Pathological jealousy — the perversion of love

In supervision, it can often be observed that much more weight is being given to the dyadic and therefore to envy than to triangular relations and to issues of jealousy. Yet, it becomes quite evident that this turning away from the dynamics that are in the widest sense oedipal (i.e. triadic) is problematic and one-sided. In supervised analyses it strikes me how often manifest conflicts of closeness and distance, understood as being of symbiotic origin, really hide unconscious jealousy, and that in these instances the dyadic defends against what really is triadic. Often the reverse is true as well: that the triadic conflict hides a deeper dyadic one. But this state of affairs tends to be more easily acknowledged and is less repressed than its obverse, i.e., when jealousy and the disavowed shame going with it are hidden by fears of separation or closeness and are clinically overlooked. It is also very surprising that, after the earlier literature (Freud, 1922; Jones, 1929; Riviere, 1932; Fenichel, 1935; Ping-Nie Pao, 1969), we hardly find any articles to this topic in the more recent psychoanalytic literature anymore, a fact also regretted in the last major work to the topic of pathological jealousy by Stanley Coen (1987).

In order to clarify the affects most closely involved, I would like to put them into words: In jealousy I feel: “I am the one who has been excluded from love. I am standing outside of an intimate relationship that is particularly precious to me”. Behind jealousy, there always stands a sense of loss, and with that acute pain and sadness, but also a feeling of humiliation and shame. Either it means: “I am the excluded third and want to be the excluding first instead,” or it implies: “I am excluded from the belonging to a larger community, and my pain and shame are so
strong that I want to hurl myself against this exclusion, but feel helpless to do anything about it.” Very easily this leads to the desire for revenge. A frequent way to deal with jealousy is its radical turn-around: “Instead of that I am jealous, I make jealous.” Yet, another prominent way is reaction formation against jealousy in form of altruistic surrender: “I generously cede my love to someone else.”

In envy the feeling says: “The other has more, is better and more respected than I am, and I feel inferior and therefore humiliated. I want to take away and destroy the good he has and is.” Also always shame lies behind envy, even much more so than is the case in jealousy. The impulse is to wipe out the perceived difference by taking that wherein one feels short-changed and diminished, even if this entails the humiliation and destruction of the other person or her worth.

In resentment the wounded sense of justice stands in the foreground: “Injustice has happened to me; I have been robbed of what was most valuable to me.” Behind resentment, we therefore commonly encounter envy and jealousy, but what is typically allied with those affects is the marked sense of helplessness and impotence about being able to redress the balance of justice.

Finally, revenge is the impulse and attitude to remove the causes of shame, guilt, envy, jealousy, and resentment, and to seemingly undo the suffered pain and shame by its reversal: “If I inflict upon the other at least as much suffering, or, still better, a multiple of what had been done to me, then I am freed from it” — the talion principle, derived from the Latin word “talis”, “the same.” Mostly, this reckoning does not tally, already internally for reasons of one’s own sense of guilt and remorse, and even less so externally because it leads to the well known cycles of retaliation where every act of revenge only conjures up a much greater vendetta.

Now a case vignette, Jane, mid fifties, married for the fourth time, with two grown-up daughters. She came a few years ago to treatment because of severe depressive episodes. From the beginning of therapy, an obtrusive problem in her
work has been her vehement jealousy in regard to her younger, by far preferred daughter, the only one from her third marriage. This had been a bond to a man whom she loved very much, but whom she also divorced because of financial disagreements and who soon afterward died. If that daughter did not call her every day and spend every weekend with her, if she cultivated her own friendships and especially when she thought of marrying, Jane went into towering rages and accused her for hours in telephone harangues that she (the daughter) was not loving her really, otherwise her own mother would come above everybody else. When the daughter did not give in to her tantrums, Jane took it to mean that she did not care at all about her mother. If she did really love her, she would yield to her. No other relationship should ever replace this most intense of all bonds — that by blood. Either there existed this absolute irreplaceability and closeness, or Jane saw herself as completely alone.

It is also in regard to this almost delusional jealousy that the analytic process momentarily collapses: all ability to step out of the immediate experience, to reflect about it with the help of the inner eye, and all rationality transiently vanish, and the analyst becomes the enemy.

Something about her history: When Jane was four months old, her mother killed herself by shooting herself in the head in the baby’s room. The two older siblings stayed with the alcoholic father whereas Jane was given to a relative of his. This adoptive mother was possessive and clinging towards Jane. Until she was 12, Jane did not know anything about her real life story although she always had a vague sense that something was not right, that “nothing was real”. With tragic irony and envious cruelty her adoptive mother used to say: “You think you are so smart, but you do not know everything!” The decisive truth had been hidden from her. Only at 12 she learned from her intoxicated “uncle” that he really was her biological father, and the reason why she had been raised apart from brother and sister: her
mother’s suicide. This threw her into such deep despair that for weeks she was not able to return to school and was hiding in her bed.

In the present also, the former feeling of being excluded, of being totally unloved, of not belonging, and of being a stranger repeats itself in almost monotonous sequence, and yet with the most dramatic vehemence.

On the face of it, the structure of jealousy seems to be triadic. But in its core, there is the fantasy of an all-powerful twosome unity from which everybody else, even the entire world should be banished. Pathological jealousy is therefore in no way limited to sexual jealousy (although the psychoanalytic literature deals, as far as we can see, only with this form). In fact, the latter is a special case of a more general search for, and addiction to, the exclusivity of the intimate relationship — the fantasy of total possession of, and power over, the intimate other. The essence of jealousy lies in this absoluteness and exclusivity of the demanded relationship. Everything that is not exclusive, is considered by Jane to be a betrayal and a fundamental breach of trust. Love is possession and means: “Either I own you or I kill you. You have no right of having your own life.”

Suddenly, a wider and deeper meaning of her pathological jealousy opens up and this with a small, yet typical happening. Her daughter who had defied Jane’s massive reproaches, had married, and then, one year later, moved to a far away town, spends one vacation week with Jane. After one day she and her husband had left the house, Jane goes in their bedroom and “discovers” the list of things to do, including buying a present for the first wife of her late father, Jane’s third husband. But Jane’s jealousy always throws itself with particularly biting ferocity upon the daughter’s relationship with her half-sister, the child from the first marriage of her father. And now the daughter wants to make a gift to the mother of that hated rival! Jane is besides herself with indignation and calls it an act of utmost disloyalty; her rage is now also directed at her analyst who tries to explore this further. The
analyst asks herself whether Jane had not been feeling guilty because she had taken her husband away from his wife and his two children and that she now expects to be punished by them. Instead of feeling this “real guilt” (Realschuld) she externalizes it and accuses in turn both women of taking her own daughter away from her. In other words, the pathological jealousy is, at least partly, a defense against her guilt feelings for having robbed them of their husband and father and given them so much cause for severe jealousy and aggrievement. However, Jane never acknowledges this guilt. What she obsessively, almost delusionally fastens upon, now manifests itself as reversal of the guilt and of the reason for jealousy: now it is she who feels herself chronically to be the excluded third and the victim of betrayal and accuses the other two, while she herself seems to be innocent. At the moment that the analyst, if ever so tactfully, tries to question this, Jane becomes furious, and for that moment the main transference becomes that of feeling blamed. It is a superego transference because the guilt feeling within has to be so vehemently defended against by the jealousy.

If we examine this now more generally, a very important aspect in much of love is the often quite unabashedly expressed wish for exclusive possession of the partner. In its midst, there crouches therefore often devouring, even murderous jealousy. It seems that this wish for exclusivity can be observed already in very small children. Newest experimental studies show clear reactions of jealousy in 6 months old infants in episodes „where the mothers directed positive attention toward a lifelike doll“ (as compared with face-to-face play and still-face perturbation)(Hart, Carrington, Tronick, & Carroll: „When infants love exclusive maternal attention: Is it jealousy?“ „Infancy,“ 2004, Vol. 6, pp. 57 - 78): „Cross-context comparisons of affects and behaviors revealed that jealousy evocation responses were distinguished by diminished joy and heightened anger and intensity of negative emotionality, comparable to levels displayed during the still-face
episode; heightened sadness, with durations exceeding those displayed during still-face exposure; and an approach response consisting of interest, looks at mother, and diminished distancing, which was more pronounced than that demonstrated during play“. Fascinatingly, this works in experiments when a lifelike baby doll is used, but not when “the mothers focused positive attention toward a book.” (p. 58). Hart and Carrington therefore conclude: “Because infants were being ignored in both conditions, the results suggest that infants find maternal inattention even more perturbing if the object of maternal attention is another child.” It is also very fascinating to notice that the crucial element is “exclusiveness”, just as we observed in the clinical example. As crucial as dyadic relationships are, the similarly critical relevance of triadic constellations from quite early infancy on is shown in these intense efforts by very young children to reestablish “dyadic relationships with attachment figures”, after they had been replaced by a triad (p. 60). “Overall, these results indicate that expressions of sadness and looks at mother were specific to the jealous evocation situation” (p. 70).

Certainly, this wish to take possession of the other person and establish exclusivity in dyadic attachment turns out to be an innate disposition that shows up extremely early in infancy. What has strikes us clinically (and introspectively) as well, is a prevalence of sadness and desperate searching, veiling repressed jealousy. Accordingly, the authors state “that infant jealousy is distinguished by the affect expression of sadness” (p. 71). This relation makes much sense: “Jealousy’s presentation through sadness may be understood in light of this affect’s potential effect on care givers… loss of exclusiveness represents disrupted attachment, and the infant’s expression of jealousy through sadness functions to solicit exclusive care giving, and thus repair the attachment relationship” (p. 72). All these findings show that it is wrong to view jealousy as a “secondary, or nonbasic emotion”.

Let’s return to the analytic experience: Jealousy in its pathological expansions has much to do with “self-love”, i.e. narcissism, and hatred, but preciously little with love itself. The concept of “normal” jealousy rests on a concept of infatuation and love that is founded on total possession and disregards the individuality of the other. The basic question becomes rather: How do we find the individually specific balance between exclusivity and sharing?

One of the great insights is that love is divisible, that it grows in the very sharing instead of getting reduced. I am reminded of the beautiful parable of the Kabbalist Rabbi David ibn Abi Zimra (1479 - 1573): “Just as a woman becomes pregnant and gives birth without lacking anything [of her own being], so too the souls of the righteous and the pious become pregnant and give birth and emanate sparks into this world, to protect the generation or for some other reasons, like one who lights one candle from another, where the first candle is not diminished”. This observation: that we have more by giving, and certainly not less, is true not only for love (and having children is the most beautiful example for it) and for goodness, but also for wisdom and justice. They all become more by being shared. The good German word “Shared grief is half the grief; shared joy is double the joy,” can be extended to love, as unusual as it may sound.

Another very important conclusion is that fidelity and exclusivity are not identical; they have to be uncoupled from each other. There exists a deep and lasting fidelity to the other, beloved person without that this faithfulness and loyalty would have to entail exclusivity. Quite to the contrary! The more broadly, strongly and deeply our love and need for being loved are being fulfilled, the better we are toward our next — more understanding and patient; and the more loving and giving we are towards others, the less we blame them and are intolerant towards them. It was, after all, one of the main insights of psychoanalysis that chronic or constantly
repeated frustration of the desire for love (i.e. of libido) is centrally pathogenic. The voice of jealousy does not want to accept this as true.

No one of us is acquitted from this conflict, and if the reconciliation of these two sides fails, as we have witnessed in Jane, the most painful wound of being totally unloved opens up. Unlovability is the core experience of shame. It comes together with desolate loneliness and sadness, and with that almost inevitably a wish to gain power over what seems to have been lost.

However, what then is love? Love means: 1. It is a main wish and need of mine for you to be, and my happiness crucially depends on your existence. 2. I want to be near you, and if you are far away I miss you very much. 3. I want you not to suffer any damage, and your wellbeing is as important to me as my own. 4. Your own will, your identity, your being so as you are, is as essential for me as my own. 5. I want to share with you what I have, what is within myself.” A sixth part is added to this that is both important and yet becomes highly problematic: “I want to merge with you on all levels, not only on the plane of the mind and the values and on that of the emotions, but also physically,” because at that point, immediately a big contradiction opens up: Not only does that not apply for every form of love, e.g. that between child and parent, or rather, we know since Freud, that it is very much the case that it exists, but should not and has to be defended against, or it is not so between friends where the sexual aspects have to remain completely sublimated, but it is true especially for many deep love relationships where the sexual wishes are very much present and stormy, cannot be defended against and are not unconscious at all, but where they are at the same time forbidden and have to be suppressed, precisely in order not to harm the beloved other. In such a case then the conflict may become intolerable, irreconcilable: it becomes tragic. With that, there exists in love a gaping, often utterly painful, inner contradiction that may lead to a dialectic reversal: where the genuine love is overpowered by the
frustrated desire and switches over into anxiety and angry rebuff, or into jealousy and furious hatred — murderous jealous rage.

Everything that happens out of the primacy of power and possession as highest value is dehumanizing and destructive to all human bonds. And here, envy and jealousy assume their “pride of place” indeed. In turn, everything that happens out of love, the way I have described it with those six criteria, appears to be good; in fact, it does belong to the highest there is. In sharp opposition to jealousy, envy, and the search for power, love, in its deepest and broadest understanding, ultimately gives life its meaning.