

Orienting Questions for Jessica Benjamin's
The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination (pp. 1-84)

In Preparation for Benjamin's November 4-9, 2019 visit to the New Center for Psychoanalysis
Master Clinician-in-Residence Program

- I. Introduction:** How does Benjamin interpret "the problem of domination"? – The power of domination isn't only about domination (i.e. self-assertation). It is also involves the need for the other to recognize one's dominance.
- A. Is some kind of domination inevitable? (p.4) – Freud believed that domination was inevitable because it was an expression of man's innate aggression. A more contemporary view would understand the inevitability of domination as related to unresolved issues of dependency.
 - B. Is domination primarily a problem of human nature or of human relationships? (p.5) Benjamin believes that domination is an extension of the bonds of love, i.e. early issues of dependency and the need for recognition from the primary love object.
 - C. How does the unexamined psychoanalytic assumption about the subordination of women to men provide "the ultimate rationalization for accepting *all authority*?" (p.7) – An unexamined psychoanalytic assumption about the subordination of women to men results from a complicated process of psychic development in which one person plays the subject and the other plays the object.
 - D. How does Benjamin propose to analyze the evolution of the structure of domination? – Benjamin proposes to show how the structure of domination evolves from a conflict between dependency and independence in the mother-infant relationship into issues of power and surrender in adult erotic life. Here early awareness of the difference between mother and father color cultural images of masculinity and femininity associated with postures of master and slave and shape the different destinies of boys and girls.
 - E. What gives domination its appearance of inevitability, i.e., makes it seem that a relationship in which both participants are subjects – both empowered and mutually respectful – is impossible?" (p.8) – The need to protect oneself, i.e. Freud's self-preservative instinct, anchors a dynamic of dominance and submission in the unconscious that seems inevitable.
- II. Chapter One:** How do "domination and submission result from a breakdown of the *necessary tension* between *self-assertion* and *mutual recognition* that allows self and other to meet as sovereign equals?" (p.12) – The inability to sustain the paradox between self-assertion and mutual recognition converts the exchange of recognition into domination and submission.
- A. What does Benjamin mean by "*recognition*" (p.15); "*mutual recognition*" (p.16); and "*the intersubjective view*?" (p.19)
 - a. Recognition – refers to an act in which both the patient and analyst are able to talk safely about the patient's experiences of incompatible, dissociated

self-states. When a person feels recognized, he/she feels known and not just “understood.” In other words, experientially symbolized meaning is not replaced by interpreted meaning

- b. Affective attunement vs. recognition – The former refers to early concrete affective interactions between the infant and the mother, whereas the latter refers to the phase at 7-9 months of age where with the mother’s cross-modal communications the infant discovers that “there are other minds out there! And that separate minds share a similar state.” (Benjamin, J. (1990). *An Outline of Intersubjectivity: The Development of Recognition*. **Psa Psychology** 7S: 37-38)
 - c. Recognition of the other – refers to where the patient is able to experience the analyst (his subjectivity and knowledge) as not defined by his/her own projections. This helps the patient see different perspectives and enhances the full development of one’s self as a human being.
 - d. Mutual recognition – refers to the experience of developing a space between and about the patient and analyst where each can recognize the other’s person’s separateness (“objectivity”) and share like feelings and intentions. This process contributes to the development of a capacity for attunement and a tolerance of difference.
 - e. Intersubjectivity – refers to the field of intersection between two subjectivities. From an intersubjective perspective, this field is an underlying structure of experience and provides the background from which all people interact in the world and understand themselves. From a relational perspective, this field is a developmental achievement and involves the capacity to recognize others as different and separate from one’s self (i.e. Winnicott’s “objectively perceived” object). According to Daniel Stern, this occurs when the child is 7-9 months old.
- B. Why does mutuality necessarily involve a “*paradox of recognition*” (p.31) or an “*essential tension*” (p.25ff), i.e., “*core conflict between (self) assertion and recognition (of the other)*?” (p.31ff) Why is the need of the self for the other “paradoxical” (p.32)?
- a. Paradox of recognition – refers to the conflict between the need to be recognized by an other (i.e. recognition of the self’s independence) and the capacity to recognize the other as a separate person (i.e. recognition of the other’s independence). Benjamin translates Mahler’s rapprochement crisis in terms of intersubjectivity to represent this paradox.
 - b. Mutuality necessarily involves a “paradox of recognition” or an “essential tension” which sustains the self’s sense of independence and the other’s sense of separateness.
 - c. The need of the self for the other is paradoxical because “the self is trying to establish himself as absolute, an independent entity, yet he must recognize the other as like himself in order to be recognized by him. He must be able to find himself in the other. The self can only be known by his acts – and only if his acts have meaning for the other do they have meaning for him. Yet each time he acts he negates the other, which is to say that if the other is affected then he is no longer identical with who he was before. To preserve his identity, the other resists instead of recognizing the self’s acts.” (p. 32)

- C. Why is that “the ideal resolution of the paradox of recognition is for it to continue as a constant tension?” (p.36) How does it counter Hegel’s paradoxical claim that mutuality *must* break down resulting in domination or the *master-slave* dialectic? (p.32)
- The ideal resolution of the paradox of recognition is for it to continue as a constant tension because it is only in that way that the self is able to maintain its independence while also recognizing the other’s separateness. Otherwise, if the self were to fully negate the other’s exist, then it would have no other who would recognize his/her independence.
 - This resolution counters Hegel’s paradoxical claim that mutuality must break down into domination or the master-slave dialectic by maintaining the self’s and the other’s separateness simultaneously.
- D. How does Benjamin think that Winnicott’s Object-Usage is similar to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic? (p. 38)
- Object-usage (Winnicott 1971) – refers to where the patient allows the analyst some autonomy and the analyst either survives or is destroyed by the patient’s aggressive assaults. If the analyst is able to survive such assaults, both the patient and analyst achieve greater autonomy.
 - Quality of externality – For Winnicott, the infant develops a sense of the other as “objectively perceived” when he/she aggressively attempts to destroy the mother and both the mother and the infant survive such destructiveness without being damaged (i.e. without retaliation). This “quality of externality” is in sharp contrast to the inner world of fantasy.
 - Benjamin notes that, for Winnicott, “the object must be destroyed *inside* in order that we know it to have survived *outside*; thus, we can recognize it as not subject to our mental control.” (p. 38)
 - Similarly, she believes that the solution to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic is that “each subject must stake his life, must struggle to negate the other – and woe if he succeeds. For if I completely negate the other, he does not exist; and if he does not survive, he is *not there* to recognize me. But to find this out, I must try to exert this control, *try* to negate his independence. To find out that he exists, I must wish myself absolute and all alone – then, as it were, upon opening my eyes, I may discover that the other is still there.” (p. 38)
 - For Winnicott, destruction involves the mental experience of negating the other, refusing that he/she exists. Ironically, when the other is able to exist despite his/her negation, the subject experiences pleasure with the externality of the other.
- E. How does Benjamin understand the rapprochement phase of development in light of Winnicott’s theory of object-usage or Hegel’s master-slave dialectic? (p.39) – Benjamin believes that it only through the other’s survival that a subject can “move beyond the realm of submission and retaliation to a realm of mutual respect.” (p.39)
- F. How does Benjamin understand Winnicott’s theory of object-usage as modifying Freud’s reality principle? (p. 41)
- Object-survival suggests “a positive source of pleasure, a pleasure of

connecting with the outside, and not just a brake on narcissism or aggression.” (p. 39) Here reality is discovered and not imposed. As a result, “selfhood is not absorbed from without but discovered from within. Reality neither wholly creates the self (as the pressure of the external world creates Freud’s ego) nor is it wholly created by the self.” (p. 41)

- b. For Winnicott, although objective reality is waiting to be found, it is subjectively created by the self. In that way reality is not totally something outside of the self and nor is it completely subjective either.

G. What does Sander mean by “open space?” (p. 41)

- a. “Open space occurs in the first month of life when the mother and infant have achieved sufficient equilibrium to allow for moments of relaxation from internal pressure or external stimulation.” (p. 41)
- b. These moments represent a balance between disengagement and engagement where an impulse can arise within the infant and feel real.
- c. For Benjamin, these moments indicate the beginning of “the capacity for full receptivity and attention to what is outside, the freedom to be interested in the object independent of the pressure of need or anxiety,” (p. 42) i.e. ‘the capacity to be alone in the presence of another.’

H. What is Benjamin’s critique of Mahler’s theory of separation-individuation using Winnicott’s theories of object-usage and transitional space? (p. 44)

- a. Transitional or potential space (Winnicott) – refers to the hypothetical area of experience that occurs between an infant and his/her mother or between a patient and his/her analyst where distinctions between “me” and “not-me,” “real” and “unreal,” or “internal” and “external” are not made. This space represents an illusion that there is an external reality which corresponds to an infant’s or a person’s ability to create and out of which personal growth and development occurs.
- b. For Benjamin, the capacity to self-soothe doesn’t involve the internalization of the mother but involves the development of a capacity to creatively play and discover external reality which is activated by another’s responsiveness.

I. Benjamin claims that to actualize *being-with* the other, or what Erikson called *basic trust*, or Stern calls *core relatedness*, what is needed is something more than drive satisfaction or an object relations focus on the whole object, viz., mutual recognition or the “*paradoxical balance* between recognition of the other and assertion of the self.” (p.46) How does “being-with” form the basis of a compassion that can “break down the oppositions between powerful and helpless, active and passive” or counteract the tendency to objectify and deny recognition to the other?” (p.48)

- a. ‘Doer/done to’ complementarity - refers to the complementary relationship where one person is experienced as the other’s opposite. That is, one person is the subject and the other is the object. This complementary relationship often occurs between analyst and patient when impasses and enactments take place in analytic treatment.
- b. According to Benjamin, “experiences of being-with are predicated on a

continually evolving awareness of difference.” (p.47) In this way, being with another involves a sense of intimacy with another while simultaneously acknowledging the differences between self and other. Therefore, instead of falling prey to a series of opposites, being with emphasizes mutuality and sharing, “the identification with the other person occurs through the sharing of similar states,” (p. 48) while also recognizing the other’s separateness.

- J. What is meant by Kundera’s concept of ‘co-feeling’? – refers to “the ability to share feelings and intentions without demanding control, to experience sameness without obliterating difference” (p. 48)

III. Chapter Two: How is domination anchored in the hearts of those who submit to it? (p.52)? That is, how does the state of omnipotence, with its absence of tension, give birth to domination? (p.73)

- a. The state of omnipotence gives birth to domination, because in asserting one’s independence, the self cannot accept his/her dependence on someone whom he/she can’t control and thus subjugates and enslaves the other. This transforms the need for recognition of the other into one of domination of the other.
- b. For Benjamin, domination is anchored in the hearts of those who submit because the dominator needs the recognition of the one who submits. In this way “the assertion of one individual (the master) is transformed into domination; the other’s (the slave) recognition becomes submission. Thus the basic tension of forces within the individual becomes a dynamic between individuals.” (p. 62)

A. What is Benjamin’s view of Freud’s explanation of domination?

- a. Benjamin believes that, for Freud, domination is inevitable. For Freud, the death instinct is projected outward and has to be harnessed by civilization. Otherwise, it would turn inward and destroy itself. As an outward force, the death instinct is negated by the life instinct and, in response, the self asserts omnipotence.
- b. For Benjamin, this only relocates the problem of omnipotence. Nevertheless, omnipotence means the assimilation of the other and the self and ultimately “allows nothing to exist outside.” (p. 67) In the end, this represents the elimination of the tension arising from the recognition of self and the other. As a result, in order to protect the self, domination and submission of the other ensue.

B. How does erotic domination, for both sides, draw its appeal from its offer to break the encasement of the isolated self, i.e., how is it a reaction to the predicament of solitary confinement – being unable to get through to the other, or be gotten through to – our particularly modern form of bondage (p.83)?

- a. Erotic domination draws its appeal by representing the longed for ideal of the devalued other and by the threat of losing that position of power by succumbing to the devalued other’s dependence.
- b. “Erotic domination expresses a basic differentiating tendency that has undergone a transformation.” (p. 68)

- c. Erotic domination “exemplifies the fatality of dissolving paradox into polarity (splitting) even as it shows it to be the endpoint of a complex process.” (p. 74)
- C. In Benjamin’s analysis of domination and submission via the example of sadism and masochism in the Story of O, she seems to pejoratively use terms like ‘surrender’ or ‘devotion’ as if motivated by a desire for an illusory form of “ideal” love which invariably results in the progressive loss of O’s true self (p.60). She says “that we see in ideal love a perversion of identification, a deformation of identificatory love into submission” (p.122). *How does she reconcile the relationship of domination as asymmetrical (p.62) with **real** maternal (and/or paternal) asymmetrical love for one’s child? (p.82)* Put another way, how (if at all) does Benjamin distinguish genuine asymmetrical “authority” from “authoritarianism” as means for the realization of “mutual recognition?” (p.64)
 - a. Surrender - refers to a quality of liberation, a letting-go, and an act of embracing the unknown that leads to an expansion of the self. In this way it involves the letting down of defenses and results in a kind of transformation which represents growth of the mind.
 - b. For Benjamin, the master’s authority, crystallized in his/her disinterest and not in his/her sadistic pleasure, “is what inspires love and transforms violence into an opportunity for voluntary submission.” (p. 64) Here it is the pleasure, in both participants, of the master’s mastery or devotion to his/her role that provides for the realization of mutual recognition.

Four of Jessica Benjamin’s most important contributions include the paradox of recognition, doer/done-to dynamic, thirdness, (her version of the analytic third) and her critique of the rapprochement crisis where she emphasizes the development of the child’s capacity to elicit the mother’s recognition of him/her separateness as being as important as the development of separateness.

For Benjamin, a core conflict for an individual involves the need for self-assertion coupled with the longing for connection. She roots this conflict in Winnicott’s view of a child’s dependency on the mother in the earliest phase of life as the child begins to experience his/her own emerging need for separateness. For Winnicott, when the mother-infant relationship is going well and the mother, via primary maternal preoccupation, is able to be relatively affectively attuned (i.e. a good enough mother) to the needs of her growing infant, distress is at a minimum, the infant’s growing separateness emerges (i.e. goes on being) naturally, and it isn’t forced to be altered (i.e. a false self defense) in order to maintain a sense of connection. But, for Benjamin and Winnicott, because of her own separateness, the mother’s inevitably fails to accommodate to the needs of the growing infant. This provides the grounding of what Benjamin describes as the doer/done-to dynamic or as Hegel described as the master/slave dialectic.

However, rather than resolving this dynamic/dialectic, Benjamin stresses that it is important for the individual to remain in the paradox of the need for self-assertion and the need for recognition from the other. For her, the paradox exists because the need for self-assertion involves a need to disavow any longing for recognition from the other and recognition from the other would automatically negate self-assertion, rendering the infant dependent. But, self-assertion is never

complete unless it is recognized by the other. Otherwise, the infant would exist in a solipsistic bubble omnipotently controlling the mother and denying her separateness.

Interestingly, for Benjamin, the emergence of a doer/done-to dynamic occurs when the paradox can't be sustained and instead is interpersonalized with the splitting of dependency/independency into subject/object dynamic. However, for her, if the paradox is sustained, it can be eventually resolved, a la Winnicott's object-destruction, with the destruction of the internal object and the survival of the external object. This process results in the liberation of the external object from the control/projections of the other. It is important to note that recognition of the other seems to exist on a continuum: at 4 months of age affective attunement of mother to the infant provides the building blocks of a sense of otherness; at 7-9 months of age the infant begins to experience the mother as a separate being; and at 18-36 months of age the child increasingly experiences the mother's responses as a recognition of his/her otherness. For Benjamin, this model of recognition is highly influenced by Winnicott (i.e. theory of dependency), the Frankfurt School (i.e. theory of recognition and domination), and Radical Feminist Theory (theory of cultural patriarchy).

A few observations and conclusions can be drawn from this model of separateness and recognition. First is that the mother and infant are only affectively attuned (i.e. in sync) 33% of the time at best. Second is that aggression is embedded in the evolving mother-child relationship and fuels development. Third is the quality of attunement (i.e. love) supports the paradox of recognition and the difficulty of letting go of the other. Fourth, for Benjamin, it is the authority of father who rescues the child from the grips of the mother, provides safety, and allows the child to become fully separate.

The following is an attempt to capture many of the important questions that emerged in the discussion of the first two chapters of Benjamin's book, The Bonds of Love:

1. How does affective attunement or acknowledgement differ from recognition?
2. Can there be mutual recognition in a doer/done-to dynamic?
3. Does Benjamin view human nature as Hobbes does where domination is inevitable or as Rousseau does where human nature involves a development of kindness?
4. For Hegel, the master-slave dialectic describes different aspects of consciousness and does not address interpersonal relationships. Is Benjamin describing the development of consciousness (i.e. internal object relations) or primitive interpersonal relationships?
5. Is gender unique in its relationship with the doer/done-to dynamic?
6. Is Benjamin describing the development of culturally based or intrinsic masculine toxicity?
7. For Benjamin, is the boy's relationship with the mother and his need to break away different from that of the girl?
8. The inevitable polarization of the sexes is disturbing. Is it possible for there to be mutual recognition among the sexes given the history of the mother's relationship with her son and his inevitable need to break the tie and suffer profound feelings of loss and ego injury from this disruption?

A few conclusions:

1. Benjamin argues for the persistence of tensions: dependency vs. independency, sameness vs. difference, doer vs. done-to, having a penis vs. not having a penis, mother vs. son, man vs. woman
2. Like Hegel, Benjamin establishes dialectics but, unlike Hegel, she offers no syntheses.

3. For Benjamin, the father rescues the boy from the clutches of the self-sacrificing/self-negating mother and shapes him into his own image, thereby perpetuating the cycle of masculine domination.
4. Present day divisions of gender, masculinity vs. femininity, involve domination and submission.
5. Contemporary notions of motherhood seem to represent a concretization of a selfless woman.
6. A mother's self-assertion is an attempt to break out of the doer/done-to cultural patriarchal paradigm.
7. Extrapolating the master-slave dialectic to the child's struggle with dependency is problematic because the former involves a theory of consciousness and the latter a theory of interpersonal dependency.
8. Benjamin seems to be articulating a theory of negation and a theory of masochism. Typically, it is the masochist who controls the relationship. Therefore, it seems that woman have the power to effect change via self-assertion.
9. Benjamin seems to be a Universalist.