

## A HUNGARIAN PRECURSOR OF ATTACHMENT THEORY: FERENCZI'S SUCCESSOR, IMRE HERMANN.



**Horst Kächele**

*Attachment theory has by now achieved considerable scientific and clinical respectability. This paper seeks to remind readers of a Hungarian precursor of this theory, Imre Hermann, who sensed astonishingly early the relevance of ethological research and its potential implications for establishing a sound theory of development.*

The history of science or scientific thinking is full of examples where creative thinkers conceived of ideas that at the outset often seemed quite far-fetched, remote, and to meld diverse discourses, but only much later could be shown to have contributed to the development of a scientific field.

One of the fascinating scientific movements of present-day psychoanalysis has been the *rapprochement* of the developmental observations that John Bowlby spelled out in his trilogy, *Attachment and Loss* (1969; 1973; 1980), with the field of clinical psychoanalysis (Fonagy 2001; Strauss et al. 2002).

Bowlby turned away from the traditional psychoanalytic emphasis on fantasy life during childhood and focused instead on the implications of real events such as separation and loss on the emotional development of a child. Hence Bowlby's theory has long been the topic of heated debates among psychoanalysts. At present, the autonomous motivational aspect of attachment has been widely accepted, which independently of hunger and sexuality safeguards the establishment of social relationships. Freud's view that social relationships are primarily formed because of the need for nourishment was not supported by the researchers working in the field of attachment.

Attachment theory sees the desire for close emotional relationships not as specifically human but rather as a common feature of all primates. This desire, which is already present in the newborn, will remain until old age and is a basic element with a survival function. Especially in infancy and childhood, attachment to the parents assures shelter and care. Analogously, the task of the parents is the sensitive care of their child. These two systems are in delicate balance and develop in a specific sequence.

By now one might ask what attachment theory has to do with the Hungarian psychoanalytic world shaped by Sándor Ferenczi and his followers. As a bridge I will mention a recent book by Tomas Geyskens and Philippe van Haute with the inspiring title, *From Death Instinct to Attachment Theory: The Primacy of the Child in Freud, Klein, and Hermann* (2007). Geyskens and van Haute delve deep into the resulting tensions between such prime components of psychoanalysis as attachment and infantile trauma, analyzing the work of Melanie Klein, John Bowlby, Imre Hermann, and the still too often overlooked Hungarian school of psychoanalysis.

Obviously, the largely forgotten contributions of Hermann illustrate his astonishing role as a precursor of attachment theory. Long before Bowlby was in the firing line of critical discussions in the late 1950s (A. Freud 1960), we encounter an interest in ethological questions among Hungarian psychoanalysts.

Imre Hermann, born in 1889 in Budapest, displayed an extraordinary interest in mathematical problems already as pupil at the gymnasium. As a second-year medical student, he worked in the experimental laboratory of Géza révész studying child psychology and the psychology of sensory perception.

Hermann opens his 1936 contribution, “Clinging-Going in search” with the following words:

In the past twelve years I often took the opportunity to point out the significant role of the wish to cling to mother’s body plays in the mental organization of the human being. By now there is sufficient material to summarize the various findings, to supplement it and to demonstrate the position of these facts in the theoretical structure of psychoanalysis. (349).

He then discusses two sets of facts: clinical observations on the erogeneity of the hand and ethological observations of the relation of mother and baby among chimpanzees.

The first source of data comprises the baby’s tendency to use its fingers for clinging and sucking; the second consists of anthropological findings of the social life of monkeys and apes that the British zoologist Solly Zuckermann had summarized in books published in 1932 and 1933<sup>1</sup>. Hermann particularly made use of the phenomenon of grooming as an important mechanism for the development of social life, and wrote about this in his 1933 paper, “On the Instinctual Life of Primates.”

Both sets of findings -clinical and ethological- led Hermann to the conclusion that the human baby in relation to his instinctual tendency is prematurely disconnected from mother’s body. (His conjecture that this also could be due to an intervention of the archaic father, or Urvater, might be read as a necessary tribute to Freud’s position.) Therefore a drive for clinging remains throughout life, which demands the restoration of the original situation (Urzustand), in which mother and child are joined in a preformed dual unity. The gratification of this drive, however, is continuously frustrated by a series of traumata (see Hermann 1924).

The creation of a new drive during Freud’s lifetime was certainly a risky enterprise; no wonder that references to it are scarce in the non-Hungarian psychoanalytic world. However, in his book *The Technique at Issue* (1988, 46), André Haynal mentions that Hermann’s descriptions of the clinging tendency (Sich-Anklammern) and the tendency to go in search (auf-dieSuche-gehen) without doubt influenced Balint’s conception of ocnophilia and philobatism in *The Basic Fault* (1968).

Balint wrote about Hermann’s contribution at length as early as his paper, “*Early Developmental stages of the Ego*”, which appeared in the original *Imago* in 1937. He reviewed the controversies that had arisen between London and Viennese analysts about early love, and quoted Freud’s (1931) description:

childhood love is boundless; it demands exclusive pos-session, it is not content with less than all. But it has a second characteristic: it has, in point of fact, no aim, and is incapable of obtaining complete satisfaction; and prin-cipally for that reason it is doomed to end in disappointment and to give place to a hostile attitude. (231)

The position of the Hungarian analysts—Balint mentions Alice Balint, Imre Herman, and himself—is influenced by Ferenczi’s works; the core features are summarized in the thesis that these early wishes are object-directed and they never surpass the level of forepleasure. This position is now strongly supported by the work of Hermann, whom Balint cites in great detail. Again we learn, first, that the baby spends a lot of time in the first months of extra-uterine life clinging to the body of his or her mother; and, second, that the human infant is prematurely separated from the maternal body. The underlying implication of this outlook for later stages of life is that clinging (Anklammerung) represents the common precursor of a whole series of object relations.

Balint endorsed his arguments by quoting the study of Alice Balint, “*Love for the Mother and Mother Love*” (1939). He quotes her to the effect that the mother is—with respect to her libidinal needs—at once a receiver and a giver, no less than her child; they both share the same kind of primitive-egoistic form of

---

1.- Among Zuckermann’s achievements is that he was a pioneer in the investiga-tion of primate behavior. His book, *The Social Life of Monkeys and Apes* (1932), is considered today to be a classic. He also elevated science to a completely normal part of governmental policy-making in the Western world.

love. The mother knows no difference between her own interests and the interests of the object. This last statement from today's point of view would certainly have to be qualified.

Returning to the main argument of my paper, I would note that the role of the mother as an attachment figure has not been adequately conceptualized by Michael and Alice Balint. Although it would be fair to say in the light of modern attachment theory that there is a strong biological basis for primary object relations, these levels of analysis are qualitatively different. Unconditional love is not the same as maternal preoccupation; it might be true that in pathological situations mothers childishly love their children, but from the standpoint of attachment, this is certainly not desirable (see Stern et al. 1998).

Bowlby, responding to the emotional and intellectual analytic environment in London, reviewed the relevant psychoanalytic literature in "*The Nature of the child's Tie to His Mother*" (1958) and again in the three volumes of *Attachment and Loss*. Sifting through Freud's works, he pointed to some quite obscure remarks on this topic and concluded: "Freud's neglect in his earlier work to give due weight to this early tie has had far-reaching effects on psychoanalytic theorizing" (1969, 361).

It is only in his final synthesis, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940), that Freud provides a pregnant but highly condensed paragraph on the relationship to the mother. He describes it as "unique, without parallel, established unalterably for a whole lifetime as the first and strongest love-object and as the prototype of all later love-relations" (188; qtd. in Bowlby 1969, 363).

In *Attachment and Loss*, Bowlby (1969) values the contribution of the Budapest school. He refers to Hermann's papers: "As a result of these observations, and resuscitating the early and virtually discarded idea from Freud's Three Essays, he postulated as a primary component instinct in human beings an instinct to cling." Bowlby then relocates the perspective: "It appears, however, that Hermann was reluctant to regard this as an object relationship, so that it would probably be incorrect to say that he subscribed to the theory of primary object clinging" (371).

Bowlby returned to the role of Hermann as a precursor again in the second volume of his trilogy (1973). Again mildly criticizing the attempts of his analytic colleagues to answer the basic question, "Why should a child be distressed in his mother's absence?," he observes that only occasionally has a student of the problem accepted the data [of observation] at their face value and presented a theory . . . that regards the distress and subsequent anxiety as primary responses not reducible to other terms and due simply to the nature of a child's attachment to his mother. Among those who have advanced this view are Suttie, Hermann, and with some qualification, Fairbairn and Winnicott. (31; citations omitted)

I think it is an honor for anyone to be mentioned on a list of forerunners to a theory that has changed the intellectual and clinical world. It marks the creativity of psychoanalytic clinicians to collect various experiences and meld them into new theoretical structures. Certainly Imre Hermann's work was of that high order.

## CODA

There is another topic on which Hermann was clearly ahead his time. Let me tell you my little story. I was a student of medicine eager to collect all kind of books about psychoanalysis. Endowed with a small stipend solely for buying books, I often strolled through the second-hand bookshops looking for suitable items. One day in October 1967 in Munich I picked a book from the shelf: Imre Hermann, *Die Psychoanalyse als Methode* (1963). Glancing through it, I realized that this book was a special item as it was a reprint of the original version published in 1934 as supplement to the *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* (Hermann 1934).

Some ten years later, the Hungarian psychoanalytic thinker, David Rapaport, also tackled the topic of methodology in a series of lectures at the Menninger Foundation (1944). There he pointed out that "in the whole psychoanalytic literature there are only three or four papers about methodology" (181); he quotes Hermann's statement that a specific prerequisite of the psychoanalytic constellation is a "mood of confidence" (201).

When Helmut Thomä and I analyzed the present state of psychoanalytic research, we reminded our readers of Hermann's early effort: "Increasingly, the analytic situation, which is the basis of the knowledge, practical scope, and empirical significance of the psychoanalytic method, is being subjected to scientific study (Hermann 1963)" (Thomä and Kächele 1985, 25).<sup>2</sup>

**Department of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy**  
**Ulm University**  
**Am Hochstrasse 8**  
**80981 Ulm**  
**Germany**  
**Mail: horst.kaechele@uni-ulm.de**

## **REFERENCIAS:**

- Balint, Alice. 1939. Love for the Mother and Mother Love. In M. Balint 1952, pp. 109–27.
- Balint, Michael. 1937. Early Developmental stages of the Ego. Primary object-love. In M. Balint 1952, pp. 90–108.
- . 1952. Primary Love and Psychoanalytic Technique. London: Hogarth. ———. 1968. The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression. London: Tavistock.
- Bowlby, John. 1958. The Nature of the child's Tie to His Mother. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 39:19–52;107–27.
- . 1969. Attachment and Loss. Vol. 1. Attachment. New York: Basic Books.
- . 1973. Attachment and Loss. Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and Anger. New York: Basic Books.
- . 1980. Attachment and Loss. Vol. 3. Loss: Sadness and Depression. London: Hogarth Press.
- Fonagy, Peter. 2001. Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis. New York: other Press.
- Freud, Anna. 1960. Discussion of Dr. John Bowlby's paper. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 15:53–62.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1931. Female sexuality. *S.E.*, 21:225–43
- . 1940. An Outline of Psychoanalysis. *S.E.*, 23:144–207.
- Geyskens, Tomas, and Philippe van Haute. 2007. From Death Instinct to Attachment Theory: The Primacy of the Child in Freud, Klein, and Hermann. New York: other Press.
- Haynal, André. 1988. The Technique at Issue: Controversies in Psychoanalysis from Freud and Ferenczi to Michel Balint. London: Karnac.
- Hermann, Imre. 1924. Psychoanalyse und Logik [Psychoanalysis and logic]. Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag.
- . 1933. Zum Triebleben der Primaten [on the instinctual life of primates]. *Imago*, 19:113–25.
- . 1934. Die Psychoanalyse als Methode. Beihefte zur "Internationalen Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse" und zur "Imago," No. 1. [Psychoanalysis as Method: supplements to the International Journal of Psychoanalysis and to Imago, No. 1]. Wien: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag.
- . 1936. sich-Anklammern—Auf-suche-Gehen: Über ein in der Psychoanalyse bisher vernachlässigtes Triebgegensatzpaar und sein Verhältnis zum sadismusMasochismus. *Internationale Zeitschrift der Psychoanalyse*, 22:349–70. Trans. Margaret Nunberg and Frank R. Hartman. clinging—Going-in-search: A contrasting Pair of Instincts and Their Relation to sadism and Masochism. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 45(1976) :5–36.
- . 1963. Die Psychoanalyse als Methode [Psychoanalysis as method]. cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Mertens, Wolfgang, and Bruno Waldvogel, eds. 2000. Handbuch psychoanalytischer Grundbegriffe [Handbook of fundamental psychoanalytic concepts]. stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Rapaport, David. 1944. The scientific Methodology of Psychoanalysis. In *The Collected Papers of David*

---

2.- Other than this quotation I could not find any other reference to Hermann's work on method in the German critical dictionaries of psychoanalysis.

- Rapaport. Ed. Merton M. Gill. New York: Basic Books, 1967, pp. 165–220.
- Stern, Daniel N., Nadia Bruschiweiler-stern, et al. 1998. The Birth of a Mother: How the Motherhood Experience Changes You Forever. New York: Basic Books.
- Strauss, Bernhard, Anna Katharina Buchheim, and Horst Kächele, eds. 2002. Klinische Bindungsforschung. Theorien—Methoden—Ergebnisse [clinical attachment research: Theories, methods, results]. stuttgart: schattauer.
- Thomä, Helmut, and Horst Kächele. 1985. Psychoanalytic Practice. Vol. 1. Principles. Trans. M. Wilson and D. roseveare. New York: springer, 1987.
- Zuckermann, solly. 1932. The Social Life of Monkeys and Apes. London: Kegan Paul. ———. 1933. Functional Affinities of Man, Monkeys and Apes. London: Kegan Paul.

**Ref:** American Imago, Vol. 66, No. 4, 419–426. © 2010 by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

*Volver a Artículos Clínicos*  
*Volver a Newsletter 27-ex-53*

