Possibilities of the Father Role¹



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My reason for choosing this particular subject is that, in recent years, I have been investigating, on the basis of autobiographies, to what extent fathers are important for the personal development of children. The main views of these investigations are founded on the concept of biographical education theory (Loch, 1979). This theory, rather than looking upon education primarily from the point of view of the educator, focuses on the person that has been educated. Erzogenheit (being educated) is the modality in which education becomes real during the process of life. It consists of the attitudes and abilities the individual has learned from the system of social relations and cultural contexts in which he or she has developed. In his or her Erzogenheit, which has factual and fictional aspects as well as conscious and unconscious dimensions, the mature individual experiences the presence of his or her educators. They constitute his or her "superego," as Freud would say; the "voices of conscience," as Husserl would put it. What is more, the previous relations to one's educators can change during the various developmental stages one goes through: one person is forgotten; another, as one grows older, appears to have been less of an educator than he or she had seemed during childhood; a third person's educational influence is realized only afterwards, when one has reached maturity. In every autobiography which I take up for analysis, I start from this concept to look for the constellation of significant others that is typical for a culture, period, society, or social class, and characteristic for the particular individual as far as his or her personal development during life has been influenced by them: in good or bad ways, as protectors or oppressors, as challengers or seducers, as saviors or corrupters, and so forth. In this way, the father may be judged by the child, who has grown up and writes his or her autobiography, as a good or mediocre educator, or even as a total pedagogical failure.

The autobiographical literature of the last ten years abounds with examples in which sons as well as daughters square accounts with their fathers. The educational function of the father has become less clear. In family pedagogy (unpardonably neglected for a long time but now again seen as the initial pedagogical discipline), in family sociology, in developmental psychology, and particularly in psychoanalysis, the significance of the role of fathers in the child's growth

has been overshadowed by the role of mothers. This even applies to research where one is attempting to define father roles in a new way; the concepts remain weak, hardly convincing and mother oriented (Lamb, 1981; Fthenakis, 1985). The well known, destructive criticism that has been leveled from various sides against the authoritarian, bourgeois father has had its effect; what is left of him today comes down to a sorry figure. The relativization of patriarchic omnipotence in favor of parental partnership, which was undoubtedly necessary, has affected the father role. In preindustrial and industrial society, the father was endowed with too much presence, outside as well as inside the family, but nowadays in postindustrial society, he appears to have too little. With all his job related and political involvements in the muddle of his commitments outside the family, the father has lost himself, and his children are unable to perceive anything but exhaustion after he comes home. Today, children appear to become more and more dissatisfied with their fathers, permanently looking for father substitutes, while the fathers themselves do not appear to have many intentions left for their children and therefore have nothing convincing to offer them for the future. Between the "fear of the father" and the "fatherless society," it seems that one is practically unable to devise the social possibilities of this role (Schatzman, 1974; Mitscherlich, 1963).

The father problem inevitably confronts pedagogy with psychoanalytical issues. For the worldwide symbolic murder of the father figure we experience today is a phenomenon that cannot only be approached by *Bewusstseinswissenschaft* (a science of consciousness), as is Husserl's well known understanding of phenomenology. It is, in addition, dependent on an archeology that explores the depths of the layers of the spiritual life on which conscience is founded. Here one can find the things that are suppressed by the conscious mind because they are too painful to be acknowledged. Therefore, I follow the example of Paul Ricoeur (1965) by considering psychoanalysis as a form of radical hermeneutics.

Langeveld (1963)² has directed our attention to the constitutive importance of the father role:

When Freud believes that the belief in God originates from human infantilism, one could just as well say: "No, the fathers have created an ideal image for themselves. The God of the religious believers is a God of fathers who have doubts about themselves. Hence the fathers say: not I, but He."

A world in which the fathers fail, because they are too well off and because they are always busy, such a world of welfare is about to turn the fathers into irresponsible people who have never really matured and who are interested only in games, pleasure and leisure-time. Who then, finally, takes over responsibility? (pp. 12,15) Today, the connection between infantilism and religious belief (in the sense of Matthew 18:3) is no longer certain from an anthropological point of view. What is more, the world of welfare is situated in the shadow of the world of hunger—a universal symptom of quite another crisis of the paternal supporter role. Yet both cited quotes still have importance for the understanding and the concern for change of a social historical process that during the last two decades has had not only a liberating influence, but also a damaging one. The damaging effect has been the destruction of the father role. Apart from its topicality in our postbourgeois, postindustrial world, this should concern us deeply, because it touches on the very history of human nature.

Like so many changes in public conscience, this process started as a private problem that Sigmund Freud, towards the end of the 19th century, believed to have experienced with his father in relation to his mother—a problem which he, as a young nerve specialist, recognized in his patient. Starting from these experiences, feelings of guilt (repressed because of their oppressing nature) were sublimated and generalized by Freud into the Oedipus complex, which was fundamental for the development of psychoanalytical theory. In this respect, it is not my intention to take part in the latest speculations about the question of what private reasons might have motivated Freud in 1897 to replace the Verführungstheorie (at first conceived as the explanation of neuroses) by the invention of the Oedipus complex (Krüll, 1979; Masson, 1984). Much more important than this episode seems Freud's own statement in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, namely that his own experiences in childhood were, if not decisive, then at least of importance for the conception of the Oedipus theorem:

Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood, even if it does not always occur so early as in children who have been made hysterics... If that is the case, the gripping power of Oedipus Rex, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, become intelligible, and one can understand why later fate dramas were such failures. Our feelings rise against any arbitrary, individual fate... but the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfillment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of expression which separates his infantile from his present state. (Freud, 1954, pp. 223,224)

This is, as far as I can see, the concept of the Oedipus complex in its earliest stage, still very much interwoven with Freud's own experiences of life, which oppressed his memory and were therefore repressed until then. This is an instructive example of the productive

part that can be played by autobiographical reflection with respect to the construction of psychological theories, and, the paradigmatic function of the myth as a way of thinking. The fatally individual, painfully private and thus repressed experiences will be perpetuated to a form of life once it delivers a myth in an ideal typical form that is illustrative to everyone. In this way it becomes generally human, publicly communicable and suited for theoretical discussion. Conversely, the explanations that are found in this way can be used to analyze and understand the decoding of distorted memories in which illusion and reality are confused as a result of repression mechanisms. Thus memory is liberated by psychoanalysis, and the infantile inclinations that have been brought back to their mythical archetypes become constructively meaningful for the development of the ego. This constructive, normative meaning is formulated in psychoanalytical theory in the form of sociogenetic functions. A mature, phenomenologically perfect formulation of the Oedipus complex in relation to the development of a child's personality can be found in Freud's essay "Mass Psychology and Ego-analysis":

Identification is known to psychoanalysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person. It plays a part in the early history of the Oedipus complex. A little boy will exhibit special interest in his father; he would like to become like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere. We may say simply that he takes his father as his ideal.

At the same time as this identification with his father, or a little later, the boy has begun to develop a true object-cathexis towards his mother according to the attachment (anaclitic) type. He then exhibits, therefore, two psychologically distinct ties: a straight-forward sexual objectcathexis towards his mother and an identification with his father which takes him as his model. The two subsist side by side for a time without any mutual influence or interference. In consequence of the irresistible advance towards a unification of mental life, they come together at last; and the normal Oedipus complex originates from their confluence. The little boy notices that his father stands in his way with his mother. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile coloring and becomes identical with the wish to replace his father in regard to his mother as well. Identification, in fact, is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone's removal. It behaves like a derivative of the first, oral phase of the organization of the libido, in which the object that we long for and prize is assimilated by eating and is in that way annihilated as such. The cannibal, as we know, has remained at this moment; he has a devouring affection for his enemies and only devours people of whom he is fond. (1953-1974, p. 105)

The wish of the son to approach again the mother who has given birth to him is impeded by the father. Therefore, as Freud concluded from his knowledge of life and his observation as a nerve specialist, the son has no other choice but to identify with the father. This occurrence is explained by Freud—in the sense of the ancient myths-as symbolic murder of the father. The son has to kill the father, so that the father can rise to the domain of the son's superego and is able to become an obligatory legacy, endowing the son with a task he has to fulfill through his actions. The importance of this magnificent idea for the history of the world lies in the fact that it is a reversal of the Christian paradigm. In the Christian paradigm, God requires the sacrifice of his son Christ for the sake of mankind's redemption. In contrast, in the psychoanalytical paradigm, the son demands the sacrifice of his father for the sake of his own self-realization. "Originating from a father religion, Christianity grew into a religion of the son. It did not avoid its fate of having to eliminate the father" (Freud, 1982, p. 580). This was the conclusion Freud drew with the claim of enlightenment toward the end of his later work Man Moses and Mono-Theistic Religion. With this dashing attempt to understand the relation between Jewish and the Christian religion in psychoanalytical terms, psychoanalysis assumes a growing importance in regard to the history of religion. That is to say, it assumes the character of a salvation theory that provides sense and meaning, whether its representatives are prepared to acknowledge it or not.

This very passage, where Freud authoritatively proclaims his theory to be the only valid one, offers phenomenology the chance to join in the psychoanalytical discourse. Rather than having a discussion with himself or with his patients and students, Freud here generalizes his theory to a dogma and claims the Oedipus complex to be universally valid. It should apply to family constellations in any society, whether historic, modern, primitive, or civilized—and in the same unvarying way, as a constant of human nature, a fate of individual lives that recurs continuously. This dogmatic assertion had to evoke counterarguments from disciplines that occupy themselves with the variety of human beings, and thus the long discussion started in which phenomenology plays a part as well.

The formula of the disappearance of the Oedipus complex was Freud's own, but what he meant was just that in the life of individuals as well as in the cultural tradition of societies, there is a temporary disappearance, a repression, a new division, and a different structuring of the deep energies in the household of the soul that express themselves in the Oedipus symbol. In an essay that is very illuminating for an understanding of this connection, "The Father Figure—From Fantasy Image into Symbol," Ricoeur shows that Freud had thought the Oedipal wish to kill the father in order to be able to possess the mother to be invincible, "as if the Oedipus complex would condemn the psyche to a sort of running on the spot, a compulsory inclination to begin over and over again. In this sense the Oedipal inheritance certainly has the character of fate" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 32) concerning the life history of every individual just as much as the history of humanity.

This elucidating discussion of psychoanalysis with all human beings is joined by phenomenology with the methodological proposal as conceived by Husserl in Experience and Judgement, the ideierende Abstraktion which the Oedipus complex generalization represents undoubtedly, putting it to the test and founding it by way of eidetical variation; that is to say, by finding and inventing as many examples of conceivable variants of the Oedipus idea as possible, one attempts to make it comparable through the formation of types. thus creating a reliable definition of what all variants have in common (Husserl, 1972, pp. 410-420). In this sense, the phenomenologist could start a discussion with the psychoanalyst in which the following question should be analyzed: How can the Oedipus complex be realized in historically demonstrable and, moreover, systematically imaginable variants of the father role, which can, next to the variants that became fateful to us for and through Freud, just as well be constituted by phenomenological description and which can even be given concrete and verifiable form by means of autobiographical documents? It appears to me that the more psychoanalytical theorists are interested in providing the universality of the Oedipus complex hypothesis, the more eager they are to entertain this proposal. In view of the limited amount of space at my disposal, I discuss only a few variants of the father role in the form of exemplary questions.

One way to start the discussion would be to oppose the psychoanalytical example of the father role (made absolute by Freud), of the father and son rivalry in relation to the mother, by the *example of the failing father figure*. What happens to the Oedipal wish, apparently present in every child, when the father fails? A possible answer is given by Jean-Paul Sartre (1965) in his autobiography Les Mots. He could kill his father neither factually nor symbolically because the latter died even before the son could take notice of him.

This father is not even a shadow, not even a glance. The two of us have lived on the same planet for some time, that is all . . . Added to this is, no doubt, my incredible inconsiderateness, I am not a leader and do not want to become one . . . The most authoritarian person commands in the name of another person, a sanctified parasite—his father. He transfers the abstract acts of violence he has suffered from himself. In my whole life I have not been able to give one command without laughing, because power means nothing to me; I have never been taught how to obey. (1965, p. 16)³

In contrast to this, what becomes of the Oedipal wish, when it is not the father who leaves the mother, but the mother who leaves the father? This is the *example of the failing mother*. In his *Kindergeschichte*, Peter Handke writes about his eight-year-old son living alone with him for some time: In the same year it came to a disagreement between the man and the child that was different from just annoyance. In the past few years he had totally directed himself to his immature companion; during the daytime he could not be much more than his "nourisher" and used to think about it as a beautiful role and as an occupation worthy of a human being. (But the child keeps the writer from working.) The continuous absence of form was caused, so he thought, by the child that paralysed his imagination with his sheer presence and thus kept away the adult from his destination . . The child, feeling the difference, moved away of his own accord, not insulted or grudging, but proud, and later he said to a third person with regard to his father: "I do not want to see him again. He should go away." (1981, pp. 81-84)

In what way is this an example of father identification? What is the sense in wishing the father away without the presence of the mother? When the mother comes back, the parents are having an argument in front of the child. They fight with "exactly the same expressions that are used everywhere in the world between disagreeing couples" (p. 89). At last when the father, tired of fighting, looks up, he sees "that the child has moved far away from both of them. In the distance, his face seems pale and stern" (p. 90). Now would he wish both parents to disappear? Or is it that he misses his father's example that should tell him how to love the mother?

What becomes of the Oedipus complex, and of the interaction of love and identification in the child's relation to the father and mother, when the child loses both parents? The dreadful example of the orphaned child is illustrated by the story of a Jewish child who, together with his parents, fled to France while escaping from the Germans and was hidden from the Gestapo in France by friends during the Second World War. Strangers tell him that his parents are on the run. Only years later the grown child reads his mother's final letter written to the protectors of her child while she herself awaited death in a concentration camp: "The fate of my husband and me is left now in God's hands. If he wants us to survive, we will witness the end of this gruesome period. If we should perish, we can still rejoice in the knowledge that our beloved child has been saved" (Friedländer, 1979, p. 82-83). This story is instructive for the answer to the question as to what, besides the parents, is the importance of others, and larger communities one links up with, for the formation of personal identity.

Contrasted to this is the example of the damaged child who has every reason to hate his parents. In Franz Innerhofer's novel, with the bitterly ironical title Schöne Tage (Beautiful Days) (1974) the constellation of the family is defined by the fact that neither the stepmother nor the father (who has taken on his illegitimate child as a foster son and uses him as a slave) accepts the child. The father beats the child for every trifle, and the mother is always overheard to be condescending about the child to other people. So the boy is unable either to love the stepmother or to have an unconscious conflict with his father in regard to her. Even with respect to his real mother, whom he has not seen for years and who is renounced by the father, an Oedipal conflict is hardly imaginable.

I conclude with a variant that is significant from a typological point of view because it illustrates Freud's prophecy of the sacrifice of the father in favor of the son. In the second half of our century, as Freud's psychoanalysis grew from an esoteric theory to an all-pervading ferment of public knowledge in Western society, the theory of symbolical murder of the father, based on psychoanalysis, became a sort of moral legitimation for all attempts to dethrone the father, to denounce him as innately authoritarian, to degrade his public and private status, and to discredit his family functions, notably his role as the educator of his children. In Joseph Heller's novel *Something Happened* (1974), this process of the devaluation of the father is brought to a fictional conclusion:

I was nothing but a selfish, petty-minded, blunt, insensitive wretch. I get depressed by feelings of shame and remorse when I think back to those self-complacent, tyrannical pursuits of my son. (p. 242)

I know now that I cannot handle children very well, not even my own, and so I hate to get into longer discussions with them. (p. 125)

If my daughter criticizes me or complains about me or makes a disparaging joke (even a very humorous and lighthearted one), I can be as affronted, hurt, and unnerved as though some stinging jibe had been inflicted upon me by Green. (I will hide my feelings from both of them, although I suspect Green sees into my skull and knows everything that takes place there. I may even want to cry.) I will sulk (and it is almost as though my daughter is the adult and I am the child). Our roles are reversed; and it is somewhat eerie. (p. 159)⁴

This example of the disintegration of the father clearly shows that the destruction of the father role is, if not the cause, then at least the significant expression of a complex of developments and complications that one could summarize with catchphrases like "upset relations between generations," "diffusion of the boundaries between the various periods of age in life," and "the mixture of sexual roles." A loss of identity that goes deeper than that which is called the social, personal, and self-identity by Goffman and Habermas is an imminent danger. The identity crisis we are approaching touches on our biological substance. Sexual identity is no longer fixed. In this regard, women as well as men are trying to find a new identity. The masculine woman and the feminine man are becoming new types. Compared with former days, men and women are less distinct from each other as far as clothes and gestures are concerned. In pedagogy as well as elsewhere, the transvestite is popular. It has become hard to distinguish between teachers and pupils, social workers and clients, professors and students. Recently there was a film on television about "Dammies and Maddies," dealing with the intermediate forms of motherly and fatherly ways to handle the education of small children.

The relation between generations seems to be reverse: The fathers are son oriented, and the mothers are daughter oriented. Margaret Mead (1970) has explained this phenomenon as the inescapable fate of the prefigurative culture we live in. Psychiatrists like Cooper (1971) proclaim the "death of the family," as it would only produce idiots. In his last great work, *L'idiot de la famille*, Sartre (1971) has used Flaubert's life history to explain once more why the bourgeois father should die. The latter is one of the most important examples of biographical research in education, which was already foreshadowed in the introductory chapter of Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960, pp. 13-111).

When the differences between generations are leveled, the boundaries between different age-periods become less apparent. Youthfulness has become a universal value. No one between 30 and 60 knows exactly whether he is allowed to feel already old or still young. We do not live, as Ellen Key (1902) has prophesied, in "the century of the child," but rather in the century of youth. Youthfulness seems to expand into childhood as well as into adulthood. Today, fathers and mothers are afraid of growing old. They have great difficulties entering old age as a cultural form of life in a creative, satisfying way that would enable them to identify with their age. Midlife crises have become part of everyday life—self-evident, inescapable, naturally belonging to the essence of adults who want to stay young at any cost.

Meanwhile, we do understand why "identity" has become the catchword, the desire, and the cult of this era. It is because we have identity problems that concern the natural foundations of human social life. In this basic, anthropological context, the radical loss of the ability to keep up the self which preys upon the root of human nature, has one of his crucial causes in the destruction of the father role. That is why today we live in what Lasch (1979) calls "the age of narcissism," not so much in the period of modern man who does not even allow his own father to tell him who he should be, but rather the age of postmodern man, whose own father is not able to tell him anything. Thus the postmodern man puts on any mask that is offered to him, looks into every mirror shown to him, and eagerly forms or deforms his attitude according to the promises made by those who offer him recognition as long as he is prepared to comply with their wishes. The desire for recognition at any cost, which makes it very easy to condition people, is one of the negative consequences of emancipation, that is to say according to Roman law, the liberation from paternal violence. The natural father who, discretely but according to tradition, defined the identity of his children by way of handed down rules has been replaced by many competing stepfathers to whom the children inexorably have to lay bare the feelings of their soul. From a phenomenological point of view, the love of the father has been superseded by the activities of psychotherapists and social workers. In the place of his unique, but in no way absolute authority—because it was relativized by grandfathers of many kinds—many new, mutually conflicting authorities have turned up.

Phenomena such as these indicate that the social-historic process of the psychoanalytical destruction of the father role has reached its culmination. Many signals point to the fact that a reconstruction of the father role in the sense of new possibilities is urgently called for.⁵ Especially the ones most concerned (the children themselves) request it. In the preface to the book *Vatersein* (Schultz, 1984), the editor writes two sentences with which I would like to conclude, because they point to the source of the conflict in the Old Testament, to the fundamental question that had induced Freud: Isaac or Oedipus, to sacrifice the son or the father—and because they entertain some hope that goes beyond this anthropological conflict without denying it:

The Old Testament closes with a vision of Shalom that is at hand, with an outlook to an age in which the "Sun of righteousness" shall arise. "The day cometh," it says, on which "the Lord shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers!"... The "new fathers," when they would come into existence, have left all self-glorification behind and cooperate with women and their children to create a new form of life, in which the deepest need, the one for love, can prosper. (Schultz, 1984, pp. 8,9)

Notes

- 1. Paper read at the second meeting of the Arbeitskreis für phänomenologisch-pädagogische Forschungen in Utrecht, the Netherlands, October 1984.
- 2. Langveld's article "To Have a Father" will be published in English in the next issue of *Phenomenology* + *Pedagogy*, 5(1), 1987 (The Editor).
- Meanwhile there has been published a very instructive study to the problem of fatherless sons: R. Wurr. (1985). Prinzen und ihre Mütter: Zwei Biographien zur Entwicklung vaterloser Kinder. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

- The page numbers refer to the German edition of Heller's (1975) novel which appeared under the title Was geschah mit Slocum? Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer.
- For this new tendency, see the following books: Tellenbach, H. (1979). Konturen künftigen Vaterseins (pp. 153-156). Stuttgart: Kohlhammer; Fthenakis, W.E. (1985). Zur Notwendigkeit einer Stärkeren Berücksichtigung der Vaterperspektive (Vol. 2, pp. 199-248). München: Urban and Schwarzenberg; Dunde, S.R. (Ed.). (1986). Neue Väterlichkeit. Gütersloh: Mohn.

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