

## **The Analyst's Shadow: Failures, Narcissism, and Ethics in the Transference–Countertransference Dynamic**

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Narcissism and its pathological manifestations constitute fundamental issues for psychoanalytic theory and practice, as they concern both the analysand and the analyst.

In this paper, I will focus on the narcissistic difficulties of the analyst, with particular emphasis on narcissistic vulnerability and on unprocessed aspects—or deficits—of the analyst's own narcissism which, as components of countertransference, may emerge in analytic practice. The consequences of this dynamic will be highlighted for the analytic relationship, supervision, and the analyst's functioning within the framework of institutions that bring into discussion critical issues concerning psychoanalytic ethics. The “asymmetrical-symmetry” of the analytic situation, as described by Bion (1963), combined with the analyst's position of “ethical asymmetry” constitutes a fundamental precondition for an open, sincere, and reciprocal analytic relationship. This position is linked to the “maternal function” of the analyst, which in recent years has increasingly been recognized as an essential aspect of analytic work—a continuous thread capable of containing and weaving together the analysand's wounded psyche.

In the writings of Bion, as well as in the conceptualizations of Winnicott, Green, Fain, and others, the importance of the mother as the fundamental, primary object for the emergence and development of the infant's capacity for thought and symbolization is brought to the fore. The maternal function—and, by analogy, the analytic function—as a containing function and as a threshold for the symbolization of the child's (or the analysand's) unconscious projections, constitutes a central axis of the therapeutic relationship and experience. More internal dimensions of the maternal function include devotion, desire, and certain enigmatic elements that render the mother—or the analyst—an object of desire. This dynamic can unfold only when the mother's or the analyst's narcissism is benign; or, as André Green (2001) notes, when narcissism is governed by the “narcissism of life,” that is, when the life drive predominates.

The modality of the maternal/analytic function is inextricably linked with the analyst's ethical stance. Of particular significance in this perspective is the contribution of Chetrit-Vatin (2014), who draws on Levinas's (1961) philosophical thought on “responsibility toward the Other” and Laplanche's (1999) theory of “primal seduction.” Chetrit-Vatin introduces the notion of the “mother of desire,” namely, the one who transforms desire into responsibility. She argues that the mother, like the analyst, must create a *matricial space* characterized by the capacity to question, by the concentration of her attention on the Other, and by a constant inner interrogation of her own feelings, attitudes, and interventions—elements decisive for the quality of the relationship and the shaping of the psyche. This “ethics of care” is grounded in respect for the Other and for alterity, as well as in the unconscious processes that influence the relationship. The “matricial space” and the analyst's ethical stance concern not only the analytic frame but also the technique, the “art” of psychoanalysis, which emerges as a fundamentally ethical act.

During the course of analysis, the analysand, renouncing the position of narcissistic self-sufficiency, regresses and finds himself in a state of acute narcissistic vulnerability, accompanied by feelings and sensations of primary passivity akin to

those of infancy (Grünberger, 2007). The idealization of the analyst is often accompanied by the projection of the analysand's ego ideal. Referring to the notion of "primal seduction," Laplanche (1997) describes the inherent asymmetry of the relationship between adult and child, where the child is confronted with enigmatic, untranslatable messages. Comparable questions arise within the analytic relationship, such as: "What does the analyst want from me?" "Where is he when he is absent?"—questions that reveal the seduction of the analyst-as-Other and the psychic tension it engenders. When, however, this seduction surpasses an "optimum seduction" (Potamianou, 2005) and coexists with "un-thought" aspects of countertransference—that is, unprocessed unconscious elements of the analyst—overstimulation and psychic trauma of the analysand may ensue. This situation is reminiscent of Ferenczi's (1933) "confusion of tongues," which may lead to violations of ethical care and to the imposition of the analyst's position upon the analysand, whether in the form of a "violent" interpretation or as an exercise of power. Such phenomena also concern processes of construction and the work of figurability; in these cases, the therapeutic function of analysis is undermined, and the analytic scene is transformed into one of retraumatization.

Seduction, however, emanates not only from the analyst but also from the analysand. The reciprocity of seduction within the relationship requires heightened vigilance on the part of the analyst, particularly regarding the reinforcement of his ego ideal and the risk of collusion. Such dynamic may derail into pseudo-analysis or into a perversion of the therapeutic relationship. The analyst's continuous interrogation of his countertransference movements—not only at the conscious and preconscious levels, but also, as far as possible, at the unconscious level—constitutes his ethical obligation. As Bolognini has emphasized, the analyst requires not only a patient but also a colleague—interlocutor for the analytic relationship to remain within a therapeutic and ethical trajectory.

Following Chetrit-Vatin's thought, one could argue that Levinas's "fundamental anthropological condition," corresponding to Freud's notion of *Hilflosigkeit* (primal helplessness), founds the analyst's ethical obligation toward the Other. As early as 1895, Freud argued that "helplessness" is the root of all moral motivation. Respect for, and responsibility toward, the alterity of the Other constitutes the ethical core of the analytic act.

Nevertheless, what is ethical and proper is not always attainable. As Bion (2005) mentioned in his Tavistock Seminars, Psychoanalysis is simply a technical instrument, which can be used for any purpose—to intensify confusion, to mislead or to deceive. The crucial question is whether the analyst is genuinely a seeker of truth or merely playing the part.

It is known that blind spots in countertransference and unworked-through narcissistic elements of the analyst may lead to serious deviations from psychoanalytic ethics. Enactments driven by self-serving motives, manipulations of the other, or even more severe violations of the analytic frame deeply wound the therapeutic process and the psyche of the analysand.

Yet what is ethically appropriate is not always attainable. Blind spots in countertransference and unprocessed narcissistic elements of the analyst may lead to serious deviations from psychoanalytic ethics. Enactments driven by self-serving motives, manipulation of the other, or even more severe boundary violations deeply damage both the therapeutic process and the analysand's psyche.

The presentation will conclude with brief vignettes illustrating the exercise of seduction or power by the analyst in the analytic or supervisory relationship, and with reference to Glen Gabbard's (2017) work on severe sexual boundary violations, based on a thirty-year study of 300 cases. The author offers critical data for understanding the causes, management, and prevention of such violations, which gravely undermine the ethical and therapeutic integrity of psychoanalysis.