

OUTLINES ON TRAUMATIC VULNERABILITY DURING PRECOCIOUS PHASES OF PSYCHIC DEVELOPMENT¹

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I shall briefly revise some aspects of the precocious psychic development, the pre-oedipal one, in order to stress the traumatic effects of precocious separation. Namely, I would like to focus the presence and role of fusion between the child and the caregiving-object. This is inversely proportional to the separateness that, during the maturation process, is going to extend itself. The child is particularly vulnerable for early separations because of the indispensable initial width of the fusion in his relationship.

I shall start from the basic need of the human cub to establish and maintain a relationship with a human object (Fairbairn, 1952). Such relationship is aimed to guarantee his physical survival and structure his mental apparatus. Only in a tight and especially peculiar relationship with an object, may occur the complex and delicate mechanisms that lead to the acquisition of his basic psychic structures. This allows the child the progressive development of the autonomy of his mental function.

In the last decades, the infant research is providing data on the precociousness of some of the functions of the newborn. But it would be difficult instead to already confer to the infant the autonomy that such functions should make possible. Stern (1985) says that newborns have an innate performed ability to distinguish themselves from the others; however, they are not able to distinguish their first scheme of themselves and those of the others as well as their subsequent representations of themselves and the objects. We must therefore keep separate, although they are functionally connected: the neuropsychological level, the closest one to the neurologic hardware, from the representational one, that is the most fully pertinent to the psychological software. The newborn would be able to perceive the other; however he would be not yet capable to represent himself the relation between himself and the other, the basic representation of any mental life.

Kumin (1996) stresses besides: “While children have the innate cognitive ability to distinguish between sensitive-motoric experiences of themselves and of the other, such ability can paradoxically be generated and supported by the not perceived supporting environment, in an ample way undifferentiated, that is provided by the good enough mother.” The outlines of differentiation and separation can therefore be developed thanks to the substratus of fusional undifferentiation provided by the mother-child matrix.

A complex “dialectic” picture

There is a complex picture in which, since the beginning of life, co-exist and complete themselves not only (and obviously), a neurologic substratus and a mental dimension but also, in the latter one: pre-objectual and objectual, fusion and separateness, (and a bit later) concrete as well as symbolic thinking. A need of an integrated vision is therefore necessary. Ogden (1992) would call it a dialectic vision in which it is essential to underline the co-existence and mutual matching of levels, or functions, which apparently are either in contrast or even exclude one from other. It is therefore necessary,

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to substitute the temporal consequentiality of some concepts (such as that of global fusion that would exhaust itself by the acquisition of separateness) with models of integrated and interacting comprehences.

When, for instance, the concrete thinking is opposed to the symbolic one, we provide a simplification of this that, if not considered as such, can be misleading. Indeed, each human thinking is an outcome of a mix of concrete and symbolic elements in different proportions, that is parallel to the co-existence, though in an oscillating proportion, of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. The expression “symbolic”, therefore means just that the “concrete” although present, is however minority.

Fonagy (1991) empirically observes that children just after the age of 4, reach the awareness that different minds from theirs’ do exist and that is possible that someone is thinking differently from them. As this means the acquisition of a more complete separateness and consolidation of the depressive position, it may appear in contrast with the fact that the instauration of the depressive position has been placed in the second half of the first year of life. Instead, these are the effects of a growing presence and meaning of the depressive position combined with the paranoid-schizoid one, which is still strong although decreasing. Indeed, still in adolescents, the paranoid-schizoid position is by no means relevant, inclining them to split goodies and badies etc.

About this we could, as it often occurs, also say that this is not something absolutely new, if we think about Freud’s metaphors – concerning the succession of libido phases – on the army that, by conquering new territories does not abandon those already conquered leaving there their garrisons. Similarly, we may as well remember that M. Klein used the terms positions instead of phases for the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive ones that, already in her opinion, besides following each other, continuously alternate each other (although for her they did not yet explicitly “integrate” themselves).

From prevailing fusion to prevailing separateness

I can therefore indulge, being less afraid to be outdated, to consider the undifferentiated fusional aspects in the mother-child relationship (Fonda 2000). Such aspects mark that “pre-objectual relationality” that Kumin (1996) poses at the base of mental development.

Here I will not go through the theoretical works which lead us from Freud’s description of the “oceanic feeling” (1929), to Winnicott’s “mother-environment” and “omnipotent illusion of union”, as well as M. Mahler’s “symbiosis” (1967) and Loewald’s (1988) “mother-child psychic matrix” etc. What I should like to point out in any case, is the idea that, in an explicit or inexplicit way, *a part* of the mother-child relationship is outlined as fused and con-fused in an undifferentiation. In this the child lives both, the sensorial presence of his mother and her mental functioning, as present *within himself* (or better said: within the undifferentiated mother-child union). The fusion relationship, the being “inside”, is essential as it allows the mother to grasp “from the inside” the child’s messages and nuances that would otherwise be not perceived. Indeed, the ample fusion spaces without Self boundaries allow the diffusion and the pouring off of raw contents (Bion would define them beta elements) from the child to the mother. At the beginning, this is nearly the only modality of communication that the child has. Such

fusion modality of contents transfer could be also considered in part analogous to the unconscious-unconscious communication postulated by Freud (1912) in the situation in which the analyst is in a state of a free floating attention and the patient lets himself go to free associations.

However, “fusion channels” are not one-way channels. There is in process, although by different proportion, also a passage of undifferentiated elements from the mother to the child. This is interesting for us as, besides an unconscious conferring to the child a kit of essential useful elements, this can also carry traumatic elements (also the trans-generational ones) or elements that can provoke distortions in the child’s development. This is also interesting, (although we shall not discuss this here) because it concerns the question on how much some contents are transferred from the analyst to the patient outside his conscious control.

Projective identification is the privileged communication means during the precocious phase of development. In order to force the object’s boundaries and introduce some contents, the human being must find in the other a delimited area where, instead of a “difference”, which strengthens the boundaries of the Self, there are “coincidences-similarities”, which fade the boundaries creating micro areas of undifferentiation-fusion. A certain quota of these areas is, in any case, existing among us and our “fellow creatures”, as we are “similar” enough, and this makes the communication possible (so as the group mental activity). An “alien” is scaring us just because, having nothing “similar-coincident” with us, puts us in a situation of isolation, of resilience and incommunicability, in a total impotence of controlling the relationship. Humans would have an innate propensity to offer to the other similitude-coincidence-fusion and to look for them as well as provoking and widening them. In infancy, such function is partially supported by an innate kit of receptivity and expressivity (the acknowledgment of the face, the tendency to imitate, etc.). This occurs also during the skin-to-skin contact.

What is however fundamental is that the mother, within this partial union, works with far more capacities of those of the child as she is capable to recognize and regulate the drives and emotions as well as to use symbolic thinking, to carry on the containment function (as described by Bion). The child lives then, as if the process of containment and regulating the affective and drive functions substantially occurs, within himself (as at that time the boundaries between “within” and “out” are vaguely perceived). This creates the optimal situation to induce the surrounding parts of the child’s Self – genetically predisposed to a praecox and rapid maturation – to act the same function. It is under these circumstances that the praecox aspects of the imitation-introjection-identification (Gaddini, 1969) take place. The functioning of the object finds the child ready to imitate and “duplicate”.

The hand of the tennis teacher holds and accompanies that of the pupil willing to imitate and learn the correct racket movement. The author of the movement is clearly at first the teacher, who forces the raw asperities of the muscular and out-of-tune pupil’s movement, but then it appears less and less differentiated who is the author as, step by step, the two movements coincide – they get fused. At this point, just once the fusion is reached, fusion itself is no longer necessary (at least at concrete level), and the teacher removes his hand as the pupil is able to reproduce the correct movement by himself, by

feeling it fully pertinent to his Self. All this process flows through a necessary phase of transitory and partial fusion, during which are forming and consolidating in the pupil some of the neuron circuits (analogous to those of the teacher) that allow the establishment of the appropriate motor schemes. Following the imitation and introjection process, the identification will then be established and it will preserve a part of the fusion (the pupil will always perceive himself partially as being symbolically his teacher too, although playing autonomously). However, now the remaining fusion is in process to the inner representation of the teacher and no longer with the real teacher.

In this way, in parallel and thanks to the maturation of the neurological sub-stratus as well as structuring of an increasingly functioning ego, occurs in the child a slow “duplication” of the maternal *apparatus for dealing with thoughts*, that, in the end, can be progressively separated-extracted from the common matrix. This will be less and less traumatic as how much complete and functioning the “establishment of the program to think thoughts”, which allows self-containment, regulating of emotions and drives, hence an autonomous life, shall be. Emancipation, also in the normality will never be total, as Kohut (1971) reminds us, how, although reduced and diversified in its sources, in human life never ceases the need to relate with Self objects with which we are never totally differentiated-separated. Indeed, we always keep the need of elaborating part of what happens within ourselves (as well as what happens around us) in connection with different minds (with single individuals and/or with the psychism of the groups to which we belong). During our whole life the fusional part of our relationship with the objects is an essential component for this vital activity.

What gets duplicated, seems to be only to a certain extent the pure function, because, as the object relation theory presupposes, introjection always concerns the whole objection relation. Hence, there would be “installed” the function combined with some aspects of the object relation and therefore also of the object itself. Each installed programme would then be signed by its agent (the “style” of the “tennis teacher”) and would also contain the emotional relational atmosphere since the time it was produced. Therefore, the object leaves in the subject his style (Bollas, 1987) thanks to which, also after the separation, he continues to feel (in good or evil), a certain concordance-belonging to the “teacher”. This installs some affinities (also cultural ones, if we consider a more ample context) which make easier “new connections” anytime the need occurs and lead the search for similar objects (especially the ones that according to Kohut, own the Self-object function) in further times (for instance the partner). However, the object leaves in the subject also his malfunctioning, as a consequence of traumas or other distortions that he underwent and has not been elaborated.

I should underline that, under this perspective, the presence of the mother “within” the child, has two finalities. The first and immediate one is the containment of “not yet thinkable” and the regulating of emotions that are continuously rising. The second is to allow the introjection of the thinking apparatus that would allow an increasing autonomy and at the end a non-traumatic separation.

In the above-mentioned framework, between the child and the mother, we deal first mostly with really existent fusion aspects (sensorial feelings) and then more and more with fusion fantasies (mental representations) such as Winnicott’s “illusion of an omnipotent union”. The second ones develop in the child as the capacity of symbolic representation is increasing. If this later doesn’t happen the child may stagnate in

concrete thinking, what makes the separation problematic and may lead to pathologic symbiotic bounds. In all this, the fundamental mother's capacity of using the symbolic thought is fundamental, as it evokes such capacities in the child. Besides the mother's general capacity of symbolical thinking, such function seems sometimes to unfold itself in different degrees, with each one of her children, depending on the peculiar life experiences of each single relationship. For example a son's fragility, connected to a physic illness, can induce a difficulty of separation with a consequent scarcity of optimal absences-frustrations, which do not create sufficient possibilities of using symbolic thinking and mental representations. The capacity of the mother of using symbolic thought goes in parallel with her capacity/possibility to live the relationship both on the fusional level and that of separation. This is close to the description that Kafka (1989) writes about the capacity of the mother to live and transmit to the child a "multiple reality".

Disillusion, potential space and symbolic thinking

A basic assumption is that symbolic thinking may develop and consolidate only in parallel with the development of separateness. To illustrate this I will use and a bit adapt Winnicott's model, revised by Ogden (1985). We start from the *holding* and pass through the *illusion of omnipotent union* and the *disillusion* through the psychological weaning to arrive to the *potential space*.

The *holding* implies, besides parents' worrying of protecting the child from traumatic aspects of physical reality, the care of avoiding at the mental level, a praecox contact with excessive experiences of impotency that would generate annihilation anxieties and determine psychic traumas. The child is therefore wrapped up by an initially thick mantle of feelings and illusions of omnipotent union with the mother, what protect him from a premature and excessive awareness of being a subject separated from the object-mother (and therefore dependent and impotent). The illusion of omnipotence is accurately preserved by the mother, who feels the duty to spare the child from a violent confrontation with reality which, by raising traumatic fears, would have disrupting effects on the first fragile drawings of his Self.

We know that if the need is instantly coinciding with the satisfaction, there is no space for the thought. There is only a sensorial experience of appeasing within a fusional experience of omnipotence. Therefore, at a certain point, is the task of the mother to disillusion the child by *optimal frustrations*, some delicate non-coincidences between her and the child which create the first fragmentary experiences of separateness. The separated mother-object is, in this way, progressively emerging from the fusional mother-environment, at a certain distance, a not excessive one, from the subject-child. If the mother has already given a sufficient evidence of her reliability, the child can use the mnemonic traces of previous satisfying experiences she offered to temporarily fill with these (proto)representations the narrow space that separates him from the absent mother, who sooner or later, shall come to satisfy his need. In this way the representation of the object-mother occurs in the *potential space*. This is a symbol, which for a certain time can replace the real mother, constituting a bridge of representations which bonds the child to her. Such space filled with symbols makes tolerable distance and deferment of

satisfaction. The possibility for the child to re-create by himself in this space the object-mother, reinforces his illusion of omnipotence; it decreases the feeling of a painful impotence and makes separation tolerable. The inner image of the relation with a substantially good object is creating and its progressively acquired persistence-constancy in the child's inner world shall become basic in order to tolerate his own experiences as a separated human being. This is the creation of the first inner object through introjection. The potential space (a reliable space where representation may be formed) is collusively created by the child and by his mother, who instinctively is worried of protecting and increasing it. The capacity of filling such space with more and more complex symbols-illusions (supported also by the transitional objects) allows the human being to endure greater and greater distances from satisfying objects.

In order to be functioning, the potential space needs two basic conditions: that sufficient object *reliability* is present, as well as an *optimal grade of frustration*, neither excessive nor absent. This tends to erode the width of fusion experiences by increasing those of separation. The representation of the relationship with the object, that is beginning to develop within the potential space, allows to connect and further more substitute the concrete fusion experiences with the symbolic *illusion of omnipotent union*. It becomes more evident and marks the co-existence of fusional experiences and fantasies on one hand, with the experiences and representations of separation on the other.

The temptation of avoiding separation is always strongly present, as well as replacing potential space and (symbolic) relationships with the direct (concrete) relationship by zeroing the distance both in temporal dimension and in that of space. From this point of view, there will be therefore the need, subsequently, of basic prohibitions: that of touching (Anzieu, 1985) and the oedipal one, in order to sustain the thought development and avoid the potential space collapses.

Disillusion – the psychological weaning – is a difficult passage for the couple mother-child which exposes more than anything to the risk of traumatic situations if it cannot occur with the due gradualism and through the optimal physiological frustrations. A premature separation risks to interrupt the channels of fusional relationship when they are still massively functioning and when they are still indispensable to build the child's mental apparatus.

In order to start and, above all, to overcome the oedipal conflict the child has to come out from a relationship so greatly marked by fusion. Only after this the baby boy will feel sufficiently separated from his mother, so that he will be able to refer to her as a love object without risking to regress to the undifferentiated relationship, that by such a great extent was marking his precedent phases. Such danger will anyhow continue and will have to be kept constantly under control. For the male, the motivation of the incest taboo, does not only come from the outside, from the threat of the castration by the father, but also from the deep inner fear of regression and loss of identity. This may explain the relative rarity of oedipal mother-son incest, compared to the frequency of the father-daughter ones. Similarly, also for the mother, the perception of her son as a substantially separated being, implies a harder elaboration compared to that easier one that the father has towards his daughter. The baby boy's object love relationship with his mother can be covered only if the subtle and difficult oedipal gangway, that can bear only the symbolic level, is sufficiently solid over the murky waters of undifferentiation. When

such solidity is not reached, we observe that the child stops before it, he does not walk on it and lags in shallow waters where the dyadicity then tends to structure a symbiotic relationship. Sexuality then cannot mature; it can only take the blind lanes of pervert outcomes.

The baby girl, instead, in the oedipal situation must change her object of love. This, from one hand can be a further difficulty compared to the task of the baby boy, but on the other, allows the baby girl, once sufficiently freed from her mother's clasp, to live her love relationship with her father without the risky dangerousness of falling into maternal regression. All this, however, exposes her more to the danger of incest.

Other factors of growth

During the whole development of psychoanalytic research, particularly in the last decades, we saw a growing ample and rich panorama of factors which determine and influence the child's mental maturation. Obviously, this has also amplified the fields in which both truly-called traumas, as well as other factors that may change the development, can be found.

An important role is played by constitutional aspects to which Freud himself used to refer to and those which nowadays genetics starts to give a more precise outlines. From the modality of attachment, to the rich facets of the relationship with the first objects, an increasing tighter interdependence child/caregiving-object and their mutual spiraliform influence and conditioning, are underlined. For this, an important role is the child's "permeability", how large are the meshes of his Self boundaries, which make him particularly receptive, in good or evil, to everything he perceives from the objects.

An amplified receptivity is also present in the parents, who are also having an inborn set that could be similar to the idea of a parental instinct. This could be expressed by the "primary maternal preoccupation" (Winnicott, 1963), in her activation of the answer modalities to the child's attachment requests, in the parents' (pre)disposition to open ample meshes within their boundaries in order to offer the appropriate dose of fusion to the child, as well as receptivity to the child's projective identifications. In such relational atmosphere have an influence on the child the modalities of managing closeness-distance as well as the communicative distortions, the phantasmatic organisations that are present in the parent. And also, the non-answers, the non-offers, as well as the continuity and discontinuity of attention and empathic disposition.

There is, even if in analysis is less considered, the influence of unconscious fantasies of the group-cultural level (rooted in the myths and collective ideals). These influences, are initially brought in more through the parents and then, in a more direct way, as the child is exposed to direct contacts with the social environment. They serve the purpose of satisfying the group functioning needs that press to have individuals brought up, in whom some typical personal characteristics are either amplified or reduced. To give an example, without considering trans-culture, it is enough to think about how much is nowadays the image of the "sufficiently good child" in our group or in the nowadays parents' minds compared to that which in our group itself used to prevail seventy or a hundred years ago: how much could have been different, in children education, the proposed modalities for the managing of drives and emotions.

Winnicott in order to underline the absolute need that a young child has of someone who relates with him in order to exist, once said something like: "I do not know an infant but only a relationship mother-child." Such statement may be extended by saying that a couple mother-child cannot exist completely outside a group culture that provides the bringing-up schemes, the survival techniques, a linguistic code as well as anything that allows the existence and the functioning of a human group.

In order to draw this, we may use the image of an *onion* (Fonda, 1991), where the child is in the centre, wrapped and contained by the mother. The mother, is herself wrapped by the child's father and by other concentric leaves represented, going outwards, by the extended family, by the closest group' environment (friends, neighbours, etc.), by the various services and institutions such as school, religion and the whole group systems with their culture and specific functions to arrive to the ethnic group, the nation and the human group as such. Every leaf provides inwards parts of the schemes of the child's bringing up and most in general, parts of the codes for the solution of problems of existence that are continuously arising. Among these leaves, there is a double relationship. First, every leaf exercises for the inner one a function of container (as Bion's concept). Second, every leaf works as a protective shield of the contents towards more external layers.

The continuous interaction of all these and other factors creates an extremely complex picture which is impossible to compose in its whole integrity and is very vulnerable by traumatic factors. However, similar difficulties, as we know, never discouraged us, psychoanalysts – who, differently from many other researchers – are used to work considering the existence of a still large unknown but active, part of our investigations.

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