

TRAUMA AND THE WISE BABY

Benjamin Kilborne

This paper expands upon Ferenczi's concept of the wise baby and explores the dynamics of ignorance and compensatory ideals of wisdom as reactions to trauma and as manifestations of "double conscience," shame dynamics and Oedipal shame. Focusing on feelings of ignorance, of knowing and not knowing and their relation to trauma, the author elaborates on the dynamics of fantasies of wisdom, adumbrating implications for psychoanalytic technique.

KEY WORDS: trauma; wise baby; shame; Oedipal shame; double conscience; Sándor Ferenczi.

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In several of his papers Ferenczi (1923, 1931, 1932a,b,c, 1933) makes use of his concept of the wise baby, a baby whose wisdom helps keep adults safe, and whose understanding makes the world seem comprehensible. The notion is, Ferenczi points out, a defense against the baby's real condition: alone in a world he cannot grasp, unable to piece together any sense of coherence, surrounded by adults who cannot or do not bother to reach out to him, neglected, humiliated by his helplessness and ashamed of his childhood.

For Ferenczi, the concept of the wise baby implicitly expresses his theory of trauma, exploring how the omnipotence of the injured and traumatized child seeks to find refuge in ideals of "wisdom" (For discussions of Ferenczi's concept of the wise baby, also see: Frankel, 1998; Vida, 2005; Boschan, 2008). It is particularly pertinent today in psychoanalysis when *knowledge* is often assumed to be a hallmark of competence, and, conversely, where *ignorance* is dismissed as shameful and generally passed over in silence. The impression many case presentations and papers in psychoanalytic journals

Benjamin Kilborne, holds a Ph.D., is a training and supervising analyst, International Psychoanalytic Association. Visiting professor, Moscow State University. Associate editor, American Journal of Psychoanalysis.

Address correspondence to Benjamin Kilborne, Ph.D., Box 491, West Stockbridge, MA 01266; e-mails: bkilborne@verizon.net, benjaminkilborne.com

give is of authors so accomplished that their powers of understanding know no limit. Ferenczi's notion of the wise baby can, I think, remind us as clinicians that we may need to know more about ignorance, about the dynamics of knowing and not knowing, than is commonly assumed.

Ferenczi's notion of the wise baby helps us understand how ideals of wisdom become part of superego judgments and evaluations. Concepts like *wisdom* and *ignorance* develop in the context of human relationships and evaluations. Wise babies as they grow up are apt to be intolerant of what they feel is their own ignorance, and their feelings of ignorance become therefore the source of toxic shame. In analysis, only when we as analysts can understand the motivations for idealizing wisdom and for defending against not knowing can the shame over ignorance be available to the analytic process and worked through. In this process, the analyst will be in a better position if he or she is aware of the wise baby within all of us, and is sensitive to what I will call the dynamics of ignorance.

I once had a friend at UCLA who taught medieval history, and the early history of the church. He was recognized by his students as particularly learned. They often commented on how much he knew and how difficult the difference in knowledge was for them, how ignorant he made them feel. One day, after yet another comment on how unbelievably learned he was, he went to the blackboard without a word and drew two circles, a big one and a small one. "This," he said pointing to the big one, "is my knowledge." And, pointing to the small one, "this is your knowledge." There was general assent. "But now look at this," he continued. "The circumference of each circle, the place where it defines what it excludes, represents ignorance. You can therefore easily see how very much more ignorant I am than you are. My ignorance is vastly greater than yours." The background of our understanding, like the ground of a painting or drawing, can never be anything other than the space or ground defined by the figure.¹

The illustration reminds us that wisdom is both defined and acquired because of psychological motivation, and that such motivation can never be more than the proper study of ignorance.² We seek to understand so much because we feel we understand so little.

THE WISE BABY RESPONDS TO TRAUMA

In his original 1923 essay on the dream of the wise baby, Ferenczi describes dreams in which infants speak fluently and eloquently, lecturing their elders on points of morals and wisdom. Ferenczi notes that the dream conceals a wish to counter feelings of helplessness and ignorance. "The wish to

become learned and to excel over 'the great' in wisdom and knowledge," he concludes, "is only a reversal of the contrary situation of the child." (Ferenczi, 1923, p. 350)

What Ferenczi is calling our attention to here are *feelings of knowing* and the *feelings of ignorance*, both of which can be seriously at variance with what one knows or does not know. The baby who lords his "wisdom" over adults is reacting to feelings of being belittled, ashamed of being a child, ashamed of not knowing, and ashamed of his parents' ignorance and indifference to his feelings and being. It is useful to recognize, however, that these feelings are a form of understanding and can designate real emotional phenomena, however confusing they may be.

When the feelings and voice of the baby (and infant, toddler and growing child) are not responded to, the child envies those Olympian beings whose power is dependent on the illusion they give [and on which they (the Olympians) can come to depend] that they "know" things inaccessible to a child or infant. Such dynamics touch upon, but are distinct from, Freud's discussions of the primal scene. Freud's notion of the primal scene and what he defines as Oedipal dynamics (e.g. Freud, 1905, 1909, 1910) seem to me distinctly different from the dynamics I will be discussing here with respect to the wise baby. While Freud touches upon the child's feelings of exclusion from "knowing," he then implies that what is to be "known" is sexual. If this were really so, then there could be no "wisdom" for the baby, an implication that was clearly in Ferenczi's mind when he proposed the concept. Not only that, but the notion of knowledge in psychoanalysis is more problematic than it might at first appear to be, as there is no simple equation between on the one hand what is not known and the unconscious, and on the other, between what is known and consciousness.

At the end of the 19th century, Charcot and others (Janet, 1889[2005]; Azam, 1887[2004]) wrestled with the concept of "double conscience," meaning at once *double conscience* and *double consciousness*. In other words, the notion of "double conscience" designates *knowing and not knowing at the same time*. Additionally, the term in French (double conscience, as in English) designates two consciences, suggesting intractable conflicts in values, ethical judgment and ideals. Paradoxically, Freud's concept of the Unconscious clouded over the importance and the ambiguities inherent in the concept of "double conscience." Psychoanalysis has never really plumbed the questions of the ethical conflicts inherent in the notion of the unconscious, since Freud tended to assume that the locus of ethics was the conscious. In contemporary psychoanalysis there are many analysts who dismiss the relevance of superego conflicts, in part because of the confusion over how "unconscious" superego conflicts are. However, if we consider the notion of "double conscience" then what is conscious

and what is unconscious becomes less relevant than how we know and do not know at the same time. In other words, what is unconscious is not necessarily unknown (although it may be unavailable), just as what is conscious is not necessarily known.

Perhaps because of his interest in trauma, Ferenczi is perhaps the only major psychoanalytic writer to allow implicitly for knowing and not knowing at the same time, for the ambiguities of "double conscience." Ferenczi (1931) returns to the subject of the wise baby in his paper, "Child analysis in the analysis of adults," where he speaks of traumatic splitting. Elsewhere (Kilborne, 1998), I have described Ferenczi's phenomenological approach to trauma and its importance for contemporary theories of trauma and psychic disintegration. Suffice it here to mention two brief points. First, that in the face of trauma the child or infant gives up a part of the self out of despair over not being able to feel connected (to the father or mother). Ferenczi writes: "part of the person adopts the role of father or mother in relation to the rest, thereby undoing, as it were, the fact of being left deserted." (Ferenczi, 1931, p. 135) On the one hand the child can undo the fact of having been abandoned, but in the undoing he must repress and deny his own feelings of abandonment and isolation, replacing these with an identification with the unresponsive parent. Such a repression of feelings of abandonment contributes to unconscious feelings of helplessness and rage, and can result in further splintering of the personality.³

Ferenczi also refers to the tendency in such traumatized infants and children to attempt to transform parts of their own bodies into antidotes to their own feelings of abandonment. Thus, the body itself—hands, fingers, head, nose, eye, genitals—can become the focus of attention in an attempt to establish some kind of substitute bond. In these trauma dynamics the child or infant represses feelings of abandonment by imagining that a focus on a body part can fill the void created by the absence of the parent. In so doing, the child provides himself with the illusion of control: he can control a finger instead of a parent. However, when a controllable body part comes to stand for a uncontrollable, incomprehensible parent, when the experienced loss of a parent (or a fear of loss) can be compensated for by a body part, there is inevitably body distortion and corresponding crimp in object relations, along with an inclination toward masturbatory fantasies and sexual identity confusion. Such an attitude toward the body itself produces an experienced split between mind and body expressed at times by fantasies and dreams in which the head is cut off from and seems to have a life of its own.

In his well-known paper "The Confusion of Tongues" (1933) in which Ferenczi speaks of confusions which traumatize, Ferenczi makes another

allusion to the dream of the wise baby. He brings up the subject in the context of his discussion of a

“traumatic progression, of a precocious maturity. It is natural to compare this with the precocious maturity of the fruit that was injured by a bird or insect. Not only emotionally, but also intellectually, can the trauma bring to maturity a part of the person.” (1933, p. 165)

In other words, the rampant, uncontrollable fear of the adult forces the infant or child to idealize and fantasize wisdom. The child compensates for his helplessness in the face of his parents' anxieties by investing in fantasies of knowledge; rather than feeling confused, anxious, alone and helpless, he feels he “knows.” In his “unripe” state, he puts out feelers and stretches the limits of his understanding and intuition, which he then judges so insufficient that fantasies must be enlisted to revise the picture. This is a manifestation of “double conscience.” The child knows and does not know at the same time.

In this way the child's efforts and illusions of understanding provide a cover for incomprehension, confusion and helplessness which, because they are intolerable to the adult, cannot but terrorize the child. However, under these circumstances the child has no conscious awareness of any terror at all. Quite the contrary, he feels himself to be the Great Dispenser of Wisdom, a bulwark for his parents. However, the fear of not really knowing and the failure of premature attempts to “ripen” can exacerbate feelings of helplessness and can lead to destructive splitting.

To complicate matters further, in such cases children may come to believe that their parents depend upon them to shield them (the parents) from the reality or even any consciousness of terror. Therefore, the forces of repression, which result in an inevitable sense of incompleteness, can also contribute to acting out grandiose fantasies: the child is not fragile himself, not a prey to life-threatening terror, but rather is the protector of a fragile parent; the child need not fear relying on his parent since he (the child) is holding the parent up. Far from being helpless, the child is the real puppeteer.

Therefore, the child need not be so concerned about the unreliability of the parent, and the parent is thereby saved from being confronted with the child's sense of helplessness. Last but not least, the child can believe that his wisdom is all-powerful, even though one of the functions of such a belief is to disown the child's feelings of shameful ignorance and helplessness and also to discount the helplessness and shame of his parents by making them dependent on his wisdom, in which case they are no longer helpless and ashamed. “Double conscience” once more.

CASE EXAMPLE

Let me provide here a short vignette to illustrate the dynamics of the wise baby, whose wisdom serves as an antidote to unbearable feelings of helplessness and shame. In this case, “wisdom” takes the form of knowing when the caretaker fails. Such a reversal of roles (see, e.g., Borgogno & Vigna-Taglianti, 2008) is typical of traumatized patients and individuals who need to believe that their wisdom and strength in tending to a parent (in this case mother and grandmother) can be a substitute for the asymmetry of the relationship. Also, when a child comes to depend upon fantasies of omnipotence and wisdom within the family, these fantasies become a part of narcissistic defenses.

Such a child can attempt to take care of himself by taking care of his parents. In this family microcosm, in this terrarium world there is a sense of safety, however illusory. However, when the wise child emerges into the outside, and discovers that his fantasies are empty, that his wisdom is an illusion, that his own development has been stunted and that he is seriously unprepared to deal with the conflicts and relationships in world outside his family, the shock and trauma of such realizations can produce reactions of fragmentation and overwhelming anxiety.

Olga

Olga is a beautiful, lively woman in her late 30's, whose professional accomplishments in design have gained her considerable recognition. Nevertheless, she suffers from skin problems (e.g., psoriasis) and severe anxiety.

Olga's parents were born in St Petersburg, named Leningrad by the Soviets and then changed back to St Petersburg after the collapse of the Soviet Union. There, they were seriously traumatized by the Leningrad Blockade of WWII⁴ when hundreds of thousands died of starvation and cold. As a result of unimaginable trauma, Olga's mother became schizophrenic and, at the time Olga was born, was utterly incapable of mothering or responding to another human being.

Olga had a primary babushka, her maternal grandmother. When she was an adolescent, the babushka's parents (Olga's great grandparents) and older brothers and sisters starved to death during the blockade and were dumped into one of the mass graves; most of her extended family died of starvation and cold. Only Olga's babushka survived, together with her younger brother and sister, who lost touch with her when they were taken outside Leningrad.

When the siblings reappeared a year or so after the blockade was lifted in 1944, Olga's babushka rejected her own younger sister and refused to

recognize her as her sister. Traumatized people often turn on those who did not experience the trauma and shut them out. For them, those who did not experience the trauma are “ignorant” and incapable of relating or understanding. This includes their children. However, in such cases the “ignorance” of the young is also the product of what their parents feel is unexpressable. One Leningrad writer, Vera Inber, wrote in her diary of the night of January 17, 1944: “The greatest event in the life of Leningrad: full liberation from blockade. And I, a professional writer, have no words for it. I simply say: Leningrad is free. And that is all.” (quoted in Salisbury, 1969, p. 568)

The traumatic consequences on children of such silence, such experiences without words, cannot be underestimated. Children “know” without knowing; and the silence of fragile, wounded parents, prompts children to fear they “know” what cannot be spoken. Out of such dynamics grows a conspiracy of silence. The adults can be silent out of shame and anxiety, but the children will interpret such silence as a vote of no confidence in their ability to be worth speaking to, to be valuable enough to have the stories told them.

Olga feels that she has been rejected by her babushka, which in Russia is all the more traumatic because of the crucial importance of the babushka as the family member on whom children depend for nurturance and care and a vision of the family. Her babushka did not cook for her, as is customary. Rather, in a reversal of roles, it was Olga who from the time she was a very young girl brought her babushka food (sausages and cakes).

Later it turned out that Olga’s grandmother, who was crippled by trauma and plagued by survival shame and guilt, survived in Leningrad because when she was a young adolescent she moved away from her family to live in a factory complex where she got a small piece of bread daily, enough to live on. She worked in the factory 14–16 hours a day without vacations or weekends. If she was 5 minutes late, she would be sent to prison. If she shared her bread, she could die of starvation by being deprived of further food. Therefore, she was always frightened of sharing what she had with others.

Not only did her babushka fail to nurture, making Olga the maternal figure, but also her babushka brought her regularly to the mass grave of her grandmother’s parents and brothers and sisters, a place where her ancestors lay placeless, lost in the tens of thousands of unnamed dead, making Olga the witness to her babushka’s loss, in another example of role reversal, and a possession of unspeakable knowledge.

Olga’s father was sent away to an elite boarding school for artists where his mother (Olga’s paternal grandmother) hoped he would be safe from his

father's drinking, scandals and violence. He was profoundly ashamed of his father and family. Although the school gave him a good profession, it was also a curse and a symbol of his own solitude and of the disconnection and unresponsiveness of his family. Like his father, he too became an alcoholic. On both sides of Olga's family (schizophrenic mother, alcoholic father) there were experiences of severe trauma, disconnection, shame and unresponsiveness. Both sides were haunted by intergenerational trauma.

Olga's dreams

Several dreams may serve better to illustrate Olga's anxiety over *feelings of knowledge* and *feelings of ignorance*, over "double conscience." Early in the treatment Olga dreams: she is walking on a fashionable street with her boyfriend. Then she realizes that the street is changing, lifting up, upending. It is harder and harder to walk. She sees a car trying to drive up the street. It is straining to get up, with great difficulty. It is harder and harder to drive. The car is in danger of backsliding; it slips back and disappears. Then the street becomes a wall. She begins to climb and then climbs easily without any help.

It would appear that the dream represents Olga's terror, and the disjunction between the fashionable street where she is chatting comfortably with her boyfriend, and the terrifying street that upends and turns into a wall that cars slide back down. The end of the dream, with its sense of ease, would appear to represent the wish that the fear be gone, and that she feel herself powerful again.

Imagine for a moment how terrifying ignorance can defend against what one cannot know because it is too much. The dream can be seen as an expression of an uphill battle, which could overwhelm her at any moment and with respect to which she feels utterly helpless; it represents an internal struggle with overwhelming feelings of horror. She can backslide and disappear as easily as the bodies of her family in their mass grave. These internal conflicts are made worse by the conflicts over knowing and not knowing. Hence, she needs to imagine she is climbing easily (confident of her wisdom and power) and without any help.

Olga has a second dream: I had a baby but I forgot about it. It lives with my Mom. No name. I don't remember him. Don't know whether he was really born or not. Then I found a photo as evidence that he exists. I was relieved that he lives. Fear and guilt because I forgot him. He lives with my parents who are afraid to give him a name. I hope we (my boyfriend and I) can give him a name ourselves. I must give something to our baby. However, I don't know what I could give him when I cannot even give

him a name. I was driving to my parents' house, to tell them that they must give something to the baby. I have to have milk in my breast. But there is no milk. I don't know how to feed a baby and don't know what to do with him.

We can imagine that the baby can represent struggles over knowing the trauma of her family, over remembering and forgetting, knowing and not knowing, being wise and ignorant. If she "knows" it is overwhelming; but if she does not "know," she is unrecognizable to her family and isolated. The baby exists (there is a photo) but has no name; the trauma of her schizophrenic mother and of her family exists, but cannot be thought. Olga's parents in her dream are afraid to give it a name. Still, the baby needs to be fed so that it does not die. The dreamer does not know what to do with it. Olga's family's traumatic identity cannot be "known," but without it Olga has no identity at all. Therefore, to exist the baby must be fed, even though she has no idea how this can be done. In this case I do say that the baby "can represent," which would seem to imply that this is mine not her associations.

Olga has a third dream. I am walking with you (the analyst). You are my neighbor. It is the block where I was born and lived for the first 5 years of my life in Leningrad. Row houses. Yards between. Hidden path in the yard connecting it to other yards in other blocks. I don't know who is showing the way, you or me. We find this path but it is closed off with big pipes. Cannot see through; we need to feel our way. Pipes chaotic, one over the other. Big gas pipes going nowhere. When we got through I show you where I lived until I was 6 years old. Then you show me the house where you lived. And my idea is to go around this place, but you decide to go through the arch (gateway?). You want to use a small pathway only children can use. Adults cannot use it. Only children can climb through. Because of this I had not used this path for a very long time. Olga adds: Pipes remind me of a strange place I found while walking with my boyfriend where pipes went into nothing. Senseless. Near the pipes is a damaged wall; a small fountain of water comes through the damage. Looks like someone pissed from inside the wall.

In the context of speaking about her fear that nurturance/love/food for the baby would not be forthcoming, Olga mentioned a French film in which a poor girl from the provinces (or elsewhere) who has a child of her own, needs to leave her child in order to care for a rich family's child as a nanny. The poor girl finds herself singing the song to this child that she was not able to sing to her own child. Olga cried as she told this story. And later in the same session she spoke of how once, when Olga had been in the hospital, her grandmother had brought her collective farm melons, (small ones, not very sweet). This was the only time that Olga remembers

her grandmother giving her anything, another indication to Olga of her insignificance in the eyes of her grandmother and yet another indication that she felt Olga was not worth nurturing. Remember her dream about not being able to nurse her baby and forgetting it.

Considering first the feelings in the stories Olga tells as associations to the dreams, it would appear that we have a feeling of neglect (the poor girl had to leave her own child to care for the child of a rich family) and a feeling of enormous sadness at not being able to sing the song to her own child. What is the song? It is clearly very sad, and expresses deep sorrow and helplessness. We can imagine that it is the song Olga's grandmother could not sing to Olga, because she was so preoccupied with those lost in the mass grave; it is the song her schizophrenic mother could not sing; it is (perhaps) the unspoken story of her family that exists, like the baby in the preceding dream, but cannot be "born;" that needs to be fed, but there is no milk to feed it; nobody "knows" what to do with it. It is a song that Olga cannot sing to herself. (It is possible that if she did, then the helplessness of her family and her own helplessness as a baby would overcome her.)

The symbol of the only things her grandmother gave her (small melons) becomes more poignant still when we consider her grandmother's experience in the Leningrad Blockade, where food was so very scarce and at least a third of the city starved. And where she managed to have enough to eat only by keeping what little she had for herself, and not sharing it with her starving family. (Perhaps her babushka was prepared to starve Olga perhaps because the babushka resented and punished Olga for not "being there", for not "knowing" because of her own guilt and shame at surviving when so many others perished.)

The case of Olga illustrates how a child can attempt to compensate for trauma by struggling against her own need not to know. These are complicated dynamics in which knowing and not knowing as feelings fit into family dynamics and patterns of intergenerational trauma. Olga's identity depends upon connecting with the history of the Leningrad Siege and the deaths of so many in her family. Nevertheless, the very figures on whom her sense of continuity depends (her babushka) treat her as a symbol of discontinuity. Hence, we can imagine, Olga becomes an architect who "builds," and whose "wisdom" and adult accomplishment is associated with building, not with destruction and tearing down (the damaged wall with the pipes in her associations). Behind the image of the damaged wall with pipes it is difficult not to see the devastation of Leningrad.

Olga's adult feelings of "wisdom" pick up on the "wisdom" of the wise baby, who is masterful in a world of the helpless; who is "knowing" in a

world where nothing makes sense, and where the nothing that makes sense hides unspeakable horror. In this way Olga attempted to control her anxiety, which bursts through in the form of psoriasis and inexplicable anxiety.

Such internal conflicts of traumatized patients perpetuate intergenerational dynamics between grandparent, parent and child and lead the child to disallow feelings of fear, since it is the parent who is more manifestly terrorized by anxiety, setting the child up as the container. And also setting up what is to be “known” as off limits, something the child is not worth telling. This, in turn, contributes to the child’s fears of worthlessness and isolation when she is not told.

In Olga’s case the failure of the container is all the more striking because her mother was schizophrenic, her father alcoholic and her grandmother was a seamstress who could not sew straight enough to fit the pieces together. Similarly, Olga’s skin, breaking open and erupting, could not contain her discrepant feelings about herself, and indicated identities that could not be sewn together; something burning, something ugly could not be hidden, something erupting from an unknown inside (compare the damaged wall in her dream). When the mind is overwhelmed, the body begins to think, Ferenczi aptly remarked (*Clinical Diary*, pp. 5–6).

As Ferenczi realized, a situation in which the traumatized parent comes to rely upon the semblance of composure and wisdom in the infant or child can have traumatic effects on the child, can blur boundaries and induce real confusion in the child over her identity and role, and confusion too over her own body. Might the second dream of the baby who was forgotten and not born also refer to Olga’s feelings toward herself?

In short, Ferenczi’s concept of the dream of the wise baby provides in fantasy needed compensation for childhood feelings of confusion, ignorance and helplessness both in herself and in her parents. Olga’s dreams pick up on the themes of horror, survivor shame and conflicting allegiance felt by all who witnessed the Blockade. The wish expressed in the dream of the wise baby is for an antidote to ignorance and confusion: the dreamer is not a baby without the means to grasp what is going on around her, but rather a master, a sage capable of reassuring others, dispensing wisdom and holding together the pieces of a world gone mad.

THE CLINICAL DIARY AND THE WISE BABY

In his *Clinical Diary*, Ferenczi (1932a) elaborates on what happens in trauma and, we may add, how the fragmentation and obliteration of the sense of self and of personhood can be related to his notion of the wise

baby. In response to trauma, Ferenczi explains, the traumatized person, reacts *in extremis* by being literally beside himself. He “regards being destroyed or mutilated with interest, as if it is no longer his own self but another person who is underlying these torments.” In other words, there can then arise on the part of the injured, a defiant reaction: he can make his (her) assailant impotent by not being there. Therefore, “to the extent that the assailant’s motive for aggression was sadism, the victim achieves vengeance through this newly developed insensitivity, for the sadist cannot inflict any more pain on the dead, unfeeling body, and therefore he must feel his impotence.” (*Clinical Diary*, p. 7) These dynamics are illustrated by a particularly cruel patient who taunted his abusive father when he beat him by defiantly saying: “hit me again, I am not bleeding yet.” Similarly, Ferenczi observes, “I do not feel the pain inflicted upon me at all, because I do not exist.” (*Clinical Diary*, p. 104)⁵

In these descriptions Ferenczi is not unlike Kierkegaard in his interest in the soulless part of the personality (see, e.g., particularly Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death*. See also, Kilborne, “The Disappearing Who”, 1998b). And, as Kierkegaard (1844) noted, the disappearance of the self can often go horrifyingly unnoticed.⁶ Ferenczi writes of “a body progressively divested of its soul, whose disintegration is not perceived at all or is regarded as an event happening to another person, being watched from the outside.” (*Clinical Diary*, p. 104)⁷

Ferenczi elaborates his ideas about the effects of trauma, writing of one patient that “her entire emotional life sought refuge in regression, so that now she experiences fully and completely no emotion whatsoever; it is, in fact, never to her that things happen; she identifies herself only with other people.” Such an identification with other people thus serves as a distraction from her own want of feeling. Ferenczi continues,

“Thus while her emotional life vanishes into unconsciousness and regresses to pure body-sensations, her intelligence, detached from all emotions, makes a colossal but—as already mentioned—completely unemotional progression, in the sense of an adaptation-performance by means of identification with the objects of terror. The patient becomes terribly intelligent.” (*Clinical Diary*, p. 203)

Here, we can see how *identification with aggressor* joins with the *dynamics of double conscience* and of the *wise baby*; the more patients cling to illusions of wisdom, the more they repress their bodily feelings and states, and the less they are able to relate to and connect with others because they have made themselves disappear. In this way, illusions (and feelings) of wisdom, disconnect traumatized children from themselves.

Ferenczi perceptively comments on the destructive nature of such traumatic disconnection. “Whenever an emotional reaction is suppressed,

interrupted or repressed, something is actually destroyed in us. The annihilated part of the person falls into a state of decay and decomposes." (*Clinical Diary*, p. 88) Ferenczi pursues his thinking. "Instead of hating her mother or father, she penetrated by her thought-process, their psychic mechanisms, motives, even their feelings so thoroughly (to the last with the help of her knowledge) that she could apprehend the hitherto unbearable situation quite clearly—as she herself had ceased to exist as an emotional person." And Ferenczi concludes his observations. "The trauma made her emotionally embryonic. However, at the same time wise in intellectual terms, like a totally objective and unemotionally perceptive philosopher." (*Clinical Diary*, p. 203)

Ferenczi explains that when the infant or child suffers a trauma, he is splintered into various parts, four of which can be dynamically identified: first "a capable, active human being with a precisely—perhaps a little too precisely—regulated mechanism;" second, "behind this, a being who does not wish to have anything more to do with life;" third, "behind this the murdered ego, the ashes of earlier mental sufferings, which are rekindled every night by the fire of suffering; and, fourth, "this suffering itself as a separate mass of affect, without content and unconscious, the remains of the actual person."⁸ (*Clinical Diary*, p. 30)

There is, I think, an implicit theory of paranoia here. It goes something like this. The traumatized person withdraws from himself leaving himself lifeless so that nothing more can be destroyed and so that he can defy his persecutor. The result is to make the other carry the dangers he has inflicted on himself.

The wisdom of the wise baby is a direct consequence of injury and mistrust; the wise baby manifests his mistrust of parents and figures on whom he needs to depend by investing himself with power. The very factual powerlessness of the wise baby, whose wisdom is but a substitute for trust in the protection and connection to parental figures, becomes, through magical thinking, the source of power in the same way that the vulnerability of the abused child becomes, by negation, the source of defiant power to frustrate the cruel and sadistic behaviors of those who injure him (injuring him all the more because he depends on them).

If we remember that our word, paranoia, comes from the Greek *paranoos* distracted, from *para*+*noos* (mind) outside the mind, we can see how Ferenczi used his understanding of paranoid processes in describing the effects of trauma; when one is traumatized one is "beside" oneself, "outside of" oneself, "away from" oneself, not oneself. Here Ferenczi presciently links depersonalization with paranoia, being outside oneself with mistrust of others.⁹

THE WISE BABY AND THE SHAME OF OEDIPUS

There is, I think, a direct connection between the dream of the wise baby and the shame of Oedipus (and the tragic dynamics of the Sophoclean play) (Sophocles, 1991). Both, as Pirandello notes of himself, are like a fruit ripened through bruising. Just as Freud took the plight of Oedipus to be that of all human beings, so we can regard Ferenczi's concept of the wise baby. Both concepts target the subject of knowledge and knowing, not knowing and blindness, and, in addition, conflicts over both knowing and not knowing, seeing and blindness. But only Ferenczi's concept of the wise baby retains the ambiguities of the notion of "double conscience."

"Double conscience" may be related to the notion of Oedipal shame as distinct from Oedipal guilt. As in the dream of the wise baby, there is "not knowing," part of which is a fear of knowing (however imagined). Side by side there is also a fear of not knowing, of being a pawn while believing that one is master of the world. The wise baby does not want to know what he is: helpless, confused and overwhelmed by fears. His is "double conscience," he knows and does not know at the same time.

Similarly, although he presents himself as the king of Thebes, a great, a powerful man, Oedipus does not know who he is, and is frightened of what he does not want to "know:" a man abandoned in infancy by his parents, his feet pierced and his murder entrusted to a shepherd who, unable to execute his task, left him helpless in the wild.

When Oedipus becomes aware of his role in the Theban plague, which as king he has publicly declared he will alleviate, he blinds himself. By conflating as it does psychic and physical blindness, the self-inflicted punishment of Oedipus expresses shame over his refusal to "know." He cannot bear to see what a fraud he is in the eyes of others. As long as he could adopt defiantly an attitude of not knowing, he could disappear as himself, and be instead the all-powerful king.

Like the traumatized patients of whom Ferenczi speaks who make themselves disappear out of defiance, Oedipus cannot bear the shame of being seen. When he says "Henceforth be dark," he is expressing suicidal, annihilatory rage at others who "see through" him or, conversely, who cannot see him for who he is. In so doing, he is attacking what links him to society and to other human beings (see, e.g., the classic paper of Bion, 1959, dealing with attacks on linking). And his attack on his eyes is an expression of intolerable suffering directed at his own "not seeing," and at his own "not knowing" (see Kilborne, 2002).

The psychoanalytic tradition has associated Oedipal dynamics with guilt and, more explicitly still, with drives and aggression (the drive to

kill the father and possess the mother, for boys and vice versa for girls). However, it seems to me that the tragedy of Oedipus stems from more than the horror and shame over acts unwittingly committed (killing his father and marrying his mother). Apart from the difficulties in pinning guilt and responsibility on Oedipus who does not “know” his father is his father or his mother is his mother, the tragedy is, I think, more centrally about shame, blindness and confusion, “double conscience,” and conflict over “knowing” than it is about guilt, incest and aggression.

Freud and many psychoanalysts pass over why Oedipus is guilty of wanting to kill his father and have sex with his mother, since, if one goes by the story, he could not have “known” his father or mother. He was an infant when taken into the wild to be abandoned. However, if one approaches Sophocles with the concept of “double conscience” in mind, then the conflicts between knowing and not knowing become more intelligible.

Oedipus seriously misunderstands himself, and has willfully constructed a false life. This is hubris. The defeats he suffers seemingly at the hands of others echo his own hollowness. “Oedipal shame” designates the shame of defeatist forces beyond one’s control or knowledge, and, more fundamentally still, by the hubris of what one does not want to know, as well as what one fears knowing. Oedipus does not want to know what in fact he “knows” (and Tiresius tells him). This exposes him to unbearable shame once his prideful refusal to “know” (hubris) becomes public. (Kilborne, 2002, 2003; Sophocles, 1992)

Oedipus has to guess the riddle of the sphinx. Riddles are supposedly about “knowing” and “wisdom.” However, Oedipus is the wise baby who feigns wisdom, inventing himself as “wise” and powerful so as to comfort those on whom he depends (his people) by confounding them about his own helplessness.

But such tactics, whether of Oedipus or of the wise baby, are like houses built on sand: they cannot withstand adversity, and one knows how easily they can collapse. Both pull down into them the dynamics of the ego ideal conflicts, identity illusions and anxiety responses. Both run the risk of announcing to the world a power that does not exist, which then makes the claimant prone to toxic shame and suicidal rage. And then there is the rage toward others for “not seeing,” for “not knowing,” for not staying the inevitable fall.

Let me open a short parenthesis here. Much that is implied and designated by the terms castration, splitting or fragmentation anxiety falls short of what we see clinically. In our clinical work fears of fragmentation come up against adult ego ideals and fears of vulnerability. Oedipus has his

superego notions of what makes him powerful and admired: he is king of Thebes, looked up to by all. He has in this sense realized his ideal of himself. But what is he to do with the uncertainty and fragmentation anxiety triggered by having been abandoned as a child? All this comes into conflict with his assumptions about who he is and who he needs to be to defend against his experience as an abandoned infant. In this "double conscience" what is he to "know?"

To be overwhelmed by affective storms and not to have control over conflicting affects leads inevitably to shame. The weaker the executive functions of affect regulation, the more intense the shame over fragility and the vain, compensatory omnipotence fantasies they can produce. In such cases shame can be the hallmark of unbearable conflict between ideals (ego ideals and ideal egos), anxiety and reality, as well as the shame of confusion over "double conscience."

As powerful, protective king Oedipus must root out the cause of the Theban plague, all the while feeling and "not knowing" his abandoned, helpless infant self, that was left to die. Such discrepancies between adult images (and ideals) of the self, on the one hand, and childhood vulnerability and helplessness, on the other, cause intense, overwhelming anxiety. The very literal power of Oedipus as king allows scope for his omnipotent fantasies which, paradoxically, drives home to us how damaged he is, how unable to know himself as he is, how utterly helpless he is, precisely because the seeming reality of his position contradicts his helplessness.

In other words, shame and anxiety can stem from unacknowledged evaluations of one's inadequacy in dealing with overwhelming feelings, evaluations that can unwittingly be associated with the judgments of the superego. Here we have infantile experiences of helplessness and vulnerability appearing as fears of helplessness in adults and overlaid with superego condemnations. My concept of Oedipal shame designates these discrepancies. It also picks up on Kierkegaard's notion that melancholy is related to aesthetics and human tragedy. "There is," he writes, "something inexplicable in melancholy ... If a melancholy man is asked what ground he has for it, what it is that weighs upon him, he will reply, 'I know not, I cannot explain it.' Herein lies the infinity of melancholy." (Kierkegaard, 1959, p. 193)

When the infant or child feels unable to compete with parents or siblings (and/or is traumatized by the sexual advances of a parent or a parental surrogate), such feelings engender toxic shame, together with shame over feeling overwhelmed by anxiety (superego condemnation). These interactions are strikingly described in Ferenczi's (1933) paper "On the Confusion of Tongues." Because in no way a sexual equal, the child who suffers sexual trauma from a family member often feels hopelessly inadequate and unable to compete.

What can we now summarize to be the hallmarks of Oedipal shame? So far we have a feeling of not being able (worthy) to compete, of being continually bested, thwarted and, as it were, stopped in one's tracks. Of being a failure. We can think here of the small boy whose widdler (the term used by Little Hans, Freud, 1909) is categorically different from his father's for reasons he cannot understand; the little boy knows he is impotent, but cannot understand why. While these dynamics have often been confused with castration anxiety, they are, I think, quite distinct.

Similar experiences of bodily inadequacy exist also for girls who compare themselves with their mothers. But is this "castration" anxiety? I tend not to think so. After all, it is not only the parent who "makes" the child feel inadequate, as the designation of "castration" would suggest. The inadequacy is implicit also in the comparisons the child inevitably makes, wondering how he or she measures up (or down) when imagined by comparison to the parent. Therefore, it is the response of parents that can either toxify or detoxify the shame of such comparisons. In short, then it would appear that what has been designated as "castration anxiety" is far less about aggression and guilt and far more about shame and comparison, identity and helplessness. What has been identified as castration anxiety, is, it seems to me, far more about relationships (and the response of the person on whom one depends) than it is about innate drives and aggression.

The transition from diadic to triadic relationships can only partially be explained by psychoanalytic notions of Oedipal dynamics (as defined by Freud) that are "worked through" (i.e., assuming responsibility for aggression toward the same sex parent and sexual desire for the opposite sex parent). Freud associates the "progression" from diadic to triadic relationships with the father. However, as Ferenczi's concept of the wise baby suggests, the shift from diadic to triadic relationships can be thwarted by narcissistic regression associated with trauma and Oedipal shame dynamics. Conversely, what can foster relationships and Object Relations may have little to do with the father.

The Freudian notions of Oedipal triumph, Oedipal defeat and Oedipal resolution can be useful, but only up to a point. For what is being "regressed" to is not what once was, but some untoward combination of overwhelming (often conflicting) feelings together with the helplessness they trigger, and the adult's judgment of these feelings. Regressive states can be triggered by overwhelming Oedipal shame from which the individual seeks relief through a sort of disappearance of the self and self-annihilation. Such states make object relations of any sort extremely problematic, and often seem to us as clinicians to be more narcissistic and/or more paranoid than they necessarily are.

Infants who cannot tolerate feelings of vulnerability and dependence on those who injure them identify with the aggressor.¹⁰ This identification with the aggressor serves masochistic purposes, as well as compensating for the experienced disappearance of the self (see Kilborne, 2002 *Disappearing Persons: shame and appearance*). As Ferenczi notes, “the weak and undeveloped personality reacts to sudden unpleasure not by defense, but by anxiety-ridden identification and by introjection of the menacing person or aggressor.” Therefore there is deep shame in the consciousness, over the complicity which, unwittingly, the patient has entered into with the very people responsible for his undoing (Ferenczi, 1933, p. 163).

When a helpless child is mistreated and the suffering exceeds the bounds of the small person’s power of comprehension, he comes to be *beside* himself, a state of ‘not-being,’ of having disappeared (*Clinical Diary*, pp. 32–33). Fears of self-abnegation and disappearance draw upon defenses whose protective functions have ceased to exist, or are experienced to be woefully inadequate. Childhood trauma troubles the outcome of developmental sexual conflicts, leading sometimes to fantasies of psychic disappearance and to appearance anxiety.

In sum, the dream of the wise baby entails denial of feelings of helplessness, overwhelming anxiety and compensatory grandiosity, just as does the story of Oedipus, who becomes king of Thebes. The wise baby and Oedipus, like Olga, believe they can rule and be admired by all for wisdom, poise and power. However, behind the facade lie infantile experiences of trauma, vulnerability, and chaos, which threaten to undo even the most craftily devised appearances.

When the self-image of wisdom as power outstrips human understanding (and the acceptance of vulnerability), it cannot lastingly be papered over by appearance. The result is hubris and shameful instability; one waits for the other shoe to drop. The genius of Ferenczi’s image of the wise baby is to have conjoined the disjunctive images of wisdom and baby, the way the image of a sphinx conjoins the disjunctive images of lion and woman. It seems fitting, therefore, to compare Ferenczi’s image of the wise baby with the Oedipus who solves the riddle of the sphinx. He was “wise” enough to get the right answer. However, at heart, he was a traumatized, neglected infant, unable to understand what had befallen him, blind to himself and others, and tragically unaware of his own blindness. This proved to be his undoing.

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NOTES

1. Such figure/ground relationships are commonplace in discussions of perception ever since the gestaltists, but are distinctly less so in the realm of psychoanalytic knowledge.
2. Ignorance turns out to be a fruitful subject for reflection. Consider, for example, the novel of Milan Kundera *Ignorance*. Kundera writes of illusions generated by what one does not know. For example, consider the following passage: "During what I call their first 20-year span (between 1918 and 1938), the Czechs believed that their republic had all infinity ahead of it. They had it wrong, but precisely because they were wrong, they lived those years in a state of joy that led their arts to flourish as never before. After the Russian invasion, since they had no inkling of Communism's eventual end, they again believed they were inhabiting an infinity, and it was not the pain of their current life but the vacuity of the future that sucked dry their energies, stifled their courage, and made that third 20-year span so craven, so wretched." (Kundera, 2000, p. 13)
3. This is particularly true if the anxiety over being alone persists into adulthood and stands for other kinds of anxiety.
4. The Leningrad Blockade began on September 8, 1941 and lasted for 867 days until January 29, 1944, including years of brutal winters. During the blockade the city, encircled and under siege by the German Army, was entirely severed from connection to the rest of the country. The roughly three million inhabitants of the city suffered horribly from shortages of food, water and energy. The ration of food during that harsh winter was 125 grams per person per day, or about ¼ pound. Hundreds of thousands starved, just in the 2 months of January and February 1942 over two hundred thousand died of starvation. Some put the total toll of the blockade at over 800,000, nearly 1/3 of the city's population. In 1942 the population was roughly three million, and at the end of the blockade, it was barely 500,000. For a magnificent and thoroughly horrifying portrayal of the Leningrad Blockade, see *The 900 Days* by Harrison Salisbury. Salisbury writes: "Nothing can diminish the achievement of the men and women who fought on despite hunger, cold, disease, bombs, shells, lack of heat or transportation in a city that seemed given over to death. The story of those days is an epic which will stir human hearts as long as mankind exists on earth." (Salisbury, 1969, p. vii)
5. "The disappearance of one's own person, while others are still present in the scene, would thus be at the deepest root of masochism (otherwise so puzzling), of self-sacrifice for other people, animals, or things, or of the identification with outside tensions and pains that is nonsensical from a psychological or an egoistic point of view, if this is so, then no masochistic action or emotional impulse of the sort is possible without the temporary dying of one's own person. Hence, I do not feel the pain inflicted upon me at all, because I do not exist. On the other hand, I do feel the pleasure gratification of the attacker, which I am still able to perceive..." (*Clinical Diary*, p. 104.) "If all hope of help from some third person is abandoned, and if one feels that all one's own powers of self-defense have been completely exhausted, then all one has to fall back on is hope for mercy from the attacker. If I submit to his will so completely that I cease to exist, thus if I do not oppose him, then perhaps he will spare my life; at least if I abstain from offering any resistance, I have

a bit more hope that the attack will be less devastating..."(*Clinical Diary*, p. 104). "This mode of explanation presupposes, however, that at moments of extreme danger, it is possible for the intelligence to detach itself from the ego, and even perhaps from all affects..." (*Clinical Diary*, p. 105).

6. Kierkegaard writes in *Sickness unto Death* "The biggest danger, that of losing oneself, can pass off in the world as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, and so on, is bound to be noticed." (p. 62)
7. (After trauma and non –response) "The individual gives up all expectations of outside help, and a last, desperate attempt to adapt, perhaps analogous to the feigning of death in animals, occurs. The person splits into a psychic being of pure knowledge that observes the events from the outside, and a totally insensitive body. Insofar as this psychic being is still accessible to emotions, it turns its interests toward the only feelings left over from the process, that is, the feelings of the attacker. It is as though the psyche, whose sole function is to reduce emotional tensions and to avoid pain, at the moment of the death of its own person automatically diverts its pain-relieving functions toward the pains, tensions and passions of the attacker, the only person with feelings, that is, identifies itself with these." (*Clinical Diary*, p. 104.)
8. p. 10 Ferenczi explains further that one must assume that whatever you do not want to feel, know of, or remember is far worse than the symptoms you escape into." Neurotic suffering is relatively less painful than the suffering of the body and soul that is thus avoided ... Great pain, in this sense, has an anesthetic effect: pain without ideational content is not accessible to the consciousness." (*Clinical Diary*, p. 30)
9. "It is not impossible," Ferenczi muses, "that the 'wise baby,' with his wonderful instinct, accepts the deranged and insane as something that is forcibly imposed, yet keeps his own personality separate from the abnormal right from the beginning, (Here an access to the permanent bipartition of the person). The personality component expelled from its own framework represents this real, primary person, which protests persistently against every abnormality and suffers terribly under it. This suffering person protects himself, by forming wish-fulfilling hallucinations, against any insight into the sad reality, namely that the evil, alien will is occupying his entire psyche and physical being (being possessed)." (*Clinical Diary*, p. 82).
10. Ferenczi writes in his *Clinical Diary*, "The withdrawal of love, and being totally alone with one's demands for love against the compact and overwhelming majority, produce shame and repression (neurosis) in so-called normal children." (p. 104.)

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