

JESSICA BENJAMIN BOOK STUDY GROUP ORIENTING QUESTIONS

“An Other take on the riddle of sex: Excess, affect and gender complementarity”

Here’s a very brief overview of Benjamin’s essay:

In the above titled essay, Benjamin correlates the experience of excess or “too-muchness” with early failure of regulation in the mother-infant dyad. This can occur in a number of ways, including the mother’s inability to contain the infant’s states of arousal that are “overwhelming to the immature psyche” as well as unsuccessfully containing her own states, i.e. a lack of “ability to regulate her excitement and anxiety, and how she may communicate or make demands upon her child’s ill-equipped and immature psyche for regulation and containment.” (p. 113) While Laplanche’s general seduction theory understands “the excess that is sexuality for all human infants,” Benjamin expands upon this concept, understanding the uncontained arousals and misattunements in the dysregulated dyad as an “alien implantation” that “functions both as a general trauma and as a source of psychic structure.”(p. 114) Key to Benjamin’s theory here is the translation of the failed containment in the mother-infant dyad into a “fantasy of the unreliable maternal container” that is then “carried into the notion of ‘feminine passivity.’” (p. 118) In addition, Benjamin expands the identification of excess/too-muchness with gender by equating control with “phallic containment” and the “catastrophe of being uncontained and over-excited” with emasculation. (p.127) In this way, issues of the complementarity and the doer/done-to dynamic reemerge through a gender-marking of affective “control” or lack thereof.

Benjamin offers material from cases, as well as examples from contemporary literature and film, to support these correspondences and their deconstruction. The clinical material looks to illustrate the ways that actual experiences in the mother-infant dyad become internalized and experienced on the fantasmatic level with discharge through physiological release. She also provides clinical material to support her identification of the gender binary and complementarity with feelings of shame around “excess” and “too-muchness.” By addressing the complementary structure expressed in the realm of sexual “too-muchness,” Benjamin suggests a movement away from the active/passive binary (another culturally gendered dynamic) and toward a form of surrender that moves away from the conventional power dynamics and into thirdness.

QUESTIONS

1. If, as Benjamin has argued in *Bonds of Love*, the structure of complementarity is the consequence of a socio-cultural understanding of gender and the stunting or erasure of maternal subjectivity, how are we to make sense of the much more physical/embodied model of relationship that Benjamin presents here? Is there an implicit (perhaps unconscious?) invocation of the phallic mother in Benjamin’s description of the “implantation” (p.115) of the “alien” by the uncontained mother?

2. Does Benjamin's theoretical position present a model that feels affect or experience near? What does it mean from a clinical point of view to think of embodied sexuality so theoretically?
3. Since the mother is responsible for containing the infant's anxiety, but the infant is overwhelmed by even the unconscious transmission of the mother's anxiety, how does mutual recognition emerge in the mother-infant dyad once the issue of "excess" has been introduced?
4. How does "excess" or "too-muchness" become equated with emasculation, which would seem to indicate a loss or absence rather than an excess or abundance? Aren't there ways in which the "excess" of male sexuality has been culturally normalized and empowered? How would "surrender" and the third be employed to deconstruct this more "phallic" form of complementarity?
5. Is Benjamin arguing for making a theory of sexuality into a form of trauma theory? Is there an implicit attempt to transcend the physicality of the sexual through the mentalized and relational?
6. How would you describe Benjamin's distinction between gender and sexuality?
7. What does Benjamin mean when she speaks of creating "a space in which the reversal of the active-passive complementarity takes us out of the power relation and into a form of thirdness..."? (p. 140) Isn't "reversal" symptomatic of complementarity? What options might there be other than "reversal"?
8. Benjamin's examples of moving toward surrender and thirdness are described in terms of "symbolic castration," and "the spectacle of male lack," both of which are recognized as "eroticized." Can this be read as a form of the triumph of the vaginal over the phallic?