

Introductory Notes to: “Instinct and Drive, Seduction and Otherness.”

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Some of you here, and perhaps others who are not here, may wonder what brings a Jean Laplanche and a Judith Butler together. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that this is a historical moment, when these two great thinkers meet and offer us a space and a time to listen to them and discern the surprising and unexpected affinities that emerge in their respective works. These points of contact are all the more surprising in view of their different theoretical concerns, and their setting out from very different quarters, the Laplanchean lifelong translation of Freudian text, spirit and intention, underpinned by a compelling lucidity regarding the points where Freud stopped short in his revolution, or the Butlerian concern and taking issue with cultural norms, among them gender norms, and addressing ethical matters, raising such questions as what is a liveable human life and in what way one gives an account of oneself.

My impression is that the correspondences which have recently become discernible correspondences between these two theoreticians have less to do with the *Zeitgeist* (although this is a contributing factor), than with their originality and inquisitiveness which leads them courageously to those places where thinking must go if pursued consistently. And of course their affinities become interesting the more their differences and even potential

disagreements make themselves felt. Let me say a few specific words by way of introducing our panel today. Jean Laplanche continues Freudian thinking with a scrupulous attention to the junctures in Freud's theory where Freud flinched from the full implications of his Copernican Revolution. At such junctures, Laplanche comes up, as we shall hear from him and from Butler's reading of him, with transformativ insights regarding psychic life, generalized, originary seduction, the unconscious, sexuality, and gender. But although Laplanche does not take part in the neglect and incomprehension rampant in some French psychoanalytic quarters regarding the (American-conceived) concept of *gender*, here, as elsewhere (and I've written about it in the last issue of *Studies in Gender & Sexuality*) his ambivalence about the concept of gender is conspicuous. Such ambivalence is understandable when the concept of 'gender' is seen to function as a competing paradigm – Laplanche calles gender the “intimate enemy” of infantile sexuality – for illuminating the profound non-normativeness of human sexuality.

Laplanche's theories offer evocctive ideas and a very fruitful conceptual apparatus for conceiving of the endlessly resonant chambers the adult other calls forth in the infant or child impinged by this other. Those are the moments when mind and body long and, further, are impelled to, translate the adult's messages that have been implanted and now circulate within the infant/child in the forms of bodily sensations and fantasies. I called this the 'tension arc' between child and caretaker, where mystified curiosity and body awakening conjoin in a response to being seduced, as it were, into building interiority and subjectivity. Laplanche overthrows our habitual

notions of the normative, oedipal family as the basis for thinking development, and offers us a frame in terms of the “fundamental anthropological situation” in which the critical axis is the gradient between the small human and the big human, rather than the gendered father-mother-child family. Laplanche proposes an inevitable and vital *seduction process* that attaches to the earliest relations of care among adult and child. Such generic seduction necessarily implies an *exogenous notion of the drive* that contrasts with biological instinct in many ways. The drive comes from the outside, from the other, although its site of birth is the endogenous need-tension in the infant’s body attended to by the caretaker. What an elegant, intellectually satisfying solution to our longstanding theoretical ordeals regarding drive theory! A solution that does not dispense with drive, yet illuminates its profoundly nonbiological, even if biologically-derived character and does justice to psychic modes of functioning that transcend biology, enlarge it and turn it into complex, polymorphous shapes. The implications of this idea are so far-reaching, and we have hardly begun to take their full measure.

Judith Butler will elaborate today on Laplanche’s ideas and her exegesis enables us to take better notice of their amplex and profundity, and in particular, to see the extent to which we are determined by that which is not us. Butler makes us appreciate the force of the idea that “our” unconscious is not ours, since we are not impermeable, hermetic containers unruffled by the force of unconscious intention and desire. She shows how the Laplanchean framework offers a “radical rethinking,” I would even say, a reversal – “of the relationship between the cultural adult world

and the formation of infantile sexuality.” She makes us aware of the otherness and importedness from the outside of human sexuality, including gender where “something foreign is introduced into the psyche” which becomes the precondition and stimulus for infantile sexuality and more generally, for “the condition of possibility of my affective life,” as she put it.

Butler insistently inquires about human norms that become reified into ontological certainties, and seeks to deconstruct categories that have become unquestionable, oppressive, even violent. She makes deep deconstructive forays into contemporary social institutions and their underlying assumptions, with the aim of inquiring what is “human,” researching into how the humanly-liveable can be expanded to include various types of minorities, and how can other, seemingly alien forms of living, be brought into the ethically compelling domain. She asks how can recognition of the other make the category of the “human” become more inclusive. Butler uses, as does Laplanche, philosophical thinking, whether phenomenological or post-structuralist, and importantly for this audience, psychoanalytic thinking.

Although Butler has always been a thorough reader of Freud (see for example her brilliant analysis of Freud’s *On Narcissism* and *The Ego and the Id* in her paper on the intrication of pain, pleasure and body erotogeneity, and on the lesbian phallus), we watch with pleasure her evergrowing reliance on psychoanalytic thinking, adding it to her Hegelian and Foucauldian-inspired theorizing. One example of this trajectory would be her earlier formulation of the subject as inscribed by (social cultural) forms of power

that “compel the body to signify the prohibitive law as their very essence,” or her talk about “redescription of intrapsychic processes in terms of the surface politics of the body” (the “regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence”), to her presentation today where she will talk about the subject being formed in response to impingement and the “primary scene of seduction.” In this sense, Butler more trenchantly takes account of the subject’s formation of the unconscious in terms of its nuanced individual experience.

Both Laplanche and Butler are brilliant readers of Freud, both push Freud’s “critique of normalization” forward, yet both are wary of structuralist, systematizing thinking. A central role in their respective theorizing is given to “otherness.” However, this “otherness” is particular and unique, rather than a symbolic, or universally normative yoke, such as Lacan would have it. This “otherness” is also never fully assimilable and translatable. As I wrote elsewhere:

*Otherness is the stuff the unconscious is made of, and it follows the impact of the other-person. The unconscious, its radical alterity, is sustained through the seduction of the other person. Here is the kernel of a crucial idea: on the one hand, the other implants something strange into us, but at the same time, **the other enables us to face, hold, and maintain our foreign consciousness, which may be too traumatic to be sustained on its own.** Laplanche articulates the otherness that constitutes the subject, yet he keeps insisting on the need for the other not to be reduced to the “subjectivity of the receptor,” but rather to be maintained in his strangeness. One’s inner*

strangeness is “held” by an outer strangeness, while that outer strangeness in turn is held by the enigmatic relation of the other to his own internal stranger ... the psyche builds itself through the fantasized other’s unconscious.