

Fleshy Memory

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Freud conceived of the ego as energetically self-contained, though formed in relations with the maternal and paternal figures of the Oedipal situation. In his Hegelian reading of Freud, Lacan emphasises the relationships that give rise to (and undermine) a sense of ego identity with his famous account of the infant's self-recognition through the other in the mirror stage. In her latest book, *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity*,* Teresa Brennan goes even further, by suggesting not only that the ego is formed through its relations with others, but also that it is neither self-generating nor self-contained in those relations. She takes Lacan's statement that 'the unconscious is the desire of the other' literally and proposes a revolutionary intersubjective theory of the drives. Brennan argues that this splits the superego and repression so that many of the contradictions in Freud's theory of femininity can be resolved. In addition, she uses her intersubjective theory of drives to explain how, in general, women experience psychic repression in relation to their socio-economic oppression. Her theory has significant consequences for psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, and ethical theory. Here I will develop the implications of Brennan's theory of drives for feminist theory and ethical theory.

Brennan develops Freud's theory of drives using his account of excitations from the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*. She emphasises Freud's theory of excitations, which is modelled on physics, rather than his theory of drives, which is modelled on biology. Following one Freud and not the other, Brennan provides descriptions of ego formation, superego, repression, psychosis, Oedipal resolution and masculinity and femininity based on a physics that circumscribes energy exchange within a spatio-temporal field constructed through that exchange. As she explains the physics of psychic energy, originally the foetus *in utero* is literally one with its mother's body and it is the distance and delay that result from birth that give rise to a sense of space and time. Both space and time arise from the exchange between mother and infant that revolves around the infant's needs:

In utero, there is no or less delay between the sense of a need and its fulfilment. It is only after birth that the sense of time is born of the sense of delay. Of course this hypothesis, especially where it concerns the origins of delay, relies on the idea of a non-reductionist materialism. It supposes some fleshy memory of a state in which the delay between need and fulfilment did not exist or was less, and where subject and other were not differentiated. But it is precisely this fleshy memory that the unconscious construction of spatio-temporal bearings will conceal.

The gap between the need and its fulfilment creates a sense of space and time, which in turn conceals the 'fleshy memory' of an original psychophysical connection with the mother's body. Insofar as there is an intimate connection between psychic and physical processes evidenced by the ways in which emotions, traumas, and repression cause physical 'symptoms', then we can suppose that the foetus is affected by its mother's psychophysical states since it is part of her body.

What is striking in Brennan's analysis is her claim that this type of *in utero* psychophysical connection operates *ex utero* only at a 'slower pace'. Human beings exchange energy through these psychophysical connections. Emotions and affects migrate between human beings; we can hand emotions to each other or trade affects. In fact, for Brennan, it is the exchange of affect in the form of directed energy, or attention, that gives the ego its coherence and identity. She concludes that the ego is neither self-contained nor self-generating but rather the effect of an interplay of intersubjective psychic forces.

These psychic forces can be either active or passive. Brennan argues that the infant's original identification is with the mother's active capacities; it is both passive and active. The infant very literally identifies with its mother's activities and takes them for its own. It passively turns her action inward. But the direction of this energy must be reversed if the infant is to act in the world. The infant's passive ego must become active. For Brennan it is the Oedipus complex that divides the passive and active forces which coexist in the infant before the Oedipal situation. Also it is in the Oedipal situation that active forces are 'cemented' to the masculine and the passive forces to the feminine.

Insofar as Brennan rejects Freud's biological hypotheses

* Teresa Brennan, *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity*, London, Routledge, 1992. 224pp., £35.00 hb., £10.99 pb., 0 915 07498 7 hb., 0 415 07449 5 pb.

and insists on a psychical interpretation of the drives, she avoids biologism in her analysis of masculinity and femininity. On her account there is a dialectic between the socio-economic oppression of women and the association of the feminine position with passivity. The ways in which little girls are given (conscious or unconscious) attention determines whether or not they will take up the feminine position; there is no inherent link between femininity and females. In fact, Brennan brings into focus that for Freud the mystery of the riddle of femininity is the appearance of femininity in men; even for Freud femininity is not restricted to females, nor masculinity to males.

In the masculine Oedipus complex, the mother's active executive capacities, having been turned inward to form the ego ideal or superego, are taken over by the masculine position and redirected outward, while in the feminine Oedipus complex the direction of energy remains inward:

If it is accepted that the superego predates the Oedipus complex, the ideal resolution of the masculine Oedipus complex can be read as a forging, a union of capacities that were hitherto identified with the mother and original superego, but come to belong to the masculine ego. In this process, the early superego changes its character. Before the Oedipus complex, the active and passive experience of these executive or subjective capacities was a fluid one; the subject was still finding its sexual bearings. The Oedipus complex cements the active deployment of these capacities to the masculine position. But in the feminine case, the capacities for attempting to and acting on reality are reversed back to their original passive state. Femininity constitutes a passive overlay on an originally passive experience, and this passive overlay is not restricted to the female sex.

The difference between femininity and masculinity is the *direction* of energy. The masculine directs energy outward and is thereby able to act in the world. The feminine, on the other hand, directs energy inward and is thereby unable to act in the world. Brennan maintains that the direction the drives take during the Oedipal situation is dependent upon the attention the infant is given. Attention, directed energy, from an external source is necessary for redirecting energy outward and for constructing and sustaining a self-image. Brennan describes this external attention as a kind of support for the ego and its actions. Without this support the ego must try to produce its own support through daydreams and hallucinations that ultimately absorb more energy than they produce and thereby render the subject unable to act in the world; energy turned inward in these kinds of self-sustaining endeavours at its limit becomes self-destructive.

Brennan argues that the feminine ego gives 'living attention' that provides an active self-image to the masculine ego. Other feminist theorists have pointed out many of the ways in which women – mothers, wives and lovers – have traditionally performed most of the emotional labour that supports men in their careers and public lives. Brennan's argument is more radical. She maintains that the feminine

ego becomes a kind of receptacle for disabling affects projected out of the masculine ego. In an aggressive but unconscious act the masculine ego dumps its hostility and disabling emotions onto the other and then forgets that it has done so. In this way the feminine other contains masculine anxiety so that he can be productive. The masculine drives 'make the other an anchor by depositing unwanted affects in her, and thereby secure a surplus of living attention'.

Brennan suggests that in order for a woman to 'overcome femininity' she needs to reconnect 'words to affects in a way that preserves her identity while it facilitates acting on reality'. This is extremely difficult if she has an inward-turned image of herself and is constantly confronted with this image in patriarchal culture. Insofar as she takes on the desire of the other she cannot overcome femininity on her own. Brennan ends *The Interpretation of the Flesh* with a call to action, but she does not provide any specific account of how we can overcome femininity and become productive. Her theory, however, provides a model for reconceiving the fundamental relationship between self and other in such a way that we can at least imagine the transformation of the asymmetrical relation between masculine and feminine egos into a reciprocal exchange between two human beings who are both active and passive.

Brennan's claim that the superego originates with the mother's executive capacities suggests that the mother provides not only the satisfaction of physical needs, but also a precursor to the Law of the Father. Brennan's suggestion is similar to Kristeva's notion of a law that operates within the mother's body. This maternal law before the law sets up the Law of the Father and the infant's entrance into language. Kristeva maintains that this maternal law is a material law and that the logic of language operates within the body. Brennan presents a similar argument when she concludes that it is the *in utero* communication code used between maternal body and foetus, and the infant's fleshy memory of this code, that set up the possibility of language. In addition to bringing the maternal function into the centre of psychoanalytic theory, this argument provides a new way to conceive of the primary relation between subject and object.

Brennan, like Kristeva and Lacan, believes that a third party is necessary in order to propel the subject into language. Something needs to break up the infant's dyadic dependence on the mother. If the mother possesses this executive function then the third term is already operating within the dyad; the dyad is already/also a triad. This means that we can take the relationship between the maternal body and the foetus/infant as a model for a subject-object relationship. The motivation for preferring this model over the Hegelian-Lacanian one of a fight to the death is that it might help us to imagine a relationship where identity does not require the death or repression of the other.

In an interview with Luce Irigaray the biologist H  l  ne Rouch discusses the role of the placenta as a medium of communication within the maternal body:

It plays a mediating role on two levels. On the one hand, it's the mediating space between mother and fetus, which means that there's never a fusion of

maternal and embryonic tissues. On the other hand, it constitutes a system regulating exchanges between two organisms, not merely quantitatively regulating the exchanges (nutritious substances from mother to fetus, waste matter in the other direction), but also modifying the maternal metabolism: transforming, storing, and redistributing maternal substances for both her own and the fetus' benefit. It thus establishes a relationship between mother and fetus, enabling the latter to grow without exhausting the mother in the process, and yet not simply being a means for obtaining nutritious substances.

As Rouch describes it, the placenta plays the kind of mediating role that Brennan identifies as the fleshy code that sets up the possibility of language. The placenta is the medium of communication between the maternal body and the foetus. Yet at the same time these two are neither autonomous nor identical. Within the maternal body we have a relationship that is neither an identity nor an absolute separation. The placenta protects the foetus from the maternal body's defence mechanisms; it communicates to the maternal body that the foetus is not an alien other.

When the relation between self and other becomes ambiguous, when identity is an exchange between self and other, then we can begin to talk about ethics. Ethics requires a relationship between two that are neither identical nor completely autonomous. For if they are identical there is no relationship and therefore no ethics. And if they are completely autonomous then there is only external law to bind two individuals together and ground obligations to the other.

At this point, taking off from Brennan's intersubjective theory of drives and weaving it together with my reading of the ethical implications of Irigaray's and Kristeva's notions of maternity, I want to suggest an alternative model for the primary ethical relation between self and other. Both Kristeva and Irigaray begin a call to reconceptualise maternity in such a way that the infant's identity with the maternal body is no longer seen as a threat to sociality. Brennan also implies that sociality is founded in, and not threatened by, the maternal body.

For Irigaray, identification with the mother is a threat to the infant's identity only because it is seen as an identification with nature. In *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* she says that the mother is a threat to sociality because she is denied a desiring body; hers is an anti-social body without the relationship to a third term which is necessary for sociality. Only if the mother's body is a desiring body can an identification with it be the beginning of a social relation – a renewed social relation – rather than a threat to the social.

For Irigaray, it is only when the mother comes to be seen as a speaking, loving, desiring human being that ethics will be possible. When the primary relationship is seen as a relationship with a speaking desiring being it will provide a model for subsequent relationships in which the ground for our relations to each other is intrinsic to the relationship itself. Only then can we talk about reciprocal exchange.

Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference requires a rearticulation of maternity that resuscitates the mother from the patriarchal association with nature/death and makes of her instead the meeting of body and culture.

Kristeva also calls for a new ethics based on a reconceived maternity that is the knot between nature and culture. 'Herethics', as she calls it in 'Stabat Mater', is founded on a daughter's love for, and identification with, her mother during her own experience of motherhood. Like Irigaray, Kristeva proposes a new notion of alterity within the maternal body. For Kristeva, the maternal body is the most obvious example of alterity within the body, but every-body is full of alterity. The social relation with an other is already operating on the material and psychic level within everyone; and the social relation is interior to the psyche. For Kristeva, the ethical relation should be modelled on an embrace of the return of the repressed other within ourselves. Ethics is based on the love of the other within yourself and only when you learn to love the other within can you learn to love others.

Although the ethical implications of Brennan's theory complement those of both Irigaray's and Kristeva's theory, the intersubjective theory of drives gives us the language with which to talk about Irigaray's vision of reciprocal exchange between subject and other and embrace Kristeva's other within. On this model the primary relationship is not one in which the subject takes identity only by annihilating difference or the other. Rather, the subject's very identity is sustained by virtue of an ongoing exchange with the other. When the maternal body is taken as the model of this relationship then the exchange can be seen as loving rather than threatening. While within contemporary patriarchal culture the psychophysical exchange of energy works to women's detriment, if we can reconceive of the primary relation with the mother then we can also conceive the psychophysical exchange of energy as reciprocal and supportive of active self-images even for women.

As Brennan describes it communication already takes place in an *in utero* psychophysical exchange. Within the maternal body the codes of the communication and the very foundation of social relations are already operating. On this model, we are not the autonomous agents of Kantian ethics. Rather we are fundamentally and intrinsically dependent on each other for the generation and maintenance of our identities. And we are dependent on each other not just on a conscious level, but on an unconscious level as well. Brennan's intersubjective theory of drives challenges any notion of autonomy on an ontological level. This is why, as Kristeva or Irigaray might say, we have to work on the level of the imaginary in order to change our very image of relationships. Brennan provides us with a new image of relationship, a more fluid and potentially reciprocal relationship. *The Interpretation of the Flesh* provides a revolutionary vision of human relationships that promises to change not only the way in which we read Freud and our notion of femininity but also our conception of our ethical obligations to each other.