Questioning the Paternal Function in Light of Contemporary Parenthood:

The Feminine Maternal Origin of Ethics

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Abstract

Following a condensed presentation of ideas introduced in my book *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*, I question the classical psychoanalytic concept of the paternal function in light of contemporary parenthood. I use the stories of Moses’ birth and infancy and Oedipus’ anamnesis as depictions of the potential dynamics of the parental psyche. I show that these narratives illustrate the sexual drives, the ethical dimension, and life-narcissism within the parent, highlighting the role of the feminine-maternal figures in both accounts. With Oedipus, we shall see the parental figures belonging as much to the paternal as to the maternal orders, with the “evilness” divided evenly between them, and how the feminine maternal dimension that I call the “matricial” -- the asymmetrical, affective dimension of responsibility towards the other -- transcends this differentiation. Following a line of inquiry in my earlier work, these readings re-problematize the classical psychoanalytic assumption of Oedipal universality. Finally, within this revised problematic I explore possible definitions of good-enough parenting in the current environment.

Introduction

“Our era is apparently witnessing the revival and renewal of the paternal function. It seems that the father is not the only person able to embody it. [...] In these times of marriage for all, the place of the father has apparently become interchangeable.” This is what Danièle Brun (2013) writes at the end of her work *L’insidieuse malfaisance du père (The insidious mischief of the father)*.

It was Laplanche (1987) who, a long time ago and in an astonishingly contemporary fashion, developed the idea of a “fundamental anthropological situation”. In this originary scenario between child and parent, he described, on the one hand, an infant endowed with bio-neuro-physiological tableaux, and capable in particular of emotional receptivity, but not yet
endowed with an unconscious in the psychoanalytical sense of the term. On the other hand, the adult or adults upon whom the child depends are endowed not only with an adult sexuality but also with a repressed unconscious; that is, as sexual¹ (Laplanche, 2007). Laplanche defines this adult sexual unconscious in terms of the polymorphous – and, somewhat ironically, “infantile” – sexuality described by Freud in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).

This adult, sexual unconscious manifests itself in enigmatic messages proffered to the child. These are otherwise conscious messages that are compromised by the parents' unconscious expressions of their sexual life and sexual death drives. Due to the gap between the child’s sexual immaturity and that of the adult world, these adults’ messages are experienced by the child as enigmatic. As such these enigmatic messages exert a power of seduction over the child's psyche. It is in this way that Laplanche spoke of the primal seduction.²

As I have long since emphasized, the primal seduction will not become ethical – thus facilitating the child’s good-enough development, forming his/her repressed unconscious, and allowing the basis for his/her future ethical capacity – unless it is anchored in a capacity for affective and asymmetrical responsibility for the child on the part of the adult world in charge of care (be it a man or a woman, a mother or a father). This adult’s capacity finds its origin in the matricial³, the feminine maternal dimension common to all human beings.⁴ The reiterated encounter of the adult world, of the parents, with the fragility of the child and the

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¹ *Le sexual* is a French neologism Laplanche introduced to denote the specifically Freudian concept of unconsciously driven sexuality, versus the common French term and concept of genital sexuality (*le sexuel*).

² Laplanche (1987) insisted that it is not a matter of a direct transmission from the parental unconscious to the child’s psyche, but rather of the child’s psyche producing a personal translation of these messages, an incomplete translation due to that very gap between that child’s psyche and that adult’s psyche. The untranslated remainders will be repressed and will constitute the “fueros” located at the origin of the drives; they will constitute the “repressed unconscious”.

³ My inspiration for the term “matricial space” (and hence also “matricial”, “matricial space position”, “matricial third”) came, a long time ago, from Bracha Ettinger (1997) who, also following Levinas (see note 4), proposed in a slightly different context the expression “matrixial space”.

⁴ Though he did not follow this idea further in his writings, Freud alluded in “Project for a Scientific Psychology” to “The Origins of Morality”, describing an ethics which does not find its first origin in an Oedipal super-ego. He described the little human being as being helpless from the outset, in a state of "désaide", as Laplanche will say. Without an object who will give him ‘specific help’, without an object to whom to have recourse, the little human being will not be able to survive. Freud names this helpful object: *Neben Mensch*, a close being. It is a matter here of enabling the child to live or... letting him or her die.
enormity of his existence does them violence, provoking in them an “ethical shock”. When everything goes as well as possible, this shock will put in place in these adults a “matricial position”, stemming from the feminine-maternal dimension in any human being. I have suggested that while the parents are the subjects of this reiterated ethical shock, they -- father, mother or any adult in charge of the child’s care -- emit enigm-ethic messages, starting from their first encounter with the newborn infant.

I have argued that these enigm-ethic messages leave their traces in the infinite depth of the child’s psyche. These traces will comprise the basis and attractors of the later identifications. The matricial position corresponds and ‘meets’ that “expectant waiting” of which Freud spoke in his early writings (Coblence, 2000). I have formulated this expectant waiting as an “ethical exigency” for the adult world in charge of the child’s care – ethics understood by Levinas (1961, 1974) as asymmetrical responsibility for the other, and by me as affective -- emotionally loaded -- and inescapable responsibility for the child and his survival (Chetrit-Vatine, 2004, 2005, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018).

**Questioning the paternal function in Moses’s early biography**

But let us return to the question of the paternal function. Danièle Brun reminds us how, in a perspective which I would term largely patriarchal, “Freud made the father the guardian of the prohibition of incest.” And I ask: what incest are we talking about? Probably that of the mother and her sons, but what about that of the father and his daughters? “Freud made the father the representative of the law.” What law are we talking about? That of the father of the horde? That of the power of the stronger over the weaker? Or that proposed by Moses and relating to the access to symbolisation? And I ask further: is the idea of a murder of the father as the foundation of morality so fundamental? After all, it is actually the desire to

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5 Levinas pointed to maternity, and specifically pregnancy and the uterus, as ethical spaces. Matricial space refers to the capacity to make room for the other; it is a space of relation to an other that is not me, at the risk of my being, at the cost of a place in my body, in my entrails (Levinas 1974). But there is also for me, in this matricial metaphor, in these desires of life and sometimes of death, the possibly tormenting aspect of that other, his disquieting aspect, which can make us “vacillate” (Bokanowski, 2004) vis-a-vis this injunction that comes from the face of the other who summons us to a “thou shall not kill”. The interpellation of the other is violence; the responsibility for the other is taking the subject hostage. The relationship with the other is from the outset violent. Arousing my anxiety, he arouses my own violence. The encounter with the other is at once violence and interpellation.

6 Vermote (2013) has spoken of a zone of infinity, building upon the idea of Transformations in O (Bion 1970). I refer here to Citivarèse’s (2018) suggestion to understand O in a simply anthropological perspective.
murder the son that the sacrifices of the firstborn, and in particular the sacrifice of Isaac, allude to.

Interestingly, in Moses and Monotheism, when he returns to the argument of Totem and Taboo Freud deliberately neglects to take into account Moses' formative years and the roles played by the adult figures in the biblical story of the new born Moses's encounter with the adult world. Freud is thus unable to envisage Moses as embodying an ethics of responsibility, related precisely to that first experience, before being subsequently able to embody the access to symbolisation. That would evidently put in question the necessity of the "Murder of the Father" and the centrality of guilt at the origin of the moral capacity.

I suggest that Moses' early biography -- and in a more marked fashion, that of Oedipus -- offer indications as to the dynamic governing any adult psyche in charge of a child's care; in other words, any parental psyche: the sexual death drive, the ethical dimension, and life-narcissism. Indeed, after Pharaoh's order to kill the firstborn is announced, and after the birth of Moses, the emphasis falls firmly on the feminine-maternal parental figures. With Oedipus, we shall see the parental figures belonging as much to the paternal as to the maternal order,

7 We shall note the quick allusions to the maternal feminine in « Totem and Taboo », furtive allusions, traces that it is our task in my view take into consideration. Freud writes that Atkinson, a historian to whom he refers, assumes "that a disintegration of the horde took place after the removal of the father through embittered fighting among the victorious sons, which thus precluded the origin of a new organization of society; "An ever recurring violent succession to the solitary paternal tyrant by sons, whose parricidal hands were so soon again clenched in fratricidal strife". Atkinson, who did not have the suggestions of psychoanalysis at his command [in 1912] ... finds a less violent transition from the primal horde to the next social stage in which many men live together in peaceful accord. [we'll content ourselves, perhaps, with a community of cease fire]. He attributes it to maternal love that at first only the youngest sons and later others too remain in the horde, who in return for this toleration acknowledge the sexual prerogative of the father by the restraint which they practise towards the mother and towards their sisters." However Freud himself will make the psychoanalytical hypothesis which became classic, of an ambivalence of the sons towards the father, whatever this father may be, and of the guilt which will soon establish itself after his murder: "After they had satisfied their hate by his removal and had carried out their wish for identification with him [by devouring him!], the suppressed tender impulses had to assert themselves." And Freud adds in a note: "This new emotional attitude must also have been responsible for the fact that the deed could not bring full satisfaction to any of the perpetrators. In a certain sense it had been in vain. For none of the sons could carry out his original wish of taking the place of the father. But failure is, as we know, much more favourable to moral reaction than success." I had the opportunity to question this last statement, supported by the developments of Klein and Winnicott, and later Lacan, insisting on the alternative foundations of ethics, foundations considering that it is not established on an in fact persecuting guilt. For Melanie Klein as for Winnicott or Bion , true morality appears when the subject becomes capable of taking the object into consideration, when the object is perceived as a subject. To do this the human subject will have to develop thanks to a good enough experience with the environment in charge of him, with an environment sufficiently 'holding', on the basis of a repeated encounter with a sufficiently 'containing' parental environment. Or, according to Lacan, on condition that the subject is inscribed in the symbolic order, without confusing an arbitrary law perverting the subject with an accepted and chosen law guaranteeing his freedom and engaging his responsibility (Chétrit-Vatine, 2013).
with the “wickedness” distributed between them. The matricial dimension will transcend this differentiation; I shall return to this.

In the story of Moses’ early biography, we have his sister Myriam, triggered by her sexual life drive, encouraging her parents to act without fear and bring a child into the world despite the risk of seeing him eliminated (a presence of the sexual death drive, then). We see Jochebed, Moses’ mother, able to separate from her baby and leave him to float on the Nile in order to keep him alive: here a life drive and an ethics of responsibility meet. This ethics of responsibility will in turn be taken up by Pharaoh’s daughter upon meeting that little other/stranger, this encounter doing her violence while summoning her to respond to the baby’s fragility. Experiencing an ethical shock, and no doubt animated by her life-narcissism, she will take care of the infant while entrusting him to Jochebed, who will continue to nurse him regularly until the age of three, according to the Midrash. Probability of murder, ethical shock, narcissistic motivation and affective responsibility are all combined here.

**The Oedipus Complex in the light of contemporary multiple forms of parenthood**

The unconscious knows no chronology, no negation, no differentiation, and contemporary parenthoods are able to transcend earlier barriers in previously forbidden or biologically impossible arrangements. That said, in the days of surrogate mothers and egg donors, of sperm donations and in-vitro fertilisations, of procreation not having much to do anymore with genital sexuality, the impact of the parental psyche on the child remains, of course, crucially important. We will still have messages proffered by the parents, necessarily compromised by their unconscious, the fruit of their sexual death drives as well as their sexual life drives, and it will still be a question of their ethical capacity, rooted in their own depth of infinity and responding to the ethical exigency presented by the child.

For a long time now we have been confronted with these new modes of parenting. Thus, the models of reference developed by Freud and by all those who, like us, remain faithful to him must be reworked again and again. What about, for example, the primal scene, what about the universality of the Oedipus complex?

Let us remind ourselves of the conditions of Oedipus’ birth: Sophocles’ tragedy *King Oedipus* begins with the child’s father, Laios, King of Thebes, learning from Apollo’s oracle that his fate consists in being killed by his son, who will become the lover of Jocasta, his wife and the boy’s mother. To avoid the realization of this prophecy, Laios and his wife Jocasta pierce and tie the new-born’s feet (hence his name Oedipus, meaning: swollen foot). Then
they put the baby in the hands of one of their servants, ordering him to abandon the child to die in the Cithaeron mountains. But the servant finds himself unable to obey. He keeps the child alive and gives him to the servant of the King and Queen of Corinth, Polybus and Merope, who desire very much to have a child and are unable to give birth themselves.

In an echo of what we saw in the early biography of Moses, we can find in the early days of Oedipus a representation of the potential dynamic of any parental psyche – a combined, a-chronological mobilisation, of varying intensity, of the Sexual, the Ethical and Life-Narcissism (Chetrit-Vatine, 2012, 2018).

- Mobilisation of the sexual death drive, represented by the “evil” couple Laius and Jocasta: We have on the one hand a potential violence provoked by the birth of the infant in his total dependence, a birth that possibly threatens the equilibrium of the couple/the parent/the adult in charge of his care, with a simultaneous discharge of a first parental reactive hatred – remember the ritualistic sacrifices of the firstborn in various civilisations – and thus an unconscious desire for murder. We have on the other hand an appeal to the infantile, to infantile sexuality in the adults in charge of the child, and as a consequence, the proffering of enigmatic seductive messages to the child – an unconscious incestuous desire on the part of the adults.

- Ethical mobilisation, an expression of the matricial dimension, represented by the servants. Laius and Jocasta’s servant experiences an “ethical shock” creating in him a space of affective responsibility for that other in its ultimate fragility and enormity, with the injunction: “Thou shall not kill!”

- Mobilisation of life-narcissism, represented by the royal couple of Corinth, Oedipus’ adoptive parents. Childless, they invest all their life-narcissism in little Oedipus and take on all responsibility for him.

We will perhaps agree with Laplanche in no longer conceiving of Oedipus complex as an endogenous phenomenon, but rather as a narrative of the messages compromised by the unconscious of the adult world and therefore transmitted by the adult world … at the price of the child’s guilt. We could reconceive of it, with Haydée Faimberg (2005), as a structure of welcoming connected to a theory of knowledge between determinism and uncertainty; in other words, and ethically speaking, a structure respecting the necessary irreducible singularity of any human subject and the singularity of the parental organisation in charge of helping him develop.
So, is the paternal function still relevant in the terms proposed by Freud? Should we not rather speak of a \textit{parental function}?

\textbf{An ethics of asymmetric and affective responsibility allows an ethical seduction}

Let us return for a moment to the implications of an ethics of asymmetric and affective responsibility and to the forms it can take. Paraphrasing Salman Akhtar (1999), I will name: the recognition of the legitimacy of the child’s physical needs and their satisfaction; the help offered to the child in understanding the causality of events; the offer of a maximally possible emotional availability and of a constant responsiveness, taking into account parental limits; the reiterated affirmation and recognition of the child’s identity; respect for his own limits as much in his interpersonal relations as in regards to his inner world; respect for his private space. In particular, the adults in charge of the child should provide him with a clear realisation of differences of gender and generations.

In order to at best provide the child with an ethical seduction, a relation made of tenderness, in other words made of “a sexuality inhibited as to its goal” thanks to “the censure of the female lover” (Braunschweig D., Fain M., 1975) or of the male lover (Parat, 2011), it is important for a living desire to exist between the partners in the parental couple. In cases of a single motherhood, we will underline the importance of the father, as genetic as he might be, in the mother’s mind.

Roussillon (2006) spoke of “the symboligenic function” of the object in enabling the child an appropriation of his subjectivity. Thus mothers or fathers, functioning as a “matricial third”\(^8\) from a matricial position of asymmetrical responsibility for their child, would be able to progressively reveal to their child the secret of his/her procreation and the possible existence of “biological others” – a genetic sperm donor father, a surrogate mother, a genetic mother – differentiated according to the possible parental combinations from a father or a mother who raises the child. From a position of asymmetrical and affective responsibility, this unveiling and this differential naming will be realized while taking into attentive consideration the child’s present representative capacity. “Whatever the means used by the parents and/or the adults in charge of the children to do it – role-play, using images, dance, words – they will

\(^8\) Placing myself in a critical perspective with regards to what was seemingly omitted by Freud in “Totem and Taboo” and in “Moses and Monotheism” (see note 6), I became interested in this missing trace which is the matricial third. I maintained that in order for a passage from the father of the horde to the inhibiting so called paternal principle to become possible, one cannot avoid taking into consideration an un-split, seductive and matricial feminine maternal dimension which stays at the first origin of any human being’s ethical capacity.
have to be underpinned by an ethics of *bien-dire*” (‘saying well’, Tisseron, 2004). Thus, in appropriating the elements that will help him/her translate the messages compromised by the parental unconscious, the child will be able to enlarge his capacity for representation and appropriate himself/herself as a subject. Identifying with his/her parents in their matricial functioning will thus reinforce the traces of the enigm-ethnic messages inscribed in the depth of his/her being, due to the “ethical shock” they experienced, at the beginning of his/her life.

**Questions continue to arise**

And yet: Will the triangularity and the necessary space between the parent and the child be assured by the fact that the parent lives with a male or a female partner, of whatever gender, in a desirous sexual relation? Will the existence of a father “in the mother’s head” suffice? Will the way in which these new modes of procreation and parenthood are taken up by the discourse, at once familial and social, ensure the adequate development of the children thus conceived and brought up? Ethics of responsibility, ethics of truth, ethics of sensitivity, ethics of saying well... However, questions will continue to arise:

- questions relating to the inescapable emission of “compromised” messages addressed to the children by the adults who are in charge of them, “implanted” in conditions of good health or “intromitted” (Laplanche, 1990) when this is not the case.

- questions relating to the good enough parental capacity to contain, metabolise and transform, for themselves and then for their child, the shame, the conscious and unconscious guilt, the suffering that they went through, the history and the conscious and unconscious motivations of the child’s conception.

- finally, questions relating to the “good enough response”, to unveiling what is representable and “keeping secret” what is not, or cannot be, still...perhaps.

Here, the ethics will be that of a saying-well which will never be “saying everything”. It will suppose the no less inescapable necessity of a parent, capable of attempting to “meet” the child’s ethical exigency, in other words the needs of that child, as prior to his own. It will suppose an adult who will deserve being designated by the child as his father or mother because that adult will be recognised as such by him: it is not the one who conceived who is called father or mother, as the Bible reminds us from time immemorial; “but the one who took care of me, the one who raised me”, adds the Midrash.
If Kristeva suggested that women will not be liberated as long as we lack an ethics of the maternal, I would say that humanity will not be able to assume a ‘limited freedom’ as long as we are unable to recognise that at the origin of ethics lies the feminine-maternal. This level of being which is the capacity for responsibility for the other, this ‘otherwise than being’ (Levinas, 1974) thus remains for me, metaphorised by the potential matriciality of any human being, his/her capacity for welcoming the stranger. And that is what has been exemplified in the Bible story, by the person of Moses who was during his formative years “a stranger”, adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter and nursed by a mother who knew that she will never possess him; all that, despite Freud’s “unknown” or, rather, despite his “not wanting to know” …
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