"THE DOING" OF

HELM STIERLIN:  A TRIBUTE

by

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Helm Stierlin, - the name conjures up many images: healer, scholar, theoretical and clinical innovator, teacher, editor, dramatist... , - a man involved in a restless search to understand himself and others. He emerges as a complex, almost enigmatic person - highly gifted, born into a deeply troubled country, soon to involve the world in a catastrophic war.

The drama of human life in all its complexity: the pain, the anxiety, the destructiveness and the guilt - the gifts and burdens passing from generation to generation - the despair as well as the triumphant transcendence - these are the issues for Helm Stierlin. He has sought to live a life rather than to write about it, or "author-ize" it, to paraphrase the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard. Stierlin has sought to put his insights to the test in his own life. His engagement is revealed in, among other ways, his astute political analysis and knowledge of the world around him, as well as in his biographical analysis of Adolph Hitler and his lectures on terrorism. However, the overriding project has been to use all his powers in an effort to bring sanity to a crazy world. In his struggles to understand how people "get stuck", become irrational and evil, he has enlightened others about the workings of human relationships. He has examined the bonds as well as the detrimental bindings
between people, and continuously explored ways to help release growth and creative potential. He has been at the forefront of the development of theory and practice in family therapy, constantly fighting obstacles on the road to new insight and understanding.

Stierlin has an ability to communicate complex ideas in a clear and concise way, and has also presented scenarios that capture the totality of the human situation. His works are usually richly illustrated with case presentations. He even wrote a successful drama, staged in his home town of Heidelberg about a German family with three generations involved in war.\(^1\)

To me the contemplative, philosophical side of Helm Stierlin has always been the most interesting. And this side of him is most salient in his early publications. My introduction to his work took place in the late sixties when I happened upon his book: "Conflict and Reconciliation: A Study in Human Relations and Schizophrenia"\(^2\). Most striking was the author's ability to combine philosophy and psychological theory, and thus illuminate both fields. "Melodies" from both traditions were transmuted into new "music", resulting in deeper insight into the complex world of interpersonal relationships. Few thinkers master such a combination. Stierlin's compatriot and colleague, Carl Jaspers, is a notable exception. Contrary to Jaspers, however, Stierlin favored psychotherapy and psychological theory to philosophy as well as direct confrontations with his patients to analytic distance.

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\(^1\) Stierlin, Helm:

In 1971 a revised and abridged edition was published in German, entitled "Das Tun des Einen ist das Tun des Anderen". Three years later a Norwegian version appeared, and had great impact, with consequent invitations to the author every year to lecture in that country. Colleagues and students were excited to discover concepts that grasped their real life experiences, both personal and professional. It is a true test of theory that it contributes to the systematization and conceptualization of experience and action. Hegel's project, at least in the work that inspired Stierlin most was precisely to explicate the relationship between philosophy and praxis, that is, life as it confronts us. This depth of understanding brings - paradoxically in view of the abstract nature of philosophical thought - theory closer to our lived reality. Stierlin himself, smiles indulgently at my enthusiasm about his early effort, and appears to see it as a youthful trip off the main road. Thus my task in this essay is to argue the point that "Das Tun..." was a seminal work in which precursors of Stierlin's, and his colleagues' later thoughts can be traced. Due to limited space I have chosen to focus on a few of many possible topics.

**Conflict and Reconciliation**

Stierlin points out that entering into a relationship, we may involve ourselves in an in-depth process releasing forces which we later have problems controlling. In this process where our delineation may be dissolved, and primitive and unmanageable needs make themselves known, we are

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confronted by the threat of dangerous undercurrents. It is in the encounter with the other that unconscious processes are challenged.

Not only did Stierlin anticipate the idea of what might be called the "relational unconscious", but he showed how deeply entangled we are with each other in close relationships, caught, as it were, in a web of mutuality and interdependency. It is necessary that we neither withdraw nor give up our own individualization if the relationship is to grow. He points out that we have to face our conflicts and reconcile our differences. The very tension of the conflict drives the relationship forward. The reconciliation requires work and renunciation, a useful reminder in our times of narcissistic entitlement. The task is to preserve both the relationship and the delineated self.

Using Hegel's metaphor of the Master and the Slave, Stierlin shows how two people in a relationship constitute sides in a totality, sides that mutually create predispositions for experience and action as well as for the other person's view of me. I loose and regain myself "in you" and vice versa. If I truly enter into your field of experience, I must give way to my individuation. As I regain myself, I have changed, and the relationship has developed. You, of course, go through the corresponding movement. Stierlin points out how this activity or movement of closeness, confirmation and self-understanding is not merely intellectual. On the contrary, it is a dynamic, life-death process involving all aspects of the person. Stierlin shows how negative mutuality develops, and how the relationship is frozen into a given interaction when for instance one person has the power to define a given reality on behalf of both partners. We discern the precursors of his later concepts of "adapting to the stronger person's reality" and "malignant clinch", a situation in which the
partners are caught in a stagnant dead-lock.

In order to demonstrate how acknowledgement or confirmation are necessary prerequisites for change, Stierlin talks about "the subject in the object" and "the object in the subject". In dysfunctional interaction one individual (or both) see the other only as an object for his/her desires, rather than being able to see the subjective side of the other, i.e. his perspective, his needs, his experiences, his pain etc. But in order to acknowledge the other, it is necessary to relate to the subject in the object! In fact the ability to relate this way is a prerequisite for empathy. Although Stierlin later on has adopted and developed treatment methods where acknowledgement appears to be less focused, both he and Hegel have thought deeply about, - and brought attention to - acknowledgement as a prerequisite for transformative change.

Both the notion of acknowledgement and the ability to relate to the subject in the other is transmuted into the so-called "clinical attitude", where the therapist becomes a clinical instrument who must incorporate into his person the ability to be open, movable, accepting, empathetic and to differentiate between himself and his patient(s).

**Integrating philosophy and psychodynamic theory.**

In "Das Tun..." Stierlin demonstrates the close relationship between Freudian theory and Hegelian dialectics, thus contributing to both traditions. He shows for instance how Freud's interest in Michelangelo's statue of Moses
mirrors the kinship with Hegel. Freud interpreted the statue as an expression of "tamed movement", i.e. two forces in opposition which are finally reconciled. The solution to Moses' dilemma is neither to choose distantiated self-control on the one hand, nor to give in to an emotional state where a necessary differentiation suffers, on the other. Both extremes must be avoided, and this is accomplished when the individual exposes himself to these "conflictual passions", fights and finally conquers them. Stierlin contrasts and reconciles Hegel's idea of desire with Freud's principle of lust, and shows also how tamed desire in Hegel's scheme corresponds to the notion of secondary process in Freud, where a balanced frustration/gratification forces the child out of primary process functioning.

Anxiety or the "fear of death" freezes the Master and the Slave into their mutual positions, thus obstructing development. For Freud too of course, anxiety forces the individual to adopt defensive mechanisms which stunt growth, and which the patients "work through" by facing anxiety and pain in the transference relationship. In the Hegelian system, however, anxiety is explicitly seen as pointing the way toward freedom and growth. Thus, when the Slave faces anxiety - the death fear - he confronts an even greater Master, namely death, and thereby has the opportunity to free himself from his partner. Freud's understanding of a symptom both as an expression of, as well as a defense against, the infantile wish, may well have been inspired by Hegel's elegant grasp of paradoxes in life - the "both-and" rather than the "either-or".

8 Existentialist thinkers have no doubt been inspired by this notion of anxiety as the index finger of freedom.
In some ways Hegel was more advanced than Freud, anticipating and indeed illuminating modern ideas about anxiety in relational terms, i.e. how the fear of annihilation and consequent anxiety is tied to the other. Stierlin's analysis of these great thinkers provides a more profound, as well as new understanding of the dynamics of individuals in relationships.

**Wholeness and Process**

Stierlin not only develops a theory about dyadic interaction, but emphasizes the total network of relationships in which we find ourselves. In this complex dialectical system all sides are interdependent, creating predispositions for experience and actions and mutually determining one another's characteristics. We detect the outline of what we might call the "systems thinking" with circular causality and interdependence.

Stierlin shows how the dual anxieties of abandonment on the one hand and engulfment by the mothering figure on the other, is related to complex systems of inner and outer defense strategies. These strategies are in turn played out in relationships, and influenced by, and influencing, ever widening social contexts in complex dialectical interrelatedness. Conflicts in the system create tension which in turn moves the entire network of relationships forward. Later Stierlin developed the concept of "delegation" to clarify how adolescents carry out tasks - mostly unconscious - on behalf of their parents. The "delegate" influences the social world and vice versa. This thinking constitutes a natural sequel to "Das Tun...". The same is true of his concepts "centripetal" and "centrifugal" family modes as well as "binding" and "expulsion" as different ways in which parents deal with underlying
unresolved ties to their children.

Process - so important both in dialectic as well as systemic thinking - is difficult to conceptualize in psychological theory. Stierlin shows how Hegel's notions of movement and transmutation must be focused - all relationships are continuously in motion.

Related individuation

Later Stierlin developed the concept of "related individuation" - in which he elegantly grasps the complex dynamics of the individual in the system. The precursors to this concept is easily located in the pages of "Das Tun...", where Stierlin discusses the deepest anxiety - the fear of death, or rather of annihilation. This annihilation results, as indicated above, from either losing a relationship necessary for survival, and thus being helplessly abandoned, - or being suffocated in fusion, unable to differentiate and grow. Stierlin focused early on this precarious balance - to preserve individuation without loosing the relationship - a balance we struggle to maintain throughout life and within which the drama of interpersonal existence is played out.

Focused polarities

Nowhere is the dialectical basis of "Das Tun..." more apparent than in Stierlin's emphasis on certain polarities in interpersonal relationships, such as for instance the polarities between satisfaction of needs and renunciation, between closeness and distance, or similarity and difference. Looking at general issues in interpersonal life Stierlin develops ways in which we can begin to study relationships - both clinically and empirically. Using the
"Master-Slave" illustration once more, he argues convincingly that it is necessary to work toward a continuous process of reconciliation of specific, polar relational needs in all close relationships, including the therapeutic one. In applying Hegel in this fashion Stierlin not only unveils the deeper anatomy of relationships, but we catch a glimpse of man's basic situation: in order not to stagnate he is forced to renounce, decenter and balance oppositional needs as well as to confront painful conflict.

The doing of one...

Stierlin dedicated "Das Tun..." to his beautiful wife, Dr. Satu Stierlin. A psychologist in her own right. She has left center stage to her husband. She too is committed to understanding - and to her work as a therapist and lecturer. The Stierlin partnership is one of continuing development - of conflicts and transcendence - and it is indeed difficult to overestimate its importance in Stierlin's work.

In this essay I have focused on one title on Stierlin's impressive list of published works. I chose "Das Tun..." in order to reveal what I feel is basic in his orientation and show how his early theoretical endeavours created the predispositions for his later development, and how ideas commonplace to-day owe much to Stierlin's prior struggles to understand relationships. I hope I have shown how the dialectic between the past and the present ( and indeed the future ) forced Stierlin's intellectual development forward and made him influential in the development of ideas. Also I have tried to emphasize that this book distinguishes itself by an unusual depth of analysis. "Das Tun..." is a classic - a continuous source of insight and inspiration. We are looking forward to be enriched by the future work of Helm Stierlin.