

Second Study Group Meeting, August 13, 2019 at NCP
Van DeGolia's Responses to the Orienting Questions for Jessica Benjamin's
The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination
(pp. 183-224) and

Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Differences (pp. 27-48)

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

Introduction

Jessica Benjamin is an intellectual tour de force. For the most part, she offers a relational/object relations re-interpretation of psychoanalytic theory involving bisexuality, gender biases, superego development (e.g. autonomy vs. relational), narcissism, aggression, Oedipus Complex, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, and intersubjectivity. Her most important contributions include the concepts of the doer/done-do dynamic and thirdness, integrating Winnicott's theory of destruction/usage with the master-slave dialectic, a critique of Mahler's theory of separation-individuation, the paradox of recognition (self-assertion vs. recognition), the tendency for paradoxes to collapse and result in polarized identifications or projections with accompanied affects (e.g. bad, aggressive self or object), the importance of maintaining tension between interpersonal and intrapsychic experience, intersubjectivity as a developmental achievement, and a further articulation of the analyst's therapeutic use of his/her self.

Orienting Questions for "The Bonds of Love"

1. What does Benjamin mean by Gender Polarity, and what is its effect?
 - a. Benjamin believes that all binary opposites are linked to gender.
 - b. This means that all binary opposites represent either male or female.
 - c. For example, day=male and night=female, sky/heavens=male and earth=female, life=male and death=female, rational=male and irrational=female, objectivity=male and subjectivity=female, autonomy=male and attachment=female, self-care=male and nurturance=female, independence=male and dependence=female, subject=male and object=female, dominator=male and dominated=female, master=male and slave=female, strong=male and weak=female, public=male and private=female, universal=male and particular=female, abstract=male and concrete=female, etc.
 - d. The effect is that there is no area of ambiguity or indistinctness. That is, the complexity of life is minimized or negated, and relationships lack a sharing of values or interdependence. In such a world of us vs. them, empathy, sharing, communion, or love don't seem to exist.
2. What does Benjamin mean by male rationality? - Male rationality involves the use of reason, differentiation, separateness, and objectivity and excludes emotionality, undifferentiation, lack of separation, and subjectivity.
3. Describe what Benjamin means by the social separation of public and private; what are the effects on men and women in both public and private life?
 - a. Benjamin believes that life is divided along lines of gender such that men live in the world of others, public life, and women are assigned to care of the home, private life.
 - b. For Benjamin, this division of labor is a social vehicle of gender domination and is intensified as society is increasingly rationalized.
 - c. Public life includes the principle of self-assertion and is deprived of authorship and recognition.

- d. Private life preserves authorship and recognition, is isolated, and is deprived of social effectiveness.
4. Discuss Gilligan's analysis and repudiation of Kohlberg's model of moral development.
 - a. Kohlberg's model of moral development when applied to women finds women less likely to reach the highest stage of moral reasoning.
 - b. But Gilligan noted that universal norms for women have different values than those for men. In fact, women tend to value the ethics of care and responsibility, whereas men tend to value the ethics of rights and justice.
 - c. As a result, women's style of moral thinking tends to be contextual, relational, and concrete, whereas that for men tends to independent of context, abstract and universal.
 5. What does Benjamin think is the cause of the erosion of maternal values such as nurturance and attunement or recognition of need and feeling?
 - a. Benjamin thinks that the cause of the erosion of maternal values involves the over-valuation of rationality and individualism.
 - b. Here rationality, self-sufficiency, performance, and competition are prized, and otherness is devalued.
 - c. This results in a threat to mutual responsibility and the lack of support and responsibility in public life.
 - d. In addition, Benjamin thinks that this over-valuation has contributed to the division between public and private life

Orienting Questions for the "Like Subjects, Like Objects"

1. What does Benjamin mean by the recognition of the other? - 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.
2. How does Benjamin's view of intersubjectivity differ from that of Stolorow et al?
 - a. Intersubjectivity refers to the field of intersection between two subjectivities.
 - b. 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.
 - c. For Benjamin, "the other must be recognized as another in order for the self to fully experience his or her own subjectivity in the other's presence," (p. 30) i.e. Winnicott's 'capacity to be alone in the presence of another.'
3. How does Benjamin differentiate real others and objects? What does Benjamin mean by "Where are objects, subjects must be?" (p. 29)
 - a. "The concept of objects refers to the psychic internalization and representation of interactions between self and objects," (p. 28) whereas real others refer to subjects like oneself.

- b. When Benjamin talks about subjects taking the place of objects, she is referring to the move from a one-person psychology to a two-person psychology, i.e. intersubjectivity, where the “interplay between two different subjective worlds to define the analytic situation” (p. 29) occurs.
4. What does Benjamin mean by mutual recognition? - 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.
5. What is Benjamin’s and Daniel Stern’s critique of Mahler’s theory of separation-individuation?
- According to Benjamin, “because separation-individual theory is formulated in terms of ego and object it doesn’t fully realize its own contribution.” (p. 31) For her, this formulation “focuses on the structural residue of the child’s interaction with the mother as object; it leaves in the unexamined background the aspects of engagement, connection and active assertion that occur with the mother as other.” (p. 31)
 - As a result, Benjamin thinks that the theory of separation-individuation is infantocentric and unconcerned with the source of the mother’s responses. In particular, she emphasizes that the theory misses the pleasure of the evolving relationship between the infant and mother in which the infant learns how to elicit a response from an unpredictable, non-fantasized other.
 - “The pleasure in mutuality between two subjects is reduced to its function of stabilizing the self, not enlarging our awareness of the outside or of recognizing others as animated by independent, though similar, feelings.” (p. 33)
 - In agreement with Daniel Stern, Benjamin’s criticism of separation-individuation theory centers on the practicing subphase when “the infant of 10 months is involved in exploring, in the ‘love affair of the world’.” (p. 35) During the practicing subphase, Benjamin sees the infant’s checking back to look at the mother as not only seeking reassurance and safety but also as seeking an affective exchange. That is, for her, this subphase is about a tension between separation and connection which involves responses from both the infant and the mother and, when it breaks down, results in a conflict between self and other.
 - Interestingly, Benjamin links this conflict to Hegel’s conflict between the independence and dependence of self-consciousness which is played out in the master-slave dialectic.
 - For Benjamin, without recognizing the other as a separate person who has his/her own subjective experiences and from whom the child can learn about how to evoke self-confirming responses the child is deprived of fully experiencing his/her own (potential) subjectivity.
6. What is Benjamin’s critique of Self Psychology and the concept of selfobject? - Benjamin asserts that by focusing on the responsiveness of the selfobject and its role in “shoring up the self throughout life” self-psychology misses addressing the importance of the responsiveness of the mother as an other outside of the child’s fantasy of omnipotent control.
7. How does Benjamin view the role of the mother in addressing the rapprochement crisis?
- Benjamin and Daniel Stern understand the rapprochement crisis as involving the breakdown of the tension between separation and connection. In this crisis the child is confronted with yearning for separation and with the mother’s independent aims.
 - Here, instead of the mother responding only to the needs of the child, the mother is also faced with the child’s independent willfulness. “How the mother responds to her child’s and her own aggression depends on her ability to mitigate such fantasies with a sense of real agency and separate selfhood, on her confidence in her child’s ability to survive conflict, loss, imperfection. The mother has to be able both to set clear boundaries for her child and recognize the child’s will,

both to insist her own independence and to respect that of the child – in short, to balance assertion and recognition. If she cannot do this, omnipotence continues attributed either to the mother or the self; in neither case can we say that the development of mutual recognition has been furthered.” (p. 38)

8. How does Benjamin think that Winnicott’s theory of object-destruction/usage helps illuminate the development of one’s capacity to recognize the other’s separateness?
 - a. Benjamin uses Winnicott’s concept of object-destruction/usage to account for how the tension between the negation of the other and recognition of the other as a separate being is dealt with. For her, ala Winnicott, the child’s assertion of the self (i.e. destructive aggression) and the mother’s ability to survive that assertion results in the recognition of the other as separate from the child’s fantasy of omnipotent control. As Winnicott states, this “creates a quality of externality.” (p. 110 Winnicott 1971)
 - b. But, like Winnicott, Benjamin believes that when the mother is unable to survive the child’s assertion and retaliates, the conflict becomes internalized and is not worked through in the domain of the intersubjective. In other words, if the child isn’t able to experience the mother as a separate person with feelings not unlike her own, conflicts around recognition and aggression result.
 - c. However, Benjamin doesn’t think that the child’s use of the mother purely involves either survival or retaliation. Rather she sees the child’s self-assertion and confrontation with the mother as other as an ongoing “cycle of exchange between the individual and the outside (p. 41)” where the loss of balance between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective, between fantasy and reality, is an ongoing problem.
 - d. Benjamin believes that it is the appreciation of the other’s reality that completes the picture of separation. For her, in the process of separation and individuation the child moves from a retaliatory world of control to a world of mutual understanding and shared feeling. Thus, the child not only gains a sense of his/her own independence and a sense of the mother’s independence as a good object who survives bad experience (i.e. object constancy) but also gains the pleasure of shared understanding, i.e. mutual recognition.
 - e. Benjamin thinks that experiencing the mother or analyst as a “subjective” other, that is, as separate from the child or patient’s omnipotent control, “means she can take care of herself and regulate herself (2010 Benjamin, p. 247).” In doing this, the child or patient is then freed from having to regulate the mother or analyst and no longer needs to suppress his/her own needs.
 - f. Therefore, the mother who isn’t able to negotiate this crisis optimally puts the child at risk for creating a power struggle in order to assert his/her independence but, by doing so, sacrifices the child’s recognition of separateness of the other.

9. What is Benjamin’s theory of aggression? When does she think that aggression becomes a problem?
 - a. Benjamin’s theory of aggression seems to follow that of Winnicott. Like Winnicott, for her, aggression involves the self’s attempt to negate or destroy the other and, thereby, “relate to the other through identification, projection, and other intrapsychic processes pertaining to the subjectively perceived object.” (p. 40)
 - b. But, when the other doesn’t respond to these attacks through retaliation or withdrawal and survives, the other is experienced by the self as outside of oneself, i.e. as an ‘objectively perceived object
 - c. For Benjamin, aggression becomes a problem when the other retaliates or withdraws, the aggression isn’t dissipated, the other is defensively internalized in order to fend off negative feelings, and a loss of balance between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective occurs.

- d. Here it is important to note that, for Benjamin, in real life there is always a combination of the intrapsychic and the intersubjective. Even in the best of worlds, when the other is able to survive object-negation/destruction and aggression dissipates, some internalization still occurs. But the problem is when the intrapsychic and intersubjective aren't in balance because then there is a predominance of aggression turned inward or outward.
10. According to Benjamin, in what way do Elsa First's observations of toddlers during the rapprochement crisis amplifies the concept of object constancy?
- By recognizing that toddlers can have shared experiences with their mother, e.g. doing to the mother what the mother does to her and then identifying with the mother's subjective experiences, toddlers move "from a retaliatory world of control to a mutual world of understanding and shared feeling." (p. 42)
 - For Benjamin, "this analysis amplifies the idea of object constancy in which the good object survives the bad experience, by adding the idea of recognizing that the leaving mother is not bad but independent, a person like me. In recognizing this, the child gains not only her own independence (as traditionally emphasized) but also the pleasure of shared understanding." (p. 42)
11. How does Benjamin understand the doer/done-to complementarity? How does she envision its resolution?
- The 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.
 - For Benjamin, the movement out of the doer/done-to complementarity doesn't involve dissolving omnipotence. Rather it involves having each participant experience each of the roles of the dynamic such that an understanding of shared experience develops. It is only then that the power of the dynamic can dissipate and not be transferred back and forth in an endless cycle.
12. What is Benjamin's view on the balance of intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions of experience? – Benjamin believes that the suspension of conflict between negating/destroying the other and needing the other's recognition establishes a "transitional space in which the otherness of the analyst can be ignored and recognized. The experience of a space that allows both creative exploration within omnipotence and acknowledgement of an understanding of the other is, in part, what is therapeutic about the relationship." (pp. 46-47)

Considerations

- Benjamin believes that the occurrence of a "doer-done to" complementarity (e.g. subject-object) in the analytic relationship is inevitable despite the analyst's best attempts to be empathically attuned. For her, the way to resolve this dynamic is to directly address it. But she doesn't believe that resolving this dynamic means that it will disappear. Rather, she believes that resolving it means balancing the patient's wish to be recognized with the patient's need to recognize the other as separate.
- In the process of object-destruction/usage where the analyst survives the patient's "attacks," it seems that the analyst attends to the needs of the patient, allows his/herself to be used, and also expresses his/her own needs in not allowing his/herself to be destroyed or controlled by the patient.

3. It seems that inevitably in every interaction between the analyst and the patient where the analyst makes him/herself available to the patient to be used in whichever way the patient needs without retaliating or being destroyed the analyst models sensitivity and attunement and provides an experience (i.e. corrective emotional experience) that is different from that which the patient expected, based upon his/her past experience.
4. For Benjamin, the analyst's survival means that the analyst contradicts the patient's expectation, assumes a reality independent of the patient's anxieties about having to be a caretaker of the analyst, and is able to take care of his/herself. Thus, the analyst is experienced as another separate subject with whom mutuality and sharing are possible.
5. According to Benjamin, it would seem that if the patient isn't confronted with the analyst's subjectivity and doesn't recognize the analyst's separateness, then he/she wouldn't fully experience his/her own separateness. However, doesn't the concept of intersubjectivity teach us that no one is truly separate? If so, it is unclear what the recognition of the other adds. Perhaps, rather than true separateness, it may help the patient "stretch" or expand his/her own subjective (i.e. imagined or fantasized) view of his/herself and others and allow him/her to experience and articulate gradations of difference. This seems consistent with becoming aware of the multiple self-states.
6. In his article the "Varieties of Recognition," Bruce Reis emphasizes how instead of viewing the individual as beginning from a solipsistic state from which he/she has to "hatch" (a la Mahler) and needing to learn how to distinguish his/her experience of himself /herself from that of others, "we have come to situate the individual increasingly in the social world from the very beginning of life..." and "may further come to conceptualize the individual as always already constituted by what is outside of them. Thus regarded, recognition itself takes on the qualities of a developing, living idea of what it means to be human in an already social world." (Reis 2008)
7. For Benjamin, "using," or recognizing the other, implies the capacity to transcend complementary structures, but it does not involve their disappearance in fantasy or negation. Rather, it involves a balance of destruction with recognition, i.e. dialectic between fantasy and external reality.

Comments and Observations on Study Group Discussion

The following includes a few of the more interesting comments and observations made during the discussion:

1. Benjamin's writing style seems very masculine, i.e. rational, clear, categorical, universalizing, and convincing.
2. Benjamin seems to have an uncanny ability to look on both sides of the experience of gender domination and describe what is gained and lost in each position, e.g. dominator vs. dominated or public vs. private.
3. Rather than focusing so much on what it is like to be the object of domination, it would have been more helpful for Benjamin to expand on what it means to be the subject of domination.
4. Benjamin doesn't differentiate between the object and the objectified. Here a theory of subjectivity seems to be lacking. The experience of being a subject as self seems very different from being a subject to another, like master-slave dialectic. How is a master a subject? For Benjamin, a subject doesn't involve vulnerability, but subjectivity does.

5. Rather than a theory of desire, Benjamin seems to only have a theory of demand, i.e. of wanting but not longing.
6. Benjamin, and Winnicott seem to believe that the mother has to fail in attunement in order for a child's self to grow and develop.
7. Benjamin seems to lack a theory of unconscious experience
8. Benjamin distinguishes between the idealized mother and the real mother.
9. Benjamin seems to idealize the child's relationship with the father in viewing the father as the one who rescues the child from the mother's engulfment. This view doesn't seem to be aware of the prevalence of father hunger among men.
10. Benjamin's theory seems very autobiographical. As a result, one would wonder about her own mother hunger given her sensitivity to the importance for the child to share the mother's pleasure in the his/her separateness.
11. Benjamin seems to fall short in fully articulating the development of the self and what it means to individuate.

In contrast to some of the above comments and observations, I would argue that Benjamin (and Winnicott) believes that the development of the self doesn't result from the failure of maternal attunement. Rather, it is the mother's recognition of the child's inevitable separateness, which includes an understanding of the child's need for independence and his/her aggressive assertion of self, and the pleasure of that both she and the child share about that separateness that help fuel further development of the self. In fact, it is this shared pleasure that is the core of Benjamin's theory of desire.