

Mother – From Freud to Lacan

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In this paper I want to introduce some of the ways, starting with Freud, that psychoanalysis has thought about the question: “What is a Mother? It is not my intention to offer here a comprehensive overview of this topic but merely to pick out some essential and distinctive features of what psychoanalysis has had to say concerning this quite provocative question. My trajectory is from Freud to Lacan, and so, from the start my apologies for not including other analysts who indeed have made important contributions in this area, perhaps most obviously Winnicott and Klein in the UK and Margaret Malher in the US.

It is important too to begin with a few preliminary remarks, the first being that we should be wary of over-generalisations in this area, by which I mean statements or responses to our question that either ignore, or seek to bypass, the complex particularity and tonalities of women’s lives. Here I am referring on the one hand to the racial, ethnic, socio-cultural and - increasingly - sexual diversity that is everywhere in our world. To take a stark example, it is, arguably, natural for us to assume that “maternal desire” is somehow independent of external circumstances, and yet we have only to think of what we see on our TV screens to put a question mark over this. I mean the images, mostly from Africa, of starving mothers and dying children, to wonder how this bond and desire may be distorted - even made impossible - in such circumstances. On the other hand we must also give due weight to the fact that being a mother is a subjective experience and in response to the birth of her child there will always be this purely subjective element and meaning within the experience itself, which in turn is made up of a complex matrix of desires, drives, projections and introjections, all fundamentally intertwined with the fantasy of what it is to be a mother or have a baby. Finally, we must not make the mistake of equating woman with mother, as if somehow the latter were a natural destiny for every woman. Clearly this is not the case even as, as we will now see, this tendency existed in Freud.

Freud does not in fact say a great deal about this topic and especially early in his work he views mothering as, one might say, a modest activity - something that was preformed in the background – and, despite its importance, something that did not require a lot of further elaboration. Mothers, for Freud it seems, just knew how to be mothers, to occupy that place of being the absolute centre of the infant’s universe and to there satisfy the infant’s basic needs. Here is a picture of the mother as a container for the infants’ endogenous drives, and interestingly, things go wrong only when she fails to successfully inhibit, facilitate or serve as the target for such drive satisfactions. Excess in any direction may become a problem but otherwise things should work out quite well. Of course this picture is a bit too simple and on at least two counts. Firstly, Freud stressed the absolute dependency of the human infant on the mother, something that Lacan would later refer to by saying that as human being we are born prematurely. Here is Freud’s evocative description, written as early as 1895, of the situation of the infant unable to satisfy even its most basic needs: “At first, the human organism is incapable of bringing about the *specific action* [i.e. that would produce satisfaction]. It takes place by *extraneous help*, when the attention of an experienced

person is drawn to the child's state by discharge along the path of internal change. In this way this path of discharge acquires a secondary function of the highest importance, that of *communication*, and the initial helplessness of human beings is the *prime source* of all *moral motives*." (Italics in original; The Project, p.318).

Several things could be said about this passage though the point I want to stress here is that it gives us a picture of the child as necessarily and fundamentally *interpreted* within its relation to the first other or mother. The child is thus not merely an object that is enjoyed or delighted in, rather the cry of the infant brings into existence the subject as lacking and it is the mother who interprets the baby's inarticulate manifestations by giving meaning and significance to them. Without this operation the child, though biologically present, cannot make its way into the human world of meaning, what Freud termed communication, and by which, with the introduction of language he or she will eventually acquire a symbolic identity. In a sense then we could say that for Freud this is the essential *task* the mother must perform in relation to and behalf of her child. However, Freud added to this picture of motherhood a further, much more controversial element via his introduction of the notorious concept of "penis envy". Penis envy was the term Freud used to describe the reaction of the little girl to the castration complex brought into being by the presence of the father in a neat Freudian divide between the mother as object of primary satisfaction and the father as object of separation. Thus whereas the little boy reacts to the threat of castration by the father by giving up the mother as his primary object of satisfaction the little girl by contrast has to confront the fact that she possesses no such object. According to Freud she can, as a result, and given that we are talking here of a heterosexual object choice, only desire to receive this missing object from the father - given that the mother is also lacking in this regard. In relation to motherhood Freud makes the further, also controversial claim, that in the unconscious of the woman the baby becomes psychically the equivalent of this absent object, a solution if you like which is thus available to a woman if she becomes a mother. Here Freud is suggesting that motherhood is not only a biological possibility for the woman but also a natural psychic destiny and indeed he goes so far as to state that in becoming a mother a woman has the possibility of fulfilling not only "every mental wish but also every psychical need" (Freud, 1910). As we will now see it is not a view that Lacan will endorse.

Lacan, as many of you will know, privileges, especially in his early work, the idea that what defines the human being is that he or she speaks and thus exists in language, and as such, to understand what a human being is we must investigate in what way the human being exists symbolically, meaning as represented in language. Once we make this shift something quite radical begins to happen, not the least of which is the idea that the symbolic baby – the baby as represented in discourse – exists prior to the birth of the actual or biological baby. In other words prior to the birth of the baby the baby to be is talked about, anticipated, named, desired or not desired etc. Of course one cannot deny here that the mother is a corporal entity, rather the point is that that the reproduction of bodies is entirely organised, and even programmed by, discourse. In other words, and with this shift, we must see that for Lacan the mother-child relation is situated in the field of the symbolic from the very start - which implies a relation that can no longer be reduced to the satisfaction of basic needs and appetites, or even in any straightforward way to the tasks a mother must or must not perform. Rather what Lacan emphasises is what he terms the "dialectic of desire" between mother and

child as inscribed in and mediated by language. Thus behind, so to speak, the act of the mother in say feeding or changing her baby is something more foundational and unrelated to the level satisfaction or dissatisfaction that may be produced by particular acts of maternal care. As Lacan (1953) puts it “Nowhere does it appear more clearly that man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognised by the other” (p.58). To put this in simplistic terms the key question for Lacan is not whether the mother functions well or badly in satisfying her infant's wants or needs but rather whether she can recognise her infant as a desiring subject. One can perhaps get a better idea of what is at stake here if one refers to the two main ways in which this can go wrong. In the first instance this occurs where the mother treats the child as an object of satisfaction in the sense of being her possession, a hostage child who remains passive and captivated in her desire and who according to Lacan is, as a result, at risk of not being able to establish and stabilise his or her own desire – something that in turn lays the preconditions for psychotic disorders. In the second instance the problem arises in relation to the absence of maternal desire, to the mother who is not able to engage with her child and neglects or abandons him or her and who in this sense is so other to her child as to be unrecognisable – this being a form of foreclosure that may be less easy to notice or perceive.

At this point two further important points need to be made. For if the desire of the mother is central for Lacan it is precisely in so far as, in order to recognise her infant as a desiring subject, she herself needs to be able to embody desire. It is on this point that Lacan diverges radically from Freud for to represent desire entails having a desire that operates beyond the child and is not as such the child. In other words the mother must first and foremost be a woman who desires something other than her baby, in traditional terms this is the father, or more loosely an other, a focus or condenser of essentially sexual desire, which means that for Lacan motherhood is never, as was the tendency with Freud, an idealised place or destiny for a woman. The second thing that changes within this “dialectic of desire” within the mother-child relation is how we conceive of the child, as for the desiring child the key question, again beyond the level of basic needs, is what is the desire of the mother, or “what does she want?” what interests her and animates her? For the child the mother cannot but appear capricious and unpredictable in the eyes of her infant, as for example she comes and goes at her whim and in doing so precisely fails to adapt to the whims of her infant. However, for Lacan this experience of the mother as lacking, as not completely a mother, is what is essential if the desiring subject is to come into being, it is, one could say, the way in which the infant must be able to *use* the mother as a cause of its own desire. It is thus not merely the introduction of absence as such but an absence that “operates” on and for the child (Lacan calls this “the operation of the absence of the mother”, in: Preliminary Question)¹.

As this stage I hope I have given some indication of how the mother is thought about psychoanalytically and as such in terms of unconscious as well as conscious

¹ It is important here to make two points. Firstly that this “operation” of the mother takes place on the back of a first moment where she does desire her child – indeed this first (m)Other must infuse and “infect” her infant with her desire which the infant introjects and moreover in the sense that it can be the sole object for the mother (Winnicott called this the time of “maternal preoccupation”). The second point relates to the paternal metaphor in so far as it comes into effect (or not) at the point of this “operation of absence”.

representations. Moreover we can I think see here a clear divergence of views between in this case Freud and Lacan. In Freud, for example, we see a tendency towards a norm – the idea that motherhood and by implication fatherhood represent a proper destiny for the human subject, a point of satisfaction where one can in this sense “have” again the object - be it penis or penis substitute - on the condition that one separates from the mother as first and primary object of satisfaction. With Lacan we see a more radical point of view in so far as he puts desire or lack at the centre of human existence – a lack that cannot be eradicated but rather must be lived by every human subject. It represents a position that is non-normative and one which states ultimately that there is no law that governs human existence, no proper way to be properly human outside the contingent arrangements or way of being imposed or carried through a particular socio-cultural invention. To put it in Lacanian terminology we can say with Miller that the real (of human existence) is lawless or again that there is no Other of the Other, meaning that we cannot appeal to any natural order in the case of the human subject. It is why you will seldom find Lacanians on the side of those who would have us outlaw different ways of organising human life as has happened for example in debates around homosexual couples, and other new forms of parenting that have emerged in our contemporary world.