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Oedipus and the Paternal Metaphor

I will try to briefly sketch the importance of the Oedipus complex, not only in the context of the possible relation or non-relation between psychoanalysis and philosophy, but in the more specific context of how to think, together, Lacan and Deleuze and Guattari, and to reconsider Deleuze and Guattari's critique of psychoanalysis in its normative function.¹ Following Deleuze and Guattari, one is tempted to say that they present psychoanalysis as a *fantasy* of the uniformity of human desire via the father as an agent of castration, or the father as One. I will formulate a little abstraction of this context and try to think the problematic of Oedipus in the more singular context of psychoanalysis itself, which is, in my opinion, complex enough, and I hope that presenting this topic in this way will shed some light also on the larger and more theoretical, that is philosophical, framework of this publication.

One could state that the question of the father is a crucial question in contemporary psychoanalytic debates, if we only consider the more and more common developments regarding the so-called "generalized psychosis", "ordinary psychosis", or even "generalized perversion". All these hypothesis about the specific structure or non-structure of today's society turn around the question of the father, the symbolic authority, the structural principle of the desire, the symbolic alienation, etc. I will state the opposite and try to show the importance of the father, not in the common sense that we assign to this signifier, the father as a male parent and his role in the conjugal family, but the father as a function, that may or may not be related to the family father that incorporates this function. This is also to say that the father, the Name-of-the-Father, does not coincide with the patriarchy.² For it is evident that the classic family is largely disturbed and that

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² I think a short remark is needed here: in the fifties, when Lacan developed his paternal metaphor, it could be thought that it has a certain connection with the patriarchy, since Lacan partially derived the paternal metaphor from Lévi-Strauss' anthropological analyses, which

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families do not distribute the same functions, roles, and tasks to the same individuals. But, as I will try to show, that was not Lacan's question at all, and, for that matter, not even Freud's, since they were both, from the very beginning of their practice, dealing with humiliated, degraded, or even impotent fathers. Nevertheless, there is an important step that Lacan made in his reading of Freud's conception of the father and the Oedipus complex as such.

My proposal thus demands two clarifications: first, to maintain a distance from general claims regarding the symbolic reality of contemporary discourse, since it is not a task of psychoanalysis to produce a *Weltanschauung*, it is not, let us say, an attempt to define the state of affairs. And second, it demands a serious reading of what was produced by Freud and Lacan about the father, serious in the sense that we will try to go beyond of what can be fantasized about the father, and as a consequence, about enjoyment as such. This is also to say that we will try to stay as close as possible not to what was said, but to the saying (*dire*) itself, the position of enunciation. I believe that this is also an immanent procedure of Lacan's reading of Freud.

If we now briefly turn to Freud: Freud introduced the Oedipus complex in 1900 in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he positioned this ancient myth as the essential kernel of psychoanalysis. At the same time he claimed that this book is his subjective response to his father's death, which is a detail that must not be overlooked, since Lacan came back to it when he started to criticize Freud's conception of the father in 1963, and, implicitly, his own conception of the paternal metaphor that he developed in the fifties.

were based on the traces of paternal intervention that one could find in different societies and tribes. There is at least one recent anthropological discovery that could put in question this approach, which has since then already been criticized by Lacan himself, namely the tribe Na in Yunnan, China, a society that functions without father and husband (a book about the Na was published by Cai Hua in 1997, *Une société sans père ni mari. Les Na de Chine*, PUF). The family is based on the pair brother/sister, with a shared paternal authority and a strict prohibition regarding intra-family sexuality. The sperm is provided by a so-called fugitive visitor, who has no social role and no power. This tribe demonstrates that the prohibition of incest does not depend on the patriarchy. The sperm provider is not a father nor a parent, but he only passes by to water the grain that was initially present in the mother. His role is to make the grain grow. The system is based on the general circulation of sperm between generations. And the grain is put into the woman's belly by a goddess, Aboagdu, the goddess that, in this case, has the function of what is called, in psychoanalysis, the Name-of-the-Father. In this case one can clearly see the distinction between the father (supposedly a male) and the father as a function of separation.

In Freud's theory the Oedipus complex is the core of human sexual development.³ It arises in early childhood and, ideally speaking (that was Freud's idea), comes to its end in puberty as a passage from the autoerotic sexual drive to a choice of the sexual object and the primacy of genital sexuality. In this sense the Oedipus complex has a structural role for human sexuality, since its decline coincides with adulthood and the identification of a human being either as a man or a woman, which also coincides with a certain object choice, a choice of sexual partner. For Freud, there is no third sex. Which is the thesis that Lacan reaffirms as well. There are only, contrary to Freud's idealized theory, the leftovers, something that can not be inscribed into this genetic scheme. But two of Freud's discoveries already directly contradict this supposedly ideal development of human sexuality: first, the problem of female sexuality: how does a girl pass from the clitoris, i.e. a phallus dominated sexuality, to the vagina as the proper female sexual organ, and how does she pass from the father to another object choice (there is, in Freud's theory, a necessary fantasmatic left-over in female sexuality: she wants to give birth to her father's children); and second, the problem of partial drives in Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which, more or less, contradicts everything about linear sexual development. In other words: every phase in this development can go wrong, becomes inverted, or the subject just can not overcome it. So that in the end the picture that we get is a proposal of a certain path that has so many branches and offshoots that one just loses the general and normative idea of the aim of genital sexuality. If there is a genitality, it is always overwhelmed by a paradoxical mixture of different libidinal fluxes.

I think we can only understand Lacan's contribution to the question of the father if we return to the Oedipus complex and sexual difference in Freud and its relation to the castration complex. Freud claims that male and female sexuality are developed in an opposite manner: even though he bases his Oedipus complex on the male, a male child becoming a man, he nevertheless struggles with the question of female sexuality, and finally comes up with the following idea (here I refer to his two essays, the first one from 1924, *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex*, and the second one from 1925, *Some Psychological Consequences of the*

³The legend goes as follows: (in the unconscious) every male subject has a desire to murder his father and commit an incestuous act towards his mother. It is a well-known cliché, often criticized if taken literally: every boy wants to get rid of his father and sleep with his mother, if we consider the father and the mother as the first objects that surround the still developing reality and sexuality of the subject-to-come.

Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes): in short, a boy is first confronted with the Oedipus complex, he has tender feelings for his mother and aggressive, rivalrous, and competitive feelings towards his father. It is nevertheless a bit more complicated, since the boy is fond of his father at the same time, but the general idea is nevertheless that a boy, being in this Oedipal disposition, is confronted with a castration complex: the boy renounces the Oedipus complex in order to keep his sex. What follows is an identification with his father as the holder of the phallus, and, simultaneously, a renouncement of the incestuous object, the mother. It is the father, and not the son, who has a phallus for the mother, who lacks one, so that the son renounces his seductions towards the mother and identifies with the subject of the same sex, i.e. the father. This is also the birth of the superego. We can see here that the phallus has to be lost if it is to be re-found, which is a trace that Lacan will insist on. On the contrary, for the girl, the castration complex introduces the Oedipus complex, she accepts her castration as an accomplished fact (and because of that she is not subjected to the superego), and turns towards the father as the holder of the phallus. This is the so called *Penisneid*, which has, in Freud, a biological basis and can very rarely be overcome. The solution that remains for a woman is to pass from this love for her father to the desire to give birth to his children. This is the well-known unconscious equation of the phallus and child. The same obstacle holds true for the submission of the son to his father as the holder of the phallus, which implies a certain feminisation of the son towards the father. This is also where Freud encounters the biological rock of castration that presents a final obstacle to the end of analysis: an embittered woman (the castration is effectuated) and a frustrated man (the castration as a threat). Even if psychoanalysis provides the subject with the possibility of a different answer, it remains difficult to overcome this biological scale. On the contrary, for Lacan it is evident that this impasse remains addressed to the Other, that it is a certain form of demand that can be overcome in analysis.

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Let us turn now to Lacan and see how he reinterprets the Freudian Oedipus, which, by the way, also has crucial consequences for the conceptualization of the end of analysis, although I will not go into this further here.

Lacan, from the very beginning, clearly distinguishes between the father as a person, as an individual in the family context, and the symbolic function that he incarnates. From the very beginning, i.e. since 1953, he speaks of three fathers: the real father, the symbolic father, and the imaginary father. For now, let

us just say that this tripartition allows Lacan to separate the father as a signifier from the father as a meaning and as a concrete human being. These three aspects of the father in Lacan never overlap, they might, but it is no pre-condition that what he usually refers to as the father implies all three aspects.

What he calls the paternal metaphor is a symbolic operation that he started to develop in the seminar on *Psychosis*, in 1955–56, and extended subsequently in the seminar *The Object Relation*, from 1956–57, where he addresses the case of little Hans and his forging of the signifier “horse” as a substitute for a failed paternal metaphor that takes place in his phobia. Then follow some basic developments in the seminar *The Formations of the Unconscious* from 1957–58, and he finally sums up his developments, basically from the seminar on *Psychosis*, in his paper *On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis*, written in December 1957/January 1958 and published in 1959. In the fifties Lacan was concerned with the question of the father from a symbolic perspective. His paternal metaphor is an attempt to show how the Freudian Oedipus complex works in terms of structure, not as an imaginary and affects-based relation between a child and his parents, but as a symbolic structure which has an ontological value, since it is a metaphor that produces a field of reality for the speaking being:

$$\frac{\text{Name-of-the-Father}}{\text{Desire of the Mother}} \cdot \frac{\text{Desire of the Mother}}{\text{The signified for the subject}} \rightarrow \text{Name-of-the-Father} \left(\frac{A}{\text{Phallus}} \right)$$

In the paternal metaphor Lacan combined the linguistic procedure with what Freud called the Oedipus complex, which is for Lacan a symbolic operation of the substitution of two signifiers: the signifier of the mother (the basic pair of her presence and absence in front of a child), and the Name-of-the-Father as a signifier that replaces this initial maternal signifier in the symbolic. This actually relates to Freud’s description that he gave of the observation of his grandson, who was playing with a reel of cotton on a thread, pronouncing *Fort* (away) when he threw it into the unseen, and *Da* (here) when he pulled it back into the field of the visible. This phonemic pair (*Fort-Da*) is a minimal symbolic difference, a first signifier that takes place in an attempt to symbolically inscribe the absence of the real object, namely the mother. Lacan, in his paternal metaphor, inscribes the cause of this capricious appearance and disappearance of the mother as an *x*, something unknown for the child, or, as he also puts it, “the signified for the subject”. And it is precisely that signified for the subject which is an enigma that

has to be named by the Name-of-the-Father. In other words, the father, by naming the desire of the mother, names exactly the cause of her desire, as far as this anonymous cause makes her appear and disappear without specific reason. The Name-of-the-Father is thus *not* a signifier father as such, one amongst all the other signifiers, but the signifier that makes possible the symbolic order itself, it redoubles the symbolic as a first encounter of the subject with the mother's desire (this is what is at stake in Lacan's scheme R, in his paper *On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis*). It is thus the signifier that separates the child from the capricious desire of the mother and restores a symbolic pact with the father. The phallus in the paternal metaphor is a signified of the totality of the effects of what can be signified. Later Lacan re-transcribes the phallus as a signifier of enjoyment, a result of the paternal metaphor is thus a re-transcription of enjoyment into the symbolic order, the so-called law of the father. What is interesting in the paternal metaphor is also the fact that it can only be read retroactively, since Lacan stresses that the primal, paternal signifier as such is a myth. The signifier and the signified never meet in the real, the first stage of the metaphor can thus only be read once the metaphor has already taken place, it is logically, not temporally first. This also means that one can only deal with an always already established metaphor, so-called pre-genital enjoyment being a pure illusion, produced by the functioning of the metaphor itself.

It is nevertheless true that Lacan's first approach deals with the classic family signifiers, even though he completely implies them in their structural role. In the seminar *The Formations of the Unconscious* he describes three phases of Oedipus: the first phase where the child, no matter what sex, wants to be a phallus to capture the desire of the mother (the cause of her come-and-go). To want to be the mother's phallus is a common trait for both biological sexes, it is a symbolic position that a child occupies in the mother's desire and often also a common feature in the male perversion, as well as in neurosis. The second phase is characterised by the prohibition of incest, during which the child has to be removed from that ideal position of the phallus that the mother is lacking. This prohibition results from the intervention of the symbolic father, which does not refer only to a child, but to the mother as well, which means that a child apprehends the father as castrating himself and the mother. In the third phase, finally, the real father intervenes, the father as the holder of the phallus, as the one who has it (which means the one that the child supposes has it), the one who uses it and is, for this reason, preferred by the mother. In short, we could say that the paternal metaphor plays

the role of the third factor that intervenes in the dual mother-child relationship and makes it clear to the child that he or she is not everything that the mother lacks. It introduces a fundamental gap (the original repression) that can only be pursued by means of a signifier. The enjoyment is now the fact of speech itself and the objects of satisfaction must pass through language, if they are to be capable of bringing satisfaction. This is why Lacan later on stated that phallic enjoyment is outside-the-body (*hors-corps*), it is framed by a fantasy that provides a way to gain satisfaction by means of the object of desire.

Besides this ontological aim, the paternal metaphor also plays a crucial clinical role. Lacan at that time was clearly concerned by the difference between neurosis and psychosis, and the paternal metaphor is in a way the ground on which he developed the case of President Schreber and the failure of the constitution of reality via the Name-of-the-Father (this is what is at stake in scheme I, in Lacan's paper *On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis*, where one can find the hole in the place of the Name-of-the-Father as a guarantee for the ex-sistence of the symbolic order, and the hole in the phallus as the signifier which for both sexes, in the unconscious, represents the sexual difference and which also makes the sexual act possible). The paternal metaphor was also Lacan's clinical bet that an analyst can lead the analysand to the point where the whole enjoyment will finally be re-transcribed into the symbolic, the signifier here plays the role of the ethical imperative "*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*". In psychosis, however, the unconscious is in the real itself, that means that the signifying chain does not work, a signifier does not relate to another signifier, since the enjoyment is not transcribed into the symbolic. This is why we can observe different body phenomena, for even though a psychotic is subject to certain signifying effects, the psychotic, as a subject, is not in the discourse as such, so that his enjoyment is localized in the body and not in the object as the cause of desire. And this is also why psychotic people make language mistakes, create neologisms, and often have difficulties with their proper name (which, without the function of the father, becomes a common name, i.e. it does not represent a subject in the symbolic). Here we could mention Joyce, who in spite of a paternal deficiency succeeded to create his proper name, by addressing the enigma of his incomprehensible work to the public for the centuries to come.

Lacan later criticized this initial conception of the paternal metaphor and he stressed the impossibility of the signifier that would stand in this specific place in

the symbolic order. This implies a lack in the symbolic, the fact that the transmission from the father to the son can not pass entirely through the signifier. But it does not mean that the father does not function. The father stands in the impossible symbolic place, to which Lacan sometimes refers by quoting the Bible and the answer that Moses got from the burning bush: *Ehyeh Acher Ehyeh*, which Lacan finally translates as “I am what I am” (*Je suis ce que je suis*), a tautological position, a gap referring to itself without referring to being. This is how Lacan reads the religious aspect of the fact that a speaking being necessarily believes in a sense which is produced by enunciation, but which at the same time derives from the gap which produces signifiers. If we consider the institutional effects of this, in 1963–64, when Lacan approached this symbolic gap, he was expelled from the *French Psychoanalytic Society*, affiliated to the *International Psychoanalytic Association*, an institution founded by Freud. At that time he explicitly brought into question the desire of Freud himself, his relation to his father and Freud as the Name-of-the-Father. This lack in the symbolic finally also means that the Name-of-the-Father as a symbolic operation produces a left-over, which is articulated in the symptom itself. The question begins to arise: what can be done with the symptom if it is a necessary effect of the symbolic, once it is inscribed in the real?

In the seminar *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (1969–70) Lacan finally separates the Oedipus and the function of the father, and this is also where we can see that Lacan’s anti-Oedipus is never equal to, let us say, anti-father or even the foreclosure of the father as a function which would lead to psychosis. It only means that Lacan progressively distanced himself from the old myth, first of all because of the fact that many psychoanalysts took it for granted that deciphering the unconscious as related to the Oedipal theme is the last and only truth of the psychoanalytic procedure as such. Lacan, at that point, proclaims a shocking assertion, namely that the Oedipus complex is a Freudian dream. This is in fact Lacan’s attempt to subtract the analytic discourse from any possible identification of knowledge and its fixation in the place of truth. In the analytic discourse, this means retaining the gap between knowledge in the position of truth (S_2) and the signifiers produced in the analytic procedure (S_1), signifiers that fix the subject’s enjoyment. In other words, the truth is not the final answer: Oedipus, produced by Freud, is a myth, which is Freud’s dream. Knowledge which pretends to be true is an impossible knowledge, and the truth as an aim of the analytic procedure is castration itself. In other words, there is no truth in the castration, it is not possible to join the master signifier and the knowledge, or, as

Lacan also puts it, the father knows nothing about the truth. The analytic procedure deals with the semblance, and this is the only way it can produce some effects in the real that go beyond what the father is supposed to represent as an agent of symbolic castration (this also means that psychoanalysis should push the subject to go into mourning for the father).

The fact that Lacan separates the Oedipus complex and the function of the father also allows him to make use of the other Freudian myth, namely the myth of the primal horde from *Totem and Taboo*, and he finally makes a clear distinction between the two myths and turns the production of myth towards the fantasmatic production in hysteria and obsessional neurosis. He speaks of the Oedipus myth as an idealized father of the hysteric (where enjoyment follows the pre-established law), and regards the myth of the primal horde as an obsessive neurotic fantasy (the enjoyment which precedes the prohibition on incest).⁴ We can finally find this fantasy of the exception and full enjoyment in Lacan's formulas of sexuation in Seminar XX, *Encore*.

Lacan's final revision of the Name-of-the-Father is related to his late teaching starting at the beginning of the seventies. The developments about the father are related to Lacan's conception of the Borromean knot, the knot where the three cords are linked together in such a way that if you cut one, the knot falls apart – this is in a way a scheme that now stands in the place where before he put the scheme of reality, but with the crucial distinction that the knot has to be taken literally; it does not represent a reality, but it is the real itself, in its material form. In the knot the father finally gains the function of the fourth cord, the one that links together the three others. The father is here equal to the symptom, the symptom-father becomes one of the multiple ways to link the three registers of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The father thus becomes a neurotic solution to how the speaking being sustains a difference and simultaneous presence of the imaginary, symbolic, and real, and thus escapes pure schizophrenia, where the registers make no difference. Which means as well that there are other possible linkings, non-father-related constructions. This explains why Lacan raises the question about Joyce: was he crazy? He definitely was not a neurotic,

⁴ The primal father is a father who has in his possession and who enjoys all women, and this is why the sons decide one day to murder the father. What follows is the prohibition on incest (they can not have them all, that is, they can not have the mother), but they can very well fantasize about it, they can fantasize about the non-castrated enjoyment.

but he nevertheless, with his writing as a *sinthome*, invented a solution regarding how to escape subjective collapse. Regarding Lacan's previous developments, one could say that this approach is much less rigid and more flexible, especially regarding nuances in psychosis. Psychosis is not regarded any more as a failure of a neurotically based construction of reality, but it is one of the possible constructions that the subject creates to sustain himself in the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real (in case where we are speaking of a non-triggered psychosis or a psychosis where the subject, in the process of delirious elaboration, has already found a solution and constructed the ego). That also means that it is possible, even when dealing with psychosis, to detect and construct different sorts of supplementary devices that were put in place in order to prevent the psychotic breakdown. Instead of the hole encountered in the Other, which usually leads to delirious production, a subject can stick to his imaginary identifications or sometimes produce even a symbolic effect that becomes its own *sinthome*, sort of his own proper name. This opens the whole palette of different clinical solutions, and weakens the rigid all-or-nothing distinction between different clinical structures (let us merely mention that in 1959 Lacan clearly stated that a psychotic subject is a dead subject, which shows the radical exclusion of psychosis at that time). Lacan's statement from 1976 that "one can get rid of the father under the condition that one makes use of the father", clearly shows that Lacan's intention was never to get rid of the function of the father, but rather to make use of the father as a semblance, to make use of the father without fantastic and mythical support. This is also to say that Lacan insisted on the father as a function of castration, and got rid of the mythical and imaginary dimension of the father, as the father was first presented in Freud's Oedipus complex.

Lacan would finally place the role of the father into a certain half-saying [*mi-dire*], which finally separates the father from any family disposition and places the father into the saying itself. This is far from the idea that the father should be a carrier of the law, for it includes not only the symbolic, but the real as well (the other half that can not be said), and we should mention here that Lacan always claimed that a father as a legislator or pure authority with no desire usually has devastating effects on the subject (see, for example, the Schreber case). The father is a naming, not naming something as an ideal, but a contingent naming of someone's own symptom, a saying that includes its incorporation in the enjoyment. Reducing a father to a half-saying is also an important clinical remark, since a therapist or an analyst can, especially when dealing with young children,

occupy that place as well: his or her saying, the enunciation itself, has effects on the subject-to-come. Words, as we say, have consequences.

To briefly return to the theme of Deleuze and Guattari's critique of psychoanalysis, I would say in the end that thinking anti-Oedipus in psychoanalysis is not the dilemma between one and multiple (as Deleuze and Guattari put it in the Wolf Man case: one wolf or multiple wolves, One father versus the immanent productivity of the unconscious desire beyond the father principle and castration⁵). The question of One, multiple, or even the uncountable is a strictly philosophical question. For psychoanalysis, on the contrary, and exactly when considering the problematic of the father, the question is not the Other, but the subject itself, in this case the Wolf Man: how did he, when in his dream the window opened and he looked through, to the other side of the fantasy, in the real of the gaze itself, how did he respond to this encounter with the real? What subjective response did the Wolf Man give to this anxiety producing encounter with the real at the moment of the failure of the fantasmatic frame? On the basis of psychoanalytic literature, namely Brunswick's later reports on the Wolf Man's symptoms, it is possible to claim that working on this primal fantasy pushed the Wolf Man into a delirious state, more precisely, the hypochondriac delirium which one can often observe in paranoia. For the Wolf Man, the Other gained a real consistence, it became the Other of enjoyment, impossible to symbolize (the Wolf Man never succeeded to subjectivize this primal scene, it remained an unanswered question – and one must add here that it remained an unanswered question for Freud a well).

So when we deal today with the question of the father, when families are clearly falling apart, one has to keep in mind Lacan's remark in *Television*: "If there were no families, one would have to invent them". It is what we can also observe in psychoanalytic practice: imaginary production is a constitutive part of the speaking being, and even in times when the father can be reduced to a sperm and when a child can be produced by imaginable and not yet imaginable scientific means, the father will, in whatever form, remain a constant and crucial reference for every single speaking being. If one were to find oneself in front of the question of the father as an affair of belief, what would remain would be the choice be-

⁵ As I tried to show, Deleuze and Guattari's reading of castration is wrong, since there is no regularity in castration: it is precisely where the Other fails.

tween imbecility (related to a signifier) and madness. A differential clinic of neurosis and psychosis thus remains a crucial orientation in the direction of treatment, even and, I would say, especially nowadays. For inventing a new clinical practice, without the father, would be as ideological as the discourse that proclaims the absence of the father itself. It is also the only way psychoanalysis can maintain distance from the ideological procedure and how it can question and put this common ideological supposition as such to work, but in the context of a singular analysis, that is, by proceeding case by case.