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Winnicott, the phenomenologists and phenomenology:
Phenomenological interpretations on Donald Winnicott’s work

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In this research, we propose multiple aims, which we want to accomplish once this thesis is finished. The title of our inquiry becomes very suggestive, albeit it does not reveal everything about it. Our title is formulated in a general manner, and it will present several ramifications throughout our research. These ramifications designate the directions of our inquiry, namely the outline of the horizon of the infant's lifeworld, starting with the empirical data furnished by the work of Donald Winnicott, but also the attempt to comment upon the most important chapters of his major book, *Playing and Reality*. Therefore, we propose to treat the possible phenomenological interpretations of Donald Winnicott's work. Two main lines can be drawn out of this statement, namely that Winnicott's psychoanalytical work will be interrogated in the framework of a descriptive and mundane phenomenology, and afterwards, the Winnicottian framework will be compared with certain phenomenological theories, coming from authors such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eugen Fink, Alfred Schutz, and others. Henceforth, our research aims to make an outline, which considers Winnicott's work as a unitary whole. The entire purpose of our inquiry is to establish how Winnicott's framework can interact with the theories of the abovementioned phenomenological authors.

In the following lines, we will discuss the interdisciplinary profile of our inquiry, namely the conjunction between Winnicottian psychoanalysis and phenomenology, the latter being represented by the abovementioned canonical authors. This organic relation between phenomenology and psychoanalysis has its origin in their common commencement, i.e. the historical encounter between Sigmund Freud and Edmund Husserl during the seminars of Franz Brentano, their common teacher. The tradition of this relation will be continued in France by the exchange of thoughts between Jacques Lacan and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, so that this relation can acquire a unitary form in the thought of Marc Richir. The thought of Marc Richir will be employed several times during our inquiry. For the moment, we can retain Richir's distinction between the phenomenological and the symbolic registers, a distinction onto which his entire system of thought is built. The framework of Marc Richir attempts, among other purposes, to provide certain interpretations of psychoanalytical subjects, such as the works of Freud, Lacan or Winnicott.

Before establishing the main activities of our inquiry, namely the attempt to provide a phenomenological reading of certain passages from the works of Winnicott, and to also provide a sort of psychoanalytical and phenomenological synthesis, we propose the presentation of some introductory chapters, which will guide us through the present thesis. Thus, throughout our inquiry, we attempt to demonstrate how phenomenology interacts with psychoanalysis, i.e. to reveal the possibility of a historical synthesis of phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Throughout our thesis, Winnicott's departure from the theories of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein will be most evident, so that we can present what exactly the former brings new to the realm of psychoanalysis. All these activities relate to our aim from this present paper, i.e. that of highlighting the psychoanalytical aspects of Winnicott's work that can be compared with certain theories coming from the perspectives of phenomenological authors. We will attempt to integrate also the perspectives of Marc Richir concerning the works of Winnicott, because he is the sole phenomenological author who provided an extensive reading upon Winnicott's oeuvre. Thus, we mention the very interesting commentaries upon the notions of "transitional object" and "transitional area", the play without pre-established rules (of phantasy), but also the mirror-role of the mother's face. The mirror role of the mother's face will become for Marc Richir the exchange of gazes between mother and infant. The exchange of gazes between mother and infant will prove itself to be pivotal, because thanks to it, two "absolute here" are instituted, i.e. that of the mother and the infant's one. We can already anticipate that when the mother turns towards her infant, looking at him or her, she fixes his or her gaze, triggering a very important exchange between the two of them, and even between the infant and the world.

The method that is going to be employed is a comparative one, but also a descriptive one. Henceforth, we are going to compare the thematizations of the phenomenological authors with Winnicott's framework, to describe how they articulate the perspectives of the problems to be investigated. We mention from a historical and thematical point of view, Husserl's text about the infant's *First Empathy* from 1935. The problem of the child, or even of childhood, is partly absent from Heidegger's work, but we can just mention some scattered remarks from his *Zollikon Seminars*, wherein the relation between the mother's being-in-the-world and that of the infant is addressed. We can thus remember that the notion of being-in-the-world is the bedrock of *Being and Time*. Merleau-Ponty's work will prove once again to be an essential resource for our investigation, because he taught several courses on child psychology at Sorbonne, which were later

published as a book entitled *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*. Eugen Fink also treated the conjunction between child's play and the problem of embodiment. Child psychoanalysis commences, of course, with Sigmund Freud's theories, followed by Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, and reaching finally the so-called object-relation school of thought, wherein the two major representatives of it were Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott. The development of the object-relation school can be seen to have given birth to a new framework of thought, entitled intersubjective psychoanalysis, and here we can mention authors such as Daniel Stern, Colwyn Trevarthen or Thomas Ogden.

Our research is rather ambiguous in nature, because it could also be called a fundamental inquiry, because it investigates the fundamental concepts of both phenomenology and psychoanalysis, but also applied research onto the subject of child's psychology and psychopathology. The assumed interdisciplinary feature of our research might refer to the conjunction between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Moreover, throughout our argumentation, the phenomenological side pertains more to the mundane one, without of course missing out on the highly remarkable remarks of Marc Richir's transcendental inquiry.

One of the first sections of our inquiry will concern itself with the infant's being-in-the-world. The topic of this chapter presents certain Heideggerian resonances, and because of this, we aim, through Heidegger's thematization, to draw the basic lines of a developmental ontology. This developmental ontology will be treated in conjunction with Winnicott's maturational processes.

Therefore, we identified certain resemblances between the works of Heidegger and those of Winnicott. First, the Heideggerian being-in-the-world which was treated in *Being and Time* and later in another works, such as the *Zollikon Seminars* will represent the cornerstone of our argumentation. Being-in-the-world, which assumes from the very beginning that *Dasein's* existence is revealed by the ecstatic horizontal temporality seems to resemble Winnicott's notion of going-on-being. Both being-in-the-world and going-on-being are highly temporal structures which reveal the human being's relation to the world.

After this chapter dedicated to the infant's being-in-the-world, and more exactly, the demarcation of his or her dwelling in the world, we propose a phenomenologically inspired reading of a psychoanalytical theme, which could be called the fact of being-at-home-in-the-world. Therefore, we will analyze the phenomenological and psychological features which make us feel

at home in the world. Henceforth, familiarity will be interrogated too. We will start with Winnicott's texts around the Second World War, wherein children were taken to hostels, to highlight the peculiar function of being at home in the world, and correlatively, the emergence of our feelings of security and safety. Authors such as Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas or Bachelard will be recalled too, alongside their main theories of what makes the house a home. We will quickly notice how a mere house is not yet a home. Moreover, the home will represent a sort of facilitating ground, following Winnicott's vocabulary, for the early mother-infant interactions to unfold, alongside the events which take place within the "potential space". Husserl and Heidegger will be considered forerunners of this question, while Winnicott's account will be mostly compared to the thematizations of Levinas and Bachelard. Thus, we aim to show how the mere house becomes the home for the infant.

Therefore, if we proposed ourselves to start from the natural ordering of the chapters from *Playing and Reality*, we have to focus, first and foremost, on the notions of transitional object and transitional area. The transitional object has been interpreted in diverse manners by multiple authors, but for the moment, we have to notice that the transitional object is a symbol, representing the first not-me possession. Its key feature is that it renders possible the, so to say, transition from one finite province of meaning to another, using Schutz's vocabulary. Therefore, there exists a certain interaction between our attention to life and the transitional object, namely the latter can modulate the former.

What we want to prove is not the paramount role played by the transitional object in the economy of the infant's existence, which would situate us in the realm of psychology, but rather we want to suggest that it plays a pivotal role also in the life of the adult. We can just think of the work of art. We can walk around a gallery, and our gaze might stumble upon a work of art, which in this case functions like a transitional object, because it marks the transition from a finite province of meaning (the everyday life) to another finite province of meaning (the world of art). All this to-and-fro play from one region of existence to another is rendered possible by the specific tensions or intensities of our attention to life.

We also find very useful Schutz's example from the same text of 1945, wherein he anticipates Winnicott, when the former states that the infant who literally grabs a toy is automatically transported into the finite province of meaning of play. Authors such as Eugen Fink

would totally agree with this statement of Schutz's, because this sort of transitional object marks the passage from a reality to another, be it the world of dreams, phantasms or even play. Therefore, the transitional object, and the shock felt by the encounter with it, in Schutz's terms, modulate our attention to life, its intensities and tensions of duration.

The issue of transitional phenomena is rather complicated, because of their diversity. Therefore, Richir's observation concerning the resemblance of Winnicott's transitional phenomena and the former's language phenomena can only interest us, because it provides another crucial point of conjunction for our analysis. Moreover, the transitional object can be considered a sort of substitute for language during childhood, because the first not-me possession comes before the acquisition of language. We can just think of the adult who can express his or her feelings through language, while for the infant, the transitional object might provide this sort of atmosphere of calmness, which could point towards the possibility of authentic dialogue. This happens because the transitional phenomenon of babbling plays this peculiar role. Assuming a dialogical and relational perspective, thanks to the mother's encouragement towards the infant, he or she might babble several times until the very first attempts to reach a words become manifest. Once again, Richir's analysis on the infant's babbling proves themselves to provide the necessary framework to develop further the issues of transitional phenomena. For Richir, babbling becomes even a sort of proto musicality, which can provide us with certain motifs for our later analyses concerning interhuman musicality.

Returning for a moment to the issue of the transitional object, and its phenomenological constitution, Gilles Deleuze analysis on the virtual object might prove themselves to explicate how the transitional object becomes operative. In *Difference and Repetition*, he mentions the virtual object, which can resemble the works of Freud, Lacan, Klein and even Winnicott, in which the object of desire is addressed. We can already notice how the virtual object, i.e. the transitional one, presents a portrayable and an unportrayable feature.

The next chapter from *Playing and Reality* concerns itself with the differentiation between dreams, daydreams and phantasms. In this context, we can already introduce Husserl's notion of phantasy and link it with the overall problem of play. Moreover, the temporality of phantasy might help us in establishing this subtle, yet essential difference between these oneiric phenomena.

In this chapter from *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott introduces a rarely discussed notion in scientific literature, namely the area of formlessness. This area points to unintegration and to a state of relaxation. Throughout the chapter dedicated to this Winnicottian motif, we aim to introduce the Kantian sublime and Richir's construal of it, to prove finally how this specific gap in experience can represent the very emergence of creativity. First and foremost, unintegration or relaxation can be construed as a sort of formlessness, which upon the encounter with the sublime, it being also formless, might result in the experience of creativity. Of course, this process is rather complicated, but in our chapter dedicated to it, we aim to explain it extensively. Contrariwise to this experience there would be trauma, or what Richir has called the negative sublime. A chapter dedicated to the fear of breakdown will also be present throughout our argumentation, wherein we will link this traumatic experience with the notions introduced by Henri Maldiney, namely those of transpassibility and transpossibility.

As we have already insisted about this point, the vast realm of fantasy opens the region of play. In this chapter, Winnicott's account will be interpreted alongside the one provided by Eugen Fink. Even though their thematizations might seem at first to resonate, their perspectives are also rather different, as Joonas Taipale has showed. Both Winnicott and Fink postulate the existence of the "playworld", as a distinct finite province of meaning from the others. The "playworld" is grounded onto a sort of ontological in-between, in this case, the in-between refers to fantasy and reality. Thus, we arrive at our next observation, which points to the idea that this realm of play is a hybrid one, in which the subjective elements such as fantasies and imagination fuse with the objective element, i.e. the shared external world. Play also represents a form of wellbeing, which can be further linked with the cohesion of group relations. Play also involves playthings, which can be interpreted in Winnicott's framework as transitional objects. As we have already stated, the Finnish phenomenological author Joonas Taipale will be also mentioned, because of his paper, wherein he describes the similarities and the differences between the accounts of the two authors. The work of Winnicott can be thus called, after Taipale, a sort of illusion-model, whereas Fink's account can be called a hybrid model. The model provided by Winnicott functions for the infant's, whereas Fink's one functions for older infant's, argues Taipale.

Another key element that can be discussed in our research is the thematization of Marc Richir of Winnicott main concepts. Here we could remember the play without pre-established rules

of phantasy, but also the psychopathology of the transitional area. Furthermore, István Fazakas's paper on the role of phantasy in Winnicott's description of play might be very useful to us. Nonetheless, Fazakas wrote also an article with Tudi Gozé, wherein they attempted to show how the transcendental history of trust unfolds. The two authors, who have drawn heavily on Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, Richir, but also Winnicott aimed to prove how the facilitating environment (represented by the family) is introjected under the guide of the Earth that does not move. This would be the very origin of our feeling of trust in the world.

Therefore, the third, fourth and fifth chapters from Winnicott's book will be treated in conjunction, as a unitary whole, the main theme being that of play. We ought to advance from the very beginning the distinction between play and playing, namely between the play with no pre-established rules and, so to say, the play with pre-established rules. Moreover, and following this pivotal distinction, we have to state from the very beginning the notion of play around which our entire argumentation will gravitate.

Creativity is a delicate subject for Winnicott, because it pertains to being alive, and we can just remember the example of the infant who prolongs his or her cry to feel the pleasure of a musical note. Play is eminently creative, it being conceived by Winnicott as a way to live, and more importantly, as a way to discover one's true self. Joonas Taipale will invoke the example of the infant's cry in another context, wherein he discusses the experiences that involve one's entire self. Therefore, these experiences that involve the totality of ourselves, accompanied by the dynamic forms of vitality (Stern), have the peculiar role of awakening the infant to the world, in Husserl's sense of the term. Thus, integration becomes the main concept advanced by Taipale.

The chapter dedicated to Winnicott's theory concerning the destruction and the survival of the object will be treated extensively, and to accomplish this task, we will start from the theories of Husserl and Heidegger, without of course, forgetting authors such as Scheler or Levinas. We will also borrow some notions pertaining to Buber's late philosophical anthropology, such as his notion of distance and relation. Our reading of this chapter can be construed as a response to Jean Piaget's theory of object permanence. Therefore, we aim to develop Winnicott's model for object constancy, which could represent also the constancy of the other person. Thus, applying all of these resources onto our reading, we aim to establish that there exists something like a Winnicottian inspired theory of object permanence. Our argumentation will be based on Husserl's theory of the

„I can”, wherein we interpret the omnipotence of the child’s mind, and its disillusionment as the acknowledging of the „I cannot”.

Therefore, Winnicott postulates a passage from object relation to object usage, a sort of inversion of Buber’s two movements of relation from his late philosophical anthropology. Thus, for Winnicott, in order that an object is to be used, the object must survive the infant’s destructive impulse, which of course, comes from aggressivity. Hegelian echoes might be found in the case of this theory, and here, we of course have in mind Hegel’s chapter on desire from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a chapter wherein the truth of self-consciousness was attained by the destruction and the survival of the object.

The question that will guide our attempt is how does it, phenomenologically speaking, happen something as a passage from relation to usage. Here we have to evoke the notion of the illusion of omnipotence, which phenomenologically can be interpreted as a sort of absolute „I can”. Therefore, the infant lives in this absolute „I can” until the point when he or she stumbles upon the resistance of the external world, a resistance which for Heidegger reminded *Dasein* that he is not the master of the world. Thus, by virtue of the resistance of the object, i.e. the fact that it survives destruction, there emerges the passage from I can to I cannot, or using Levinas’ wording, what was previously in our face, now opposes us. This I cannot is paramount for the infant’s acknowledging that the object is something different from the self, this phenomenon being designated by Buber as distance, or even the act of distance. Henceforth, we argue that once the passage from I can to I cannot takes place, the infant sets the object at a distance, thus instituting an absolute here and an absolute there. From now on, the object has permanence in the mind of the infant, or as Winnicott put it, the object has even a life for the child.

We are now moving towards the problem of the mirror-role of the mother’s face, a theory in which Winnicott draws on the works of Lacan. We are going to start from the phenomenology of the gesture, as it is found in Heidegger’s *Zollikon Seminars*, to analyze how this gesture is mirrored by the mother, thus awakening the infant to the world. We consider that Winnicott’s theory anticipates the works of Daniel Stern, especially his notion of affect attunement, but also the moment of meeting. Briefly put, when the mother receives the spontaneous gesture of the infant, she mirrors it, providing back a part of the infant’s self, this allowing the infant to be creative. We do not exclude the possibility of appealing in this chapter to the ideas of Joonas Taipale

concerning affect attunement, because these ideas can be easily applied to Winnicott's framework. This face-to-face interaction between mother and infant represents a moment of meeting, because the mirroring coming from the mother's part of the infant's gesture provides him or her with the moment of sublime, as it was described in the works of Marc Richir. We can thus call this process the interhuman sublime.

This affect attunement between mother and infant, which is called by Winnicott the mirror-role of the mother's face plays different roles. The first function would be that of regulating the infant's affectivity, and the second, to mirror it. We can once again, not forget Joona Taipale's very interesting interpretations, wherein he discusses the infant's self-understanding provided by the mirror, but also the possibility of the emergence of reflective distance, namely the possibility of regarding oneself as a detached spectator, at the third person. Furthermore, we will also invoke Lacan's mirror stage, which involves several philosophical and phenomenological implications. The dialectics of perception and apperception are also present in Lacan's conception.

The adjacent chapters of this research, namely the second section, demand to be mentioned. Thus, we must build up a chapter about the four key notions which are present in Winnicott's work only implicitly. These are the notions of intersubjectivity, temporality, corporality and musicality. Our aim is to prove how these four components interact reciprocally, these being constitutive for the life of the infant.

Musicality is the *sine qua non* of every communication established between mother and infant, as Trevarthen suggests, following Daniel Stern. The idea of an affect attunement which precedes musicality is to be found in the texts of Alfred Schutz concerning the issue of musicality. Therefore, our main activity will be to compare the accounts of Schutz and Stern, to apply our results to Winnicott's notion of primary maternal preoccupation, which is rendered possible by the musicality between mother and infant. Our argument will be strengthened by the observations of Husserl and Taipale about the temporal, or even musical structure of empathy.

We have already mentioned the notions of primary and secondary intersubjectivity, which will guide our analysis in this chapter. Shaun Gallagher draws on Trevarthen, to prove how the infant interacts with the world from the very beginning. Therefore, primary intersubjectivity would indicate the face-to-face interaction between mother and infant, while secondary intersubjectivity presupposes the presence of an object between mother and infant. The contribution of Gallagher

resides in the fact that we proved how these two primary modes of interaction do not disappear when we grow old but rather are conserved during adult life. We wish to argue the fact that these two types of interactions are already present in the works of Winnicott, especially in his writings on maturational processes and on reciprocity.

We can anticipate already the attempt to sketch a theory of desynchronization between mother and infant, which would result from the infant's experience of explicit temporality, of course, in the meaning attributed to it by Thomas Fuchs. Hence, in the chapter dedicated to temporality, the distinction between implicit and explicit temporality will be addressed. The theory of narrative identity proposed by Paul Ricoeur will prove itself to be a cornerstone for our argumentation, because thanks to it, the narrative identity comes close to the thematizations of Marc Richir about the processes of subjectification and humanization. We will ask ourselves how the infant acquires a narrative identity. Thus, alongside the theory of Beatriz Priel, we aim to sketch the intersubjective process of the construction of time, proving that it is not an accomplishment of the isolated mind, but rather it has its basis in an intersubjective context.

The chapter concerning corporality will also have the peculiar role of setting up our final chapter concerning the process of self-other differentiation. We will advance certain observations coming from Merleau-Ponty thought, alongside Winnicott's remarks. Whereas Merleau-Ponty speaks of the flesh of the world, Winnicott discusses the body as a limiting membrane. The contributions of Francine Wynn will be also presented, because the author proposed a process of differentiation from the standpoint of our bodily being, which has at its basis the chiasmic relation between mother and infant. Coming back to Merleau-Ponty and to Winnicott, while the first proposed a Husserlian version, wherein the lived body was the origin of spatial and temporal coordinates, the latter proposed that the limiting membrane represents a genuine accomplishment of the maturational processes which allow the infant to discover his or her body, but also to demarcate the interior from the exterior.

The last chapter of our inquiry presupposes the complex process of differentiation between self and others, a chapter wherein we will provide a critique to the theory of fusion between mother and infant. Thus, the framework which we will propose is twofold, namely it presupposes the bodily register and the temporal one. Considering the bodily register, once again the theories of Merleau-Ponty will be of great use to us, while on the side of the temporal process of

differentiation, we will draw mostly on Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, this being crucial for the genesis of the infant's autobiographic self.

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