

## **REVIEW: *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, feminism and the problem of domination***

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A colleague of mine introduced me to the book I am about to review. It came to me "via" interaction and interaction in relationship is its main subject.

Benjamin, a practicing psychoanalyst and feminist scholar, reflects deeply on the nature of human "maturity", questioning in particular two concepts which had until recently been considered superior developmental stages of the "healthy" person. One is attaining autonomy through the Oedipal resolution, as in Freud's psychoanalysis, and the other is attaining Margaret Mahler's last developmental stage, the separation-individuation subphase. These two concepts may be reduced to one, as each includes the other.

Benjamin proposes that we widen the developmental stages to include "pre-oedipal" and "post-oedipal" stages. Recent studies on narcissism, she argues, give place to growing consciousness of the strength and validity of caring unity, symbiosis, merge,... and repairs psychoanalytic rationales which repudiate maternity. It opens a space for body continuity with the other, including the intersubjective experience of recognizing the emotional elements involved in taking care, touching, and responding to the other. These are the elements prominent in early childhood and well-known in bioenergetic analysis.

When we remain with the Oedipal resolution as the most mature phase of development, we assume a notion that paternal authority is sound. This notion accepts a dichotomy or split in which there is a polarization between mother, who symbolizes irrationality and undifferentiation, from whom we must separate with the assistance of father who symbolizes rationality and separation. This polarized structure is not only limited to the individual psyche but also impregnates Western thinking with the consequence of eliminating the possibility of mutual recognition.

Recent studies in developmental psychology (Daniel Stern, 1985) question Margaret Mahler's previous work and hence the foundation of depth psychology. They show that the baby, between seven and nine months old, realizes with great pleasure that another person can feel the same as he/she. In other words, the baby can establish an emotional connection in which he/she recognizes the existence of the other as both equal and different. Stern calls this phenomenon intersubjectivity.

Stern's formulation of intersubjectivity introduces a revolution to psychology as we have known it. These innovative notions are ones we have been managing for a long time in bioenergetic analysis, but now we find them framed in a consistent theoretical position. For instance, the concept of pleasure in the interaction, in which we see that the baby gains satisfaction from emotional connection from as early as seven months. Or the concept of mutual

recognition, with the consequent revalorization of the role of the mother, of the woman, repudiated until recently by Oedipal theory.

Benjamin does something else that I would like to reproduce. She brilliantly synthesizes and critically reformulates the plethora of studies about Oedipus, both past and current. This is what I want to summarize.

Briefly, the Oedipal myth is as follows. Laius, king of Thebes, and Jocasta, his wife were told by an oracle that if they had a son, that son would kill his father and marry his mother. In order to avoid what had been previewed, his parents abandoned Oedipus. Oedipus did not die but was raised instead by Polibus, king of Corinth. The oracle's message reached Oedipus' ears and to avoid killing the one he thought was his father, he left Corinth. On his way, he met Laius with whom he argued and then killed. When he got to Thebes, he solved the Sphinx's enigma and killed her. Thankful, the inhabitants wanted him to be their king. This is how he came to marry Jocasta, Laius' widower and his mother. Jocasta deduces that Oedipus is her son and she commits suicide. Oedipus is exiled and dies in Atica.

Freud uses this myth to explain our unconscious wishes and unavoidable sense of guilt. Acceptance of paternal authority is presented as healthy. In doing this, he denies and ignores the fear and submission that paternal power has historically inspired. He, furthermore, fails to elaborate on the role of the father in the maintenance of the fantasy of omnipotence. Freud's reading of the myth both "overlooked" the father's violence, aggressiveness and coldness and failed to analyze Laius' intent to murder Oedipus at birth, the trigger of the events that follow. If we don't "overlook" these transgressions, a very different reading emerges. Laius now appears as a father seeking to avoid what is, in some sense the fate of all fathers –to die and be superseded by their sons. The Oedipal father is one who cannot give up omnipotence. The thought of his own mortality and the surrender of his kingdom to his son are too much to bear.

In this book, Oedipus also appears in a different light. In Freud's version, Oedipus appears possessed by the wish to kill his father, whereas in this reading Benjamin also notes Oedipus' effort to evade the prophecy. The Oedipal, therefore, is one who cannot bear his wish to unseat his father, because its fulfillment would deprive him of the authority who is both his protector and the ideal that gives him life.

Reconnecting with the developmental stages already conceptualized, Benjamin proposes the notion of a post-oedipal phase of separation in which the metaphorical death of the parents is accompanied by the joy of successful survival and the grief of loss. This joy and grief could be, at least partially, disentangled from the archaic, polarized images of reunion and separation, murder and guilt, so that they may be felt as conscious ambivalence. This would make it possible for sons and daughters to take responsibility for their own desires by responding to them rather than relinquishing them.

Benjamin also discusses the way in which the fall of parental authority and the search for different ways to individuate form the context for the contemporary controversy between Oedipus and Narcissus. Oedipal theory denies the necessity of mutual recognition between man and woman because: a) it gives primacy to the wish for oneness, b) confers the embodiment of regressive force to the mother and c) talks about the necessity of paternal interventions to create the paradox that the only liberation is paternal domination. If we go beyond Oedipal theory, we can envisage a direct struggle for recognition between man and woman, free of the shadow of the father that falls between them. By rejecting the false premise of paternal authority as the only road to freedom, we are left with coming to terms with difference.

I am pleased that Benjamin doesn't promise a panacea or draw fairy tale conclusions. She is aware that there will be inevitable difficulties that arise from the direct confrontation between equals. Her proposal is to continue working and elaborating upon them.

I hope that these excerpts have stimulated your curiosity and that you feel like reading this book. This is not a "best seller", in the sense of an easy to read volume, but I think it is an excellent synthesis of developmental research and its impact on debate, and on theoretical reformulations in contemporary psychoanalysis. Besides, I think this is an important turning point and one to which we should be attentive. These new theoretical contributions widen the notion of "health" to include concepts that bioenergetic therapists have been using for a long time –emotional connection, interrelation,... all of which tend to emphasize a democratic rather than authoritarian position and in so doing, allow for the inclusion and valorization of all human beings.

Review of BENJAMIN, Jessica, *The bonds of love: Psychoanalysis, feminism and the problem of domination*, New York: 1988, Pantheon Books.