

Incest in Jung's work: the origins of the epistemophilic instinct

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Abstract: In this paper the differences between Jung's and Freud's writings on incest are explored. Jung's view is that the purpose of the child's sexual interest, as expressed also in his incestuous longings, is not purely the satisfaction of the biological instinct but is more importantly seen to be the development of thinking. The importance of the incest taboo for analytic work and the dangers of enactment of the erotic transference-countertransference dynamics are highlighted.

Key words: incestuous impulse, enactment, epistemophilic, thinking, transference.

In this paper, I would like to focus on the connection between the incestuous impulse and the formation of thinking. I suggest that the developmental origins of the capacity for symbolic thought lie in the incest taboo and, furthermore, that this has profound implications for analysis, in that analysts who respond to the erotic transference with enactment of a sexual relationship prevent the very psychological growth and separation that constitute the central analytic task. The analytic process has been subverted for the analyst's purposes and becomes destructive rather than reparative.

Freud's views on the importance of the Oedipus complex and its role in psychological growth were undoubtedly influenced by his own early encounters with the erotic transference, or what he refers to in a letter to Jung as his 'narrow escapes'. Jung also had his own 'narrow escapes', most notably with Sabina Spielrein. It was through Jung's analytic relationship with Spielrein and their subsequent work together that Jung came to view the incest barrier as a fundamental psychic defence against the regressive pull towards a return to the mother. Jung, however, differed from Freud in placing primacy, not on the Oedipus complex, but on the early relationship with the mother. Psychological development and maturation, in his view, are facilitated and necessarily accompanied by regression towards the mother. Separation from the mother is the primary struggle in life – this is the hero's journey. For Jung, the incestuous impulse contains both positive and negative or destructive aspects. In its positive guise, it serves initially to help the child form a loving relation with the

mother and then with the father from which separation and differentiation can take place. When parents are able to acknowledge their child's loving and sexual feelings, the child can then feel safe to explore differences and to accept limits – to become separate. This is the teleological or purposive view of the incestuous impulse that also contains its opposite, the incest taboo. In its regressive aspect, the impulse may serve either a benign or malignant function. In its benign form, the impulse serves to aid psychological growth in redressing or repairing what was missing in the primary relationship. In its malignant form, the impulse can be perverted in a defensive way as an attempt to form a symbiotic, or two-person relation, in order to avoid having to know about what was missing and to avoid a separation which would be experienced as unbearable.

Jung was very interested in the connection between the incestuous impulse and the formation of thinking. But his views on this differed in significant ways from Freud. He outlines this difference in his essay, 'Psychic conflicts in a child'. This paper was originally delivered in 1909 as a talk at Clark University in Boston where he was attending a symposium with Freud. It is a companion piece to Freud's essay on 'Little Hans' – the marked difference between them being that, unlike Freud, Jung makes no attempt to analyse the subject but uses it rather as the basis to form a theoretical view of the sexual behaviour of children. (Anna, the subject of Jung's essay, was, by the way, his eldest daughter.)

Jung wrote a very interesting foreword to the second edition of this paper in 1915, in which he makes his differences with Freud quite clear. He writes:

The point of view adopted in this work is psycho-biological. It is naturally not the only one possible, indeed there are several others. Thus, more in accord with the spirit of Freudian psychology, this little piece of child psychology could be regarded from the purely hedonistic standpoint, the psychological process being conceived as a movement dominated by the pleasure principle. The main motives would then be the desire for and the striving towards the most pleasurable, and hence the most satisfying, realization of fantasy. Or, following Adler's suggestion, one could regard the same material from the standpoint of the power principle, an approach which is psychologically just as legitimate as that of the hedonistic approach. Or one could employ a purely logical approach, with the intention of demonstrating the development of logical processes in the child. One could even approach the matter from the standpoint of the psychology of religion and give prominence to the earliest beginnings of the God-concept. I have been content to steer a middle course that keeps to the psychobiological method of observation, without attempting to subordinate the material to this or that hypothetical key principle.

(Jung 1915, pp. 3-4)

He continues:

The basic hypothesis of the view advanced in this work is that sexual interest plays a not inconsiderable role in the nascent process of infantile thinking, an hypothesis that should meet with no serious opposition. . . . I also lay stress on the significance of

thinking and the importance of concept-building for the solution of psychic conflicts. It should be sufficiently clear from what follows that the initial sexual interest strives only figuratively towards an immediate sexual goal, but far more towards the development of thinking. Were this not so, the solution of the conflict could be reached solely through the attainment of a sexual goal, and not through the mediation of an intellectual concept.

(*ibid.*, p. 4)

Here Jung is stating that the object or purpose of the child's sexual interest, as expressed also in his incestuous longings, is not purely the satisfaction of the biological instinct but it is more importantly seen to be the development of thinking.

He concludes:

I do not regard the thinking function as just a makeshift function of sexuality which sees itself hindered in its pleasurable realization and is therefore compelled to pass over into the thinking function; but, while perceiving in infantile sexuality the beginnings of a future sexual function, I also discern there the seeds of higher spiritual functions. The fact that infantile conflicts can be resolved through concept-building speaks in favour of this, and also the fact that even in adult life the vestiges of infantile sexuality are the seeds of vital spiritual functions. The fact that adult sexuality grows out of this polyvalent germinal disposition does not prove that infantile sexuality is 'sexuality' pure and simple. I therefore dispute the rightness of Freud's idea of the 'polymorphous-perverse' disposition of the child. It is simply a polyvalent disposition. If we proceeded according to the Freudian formula, we should have to speak, in embryology, of the ectoderm as the brain, because from it the brain is ultimately developed. But much also develops from it besides the brain, for instance the sense organs and other things.

(*ibid.*, p. 5)

Jung hypothesizes that the thinking function does not arise as a result of the sublimation or repression of sexual impulses, as Freud would have it, but that infantile sexuality is polyvalent and as such contains the seeds of higher spiritual functioning. Jung advances the idea of the epistemophilic instinct, later to be elaborated more fully in relation to child development in the work of Melanie Klein.

In his foreword to the third edition, written in 1938 (23 years later) Jung reiterates his position. Here he writes:

[This paper] demonstrates something of great practical and theoretical importance, namely the characteristic striving of a child's fantasy to outgrow its 'realism' and to put a 'symbolic' interpretation in the place of scientific rationalism. This striving is evidently a natural and spontaneous expression of the psyche, which for that very reason cannot be traced back to any 'repression' whatsoever.

(Jung 1938, p. 6)

Here Jung once again emphasizes the polyvalent nature of infantile sexuality and its intrinsic connection to the spiritual instinct.

In his paper 'Psychic conflicts of a child', Jung tells the story of how Anna, at the age of four, comes to terms with the birth of her baby brother and her growing awareness of how babies are born. The story begins when Anna visits her grandmother who tells her that when she dies she will become an angel. Anna links this with a story she has been told before that babies used to be angels and are delivered to their parents by storks. She comes up with her own theory of reincarnation. In anticipation of the birth of a baby brother, Jung asks Anna what her feelings would be. Her response to this information is to announce, 'I would kill him!' In a surprising passage, Jung comments: 'The expression "kill" looks very alarming, but in reality it is quite harmless, for "kill" and "die" in child language only mean to "get rid of", either actively or passively, as has already been pointed out a number of times by Freud' (Jung 1915, para. 7). Jung minimizes the intensity of the child's emotions and sidesteps the problem of aggression, preferring to focus instead on Anna's mental processes. We come to see that because Anna has linked the birth of a baby with the death of an adult, her reaction, according to Jung, is primarily derived from her desire to save her mother from death.

Anna continues to experience intense emotions and to search for an answer to the question of how babies are born. She suffers from night fears of earthquakes and volcanoes, and there is a suggestion that there is something dangerous that is being concealed. Significantly, we are told that Anna had first experienced these night fears when she was aged one, which suggests (at least to my mind) that they were associated with separation anxiety. What is notably missing, once again, in Jung's account is any recognition of Anna's aggression. Anna eventually gets her mother to tell her that babies grow inside the mother's tummy. Subsequently, Anna's fantasies and play demonstrate her trying to work out whether babies come out through the mouth or are evacuated through the anus. But she is still left with the question as to how they get there in the first place and for this explanation she is referred to her father. Anna has in the meantime shown a noticeable interest in her father with whom she has become particularly affectionate. At one point, she is reported to have lain down on her parents' bed face down, legs flailing, and asked her parents, 'Look is that what Papa does?', thereby indicating her awareness of her father's role in this process. When she is finally told that the father plants the seed in the mother, Anna's erotic wishes for her father become extended to an increased interest in boys and she reports a dream in which the primal scene is clearly depicted. 'I dreamt I was in the bedroom of Uncle and Auntie. Both of them were in bed. I pulled the bed clothes off Uncle, lay on his stomach, and joggled up and down on it' (*ibid.*, para. 71).

Most significant, however, is Jung's conclusion to this story. In the 'Supplement' to this essay, Jung states that 'despite the enlightenment they received, the children exhibited a distinct preference for some fantastic explanation' (*ibid.*, para. 75). From this observation he concludes,

The fact that the fantasy activity simply ignored the right explanation seems, in my view, to be an important indication that all freely developing thought has an irresistible need to emancipate itself from the realism of fact and to create a world of its own.

(Jung 1915, para. 78)

He goes on:

Only for human beings is [the link between copulation and pregnancy] – not *not known*, but flatly *denied* – that this is so, for the simple reason that they prefer a mythological explanation which has freed itself from the trammels of concretism. It is not hard to see that in these facts, so frequently observed among primitives, there lie the beginnings of *abstraction*, which is so very important for culture. We have every reason to suppose that this is also true of the psychology of the child.

(*ibid.*, p. 34; italics in original)

Jung uses this final observation as evidence to support his theory that symbolic activity arises spontaneously – *sui generis* – from the psyche as a function of the individuating self. For Jung, ‘all freely developing thought has an irresistible need to emancipate itself from the realism of fact’ (*ibid.*, para. 78). Culture and thinking are not viewed as developing from the struggle to come to terms with reality – or the sublimation of the id – but rather as an emancipation from reality. Instead Jung postulates that our need to symbolize derives from and is intrinsic to our epistemophilic instinct. This is, as Jung takes pains to point out, in marked contrast to Freud’s idea that symbolic processes result from the working through of the Oedipus complex and highlights the different valence Jung and Freud place on the Oedipus complex in their respective theories.

The importance of this essay lies in the original link Jung makes between infantile sexuality and the epistemophilic instinct. What Jung fails to elaborate is the link between the child’s incestuous desires, their frustration and eventual relinquishment, and the development of mental processes – of thinking. In this story of Anna, we see her struggling not only with the question of how babies are born, but also of having to accept that she cannot control the world around her and her need for others. She is having to struggle with her omnipotence. We can see several other processes at work in Jung’s account of Anna. For example, when a nurse arrives following the birth of her baby brother to take care of Anna, Anna initially greets her with cold hostility. She is clearly very jealous of the attention her mother is giving her baby brother and directs her aggression towards her nurse. However, Anna gradually softens and plays being a nurse herself and begins to turn her attention towards her father. We can see how Anna overcomes her conflict with her mother through identification with her and then directs her libido towards her father. She nevertheless has to struggle with her ambivalent feelings towards her father, with whom she is also angry for his part in giving mother a baby. She then imagines him as a big brother who is indestructible – he is protected in her mind from her

attacks and at the same time he is aligned with her as a brother and is removed from his position in relation to mother.

Anna's struggle continues after her father tells her the facts of life. She dreams 'she was "*in the garden and several gardeners stood making wee-wee against the trees, and Papa was also doing it*"' (Jung 1915, para. 63; italics in original). Jung regards this as another example of Anna's quest for understanding in seeing the dream as posing the question, 'what does the father do?' However, this is directly followed by an incident in which a carpenter comes into the house and Anna watches him planing some wood. 'That night she dreamt that the carpenter "sliced off" her genitals' (ibid., para. 65). It is strange that Jung does not view Anna's dream as revealing her castration anxiety. Instead, he seems to avoid the 'concrete' sexual reference in the dream and writes: 'The dream could be interpreted to mean that Anna was asking herself: will it work with me? Oughtn't one to do something like what the carpenter did, in order to make it work?' (i.e. in order to make a baby) (para. 66). In Jung's emphasis on Anna's attempts to figure out how babies are born, he misses the point that what Anna must also figure out (and come to accept) is the difference between men and women and children and their parents and her own identifications (e.g., she experiments with being like her father when she lies on the bed demonstrating her father's love-making and she identifies with her mother in her role as nurse). I would like to suggest that it is this process of differentiation that enables thinking to occur.

I think this oversight is an important one and has had repercussions on the development of Jung's thought and particularly on the notable lack of an adequate Jungian theory of sexual development and sexual identity. Jung's failure to take Anna's murderous and aggressive fantasies seriously and his failure to discuss how Anna works out her Oedipal conflict may go some way towards explaining Jung's own difficulties in resisting incestuous entanglements with his patients and supervisees (still a serious problem within the analytic profession) and his uneasy relation with authority.

Having said this, Jung's emphasis on the primacy of the mother-infant relation is important in so far as it allows us to trace the roots of incestuous wishes to the pre-sexual stage of early infancy. It is at this stage that the infant is first made to feel desirable and that his desire for the mother can be accepted. Thinking in terms of archetypes, the archetypal image of the primal scene is first met with in reality in the form of the mother-infant relation. When this early relation works well, the infant as he develops can gradually afford to relinquish his omnipotent control over the world because he has a secure sense of himself in relation to an object in his mind. When this is not the case, separation from the mother is fraught with unbearable anxiety and the infant ego remains in a state of primary narcissism, unable to develop as an observing ego.

We can see how this process gets stuck in our clinical work with patients who manifest erotic transferences. If we return to Jung and his relation with Sabina Spielrein, we can see how they viewed their relation as a repetition of

the past. In a letter to her mother, probably written towards the end of 1908 (a year before Jung's talk at Clark University), Spielrein comments on Jung's recent paper, 'The significance of the father in the destiny of the individual'. She writes:

[In this paper, Jung] shows that the choice of the future (love) object is determined in the first relations of the child with his parents. That I love him is as firmly determined as that he loves me. He is for me a father and I am a mother for him, or more precisely, the woman who has acted as the first substitute for the mother (his mother came down with hysteria when he was two years old); and he became so attached to the (substitute) woman that when she was absent he saw her in hallucinations, etc., etc. Why he fell in love with his wife I do not know... Let us say, his wife is 'not completely' satisfactory, and now he has fallen in love with me, a hysteric; and I fell in love with a psychopath, and is it necessary to explain why? I have never seen my father as normal. His insane striving 'to know himself' is best expressed in Jung for whom his scientific activity is more important than anything in this world...

(Lothane 1999, p. 1196)

What is evident in these passages is, at least according to Spielrein, their mutual incestuous desires – he for a mother and she for a father. The basis for their mutual attraction is related to their early parental relationships. However, what is not acknowledged at this stage (and perhaps later) between them is their respective need to discover that they can be loved in a different way from the way in which they were loved in the past (that they can form a different object relation) and, in so doing, recognize the ways in which their own early relationships had failed them. Without this differentiation, the incestuous relation is merely repeated and cannot be resolved. Regression is then the desire to remain in a fused, undifferentiated state as a defence against depression and separation – as a defence against having a mind. The analyst who succumbs to the erotic transference and breaks the incest barrier is then repeating the past by using the patient for his or her own narcissistic needs rather than being able to resist the incestuous pull and think about what the patient actually needs in order to grow and to become independent, and to enable the patient to understand the ways in which his or her own incestuous longings act as an attack against the need to be able to differentiate between hate and love.

TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Les différences entre les écrits de Freud et ceux de Jung sur l'inceste sont explorées dans cet article. Le point de vue de Jung selon lequel le but de l'intérêt sexuel de l'enfant, tel qu'il s'exprime entre autre dans son désir incestueux, n'est pas seulement et purement la satisfaction de l'instinct biologique mais aussi le développement de la pensée, ce deuxième élément étant vu comme plus important. Sont remis en lumière et reconsidérés

l'importance du tabou de l'inceste pour le travail analytique et les dangers du passage à l'acte de l'érotique dans la dynamique du transfert et du contre-transfert.

In dieser Arbeit werden die Unterschiede zwischen Jungs und Freuds Schriften über Inzest untersucht. Es ist Jungs Sicht, daß der Zweck des kindlichen Sexualinteresses, das sich auch in seinem inzestuösen Begehren ausdrückt, nicht nur die Befriedigung des biologischen Triebes ist, sondern vielmehr in der Entwicklung des Denkens besteht. Die Wichtigkeit des Inzesttabus für die analytische Arbeit und die Gefahren des Agierens der erotischen Übertragungs-/Gegenübertragungsdynamik werden hervorgehoben.

In questo lavoro vengono esaminate le differenze negli scritti di Jung e di Freud sull'incesto. Dal punto di vista di Jung lo scopo dell'interesse sessuale del bambino, espresso anche nei suoi desideri incestuosi, non è semplicemente la soddisfazione di un istinto biologico, ma è principalmente visto come lo svilupparsi del pensiero. Viene enfatizzata l'importanza del tabù dell'incesto nel lavoro analitico e i pericoli di agire le dinamiche del transfert/controllotransfert erotico.

En este trabajo se exploran las diferencias en los escritos de Freud y Jung en relación al incesto. El punto de vista de Jung en relación al interés sexual del infante, no es la satisfacción de un instinto puramente biológico sino que es mas visto como importante en el desarrollo del pensamiento. Se subrayan la importancia del tabú del incesto para el trabajo analítico y os peligros de la actuación de la dinámica erótica en la transferencia/contratransferencia.

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