ENVY: HOW TO INTERPRET A MORTAL SIN?

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Abstract: *Envy has always been a frequent topic in religious scriptures and literature. Freud formulated penis envy as a central element in female psychology. Nowadays this theory has been largely abandoned. Envy, however, continues to keep its position as a central psychoanalytic concept in the form of oral envy. Melanie Klein conceptualized it as a direct derivative of the death instinct. This paper starts with demonstrating examples of envy in literature. The author continues with searching his own life for traces of envy. He then draws on his own clinical practice and on case studies of other analysts. He concludes that a theory, describing envy as directly deriving from the death drive does not do justice to the multiple aspects of the complex emotional state of envy. Anne-Marie and Joseph Sandler's work on the present and past unconscious as well as Mark Solms' neuropsychanalytic research on the unconscious and the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis corroborate this conclusion.*

Keywords: envy, death instinct, countertransference, interpretation, sin, neuroscience.

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Introduction

Writing this paper I do not know whether I am preparing an oral presentation for a live audience, a paper to be presented at an internet meeting, or a paper to be solely read. The Covid-19 pandemic makes any sort of planning elusive and, as everyone else, I am in a constant state of uncertainty. This fits very well with the topic of this year's EPI school "*An Art of Interpreting: what, where and when*". As an analyst, before giving an interpretation, I usually swim in an ocean of many possibilities and meanings and rarely feel sure about whether I found the meaningful "selected fact" (Bion, 1962; Britton, Steiner, 1994). As everyone knows, the "selected fact" of today may be the "overvalued idea" of tomorrow. In this situation of doubt and uncertainty, one may be tempted to seek refuge in theory. However, this could end up in lifeless rationalisations devoid of affect and lived experience. To develop my thoughts on interpretation and inherent pitfalls one is often confronted with in the act of interpreting, I will use the phenomenon of envy.

Envy in literature

Before embarking on our journey into the dark continent of the complex emotional state of envy, I want to look at examples in literature. Writers often intuitively grasp the essence of the human mind and rarely neglect the multi-faceted phenomenology of emotions.

I start with the biblical story of Cain and Abel. In the International English Bible we read the story as follows:

In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord ... but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor . But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of

his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering ... So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it'. Then Cain kills Abel, initially denying all responsibility ... 'I don't know', he replies. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Jehovah condemns him to the infertility of his efforts, and to be a rover and foreigner, but at the same time he covers him with a mark that is both the stigma of his crime and a sign of protection. Cain disappears from the presence of Jehovah and lives at the East of Paradise. Cain met his wife who begot and gave birth to Enoch who had a prolific offspring. Jehovah substitutes Abel with a third brother named Seth. She [Eve] says ... 'God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him'

We all know this story. It deals with envy among brothers, ending in murder. A closer look, however, reveals a more complex story. There are three persons involved, whereas envy is usually regarded as something between two persons. Jehovah distributes his favour very arbitrarily and unfairly. There is no justified reason to prefer Abel over Cain, unless we think of God as favouring cattle breeding over agriculture. Furthermore, we may wonder whether it is more a case of jealousy rather than proper envy. The story of Cain and Abel shows something very characteristic for cases of seemingly pure and simple envy. If you try to understand more deeply what is going on, you discover an interplay of different motives, affects and relationships.

Let's turn to another biblical story, that of Joseph and his brothers. Here is a short narrative of the plot:

Joseph, son of Israel (Jacob) and Rachel, lived in the land of Canaan with eleven brothers and one sister. He was Rachel's firstborn and Israel's eleventh son. Of all the sons, Joseph was loved by his father

the most. Israel even arrayed Joseph with a "long coat of many colours". Israel's favouritism toward Joseph caused his half-brothers to hate him, and when Joseph was seventeen years old he had two dreams that made his brothers plot his demise. In the first dream, Joseph and his brothers gathered bundles of grain. Then, all of the grain bundles that had been prepared by the brothers gathered around Joseph's bundle and bowed down to it. In the second dream, the sun (father), the moon (mother) and eleven stars (brothers) bowed down to Joseph himself. When he told these two dreams to his brothers, they despised him for the implications that the family would be bowing down to Joseph. They became jealous that their father would even ponder over Joseph's words concerning these dreams. (Genesis 37:1-11) They saw their chance when they were feeding the flocks, the brothers saw Joseph from afar and plotted to kill him. They turned on him and stripped him of the coat his father made for him, and threw him into a pit. As they pondered what to do with Joseph, the brothers saw a camel caravan of Ishmaelites coming out of Gilead, carrying spices and perfumes to Egypt, for trade. Judah, the strongest, thought twice about killing Joseph and proposed that he be sold. The traders paid twenty pieces of silver for Joseph, and the brothers took Joseph's coat back to Jacob, who was lied to and told that Joseph had been killed by wild animals.

Again, at a closer look, a seemingly clear-cut story of sibling rivalry and envy appears more complex. Envy and jealousy are intermingled, and there is also a parental figure preferring one child over the others. As in "Cain and Abel" the outcome is murderous hatred.

For a third example, let us have a look at a master in describing and exploring human passions – Shakespeare. In his play "Othello", Iago destroys Othello's love and life with such a malignancy and cruelty

that he hardly represents an example of human psychology, appearing instead more like a semi-secularized version of the devil. Coleridge saw in Iago the “motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity”. Psychoanalytic authors however describe Iago often as the epitome of destructive envy. In contrast to Iago, Richard III appears as more human and understandable, although not less destructive specimen of an envious character. His physical deformity makes him envy the healthy, normal and seemingly happy people.

As a last literary example I chose “The Count of Monte Cristo”, written by Alexandre Dumas in the 19th century. For a short summary of the plot I quote Wikipedia: *On the day of his wedding to Mercédès, Edmond Dantès, first mate of the Pharaon, is falsely accused of treason, arrested, and imprisoned without trial in the Château d'If, a grim island fortress off Marseille. A fellow prisoner, Abbé Faria, correctly deduces that his jealous rival Fernand Mondego, envious crewmate Danglars, and double-dealing magistrate De Villefort turned him in. Faria inspires his escape and guides him to a fortune in treasure. As the powerful and mysterious Count of Monte Cristo (Italy), he arrives from the Orient to enter the fashionable Parisian world of the 1830s and avenge himself on the men who conspired to destroy him.*

In my youth this novel was a central piece of my literary world and fantasy life. I hope many of you know it too. It offers many opportunities for a young boy to identify with. Again, it demonstrates the interplay of envy and jealousy. It is embedded in a world filled with love and hate, courage and cowardice, faithfulness and betrayal. In contrast with other stories this one shows how the envied person takes cruel revenge on his envious adversaries.

The “Count of Monte Cristo” is but one example of a plethora of other novels, dramas, theatre-plays and movies dealing with the topic of envy. They all are embedded in Christian tradition and culture,

condemning envy as one of the seven mortal sins. Thomas Aquinas described the mythical monster Leviathan as the demon of envy, the worst of the seven deadly sins. Surely you all know the Russian movie “Leviathan”, directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev, where an envious mayor destroys the existence and life of a landowner.

Melanie Klein (1956, p. 189) too wrote in “Envy and Gratitude”:

“There are very pertinent psychological reasons why envy ranks among the seven ‘deadly sins’. I would even suggest that it is unconsciously felt to be the greatest sin of all, because it spoils and harms the good object which is the source of life. This view is consistent with the view described by Chaucer in The Parsons Tale: ‘It is certain that envy is the worst sin that is; for all other sins are sins only against one virtue, whereas envy is against all virtue and against all goodness’”

Envy in Psychoanalysis

Theorizing about envy has a long tradition in the history of psychoanalysis. Freud discovered penis envy and understood it as a core element of female psychology. Since then this view has been widely abandoned. Of course, penis envy may play an important role in individual psychopathology, but it lost its quality of a central element in female development. Later on and till today, Melanie Klein’s concept of primary oral envy, as a direct derivative of the death drive, seems to have replaced penis envy as a central element, not of female development, but of any individual human development. The above quotation conveys something of the fundamental quality Melanie Klein and her followers ascribe to the concept of envy. In his writing about penis envy, Freud has often been accused of not putting forward a scientific hypothesis which can be validated, but of expressing

prejudices of the 19th century about female psychology. Reading the above quotation of Melanie Klein, one may also doubt whether this is a scientific thesis about the human mind or a Manichean statement about the human condition.

Writing this paper I feel burdened with the bulk of evil, sin and malice, notions that apparently captured the mind of all authors, be it literary or scientific writers or artists, who dealt with the topic of envy. I started to ponder upon the question: Where does this deadly sin appear in my psychoanalytic practice, in my patients, their transference and in myself, in my countertransference? With a certain surprise I realized that I did not find frequent instances where envy played a central role in my analyses or psychoanalytic treatments. I started to develop doubts about myself, respectively my way of working psychoanalytically. Did I not see envy in my practice because of personal or theoretical bias? Was I one of those analysts whom Etchegoyen et al. (1987, p. 51) described as *“Those who flatly reject the theory of primary envy will never see it emerge in their patient's material... ..If the analyst does not adequately interpret it, envy does not become apparent”*? I thought of what Eduardo Laverde-Rubio wrote in his paper *“Envy: One or many?”* (2004, p. 414): *“In other words, Freudian psychoanalysts would tend to interpret in terms of penis envy, Kleinian ones as death instinct projected in the good object, while followers of Winnicott would ignore the issue.”* Yet I could not find myself in this slightly joking and seemingly simplistic scheme. I do not consider myself adhering to any so-called psychoanalytic school. In my view, thinking in terms of schools is a relic of the past and no longer fits into the picture of psychoanalysis as a science which has evolved considerably since its beginning. Studying envy in psychoanalysis, however, inevitably leads into the discourse of schools, since the concepts of “envy” and the “death drive” are especially put forward by Kleinian analysts.

Before entering into a theoretical discussion, I want to concentrate first on the phenomenology of envy. My point of departure is that only the exact consideration of phenomena can lead to sound concepts. I start with quoting from Wikipedia:

***Envy** (from Latin invidia) is an emotion which "occurs when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it".*

Aristotle defined envy as pain at the sight of another's good fortune, stirred by "those who have what we ought to have." Bertrand Russel said that envy was one of the most potent causes of unhappiness. Not only is the envious person rendered unhappy by his or her envy, Russell explained, but that person may also wish to inflict misfortune on others, in forms of emotional abuse and violent acts of criminality.

How does it feel to be envious? Reading psychoanalytic papers on envy, even case reports, one misses the actual emotional quality of the envious experience. Usually the analyst is dealing with unconscious envy and its derivatives. The unconscious ideation is described and analyzed. However, the accompanying feeling has to be surmised by the reader. Sometimes "envy" appears more as an explanatory concept than a lived experience. Two paths promise to learn more about the experience of envy: I already mentioned one of them. It is literature. Writers often have a more intuitive grasp on emotions than psychoanalysts. A second path is self-observation as a genuinely psychoanalytic way of gaining insight. I chose this method to learn more about the envious experience and embarked on a journey into my inner world and my biography.

A journey to my inner world

Of course, the value of this approach is jeopardized by personal bias and my own defenses. Nevertheless, I think it is worthwhile because I have immediate access to my emotions. Neurobiological research teaches us that affects are in principle conscious. I quote Mark Solms: *“Freud himself always insisted that the notion of unconscious affect was an oxymoron”* (Solms, 2018, p. 4).

From my personal biography I know instances where I envied persons who had something I did not have. In school I had classmates whose fathers owned a car or who could afford travelling to winter sports. Or I passed a tennis club and watched these wealthier people (at that time) exercising this elegant sport. My psychic pain however was limited. Only my wish was generated to have or do all these things later in my life. I would not even call my feelings pangs of envy. From my actual life, however, I know experiences which resemble more these pangs of envy. If in a discussion somebody brings forward an excellent argument which I myself would have liked to think and utter I can more clearly say that I really envy this person. I admire him, but I do not feel any temptation to spoil his joy or satisfaction. On closer examination this seemingly simple example turns out to be more complicated. The other does not only have something I do not have. He embodies my ideal self. I would like to be such a bright and profound thinker as he is. The gap between my ideal and my actual self is what fills me with dissatisfaction. It is more important that the other person stimulates the emergence of this ideal inside me than he is actually living up to this ideal. The drama takes place in the mind of the envious person. My following reminiscence shows how far away from the envious person's mind the external reality may be. In the years after the war I grew up surrounded by traumatized, resigned, crippled, depressed men whereas

I was looking for idealized heroes. So in my fantasy I transformed former soldiers into heroes whom I intensely envied. I was extremely dissatisfied with my young age, which had prevented me from being a hero myself. The young men, however, whom I envied so much, were actually anything but heroes. They were just glad to have survived the carnage of war. I think this example clearly demonstrates that the process of envy takes place in the internal world of the envious person and does not simply reflect the external reality. Another aspect of envy is demonstrated in an experience of mine from more than twenty years ago. At that time I got severely ill, my health status deteriorated and the attending physicians did not find the correct diagnosis. Day by day I increasingly lost the hope of ever getting well again. In those days, I grew extremely envious of the nurses. They could go home every evening and enjoy life in the company of their loved ones whereas destiny was so cruel and unfair against me, by putting me in this desolate situation. Why me? I did not deserve this fate!

What do these examples teach us? For the envier, his internal world is more important than the facts of the external world. The envied person is being engulfed in the inner world of the envier. Only by this process of internalization and transformation the comparison between actual and ideal self can take place. Such a process does not only occur between two persons but also in groups, and – I have to stress – also in groups of psychoanalysts. I think of instances where an analyst could hardly bear the success of a group of colleagues that he did not belong to. This situation resonated with a deep-seated narcissistic imbalance. He could not bear his deflated actual self and started to attack the envied initiative that he wanted to have invented and owned himself. My experience as a little boy described above and these more malignant group processes have something in common: a life situation sets in motion an internal process dominated by a narcissistic imbalance. This

tight connection between envy and narcissism has been underlined by various authors (Berke, 1985). In this sense the libidinal and destructive narcissism (Rosenfeld, 1987) can be paralleled with the libidinal and destructive envy.

There is another aspect demonstrated by my self-exploration. Envy is not inevitably connected with utmost aggression and destructivity. One may object that my stable defenses prevent me from experiencing my aggression, but I tried to be as honest as possible with myself. Envy may even release psychic resources fostering personal development. From an evolutionary psychological perspective, envy must have a certain survival value. While it is recognized that simple emotions like anger, fear and joy have a genetic basis and have developed in the evolutionary process of natural selection there is growing evidence that more complex emotions like envy and jealousy also have a genetic scaffolding (Ramachandran, 2017). This developmental perspective of envy, be it from an individual point of view or from a general evolutionary one, describes what is known in the psychoanalytic literature as “libidinal envy”. It contrasts with the “destructive envy” that aims at harming or destroying the envied object. Envy seen as a direct expression of the death drive has this malignant potential.

A third aspect revealed through my self-exploration also seems important. The experience of envy is a complex emotional experience with varying components. There is pain, imbalance of self-regulation, grudge, feeling of injustice, release of energy. The use of the term “envy” in psychoanalytic publications sometimes obscures the multiple shades of feeling which analysand and analyst experience while dealing with envy in the analytic situation.

My clinical experience

After this journey into my own psyche I want to explore my clinical practice. Although envy is not the dominant affect I encounter in my therapies, it appears in many cases. Envy is an important emotional experience. A patient of mine who underwent a long analysis had a father who died from a chronic disease during her childhood. Some years later, her sister passed away from a similar chronic disease. Throughout her childhood she defended against intense feelings of jealousy and envy behind a façade of reaction formation. She was a good girl, caring for the sick father and sister and helping the overburdened mother. Only rather late in her life she began a psychoanalysis where she became aware of her intense feelings of envy and hate against her sister causing severe feelings of guilt. These feelings of guilt appeared in the transference when she became livelier and got access to aggressive feelings. She became conscious of her envious feelings, also towards her analyst. But they did not spoil the analytic process and did not lead to negative therapeutic reactions.

Another case is still confronting me with difficulties regarding envy and narcissism. For many years a man in his seventies has been with me in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, with two weekly face-to-face sessions. Earlier in his life he had undergone two long-term analyses that helped him maintain a reasonably successful professional life. But he stayed solitary, always threatened by depression and anxieties. When he did not succeed in finding an adequate new job after his forced retirement because of reaching the age limit of 65 years, he searched anew for treatment in a state of chronic depression. In the transference he was looking for a stabilizing and supporting father, always threatened by me becoming a dismissive and destructively criticizing mother. Although his mental state considerably improved in the

therapy, he never responded to interpretations of the analytic relationship. Frequently I thought that he must inevitably envy me, an elderly man like himself, but settled in a satisfactory social and professional situation. When I finally succeeded in seeing more clearly his extreme feelings of shame in his encounter with me and other objects, the atmosphere in the sessions became more personal. The problem of shame seems not to have been worked through in his two previous analyses. Finally I could address his courage in overcoming his shame anxiety in certain social activities. These two interpretative steps only became possible after I managed to overcome my negative countertransference. In almost exclusively seeing his narcissistic defenses and his clinging to a grandiose self, I was identified with his transference object of a mother, who could not accept him as a boy who desperately vied for her love and acceptance, but instead constantly confirmed his feeling insufficient and worthless. Instead of empathizing with his deep pain, anxiety and shame, longing for a dependent relationship with me, I had stayed bound in a mutual enactment repeating the noxious relationship to his mother. Although envy remains a topic in our analytic discourse, I do not see or conceptualize it as a primary destructive force threatening the analytic relationship. I understand it as a concomitant and outcome of his narcissistic problems based on a traumatizing early relationship with a severely disturbed mother.

A third example is taken from the supervision of a colleague. She was analyzing a middle-aged woman who threatened her in her ability to maintain a neutral analytic stance toward the patient. Instead she often felt overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness and anger. The patient constantly rejected any transference interpretation and negated the impact and importance of the analytic relationship. Especially when some closeness and personal atmosphere in the sessions had developed,

she abruptly returned to her usual attitude and dismissively rejected any interpretation. One could describe this sequence as a typical negative therapeutic reaction. The colleague felt tempted to seek refuge in the concept of a destructive envy attacking the analytic process and destroying any meaningful link between analyst and analysand. But then a concept would have served the purpose of rationalizing the enactment of a negative countertransference. Envy played an important role in the patient's transference. However, I believe it to be rather a reaction to the danger of becoming trapped in a dependent relationship than a primary destructive force. The early years of the patient make it understandable that she cannot bear even the thought of getting into a relationship where she feels totally dependent on a nourishing object. As in my own aforementioned case, this analysis took a promising course after the analyst could better understand her countertransference.

The excursion into my inner world and the description of my clinical practice thus far outline how I see the place of envy in practice and theory. Envy is a complex experience that is part of human emotional life, has genetic roots and has developed in the course of evolution. It is not an instinctual impulse. Its derivation from a hypothetical death drive seems to me superfluous. Like other emotional experiences, it has its place in psychoanalytic practice. However, understanding it as the primary motivating force behind the negative therapeutic reaction seems to me like introducing a *deus ex machina* instead of scrutinizing one's countertransference deeper.

Two Cases

You might think that my negative countertransference to the concepts of "death drive" and "envy" is overshadowing my thoughts. Therefore, I want to draw your attention to the case reports of two other

analysts. One is written by John Steiner, a famous Kleinian analyst. The other stems from J. Gerhardt, who at first tried to conceptualize her experience with a patient along the lines of the Kleinian concept of envy, and then modified her practical and theoretical approach.

First John Steiner's case (2008). The analyst describes two sessions of an analysis, one immediately before and another one after the Easter break. Steiner believes "*that Freud's ideas about the death instinct and Klein's description of envy help us to orient our thinking*" in the area of the repetition compulsion. The patient endlessly repeated frustrating setbacks in his life. A striking feature of the analytic "*interaction was his lack of response to any interpretation of transference. He seemed to deny the presence of any meaningful link between himself and the analyst and would calmly explain that the analyst's comments meant nothing to him.*" Just before the Easter break he announced that his son and his wife were to have a baby. His daughter-in-law had come out in a rash. His wife was concerned that it could be German Measles, and if that was the case, it was terribly serious. Steiner interpreted that he was not sure if he cared too little or too much. It all seemed to go from the rash having no significance to it being a disaster. Just before the break he was also concerned to know if the analyst cared or not. To this the patient replied that he could not see why the analyst should care. He knows that after consulting the GP everything will turn out to be completely harmless. The analyst was dismissed as making an unnecessary fuss, particularly when he suggested that the patient needed to be supported and could miss the analyst during the break.

Two weeks later, after the break, the patient returned looking miserable and reported that things had gone wrong, exactly as he had predicted. When the analyst suggested that the patient wants him, the analyst, to accept responsibility for the state he left him in, the patient

disagreed and rejected all the transference connections the analyst tried to make. He argued that the events of his break were not the analyst's responsibility. The session continued to remain repetitive, each of the analyst's attempts to connect the patient's experience with the analyst's work being dismissed as unreasonable. The analyst stayed with his strategy of interpreting the hic-et-nunc of the analytic situation. He addressed the patient's feelings of helplessness and desperation and his feeling humiliated by the analyst.

In my view the report of these two sessions shows a competent and empathic analyst working with a patient who defends against becoming aware of his need to be contained and held. In his countertransference the analyst has to cope with the constant devaluation of his interpretations. Neither in his thoughts nor in his interpretations does the analyst refer to envy. Only in his final discussion he emphasizes the importance of envy in this analysis. *"It seemed to me that it was the adoption of a receptive relationship to the goodness of the breast that proved to be so difficult for the patient, and it was precisely this relationship that was attacked by envy."* A sentence like this one sounds rather general and lifeless compared with another commentary of the analyst referring to the analytic process: *"he struggled with a growing possibility of allowing himself to accept a receptive position in relation to my thoughts, ideas, and feelings. It seemed to me that it was this receptivity that was seen by my patient as feminine and inferior and was the most difficult experience for him to tolerate"*. The final introduction of "envy" and the "death instinct" by the author seems to be owed to the adherence to an overvalued theory rather than to the need to conceptualize a complex clinical situation. Moreover it is striking that Steiner writes about the earliest vicissitudes of the infant's relation to the breast without mentioning any concrete

aspect of the patient's early relationship with his mother. This observation leads me to another psychoanalytic case report.

In her paper "The roots of envy" (2009) J. Gerhardt reports the fragment of an analysis and starts with a short description of the patient's early relationship with her mother. The patient, Ms. A, is a woman in her forties, daughter of a distant father and an extremely narcissistic mother. Mother was a highly regarded artist, and Mrs. A was also artistically gifted. *"The mother-daughter bond was one of over-stimulating bondage resulting in phantasies of idealized merger, then betrayal, exaggeratedly slavish masochistic display, bitter accusations and intense self-loathing."* In the fourth year of her analysis, Mrs. A *"began to make her grievances explicit in the form of constant comparisons with the analyst. Whether she focused on her clothes, car, décor, or what she fantasized about the analyst, her husband, or daughter over the weekend, Ms A conveyed her sense of lack, protest, despair, and tormenting envy in feeling diminished and/or cheated by her mother/analyst."* Often, *"Mrs. A's envious attacks tended to occur after sessions when the analyst had managed to empathically register a terribly painful or shameful experience that she had had."* Provocations about her 'picture perfect life' at first led the analyst to interpret Mrs. A's attacks in terms of fairly standard envy interpretations – without mentioning the term 'envy'. *"The aim of such interpretations was to make conscious the unconscious phantasy of Mrs. A's need for merger with, loyalty to, wish to spoil, or revenge against, her maternal object/analyst viewed as containing all the goods to which she felt entitled."* But the analyst could not observe any change in the patient. Her interpretations seemed to foster Mrs. A's defensive organisation. However she increasingly became aware of her countertransference. She writes: *"Only by attending to the subtleties of my countertransference – especially my slight emotional withdrawal,*

physical tightness, and self-protective edge with Mrs. A – was I able to shift from enacting the role of the narcissistic mother who secretly quarantined herself off from her child's non-symbolic mental functioning, i.e., the abject, terrified, and envious child to become a more emotionally receptive, sensitive-to the-child's-rhythms mother who was able to take in and register her child's vulnerability-pain and transform it into something usable.”

During one session, in a state of reverie, she thought of her 3 1/2-year-old daughter who recently very energetically tried to touch her breast. She sensed that this reverie distilled an important unconscious communication from her patient. Later in the evening she had a terrifying sense of acute depersonalization and emptiness and felt abandoned and utterly isolated. The analyst thought that this experience paralleled the patient's experience and gave shape to the dissociated emptiness Mrs. A was trying to convey. This emotional encounter with the patient helped the analyst to get a deeper felt understanding of her patient's utter despair. Emphasising envy in her interpretations was a symptom of her identification with the mother who defended herself against her needy and greedy daughter.

At the end of her case presentation J. Gerhardt draw the following conclusion: *“More generally, only once I was able to attend to the different emotional currents (projective identifications, reveries, personal associations) woven into my countertransference and find words for what I was feeling was I able to shift from being narcissistically intact but much too separate/distant to being able to drift in and out of states of oneness with Mrs. A's most vulnerable, split-off states and thereby contain these states from within the experience. Only by becoming one with Mrs. A in this way could she begin to tolerate these unbearable states so that they could become integrated with her positive affects/states and reflected upon in terms of her history*

and, ultimately, arouse bearable, because shareable, feelings of shame, guilt, envy, reparation and acceptance.”

Art or science: the use of theory in psychoanalytic practice

After this tour de force dealing with the role of envy in psychoanalytic theory and practice, we can return to the question whether interpretation is an act of art. Interpreting is a complex process. Certainly, there is no recipe or manual as to what, where or when. An element of art may be inherent, but interpreting is also a craft, a technique which can be taught and learned, and besides and above all it implies the use of theory. As analysts we have to subtly and patiently observe the external and internal reality of both participants, of analysand and of oneself as analyst. Thereby we especially emphasize the affective aspects of the analytic relationship. This complex process of observation is constantly accompanied and guided by our theories, not only the great official ones but the multiple so-called private theories which every analyst creates during his professional life – most often not consciously but pre-consciously. Quoting Hamlet, however, “there’s the rub”. On the one hand, there is no observation without theory. On the other hand, theory can also be used as a defence against understanding and experiencing reality.

By studying the role of envy in psychoanalysis one can explore in depth the above described inter-related complexities within the process of interpreting. Whenever we deal with envy in our analytic practice, we first have to make clear what we mean by this term. If we understand it to be a complex emotional state of feeling, we have to pay attention to the subtleties of its phenomenology. Furthermore, we should know as much as possible about its ontogenesis and have a look at other sciences, like affective neuroscience, which may contribute to the understanding of this emotion. If we understand envy not to be just

an observable feeling state, we should clearly differentiate it from that notion and clarify what exactly we mean by this expression: a drive derivative, a basic over-arching concept or even something else. Psychoanalytic papers dealing with envy sometimes create more confusion than clarification.

My second point is that the assumption of an inborn primary envy as a derivative of the death instinct may invite to prematurely introduce theory in our work, thereby obfuscating the subtleties of the unconscious dynamics of the analytic encounter. Gerhardt's case and my analysis of an old man demonstrate the clinical relevance of analysing how the early object relations reappear in the analytic relationship via the transference of the analysand and the countertransference of the analyst. One always has to bear in mind that the assumption a patient is enacting his envy might cover up a transference-countertransference-entanglement. Carefully listening to the re-actualization of a patient's early object relations leads to realize the importance of a patient's biography. It goes without saying that in any biography a tendency to envious reactions may have developed. In case descriptions of analysts who adhere to a theory of primary inborn envy, the biographical dimension is often neglected, whereas the here and now of the analytic situation seems to be the only source of understanding the patient. Bion's famous "No memory, no desire" (1970) does not imply forgetting all about what one knows about a patient's biography.

A negative therapeutic reaction or a stalemate is often used to show the impact of primary envy on the analytic process. A patient is described as enviously attacking the helping, containing and interpreting capacity of an analyst. Yet from my clinical experience it is more often an unrecognized mutual enactment between analysand and analyst that lies at the bottom of these difficult states. Gerhardt's

case and mine are typical examples of this kind. In his early works Herbert Rosenfeld adhered to the concept of primary envy derived from the death drive. In his later life he modified his earlier views on the subject of envy. He no longer assumed that envy was of central importance in slowing down progress in analysis or leading to an impasse. In his experience *“it is when a patient feels accepted and helped in analysis, and feels that he or she has some space to think and to grow, that envy gradually diminishes.”* *“An over-emphasis on the interpretation of envy or the over-valuing of the analyst's contribution as compared to that of the patient is a frequent cause of impasse.”* (1987, p. 266)

Concluding remarks

I have travelled a long way starting from envy to finally discussing questions of interpretation in general. I am convinced that our interpretative work should start from clinical facts (Tuckett, 1995), i.e. observable phenomena including the patient's and the analyst's subjectivity, be it conscious or unconscious. Of course, clinical thinking and interpretation always are embedded in a conceptual background. Concepts like the death instinct and primary envy are, however, so far away from clinical observation that I cannot attribute to them any clinical relevance. Adhering to them may invite to scholastic and hermetic thinking.

Psychoanalysis is a developing science. The work of three contemporary analysts seems to be especially suitable to stimulate our thinking about interpretation. Anne-Marie and Joseph Sandler (1994) differentiate two areas of the unconscious, the past unconscious, and the present unconscious. The past unconscious is the inner child of the first four to five years. What the child experiences before this age

cannot be remembered, is repressed and falls prey to the infantile amnesia. *“But the past unconscious can be regarded as acting like a dynamic ‘template’, a structuring organization that gives form to current wishes or wishful fantasies, which are then further modified in the present unconscious before gaining access to consciousness”* (p. 278). There is a repression barrier between the present and past unconscious. The content of the present unconscious gains access to consciousness only through a second censorship. As analysts we are dealing with the unconscious fantasies as a representative of all thoughts, wishes and impulses as they exist in the present preconscious. These fantasies are being actualized in the analytic relationship. The Sandler emphasize their view that interpretation should start from the here and now of this relationship. These interpretations would *“allow the most intensely affect-laden material that is near the surface, but is being warded off, to become acceptable to the analysand”* (p. 290). Reconstructions of the past can then follow. They write, *“that our knowledge of the child within is based almost entirely on informed reconstruction. We reconstruct, we do not excavate it”* (p. 290).

Independent of what Anne-Marie and Joseph Sandler wrote more than 25 years ago, Mark Solms (2018), from a neuro-psychoanalytic perspective, also stresses that the traces which early experiences leave in our psyche are not directly accessible. They are repressed, stored in non-declarative memory, and not amenable to symbolic reformulation. They cannot be modified. They form powerful templates for never-ending neurotic repetitions. Only their derivatives, like the fantasies in the present unconscious of Sandler, can be reached and addressed via interpretation of the analytic relationship. This is, as Solms stresses, the only way to effect permanent changes in the inner world of a patient.

This is but a sketched outline of the thoughts both authors put forward regarding the interpretive activity of an analyst. Solms’ ideas

are still to be thoroughly discussed by psychoanalysts. The Sandler's' introduction of the past and present unconscious did not find much resonance among analysts. Therefore, their theory has not been further elaborated. One may ponder on the reasons for this neglect. Were their thoughts not “deep” enough or too “scientific”? Solms’ neuroscientific view is still a challenge for psychoanalytic theory and practice. In any case both the Sandler's’ and Solms’ ideas leave no space for constructs like death instinct or primary envy. Their ideas demonstrate that psychoanalysis is open for new developments and not imprisoned in scholastic thinking.

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