

Tri-bar mental structure in masochistic perversion

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of a Tri-bar third in relation to a perverse, masochistic patient. Using the visual metaphor of the Penrose Triangle, a series of theoretical and clinical observations exemplified by case material are discussed in relation to a) the patient's symptom structure, b) the transference and countertransference, and c) the patient's management of affect. The masochist's symptomatic oscillations between mindless bodily symptoms on the one hand, and rigid cognitions and relational deadness on the other, are understood as two different defensive strategies to save the masochist from knowing about a terrifying object in her mind. Although this annihilating object threatens her very ego integrity, the paper argues that she seeks to maintain a relationship with this object in the compulsion to repeat her infantile trauma. This desperate state of affairs is echoed in the therapeutic relationship, which also flips between the mindlessly visceral and cognitively dead. These two irreconcilable states are maintained in the perverse relationship via the use of deception and illusion, which in turn obscures the horrifying emotional reality of the annihilating object. The paper then discusses the way in which the split in the pervert's symptoms and her relationships may relate to two different ways of organising her affects: in pretend mode and psychic equivalence. The paper concludes that Tri-bar structure, although resulting from severe developmental arrest, also serves a defensive function that protects the masochist from full awareness of her persecutory emotional world.