such as she had felt from the church in which she had been raised, but from my personal relation to the Third, my faith in what is lawful. At the time, I felt how precarious the analyst’s endeavour is, the risk of the trust placed in me: could I indeed reach into myself and be truthful enough to be equal to this trust?

All patients, in individual ways, place their hopes for the therapeutic process in us, and for each one, we must use our own subjectivity in a different way to struggle through to a specific solution. But this specificity and the authenticity on which it is based cannot be created in free fall. Analytic work conducted according to the intersubjective view of two participating subjectivities requires a discipline based on orientation to the structural conditions of thirdness. It is my hope that this clinical and developmental perspective on co-created, intersubjective thirdness can help orient us towards responsibility and more rigorous thinking, even as our practice of psychoanalysis becomes more emotionally authentic, more spontaneous and inventive, more compassionate and liberating to both our patients and ourselves.

Our appointment in Thebes

Acknowledgment, the failed witness and fear of harming

So in the end we succeed by failing—failing the patient's way.

D. W. Winnicott (1965, p. 258)

My aim in this chapter was to propose a theory of acknowledgment, and further explore the process of creating a Third in relation to failures of witnessing. The struggle to face the analyst's own role in impasses or collisions had been less well-articulated at the time I wrote this. In particular, therefore, I wanted to think out loud about the way in which analysts may free their sense of agency from the shameful, blameful evocation of badness that characterizes impasses and many enactments. This chapter, written in 2005, represented a continuation and development of the themes in Chapter 1, especially developing the idea of the moral Third.

One of the major reasons we are not free to make the best use of analytic agency is that, consciously or unconsciously, we fear doing harm. Since the patient will present to us, in the form of enactment, the very injuries she has come to heal, a dilemma Ferenczi first articulated, we often find ourselves in the position of the “wounding healer.” Consequently, our task should be to facilitate the creation of a shared Third between therapist and patient that can hold the oscillations between attunement and misattunement, separations and reunion; this Third allows us to work with this paradox: *We may harm to heal*. This effort requires, in turn, that therapists be held by a clinical ethos that allows us to sustain the paradox and recognize that our patients—to reverse Winnicott’s dictum—also can and often do survive destruction in the form of our lapses, dissociations and vulnerabilities.

This revision of Winnicott’s (1971a) idea highlights the need for reciprocal survival in the analytic couple. In turn, this revision corresponds to our awareness that both members—with their projective and dissociated processes—co-create the dialectic of recognition and breakdown.

In my model of intersubjectivity, breakdown is understood as twoness—the complementarity of “doer and done to” with its ball-in-socket interlocking dependency of opposites. Typical of this dyadic structure are rapid oscillations between doing and being done to, a ping-pong (Racker) dynamic, in which reciprocal

violated, degrades victims. In social psychological terms we need to assert the reality of suffering, to dignify it with the recognition it deserves, to allow those who have suffered to move out of victimhood into agency. The limitation on this recognition is the acknowledgment of responsibility by the harmers, which alone can enable those who have harmed or acted out of self-protection to move out of paralyzing guilt into reparation. In this way, recognition, by reincorporating acknowledgment of responsibility, may help to own and ameliorate the suffering that comes from denial; help to mitigate the corruption of social bonds, and restore the moral Third that gives human life dignity beyond mean survival. To imagine a way out of the binary of deserving and discarded in which Only one can live requires the vision of a lawful world in which our mutual attachment to all parts of the whole is honored. Both harmers and harmed need the moral Third of "All can live" to replace the frightening world in which "Only one can live."

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