IDENTITY AND THE FOUNDATIONAL MYTH

Psychoanalytic Insights into Gender Distress

Marcus Evans

KARNAC
firing the mind

First published in 2026 by
Karnac Books Limited
62 Bucknell Road
Bicester
Oxfordshire OX26 2DS

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80013-388-4 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-80013-393-8 (e-book)
ISBN: 978-1-80013-392-1 (PDF)

Typeset by vPrompt eServices Pvt Ltd, India

www.firingthemind.com

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name

—William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Contents

Part II
Case studies

Acknowledgements

I would especially like to thank J. Cohn for her amazing support and work in helping me edit this book.

I would also like to thank Susan Evans, Bob Hinshelwood, Shlomit Gorin, Roberto D'Angelo, Heinz Weiss, and Ian Williamson for helping me with the different chapters of this book.

About the author

Marcus Evans is a psychoanalyst and fellow of the British Psychoanalytical Society. He was a consultant psychotherapist and mental health nurse with forty years of experience in mental health. He was head of the nursing discipline at the Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust between 1998 and 2018. He was also the lead clinician in the adult and adolescent service and one of the founding members of Fitzjohn's Service for the treatment of patients with severe and enduring mental health conditions and/or personality disorders.

He has written and taught extensively on applying psychoanalytic thinking in mental health settings. Karnac published the first, *Making Room for Madness in Mental Health: The Psychoanalytic Understanding of Psychotic Communications*, in 2016.

His second book, *Psychoanalytic Thinking in Mental Health Settings*, introduces front-line mental health professionals to psychoanalytic thinking and was published by Routledge in 2020.

The following year his third book, *Gender Dysphoria: A Therapeutic Model for Working with Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults*, written with his wife, Susan, was published by Phoenix.

Preamble to the foreword

Ron Britton was one of the foremost psychoanalytic thinkers of his generation. Trained at the Tavistock Clinic, he became a training analyst and later served as President of the British Psychoanalytical Society. His books, in particular *Belief and Imagination* and *Sex, Death, and the Superego*, along with a series of influential papers, helped to shape how analysts understand borderline states, psychotic anxieties, and the dynamics of belief. His international influence was significant, but what stood out in my own encounters with him was the combination of originality, curiosity, and presence with which he engaged others.

I asked Ron to endorse the book my wife, Susan, and I co-wrote, *Gender Dysphoria: A Therapeutic Model for Working with Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults*. The subject at that time was highly contentious, but he agreed without hesitation and even offered to organise a book launch. Later, when we asked him to write a preface, he agreed immediately. His response reflected his conviction that clinical work should confront difficult realities rather than avoid them.

A recurring theme in Ron's work was the distinction between two uses of thought. One develops frameworks that enable painful dilemmas to be confronted and understood. The other employs belief systems to defend against reality by simplifying or denying it. He supported our

first book because he saw it as an effort to engage with and explore painful aspects of reality rather than deny them.

Ron generally viewed painful dilemmas as a natural part of being human. His starting point was always: *Where is the patient, and what are they struggling with?* His approach was grounded in the patient's lived experience, seen through his own perspective but without imposing it. He remained attentive and curious, consistently interested in the other while recognising how his own experience shaped the encounter.

Regarding my new book, *Identity and the Foundational Myth*, it seemed fitting to ask him once more to write the preface. By that time, writing had become challenging for him, so we agreed that I would conduct interviews, record our meetings, and produce a transcript. These conversations were fascinating and covered his personal background, his time at the Tavistock, and his reflections on psychoanalysis, theology, philosophy, and neurology.

Ron was an original thinker. His paper "The missing link" remains, in my view, one of the most significant contributions to psychoanalysis, particularly in its account of borderline states. His ideas about triangular space and the internal parental couple changed the analytic frame, demonstrating how a third element is essential for creative thought and ego development.

In my clinical work, I have often observed the absence of this triangular space. Without it, the ability to imagine, symbolise, or think flexibly is greatly restricted. Instead of relying on fantasy or thought to navigate conflict, many individuals resort to concrete solutions, often focused on the body, to ease internal tension. Ron's explanation of triangular space has been central to my understanding of these mental states and to the work described in this book.

His view that the child's exclusion from the parental couple creates a space for imagination is also highly relevant. Many of the young people I see lack such a space. They struggle to think about themselves in an abstract way, to integrate different aspects of mind and body, or to tolerate different parts of themselves. The expansion of the two-person relationship into a triangular one often leaves them feeling persecuted by ideals they believe they cannot meet. They seek an imagined door out of the mind and body in which they feel trapped. Ron insisted that the analyst should not provide such a door but should try to understand

how the young person's mind is working. If the analyst appears to claim greater knowledge of who they are, the patient is likely to feel invalidated and withdraw.

Many colleagues knew Ron better than I did, but I, too, saw what they described: his creativity, warmth, and generosity. He consistently demonstrated the ability to pay close attention to others, including their backgrounds, cultures, religions, and histories, which shaped their beliefs. I was left thinking afterwards that this kind of attention reflects a function and aim of the life instinct.

The following Foreword brings together the conversations between Ron and I recorded during the last weeks of his life. It showcases both his ideas and the disciplined focus that made him such a distinctive and important figure in psychoanalysis.

Preface

We all, as human beings, have some sense of who we are. We can represent ourselves to ourselves in the typical way humans can reflect on matters within and without. It would seem we are all born with an innate ability to sense our own existence. But the special characteristics of that unique being are acquired from the word "go". The very earliest hints to who we are get woven together under the personal and cultural pressures of our context comprising our family and the society.

This book is a remarkable account of what can go wrong to impoverish our sense of being a person, of being an *adequate* person. It explores the tragic influence of the context that embraces us from the beginning. I have been privileged to see the progress of Marcus Evans' thinking on these underlying strands of stress, and the ensuing search for a sense of identity and self thereafter. Solutions of some kind emerge at an early age, before maturity. And as the author points out, those solutions are reached, with the help or hindrance, of parents and others who can helpfully grasp a little of the developmental stresses or alternatively those who form a context that *cannot* support or empathise sufficiently well for the developing young.

Marcus Evans has not debated general and hypothetical issues, such as the unevidenced biological surmise that physical and chemical influences in the body determine decisively the gender identity. Rather, he has, with patience, taken a detailed practical approach. To study the actual influences on each unique person takes time, practice, and ingenuity. The practice of unrushed psychotherapy with those who are willing provides the opportunity to come close to the implicit and unconscious struggles that beset us from our earliest stages. Generalisations come more slowly from this practice but have a greater certainty than hypothesising the unknown physiological causes.

It is adolescence when these beginner issues from infancy reopen again in a very different context of others, and we become exposed to group attitudes and pressures (including the vagaries of the social media). Nevertheless, it is explicitly demonstrated in this work that it is a reopening. It is not a new developmental struggle. The context of colleagues of the *same* generation provide new pressures on the old struggles to compose a self. It is at this stage that the work of psychotherapy applies its microscope, peering as if back in time into the early reaches of the universe. But this time into the early reaches of the existential becoming of the self.

Evans picks up on the foundational "myth" of the self in relation to its existential context. It is in this case not Oedipus exactly, though Oedipus too was caught in an existential context in which his parents struggled (and failed) to accept his existence. As we look at the cases presented, one can see how the foundational myth is about the willingness (or otherwise) of the family and maybe society to acknowledge the self of the new individual. As Evans puts it in his introduction, "Questions like, 'Was I wanted?' or 'Was I a mistake?' can form part of a foundational myth that influences self-perception and worldview." The successful establishment of a sense of oneself can only occur if there are satisfactory answers *felt* by the infant. Such issues are almost certainly not known cognitively by a baby—and only when reopened in adolescence and therapy. For the infant they are communicated in nursing and handling, in the sounds and lullabies, and in the now-understood imitative conversations of babies with their intimate carers. It is of great importance that we should become familiar with these foundational issues in our own development, in that of our children and of all young people. It is an

issue that pervades life ever-after; that implicit existential awareness, "Am I wanted by my parents for the person I am, whatever that is; or is it for some distant and alien purpose of my parents; or even a mistake on their part."

The slowness of accumulating evidence of these issues and struggles, as well as the uniqueness of individuals and the history of their experiences, contributes to the opportunity for debates in wider society, debates about binary normality and diversity. These more generalised social debates about gender that have to await corroborating evidence from the work of psychotherapists have already reached furnace-like intensity. Such often-vituperative intensity can only be an echo of the viciousness of the internal debates and jealousies, and the envy reflected from the early years. The sophisticated psychological and political debate is the echo of the violence of the *internal* struggles to confront and live with the generative parents, whatever gender they are seen to have. That internal wrangling will in those early days disorganise the sense of self and often lead to inconsistency in behaviour, emotions, and experiences. And in later life beyond adolescence, the deep and non-cognitive struggles we harbour from our early days emerge in these bitterly argued and cognitive disputes.

Remarkably, the approach demonstrated in this book, however, is one of calmness in the face of the troubled persons' struggles and often self-harming (even mutilating) behaviour. The reflectiveness that calm brings allows a mental space to reconsider the desperateness of the non-mental bodily urges and the torturing uncertainties. Gender points directly to the need to connect in relations with other persons. A gender exists only in relation to others' genders. They may be collegial relations with a similar or congruent gender or they may be a complementary relationship of a sexual nature. These intimacies with colleagues and with sexual partners preoccupy us all our lives. Meeting with the calm reflectiveness mirrored in this book, and in the debates I engaged in when Marcus showed me pieces of his chapters, showed the importance of the approach. It is the mental aspects of sexual needs that run parallel or may even underlie the hormonal and physiological grounding that need exposing and putting carefully into non-provocative words.

Unfortunately, the correlation between mind and body is often simplified mistakenly. And we have hardly even begun to understand

how the experiences and meanings of the mind can emerge from the deterministic causality of the physical brain. This is not the preoccupation of psychotherapists. It is merely a handicap we have had to pick up from the inadequacy of philosophers to deal convincingly with the mind–brain problem!

Perhaps we are left with the uncomfortable question of why there are so many more young people struggling with a dysphoria in recent years. Is it that our society (in the West, I presume) is less and less good at providing the advantageous context of a healthy family? Or, is it that current trends in society encourage this way of expressing the troubles of development? The newness of the confused, challenged, or "trans" gender identities may just be a sexualisation of familiar old identity problems which in the past were expressed as other symptoms such as depression, or hooliganism, or frank criminality. Or are we seeing both these factors—an increase in identity problems from inadequate care in infancy, and the newer sexualised expression of these problems—interacting together?

R. D. Hinshelwood
Professor Emeritus of Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex