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ON THE CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE OF CONFLICTING EMOTIONS: THE CASE OF EARLY MOTHER-CHILD INTERACTION AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

abstract

In this paper I seek to define a first, preliminary basis for a dialogue between philosophy and psychoanalysis on the topic of emotional conflict. As I will argue, the interaction between mother and child in the latter's first year of life represents a privileged vertex of observation on the positive effects that can be produced by coping with emotional ambivalence, both on the quality of the relationship and on the development of the child. Furthermore, tolerance for emotional conflict not only contributes to the development of the Self in the infant but it also favours the acquisition of prosocial attitudes, such as the capacity for concern, authenticity and creativity.

keywords

ambivalence, integration, authenticity, concern, morality

1. Introduction In a well-known passage of the *Symposium*, Aristophanes talks about the mythological origin of love. Humans, he says, were cut in half by Zeus who wanted to punish them for their arrogance and their attempt to overthrow the gods. This punishment decreased their strength and made them more dependent, both on the gods and on each other. This original wound gave humans a permanent desire to recreate their initial unity and search for their lost half. This myth, according to Aristophanes, explains the origin of love, which can be essentially interpreted as a desire, in particular as the desire for Completion and Wholeness.

In a subsequent speech, Diotima interprets love as a basic human motivation, a vital force which generates the passions that animate human life. But - and through this argument she specifies Aristophanes's myth - love is a desire for the Good only. No one desires anything that is bad. In particular, "even if lovers seek their other half for the sake of wholeness, they only want to be a whole with the good part, while the parts that are bad will be avoided and kept away. Good things, in their turn, are not desired for their own simple goodness, but are sought as the means to achieve happiness which is humans' final end" (Naugle 2016).

Plato's idea of love as always directed towards what is good diverges significantly from the psychoanalytic view of love and hate as inextricable and omnipresent in our affective relationships. According to the latter, love has a dark, ambivalent side and is also directed to those parts of the Other that may hurt and frustrate us.

Since its inception, psychoanalysis has identified emotional ambivalence as a distinctive characteristic of our psychic functioning. A seminal development of the concept of emotional ambivalence was provided by Melanie Klein (1937, 1946, 1948, 1952). Afterwards, building upon Klein's theory, Winnicott (1945, 1949, 1960, 1963) focused on the ambivalence of maternal affect. In his article "Hate in the Counter-Transference" (1949), a famous paragraph describes at least eighteen reasons that a mother has to hate her child before the child learns to hate her. These include: "The baby is not her own (mental) conception", "The baby is not one of childhood play, father's child, brother's child etc." "The baby is ruthless, treats her as a scum, an unpaid servant, a slave" (Winnicott 1949: 72-73).

In this paper I argue that the emotional ambivalence theorised by Winnicott and Klein is not a symptom of dysfunctionality but has a constructive role and is functional for living and perceiving a life as authentic.

Furthermore, I suggest that the personal elaboration of ambivalence is not only significant for individual maturation but it also promotes, or inhibits, the emergence of a natural basis for collective morality.

How may the psychoanalytic perspective on love and hate be reconciled with Plato's view in the *Symposium*? I answer this question by focusing on the difference between the intelligibility of emotional conflict and intimacy with it. Although both are needed, they serve different functions, as I will explain.

In particular, intimacy with ambivalence is constitutive of a mature functioning modality of the psyche in which all components of reality can be perceived and accepted. Far from being only a personal achievement, such a capacity also has significant implications for society, as I will tentatively suggest.

Emotional ambivalence is the experience of having *simultaneously* both positive and negative feelings toward an object. Such an experience gives rise to an internal conflict in the subject, who feels love and hate at the same time, and toward the same person.

According to the English psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1946, 1948), the coexistence of love and hate characterises human beings from their earliest days of life. Klein develops her argument through the analysis of the most primitive mental states that arise in children. According to her most famous theoretical contributions, the infant develops an integrated Self by going through the turbulent phases of the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position in the first year of life. The vicissitudes of these phases - how they are faced and dealt with in the relationship with, mostly, the mother - have an impact on the infant's maturation and on her chance to reach psychic integration.

Klein (1946) uses the term "paranoid-schizoid position" to describe the earliest months of an infant's life. Its most perspicuous evidence is the splitting of both the Self and the Object (the person to whom feelings are directed) into a "good part" who loves and a "bad part" who hates. The good and the bad part are not integrated but coexist in the Self and in the Other. The infant uses phantasies of splitting, projection and introjection in order to deal with fear and anxiety that arise from her conflicting feelings. The most intense conflict has to do with the coexistence of love and hate in the relationship with the mother. She uses splitting to manage this unbearable ambivalence. Once her own feelings have been separated into loving and hating ones, she projects them into separate parts of the mother. As a result, the mother is also split into a good mother, or breast, from which love and gratification can be received, and a bad one, that is felt to be frustrating and persecutory.

If development proceeds normally, splitting will be gradually given up, the mother who is hated and the mother who is loved will be "put together" as parts of the same person and, accordingly, the Self will be felt as an integrated and tolerable mixture of good and bad components. But this stage will take time to be consolidated.

In the paranoid-schizoid position, binary splitting is still dominant and, in parallel, omnipotence and idealisation colonise the mind of the infant. Bad experiences are omnipotently denied and projected outside the Self to reduce persecutory feelings, while good experiences are idealised as a protection against the fear of the persecuting breast¹.

The depressive position follows the paranoid-schizoid one. It begins in the second six months of life and is repeatedly refined throughout childhood and intermittently throughout life. In this phase, love and hate still coexist but love surmounts hate, thus promoting integration. At this stage of development, the baby realises and accepts that the hated mother and the loved mother are one and the same person. By re-composing the ideal and the persecuting

2. Love and Hate in Melanie Klein's Contribution

1 Both constitutional and environmental factors affect the course of the paranoid-schizoid position. Constitutional factors include the life and death instincts in the infant and the balance between them. The main environmental factor is the mother and the quality of the maternal care that the infant receives.

parts of the Object, she is enabled to re-compose love and hate in her feelings, thus developing a more integrated sense of Self.

As a fundamental consequence, the Self, the Object, and the world are perceived more richly and realistically. The Object is recognised as separate from one's own Self and as real, while idealisation and illusion of omnipotent control over it diminish.

3. Winnicott and the Ambivalence of Maternal Affect

Winnicott² built upon Klein's perspective by focusing on the mother-child interaction in the first year of life. The *good enough mother* that Winnicott (1945) describes is full of ambivalences about being a mother. When she takes care of her baby, she is selfless and generous, offering dedication and deep love, but she is also self-interested and prone to resentment. A mother has many and varied reasons to hate her baby as Winnicott suggests in his article "Hate in the Counter-Transference" (1949: 72-73):

The baby is not her own (mental) conception;
The baby is not the one of childhood play, father's child, brother's child, etc.
The baby is not magically produced;
The baby is a danger to her body in pregnancy and at birth;
The baby is an interference with her private life, a challenge to her preoccupations;
To a greater or lesser extent, a mother feels that her own mother demands a baby so that her baby is produced to placate her mother;
The baby hurts her nipples even by suckling, which is at first a chewing activity;
The baby is ruthless, treats her as scum, an unpaid servant, a slave;
She has to love him, excretions and all, at any rate until he has doubts about himself;
He tries to hurt her, periodically bites her and all, we say, in love;
He shows disillusionment about her;
His excited love is cupboard love, so that having got what he wants, he throws her away like orange peel;
The baby at first must dominate: he must be protected from coincidences, life must unfold at the baby's rate, and all this needs his mother's continuous and detailed study;
At first he doesn't know at all what she does or what she sacrifices for him and especially he cannot allow for her hate;
He is suspicious, refuses her good food, makes her doubt herself, but eats very well with his aunt;
After an awful morning with him, she goes out and he smiles at a stranger who says, "Isn't he sweet?";
If she fails him at the start, she knows he will pay her out and for ever;
He excites her (sexually too) and frustrates her – she must not eat him or trade in sex with him.

As this quotation suggests, a mother has many comprehensible reasons to hate her own child. What seems to be important, however, is not hate as such but its acceptance. The process of coping with ambivalence³ is indeed fundamental and requires an acknowledgement both of its

2 Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) was an English pediatrician and psychoanalyst who devoted much of his professional life to the study of mothers and babies. Through his concepts of the "good enough mother" and the "transitional object", he revolutionized psychoanalytic thought but also became a popular writer and contributor to the public debate on education and child care.

3 According to Winnicott (1945, 1949), such a process requires recognition of ambivalence as an unavoidable part of the mother-infant relationship. Only when this recognition takes place signification of ambivalence within the

existence and of its potentially positive effects. Let me consider the effects for the mother first. In my view, emotional ambivalence helps the mother in two main ways:

- The mother who is able to accept the conflictual nature of her feelings toward her baby without denying or minimising them will spontaneously resist the temptation to offer the baby an idealised image of herself, because she experiences the dark, ambivalent nature of her feelings and this makes her feel human, limited and imperfect. She will be authentic in the relationship with her baby.
- Such a mother is much more likely to gradually forget the “ideal baby” that she imagined during pregnancy and to start a relationship with the real one, the baby as she truly is, regardless of how different she may be from any idealised image. This will put her in touch with the authentic baby.

Let me now consider the infant⁴. In the first year of life, the infant’s Self is in development and depends on the maternal Self to emerge and become stable. In this phase, the infant exists only because of maternal care, together with which it forms a unit (Winnicott 1945).

In particular, any infant starts with an inherited potential that can develop or vanish according to the quality of maternal - and then parental - care which is provided. Winnicott uses the expression “facilitating environment” to define a context in which the needs of the baby are sufficiently understood and met by her parents, thus guaranteeing the natural course of development:

Infants come into *being* differently according to whether the conditions are favourable or unfavourable. At the same time conditions do not determine the infant’s potential. This is inherited, and it is legitimate to study this inherited potential of the individual as a separate issue, *provided always that it is accepted that the inherited potential of an infant cannot become an infant unless linked to maternal care* (Winnicott 1960: 589).

Through satisfactory parental care, the baby starts to feel integrated, she becomes a “unit”, and, most importantly, she learns to differentiate “me” and “not-me”. This latter ability gradually leads her to see the mother as a separate object. Gradual, relative independence is then acquired through a sort of “mental detachment” from the mother which allows for differentiation into a separate self.

A mother who acknowledges and accepts the ambivalence of her feelings toward the baby helps her development in at least two ways:

- 1) The baby, by experiencing the love but also the hate coming from her mother, will learn to legitimate - and thus to maintain - both love and hate in herself as a natural and not a dangerous possibility, thus accepting their intermittence and inextricability as a constitutive part of the relationship. Thus the baby has the chance to develop her whole Self, without ignoring or excluding any part, in particular not minimising or denying the hating part.
- 2) Through contact with the integrated Self of her mother, the baby can develop the capacity to accept “the good” and “the bad” in the Other and to enter into relationship with both.

These achievements are essential for living and perceiving a life as authentic, so they strongly contribute to the well-being of the individual.

As Winnicott argues,

relationship becomes possible.

⁴ According to Winnicott, the terms “infant” or “baby” imply a child whose relationship and communication with the mother is mediated by maternal empathy and not yet by language.

sentimentality is useless for parents, as it contains a denial of hate, and sentimentality in a mother is no good at all from the infant's point of view. It seems to me doubtful whether a human child as he develops is capable of tolerating the full extent of his own hate in a sentimental environment. He needs hate to hate (1949: 73).

In other words, the baby needs to be in contact with the full spectrum of human emotions to learn that they all deserve legitimacy and that they all need to be preserved in order to develop an authentic Self.

4. Capacity for concern and moral sense

The nexus between emotional ambivalence and guilt further clarifies the importance of emotional conflict and its constructive potential in the affective world of the infant. Emotional conflict does not only allow for the development of an integrated Self and for the capacity to be in relationship with an integrated Other, but it also represents the basis for the acquisition of other fundamental psychic capacities. For both Klein and Winnicott, by coming to accept the reality of her own aggressive drives, the infant gradually starts feeling guilty for her hate and responsible for the damage that the Object may have suffered because of her. In a new-born infant, whose personality is still far from integrated, destructiveness and hate are unaffected by concern. Initially, the impulse is ruthless, unaware of the love and the hate that brings it about. The mother's capacity to survive, however, allows for the emergence in the baby of a gradual capacity to differentiate between reality and fantasy, between the real mother who is still there and the phantasmatic mother who has been attacked and destroyed. Once the fantasy has been recognised as different from reality, the baby can feel fully responsible for the fantasy in all its dimensions - both positive and hostile. With the acknowledgment of one's own aggressive drives, the capacity to experience a sense of concern for the damaged object develops. Such a capacity triggers the intention to repair, a constructive motivation that stimulates creativity. Indeed, the urge to repair is a vital sentiment that gradually strengthens, especially in the presence of a good enough mother who supports the child and shows - with her affective presence - that she has survived the hate and the aggressive attacks that were present in their relationship.

The nexuses that Winnicott has made explicit among tolerance of ambivalence, integration, sense of guilt, and reparation are not only significant for individual maturation. They also have a considerable social impact, for they promote, or inhibit, the emergence of a natural basis for collective morality (Winnicott 1963, 1966).

In fact, in the young child, tolerance of ambivalence allows for the spontaneous structuring of a moral sense - that is, the capacity to recognise the damage to the Other and to feel guilty about it (Winnicott 1958a). Such "primitive moral sense" is not inculcated in the mind from outside, nor is the result of an imposed code of conduct. Instead, it springs naturally from the dynamic of human affectivity, given that ambivalence has been recognised and accepted, first by the mother and then by the child⁵.

As Winnicott argues,

5 In Winnicott's words, "in health the infant can hold the guilt, and so with the help of a personal and live mother (who embodies a time factor) is able to discover his own personal urge to give and to construct and to mend. In this way much of the aggression is transformed into the social functions, and appears as such. In times of helplessness (as when no person can be found to accept a gift or to acknowledge effort to repair) this transformation breaks down, and aggression reappears. *Social activity cannot be satisfactory* except it be based on a feeling of *personal* guilt in respect of aggression" (1950: 207).

Moreover, in unfavourable circumstances that prevents the emergence of the basic capacity for feeling guilty, "the implanted moral code is necessary but the resultant socialization is unstable" (Winnicott 1958b/1965: 24-25).

The study of the sense of guilt implies for the analyst a study of individual emotional growth. Ordinarily, guilt-feeling is thought of as something that results from religious or moral teaching. Here I shall attempt to study guilt-feeling, not as a thing to be inculcated, but as an aspect of the development of the human individual. (...) Those who hold the view that morality needs to be inculcated teach small children accordingly, and they forgo the pleasure of watching morality develop naturally in their children, who are thriving in a good setting that is provided in a personal and individual way (1958: 14).

Psychoanalysis has shed light on emotional ambivalence as an unavoidable human characteristic which can potentially promote healthy psychic maturation in the individual and the development of prosocial attitudes, such as moral sense and creativity.

Interestingly, in his *Ethics*, Spinoza anticipates a fundamental issue of psychoanalysis: the possible coexistence of opposite feelings for the same object of love: "If we conceive that a thing, which is wont to affect us painfully, has any point of resemblance with another which is wont to affect us with an equally strong emotion of pleasure, we shall hate the first-named thing, and at the same time we shall love it" (*Ethics*, quoted by Greenspan 1980: 225).

As this quotation shows, Spinoza does not only allow for a form of ambivalence between love and hate that he calls "fluctuation, or vacillation", but he also suggests a nexus between ambivalent feelings that are experienced simultaneously and the basic emotions of pleasure and pain coming from the same person (Greenspan 1980). Such a nexus has a clear affinity with the Kleinian idea of simultaneous gratification and frustration that the infant receives from the mother, due to the human impossibility to satisfy the Id - the impulsive part of the infant Self - in all its requests. This impossibility and the subsequent experience of pain and pleasure from the same affective source generate in the infant the inextricable mix of love and hate that Spinoza also describes.

Notwithstanding this affinity and although philosophers, as Greenspan (1980: 224-225) argues, nowadays know enough about emotions as "to question the familiar ideal of 'philosophic detachment' from them", emotional ambivalence remains a controversial issue (but see Berlin 1958), especially for those who consider emotions as a kind of rational judgement.

An analysis of the philosophical debate on emotions is beyond the purposes of this paper. Instead, I would like to suggest how philosophy and psychoanalysis could integrate their lines of inquiry on emotions, and especially on conflicts between opposite feelings.

I would like to start from this idea: the focal question is not how to free us from conflicts – as this is not possible and, were it possible, it would not be useful; but rather, the question is how we can become free to represent the conflicts in our mind and to feel involved in them.

Representation of and involvement with emotional ambivalence are the neuralgic points. While philosophy can enrich our intelligibility of emotional ambivalence by investigating the modalities through which it can be represented, psychoanalysis can guide us to recognise it as a constitutive part of ourselves, a part with which we are in intimate contact throughout life. Intelligibility and intimacy are different forms of knowledge and each of them has a specific, valuable potential.

The first is the result of a thought process which can widen the burdens of our comprehension, by eliciting the possible meaning that we attach to feelings and, also, by enriching our capacity to express them.

Intimacy, on the other hand, is a mental and bodily condition which implies emotional contact. It makes comprehension less abstract and deeply rooted in a personal, and also physical, experience which is coloured by one's own way of feeling and interpreting.

By integrating intelligibility and intimacy, I suggest that emotional conflicts deserve attention,

5. Intelligibility of, vs. intimacy with, emotional conflicts

can be studied and fruitfully understood but that they also need to be recognised as a component of our identity, a part that plays a significant role in our development, for it can favour, or inhibit, well-being and social adaptation.

While intelligibility has to do with an intellectual process of comprehension and, as such, it presupposes the existence of a mature thinking mind, intimacy defines the affective ground for the development of such a mind. Moreover, it can affect the modality through which the mind is able to think, by influencing its capacity to “see” the world - and thus also one’s object of inquiry - in more or less realistic terms and to enter into relationship with all its parts, those which are compelling as well as the obscure, those easy to grasp as well as the ambiguous, with none of them being excluded or denied.

Furthermore, both intelligibility and intimacy with ambivalence need an affective environment to develop.

Intelligibility needs intellectual exchange, comparison and integration among different and interdisciplinary vertices of observation (Creighton 1922, Urban 1929). Intimacy requires - and also fosters - a mind/body active interchange and, most of all, the affective bond with another person (Mendelsohn 1982, Zaltzman 2007). On the one hand, it has its origin in the existence of drives or impulses that cannot be completely satisfied, e.g. it has a physical, bodily root. On the other, it characterises the dynamic of primitive affective experiences: an infant cannot learn to maintain - and thus cannot benefit from - ambivalence in herself unless she has a mother who accepts hate and keeps it within their relationship.

I also believe that intimacy with love and hate and intelligibility of their functions can be seen as mutually reinforcing processes that generate knowledge, provided that they are both recognised and considered. On the contrary, it would be a loss to take one and leave the other. For intelligibility which is not subsumed by deep emotional awareness is bounded to the surface of things. Equally, intimacy which is not supported by verbalisation and reasoning cannot become conscious and be valued in its many potentialities.

6. Conclusions The psychoanalytic study of early mother-infant relationships⁶ gives us an image of love that is rather different from that which Plato offered us in the *Symposium*. Indeed, authentic love is not directed to the good only. Instead, it involves reciprocal acceptance of both positive and hostile feelings in both the Self and the Other.

The emotional ambivalence that arises in early mother-infant relationships does not vanish in childhood. Instead, it is continually experienced throughout life as an unavoidable and valuable component of our relationship with others. Moreover, it offers crucial contributions both to the individual, by favouring her development and the maturation of different psychic functions, and to society by contributing to the generation of prosocial forms of behaviour.

As far as the individual is concerned, the capacity to accept and maintain both love and hate for the Other in one’s own conscious mental sphere favours integration and authenticity. It also sustains the passage to the depressive position and to a creative way out of it, which is based on concern for the Other and trust in reparation.

Pro-sociality, in its turn, is strengthened by emotional ambivalence in at least three main ways:

- First, the acceptance and personal development of ambivalence reduces the risk of acting it out, e.g. of an aggressive and uncontrolled attack on the Other;
- Secondly, it helps to mentally integrate reality in its multiple dimensions, thus affecting the capacity for realistic thinking;

⁶ The same argument may be applied to any primary care-giver who is in close and stable relationship with the infant.

- Thirdly, it is the basis from which moral sense springs naturally and sets its deepest roots, before being reinforced by culture and education.

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