

Book Review

**Alessandra Piontelli: From Fetus to Child.
An Observational and Psychoanalytic Study***

The New Library of Psychoanalysis 15. Tavistock, Routledge, 1992.
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“There is much more continuity between intra-uterine life and earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth would have us believe.”

Sigmund Freud *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, SE 20:138

This enigmatic quotation appears twice in the paperback edition of this book like a dangling *imprimatur* even before the story begins; first in the editors note inside front cover (pbk) and on the facing page to the Contents. In consequence your reviewer takes the liberty of also presenting it as the keynote to this review in hopes to be found acceptable as a friend of Freud.

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It would make a movie! Here is the script treatment! The heroine is a highly respected clinician and researcher with impeccable credentials and lifetime service with the bosom of her esteemed professional discipline. Suddenly, she is given a window of opportunity which plunges her into a world which to that moment had been held to be innately unreachable and if not anathema, somewhere between unacceptable and highly suspect by her colleagues. The implications of her observations are so ‘clearly clear’ she has to make them available to members of her intentional world and perhaps a wider audience as well. Yet she is poised on the sharp points of trilema: being ostracized because of previously held fundamental beliefs of her colleagues; being an objective scientific researcher; or being a committed voice in a new landscape of human consciousness. How does she make her new dimension, her new paradigm acceptable to her peers without calling down wrath from above? She writes a book about her discoveries.

In the prebirth world, here is Dr. Alessandra Piontelli like a goddess on Mt. Olympus peering down through the penetrating eye of her ultrasound scanner onto three singletons and four pairs of incubating identical or fraternal twin earthlings in their Neptunian environment. Her attention, confirmed by others present, is caught by very specific and perceptible behaviors of the fetuses as they

* A review of this book appeared in German in the September 1992 issue of our Journal. Because of the significance of Dr. Piontelli’s research into the psychological states of the child during the prebirth period, the Editors felt it also appropriate to bring it to the attention of English readers.

share diminishing space in the amniotic world of their mother's wombs. Her aim is to describe a preliminary study of prenatal life and its impact on the future development of the individual. Dr. Piontelli describes in five or six monthly observations from 16 weeks of gestation to birth that these fetuses are acting with discernible human personality behaviors. Can this be? There it is loving empathy, jealous rage, pathological aggressive attack, impervious indifference – a whole menu of emotions are offered up. The bridge between before birth and childhood in weekly observation for the first year and monthly to the age of two using Esther Bick's infant/mother methodology is used. Some cases were followed up to four years of age. The significant factor is that as the babies grow and develop they continue to display the same prebirth behaviors to such a degree that some parents feel compelled to turn to Piontelli for help while other are benignly (and I might add frustratingly) unaware of serious pathology. Piontelli confesses "What I think my findings do suggest is that the interplay between 'nature' and 'nurture' begins much earlier than is usually thought, and that certain prenatal experiences may have profound emotional effect on the child, especially if these prenatal events are reinforced by post-natal experiences".

Although the main body of *From Fetus to Child* is made up of case studies, this reviewer would like to focus one aspect of Piontelli's exposition. The debate which she skillfully stays within. It may be interesting and possibly threatening to some psychoanalysts to follow Piontelli's development into a prenatal hypothesis. For all other therapists it may be frustrating that she does not open to wider possibilities. Whatever your perspective, the reading is worthwhile. The reader must acknowledge that within her discipline Piontelli does take a big leap by writing that, "Through inferences from the re-living in the transference of what might have been the emotions, defences, and mechanisms operative in a patient's past, even the prenatal past, one can certainly gather many ideas for the formation of hypotheses about pre-natal life."

Piontelli acknowledges that "One of the most intense debates within the psychoanalytical movement centres on the psychological birth of the human infant; its capacity to live mentally and emotionally in the outside world once out of the narrow boundaries of the womb". This debate, of course, reflects a conflict inherent in many ISPPM members who are analysts willing or unwilling to totally accept the possibility of prenatal life. "On the one hand are the analyst who consider that the infant is not psychologically born for at least a few month of its post-natal life and regard it as an ego-less creature still living inside a kind of post-natal womb." Piontelli contrasts this cadre with a second group of analysts "who consider mental life to be operative from birth, for most of them the actual event of birth is regarded as the turning point that sets mental functioning in motion. Only with meeting other human beings after birth do they consider that the infant begins to feel and think. Piontelli admits and one wonders if not sadly that "Very little mention can be found in psychoanalytical literature of the possibility of mental life, ego functioning, and awareness in the fetus and of the possible bearings of this previous stage, fetal life, not only on the future development of the individual, but also on the mental functioning of the baby".

Pointing out the growing interest centered in a third group of analysts on the effect of maternal influences on the fetus during pregnancy Piontelli states, "Many psychoanalysts believe that the maternal emotions and even phantasies can have a strong impact on the fetus and therefore may determine the outcome of its future personality as well as its future sanity or pathology. But here again the fetus is considered almost as a non-entity and in its extreme form this view tends to consider the fetus as a totally malleable 'tabula rasa' on which the mother leaves her imprint, and pregnancy is regarded as important only so far as her state of mind is concerned".

Some readers may get the feeling that Piontelli would like to have taken the next step into a fourth group composed of non-analyst who are ISPPM members exploring even broader concepts of prebirth memories through regression therapies sourcing her observed fetus's behaviors and mapping these behaviors through a prebirth and birth analysis matrix. Their trained senses will recognize the obvious patterns and attitudes of the mothers which became encoded into their babies forming during gestation the observed expressions of those babies personalities. Other therapists trained in past life regression therapies will read Piontelli's well presented cases chafing at the prospect which is obvious to them, of the behaviors being explored and released from past life dimensions of consciousness.

In conclusion, Piontelli has presented *From Fetus to Child* precisely as her subtitle states "An observation and psychoanalytic study." But it is far more. In exceptionally readable style, "From Fetus to Child" is the first step of an evidential scientific nature that personality is guilded and crafted far earlier that had ever been proven before. It is important for analysts and non-analysts alike because it sets a platform for a possible synthesis in what in the past has sometimes been a fitful and unsatisfying unity amongst ISPPM members when fundamental psychological toes had been stepped on. This is a landmark book which every ISPPM member of whatever discipline as well as the general reader would benefit from reading. As in the movies, let us look forward to the sequel *From the Fetus to Child II*.

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