

FROM "CHILDREN OF THE HEART" TO "ABANDONED CHILDREN": CONSTRUCTION OF "THE ORIGINS" OF ADOPTION IN SPAIN

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For adoptive families and adoptees, discourse on adoption raises a range of questions for discussion in relation to which they negotiate the meaning of the adoption in their life trajectories and identities. Based on the results of an ethnographic research study on the speech of adoptive families, adoptees and adoption practitioners, this article examines how the notion of the "origins" of adoption has been built in Spain, from their concealment to the propagation of the discourse that considers "abandonment" as an inescapable fact in the adoptees' lives. Finally, the implications of the latter are discussed.

Key words: Adoption, Origins, Loss, Abandonment.

Los discursos sobre la adopción constituyen, para las familias adoptivas y las personas adoptadas, un repertorio que las interpela y en relación con el cual negocian el significado de la adopción en sus trayectorias vitales e identidades. A partir de los resultados de una investigación etnográfica sobre los discursos de las familias adoptivas, las personas adoptadas y los profesionales que con ellas intervienen, se analiza cómo se ha construido la noción de "los orígenes" en la adopción en España, desde el silenciamiento hasta la penetración de un discurso que considera al "abandono" como insoslayable en la trayectoria vital de toda persona adoptada y cuáles han sido sus implicaciones.

Palabras clave: Adopción, Orígenes, Pérdida, Abandono.

In Spain, as in any other society that follows the Euro-American model of kinship, we currently find a diversity of types of families and ways of becoming one. Birth control and new reproductive technologies have permitted family planning and the appearance of new discourse referring to it – today, being a mother or father does not depend on a heterosexual relationship but on the "desire" to be one. In this regard, both adoption and Assisted Reproduction Technology (ART) with donated genetic material call into question the need for biogenetic relationships to establish kinship ties. However, as Modell (1994) pointed out, in adoptions in the American context, these new forms of relatedness are built in relation to the pattern marked by the biological kinship, whether it is to question it or to develop strategies to equal it.

In contrast to what happens with ART (with the exception of gestational surrogacy), in adoption, not only are girls and boys who are produced by other bodies adopted (Howell, 2003), but after their birth, they go both symbolically and physically from one family (called "biological") to another (adoptive). The notion of "the origins" makes reference to this transit, as well as to the

birth family and what occurred before the adoption.

As Palacios (2009) reminds us, it was not so long ago that it was a common practice among adoption professionals to conceal information about the pre-adoption period of their sons' and daughters' lives from adoptive families because of fear of stigmatization or raising fears among those who were adopting. However, at present, there is a certain consensus about the right of adoptees to know their history, which has been reflected in the legal acknowledgement of their right to the information on this topic that is in the possession of public entities (see article 12 of the *International Adoption Law*, 2007).

In that referring to the "revelation" – the disclosure of being adopted – there are data that show a notable advance. If in 1996, 50% of children adopted in Andalucía were unaware that they had been adopted (Palacios, Sánchez-Sandoval & León, 1996), ten years later, that figure was 5% (Palacios, Sánchez-Sandoval & León, 2005). Nevertheless, recent research indicates that speaking of adoption is not equal to speaking about "origins" given the singular difficulty – familial and social – of including the birthparents, in particular the mothers, in these accounts (Marre, 2009), as well as of speaking about what occurred before the adoption (Berastegui & Jódar, in press).

Jociles and Charro (2008) have stressed the influence of the discourse of psychology and social work professionals

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responsible for the training and assessment of those who wish to adopt transnationally in the construction of the parental roles of the adoptive families. This discourse insists on differentiating biological parenthood from adoptive parenthood, indicating, among other aspects, that future mothers and fathers must “value and respect the minor’s origins and facilitate the development of a feeling of pride in his/her origins and identity” (2008, p. 118). However, in not specifying what is understood for “origins”, what aspects of these must be disclosed or what the reasons are for feeling pride in them, “origins” becomes a category empty of content that, in the case of transnational adoptions, tends to be interpreted as the culture (of the native country) that the boys and girls bring with them, even when they have arrived in Spain at very early ages, that is, in an almost genetically or biologically manner (Marre, 2007).

The discursive psychology followed in this article and the research that supports it has pointed out the essential role of discourse – understanding this for a system of statements which constructs an object (Parker, 1992) – in the constitution of social subjects – subjectivities and their associated identities – and in the establishment and stabilization of power relationships on the part of dominating groups. “Descriptions and stories construct the world, or, at least, versions of the world” (Potter, 1998, p. 130) which compete between them to construct the truth, in relation to which people negotiate their identities (Hall, 2008). For the adoptive mothers and fathers and their sons and daughters, the discourse about families extended or formed through adoption constitutes a repertoire that challenges them, and in relation to it they negotiate the meaning of adoption in their biographies and in their identities.

The aim of this article is to analyze hegemonic discourses – in terms of their acceptance and reproduction on the part of adoptive families and adoptees – on the transition from one family to another in adoption in Spain and its evolution, from the initial silence to the concept of it being like a “loss” or an “abandonment” with inevitable emotional consequences for the adoptees. This last concept, unlike the hegemonic precedent based on the idea of the adopted child as a clean slate (Howell & Marre, 2006), understands that adoption is not a turning point in the vital trajectories of the adoptees, because the “consequences of abandonment” continue to be present in their lives and affect their personalities and their relationships with others and with the world.

Although they are attributed to being natural consequences of not being able to grow up in the bosom of a birth family, “loss” and “abandonment” are psychosocial and socio-cultural constructions. There is no place here for an exhaustive exposition of examples in this regard (see Bowie, 2004; Carroll, 1970; Marre, 2010), although it is worth mentioning that in many cultures it is not biological relationships that establish kinship; thus, the fact that bearing and raising do not coincide in the same people does not represent a stigma or disgrace for them, but in many cases, the opposite. Although it does not eliminate the discomfort derived from possible “losses” sustained through adoption in our culture, it is a substantiation that suggests the need to reflect on how to discursively construct the transition from one family to another and the possible “losses” derived therein.

This article is based on data gathered during a four year period of participant observation in the Spanish group of adoptive families (ten years if it is taken into account that for six years previous to the beginning of this study, the author actively participated in the adoptive family group and in the associative movement that emerged from it, and gathered information for the elaboration of two books related to adoption), on the participation in thirty-two conferences and workshops for families and professionals on the social and familial integration of adoptees, on texts written by psychologists specialized in adoption and on ten in-depth interviews with adoptees and four with professionals and practitioners having a psychological base in the area of post-adoption and/or child protection in general.

My condition as an adoptive mother and active member of the associative movement of adoptive families in which I have had personal and virtual relationships for more than a decade facilitated my work in the field, my permanence in it, as well as access to certain information. However, it has also required the constant exercise of reflexivity with special attention to balancing notions of empathy and estrangement to prevent my experience and ideas from conditioning the gathering and interpretation of data. The critical rereading of the diary and texts about adoption that I wrote during the pre-adoption period and the first years of adoptive maternity, as well as the discussion of preliminary research results in formal and informal meetings with other researchers, with members of the adoptive community and with psychology professionals in the area of adoption, have been of exceptional utility. Belonging to and working in a



multidisciplinary team was fundamental in orienting and reorienting the analysis based on the critical comments and contributions of its members.

From the taboo of adoption to “children of the heart” (2000 – 2008)

“ (...) they have parents that conceived them in their hearts and not in their wombs (...) they are our children of the heart”.

From the webpage of the Adopchina Association (<http://www.adopchina.org/quienes.html>)

In Spain, until the end of the twentieth century, adoption was the last opportunity for those who could not procreate (Berástegui, 2010a), a shameful fact that converted it into a taboo surrounded by concealment and secrecy (García Villaluenga & Linacero de la Fuente, 2006). However, the development of transnational adoption and the greater visibility of adoption led to substantial changes in the way adoption was addressed.

The appearance, a little more than a decade ago, of the first associations of the self-proclaimed “adopter families” and the numerous Internet forums where they met to share information and experiences and organize periodic meetings were clear symptoms of the change in tendency (for an analysis of the birth of the associative movement of adoptive families see Marre, 2004). The decision to adopt and the adoption process went from being an intimate matter to becoming a shared experience. Internet, with its possibility of contacting other people immersed in the same type of process while maintaining anonymity, was initially used as an information source about the processes and their proceedings, but soon became a place to share experiences, doubts and feelings as well as obtain advice and opinions.

The parallelisms between biological parenthood and adultcentrism in the accounts are the most notable characteristics of the discourses in this stage. The process and “the wait” (the time that elapses between the attainment of the suitability certificate - with which the administration declares the requesting families “apt” and authorizes them to continue the process - and the completion of the adoption) were perceived as a long road hampered by bureaucratic obstacles that prevented adoptive parents from being with their future sons or daughters. Howell and Marre (2006) analyzed the parallelisms between adoption processes and “natural” procreation, the result being that the “pregnancy” stage was initiated when the future adoptive mothers and

fathers were approved by the Administration, while the “birth” was produced with the assignment of a specific girl or boy and was completed at the moment these were united with their adoptive families. In adopters’ narrations, biological maternity and paternity are the constant, ineludible reference and model, manifest in the use of metaphors and comparisons that link both processes. Thus, for example, an adoptive mother who has just received the first photo of her future child described her emotion on an internet mailing list writing “this is like seeing the first ultrasound”; another, in a message in which she answered a woman who finally had a travel date to go and bring back her child jokingly commented, “you’ve got the face of a woman in labor!”. Referring to the adoption process, expressions like “bureaucratic pregnancy” or “elephant pregnancy” (for its duration) were frequently used.

In these discourses, the children were present as an objective, the final goal at the end of the road. As indicated by Howell (2006), in these families and in the media, discourses centered on the project - adult - parenthood. The children appeared as the “most desired children” (Cernuda & Sáenz-Diez, 1999), who arrived in the family after a tortuous bureaucratic road that took into account the family’s effort, and consequently, the magnitude of their desire.

What happened before the adoption was eclipsed by the necessity of raising the value of adoptive parentage, capable of constructing ties equal to biological ones. “Adopting is not a work of charity nor an act of solidarity, adopting is wanting to be a father, wanting to be a mother, without caring about the origin of this child” (original citation in Catalan), wrote Mercedes Vilaseca (2008), president of FADA (Federation of Adoption Associations). For the professionals responsible for the selection and training of adopters, the “desire to be parents” was also an adequate and correct motivation for initiating the adoption process compared with others considered to be incorrect or insufficient (Jociles & Charro, 2008). On Internet forums about adoption, people who began the process were advised to answer psychosocial interview questions about motivation for adoption in this sense, as, according to what was being said, any answer that did not refer to the desire to “be parents” could be a cause for the rejection of the suitability certificate.

As a consequence, the expression “children of the heart”, probably that which best represented the magnitude of desire and served as a title to one of the



bestsellers about this topic (the book by Javier Angulo and José A. Reguilón, whose first edition was published in 2001), became commonplace. It appeared profusely in the accounts of adoptive families – “I tell my daughter that she didn’t grow in my womb, but a little higher, in my heart”, explained an adoptive mother – and also in numerous articles and reports in the media, such as the eight-episode documentary series *Children of the Heart* produced by TVE and shown for the first time on 12 November, 2006.

From “children of the heart” to “abandoned” children (2008 - ...)

“An adopted child is an abandoned child”.
From the blog by Javier Múgica, psychologist and family therapist

(<http://javiermugicaadoptia.blogspot.com/2012/01/el-nino-adoptado-es-un-nino-abandonado.html>)

While the discourses analyzed previously have not disappeared and continue to be frequent among those who initiate the first steps in adoption, in the past few years, changes in the way people who have adopted speak of adoption have been noticed.

A first factor that has contributed to the change is the challenges posed by the familial and social inclusion of children arriving in Spain at early ages at a time when transnational adoptions were at a maximum. This hypothesis is consistent with studies on the evolution of adopted boys and girls, such as those mentioned in the meta-analyses conducted by Wierzbicki (1993) and Brodzinsky (1993), who pointed out that adaptive problems in this group emerge more clearly in the second part of childhood (school age) and in adolescence. While adoption has proved to be an intervention with positive consequences for the development of children, especially when they are compared to those who were not adopted and who spent their infancy in institutions (Juffer/Van IJzendoorn, 2005), part of the adopted children present adaptive and relational difficulties (Albrines et al., 2012; Barcons et al. 2011, 2012). Although a good portion of families are delighted with their children’s progress during the first part of childhood, at the start of compulsory schooling and preadolescence and adolescence, accounts about problems at school and externalizing disturbances increase substantially, along with the hypothesis on the effects – negative – of experiences previous to the adoption on cognitive and psychological structures.

A second factor that has contributed to the change in discourses about adoption is the appearance of new actors on the post-adoptive scene: adopted adults and their associations and post-adoption professionals, producers of “new” explanations on the meaning of “being adopted”. The adjective “new” is in quotation marks here because, as will be clarified later, it is based on ideas promulgated in The United States, the first country in the world in number of adoptions since the beginning of the 90s. On the other hand, in France, one of the European countries with a more sustained adoption tradition and where simple adoption has survived (that which does not require a break with the birth family, but that adds the adoptive family to this first parentage), these types of discourses are unusual in the bibliography although there has been a certain amount of penetration through the translation of Verrier’s work (2004).

The conference “Post-Adoption: various outlooks for the future” organized by the association of adoptive families Anichi and the state federation CORA (Coordinator of Associations in Defense of Adoption and Fostering) was celebrated in Donostia in April of 2008, where the vice-president of the French association La Voix des Adoptés participated as a speaker. Her testimony had a great impact on those present (mostly adoptive Basque families and representatives of adopter associations from different parts of Spain), who even months later continued to comment on how their view of adoption had been changed. This person, adopted a few days after birth, explained that her infancy had been normal, happy, except for a few difficult to diagnose health problems for which she could not find an answer until adulthood when she discovered that her personal problems were due to what she called “the primal wound of abandonment”. For a good part of her intervention, she held the French translation of *The Primal Wound* by Nancy Verrier in her hands (which would be translated and published in Spain in 2010 with the name *The adopted child: understanding the primal wound*). According to what she said, that book had changed her life and allowed her to “understand why I am like I am and why I feel like I feel”.

First published in English in 1993, Verrier’s book is part of an American bibliography from the beginning of the 90s that showed that together with the impact of privations and deficiencies in the pre-adoptive period, the transition from one family to another produced psychological repercussions that the adoption must repair. Already in 1990, in the introduction chapter to the



book *The Psychology of Adoption*, comprised of diverse works derived from research and clinical practice, Brodzinsky had indicated that “in the past few years, adoption specialists have recognized the role that loss plays on psychological adjustment, including in those children who had been placed in a home very early in life” (1990, p.7).

Three years later, based on her experience as an adoptive mother and after writing a master’s thesis in clinical psychology for which she interviewed adoptees, Verrier appealed to the “primal wound of abandonment” to argue - with references to neuroscience, attachment theory and “pre- and perinatal psychology” (Verrier, 2010, p. 26) - that the rupture of the bond created during pregnancy “dramatically” affects the brain structures of adoptees even when they are adopted immediately after birth. Seven years later, Soll (2000), psychotherapist, adoptee and director and cofounder of *Adoption Crossroads*, an international organization that comprises more than 470 adoption agencies, mental health institutions and adoption search and support groups, adheres to this idea adding that the “revelation”, generally produced during infancy, means a second trauma usually followed by a third at around six to eight years of age when the adoptees’ feelings of frustration, rage, anxiety and grief are met with messages in their social environment that urge them to repress them. In his opinion, not recognizing these feelings produces a “psychological death” (Soll, 2000, p. 27) in them because of repressing or distrusting their own feelings.

Other North American authors who write about adoption from professional practice or research speak of the “feeling of loss” (Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1993; Courtney, 2000; Groza & Rosenberg, 2001; Melina, 1998; Schooler, 2001) to refer to the consequences of separation from the birth family, which implies a less deterministic view. They do not use the term “abandonment” but “feeling/s (or sense) of abandonment”. The “abandonment”, then, is not presented as a fact in itself in whose genesis the adoptee has had no part, but as a *feeling* – Keeling – or a *sense* – which is a “consequence of the loss” (Schooler, 2001, p. 57) of the mother following birth, or in the case of those who were adopted at a later age, of “all that is familiar to them, of the family, the culture, the community” (Grazza & Rosenberg, 2001, p. 10).

In Spain, the so-called boom in transnational adoption, which was at its peak in 2004, led to an increasing number of professionals who work with adoptees and

their families. At the same time, there was a growing literary production about adoption in great part written by those professionals, in which what Berastegui (2010b, p. 115) defines as “the breakdown of the temporal sequence in the establishment of ties” appears frequently constructed as “abandonment” (Miravent & Ricart, 2010; Múgica, 2006 and 2010; Sagarna, 2010; Vilaginés, 2007). It is pointed out that “the child has suffered the rejection of those who conceived him/her” in a real way (Miravent & Ricart, 2010, p. 307), that his/her history is marked by an abandonment (Sagarna, 2010) and that, therefore, the communication of “the origins” “is not merely a fact or an innocent piece of information [as it implies] an authentic and complicated reconciliation with the protagonists and motives for the abandonment that was experienced” (Múgica, 2006, p. 161).

From that first presentation given by its vice-president in Donostia in 2008 and for the following two years, the Spanish associations of adopters invited *La Voix des Adoptés* association to give conferences in different places in Spain – among those, Vigo, Segovia, Valladolid, Zaragoza and Pamplona. If during these first years these entities had been fundamentally dedicated to informing and orienting families in adoption processes (“the paperwork”), they gradually allocated more resources to activities, workshops and conferences about adoptive parenthood, conducted by psychology professionals from public and private post-adoption services and members of the Spanish association *The Voice of Adoptees* (*La Voz de los Adoptados*) founded at the beginning of 2009 and which, contrary to its French namesake, was fundamentally comprised of people who had come to their adopted families through national adoption. From the beginning, the members of the Board of Directors of this association assumed the discourse of “abandonment” in conferences that they imparted. In October of 2009, coinciding in Gijón with its president and vice-president in the convention entitled *Attention to infancy in times of crisis*, when I asked them what their presentation was about, the answer was emphatic: “About abandonment, abandonment and abandonment”.

The association of adoptive families also incorporated the “abandonment discourse”, along with the claim of their role as “therapeutic families” (Azcona, 2009; Eguzkika cited by San Román, 2008; Nuñez, n.d.) and the need for professionalized post-adoptive support services.

However, those who were adopted do not always perceive themselves – or construct – as “abandoned”. On



Facebook, where there is extensive interaction among adoptees – many of whom are in the process of searching for their “origins” —, there was some discussion about this question. While some considered the abandonment as an ineluctable fact in their biography, others indicated that what they felt was more like a compelling curiosity to acquire information about their birth families, in a similar way to that described by Carsten (2000a) in his work with Scottish adoptees, who had been reunited with their biological families

In Spain, the dissemination of the “abandonment discourse” coincided in time with the “discovery” that a good number of the children proceeding from transnational adoption were not orphans as had been believed. The Spanish version of the article by E. Graff (2009) “Children of the lie” (*Hijos de la mentira*) – “The lie we love” in the English version – caused a great commotion on Internet adoption forums. As opposed to the widely spread idea that there was a “global orphan crisis” in poor countries where adoption was the last chance of living in a family, the author brought to light not only the existence of birth mothers (and fathers), but also the fact that many of them had been forced to give up their children.

The idea that “every adopted child is an abandoned child” conveyed by the “primal wound” has gained ground until becoming almost hegemonic – in the gramscian sense of the word. An example of this was the *1st Conference on Adoption and Fostering in The Canary Islands* in April of 2010, in which professional speakers from different areas related to adoption, adoptees and adoptive families and foster parents participated. From the first three on, practically all of the speakers congratulated those who had preceded them on speaking about the “abandonment inherent in all adoptions”. A few months later, the Parliament of Navarre, at the insistence of adoptive family associations and adoptees, passed an amendment to *Foral Law 15/2005 on the promotion, attention and protection of infancy and adolescence* for which the status of “abandonment victims” was recognized. Although not having any practical consequences, this recognition was one more proof of the quick penetration of the “abandonment discourse” as a solution to the issue about “origins”.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABANDONMENT DISCOURSE

As opposed to the silence about what had happened before the adoption, which characterized the accounts of

adoptive families until very recently, the notion of “abandonment” means, at the very least, the recognition of the pre-adoptive period in the vital trajectories of adoptees. Life stories and interviews of adults who were adopted in their infancy confirm that the way in which “the origins” have been treated (or sidestepped) in family stories is usually a source of concern and unease. On the one hand, the scarce or non-information about the reasons that led to separation from the birth family is frequently experienced with anguish; on the other, many adoptees confirm having felt great pressure from their family and social circle who demanded a feeling of gratitude toward the adoptive families and the obligation to compensate them for “everything that they have done for you”.

In this regard, the “abandonment discourse” becomes liberating both for people who are adopted and their adoptive families. For the first, because it repositions them – or constructs – as defenseless victims and thus, passive, who carry emotional wounds for life for which neither they nor their adoptive families are responsible. For the second, because this permits them to face questions and doubts about the adoption and/or their children’s possible problems as something whose genesis is totally foreign to them - as far as inevitable consequences of “their origins” – and before these they can assume the role of rescuers or “therapeutic families”.

However, the position in which this discourse places birth families is very different. The use of a transitive verb in its passive form, such as the citation in the last paragraph of the previous section (“an adopted child is an abandoned child”), immediately takes us to an abandoner subject. Parents, particularly mothers – who have traditionally remained “silent, invisible and unknown” (Marre, 2009, p. 99) both in national and transnational adoption, thus take on a prominent role as “perpetrators of abandonment” and, for this reason, the cause of adaptive and emotional problems – “manifestations of the emotional consequences of abandonment (Sagarna, 2010, p. 272) – of adoptees. As a result, a patriarchal conception of maternity is naturalized, according to which pregnancy (even when it was unwanted or when family planning methods to prevent it were unavailable) implies an obligation for the woman to care for and love the baby she will give birth to. The generalized use of the term “abandonment” encompasses, as a conscious and voluntary act of desertion, a variety of casuistries in which women are often the object of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979), which leads them first to give birth



regardless of whether or not they have a maternity project, and afterwards to separate themselves from their children. Without going into the diversity of reasons for which children are given in adoption, relinquishing a son or a daughter could also be a way of providing the care they need and that, for whatever reason, the birth family is not in a position to provide. In the case of transnational adoption, today it is known that families of origin are frequently pushed or forced into giving up their descendents for reasons of poverty (Rotabi & Gibbons, 2011; Smolin, 2005). As Leinaweaver (2012) pointed out, by declaring the latter as abandoned, "the act of taking away and exporting the sons and daughters of the poor succeeds in normalizing it as something morally appropriate and beneficial".

From my point of view, the construction of "the origins" as "abandonment" – and the assumption that this causes a psychological impact whose consequences last long after the adoption – falls into what Pérez Álvarez (2011, p. 98) has named the "brain-centered tendency" that is invading psychology and popular culture. The idea that separation from the mother after birth carries a series of consequences (supposedly imprinted on the brain circuits) elude the crucial role of discursive practices in the configuration of subjectivities – and on the (re)production of power and oppression structures – at the same time as they reduce people's emotional problems and discomfort to simple neurochemical imbalances or defects in brain circuits.

From another perspective, I suggest that, for adoptees, assuming to be the victims of abandonment can induce them into not feeling responsible for those aspects of themselves that they wish were different, weakening their capacity of agency. It is thus revealed in the discourses of the most active members of the association The Voice of Adoptees as well as in two of the interviews with adoptees, who spontaneously mention abandonment as a key not just to their history but to their way of being or their difficulties with interpersonal relationships.

Since the beginning, anthropology, through the description and analysis of other cultures, has demonstrated that kinship as social recognition of a biogenetic relationship is a cultural construction – not natural (Strathern, 1995), and, therefore, contingent. Likewise, non-traditional families and, since the 80s, assisted reproduction technology (ART) question the relationship between blood ties and kinship from inside our own culture (Carsten, 2000b). If instead of defining adoptees as "victims" and of speaking about their

experience as "abandonment", they would speak of "separation" (from their first families), perhaps reconciliation with "the origins" would be facilitated, not only on the part of the adoptees, but also the birth mothers – and fathers, whose silencing and stigmatization continues to contribute to the "new" discourse about adoption in Spain. "Separation", as a neutral term to describe an also neutral fact, would allow adoptees to incorporate it as such, that is to say, as a fact in their autobiographies, and to manage the possible discomforts derived from it without the pain of rejection (why was I abandoned?) or the determinism that gives it the capacity to affect their brain circuits.

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