FROM THE PARENTS TO THE CHILD: THE ETHICAL DIMENSION¹²

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Abstract: *In light of the questioning related to contemporary parental combinations, I maintain that whatever these combinations may be, in the majority of cases a good enough mixture of life and death sexual drives, of ethical ability and of vital narcissism, will exist in the parents' psyche, even though proper genital sexuality has been either partially or completely excluded from procreation. This good enough mix lies at the foundation of a good enough child development for what concerns the unavoidable impact of the parental environment upon the child's psyche's formation. I will use the Oedipus's "anamnesis", describing the potential dynamics of any parents' psyche through this myth. I will insist upon the ethical dimension, while, following Emanuel Levinas, I will define ethics as a responsibility for the other, an ability originating, in my view, in the **feminine/ maternal** of any human being and resulting first from the traces left in the infant and then the child's psyche's zone of infinity by the enigm-ethic messages coming from the adult world, which is in charge of him or her. Respecting this emotionally loaded **asymmetric responsibility** in the*

¹² Cf. as a basis of this paper the lecture I gave in the panel: Sexuality, procreation and ethics in times of biotechnology at the EPF Conference, Warsaw, 2018: *The origin of life*: When the parents' sexual, ethical dimension and narcissism of life meet the child's psyche zone of infinity: its ethical exigency.

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parent/child relationship, in any kind of parental constellation, facilitates a sense of singularity, of identity and of belonging in the child.

Keywords: asymmetry, ethics, new parentalities, saying-well, sexual, vital narcissism.

Introduction

In the first part of my paper, and as a way of problematizing the Oedipus complex's universality, I will paradoxically use the Oedipus's "anamnesis", describing through this myth any parent's (s') potential psychical dynamics. This dynamic may be defined as the "playing" of the Sexual (Laplanche, 2007), the ethical dimension and the life narcissism (Laplanche, 1970; Green, 1988). Then, I will deal more extensively with the ethical dimension. I conceive ethics as asymmetric responsibility for the other (Levinas, 1961, 1974), a capacity originating in the feminine/maternal of any human being (Chetrit-Vatine, 2012a) and resulting from the traces left in the subject's zone of infinity (Vermote, 2013) by the enigm-ethic messages of the adult world in charge of him or her from the beginning of life (Chetrit-Vatine, 2014). I will specify the forms that this asymmetric, emotionally loaded responsibility has to take for meeting the 'believing waiting' (Coblence, 2000), or in my terms the 'ethical exigency', with which any child comes to the world. Respecting this asymmetric responsibility that to me seems a central factor for a good enough child development in any kind of parental constellation, will allow in the child a sense of singularity, of identity and of belonging (Ehrensaft, 2008).

Oedipus's anamnesis

For a long time now, we have been confronted with 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, in particular the Oedipus complex. Let us remind ourselves of Oedipus's "anamnesis": Sophocles' tragedy *King Oedipus* begins with Laius, King of Thebes, learning from Apollo's oracle that his fate is to be killed by his son's hands, while the latter will become his mother's lover. To avoid this prophecy becoming reality, Laius and his wife Jocasta pierce and tie the new-born's feet (hence his name Oedipus: swollen foot). Then they hand the baby to one of their servants and order him to take the child to the Cithaeron mounts and leave him to die. 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 want to have a child very much and are unable to procreate themselves.

A long time ago and in an astonishingly contemporary fashion, Laplanche (1987) developed the idea of an asymmetrical "fundamental anthropological situation": on one hand, an infant endowed with bio-neuro-physiological montages, in possession or in conditions of good health, of an instinct of self-preservation at the origin, in particular, of his or her capacity for attachment, capable of emotional receptivity, but not endowed with an unconscious in the psychoanalytical sense of the term and therefore not endowed with drives; on the other hand, an adult or adults (man or woman) who will have to take care of him or her and are endowed on their part not only with an adult sexuality, but also with an unconscious in the psychoanalytical sense of the term, that is of a Sexual (which we can understand as infantile sexuality or as a polymorphous sexuality as described by Freud in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 1905). This unconscious manifests itself in

enigmatic messages proffered to the child. These messages, therefore compromised by the parental unconscious, inevitable expressions of their sexual drives of life and death, will have, due to their enigmatic quality and to the very fact of the fundamental gap between the two partners, a power of seduction over the child's psyche. It is in this way that Laplanche spoke of primal seduction.¹⁴ Thus Laplanche says (2007, pp. 297-298): "there is, so to speak, a misattribution of the initiative of the Oedipus complex. The initiator of the sexuality-carrying messages is actually the parent. The incestuous adult [and I would add: the murderer] is the adult". Laplanche speaks of course of the normal adult or the commonplace neurotic. How, asks Laplanche, does the initiative of incest in the narrative of the Oedipus complex thus turn around and pass from the adult to the child? I would say once again, initiative not just of incest but of murder.

I have suggested (Chetrit-Vatine, 2012b) seeing the dramatic, three-phased representation of Oedipus's "anamnesis" as the combined and a-chronological mobilisations occurring in any adult taking parental charge, in his or her encounter with any new-born child, when everything goes as well as possible:

Unconscious mobilisation of the sexual or the sexual death drive; ethical mobilisation deriving from the sexual life drive, itself facilitated by the inscription in the depth of the child's psyche, in the zone of infinity, of enigm-ethic messages (Chetrit-Vatine, 2017); and narcissistic mobilisation also deriving from the life drive.

- First phase – mobilisation of the sexual death drive, characterized by Laplanche as the Sexual. This mobilisation is

¹⁴ Laplanche 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, which cannot be completely translated due to that very gap between the child's psyche and the adult's psyche. The un-translated remainders will be repressed and will constitute the "fueros" located at the origin of the drives; they will constitute the "repressed unconscious".

represented by the couple Laius and Jocasta: We are dealing with a potential violence provoked by the birth of the new-born, in his total dependence, a birth that possibly threatens the equilibrium of the couple/the parent/the adult in charge, with a simultaneous discharge of a first parental reactional hatred – remember the ritualistic sacrifices of the firstborn in various civilisations – thus an unconscious desire for murder; we are also dealing with an appeal to the infantile, to infantile sexuality in the adults in charge of the child and, as a consequence, with the proffering of enigmatic seductive messages to the child – an unconscious incestuous desire on the part of the adults.

- Second phase of the myth – ethical mobilisation, deriving from the sexual life drives and represented by the servants. Laius and Jocasta's servant experiences an "ethical shock" creating in him what I have called "a position of matricial space", a space of affected responsibility for that other in its ultimate fragility, with the injunction: "Thou shall not kill!" This ethical shock does violence to the parents, while being caused by the distress of the new-born and by his or her absolute dependence.

- Third phase – narcissistic mobilisation of life: It is represented by the royal couple of Corinth, Oedipus' adoptive parents. Childless, they invest all their narcissism of life in little Oedipus and take on all parental responsibility for him.

We shall have to consider the conditions of Oedipus' entry into the world as the psycho-dramatic enactment of that famous "fundamental anthropological situation": the inescapable and asymmetrical encounter between a new-born and an adult, that *Nebenmensch* of whom Freud spoke in the *Project for a Scientific*

Psychology (1895), that neighbour or fellow man without whom the new-born would not survive (p. 348).¹⁵

We will perhaps agree with Laplanche in no longer perceiving Oedipus as an endogenous phenomenon, but rather as a narrative allowing an organisation of messages compromised by the unconscious of the adult world and therefore transmitted by the adult world... at the price of the child's culpability. We could conceive it, according to Haydée Faimberg (2005), as a structure of welcoming, connected to a theory of knowledge situated between determinism and uncertainty; in other words and ethically speaking, respecting the necessary irreducible singularity of any human subject and the singularity of the parental organisation in charge of helping him develop.

Laplanche suggested the idea of a primal seduction, encouraging the developing child, in conditions of good health, to curiosity and to the search for meaning. For my part, I have suggested that the human subject is in need, for his survival and his capacity for a creative life, of an adult world, of parents susceptible to seduction, certainly, but to ethical seduction (Chétrit-Vatine, 2012a, 2014). It is therefore now on the ethical dimension – ethics being conceived as responsibility for the other – that I am going to centre myself.

¹⁵ Though he did not pursue this idea further in his writings, Freud alluded in this work to the first origin of ethics - in his terms, to the origin of “moral motives”- describing an ethics that 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’, whom his cry will take back to his own former cry, without an object to whom to have recourse, the little human being will not be able to survive. Freud names this helpful object: *Nebenmensch*, a close being. It is a matter here of enabling the child to live or... letting him or her die.

The ethical dimension and the zone of infinity

The primal seduction will not become ethical, facilitating the child's self-preservation, and situating itself at the basis of the ethical capacity of that subject in becoming, unless it is anchored in that which, on the part of the adult world in charge, will be an affected and asymmetrical responsibility for him. Inspired by Laplanche, I have suggested that any parent – father, mother or any adult in charge – transmits, in combination with the care given at the heart of a shared emotional mutuality responding to any healthy child's instinct of attachment (connected to that so-called instinct of self-preservation), not only messages compromised by the parental unconscious, in their incestuous and destructive sexual charge, but also equally unconscious enigmatic messages, carried by the sexual life drive of the adults in charge, proffered to any new-born, and leaving their traces in the infinite depth of the child's psyche, from the first encounter with him. These messages respond to that "believing waiting" of which Freud spoke in his first writings, a believing waiting that, in my view, stems itself from that zone of infinity¹⁶ with which all human creatures are endowed from their conception. I have formulated this believing waiting on the part of any new-born and child as an "ethical exigency" on the part of the adult world in charge, an ethics understood as affected asymmetrical and inescapable responsibility for the child and its survival. The encounter of the adult world, of the parents, with the child's fragility as well as the enormity of his existence provokes in these adults, when everything goes as well as possible, an "ethical

¹⁶ 'Experience of this zone corresponds to a Transformation in O (Bion, 1970)' (Vermote, 2013) and I refer here to Citivarèse (2018)'s suggestion that we understand O from a simply anthropological perspective.

shock”.¹⁷ This shock will put in place in these same adults a “position of matricial space”¹⁸ stemming from the feminine/ maternal dimension in any human being.

The implications of an ethics of asymmetrical and affected responsibility: the forms that it can take.

Referring to Salman Achtar (1999), I will name: the legitimacy of the child’s physical needs and the meeting of these needs ; the help offered to the child in understanding the causes of events; the offer of an as great as possible emotional availability and of a resilient responsiveness, taking into account parental limits; the reiterated affirmation and recognition of his identity; respect for his proper boundaries 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 generation. This is why I insist on the asymmetry of the parental responsibility as much as on that of the primal seduction, a seduction for which the adults in charge have all the responsibility.

Here lies, in my view, the importance of a living desire between the partners in the parental couple, in order to at best provide the child

¹⁷ 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, p. 121). But there is also for me, in this matricial metaphor, in these desire 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.

¹⁸ My inspiration for the term ‘Matricial Space’ (and hence also matricial, matricial position, matricial space transference...) came, a long time ago, from Lichtenberg-Ettinger (1997) who, also following Levinas, proposed in a slightly different context the expression Matrixial Space.

with a primal seduction unencumbered with any possibly traumatic seduction towards him, 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, Fain, 1975), or of the male lover (Parat, 2011). In cases of a single parenthood, we will underline the importance of the father, as genetic as he might be, in the mother’s mind.

Roussillon (2006), who insisted on the importance of affects on the part of the adults in charge of the child, spoke of “the symboligenic function” of the object and of his responsibility in enabling the child an appropriation of his subjectivity.

Thus mothers or fathers, functioning as a “matricial third” (Chetrit-Vatine, 2013)¹⁹ from a matricial position of asymmetrical responsibility for their child, would be able to progressively reveal to their child the secret of his 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 affected responsibility, this unveiling and this differential naming will be realised while taking into careful 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 have to be underpinned by an ethics of *bien-dire*” (Tisseron, 2004). Thus, in appropriating the elements that will help him translate the messages compromised by the parental unconscious, the child will be able to

¹⁹ Placing myself in a critical perspective with regards to what was seemingly omitted by Freud in “Totem and Taboo” and in “Moses and Monotheism”, I became interested in this missing trace – the matricial third. I maintain that in order for a passage from the father of the tribe to the inhibiting paternal principal to become possible, one cannot avoid taking into consideration an un-split, seductive and matricial feminine/maternal dimension which exists, in my view, at the first origin of any human being’s ethical capacity.

grow his capacity for representation and appropriate himself/herself as subject.

In addition, identifying with his parents in their ethical functioning will reinforce the traces of the “enigm-ethic” messages inscribed in the depth of his being, because of the “ethical shock” which was their experience, at the beginning of his life. This ethics of *bien-dire* (saying things well) is an appeal to the child, in the order of the Levinasian “caress” (Chetrit-Vatine, 2005). This formulation also emphasises the ethical dimension of responsibility for the other while of course echoing the concepts of holding, objective love and objective hate c/o Winnicott (1947) and the concepts of reverie, containment and passion as defined by Bion (1963) in Love-Hate-Knowledge as ‘to represent an emotion experienced with intensity and warmth though without any suggestion of violence’ (p. 13). When from the beginning of life that believing waiting, that ethical exigency, will have been met by a parents functioning as matricial third, then singularity, personal experience of identity and a feeling of belonging (Ehrensaft, 2008) will have a chance to find their place during the child’s development, as a feeling of agency will be able to animate the course of his/her life.

To not conclude

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:

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

- 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 offering the child “the matricial space” which he fundamentally needs, that is to say capable of attempting to “meet” his believing waiting, his ethical exigency, i.e. 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; 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”, added the commentators.

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