

Book Review

Vital Flows Between the Self and Non-Self. Stefano Bolognini, 2022.

Review written by Matt McArdle, November, 2023.

Having read Vital Flows between the Self and Non-Self I must declare upfront that one of my central motivations in writing this review is to encourage you to read it for yourself. This important work has clearly been written to expand our minds and our practice as psychoanalysts and psychotherapists. Bolognini begins with a personal story that is laden with meaning and significance, I will begin with a story of my own.

Recently I went to the National Gallery of Victoria with some friends, including several children. At one point I found myself standing and looking at or into (or both) a painting by Mark Rothko. The painting is red, various shades on a large canvas. One of the children came and stood with me and as we looked at the painting together, she asked “What does that mean?” Such a great question! I was aware then as I am so much more now that having an ‘answer’, or worse ‘the answer’, could damage or destroy the curious open exploring of meanings and potential meanings that might be possible. Her question was wonderful and the thoughts it inspired in her and me were abundant and alive. A space momentarily existed somewhere between us that didn’t require ‘answers’, an in-between. For a few moments there was a deep connection between us, a blurring of separateness, yet never a loss of our unique selves, as we pondered in both words and silence this painting before us. This was not just an interpersonal but an interpsychic exchange. In Vital Flows Bolognini explores this fusional and co-created area of the interpsychic. As we the reader follow Bolognini’s imagery, stories, well-digested conceptions and wisdom coming from years of learning from experience in life, in the consulting room and in psychoanalytic institutions, we are drawn into his deep understanding of human interconnectedness at all levels.

Vital Flows is a work of art and of science. It expands on Bolognini’s previous volume (Secret Passages) and takes us further into his deep understanding of not just what is happening at an interpersonal or intrapsychic level but at the interpsychic level. He explores how this ‘deeper’ communication with both self and other can be ‘facilitated’.

Read as a work of art, this is a work of beauty that can be enjoyed and savoured. Looked at with scientific eyes, this is a major contribution to psychoanalytic and human thought, arising from Bolognini's vast and diverse understanding. However, I think Bolognini presents us with a 'work' to be engaged with on a personal level. Not just a book to read or a series of scientific papers to 'process', but as an alive dialogue that might occur between us the reader and Stefano Bolognini the author.

"Reading is an experience in which we do not simply "take in" the meaning of the text. In the act of reading, we transform the black markings on the page into linguistic structures that hold significance. But when we read creatively, we do something more than that. We each produce our own personal set of meanings and ideas using the text as a starting point". This is how I imagine Bolognini expects and wants us to read his work; creatively.

At the beginning of Chapter 2 Bolognini informs us that "the topic of energy saving and intra- and inter-psychoanalytic fluidity has long inspired in me a series of reflections that go beyond the specifically theoretical and clinical field of psychoanalysis". He takes us 'into his confidence' throughout this book and shares from places "beyond", giving us a much richer sense of what intra- and inter-psychoanalytic really are, and most importantly how to 'swim' in them.

He defines psychoanalysis as "the science of the possible pathway to the Unconscious and the natural relationship with it".

This book is rich with accessible stories and beautiful images that bring psychoanalysis alive and make it visible in a genuinely human way. He introduces us to the "Mariana Trench" (of the Pacific Ocean) and 'babyscaphe' (early single manned submarine) as metaphors for the unconscious and psychoanalytic exploration. Then, there are the "eustachian horns" in medieval architecture and other modes of communication via bells, smoke, fire and reflective mirrors to transmit messages bypassing the length processes of travelling great distances (often by horseback), just as we analysts with analysands need to find 'secret passages' to explore the depths of inner human experience.

Bolognini gently assists us in meeting an intermediate creative area between the self and non-self where a degree of fusionality between self and other can be safely allowed for a time. He notes how these psychic pathways can provide access to aspects of our patients minds that would otherwise be 'inaccessible fortresses'. In this book we come to learn that "healthy intimacy is the natural dimension of deep interpsychic exchange, in a shared atmosphere in which each individual can learn to alternate between primary and secondary processes without fear or shame". Further, "intimacy is the co-created and co-creating condition that characterises (the analytic) .. scene, where the here and now, the there and then and everywhere and every-time co-exist and interact".

He draws widely on personal experience and observation, psychoanalytic theory, clinical experience, history, art, literature, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, biology and myth. Bolognini tells us that Antonino Ferro sees us (analysts) as cooks, and that he (Bolognini) cooks "definitely in the realm of Bolognese cuisine". This is certainly true, yet it is clear that his psychoanalytical diet (as all healthy diets should be!) is broad and varied. Bolognini has clearly digested well the thinking of Freud, the British object relations school, Winnicott, U.S. ego psychology, Italian analytic thinking of Ferro, Civitarese and others, as well as Bion's early and late ideas, not to mention other French and Latin American influences. It is from this broad diet that Bolognini has become the unique analyst that he is. Throughout this book he generously invites us into both his personal thoughts and ideas, and into his consulting room where we get glimpses of how he works day to day.

Of the central thesis of this book, the interpsychic, Bolognini tells us that "the interpsychic is a universal and ubiquitous dimension, but it does not presuppose that in that moment the only functional level at work is the one belonging to separate subjects capable of recognising others". He asks us to think of the essential area of "companionable and cooperative fusion' during psychoanalytic work (and in daily life). This enables us to think of the interpsychic as "a highly permeable functional level shared by two psychic apparatuses".

Alongside these dense, but well explicated, clinical concepts are many statements of wisdom coming from Bolognini's many decades of clinical experience. He states that "an expert analyst is serenely secure in the knowledge that he knows little or nothing at the beginning, and sometimes even for a considerable period of treatment, and this, paradoxically, is where his strength lies". In chapter 6 he gives us 'six commonly used minimal technical tools' to think about and reflect on.

On being and becoming a psychoanalyst he says “over time we come to trust ourselves enough without overestimating ourselves or our official status as ‘psychoanalysts’: and then is when we are able to be psychoanalysts for real and not just on paper”. ‘Vital flows between the Self and Non-Self’ is written by a real psychoanalyst and is an important contribution to assist us in the lifelong process of being and becoming real psychoanalysts.

References

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