First Nature and Second Nature in Hegel and Psychoanalysis

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Two broad tendencies can be identified in the history of psychoanalysis. Classical analysts, to one degree or another, adhere to Freud’s pessimistic anthropology. Whether they conceive of it in terms of the drives, hallucinatory wish-fulfillment, the death instinct, infantile helplessness or primary narcissism – that is, a completely monadic “primal psychical situation”¹ – they posit a thicket of negativity at the heart of the psyche, which makes substantial conflict within the individual and between the individual and society inevitable. Freud puts it in thoroughly Hobbesian terms when he speaks of the “primary mutual hostility of human beings.”² At the same time, a countertendency has existed within psychoanalysis almost since its inception, which has contested basic tenets of Freudian anthropology – particularly, the theory of the drives and the postulation of an undifferentiated stage – in an attempt to portray a less conflictual and more mutualistic, which is to say, more sociable picture of the human nature.

Two recent representatives of the countertendency, the Relational and Intersubjective Schools of psychoanalysis, believe that infant researchers’ refutation of primary narcissism – together with their demonstration of the interactive nature of the self – substantiate their anti-Freudian program. And who, since Winnicott’s famous aperçu that there can be no baby without a mother, can disagree with the centrality of interaction and its ramifications for classical theory? I believe, however, that the Relationalists and Intersubjectivists aren’t only interested in revising development theory, metapsychology and clinical technique, as important as such revisions may be. They also have a more ambitious – if not always explicit – agenda having to do with questions of weltanschauung. For they think that by showing that the self is a product of interaction, they are also showing that the self is intrinsically sociable. Their unstated assumption is that interaction is equivalent to mutuality, which means that if the self is in fact a product of interaction, it is inherently mutualistic. Can we accept this assumption? I think not. The distinguished infant researcher Beatrice Bebee has ferreted out this hidden assumption and argued interaction is not synonymous with mutuality.³ After all, there are innumerable forms of malignant infant-mother interaction that produce selves, which are anything but mutualistic. Clinically, we now know that various forms of mother infant misattunement are responsible for some of the most serious forms of adult psychopathology: for example, schizoid, narcissistic, sociopathic and impulse-ridden personalities.

In addition to the all-too-mundane world of warm milk, dirty diapers, baby strollers and snot-covered security blankets, some relationally oriented theorists have also turned to the transcendent heights of German Idealism in their attempt to refute Freud’s pessimistic anthropology.⁴ For good reason, Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Spirit, especially Chapter IVA, has become a central text in this discussion.⁵ Because it conceptualizes the emergence of the self in terms of the interactive process of recognition, the relational theorists believe the text provides further confirmation for their position. In what follows, I will take exception with this claim, showing that Hegel’s argument is more complicated than the Relationalists and Intersubjectivists would like to believe and that it does not provide the validation they
are looking for. In order to make my case, I must stress the following interpretative principle: Hegel and Freud – at least the Hegel of the Phenomenology – share a common theoretical orientation. They are, strictly speaking, neither theorists of first nature nor of second nature, but of the transition of the former into the latter. That is, they are not primarily theorists of biology nor of culture, but of “the accession of the individual ego to culture.” It follows from this that any acceptable interpretation of these two thinkers must avoid the poles of biologism and sociologism.

It is precisely at the point of the transition from first to second nature in Hegel’s text that the questions we are considering are the most perspicuous. Because it emerges from the vicissitudes of Life and Desire, the dialectic of recognition involves Zwang, pulsion, pressure. It is a drive phenomenon, rooted in the biological substratum of human existence, and any interpretation of Hegel that fails to adequately register this fact is guilty of sociologism. Gadamer makes the point nicely in his criticisms of Hyppolite’s explicitly sociologizing translation of the Phenomenology into French. Gadamer takes Hyppolite to task for translating the German term Begierde as désir rather than appétite. Hyppolite justifies this choice by saying it captures the specifically human nature of Desire as “the desire for the desire of the other.” But, Gadamer objects, this is exactly the opposite of what Hegel intended. Hegel, Gadamer argues, chose Begierde – rather than Verlangen, which has more of the connotation of “yearning” – precisely because of its strong “carnal” or appetitive connotations.

Gadamer’s claim receives further support from a consideration of the structure of Hegel’s argument. Whereas Desire as such is introduced in ¶168 of the Phenomenology, the specifically human desire to be recognized by another doesn’t appear until ¶178. The task for Hegel is to demonstrate how the specifically human form of desire emerges out of biological appetitive striving, not to short-circuit that explanation by positing human desire ab initio.

One might wonder why the section on Life begins with self-consciousness rather than simply with consciousness. I would explain it as follows. Life emerges in the development of the Phenomenology out of the limitations of Understanding [Verstand]. This is because as Kant had recognized, it is difficult, if not impossible, for Verstand to adequately account for vital phenomena – for biology to be reduced to physics. Sentience is, of course, a defining feature of life, and Hegel seems to be assuming that sentience, selbst-Gefühl, is the first, most elemental form of self-consciousness, out of which its higher forms unfold. As an emergent phenomenon of Life, self-consciousness tenaciously manifests a “being for-itself” – “closure” – with respect to its surroundings, which is characteristic of all vital phenomena. And a significant degree of that for-itselfness will adhere to self-consciousness through all of the later, more humanized or socialized Aufhebungen it will undergo. Again, the rhetoric of interaction suggests that because self-consciousness is, to a large degree, “a product of interaction,” the self is intrinsically an interlocutor – a “being ‘for-others.’” But this disregards the significant dimension of closure and for-itselfness we are taking note of. In contrast to the external or passive unity of the inanimate object, the living thing preserves its “self-identical independence,” that is, its identity, by actively maintaining its boundary – its “shape” or “form” (Gestalt) – vis-à-vis the flux of the surrounding environment.

Hegel is a Kleinean avant le lettre. He argues that consciousness’ original “intention” (Meinung) is to maintain its autarchic unity, its omnipotent self-sufficiency, with respect to “the independent object.” Self-consciousness appears to go through the whole panoply of manic defenses – adumbrated by Mrs. Klein – in its attempt to maintain its omnipotent self-sufficiency and deny its dependency on – and the independence of – the object. At the
stage we are considering, it can only affirm itself though oral cannibalism, by consuming the object, which is by definition “bad”:

Self-consciousness is thus certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life; self-consciousness is Desire. Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is for it the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as true certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself in an objective manner.¹³

Hegel argues, however, that the gratification of appetitive Desire is, by its very nature, transient and unsatisfying, unable to secure the plentitude and self-sufficiency that consciousness is after. For not long after the object has been consumed, Desire – privation, dissatisfaction, hunger – inevitably returns. Self-consciousness, in the form of appetitive desire, is embedded in the infinite circularity of the life cycle and therefore fated to repetitiously reproduce itself along with its object. The constant repetition of this experience – compare it with Freud’s notion of the repeated “non-appearance of the breast” – constitutes an “education to reality.”¹⁴ Through it, consciousness comes to see that the “essence of Desire” is outside of, “something other than” itself. In other words, it grasps “the independence of the object.” For both Hegel and Freud, the subjects education to reality is a result of the frustration of desire owing to the independence of the object.

Hegel argues that, at this point, “self-consciousness,” can achieve “its satisfaction only in self-consciousness.” More specifically, “self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, only as something that is recognized.” To be satisfied, self-consciousness must give up its striving for omnipotent self-sufficiency, acknowledge the independence of the object and turn to it for gratification. It should be clear that consciousness doesn’t turn to the Other because of an inherently mutualistic disposition, but because it is compelled to by the breakdown of its monological or narcissistic program.

The bind is that consciousness B wants to be recognized by consciousness A as much A wants to be recognized by B. Hence the inevitability of struggle – a struggle which is so intense that it assumes murderous proportions. I want to stress that the fact that there is a struggle doesn’t mean that mutual recognition is an unattainable illusion, as the Lacanians, whose analyses generally come to a halt with the master-slave dialectic, often maintain. It only means that mutual recognition doesn’t emerge straightaway out of a primary sociability, but results from a learning process (Bildungsprozess) that is fraught with antagonism and violence.

In ¶ 177, Hegel pauses and offers a sketch of self-consciousness’ itinerary beyond the struggle for recognition. Self-consciousness, he tells us, will only overcome its internal contradictions and reach its fulfillment when it understands that intersubjective Spirit is its ground and truth. “What still lies ahead for consciousness,” he writes, “is the experience of what Spirit is,” namely, “‘I’ that is a ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’.” While this passage obviously supports the ultimate validity of the intersubjective position, inflated intersubjectivist conclusions shouldn’t be drawn from it too quickly. For the fact that Spirit – “intersubjectivity” – is the ultimate truth of consciousness is privileged information “for-us,” that is, for Hegel and the readers of the *Phenomenology*. We see that Spirit is prior to the self “in the order of being” – that the self genetically emerges out of Spirit and can only achieve its identity in it. But, “in the order of knowing,” this is something that each individual consciousness must discover for itself. As children, we are all thrown into and formed by the intersubjective
world of Spirit – of kinship structures, language, institutions, laws, culture and so on – which is alien to us insofar as it isn’t of our own making. And it requires a long process of socialization for our egocentrism to be decentered and for us to realize that we can only fulfill our identities in and through the world that created us – sometimes by transforming that world. The transition from the standpoint of self-consciousness to the standpoint of Spirit is a hard won developmental achievement.

With the struggle for recognition, we reach the point where the Hegelian narrative and infant research begin to diverge. Whereas the struggle for recognition is basically symmetrical – both parties are on the same level of development and awareness – the interaction between mother and infant is not. Let us therefore turn from the details of Hegel’s text and examine what the infant researchers tell us about the process of recognition.

In an attempt to correct the significant deficiencies in Freud’s drive-reduction model, Hans Loewald distinguishes between “satisfaction” and “recognition.” “Satisfaction” refers to the activities that Freud was primarily concerned with, namely, the mother’s ministrations to her baby’s bodily needs, which aim at relieving the infant’s tensions and restoring a state of internal equilibrium. “Recognition,” on the other hand, pertains to a mother’s ability to empathically grasp her baby’s inner experience – which is externalized onto her – to contain and organize it, and to mirror it back to the infant in a different form.

A moment’s reflection reveals, however, that the distinction between satisfaction and recognition isn’t so neat as Loewald implies. To be sure, infant research has taught us much about the non-drive-related interaction that goes on between a mother and her baby and the sort of non-climatic ego-pleasure associated with it. Visual play is a primary example. At the same time, however, much of what the mother empathically apprehends, contains and mirrors back to her infant – proto-social interaction that Relational and Intersubjective analysts like to point to – has to do with the child’s drive-determined bodily states. Put differently, affective states are much of what the infant-mother dialogue is about.

I would suggest that, though this early dyadic activity is interactive, indeed, even dialogical, we shouldn’t refer to it as intersubjective. To do so confuses things, for it prevents us from making distinctions that have to be made. The concept of “intersubjectivity,” I would argue, should be reserved for a later stage of development where self-reflection and symbolization are in place. This would allow us to conceptualize intersubjectivity as an emergent phenomenon and to distinguish it from the earlier forms of interaction, which are its precursors. Proceeding in this way, we could conceptualize early stages of development which are interactive but not symbolic, thus avoiding the debate – deriving from philosophers who use Wittgenstein to interpret psychoanalysis – about the nature of preverbal mentation. Moreover, because feelings or affects, rather than meanings, are what infants and mothers share in these early interactions, “communicate” about, we ought to follow Stern and refer to them as “interaffectivity.”

This brings us to the theory of mirroring, – a theory that attempts to account for the nature of early infant-mother interaction – which, in its strong form, involves a serious difficulty. The claim that the self is in toto a product of mirroring – whether the mirroring is conceived of visually, aurally or linguistically – precludes the existence of a pre-reflective self. But logically, for mirroring to take place, there must be a pre-reflective self-precursor that can pick out an item in the mirroring phenomenon and recognize it as a reflection of itself. In Winnicotian terms, the infant’s ability to “interpret the mirroring face as a reflection of its own state” must be accounted for.

A parallel problem arises with George Herbert Mead’s theory of self-formation. Mead’s thesis holds that the self is formed by taking on the role of the Other, which means there
can be no self prior to the adoption of the Other’s standpoint. But again, the very grammar of “taking on the role” assumes the existence of a pre-reflective agent, however minimal, capable of doing the taking on. Mead, of course, recognized the difficulty and posited the existence of the “I,” in part, as a way of resolving it. The problem is, however, that he left the “I” so contentless that it amounted to an empty cipher, incapable of performing the task. Furthermore, by leaving the “I” so indeterminate, he unwittingly encouraged a strong conventionalist interpretation of his theory, in which self-formation becomes a process of imprinting, in which the standpoint of the other – that is, the demands of society – is stamped on a relatively indeterminate “I.”

The existence of a pre-reflective proto-self isn’t only a logical necessity. It’s an empirical reality. The fact is that babies bring much to infant-mother interaction that is specifically their own. I am of course referring to the so-called constitutional factor – the infant’s distinct physiologically determined repertoire of dispositional states – which is the fundament upon which all higher forms of individuality are constituted. Analysts from the anti-Freudian second camp tend to downplay constitution, for fear that acknowledging it validates the existence of naturally determined social hierarchies. There is no doubt that the constitutional argument has often been used for conservative purposes – “biology is destiny.” Nevertheless, to deny the strength of inborn dispositions is to engage in wishful thinking. Any nurse with extensive experience in neonatal care can tell you that babies have markedly different personalities from the moment they are born. The question is not whether these individual bodily-based dispositions exist, but how they are taken up and elaborated in the process of mirroring.

To avoid the difficulties we have noted with the theory of mirroring, Fonagy and his colleagues postulate the existence of an inborn contingency-detection device, which fulfills the criteria for the self-precursor we are looking for. It is pre-reflective and it allows infants to pick out items in the mirror-phenomenon as reflections of their externalized states. Fonagy’s group rejects the traditional Freudian concept of an original undifferentiated or symbiotic phase, in which infants are totally absorbed in internal stimuli. They argue instead that, already in the first three months of life, babies are oriented towards the external stimulation. During this period, the contingency detection device appears to be “set” in such a way that infants show a preference for perfect contingency – that is, for responses to their actions that most completely mimic them. To demonstrate this point, an experiment was performed in which two video monitors were placed in front of three-month-olds, while they were sitting in highchairs and freely kicking their legs. The first monitor showed the kicking in real time, so that the image was perfectly contingent, that is perfectly synchronized with the child’s action. The other monitor offered the infants a slightly delayed version of their kicking, which is to say, one that was imperfectly contingent with their actual movements. The infants consistently showed a preference for the first screen.

At three months, Fonagy and his colleagues argue, the contingency-detection device gets “reset” so that babies show a preference for highly but not completely synchronous responses to their actions – especially with regard to the affect-mirroring responses of their attachment figures. This fact allows us to reconceptualize the nature of good enough mothering. It must consist in strongly but imperfectly contingent responses to the infant. This allows mothers to “mark,” the “dispositional state expressed in” their children’s’ emotional displays in such a way that the infants can recognize that the states belong to them and not to the mothers. If mothers were to present a perfectly accurate, that is, a perfectly contingent reproduction of the dispositional state, infants would perceive the affect as the mothers’ and not as their own. “Marking,” according to Fonagy and his colleagues, “is typically achieved by
producing an *exaggerated version* of the parent’s realistic emotion expression.” The playful overstated contours of “child’s talk,” when an adult approaches a baby, are a well-known example.

That the self is a product of interaction or mirroring doesn’t radically diminish the importance of biology and the body in the self’s formation. What the contingency-detection device allows infants to pick out are, to a significant degree, their affective-bodily states, which they have projected onto their mothers. The internalization of these reflected states, marked as their own, builds up a core of bodily representations, inscribed in procedural memory, which Emde calls the “emotional core of the self.” This core, in turn, becomes the fundament upon which the more elaborated and reflective forms of selfhood are constructed. Indeed, the next stage, in which this core of representations is itself represented, becomes the first step in self-reflection. The ego is still first and foremost a bodily ego.

Furthermore, although the contingency-detection device provides the hard-wired biological basis for sociability and although the self is formed through interaction, this doesn’t guarantee the mutuality of the self. As we have noted, there are many ways in which that interaction can go awry. While it is a well-known fact that depressed mothers are prone to misattunement and that this can have devastating effects on the development of their children, Fonagy’s group has been able to specify one form of that misattunement in greater detail. “Research on the facial and vocal interaction between depressed mothers and their infants has shown that there is a decrease in the number of contingent affective interactions as well as more intrusiveness and more negative affect expression on the part of the mother.”

That the doctrine of omnipotence should be a centerpiece of Freud’s pessimistic anthropology needs little explanation. It holds that human beings have an innate and powerful tendency to deny the demands of reality – especially social reality – and attempt to refashion it in terms of their own grandiose private wishes. Because, according to classical analysts, omnipotence derives from the experience of an undifferentiated or symbiotic phase of development, analysts from the second camp have repeatedly attacked the notion of symbiosis. Recently, the Relationalists and Intersubjectivists have leapt on Stern’s supposedly definitive refutation of Mahler’s theory of a symbiotic phase and treated it as holy writ. There continue to be, however, convincing arguments in favor of symbiosis, and I would like to examine two of them.

The first is Fred Pine’s trenchant critique of Stern. While Pine acknowledges that the baby watchers have demonstrated that “the competent infant” enters the world with greater adaptive capacities and is far more reality-oriented than the classical analysts imagined, he points out a flaw in their research program that causes them to vastly over-generalize their findings. Their tests can only be administered during a small fraction of the day when the infant is in a particular state, namely, of alert inactivity. This is a state of low arousal, where the fact that infants’ inner drive-demands do not impinge on them, allows them to attend to external reality. But this means that the deck is stacked so that the infant researchers will discover exactly what they want to find. For if they can only test children when they are in fact in a reality-oriented state, then their tests will find that they are oriented towards reality.

This leads Pine to assert that “the fact that relatively sophisticated functioning is present in the ego sphere at some moments says nothing about what may be going on in other spheres at other moments in the infant’s day,” when the infant is less alert. Pine argues that it is reasonable to believe that during these somnambulant phases – which make up the greater part of the infant’s day and are marked by a high degree of REM sleep – the inner world of the infant approximates something like an undifferentiated experience. He cites
an astute remark by Jacobson that “gaining access to the infant’s world of somnolence, to
gather data naturally, without ‘waking’ the infant to alertness, requires even more ingenuity
than it has taken to evolve these techniques” for infant observation.31 Though perhaps next
to impossible, this would indeed constitute truly psychoanalytic infant research.

To his credit, György Gergely – a member of the Fonagy group and therefore a proponent
of the interactional model – has suggested that the wholesale rejection of Mahler’s work may
be precipitous.32 He believes that her theory of normal autism, that is, of the earliest phase of
the undifferentiated period of development, when the infant is supposedly surrounded by a
stimulus barrier and thoroughly preoccupied with internal stimuli, has more in common with
the Fonagy approach than one might think. As we have seen, Fonagy and his colleagues argue
that even in the first three months the infant is oriented outwards, toward external stimuli. But
we have also seen that they are oriented towards the outside in such a way as to prefer perfect
contingency. Can’t the condition of perfect contingency, in which infants don’t experience
the external objects with which they are dealing as separate from themselves, be interpreted
as a form of non-differentiation? As Gergely puts it, “normal autism may best be understood
in terms of an initial phase of primary preoccupation with self-generated (perfectly response-
contingent) stimulation.”33 Indeed, the description of perfect contingency reminds one of
Winnicott’s theory of omnipotence. Just as, with Winnicott, babies’ ability to “magically”
summon up the breast through their crying creates a sense of omnipotence, so their ability
to generate a perfectly contingent response might produce one as well.

NOTES

Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000),
134.

Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works (New York: W. W. Norton &
Company, 2000), 112.

3. Beatrice Bebee and Frank M. Lachmann, Infant Research and Adult Treatment: Co-constructing

4. See for example Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem
of Domination (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Axel Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition (Cambridge:
MIT Press, 1995); and Jurist, who is largely responsible for the philosophical passages in Peter Fonagy,
György Gergely, Elliot L. Jurist and Mary Target, Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of


analysis, John McDowell has returned to the topic of first and second nature in an attempt to resolve some
of the central conundrums of contemporary analytic philosophy. See John McDowell, Mind and World
(Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), Chapter 4; unfortunately, he leaves the concept of
second nature sorely underdeveloped.


riadis notes that while intersubjectivity is a possibility for human beings, it is, from the larger perspective, a
rare anomaly that goes against life’s tendency towards closure: “The for-itself may be thought of an enclosed sphere – that is what closure means – whose diameter is approximately constant. . . Human subjectivity is a pseudoclosed sphere that can dilate on its own, that can interact with other pseudospheres of the same type, and that put back into question the conditions or the laws, of its closure. . . Genuine interaction with other subjectivities signifies something unprecedented in the world: the overcoming [dépassement] of mutual exteriority.”

16. See Beebe and Lachman, Infant Research and Adult Treatment: Co-constructing Interactions, Chapter 4.
21. Fonagy et al., Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self, 176. This fact leads Fonagy et al. to argue that the idea of mirroring is “seriously misleading”. If we stop and think about it, what occurs in an actual mirror is perfect contingency, precisely what is not required counter-indicated if the self is to develop properly.
22. Ibid., 177 & 175.
23. Ibid., 177.
27. Fonagy et al. Affect, Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self, 157
31. Ibid., 241
33. Ibid., 1200.

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