

Thinking the Unthought

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Abstract: Some psychoanalytic researches are reviewed here to give an overview of how ideas on prenatal life and psychoanalytic ideas on ego-formation got tentatively together during the last century and the first years of the new century. There is a large bow to Ferenczi who published his long paper *Thalassa* in 1924 after about ten years of thoughts on it that were shared by Maiello, Hidas and Raffai, and Wilhelm. Certainly this bow is incomplete. However, we can see how prenatal life becomes more relevant in psychoanalytic research, too. The developing ego of the prenatal child cannot be mentioned until the end where we can realize it via hearing and answering.

Keywords: Prenatal life, psychoanalysis, cellular memory, hearing and listening of the unborn

One of the essential thoughts of the early psychoanalysis – unthought before – was the connection between the suffering of the grown-up patient and his experiences of early childhood. Here I present some different steps of psychoanalytic thought in regard to prenatal life. In the time of their becoming thoughts of the formerly unthought they started to build thoughts of human inner reality and of social reality. Psychoanalysis in itself is a realm in which the unthought of human beings can come to thought. From the beginning psychoanalysis existed in a sequence of discoveries about inner reality, which disperses further into realms of unthought or, as Bion (1977) said, to thoughts without a thinker which are there to be held in mind, contemplated, and come to speech in analysis. Thus, psychoanalysis knows about the deep and fundamental realities of individual human experience. What is striking is that psychoanalysis is about not knowing and not understanding, too, being able to recognize the gaps in what we think we know and tolerate our ignorance. Psychoanalysis can detect problems not previously realized

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and pose previously unthought questions, leading to thoughtful answers in the togetherness of the psychoanalytic situation. Much enlightening to this start is Freud's (1926/1959) interpretation of the following dream. The dreamer sees her father many times in a room. Freud suggests that her father might have visited her mother during the pregnancy with her many times. Caruso (1973) mentions Sadger, one of the early psychoanalysts, who pondered about dreams of his patients not only about procreation but even about the spermatozoic existence, reaching by that thoughts without a previous thinker. So we realize that the early psychoanalysts understood prenatal psychic movements and not only oedipal memories.

We know a small paper by Ferenczi (1929) about the unwelcome child. He reveals in this paper that a mother's conscious or unconscious aversions to her future child can influence the child's physical and mental development and his attitude to life. On the basis of data learned from some patients, he associated the origin of self-destructive tendencies working in the unconscious with the fact that they were born as unexpected intruders. Their symptoms included nervous, circulatory, and respiratory disorders; asthma bronchiale, complete anorexia, loss of weight, and suicidal impulses; alcohol abuse, and laryngeal spasms in childhood as a suicidal attempt. In some cases he saw the birth as a tenth child, the death of the father, the birth as a third daughter as important factors in mothers who could not welcome their babies. Thus, the infant's desire to live had been broken. An infant, being still very close to individual non-existence, would slip back to it very easily. When these children grow up they often catch a cold, they show thoughts of suicide, pessimism, scepticism, mistrustfulness, at times expressed in impotence and frigidity, a desire for passive tenderness, lack of ambition for work and the inability to perform lasting effort. To "slip back to non-existence" is always near in the life of unwelcome children.

In 1949 Winnicott presented a paper titled "Birth memories, birth trauma, and anxiety." To him a normal birth means a strengthening of the child. It is non-traumatic. A traumatic birth, in Winnicott's view, is a basic matrix of experience for later life. He gives casuistic examples of actualisations of traumatic birth experiences via psychosomatic symptoms: headache, breath disturbances, sensations of constriction in the chest. In cases of persecutory anxieties it is necessary for healing to re-experience the traumatic birth condition in the analytic situation.

Winnicott (1961) once said that he could not imagine a child on his own but only a mother-child-couple. But he mentioned too, "The most

important role of father is to make something human within mother, to take away from her the element which otherwise becomes magic, remains too powerful and destroys the qualities of motherhood." That accentuates the need for a mother and her baby not to cling to the unity lost and dream about it, but feel love for the baby's father and think a unity of three persons.

The "good enough mother" follows the needs of her baby as she understands her infant's feelings empathically. By this she eases the infant's way to "create" the object. An example, the baby wishes to have the breast and in that moment mother offers the breast to him. He feels as if he has created it. The hallucination here is a creative act and leaves memory traces of a special kind.

In Winnicott's view health and creative living depend on the establishment of a third transitional or intermediate realm in which the subjective and the objective are fused and remain undifferentiated. In this transitional or potential area, objects are felt to be parts of both internal and external reality. If this illusion is successfully created and disillusionment is avoided the individual will feel at home in the world and have a creative relationship with it. In later life this potential space may occur in art, in science, and in secrets as well. What Winnicott calls play, is the "work" of childhood and later on may become the work of psychotherapy. The transitional object provided helps to overcome primary losses in human beings.

The reaction to his ideas was overwhelming. Winnicott (1992) moved the analytic world forward with his thoughts, which before were unthought. Some of the further thoughts on these phenomena are collected in a book on transitional objects and phenomena, *Between Reality and Fantasy* (Grolnick, Barking, & Muensterberger, 1988). And one of Winnicott's thoughts really got entrance to the social world of families: The baby chooses an object of his own which should be with him everywhere and should not be given away. Even children's books have told stories about the transitional object for many years.

Graber and his *International Society of Pre- and Perinatal Psychology* (ISPP) thought about the social connections which a baby feels while in utero via his mother. The baby is born into the connections of its parents and is accustomed to them before birth and reacts to them and their connections. So, the intrauterine baby and the baby after birth is dependent upon his environment, which accepted him earlier in his intrauterine life. The impact of ISPP – later and now ISPPM – was not that impactful for psychoanalysis as it dealt with the social dimension more than with the psychoanalytical. Certainly it has spread out more and more in ISPPM, in the way of thinkers of

thoughts known already and connecting to them. That is well and best done certainly, as we need more certainty. But what we need most are the thoughts unthought before to understand more about the life of the unborn baby, not the surroundings but the baby itself. Graber's initiative, however, led to the International Society of Pre- and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine which existed now for 21 years and published a Journal since 1989. This is at least comparable to the volumes on Winnicott's and Bion's findings in further research.

In the thoughts about the psychoanalytical process by Wilfred Bion (1977) egg and semen and the prenatal development are always included. Wilhelm (2008) reports from a session with Bion, when she remembered a journey on sleigh in winter-time, "To my greatest surprise Dr. Bion started to talk about the silence to which I had listened while in the womb of my mother and enveloped by the amniotic fluid which muffled all outside noise." She became curious about this realm and followed it since then.

In *A Memoir of the Future Bion* (1991) illustrates, in over more than 550 pages, the pre- and postnatal developmental feelings. The postnatal entities give voice to the prenatal here. Bion describes a critical psychic situation in the realm of manifold changes. To take up in artistic form the "dangerous experience of the coming together of prenatal and postnatal personalities" one would need the quality of a Shakespeare-drama. To give an idea I quote the entrance of Part three of Bion's text, EM-MATUTE (EM = embryo) tells, "This book is a psycho-embryonic attempt to write an embryo-scientific account of a journey from birth to death overwhelmed by pre-mature knowledge, experience, glory, and self-intoxicating self-satisfaction. I was spared any knowledge of the courtship of my sperm with my ovum, but many years later was given to understand that my ancestors had a long and disreputable history extending to the day when an ancestral sperm, swimming characteristically against the current, lodged in a fallopian tube to lie in wait for an unknown ovum. The history of my ovum appears to be virtually non-existent. My sperm impetuously penetrated a Graafian follicle before my ovum had time itself to escape penetration. I cannot vouch for the truth of this tale which became known to me through scientific hear-say many years later. I admit responsibility for what I have experienced, but not for the distortions of scientific sense. I acknowledge dependence on sensible and experienced transcriptions; I cannot promise communication of pure non-sense without the contamination by sense. I shall not repeat my apology for having to borrow the language of experience and reason despite its inadequacy" (p. 429).

Bianchedi, et al. (1999) refer to the later works of Bion in which he accentuates formations in personality which trace back to very archaic times, he calls their manifestations traces of prenatal phenomena. "In *A Memoir of the Future Bion* (1991) no longer talks about the psychotic and non-psychotic part of personality and we assume that his model of the mind of pre- and postnatal persons replace the former. The prenatal characters, like Somite Three and Em-Mature, do not seem to have a psychotic functioning; rather, they have valuable gifts, like the intuition of danger, sub-thalamic fear, and contact with dream life, but also a strong resistance to be born, that is, to live in a gaseous medium, the shared world which demands individual renunciations in favour of the need of adaptation (p. 56). The authors think that the proto-mind (prenatal) basically is not differentiated from the body and lasts within the person born, however, the relation is not always conflicting. Constantly we risk loss of our "embryonic intuition."

On the other hand Bion (1991) deduces and describes in a very differentiated manner the projection of the baby's anxiety into his mother, when, for example, hunger mobilizes anxiety of death. The mother's capacity for rêverie makes it possible for her to function as a container for the baby's projections when she is able to withstand the baby's agony and translates his anxiety into more realistic components and so can transform the organismic panic in specific fear or care in the realm of reality. The baby can calm down and feel secure that there is something to make bearable the unbearable, to make thinkable the unthinkable and so step-by-step, in identification with his mother, learns how to think.

Bion's view is that if mother lacks the capacity to make the unbearable bearable she cannot take up the baby's projections and return them changed. If rêverie is not associated in a mother with the baby and his father that fact, like an incapacity for rêverie, will be communicated to the baby, albeit in an unmanageable, indigestible way.

Bion's thoughts about the before unthought got a big echo, too, in the psychoanalytic world, not at least in the collection of papers *Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?* (Grotstein, 1981). Even today many former lectures by Bion are published and translated. To feel in every session without any background opens for every thought unthought until now new dimensions. That was his idea, which might mean feeling like the unborn baby in every new estate of being.

Meistermann-Seeger (1986) developed in focal analysis a method, where a group of analysts ponders about procreation, nesting and earliest development of every patient to further regression and a new

start to life and free the ego-capacities of the person. To her vision procreation and birth should rather be a revelation of a longed for new start to exist in all varieties of earliest problems but to overcome as the being conceived and born.

In the moment of mating, fusion and fulfilment may be felt, but torture and destruction might be felt as well depending upon what the couple in love passes on to the cells to remember in the first cell-memory. The earliest traces are recognizable in the later life of the person and unfold in psychoanalytic treatment via transference and counter transference and can be understood and handled there.

Joanna Wilhelm (1993; 1995; 2008), too, looks back to the previously unthought question of psychic indigestibility at procreation. One of her hypotheses is that the relationships of persons reflect the relationship of semen and egg in their meeting. She combines the biological process of procreation with a psychical initial register of these experiences and on this background she follows the way semen and egg and the new being have until nestling. She mentions two ways, a register to accept what has happened and a register to neglect the good outcome. Wilhelm regards problems of interaction in the psychoanalytic setting as earliest prenatal problems in the encounter of semen and egg or as problems of a vanished twin which make procreation and the beginning of self awareness laden with guilt. "Thus the moment of mating, fusing and fulfilment may be experienced as a joy for life being created but it may also be felt – mostly on the spermatozoic's cellular memory side – as a moment of torture and destruction, in which it loses its previous original identity (Wilhelm, 2008)."

That experience might be kept in the cellular mind as double information and a double register in the mind and only worked out during psychonalysis later on in life. The earliest ego-traces are overwhelmed by guilty feelings then and can hardly grow. The person reacts double minded and cannot say why he has to until not the double register of his mind is brought to thought. Only then the original ego can develop.

This leads us to newest developments in the realm of prenatal life and psychoanalysis and how to prevent earliest feelings of guilt.

When, in 1992, Piontelli's research on intrauterine life via ultrasound observations was published, the book and the author were praised for the new and convincing observation "that there is a remarkable consistency in behaviour before and after birth." "She does something no one has done before" says the preamble to her book. Alessandra Piontelli started a new movement in psychoanalysis, when

she learned to read ultrasound scans and observed once a month for one hour, together with the mothers, the movements of the unborn children. After birth she followed the development of these children in their families up to the fifth year. It is as if she verified Freud's hypothesis, "There is much more continuity between intra-uterine life and earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth would have us believe. What happens is that the child's biological situation as foetus is replaced for it by a psychical object-relation to its mother (Blazy, 2006)."

However, between Freud's idea and Piontelli's findings there have been other researchers who pointed at the continuity between pre- and postnatal behavioural patterns. Gidoni (1985) made us remember that since the 1930s studies by Peiler and Ingram showed prenatal movements in the sound newborn. Some of these movements retreated before birth some others continue on, and some emerge again in problematic situations and give a key to understand difficult relations. Milani Comparetti and his research team, of which Gidoni is a member, refer to the prenatal patterns as a key for relational problems between mother and baby in the early postnatal time. The topic is on movements but not only on patterns of movements but rather on relational patterns in the movements.

Hans von Lüpke (1997) refers to an essential point in one of the case studies by Piontelli; Pina, an intrauterinely traumatized child. "I suppose that before this study I would have minimized the longterm affects of the intrauterine trauma in a child like Pina. As one could not doubt in the attentive help of her mother I probably would have tried to ante-date Pina's claustrophobia and anorexia to some innate factor. The knowledge of the prenatal events permits quite another access to understand later patterns of behaviour."

Rather we can say now that Maiello's (2003) ideas were a revelation in the special realm of hearing. At the end of the fourth month the intrauterine child has his complete hearing. Now he registers the dark and high frequencies that correspond to his mother's voice. Other frequencies he heard earlier. The prenatal child actively listens to his mother's voice from then on and reacts to it – normally her voice has a stimulating effect. Sometimes the voice is there, sometimes not. Could not the presence or absence of the motherly voice give the intrauterine baby a touch of presence or absence in order to build proto-ideas of absence and loss? This question was posed by Maiello. It could give a certain idea about distance and a difference between the voice and the ear, a difference between a listening me and a speaking not-me which gives an idea to an ego-

formation. Me is creating us with the voice, off-voice is creating me in absence, in myself, the baby.

Maiello (2003) gives an outlook on children born preterm who cannot yet activate voice but miss mother's voice the more to help them find their own voice. The preterm baby does not only lose the rhythm inside, but also loses his mother's voice. Instead he listens to mechanical movements and electronic signals. Today we know that the development of those children is delayed when they are about three years old. Language-development is significantly delayed.

György Hidas and Jenő Raffai (2006), two Hungarian psychoanalysts, discovered when treating juvenile psychotics that their intense anxieties at first diminished when they got into the intrauterine realm with them, but then became more intense when the question of separate existence came up. There were very difficult times in which the patients became anorectic and would rather let themselves die than leave the psychophysical connection to their mothers. Psychic connection could only exist with physical connection. Hidas and Raffai didn't think about a new theory about schizophrenia then, but made a genial jump to a prenatal prevention of psychosis in their creation of bonding analysis. And it is unique.

Bonding analysis is designed to foster the bond between mother and her intrauterine child in a way that they know each other as separate identities and respect each other in their own identity. There is a playful meeting from the 7th month on: I show you my head, now show me your head, etc. At the end of bonding analysis there are nine sessions specially prepared for birth and separation from each other to meet again in the perinatal surrounding so the baby knows what he has to overcome to be safely born and reach his mother during birth and after birth again, so that love between them as individuals is never broken. The steps in between are difficult as psychotic feeling is always near during the step from adolescence to mother- and fatherhood. The experiences of the ancestors come vehemently into the idea of a threefold couple and disturb the couple.

I'll finish with some unthought thoughts from a bonding analysis which could become transferred to thoughts. We early felt that in Mrs. L. were two movements, one very tender with her baby and another disturbing "which always stumbles to the contrary." That came up repeatedly until we could locate it in a conflict passed further from the mother of her mother. Mrs. L's grandmother had suffered very much from a stillbirth before becoming pregnant with Mrs. L's mother and was much afraid of having a dead baby. She passed her anxiety on to her daughter when she was pregnant with Mrs. L. Mrs. L's husband

then asked his mother and got to know that before his birth his mother had had two miscarriages and was afraid if he would be born safely. As these facts never before had been thought or spoken about they could only manifest in inner fearful images in Mrs. L. After this traumatic event from previous generations could become thought about, Mrs. L. could see her baby inside with fair hair like his father and waiting, ready for birth.

The ideas are overlapping, these early realms are what in psychoanalytic thought is thought from the beginning, unthought movements could and can jump into existence. If we catch a close glimpse from Ferenczi to the newest investigations in intrauterine life we can feel that our first reality of life might be like that, between catastrophe and hope.

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