ABSTRACT

It is argued that traditional functional explanations of the incest taboo do not sufficiently supply causal conditions. It is widely acknowledged that the incest taboo, although universal among human societies, is largely a feature of human behavior. Husserl’s investigations of intentionality are introduced to supply the particularly human element by which the taboo may be understood. So as to illumine the contrast between the conflicting intentionalities, a classical Aristotelian contrast between eros and parent/child philia is drawn. Parent/child philia and eros, although both requisite for the survival of the species, are shown to be cross-purposeful in several ways. Husserl’s understanding of ‘negation,’ as it applies to affective and practical intentionalities, is reconsidered. It is thereby explained how parental/child affection and erotic love, are ‘incompossible’ and not only conflict, but ‘nullify’ and ‘cancel out’ each other, generating the ‘taboo’.

A proscription against incest seems to be universal in human societies. Although, in some societies, sexual relations between half and full siblings may be tolerated and even idealized (Middleton, 1962; Shaw, 1992; Scheidel, 1997), sexual relations between mothers and sons and between fathers and daughters are cross-culturally forbidden in the general population, if not by precept, by practice.

Durkheim (1962), Malinkowski (1930), Frazer (1910), Freud (1913), Lévi-Strauss (1960, 1969), and Karl Marx
(1884), to cite the most influential, all offer accounts for the proscription. Generally, explanations for the taboo sort out into three types of functional explanations. On one account, the taboo inhibits negative recessive genes from accumulating in successive generations. An accumulation of the results of studies by Adams and Neel (1967), Carter (1967), Baird and McGillivray (1982), and Seemanová (1967) indicates that a very high mean rate (31.4 percent) of children of incestuous unions, in excess of a reference group, have severe physical and mental abnormalities. These studies, however, do not successfully rule out various nongenetic factors (Smelser and Baltes, 2001, p. 7258). On a second functional account, the incest taboo minimizes sexual competition within the nuclear family. According to a third account, the taboo produces links with social groups outside the nuclear family and thereby creates social networks bonded by family ties.

There is little question that some or all of these functions are promoted by the incest taboo. But a problem, long recognized by anthropologists, lies in the fact that family-bonds, if established in childhood, make erotic feelings towards close kin repugnant since family ties seem to cancel out or nullify the emotional life of erotic passion, regardless of whether or not there are de facto blood ties. Indeed there is considerable evidence in support of the view that family ties, among children outside the same natal group, nullify erotic feelings after the children have become sexually mature.

Wolf and Huang (1980), for example, found in their study of sim pua, a traditional form of Chinese marriage, that non-blood related children who grow up in the same family have less sexual interest in each other when reaching maturity. In sim pua, a family adopts a non-kinship infant female into a household to be raised, ultimately, for marriage with an infant son. Wolf and Huang found that these children, upon reaching sexual maturity, are reticent to marry. If they do marry, sim pua marriages result in a higher divorce and lower fertility rate as compared to arranged marriages between strangers. Studies of non-blood related children, in other parts of the globe, seem to confirm the same result. Joseph Shepher (1983), for example, documented the absence of marriage and sexual liaisons between children who lived together in the same kibbutz, despite the fact that they were encouraged to marry. In fact, an exclusion between early family bonding and eros appears also in nonhuman primates. Many studies of nonhuman primates support the thesis that animals
of various primate species prefer to find sexual partners outside their the natal group (Maryanski and Turner, 1992).

How, then, can such an exclusion between family-like bonds established in childhood and sexuality be explained? A phenomenological explanation of how two types of human bonding, namely the family bond established in early childhood and erotic passion are practically incompatible can answer this question. Our proposal, it will be argued, fits with how the incest taboo is experienced. What will be proposed is, to speak the language of phenomenology, that the incest taboo arises from an incompossibility of two types of intentionality. The taboo is universal because both types of intentionality are requisite for the survival of the species. The intentionality of eros is requisite inasmuch as it elicits sexual reproduction. The intentionality of the child/parent bond is requisite inasmuch as it enables survival through infancy and childhood. Both types of intentionality, as practical projects, are nonetheless incompatible. Once the exclusivity of these types of intentionality are described, I shall explain in more detail the nature of this affective and practical intentionality.

**The Eros/Philia Conflict**

Distinguishing between kinds of affective bonds has long been attempted by philosophers, psychologists and anthropologists. I propose to develop what I think is a phenomenologically accurate distinction between two kinds of affective bonds. This contrast is far enough removed from our own historical period as to warrant consideration as persistent, if not perennial. In particular, I would like to return to the distinction between philia and eros as proposed by Aristotle. In making this distinction, Heidegger’s celebrated characterization of Aristotle as the last philosopher “to force inquiry back to the phenomena” perhaps is not so great an overstatement (Heidegger, 1988, p. 232). Further, the philia/eros distinction can be made analytically precise. I shall review first Aristotle’s understanding of the bond that exists between parents and children conceived as a kind of ‘mutual regard,’ i.e., as a kind of philia. I’ll then juxtapose this variety of human bonding with eros. Afterwards, I’ll generalize how these two types of love deserve to be treated as intentional projects which exclude each other.
Aristotle (1984) describes the love of children for parents in Books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the books on Friendship, i.e., on *Philia*.¹

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* there are three statements (1162a4-8, 1161b18, 1161b29) to the effect that children love their parents because parents are a source of their existence. The fullest account is in Book VIII, chapter 12:

> The friendship of children to parents, and of men to gods, is a relation to them as to something good and superior; for they have conferred the greatest benefits since they are the causes of their being and of their nourishment, and of their education from their birth (1162a, 4-8).

On the other hand, the love of parents for children, according to Aristotle, is similar in that it concerns the generation of one’s self. In the case of parental love, however, it is founded upon reproducing and extending one’s self, or at least part of one’s self, in the form of another self. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* we have: “for parents love their children as being part of themselves,” (1161b17). And, later, “Parents, then, love their children as themselves (for their issue are by virtue of their separate existence a sort of other selves)” (1161b28). Basing parental love on the principle that a producer loves her product, Aristotle goes on to declare that parental love is stronger than filial love, and that mothers love children sooner than fathers do:

> The originator is more attached to his offspring than the offspring to their begetter, for the product belongs to the producer (e.g., a tooth or hair or anything else to him whose it is), but the producer does not belong to the product, or belongs to a lesser degree (1161b22-24).

Since the parent knows the child at birth and the mother knows the child she carries more than the father does, mothers and fathers love their children “as soon as they are born, but children love their parents only after time has elapsed and they have acquired understanding or perception,” (1161b25-27).

Aristotle describes here the ideal case of loving parents and children who recognize the importance of this love. Yet, there is little question that parent-child relations often do not live up to the ideal Aristotle describes. We shall return to the case of derelict or absent parents later. However, for now, let us observe that parent-child love turns upon a certain axis which I’ll call the ‘generation or regeneration of self axis.’ In cases of both parental and filial love, nothing less than one’s own existence is at issue. It is directly so in the
case of children’s love for their parents, and by extension to another self in the case of parents’ love for children.

How, then, does eros compare? Eros contrasts radically with philia. First, eros does not require the mutuality which applies to even the more remote cases of philia. It is hardly unusual to form an erotic relation with a stranger. It’s not only that Cyranos abound in the world, it’s also that eros does not require the recognition of the beloved. Otherwise, the publication of romance novels and tabloid stories about media idols would be in trouble. Secondly, erotic relations are connected with appetite insofar as they entail a longing for the loved, pain in the person’s absence, and pleasure in recollection, (1167a4). For eros one must desire the beloved’s presence, (1385a22-24). Aristotle makes the longing for the beloved during her absence a sign of love. A third feature of eros is that, unlike philia, it requires a sensuous object. Eros is formed “according to the sensuous,” (1167a7-8). “For no one falls in love without being delighted by their form,” (1245a25-27). It is for this reason that the lovesick always take pleasure “in talking, writing or composing verses about the beloved, for it seems to them that all this recollection makes the object of their affection perceptible,” (1370b20-22).

As indicated earlier, we are returning to the Aristotelian distinction between eros and philia because these kinds of human affective bonds reflect what, even today, is a commonsense understanding of different kinds of love. And, the distinction between eros and philia allows us to note several contrasts vis-à-vis eros and the affection between parents and children. These contrasts are, first, that eros is not necessarily mutual, while the affection between parents and their children necessarily is mutual, although often unequally so. Second, the affection between parents and children, unlike eros, is not based in a desire for the presence of the beloved, but on the causes of, or extension of, one’s own existence. And third, parent-child love does not depend upon a delight in the sensuous form of the beloved, but rather on the fact that parents and children see in each other a generation or regeneration of their own life.

Let us consider further these contrasts. First, as previously mentioned, the account of parent/child love we are taking from Aristotle conveys an ideal. It represents a felicitous and fulfilled parent/child bond in which biological parents sustain children through childhood and foster their children’s education. But don’t parental relations often fall short of this ideal? Many cases
of parenting do not involve mutuality. Some biological parents never see their children. How do such cases involve mutuality?

De facto genetic inheritance, which indeed from a phenomenological point of view needs be “bracketed,” counts for little in explaining the incest taboo since what is at issue is not the de facto biological relation, but the belief that a parent/child relation exists. This is presumed by the long-standing meaning given to the incest taboo in the literary tradition. For example, in John Dryden’s and Nathaniel Lee’s 1769 adaptation of Oedipus Tyrannos, in Act II Oedipus sleepwalks and then returns to bed with Jocasta where he admits to incestuous dreams. But the incestuous dreams Oedipus confesses are not with his actual mother, Jocasta, with whom he, as a matter of fact, is having sexual relations, but with Merope, the woman who raised him and whom he believes to be his mother. For such a twist in the classic Sophoclean version of the Oedipus story to evoke horror, the audience is called on to recognize that the belief, and not the fact, of a parent/child incest evokes the taboo. Even the Sophoclean version of Oedipus Tyrannos relies on the presumption that Oedipus, as a riddle-solver, is destined to unravel the inconsistencies of his childhood, and finally to confront, and come to believe, the circumstances of his birth. Comedic presentations of the incest taboo, as for example between Figaro and Marcellina in The Marriage of Figaro, also rely on the belief that incest exists, or might exist, for its proscription. No belief, no taboo.

That the incest taboo requires the belief that someone is a parent or child itself implies ‘intentional’ relations in the phenomenological sense. Indeed, approaching the taboo through the intentionality of consciousness addresses how the taboo extends to absent or derelict parents, even if they do not participate in parent/child philia. The designation, ‘father’ or ‘mother,’ is enough to engender the repugnance since the designations, ‘father’ or ‘mother,’ convey the belief that a father or mother, as a type, ought to sustain his or her child through infancy and childhood. Husserl, in his remarks on family roles in the Nachlass, published in Volume XIV of Husserlana, explains that the sense of ‘father’ and ‘mother’ as well as of other family members, arises from the function each family member serves in fostering the family as a whole (Husserl, 1973a, p. 181.3-9). By contrast, “artificially” (künstlich) established roles, such as the roles of master and servant and those established by social clubs and unions, may be annulled. “The runaway slave is no longer a slave,” as Husserl
states (Husserl, 1973a, p. 181.38-39). In the case of family roles, however, there are responsibilities which are not ‘artificial’ but ‘natural,’ (Husserl, 1973a, pp. 180.38, 181.12). Absent or derelict parents, however de facto absent and derelict they may be, inasmuch as they cannot absent themselves from the designations, ‘father’ or ‘mother,’ are subject to the same norm of mutuality, even if unrealized. The very designations, ‘absent’ and ‘derelict,’ presume a norm according to which an absence or dereliction counts as a deviation. Derelict and absent parents, by virtue of the meaning ‘father’ and ‘mother,’ sustain a relation which, in its intentionality, is mutual.

In our description, eros differs from philia in other ways than mutuality. Eros is located on an appetitive-sensuous axis and, in the absence of the other person, subject to longing or yearning. Of course this is not to say the parents or children do not miss each other when apart. But the desire for, or by, the child is for different reasons. Loving parents miss their children, as children miss their parents. But, the parent who sorrows at the absence of a child, is relieved upon evidence of the child’s well-being, just as the child is relieved at the appearance of the absent parent, sensing that its security and welfare is no longer at risk. Again, causes of generation and regeneration seem to be at issue with parent-child affection but not with eros.

According to the third difference between eros and philia, eros is based in the sensuous aspect of the beloved. “The pleasure of the eye is the beginning of love [eros],” as Aristotle states (1167a4). Surely parents can and do pride themselves in the physical appearance of a child. But this is not a desire for their looks as such, which, as the Act II.ii Romeo says of Juliet, “would shame those stars/As daylight doth a lamp.” Parents take delight in a child’s looks more along the lines of accomplishment. This pride, again, suggests the regeneration of another self. Similarly a child may take pleasure in a beautiful mother or in a dapper father but again it is pride, which moves the child and that pride belies the nexus to the generation or regeneration of its own self.

To contrast eros and the philia between parents and children is not to deny that there are crossovers. Psychoanalysts of the last century made into a cri d’armes that children eroticize parents and brought incest, real or imagined, into the forefront of the etiology of neurosis. But leaving out for now, how incest may play into the psychopathology, there is nothing in the psychopathology of incest which rules out an intensive account. Incestuous fantasies
aside, Husserl was surely correct to note that family roles, far from wholly encompassing a person’s identity, involve as a matter of course, “neglect in the natural solicitude” which one family member, as father or mother, feels for other family members, perhaps because of “omissions, moments of ego-ism or irrationality” (Husserl, 1973a, p. 180.21-26).

Indeed, without some lapses in the intentional project of parenting, it is difficult to see how the incest taboo would have relevance. It may well be, given that eros and parent/child love support reproduction and child development respectively, some degree of conflict is to be expected. Yet, the peculiarly human component of the incest taboo follows from the fact that the human animal is an intentive animal. Because we are human, we, perhaps along with some other primates (Maryanski and Turner, 1992), inhabit a world filled with persons and things which are given, in our immediate experience, as meaningful. Some of these meanings conflict with one another to the extent that one meaning tends to ‘cancel out’ the other, in Husserl’s terminology. The cause of the incest taboo then becomes, in a sense, an ‘incompossibility’ of practical and affective intentions. In its practical and emotive intentionality, it compares to a kind of category error. One way to understand the horror of many Greek myths is to see these myths as circumscribing clashes in counterpurposeful beliefs. It is not only Oedipus who makes a whopper along spousal-filial lines. Other mythological figures suffer from radically mistaken beliefs as well. Thyestes mistakes his dead child for supper. Priam mistakes the peace offering of an artificial horse for the enemy. Pentheus mistakes the god Dionysus for a truant boy, etc. Eros and parent-child love, as intentive projects, are incompatible, since, given the power that eros has over our lives, eros excludes the benefits that come from parent-child affection. And that would lead to a very grave loss indeed considering how elemental parental/child love is for the child’s development and future.

What, then, is the problem with incestuous relations given the eros/philia contrast? The sketch of eros and the philia between parents and children implies that eros excludes fundamentals of parental/filial love. Given that love between parents and children might be described along a ‘generation or regeneration of self axis,’ the potentialities of child development are at stake. Insofar as parent/child love has a goal of generation, or regeneration, accordingly, eros, by recasting the parent or child into a immediate sensuous object of desire,
transforms the apprehension of a person and removes her or him from the long-term intentions, plans and deliberations which foster the generation or regeneration of self. As felt from a parent to a child, it, in effect, conflicts with the child’s potentiality for maturation. As felt from a child to a parent, it removes the parent from her or his de facto role as the source of existence and makes the child, in effect, parentless. Since the repugnance of incest arises from intentional relations which conflict with one other, the taboo appears even in imagination. Phaedra, after all, never actually has sexual relations with her step-son, Hippolytus. The tragedy is propelled by the mere prospect of their incest.

The Incest Taboo as the Product of ‘Incompossible’ Practical and Affective Intentions

We have proposed that the incest taboo arises from the incompatibility of practical and affective intentional relations in the phenomenological sense. What, then, is meant by practical and affective intentionality as these terms are used here?

Husserl’s investigation of the intentionality of consciousness is perhaps best known for his analyses of perception and cognitive judgments. But, Husserl also investigated in detail the intentionality he discovered in practical and affective concerns. In middle and later writings, Husserl often distinguishes ‘theoretical,’ ‘practical’ and ‘affective’ attitudes of consciousness. In making this division, he repeatedly asserts that there are logical structures in the affective and practical attitudes which are analogous to the logical structures in the theoretical attitude (Husserl, 1950, pp. 269, 272, 279, 323/1982, pp. 280, 282, 269, 335). For example, Husserl states in §121 of Ideas I (Husserl, 1950, p. 297/1982, p. 289):

Or, as I usually express it, there is besides the doxic, “and” (the logical “and”), also an axiological and practical “and.” The same holds for the word “or,” and all the syntheses belonging here.

“Negation,” Husserl explains in Experience and Judgment, “is not first the business of the act of predicative judgment” but “already appears in the prepredicative sphere of receptive experience” (Husserl, 1973b, p. 90). Husserl grounded the notion of negation, usually conceived as a property of judgments
or propositions, in the immediate perceptual experience of the world. In viewing a red ball, for example, I presume its redness and sphericity will extend to its backside. But if I turn it around and discover its backside is green and dented, a recasting of previous presumptions occurs. In Husserl’s description (Husserl, 1973b, p. 88):

The new objective sense “green” in its power of impressional fulfillment has a certitude of original power which overcomes the certitude of the prior anticipation of “being red.” But the certitude which has been overcome is still present to consciousness, although with the character of the “null.”

The previous presumption of a uniformly round, red ball is not erased but made “null.” Husserl variously returns to such terms as ‘annulment,’ ‘nullification’ or ‘canceling out’ to describe how the misperception becomes corrected. A motorist on a hot day will often see a pool of water seemingly in the midst of long stretch of highway. But soon this vision is ‘annulled’ and perceived to be atmospheric. Jastrow’s duck/rabbit picture, which Wittgenstein made famous, is an especially good pictorial contrivance whereby we witness the shifting from the perceptual significance of one meaning to another. But Husserl’s careful description of such perceptual corrections catches what ordinary observance usually misses. The cancellation of the earlier perception is “retroactive” insofar as it modifies the earlier phases of perception (Husserl, 1973b, p. 89). When we thought the ball was wholly red, we did not see the whole of the ball. Our perception of a wholly red ball in fact depends on a fusion of horizons with immediate perceptions. When we discerned that it was, in fact, half-red, half-green and dented, the previous perception became annulled retroactively; prior anticipations were made “null.” Such corrections would be impossible if perception did not, from the beginning, include a fusion of anticipations of the whole object which are given as present, although yet unseen.

Husserl indicates that this ‘canceling out’ of a misperception has an analogue in the case of values and plans of action. In fact, as he states, it applies to every object of ‘positional consciousness’ (Husserl, 1973b, p. 90):

What holds in the analysis of the example of external perception holds in analogous manner for every other intending, object-positioning consciousness (positional consciousness) and for its objectivities.
This comparison of external perception with other manners of ‘object-positional consciousness’ needs some explanation. Turning to Ideas I, a central work of Husserl’s middle period in which Husserl offers a comprehensive general introduction to phenomenological philosophy, in §37 we find a description of how values, actions and goals, as well as objects of perception become ‘objects of positional consciousness.’ Say I am looking at a table on which there is a large bowl filled with oranges, apples and pears. The bowl of fruit need not be apprehended as an ‘Object seized upon’ (Husserl, 1950, p. 82.3,19/1982, p. 76.12,25). It need not involve a ‘heeding’ of the fruit (Husserl, 1950, p. 83.32ff./1982, p. 77.27ff.). In pre-reflective consciousness we find ourselves ‘turning towards’ or extending a ‘regard-to’ surrounding circumstances, as Husserl states (Husserl, 1950, pp. 81-83/1982, pp. 75-77). There has not yet been an ‘objectifying turn’ in which a thing or value is made into an object (Husserl, 1950, p. 76.34/1982, p. 82.29).

If I pick up one of the pears and take a bite, I might consciously evaluate this brand of pears as particularly satisfying and make a mental note to buy more. This bit of behavior involves a shift to objectifying consciousness. The ‘regarding’ or ‘turning towards’ of mere awareness shifts to an ‘attending’ or ‘heeding’ of the experience. My consciousness is no longer pre-reflective. As such, evaluations and practical plans are ‘objectified’ and consequently subject to cancellations and annulments just as are perceptions. If, for example, as I am eating the pear, I recall an article in the morning’s newspaper about lethal pesticides in local pear farms, my evaluation of the succulence of the fruit changes even as I am eating it. Accordingly, my plans to include pears in the grocery list change as my previous enjoyment of the fruit comes into conflict with the belief that they are laced by toxic pesticides. As with the case of the half-red and half-green ball misperceived as wholly red, expectations of toxicity, and thereby anticipations of consuming food contaminated with pesticides, are drawn into the immediate perception of the object and understood as having been there all along. As the value of the fruit changes so do plans and actions dependent on those values. As values and decisions are absorbed as anticipations, they nullify previous values in a way that is analogous to misperception. There is no room for a pear to be both healthy and toxic. One value not only conflicts with the other, it nullifies the other. As with the corrected perceptual meanings, previous values are not forgotten but rather their claim to an existing thing is made “null.”
Returning to the incest taboo, erotic objects and objects of parental philia are clearly complex. In the language of Husserl’s *Ideas I*, erotic objects and people subject to parental affection involve ‘polythetic syntheses’ (cf. Husserl, 1950/1982, §138). This terminology applies in that the eroticized individual engenders not only perceptual and recollective ‘meanings’ which pertain to the person’s physical appearance, style of movement, manners, characteristic physiognomy and gestures, etc. It also includes affective and volitional ‘meanings,’ e.g., longings to be near, desires to touch the beloved and a delight and elation in her presence, etc. The eroticized person is a fusion of these collections of ‘meanings.’

But, the erotic love and the family member as affective and volitional intentional objects, as ‘polythetic syntheses,’ are in opposition. In keeping with the previous analyses of eros and parent/child philia, three types of oppositions may be noted.

First, since eroticized persons are loved for their immediate looks, manners, gestures, and promise of sensuous delight, the long-term development of the person, at least while in the throes of eros, is not at issue. By contrast, parenting, concerned as it is with infant and child maturation, focuses upon long-term goals and does not settle upon the immediate and sensuous appearance of a child or adult. Given, then, Husserl’s doctrine of the nullification of opposing meanings, sensuous strivings and desires make “null” non-sensuous prospects and deliberations for child development. Second, eros leads lovers to make light of, and perhaps find tedious, the obligations of social roles. So Anthony and Cleopatra shirk the obligations of state, however weighty, to return to each other as do countless other lovers in legend and literature. Husserl, in discussing the development of duty and responsibility in types of love, observes: “As lover, I know that what I think, feel, strive for, do, all which is necessarily in keeping with the understanding of my beloved, is right for my beloved . . .” (Husserl, 1973a, p. 173.29-31). By contrast, in the case of family members: “Every family member is a responsible subject, a subject which, in accordance with the circumscribed and special case, has an ‘I should’ born out of this generality” (Husserl, 1973a, p. 180.34-37). The father, as a father, should guide his children; the mother should tend to the infant’s cries, etc. The sole obligation of lovers, as lovers, consists in not being false, i.e., not actually being lovers. Otherwise they are free from obligations to
their partner. This opposition between normative-free and the normative-laden love threatens the parental/child bond since it nullifies the obligations that are beholden to the upbringing of offspring. Last, the throes of *eros* imply the captivation and fascination of the lover. Arresting although it may be, as we have proposed, *eros* does not require mutuality. The feelings, strivings and actions associated with it may be wholly private. Parent/child *philia* on the other hand necessarily involves mutuality. Thus, thirdly, there is a private/shared opposition. The various oppositions mentioned then are: 1) immediately sensuously attractive versus long-term developmentally valuable; 2) a normative-free versus normative-laden social significance; and, 3) a private versus shared significance *vis-à-vis* the strivings, feelings and actions involved.

**Lingering Questions**

Several outstanding questions need to be addressed to sufficiently explain the thesis offered here. First, a question arises in that the ‘canceling out’ of *eros* from parent/child love would seem to involve momentary cancellations, as in the case of perceptual misconceptions. It may be argued that the nullification of an earlier perception by an ‘incompossable’ new perception, even if the perception includes affective and volitional aspects, is not analogous to the decades of strivings, feelings and actions which are part of parenting. Parenting is not a series of momentary corrections but a *continuous* pursuit. Further, parental roles are widely diverse. Traditional parental roles whereby the father is head of the household and the mother ministers to the needs of the children and manages the household budget have little relevance to an increasing number of US families today in which children are often raised by single parents.

These concerns may be addressed insofar as parental and child roles are conceived functionally in keeping with Husserl’s analysis (Husserl, 1973a, p. 181.17-28). The father or mother, as father and mother, and the same would apply to the single-parent, have the function of supporting the development and maturation of the child. This function is ongoing and its temporal horizons extend across the child’s development. Nor need the parental commitment spring solely from parent/child love. Complementing the parents’ own desire to raise their children is the force of law and public opinion which urges on the project. Granted that parenting involves numberless desires,
plans, deliberations as well as perceptions and judgments, even so they cluster about ongoing continuous volitional intentions concerned with the child’s maturation. The role of ‘parent’, whether single or not, presumes a commitment to these intentions. As such, the various oppositions which were suggested above enter into the continuous project of the upbringing of offspring and extend throughout childhood and adolescence to maturity.

A second question concerns the ‘temptation’ of incest. On our account, parent/child love ‘cancels out’ erotic attraction. Such a ‘temptation’ would presumably also apply to the incest fantasies of children and would seem to rule them out. This question is a weighty one. The nullification of eros seems to fly in the face of long-standing accounts whereby incest, real or imagined, leads to psychopathology. Not only Freud and his immediate followers, but also second and third generation psychoanalysts, often revising and correcting Freud’s own theories, make incest, fantasized and real, a cornerstone of psychopathology. Further, there is an enormous body of psychological discussion of people who have difficulty integrating ‘lust’ and ‘love’. On the one hand, cases are discussed of unfortunate people who are sexually cold or repulsed by spouses for whom they otherwise feel much affection. On the other hand, there is abundant discussion of people who cannot experience tenderness and care for their sexual partners. It is often supposed that these difficulties emerge from vestigial conflicts retained from the eroticization of parents or parental figures.

Two responses may be offered. First, as mentioned before, it is Husserl’s view that family roles have their lapses. The role of father or mother does not wholly absorb a person’s subjectivity. In fact for Husserl, parental obligation requires that there is some degree of “neglect in the natural solicitude” of the father and mother to other family members, perhaps because of “omissions, moments of egoism or irrationality” (Husserl, 1973a, p. 180.21-2). Thus even though parental roles nullify erotic attraction, the nullification need not apply to the totality of a person’s wishes, strivings, desires, judgments, feelings, etc. This would open the door, not only from the parents’ side, but perhaps especially from the child’s side, to the eroticization of a parent or child due to a lapse from the constraints of parental/child love. This would at least address how lust might conflict with love insofar as conjugal love might have associations to parent/child love.
A second, perhaps more comprehensive, response requires that we consider, however briefly, a bias which, from the vantage point of the beginning of the twenty-first century, seems to have been extended widely across early twentieth century psychological, sociological, anthropological accounts of the incest taboo. There is little question that incest, fantasized or real, even as part of normal human development, was a cornerstone of early twentieth century psychology, sociology and anthropology. Sir James Frazer’s declaration, made early in the twentieth century, that “we may always safely assume that crimes forbidden by law are crimes which many men have a natural propensity to commit” (Frazer, 1910, p. 97), was scarcely questioned when applied to the incest taboo. It was not only Freud and Lévi-Strauss and their schools which maintained that the incest taboo corrects instinctual behavior. Ranks of sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists, whose theoretical commitments were not only psychoanalytic and structuralist, but Marxist, cultural materialist, and radical social constructionist, presumed that incestuous desires were instinctual (cf. Smelser and Baltes, 2001, pp. 7259-62). These researchers may have otherwise disagreed radically with each other; nonetheless, they widely concurred that the incest taboo was the product of imposing social conventions upon instinctual behavior. What they uniformly denied was that the proscription was somehow rooted in human nature.

By the second half of the twentieth century the bias according to which incestuous desires were elemental to human development began to be noted. Reviving the work of the Finish sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher, Edward Westermarck, studies emerged which confirmed Westermarck’s hypothesis that early childhood association inhibits sexual attraction. Westermarck had proposed decades earlier (Westermarck, 1926, p. 80):

Generally speaking, there is remarkable absence of erotic feelings between persons living very closely together from childhood. Nay more, in this, as in many other cases, sexual indifference is combined with the positive feeling of aversion when the act is thought of.

We cited before the testimony of kibbutz marriages and the Chinese practice of sim pua. Studies of McCabe (1983) and Walter (1997) might be added. McCabe and Walter demonstrated, respectively, in a study of 93 marriages in Lebanon and 275 marriages in Morocco, the validity of the Westermarck hypothesis: early childhood association inhibits sexual attraction. It would
seem that among Arabs, as among Israelis and Chinese, that children when reaching adulthood resist mating with those with whom they have grown up as members of their families. Wolf (2001) and Arens (1997) accordingly, in overviewing of the accounts of the incest taboo, observe that, by the end of the twentieth century, the Westermarck hypothesis has eclipsed the view that the incest taboo is the result of social constraints upon instinctual cravings. Wolf states in his article, “Incest Prohibition, Origin and Evolution of” in the recent *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2001, pp. 7261-2):

> In his introductory lectures in 1917, Freud suggested that his audience “would hardly recall without smiling” the view that “sexual attraction is diverted from members of the opposite sex in one family owing to their living together from childhood” (Freud, 1920, pp. 343-4). As we enter the twenty-first century, it is Freud’s view that elicits smiles. . . . Westermarck’s second proposition, [that living closely together from childhood inhibits erotic feelings] was right all along.

In response, then, to the issue of the ‘temptation’ to incest which has been established by the work of early twentieth century anthropological, sociological and psychological theory, at the very least, it is questionable whether we should presume the normality of incest fantasies and their vestigial impact upon adult life. This is not to deny that the abrogation of the incest pro\-scription can, and does, result in psychological trauma and human tragedy. But as the approach here has attempted to show, one need not appeal to a variety of social constraints to explain the taboo, e.g., the desire of men to have trophies in their wives, the desire for marriage by capture, superstitions that incest blights crops and renders women sterile, etc. Rather, as a matter of human nature, two vital human concerns, reproduction and the upbringing of offspring, as intentional projects, are experienced as incompatible. One need not suppose that repressed incest fantasies drive the taboo. It is enough that human subjects, who reflect on incest, experience a repugnance, just because they are drawn into contemplating a collision of two vital projects and as result experience painful emotions. Readers of *Oedipus Tyrannos* understand the expression of Oedipus’s despair. It is not required that we reac\-quaint ourselves with our own ‘Oedipal conflict.’ Rather, the drama leads us to confront an interweaving of human possibilities whose meaning is directly
experienced as ‘a dead end.’ It is worth recalling that in the Sophoclean version, Oedipus laments the future of his daughters, saying: “Such a disgrace you must bear! Who will marry you then? There is no one” (ll. 1500-1, my trans.). Oedipus’ daughters are not merely besmirched and demoted to a degraded level of society; rather, their marriage to any man, as well as their future participation in the social world, is not degraded, but nullified.

Conclusion

It is argued that the approach offered here has several strengths. First it addresses why the taboo is universal among diverse human societies. As caused by the ‘incompossibility’ of two vital projects, it is universal because the projects of species reproduction and the parental upbringing of offspring are universal in human society. Further, since the taboo results from a radical conflict in meanings and their consequent actions, it explains that the taboo can be elicited by properly contrived literary presentations. Third, given the emotional repugnance borne out of a nullification of vital projects, it substantiates that the taboo is universally institutionalized in law and public morality. It thereby follows that, on the one hand, incestuous behavior can be psychologically traumatic for incest victims who experience the social proscription and the, too often, deliberate abuse of their victimizers perpetrated in view of the social proscription. It also follows that relatively innocuous cases of incestuous behavior can and, very likely, do exist, depending upon special social contexts and personal idiosyncrasies.

As to the three functional accounts of the incest taboo mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it is not contested that the incest prohibition has various functions: viz. 1) the prevention of the accumulation of recessive genes; 2) the sustaining of a more peaceful upbringing; and, 3) the fostering of extra-familial social ties. That harmful effects arise from the capacity of incestuous unions to compound deleterious recessive genes seems to be proven. But even so, any one or all of these ‘functions’ may have arisen fortuitously along with the incest taboo and thereby have limited causal efficacy. Further, these functions do not explain why a behavioral avoidance of incest does not appear in species other than human beings and, possibly, some primates. After all, the prevention of the accumulation of recessive genes, the securing of maturation and the establishing of non-kinship bonds are useful to other
species besides human beings and primates. But, the incest taboo is especially an aspect of human behavior. The intentionality of consciousness, by which we may reflect on the objects of our desires, and come face-to-face their discord, supplies that condition.

References


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**Notes**

1. *Philia*, usually translated as ‘friendship,’ as Aristotelian commentators often point out, has a broader application than the English, ‘friendship.’ Aristotle includes in *philia* the notion of friendship as contemporaneously understood, but included also is the bond between parents and children, husbands and wives, as well as a great variety of communal establishments which draw people together, e.g., clubs, religious guilds, amusement parties and mercantile and political associations. As defined in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.2, 1156a14-5, *philia* has four conditions: 1) mutual recognition; 2) each party bears goodwill for the other; 3) each party wishes well for each other; 4) the goodwill and well-wishing is for reasons of virtue, pleasure or utility as found in the other. A suitable translation of *philia* is ‘mutual regard.’ Hardie (1968, pp. 317ff.) offers an especially good account of the meaning of *philia*.

2. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, at 1157a13 and 1164a3, does discuss briefly *philia* relations that are also erotic, i.e. lovers who are also friends. None of this discussion however applies to parent/child *philia* which, as argued, has the unique feature of parents and children regenerating or generating one’s self.

3. In the Aristotelian analysis, *pothos*, or longing, is a condition of *eros*. On the other hand, *eunoia*, or goodwill, is a condition of friendship, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.5, 1167a6-8.

4. For Husserl’s description of the ‘cancellation’ (*Durchstreichung*) and ‘exploding’ (*Explodieren*) of one intentive meaning by another see, for example, *Ideas I*, §§106, 138, 151.