

Being the non-Being: this is the question

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the metapsychology of the being under the psychoanalytical framework, according to formulations worked out by Winnicott. Besides, it deals with epistemological questions relevant to the clinical practise and its theorization, articulating these experiences with contemporary issues.

Key Words: Being; identity; identification; loneliness; human

I

What is psychoanalysis for each psychoanalyst? How is this professional practice lived today by each member of this community? Do we still trust its theoretical-clinical potential when we think about the complexity of our contemporary world? These and other questions haunt our professional everyday. As we try to find answers, we would like to state something about which we are sure: in our psychoanalytical path we have chosen to focus on clinical experience as the magna activity of psychoanalytic experience. This has been the birthplace of our experiences, of our thoughts, the basis of our work, individually or together.

As analysts we are affected by the suffering of many of our patients as well as by our failures and successes attending them and we discovered in ourselves a great interest in discussing and writing about clinical practice every time we were crossed by an impasse. This has been the starting point of our interest in writing about clinical experience. So, papers were originated in an attempt to theorize and advance on issues pertaining to current clinical practice.

We started to like very much to write about the clinical experience besides living it in our professional everyday. .

All this made us take into consideration not only traditional theories, articulating them with our personal theories, but also our emotional experience originated in our efforts of communicating with patients. It was necessary to listen carefully to the patient's own theory about his illness, his suffering and to connect with the patient's affective fluctuations as well as with his sensations of emotional comfort or discomfort. It was necessary to feel the patient viscerally. From there on something very new happened. Frequently we found no one we could feel. Or better, we could not find in ourselves any emotion. The individual, who talked to us, did not touch us emotionally. We did not resonate with a talk of suffering. But someone was there, sometimes talking about very difficult, dramatic, unusual situations, but this was all. And the rest? No emotion came forward while pain was being shown. We begun to ask ourselves questions about the nature of that experience. Perhaps, we could formulate the following: it was not enough to put oneself in the place of the patient to be able to understand what was happening, it was necessary to put the patient inside himself to be able to feel him. We thought: what could we say, what words to choose if what was being said, did not touch us? It was possible to interpret; it was not possible to talk. What was missing?

We did not want to take the patient's text as a pretext of our text or to attribute value to the text to find a meaning in it. We thought that to interpret under these circumstances could interfere and change the value hidden in the text. Or, we could find the latent content, but loose the emotion contained in the content. We wanted, before anything, to feel the importance of the patient's communication to be able to feel the presence of the author and not only his text, his narrative, his speech. This clinic we are trying to write about raises questions of an epistemological nature in psychoanalysis, as it brings a new perspective to developmental considerations about human development placing in the center the pair analyst-patient and the *setting* within which psychoanalytic treatment occurs.

In this understanding the importance given to the object (the person of the analyst) in the dynamics of treatment permeates the clinical situation. This importance does not mean power, dominion or invasion. It means understanding and adaptation and, at the same time, it includes the analyst's failures as necessary for evolution of the analytic process. Thus, we are considering the *setting* as a new environment where the patient will be able to experience life situations together with the analyst. Here, this "togetherness" does not mean resignification of what has already been lived. It means living for the first time what has already been lived as a new experience that permits the continuity of being. This is the point that will take into consideration the person of the analyst.

Here, the possibility of the analyst's identification with the patient's needs gains importance; it is this that presents itself as essential in the analytic *setting*.

In our work with our patients many of them expressed a disenchantment and despair in life, although they apparently enjoyed satisfactory existential conditions. We transformed the pleas we recognized in the suffering of these patients into a question: What does the human being want and expects of life?

We realized that to live and to maintain oneself living was a constant plea, although this manifested itself in a vague manner.

II

Some of Winnicott's texts were helpful when we thought about these questions. Initially, we can quote a significant excerpt from his work. *"In terms of psychology we must say that the infant is at the same time dependent and independent. This is a paradox, which we must examine. Everything that is inherited has its own reality and nobody will be able to change it. At the same time, the maturational process depends for its evolution on environmental provision. We can say that the favorable environment makes the continuous progress of the maturational process possible. But the environment does not*

make the child. In the best hypothesis it enables the child to make its potential possible. The mother and the father do not produce a baby as an artist produces a picture. (...) If they can furnish this environmental provision, the maturational process will not be hindered, but is touched and is able to become part of the child.” (1963, p. 81)

As we examine this text we come across a truly psychoanalytic question. We may consider an individual isolated in his intra-psychic processes or we can place the individual in an interpersonal context, taking this into consideration during psychoanalytic work at the moment of interpreting as well as in the handling of the *setting*. Or we may work in both directions according to the patient's psychic movements. This means taking into consideration the paradox mentioned above by Winnicott. Here he considers, simultaneously, something fundamental: the environment and what is unique in each individual.

Winnicott attempts to find a way to conciliate a subjective initiative with respect to the circumstances that surround individuals and their life stories. These are circumstances that may condition ways of thinking, feeling and acting. It is in this sense that he values the environment that permits individual personal expression when he formulated decisively: “But first, being”. With these words Winnicott leaves no gaps for the initial polarity between inner and outer, neither for a dilution of the internal faced with the external. His focus of attention and interest is on what is unique in every individual, that is, on that which is a part of potential endowment, including instinctual life and he will try to understand the experience of this uniqueness with the environment that receives and interacts with this individual. At the beginning of life Winnicott does not undo this configuration individual-environment. He will work from this experience. But he takes into consideration the angle from where to look. The angle of the place of the adult who recognizes the infant's absolute dependency and vulnerability and therefore legitimates the infant's point of view, validating its initial needs. In this way he is able to penetrate into the specific experience of each individual, while at the same time observing environmental circumstances. It is from this perspective that he examines object relations, which engender servitude,

obedience, conformity, subjection, or reactions fearing these experiences. He describes situations that show how the individual fearing submission covers up. The individual will react without realizing that what genuinely belongs to him has been lost somewhere in the past. We remember here the words of an adolescent patient: *"It should have been one way, but it turned out to be something else and now I don't know how to unturn it..."*

And what makes a human being not be himself?

What does it mean for psychoanalysis to place the question of the Being in the analytic *setting*? And, as Winnicott says: *'... But first, being'*.

The condition of being is born in the most simple and at the same time the most complex human experience. How is this experience lived?

III

Winnicott's ideas about human development at the start of life, when *"... But first, being"*, differ essentially from theories which have as basis a psychic apparatus structured around instincts that would lead us to think about goals and intentionalities, therefore believing in the existence from the very start in a human being and an object. But, if instead of believing in the existence of a psychic apparatus in the beginning, we think about maintaining life, we shall be agreeing with Winnicott's affirmation about living. In this sense, life does not derive from instinctual satisfaction. Winnicott translates this terminology placing emphasis on the human experience. Life will become possible if an infant being completely dependent, is able to find a mother who recognizing and identifying with this initial condition, adapts herself actively, sensitively to the infant's unique needs. In Winnicott's perspective this is an experience that the human being must come to know: *"when I look, I am seen, therefore I exist (..) my existing is seen and understood by someone and even more; it is given back to me (as a face reflected in a mirror) the evidence that I need to be perceived as existing"* (1971, p. 157; 162, p. 60).

Here we have the expression of a baby's search for its existential citizenship. Before having satisfactory or frustrating experiences there must be experiences that acknowledge a vulnerable condition in the beginning of life. Someone must assume this risk. This understanding made Winnicott say - "*The baby, this is something which does not exist*". What exists is a field of experiences lived by the dyad mother-baby. Maintaining and holding this initial structure is what will enable the establishment of the condition of being.

On one hand, we could insert in this context the individual and his vital force, his inherited potential, the tendency to integrate and the impulse towards humanization. On the other hand, the mother, the environment supplying conditions for the expansion of this basis charged with uniqueness, developing in a specific, circumstantial, historical time-space. The mother emotionally present in her function, permits this potential to happen, to occur, assuring the continuity of the infant's existence. Otávio de Souza, synthesizes this moment expressively: "*a sense of I am does not as yet exist, but a sense of continuing being*" (2000, p. 135).

At the very beginning of the individual's being, the presence of the object (mother) must not be intrusive since it is the possibility of enjoyment of innate primary creativity which is at stake. During some time the mother sustains this situation without the baby realizing the existence of the environment and all affects contained in the environment. Unawareness at this moment means experiencing the relation with the object as being part of oneself. This happens because the mother offers herself as an object to be found and created by the baby. Describing the situation, Winnicott says: "*The mother puts the real breast exactly there, where the baby is able to create it, at the exact moment. In this atmosphere, the baby lives the illusion of the existence of an external reality corresponding to its capacity to create*" (1971, p. 157). In this context, the flow of life itself is not endangered. It is worth noting then that "...but first being" maintains Winnicott's original ideas about the inauguration of the human being, shifting the axle of the origin of the psyche from the instincts for an origin that

gives priority to psychic events generated in the mother-baby experience. Experience-synthesis favoring the emergence of a human identity conceived in its ontological aspects. The relevance here is not on instinctual satisfaction, but on the creative act on the baby's part as it feels being the creator of its own mother. Through this creative experience the present presents itself as live and real. And as a live entity for the other, the essential becomes possible in the baby's experience and, perhaps, the baby could say: *"I am alive, and my living is my creation."* So, one lives the feeling of being. The humane is incarnated. All this becomes possible because the baby's needs point to an absolute "here, now". And this requires recognition by the other that reveals itself in a sensitive handling of these needs. This objectification confers real value to subjectivity in the sense of making it a unique one, internally valuable. From there on, internal phenomena begin to have a meaning for someone who can experience them as its own: the conditions for a human psyche that is ready to start the path of mental representations are established.

In the human development proposed by Winnicott what is at stake in the beginning is the mother's identification with her child. It is this condition that will enable the mother to sustain the baby's continuity of being, making its existence possible as well as its illusion of being the creator of the world. In this process the mother will, at the same time, reveal herself as another in the synchrony of time and space of experiences lived together. At this point, when we think about identification in the constitution of the human psyche, it seems important to turn to Freud for a dialogue.

In 1922, in *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego*, Freud looks at the psychology of groups as having as basis the processes and changes in the psychology of the individual mind.

In this text, Freud states that all relationships that constituted the individual can be considered as social phenomena: *"Something more is invariably taking place in the individual's mental life as a model, an object, a helper, an opponent, in such a way that from the beginning individual*

psychology is, in this larger sense, but entirely justified by the words, at the same time social psychology." (p. 91).

With these thoughts in mind, Freud stresses the importance of the other in the process of subjectivation: objects, the other, the environment, culture. In Chapter VII of this same text, he will point specifically to the question of identification. He develops this concept not only for the understanding of the primitive functioning of the psyche, but also for the understanding of the process of human subjectivation from the very first social phenomenon: *the relationship with the parents*.

Freud wrote about the concept of identification and for him this phenomenon is "*the most remote expression of an emotional tie with another person*".

Still accompanying Freud, identification will include different stages in the process of subjectification: primary identification with "the father of pre-history", multiple identification with the parents, paving the basis for the Oedipus complex and, if the individual is successful, growth of a unique personality. In this process Freud considers that there is no disentanglement of

body, affect and representation. Freud's idea also includes the phenomenon of empathy in relation to certain love states and even mystical states, emphasizing the emotional effects of identification. Something important happens when empathy is present: the capacity to recognize and accept the element that is unfamiliar to the ego and which belongs to the other ego. Continuing, Freud stresses ego mechanisms of identification that assimilate a certain aspect, a manner or trait of another where the individual transforms himself totally or partially according to the model of a person. Freud's work shows us that at the beginning of life there already exists an ego relating with an object.

At this point we wish to turn to Winnicott's retreat in relation to identification as a vital phenomenon in the constitution of the human psyche.

Here not only is the retreat important, but the description in slow camera and with amplified lenses of the minutiae, details, small parts of the very first experience of the individual with the object. Winnicott does not give relevance to the cannibalistic question of incorporation of an object's attribute at the beginning of life. For him, what is indispensable is the mother's real presence. This presence manifests itself in the maternal capacity of putting herself in the place of the baby, making possible the experience of merging that makes possible a subjective experience of union between mother and child. The result of this fusional experience is unawareness of dependence on the other and of any external attribute. Unawareness at this moment means to experience contact with the other without perception of externals; what exists is a state of perception making possible the creation of objects of the world. The mother in her emphatic identification favors this type of emotional tie and the baby can then live a time for and within itself – a time Winnicott called *essential solitude*. In his words Winnicott explains: *"In the beginning there exists an essential solitude. At the same time, such solitude can only exist under the condition of maximum dependence. Here in this beginning, the continuity of the new being occurs without any knowledge of the environment and of the love contained in the environment, active adaptation of a kind and dimension are such, that the continuity of the being is not disturbed by reactions against intrusion"* (1988, p. 153, 154)

What is essential is shaped in solitude to be together with another, who is part of the individual. It takes two to know one. This initial wholeness, therefore, is possible only if there are two, where the capacity of one presents itself as integrating the whole. The mother's function is to create an environment for her infant, where it is safe to be no one, because only when it starts from a place like this, it is possible for the infant to find itself with its silent center. Here, relationship with an object does not as yet exist. What happens is the presentation of objects in the exact moment when the individual is ready to create them, starting from his own needs. It is worth noting that the objects are not there to be incorporated in their qualities, but to be created as a condition for being. Here "inside" experiences do not oppose themselves to "external"

experiences, since a state of non-being, non-living, non-integration arises. Winnicott tells us about these states, looking through the eyes of a baby: *“In the beginning what exists is non-integration, there is no link between body and psyche and there is no space for a non-I reality. (..) there is no place from where to look. However, the seed of all future development is there and the continuity of the experience is essential for the future health of the infant, who will become an individual”* (1988, p. 153, 154)

Here we understand that the nature of every human being is there to merge with some one similar and not for opposition. Only in this way is it possible to be.

In this process the mother’s condition of identification with these initial states would legitimize the value of this nature. Winnicott’s retreat gives priority to this question.

The mother’s retreat is possible during the experience of that special state of increased sensitivity, which we call “Primary Maternal Preoccupation”. Sustaining this state guarantees primary identification and so the infant lives the object as being itself, that is, the presence of the object is not felt prematurely. Thus, the way for resting, for relaxation is opened, but most of all, for intimacy with oneself as it is not necessary to perceive, to know, to investigate if what is happening, is coming from the inside or the outside. From there a being who can enjoy and who, before all, can take hold of its human identity emerges.

Hannah Arendt, in her book, *The Human Condition* – tries to describe the importance of the private world as something fundamental for human happiness, showing as relevant what the public sphere considers irrelevant: *“After the decline of its big and glorious public sphere, the French became masters in the art of being happy among “small things”, within the space of their four walls, between the table and the chair, between the dog, the cat and the vase of flowers, dedicating these things care and tenderness that in a world where rapid industrialization constantly destroys things of yesterday to produce today’s*

objects, which can seem to be the last purely human corner of the world. This amplifying of the private sphere, the enchantment, that is to say, of a whole people, does not make it public, does not constitute a public sphere, but on the contrary, it means only that the public sphere flew back almost entirely, in such a way, that everywhere, grandeur gave place to enchantment: for although public sphere can be big, it can not be enchanting, precisely because it cannot shelter the irrelevant". (2001, p.61,62)

In his psychoanalytical retreat, Winnicott sheltered what before was irrelevant – Being, before all. This meant giving priority to the mother-infant experience in all its human extension, making relevant for psychoanalytical treatment the deep understanding of this initial experience. As Hannah Arendt, he will search in the intimacy of the home, of everyday, of his pediatric and psychoanalytic consulting room for the essential elements to shape the relevance of the private. In this way, he conceives as fundamental for human development the experience of being in union and in such intimacy with the other that the presence of the object points to the impermanence of alterity. It is from there that the possibility of flowing in direction of the other, in the attempt to build the ground of its own existence, arises. If the infant's development is a healthy one, it does not have to assume prematurely the perception of the other. The environment will take care of this: identifying to perceive. The infant is then free to create, to live the "*non-sense*" of transitional relatedness. In this sense to be unaware, to ignore means not to enter prematurely into the public sphere, that is, the world of object relations. Here it is worth presenting a clinical example: For a year and a half in her analysis, an adolescent patient avoided any closeness. She communicated frequently through intense aggressiveness. She expressed fear and at the same time she showed an intense longing to have an experience of intimacy. After a long period of disintegration, she could conceive an idea about something that would meet her real needs and on a certain day she said in an omnipotent manner during a session: "*... we could have something to eat here ... and it is you, who must bring the snack ... it is you, who must give me everything*". Here we have the importance of regression: to experience with the analyst food which is important for the body and which

gives meaning to the experience with the other. Understanding and empathy are here essential.

Emmanuel Lévinas also contributed to the course of this adventure of being: *“To understand the being is to exist (...) The whole of man is ontology. His scientific work, his affective life, the satisfaction of his needs and his work, his social life and his death articulate the understanding of the being”* (1997, p.22)

Within we face individual experiences, which are more of an ontological than of a psychological quality. Here we place the mother that is, the one who facing the vulnerability of her infant, takes on the possibility of existing for someone else, everything happens as if the beginning of the human individual would give a meaning to maternal presence.

IV

But when this is not possible, clinically we frequently hear in different ways: “What is left for me is to become what one wants me to be”. Under these circumstances, the public sphere becomes the most important.

If the object starts to belong to external reality prematurely, there goes the creator. This happens because the object is no longer available for its purposes of self-expression. What remains is a world that already exists, pre-established, that imposes itself with its multiple characteristics, demanding classification, decodification and cataloguing as well as a constant search for information. Or, what is left is alienation, since impinging itself prematurely, the world begins not to make sense and indifference, negation and destruction of the public sphere can take place. In any way, here is the field of adaptation as an attempt of survival. Or our ground is of reaction as defense against impingement by the object. Under these conditions to live is a defensive act: being the non-being places itself as a question, frequently it is the only way to maintain a tie with the other.

Today we are living evident transformation in the social contemporary scenery, where we perceive anesthetized a cultural heritage marked by historicity and tradition, crumble down. We live a dilution of references making it difficult for the emergence of the being upon a symbolic anchorage. A being that will be able to develop and identify with projects which bear a sign of difference. Difference is perceived with hostility, a situation that frequently arouses a need to belong, whatever the price of belonging.

We can think about interdiction of a being, about fear of uniqueness, of spontaneity, of creativeness, which tend to become confused with madness. The importance given to new technologies, preoccupation with the ups-and-downs of the market, the primacy of economic logic and the rapid transformations engendered by globalization have structurally modified the relationship with time and space in the individual's life affecting human subjectivity.

Is it possible to be?

A patient calls a friend to ask for news about her newborn baby. On the telephone the mother complains that the baby is very "spoiled", because it cries a lot. The patient finding this strange, answered: *"Spoiled? Oh, no, he is only three weeks old! What he wants is to be near you, to be in your lap, to feel the holding of your lap. He is a baby and that's the way babies are; we have to discover, why they are crying". The friend disagrees, saying: "He is "spoiled", yes! If I let him, he only wants to be in my lap, this is being "spoiled".* Here we have a metamorphose: the baby is no longer a baby, he is determined to be a "spoiled" baby. It is possible that this baby is making an effort to be seen in its condition of a living being. Or, that it is trying to discover a way of existing as itself, a fundamental element to feel real, to feel existing.

Gilberto Safra clarifies this, when he says: *"From the clinical point of view, a very interesting aspect is to observe on what element of its constitution an*

individual anchors a deficient sense of self. Some anchor on conventional time, or on making use of muscles or even on rationality. Anchoring can happen on any aspect of one. The individual lives anxieties of dispersion and annihilation of itself, when unable to anchor himself on that aspect which is the element that defines his being". (1999, p. 67)

Here the individual does not define himself through wholeness, but through a part which assumes its human condition. It can be beauty, intelligence, wealth, a specific ability and even the professional sphere. Or, even, its own negative aspects. The individual may become absolutely dependent of this element that defines his being.

Throughout this paper, we have come to understand that the being inserts itself in life as a style of being. In this sense, also the relationship with the other is no longer thought of as enslaving, alienating or submitting, but as something that challenges, inspires or calls upon the individual to be. This is how the time of life is freely perceived for both: to be as well as to do.

Once more we find in Hannah Arendt Winnicott's understanding that grounded his retreat "But first, being": she writes: "*One is never more active than when one does nothing; one is never less alone than when one is alone with oneself*". (2001, p. 338)

But for this the constitution of the being is the starting point for a human epistemology. It is in this sense that we would like to think and reflect about the individual's experiences with greater ontological qualities rather than psychological ones. Or, experiences that translate the humanizing action of maternal care before becoming psychic action. This is the emphasis placed on "...But first, being" – to humanize first and then, to psychoanalyze. The human being will only be able to make use of the psychological if it is flowing in its being.

With this paper we are continuing a line of research about the constitution of the being in psychoanalysis from questions pursued by Winnicott. This is only the beginning; there is still a long way to go. What matters in this moment is that we have begun to think and write about this interesting theme and so, perhaps, we can give our contribution and help to clarify many impasses lived in psychoanalytic practice today.

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