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At the Symposium "Love, Sex and Passion: The Anatomy of Desire";
Panel on "What Does a (Wo)man Want?"

WANT AND DESIRE

The word symposium comes from the Greek word *sumpotēs* meaning fellow drinker. Symposia were convivial meetings, drinking parties. Rather depressingly, the dictionary points out that nowadays the word refers to "a meeting or conference [or] ... a collection of ... papers ... on a particular subject by a number of contributors." Well, we have a number of contributors but do we have a particular subject?

Conceptual clarity is a good thing; necessary for debate, necessary if there is to be an honorable attempt to convince about any matter on which we disagree. A concern for conceptual clarity is a *sine qua non* for any dialogue which aims to advance knowledge. Thus it was for Socrates and so it is for us. For just a moment sit in awe, contemplate the conceptual richness of the five substantives of our symposium: love, sex, passion, anatomy, desire. A symposium which rallies distinguished psychoanalysts under that banner threatens to be a collection of brilliant insights whose articulation with each other and with the general body of psychological knowledge will be postponed until the Wednesday following the arrival of the Messiah. In this brief talk I aim to clarify certain concepts about sexuality by distinguishing 'want' from 'desire'.

The title of our panel: "What Does a (Wo)man Want?" is perfect.

- The word 'woman' is clearly connected to love, sex, and passion. That the first two letters of 'woman' are put into a parenthesis underlines the notion of gender and implicitly asserts that what women want is likely to differ from what men want; it is the assertion that desire is or can be gendered.
- The word 'want', to a first approximation, is synonymous with 'desire'. However, when 'desire' is understood in a sexual, gendered context it appears as a category which is distinct within the more notion of 'want'.

Initially I will use 'want' and 'desire' interchangeably. I will also speak of behavior. All motivated human behavior, including the thinking that concerns us as psychoanalysts, involves desires. When I refer to behaviors, you should presume relevant desires.

"What does a (Wo)man want?" A prior question might be "What is required for a want to be gendered?" Everyday observation suggests that very little human behavior is sexual, at least at first blush. Similarly, although human subjects are gendered and, in any given culture, some behaviors take on a gendered coloration, typically desires are not limited to a specific gender. Consider the desires involved in your own behavior:

- if you were hungry and had time, you ate breakfast;
- believing it might be cold, you put on warm clothes;
- you selected a specific bus or subway because you believed it would bring you close to building; you wish that I would say something interesting;
- on your next vacation, you may admire the beauty of nature, go swimming, scratch a bug bite, massage a sore muscle;
- you wish friends and family health and happiness.

These are everyday behaviors, some entailing physical activity, all of them entailing mental activity and not one is gendered. Some are sensual, pleurably or otherwise, and some may be accompanied by sexual fantasies, but not one of these desires is limited to a specific gender.

So is any desire fundamentally gendered? Are sexual desires gendered? Is the wish to kiss or to be kissed gendered? On what basis do we call some desires sexual? This line of questions leads to dense woods harboring beastly questions about the nature and genesis of sexuality and of gender, and about the relation of sexuality to attachment. Our compass in these woods is Freud's expanded conception of sexuality: infantile sexuality, polymorphously perverse sexuality.

Alongside the concept of repression, infantile sexuality is arguably Freud's most important contribution to psychology as a science, to psychological theory. Yet Freud's

attempts to theorize sexuality are notoriously incomplete, contradictory and speculative. “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” is the work he modified more than any other and mostly without attempting to make 20 years of changes and additions consistent with the earlier material. Freud again tried to theorize sexuality in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” which, although a powerfully generative work, mostly adds to the confusion.

The work of Jean Laplanche is widely recognized as offering what may be the most important, certainly the most coherent, development of the Freud’s theory of the nature and genesis of infantile sexuality. I said “widely recognized” but that is not true of the Anglophone universe. While his complete works are translated into Spanish, Italian and German, most of it, including almost all the recent work, has yet to be translated into English. In the next few years, International Psychoanalytic Books plans to correct that unhappy deficit. To frame our question, I intend to outline the basic elements of Laplanche’s theory: the Fundamental Anthropological Situation, the General Theory of Seduction, and the translational model of repression. I say outline these basic elements, but the time available permits only enigmatic – but I hope seductive – allusions.

It will help to start with two aspects of the concept of instinct. The first aspect of instinct I will approach is the contrast between conceptualizing instinctual behavior exclusively as innate to the individual and conceptualizing some instinctual behavior – especially the mental processes that interest psychoanalysts – as essentially intersubjective; you might call the latter a two-person understanding of instinct. Secondly, I will discuss the opposition of instinct and drive. This will raise the issue of the relation of instinct to infantile sexuality and to attachment. In what follows I am, very largely, paraphrasing or quoting from essays by Laplanche.¹

INSTINCT: A ONE PERSON AND A TWO PERSON CONCEPT

¹ What is quoted or paraphrased without citation is from the soon to be published translation of Laplanche’s most recent book “Sexual: Sexuality Expanded in the Freudian Sense” which collects his papers from 2000 to 2006. A good deal is taken from chapter 10, *Three Meanings of the Word “Unconscious” in the Framework of the General Theory of Seduction*, either directly quoted or a modified from a translation by John Fletcher. Other bits are taken from chapters translated by Nick Ray, Jonathan House and Sophie Forst.

Instinct appears as hereditary and adaptive. Here is one classic definition:

[An instinct is] a hierarchically organized neurological mechanism which, in response to certain activating, initiating and structuring stimuli of either internal or external origin, produces coordinated movements which contribute to the survival of the individual or of the species.²

As is common, this definition focuses on what is innate to the individual. Instinctual behavior in its individual aspect is often contrasted with behavior that is learned or acquired. This is highly misleading, especially for human psychology. Remember Bowlby. Remember Winnicott -- "there is no such thing as a baby." Limited to what is innate to the individual, the baby's instinctual repertoire is utterly inadequate to survival. The cries of a rat pup and of the human baby each elicit responses necessary to the infant's survival. The baby's "instinctual" behavior dies out – along with the baby – unless it finds an adequate response. We are in the domain of attachment. Communication is essential to the attachment. As Laplanche puts it, "On an evident genetic instinctual basis a dialogue, an adult-infant communication, develops very quickly, even from the beginning."

I will leave aside the question of in which respects the adult contribution attachment behavior is instinctual. However, it makes sense to think of some aspects of human intelligence as instinctual. Consider, for example, 'object permanence', or 'mentalization' or language. The potential to acquire them is innate and emerges in the usual, good-enough environment. Speaking English is not innate, but the ability to acquire a natural language is characteristic of our species.

Whether called instinctual or not, what I want to emphasize is the communicative nature of adult-child interactions. As Laplanche puts it, "attachment in humans is primarily a reciprocal relationship constituted by communications and messages." Attachment interactions are not characterized by primary process. For a baby to survive, these interactions must be based on concrete, physical reality; they must be coherent, logical and timely. Long

² Tinbergen, *The Study of Instincts*, Oxford, 1951, cited by Benassy M., RFP 1953, 17, 1-2, p. 11,

ago, infant observation proved that early relations are organized, differentiated, and reciprocal. The mother's communications, both the verbal and the non-verbal messages, are created on the conscious/pre-conscious level. The mother responds coherently to the infant's communication in such a way that the child survives and grows physically and mentally. She feeds him, burps him, changes him, calms him. Very rapidly the communication takes place on the basis of a natural language: "Have another spoonful of yummy cream of wheat!" Consider the communicative interactions involved in acquiring a theory of mind, or in teaching your kid not run out into traffic. There are two points to be emphasized: first, the adult messages, which are increasingly verbal, are created on the conscious/preconscious level and are rational, secondary process messages; second, it seems that there is nothing necessarily gendered about these communications. True, the subject of the behavior on each side of the interaction does have a gender, but there is nothing intrinsically gendered in the attachment behavior itself.

So is any desire, is any behavior intrinsically gendered? In the child, what desires, what behaviors are sexual, and what makes them so? What is infantile sexuality and how does it arise? Freud may not have come up with good answers, but he did raise basic questions and he did point to some key facts. To begin with, he stressed the difference between the sexual drives and the instincts.

INSTINCT VS. DRIVE

In the Standard Edition the distinction between drive and instinct is obliterated, repressed if you prefer, by the decision to translate '*trieb*' as 'instinct' rather than as 'drive'. If not always terminologically consistent, Freud was utterly clear in his insistence that the drives of infantile sexuality are fundamentally different from the non-sexual instincts. He was not, however, clear, consistent, or convincing about the basis of this distinction or about the origin of the sexual drives. "The idea of an endogenous infantile sexuality has been thoroughly criticized, but this sometimes leads to the denial of infantile sexuality [itself]." The responsibility for this problem must be laid at Freud's feet: he lost sight of the intersubjective when he tried to locate the origin of infantile sexuality in what is hereditary within the individual.

But Freud did not start out with this position. He did not initially recognize infantile sexuality at all. Freud first encountered sexuality in children in the context of pathology, hysteria and the other neuroses of defence. Focussing on the similarity between the hysteria which follows physical trauma and “common” hysteria, he searched for trauma in “common” hysteria and kept bumping into the sexual. He developed what others called “the seduction theory”, a theory of intersubjective pathogenesis. In this theory, sexuality intrudes on the child from the outside in a first moment, in a first scene, which Freud called a “pre-sexual sexual” event; in a second moment, something stirs up the memory of the first scene, which then is understood in a new way such that it becomes traumatic and then is repressed.

In retrospect, not only was Freud close to an understanding of a psychopathological entity, but he could have given an intersubjective account of the origin of infantile sexuality if, instead of abandoning his theory, he had generalized it. But he was not in a position to do that; too many concepts were missing:

- First of all he lacked the concept of a universal polymorphously perverse sexuality which he would describe 8 years later in the *Three Essays* of 1905.

Two other groups of concepts were necessary to generalizing a theory of seduction in a way which explains the origin of infantile sexuality. Over the past four decades they have been added and theorized by Laplanche:

- There are the concepts of “primordial adult-infant communication” and of a “message.”
- Then there are the concepts needed to theorize “*translation* as the mechanism of repression.”

Before turning to these concepts, I will underline what Freud **did** see and did stress about the difference between sexual drives and instincts. Laplanche cites a key passage in “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” in which, as he points out, although “the word ‘*instinkt*’ is not used it is clearly present in what Freud refers to as “the popular view” of sexuality.

Popular opinion has quite definite ideas about the nature and characteristics of this sexual drive. It is generally understood to be absent in childhood, to set in at the time of

puberty ... and to be revealed in the manifestations of an irresistible attraction exercised by one sex upon the other; while its aim is presumed to be sexual union, or at all events actions leading in that direction. We have every reason to believe, however, that these views give a very false picture of the true situation. If we look into them more closely we shall find that they contain a number of errors, inaccuracies and hasty conclusions.³

The work emphasizes the contrast between the sexual drives and the self-preservative instincts which are, essentially, attachment behaviors. Here are two important examples of how, for Freud, sexual drives differ from the instincts.

1. Whether understood as an interaction between child and adult, or as a biological process within the child, instincts are homeostatic. Instincts seek to create, restore and preserve an optimal level of something, e.g. glucose, carbon dioxide, body temperature, sensation, physical and mental activity generally. This essential aspect of instincts is a tendency to seek a happy medium, a stable state – **a stable organization** – a state with minimal mental tension and no tendency toward quantitative increase or decrease. In contrast, the sexual drives typically seek an increase in or a persistence of tension, sometimes painful tension, they create unstable states leading to complete discharge, exhaustion and **disorganization**.
2. Second example. Whereas the aims and objects of the self-preservative instincts are essentially fixed, specific to each instinct, the objects of the sexual drives are at the other extreme, variable to the point of independence. It is to make this point that Freud's devotes his first essay on the theory of sexuality to the sexual aberrations. The infant's hunger must be satisfied with milk, the infant's desire to suck, can be satisfied with a nipple - or a thumb, a toe, a toy and so forth.

Infantile sexuality is polymorphously perverse. However, as Laplanche points out, "There exists, a fundamental difference between the sexual **drive** of infancy and what kicks in at the moment of adolescence, that is the effective appearance of the sexual **instinct**. The sexual

³ Freud, S. (1905). Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality SE 7: 135-136

instinct which is innate and hereditary has to catch up with the sexual *drive* of intersubjective origin, a drive which has developed autonomously over a long period, and there emerges a serious problem of integration and cohesion between the two...”

In contemporary child psychology, Freudian self-preservation has returned under the rubric of ‘attachment’. Laplanche writes: “On an evident genetic instinctual basis a dialogue, an adult-child communication develops very quickly, even from the beginning. The old theory of ‘symbiosis’ has disappeared thanks to the observation of early relations that are organised, differentiated, and reciprocal from the beginning ... However, what the theory and observations of attachment usually fail to take into account is the dissymmetry on the sexual plane. What is missing is an insistence on the fact that, from the beginning the reciprocal dialogue is compromised by something external to the communication. ... There is a unilateral intervention by the adult’s repressed, sexual unconscious ... an intervention by the *infantile* unconscious of the adult, to the extent that the adult-infant situation reactivates unconscious infantile drives.”

Necessary and universal, this aspect of the adult-child relationship is what Laplanche calls the Fundamental Anthropological Situation. It is the most general aspect of a body of theory which, from another angle is, or can be said to include, both The General Theory of Seduction and the translational theory of repression. These two together – the General Theory of Seduction and the mechanism of repression – give an account of creation of infantile sexuality within the child: the adult has an unconscious such as psychoanalysis has described, a sexual unconscious, made essentially of infantile residues, an unconscious that is perverse in the sense of the *Three Essays*; the infant does not yet have genetic sexual instincts, the infant lacks the hormonal activators of sexuality **and, at the beginning, is without sexual fantasies.** The communication necessary for attachment is compromised by sexuality from the side of the adult. Just as a radio message can be scrambled by static, the logical secondary process messages of the adult are bungled, because the adult’s communicative intention is parasitized and compromised by the adult’s sexual unconscious. Importantly, the adult’s infantile sexuality is stimulated by the interaction with a child – a return of the repressed. This static, the slips

and seeming incoherences in the adult's messages, is doubly enigmatic – enigmatic to the sender and to the receiver. Enigmatic to the adult sender because for these bungled actions (these parapraxes, these Freudian slips) the motives and meanings are unconscious; enigmatic to the child to an even greater extent because the child does has even fewer tools to understand the motives and meanings.

We are a meaning making species. The child seeks to make sense of all messages sent by the adult, to seeks to translate the adult's messages into meanings, schemas or narratives but can do so only with the cognitive tools available at any given stage of development. What does not get translated constitutes the unconscious, the repressed unconscious. While in a normal dialogue (verbal or non-verbal), there exists a common code and there is either no need for translation (or it is instantaneous), in the primordial communication the adult message cannot be grasped in its contradictory totality. In the typical example of breast-feeding, there is a mixture of love and hate, appeasement and excitation, milk and breast, the 'containing' breast and the sexually exciting breast etc. The 'codes', innate or acquired, that the infant makes use of are insufficient to cope with this enigmatic message. The infant must resort to a new code, both improvised by him and involving schemas furnished by his cultural environment.

When applied to the enigmatic aspects of the adult's message, the results of the child's attempt at translation, at making meaning, cannot be fully successful. Some of what is enigmatic remains untranslated. The unconscious is what has escaped from the construction of meaning that Laplanche calls translation. The unconscious is not part of the domain of meaning, but is constituted by signifiers (from the adult message) deprived of their original context, and therefore largely deprived of meaning, and scarcely coordinated among themselves. The drive to translate what remains untranslated constitutes the sexual drives. In a word, the repressed unconscious is at the origin of the drives. One could invert Freud's famous formulation defining the drives: the drives are "the demand for work" imposed on the body by the repressed repressed unconscious signifiers.

Laplanche's contribution reworks the foundations of psychoanalysis. It provides a powerful frame in which to revisit basic questions and to re-interpret many solid research findings. Time permits only pointing to examples. The Fundamental Anthropological Situation makes it possible to conceptualize gender emphasizing the contribution of gender assignment, this is, of attribution by the adult world – gender not as identification WITH, but as identification BY the adult world as a specific gender. Or consider Roiphe and Galenson research finding of a “precocious genital phase” which they interpret as “a reaction to castration” - following Laplanche, we can re-interpret these observations as “a reaction BY the castration complex” i.e. as the child making use of a schemata communicated by the adult world.

The foundation that Laplanche provides – a translational theory of primal repression, a generalized theory of seduction, and the fundamental anthropological situation – is a foundation on which we can ask and perhaps answer the questions of what constitutes gender and what constitutes gendered desire, or, in the form of this panel's title: “What does a (Wo)man Want”.