

Some reflections on the last three sessions of Lacan's *Seminar VII*

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I have studied and worked on this seminar for years, following the French edition established by J. A. Miller and published by Seuil (Lacan 1986), as well as its English translation (Lacan 1992). It is only more recently that I have read the non-commercial translation printed by the Association Freudienne Internationale. In the preface of this version of the seminar, the chief editor asserts that Lacan's seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis is, *without a doubt* [my italics], the most important of all of Lacan's seminars, and that a well-known psychoanalyst, Charles Melman, stated once that it is the most important book of the 20th century.

Leaving aside the pertinence of such evaluations, it is nevertheless with some trepidation that I am going to share with you some reflections on the last section of the seminar.

Ethics and praxis

The seminar on ethics is undoubtedly a remarkably enlightening work, which all by itself would make of Lacan an indispensable source not only for psychoanalysts but also for moral philosophers.

The three chapters I want to discuss—or rather, a selection of the topics that they address, as a more detailed commentary would exceed the limits of this paper—concern directly our work as analysts, the work which we usually call 'clinical' in a reductive way, as this work is traversed at all moments by an ethical axis. All the problems that we subsume under the headings of 'analytic technique' (our 'technical' problems) are in fact ethical ones. They involve our position in the analytic experience, for which we are entirely responsible; they involve also our position as analysts vis-à-vis the community in which we work at large; they involve the desire that sustains our peculiar form of being and acting,

that desire which Lacan, in a most original formulation, called 'of the analyst'; they involve what we promise to our patients and what we actually give to them—our patients, those fellow human beings, subjects of the unconscious the same as us, for whom their malaise, their suffering, their symptoms, their unhappiness have an ethical significance. For the patient may put it in words different from ours, but it is clear from the first encounter that he/she regards his/her situation as concerning good and evil, as involving benevolent or malignant wishes, as having acted, or having failed to act, in an honourable, moral way, as doing damage to themselves or others.

In the course of the analytic experience it becomes apparent that the subjective positions that we describe as clinical structures are also ethical positions, in that they concern the assumption of a stance in relation to what, from the beginnings of history, have been regarded as moral problems: not only good and evil but also those human products that are beyond good and evil yet determine what we come to evaluate as good or evil: desire itself, *jouissance*, the Law and its effects, the significance attributed to one's actions, our relations with truth and knowledge, the exercise and distribution of power.

It is not only for us, psychoanalysts, that ethics is eminently a practical question—that is, a question that concerns our practice, or *praxis* (a practice informed by a set of more or less established concepts). No matter the level of abstraction that a philosophical debate on moral questions may reach, it always boils down to practical matters, the practice of living with other humans, co-existing with them and organising the individual's sacrifice of *jouissance* necessary for such a co-existence. This is why Kant defined the field of ethics as that of *practical* reason, which is also *pure* reason, but pure reason applied to concrete human affairs. (Kant 1956 [1788])

The target of all ethical systems considered as prescriptive moral rules is in every case human acts. Of course, it has not escaped moral philosophers that human acts are supposed to be preceded by judgements, and that human judgements reflect human desires, which in turn entail a relation with happiness; so that the field of moral philosophy has traditionally contained all these factors,

and not only the acts that are their material expression and outcome. That is why morality (which we can distinguish from ethics in that morality involves the moral prescriptions on one's conduct prevalent in a community, whereas ethics involves a critical examination of these prescriptions and the analysis of their rationale) has always tried to pre-form the conduct of the subject *before* he/she acts: it is more expedient to install in every human subject the desire *not* to kill a fellow human being than to remind him in every instance that he should not kill. This is the practical utility of having a superego, even if the superego brings other complications in life.

Lacan includes these two dimensions of the ethical reflection (human acts and the ethical judgements that precede and succeed those acts) in the definition that he proposes in the very last session of the seminar:

[...] an ethics essentially consists in a judgement of our action, with the proviso that it is only significant if the action implied by it also contains within it, or is supposed to contain, a judgement, even if it is only implicit. The presence of judgement on both sides is essential to the structure. (Lacan 1992, 311)

One does not need to be a psychoanalyst or a moral philosopher to understand the content of this definition. The neurotic who comes to us seeking help knows it very well. He still has to learn—and analysis may enable him to learn—that the actions of ethical significance in his life that he condemns—his own actions and the actions of his significant others: his father, mother, teachers, friends and enemies—cannot be reduced to being simply the product of particularly adverse psychosocial constellations or neurobiochemical imbalances.

Good for nothing

A man in his thirties came to see me and said he wanted help because he was in a critical situation: his difficulty in relating to others was such that he feared he was going to lose his job, of which he was contemptuous anyway, as it involved

simply manual tasks which did not require particular skills. The social exchanges he had to face at work were minimal; but even so he felt inadequate, embarrassed, unable to speak to others or look at their faces. He did not look at my face either.

He was a 'good-for-nothing', he told me. Born to a family of achievers, he was the only one who had not attended university and who did not have an interesting job. He was single and had never had a girlfriend. He had more difficulty approaching women than men, although he had sexual desires. He had visited prostitutes on a couple of occasions, but had felt embarrassed and ashamed of himself and unable to 'perform adequately'. He had been to twelve professionals before me: nine psychologists or psychiatrists and three psychoanalysts. He had gained the impression that all of them had regarded him as a hopeless case and a lost cause. Two of the psychoanalysts had recommended that he did *not* embark on a psychoanalysis for reasons that he did not find plausible. The third one, a woman, told him that psychoanalysis was not going to be of any help to him because he did not speak in the sessions. He did not speak, he explained to me, because she was a woman, and he had always had problems with speaking to women. Now, he added, he was going to see a psychoanalyst precisely *because* of that, but the female psychoanalyst did not seem too keen on taking him as a patient.

After the first session he telephoned me to say that he was cancelling the next appointment, that he did not see the point, that he did not want to make me waste my time and that he was a hopeless case. I wished him good luck. A few minutes later he telephoned again and asked me whether I would see him anyway, and he apologised for his hesitation. I agreed to see him. This was over five years ago, and he has been a good analysand ever since.

When the patient came to see me for the second time he told me that, although he had not found any help in any of the analysts he had seen before me, one of them had nevertheless made a remark that had created an impression on him. It concerned a childhood memory from when he was four years old. He was playing with a cousin, a girl, and two guinea pigs. He put the

guinea pigs inside his pullover. He kept them there for a long time, so long that they suffocated and died. Shortly after, his older brother discovered what he had done and reprimanded him. He had preserved this memory without attaching much significance to it, but when the analyst told him that the event *might* have been of some importance in his life, he realised that he had *always* remembered it and always felt *guilty* about the killing of the guinea pigs. Guilt (or at least a *sense* of guilt) played a central role in his life, in a variety of circumstances.

Guilt

I introduced this brief account of the beginning of an analysis because it shows patently something which is typical in our experience: the universality of a sense of guilt among neurotics. This sense of guilt, whose unconscious sources are disguised or displaced, always involves a *moral judgement* on the part of the patient. It is a moral judgement that concerns an act, which in turn prompts another judgement (according to the model proposed by Lacan):

Judgement ↓ Act ↓ Judgement

My patient accused himself of *murdering* the guinea pigs, and retrospectively interpreted his act as being based on a judgement, a bad, criminal judgement: he did not regard it as just an unfortunate accident. The work of analysis later revealed the link between that scene and the pregnancy of his mother, which occurred at the time of the guinea pigs' murder. This led in turn to the recognition of a more fundamental, unconscious sense of guilt.

The ethical question, therefore, is as much of a problem for the analysand as it is for the analyst. There is no field of human endeavour from which ethics is exempted. The notion that some activities are morally neutral—or beyond good and evil: activities such as certain technological applications of science, in which the subject appears to be a mere non-reflexive, mechanical component of a piece of machinery—has long been discredited. A degree of moral responsibility (problematic as it may be to establish it with some precision) is always expected of the fellow human being: we consider *unethical* that a fellow human be reduced to a robotic instrument, devoid of subjectivity and moral judgement.

Lacan's study of the ethics of psychoanalysis concerns the specificity of the ethical responsibilities not only of analysts but also of analysands: there are moral rights and duties expected of the analysand, which are inscribed in the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis as Freud conceived it. Freud inserted in it a direct reference to the ethical duty of the analysand. Among other things the rule tells the patient: 'Remember that you have promised to be honest at all times.' Freud did not tell his patients: 'Try your best,' or 'Speak freely, no matter what, and we'll learn something from it.' No; the rule of free association includes a *moral* injunction, a demand for honesty, which imposes a constraint on the blah blah of the patient, as it orients him towards the enunciation of the truth. (Freud 1913c)

Ethics and the direction of the treatment

The direction of the treatment that Freud invented is first and foremost *ethical*; any therapeutic benefit that derives from it (and it is important that there are therapeutic benefits in analysis — otherwise my patient would not have worked in analysis for five years) is subordinated to the ethical principles and aims of the analytic experience. The analyst cannot be neutral on ethical matters. The notion of *analytic neutrality* (present since Freud) is only of relative value if it is confined to what Lacan called 'the direction of conscience':

Assuredly, a psychoanalyst directs the treatment. The first principle of this treatment, the one that is spelled out to him before all else, and which he finds throughout his training, so much so that he becomes utterly imbued with it, is that he must not direct the patient. The direction of conscience, in the sense of the moral guidance a faithful Catholic might find in it, is radically excluded here. [...] The direction of the treatment is something else altogether. (Lacan 2002 [1961], 216.

Freud himself had defined the ethical position of the analyst as involving the renunciation of any attempt to direct the patient's conscience. This is a positive renunciation which allows the analyst to listen without prejudices and to abstain from defining what is right or wrong; that is to say, to retain an ethical position that is not a moralism. In his 1919 paper, 'Lines of Advance in Psycho-Analytic Therapy', Freud wrote:

I do not think I have exhausted the range of desirable activity on the part of the physician in saying that a condition of privation is to be kept up during the treatment. [...] We refused most emphatically to turn a patient who puts himself into our hands in search of help into our private property, to decide his fate for him, to force our own ideals before him, and with the pride of a Creator to form him in our own image and see that it is good. [...] I have been able to help people with whom I had nothing in common—neither race, education, social position nor outlook upon life in general—without affecting their individuality. [...]

Our honoured friend, J.J. Putnam, in the land of America which is now so hostile to us, must forgive us if we cannot accept his proposal either—namely that psychoanalysis should place itself in the service of a particular philosophical outlook on the world and should urge this upon the patient for the purpose of ennobling his mind. In my opinion, this is after all only to use violence, even though it is overlaid with the most honourable motives. (Freud 1919a, 164-5)

An open question

Lacan considered the ethics of psychoanalysis to be an open question. Any prescriptive moral guidelines that we follow in our practice (and we certainly need some, and do apply criteria of a moral nature in our work) are open to scrutiny and research—we cannot content ourselves with the theoretical and technical principles that we have adopted. Lacan says:

If there is an ethics of psychoanalysis—the question is an open one—it is to the extent that analysis in some way or other, no matter how minimally, offers something that is presented as a measure of our action—or it at least claims to. (Lacan 1992, 311)

The whole problem turns around the *criteria* to measure our action. Our specific acts *within* the psychoanalytic experience are open to investigation using psychoanalytic and —why not?—other epistemic criteria. This is eminently the function of supervision, as far as concrete treatments are concerned; but not only of supervision, since the whole of our intellectual efforts (our papers, our seminars and conferences, our solitary or collective work of research) have the analytic *clinical* experience as their ultimate point of reference—and the ethical reflection cuts across all of them.

We can distinguish at least two senses in the expression ‘the ethics of psychoanalysis’. In the first place, there are the contributions that, since Freud, psychoanalysis has made to our understanding of ethical matters—in particular, the psychoanalytic findings and creations that have enriched the field of ethical enquiry: the theory of the drives, the concept of the superego, the theses concerning the functions of law and of desire, the identification of the different forms of *jouissance*, their sources, causes and effects, and all the related clinical problems. In brief, we can in this sense speak of *ethics* since Freud, or the impact of psychoanalysis on the ethical reflection and the *morality* of our times. This impact has been multiple, and has affected human morality in the Western world in a general way, as Lacan points out in ‘The Instance of the Letter’:

Freudianism, however misunderstood it has been and however nebulous its consequences have been, constitutes an intangible but radical revolution. There is no need to go seeking witnesses to the fact: everything that concerns not just the human sciences, but the destiny of man, politics, metaphysics, literature, the arts, advertising, propaganda—and thus, no doubt, economics—has been affected by it. (Lacan 2002 [1957], 165)

The analyst's duties

In a second sense, 'the ethics of psychoanalysis' refers to the specific problematic concerning the moral goals of psychoanalysis as a human experience. It is mainly in this second sense ('our ethics as analysts', to use Lacan's words in page 291 of the English version) that I am approaching the problem.

At the beginning of chapter XXII Lacan defines the *duties* (my word, not his) of the psychoanalyst (or 'the psychoanalyst's job description'):

I said somewhere that an analyst has to pay something if he is to play his role.

He pays in words, in his interpretations. He pays with his person to the extent that through the transference he is literally dispossessed. [...] Finally, he has to pay with a judgement on his action. That's the minimum demanded. Analysis is a judgement. It's required everywhere else, but if it seems scandalous to affirm it here, there is probably a reason. It is because, from a certain point of view, the analyst is fully aware that he cannot know what he is doing in psychoanalysis. Part of this action remains hidden even to him. (Lacan 1992, 291)

He had written almost the same definition in 'The Direction of the Treatment', a text that precedes (1958) the seminar on ethics, but was published after it (1961). I do not know whether Lacan modified it before publication, but there is a variation in the third definition (of what an analyst must pay). The 'Direction' reads:

Can anyone forget that [the analyst] must pay for becoming enmeshed in an action that goes right to the core of being (*Kern unseres Wesens*, as Freud put it) with what is essential in his most intimate judgment: could he alone remain on the sidelines? (Lacan 2002 [1961]), 217

I have wondered about the different definitions of the third point, that which concerns the analyst's judgement. For to speak of a judgement concerning one's action, an action that remains partially unknown, is not exactly the same as speaking of a judgement, and a most intimate one, on an action that goes to the heart of being—at least at first sight.

But then I thought that there is perhaps nevertheless consistency between the two definitions, in that the analyst's action that remains hidden to him could well be precisely the heart, the core, the nucleus of being, that is, in Freudian terms, *unconscious desire*.

The analyst's desire

Desire *in* the analyst is the basis of what Lacan called *the analyst's desire*. I say 'the basis of' and not 'identical with' because the analyst's desire, the desire of the analyst, is *not* just any desire and has specific determinants. Towards the end of the same session of the Seminar, Lacan says:

What the analyst has to give, unlike the partner in the act of love, is something that even the most beautiful bride in the world cannot match, that is to say, what he has. And what he has is nothing other than his desire, like that of the analysand, with the difference that it is an experienced [averti] desire.

What can a desire of this kind, the desire of the analyst, be? We can say right away what it cannot be. It cannot desire the impossible. (Lacan 1992, 300)

In this definition of the analyst's desire there is a positive statement and a negative one. Positive: the analyst's desire is defined as requiring a process of formation. Negative: it is defined as *not* aiming at the *impossible*. 'Impossible' here means (judging from what follows in the text) not only a desire impossible to realise but also, and more importantly, a desire that would make the analytic

work impossible, such as in the example given by Lacan (p. 301), where the analyst attempts to realise a fantasy of fusion with the analysand, a kind of symbiosis or alienating identification that would end up in something other than psychoanalysis.

Over the years Lacan added precision to his conception of the analyst's desire. A significant milestone of this development was his definition, at the end of *Seminar XI* (on the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis) of the analyst's desire as the desire 'to obtain absolute difference', or the logical opposite of an identification with or idealisation of the analyst—which is the aim of psychoanalysis according to ego psychology. (Lacan 1977, 276) We can also inscribe in the same conception the comparison that Lacan made between the analyst and the saint, in so far as both act as a *cause of desire*:

[The saint] acts as trash [...] so as to embody what the structure entails, namely allowing the subject, the subject of the unconscious, to take him as the cause of the subject's own desire. (Lacan 1990, 15)

It is necessary that the desire of someone follow a defined orientation in order to operate as a *cause* of desire. If the analyst proposed to his patient any particular model or ideal as the aim to achieve in the analysis, the result would be an experience in education of variable value, but not an experience in the recognition of the patient's desire, its limits and its possibilities

'Limits' and 'possibilities': it is pertinent to stress this point in relation to the analyst's desire. The analyst's desire cannot be conceived as impossible, unlimited, or infinite.

The metonymic structure of human desire could open the way to a conception of desire as infinite: if it is always the desire for something else, then it would be potentially infinite. However, such a notion disregards the fact that human beings—the only desiring beings in the strict sense of the term—are also living beings, that is to say, *mortal* beings. Death imposes an absolute limit to desire, as it is also its cause and absolute condition.

In 'The ethics of psychoanalysis and the malaise of our culture' (Rodríguez 1995, 126), I illustrated this point with a passage taken from a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Immortal', where a traveller visits a city of immortal people. And what does he see?

Indoctrinated by centuries of practice, the republic of immortal men had achieved perfection in tolerance and almost in disdain. They knew that in an infinite period all things occur to all men. Because of his past or future virtues, every man deserves every form of kindness, but also all forms of treason for his infamous acts of the past or future [...]. Under such conditions, all our acts are just, but also indifferent. There are no moral or intellectual merits. Homer created *The Odissey*; given an infinite period, with infinite circumstances and changes, the impossible thing is not to write, at least once, *The Odissey*. Nobody is somebody, a single immortal man is every man. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am a philosopher, I am a demon and I am the world, which is a tedious way of saying that I am not. (Borges 1974, 541 [my translation])

Without the prospect of death, there is no desire. Death introduces lack at every moment of life. Yet lack is a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition for desire.

'Lack', 'the void', 'the holes in our being' are different words that designate our human lack-in-being. This lack-in-being is constitutive, structuring of desire, but not exclusively—not all by itself. A positive constellation that is intersubjective and beyond intersubjectivity (desire is the desire of the Other) is necessary for the setting in motion of desire through our living bodies. These *living conditions* of desire impose further limits, or finitude, to our finite existence.

The analyst's desire is finite in the same sense: it is only as the desire of *singular* analysts that it exists. To speak of it as an abstract concept is not useless, but the ethical questions that arise around it are better grasped when circumscribed within particular instances.

In 'The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power', Lacan writes that the being of the analyst cannot be reduced to his being something or other, even less to being a particular kind of person with certain personality traits regarded as good or virtuous. The analyst is better described, Lacan argues, with reference to his lack-in-being, that is, to his offering himself as an attractive but empty something, lending his body and person to the transference-relation, in which he can be captured by the patient's signifiers and come to represent in the patient's imaginary register anything and everything that the patient is able to make of him. But it is the real of the transference that requires in particular, the *analyst's judgement*, in which his desire is at stake.

Lacan correlated the three duties of the analyst with three levels of action, designated by terms borrowed from military and political science: *tactics* (interpretation); *strategy* (handling of the transference); and *policy* (or rather, politics: the judgement on his action that is supported by a conception of the end and aims of analysis).

How analysis works

During the preliminary interview that I had with my patient, he asked me for an explanation as to how analysis works, which I did the best I could. Ostensibly he did not know anything about psychoanalysis, although I learnt later that this was not exactly the case. I talked to him about the fundamental rule and its rationale, and he protested. He said that, according to what I had been explaining, *he* had to do all the work and the only thing *I* had to do was watch and listen. I replied that his way of looking at the matter was the result of a position he had adopted in his life, which I had deduced from what he had been telling me of his history: a position of 'good-for-nothing', incapable of creating anything for himself, always depending on the goodwill of others (his parents and other people) to sustain himself. I added that there was no law or power on earth that compelled him to adopt such a position, nor any impediment in him that I could perceive that would prevent him from working in a psychoanalysis.

I can say that for me it was exactly as Lacan puts it in his seminar: the rationale for my action (since my interpretation had an effect) was largely hidden to me. What I thought in the first place was that this guy was starting to exasperate me and that I had better do something to stop his whinging. Judging my act from its effects, I thought that the *desire of the analyst in me* had prevailed over my irritation (which is a form of jouissance) and that I had managed to keep the thing moving.

Shortly after, the patient declared that he had never read a book in his whole life. That was why he had failed high school, as one of the requirements in the last year was to discuss a novel, a task that he never managed to complete. To my surprise, in the same session he said (obviously without knowing what he was saying) that he had read *in a book* that a boy is bound to fall in love with his mother and hate his father, and that this was called 'the Oedipus complex or something like that'.

I asked him what book it was that he had never read. He told me: '*The Interpretation of Dreams*, by Freud. You know, Freud, the chap who wrote about sex and all that stuff.'

'And you don't count that as a book?', I asked him—I could hardly conceal my sense of indignation.

'Well,' he said, 'it's not a novel or something like that, it's not a proper book.'

He told me later that at home they had the whole collection of the Penguin edition of Freud, which his father had bought once following the recommendation of a psychiatrist.

As for the Rat Man and Melanie Klein, the reading of Freud had somehow promoted in my patient an *analysing desire*, and it was my fortune to have acted in a way that let his desire be.

No Sovereign Good

In ethical terms, the desire of the analysand and the desire of the analyst require the renunciation of an ideal:

The question of the Sovereign Good is one that man has asked himself since time immemorial, but the analyst knows that it is a question that is closed. Not only doesn't he have that Sovereign Good that is asked of him, but he also knows there isn't any. To have carried an analysis through to its end is no more nor less than to have encountered that limit in which the problematic of desire is raised. (Lacan 1992, 300)

That the Sovereign Good does not exist does not mean that there are no good things—on the contrary—and it is important to recognise and differentiate them from the bad things that take so much energy from the life of the patient. Good and bad things can and should be identified during an analysis. But we do not possess a universal canon or standard to determine what is good or bad, or to make the good things in life *stay good* and not have evil effects. Lacan questioned the idea that the service of goods is a good enough aim for analysis:

When in conformity with Freudian experience one has articulated the dialectic of demand, need and desire, is it fitting to reduce the success of an analysis to a situation of individual comfort linked to that well-founded and legitimate function we might call the service of goods? Private goods, family goods, domestic goods, other goods that solicit us, the goods of our trade or our profession, the goods of the city, etc. (Lacan 1992, 303)

The ethical end of analysis

This concerns the whole problematic of the end of analysis, in particular the end of the analysis called *training analysis*, the analysis of analysts or prospective analysts.

Lacan had high expectations in relation to the analysis of analysts as well as a strong interest in establishing a theory of the end of analysis. This eventually led him, seven years after the seminar on ethics, to create the theory and practice of *the pass*, an original procedure to investigate how analyses actually end, how these endings compare with what is expected of the end of an

analysis in conceptual terms, and what are the unprecedented, non-theorised phenomena that emerge in the course of the testimonies provided by analysands about their analytic experience. (It exceeds the limits of this presentation to elaborate further on the question of the pass.)

In the seminar on ethics Lacan stresses his belief that the ending of an analysis should include an elucidation of the analysand's position in relation to his mortality:

As I believe I have shown here in the sphere I have outlined for you this year, the function of desire must remain in a fundamental relationship to death. The question I ask is this: shouldn't the true termination of an analysis — and by that I mean the kind that prepares you to become an analyst — in the end confront the one who undergoes it with the reality of the human condition? It is precisely this, that in connection with anguish, Freud designated as the level at which its signal is produced, namely, *Hilflosigkeit* or distress, the state in which man is in that relationship to himself which is his own death — in the sense I have taught you to isolate it this year — and can expect help from no one.

At the end of a training analysis the subject should reach and should know the domain and the level of the experience of absolute disarray. It is a level at which anguish is already a protection, not so much *Abwarten* as *Erwartung*. Anguish develops by letting a danger appear, whereas there is no danger at the level of *Hilflosigkeit*. (Lacan 1992, 303-4)

This is a precursor of his concept of subjective destitution, or the dropping of the ideals and identifications that have sustained the subject, obscuring and concealing the fact of his finite, mortal, ultimately helpless condition.

As Lacan himself remarked in his 'Proposition' of 1967, the analytic aim of subjective destitution is unlikely to become appealing to those who seek happiness through a treatment; it an improbable popular slogan. (Lacan 1995, 8) But analysis was not invented to satisfy the public—or the patient for that matter.

Yet it is not a new version of Puritanism or asceticism that rejects all satisfaction — an impossible and fraudulent moralism where a ferocious jouissance is disguised as virtue.

Ethics and the superego

Central to the psychoanalytic contributions in the field of ethics is the concept of the superego. Freud wrote that it is equivalent to Kant's categorical imperative. It is the paradoxical effect of the moral law (required by Kant to be of universal applicability in order to be legitimate) that although being devoid of content it becomes implacable and persecutory when internalised. For Lacan it is essential to distinguish clearly between the Law and its internalisation, and this is because the superego is an instrument of the subject's jouissance:

We have never stopped repeating that the interiorisation of the Law has nothing to do with the Law. Although we still need to know why. It is possible that the superego serves as a support for the moral conscience, but everyone knows that it has nothing to do with the moral conscience as far as its most obligatory demands are concerned. What the superego demands has nothing to do with that which would be right in making the universal rule of our actions; such is the ABC of psychoanalytic truth. But it is not enough to affirm the fact; it must be justified. (Lacan 1992, 310)

And here we face the problem, which does not have a normative solution, of how to deal with the superego which, as Freud proposed in *Civilisation and its Discontents* operates at the level of both individuals and institutions. How do we prevent our reflections on the ethics of psychoanalysis, which if they are any good ought to result in some form of practical guidance, become yet another version of moralism? The question is pertinent for the direction given to singular analyses and for our collective work in analytic institutions and schools.

Freud's thesis in *Civilisation and its Discontents* affirms that the conflict arising from the renunciation of jouissance required by civilisation is primary—a necessary condition rather than a symptom. *Malaise* and *neurosis* are the resulting symptoms, and it would be a mistake to forget that our primordial solitude (i.e. that one has to deal with one's jouissance all by oneself) is a permanent condition and that our treatments of jouissance and its effects are always contingent.

The fall of ideals

The fall of an ideal can be beneficial, and not only at the end of an analysis.

My patient started to work in his analysis. He was tentative for quite a while. Rather depressed most of the time, he was cynical and sceptical in relation to himself and the treatment.

One day he appeared to be enthusiastic, and started to speak more frankly and to manifest trust in relation to me. He explained what he thought had happened. He had seen me in the street, coming out of my car. He thought my car was rather decrepit, not the sort of car you expect a doctor to have. He associated this with having been surprised at the state of my consulting room: messy, papers and books all over the place, pictures on the walls in no particular order and of different styles. He told me he had found it a bit strange, as all the previous professionals he had seen were very tidy, no papers around, no pictures on the walls. He thought then that I looked rather human, that I didn't seem to make any effort to appear professional and superior, unlike the other professionals he had consulted.

The line of associations that he then produced was anchored in his history. His father had occupied a position of authority and prestige in the business world, but at home he easily lost control over his temper and became a rather pathetic creature. The sight of me emerging from my miserable-looking vehicle completed the demolition of me as a figure of brilliance and prestige—and made it possible for me to become a semblance of the cause of desire rather than an authority or somebody too concerned with personal prestige.

Four propositions

Lacan ends the seminar with four propositions. They could be read as ethical guidelines for both analysts and analysands, in the sense of markers, reference points to bear in mind when confronted in actual experience with an ethical problem—and this occurs everyday in the life of an analyst:

First, the only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one's desire.

Second, the definition of a hero: someone who may be betrayed with impunity.

Third, this is something that not everyone can achieve; it constitutes the difference between an ordinary man and a hero, and it is, therefore, more mysterious than one might think. For the ordinary man the betrayal that almost always occurs sends him back to the service of goods, but with the proviso that he will never again find that factor which restores a sense of direction to that service.

We come finally to the field of the service of goods; it exists, of course, and there is no question of denying that. But turning things around, I propose the following, and this is my fourth proposition: There is no other good than that which may serve to pay the price for access to desire—given that desire is understood here, as we have defined it elsewhere, as the metonymy of our being. The channel in which desire is located is not simply that of the modulation of the signifying chain, but that which flows beneath it as well; that is, properly speaking, what we are as well as what we are not, our being and our non-being—that which is signified in an act passes from one signifier of the chain to another beneath all the significations. (Lacan 1992, 321-2)

The first proposal has been the object of controversy. Some analysts have objected to what appeared to them to be an incitement to transgression and a disregard for the law. 'Is it ethical,' the objection goes, 'that if I wish to beat my

neighbour up, and if my desire is determined to go in that direction, I should proceed to do so since I must not give ground in relation to my desire?’

No, that would not be ethically very sound. But the objection is based on a tendentious misreading of Lacan’s view on human desire. No version of desire according to Lacan reduces it to the level of an appetite or instinctual impulse striving for satisfaction. The relation between the law and desire is constitutive of desire. Although it affects the functioning of the body, desire is not ruled by the natural order. Not to give ground relative to one’s desire requires that desire be recognised and assumed as such. Not to give ground in relation to one’s desire means also that one does not give up the fulfilment of desire. Now, what defines desire is precisely its lack of fulfilment. But this does not mean that in its striving for satisfaction desire never gets anything done. On the contrary, we can verify in our clinical experience that when desire is at work some satisfactions are obtained, although never *the* satisfaction that would represent desire’s fulfilment. That satisfaction is an illusion. Borges’ short story shows what happens when all desire is fulfilled: desire simply dies. Yet desire, alive, manages to bring the subject little satisfactions here and there. One has to be a neurotic to deny the existence of such satisfactions, and to organise one’s life in order to carefully avoid any satisfaction. For the living being, desire requires a deployment in the field called *reality*, but which in fact corresponds to the fantasy: \exists & *a*. The scenario offered by the fantasy presents the subject desiring an object which, in so far as it is irreversibly lost, cannot be properly represented by the multitude of objects in the world that may provide the subject with little satisfactions. The fantastic scenario is a place of *jouissance*, and the *movement* that desire is (according to Freud’s definition) aims at that *jouissance*: desire is not ascetic.

Desire has to be recognised in its finitude: given our mortal condition, not every desire is open to anybody. The finitude of desire is another name for what traditionally was considered the human destiny, even if we do not accept anymore that it is the gods who write down our *lines of fate*. Not to give ground in relation to one’s desire demands the recognition of the inevitability of one’s history, where the necessary and the contingent converge to make of each of us

men or women of our times, and of our times only. An analysis involves the writing-up of the history of one's desire, a recognition of its workings and a rectification of our misrecognitions of it. These misrecognitions—the stories we construct and tell ourselves regarding what we want—are the subject's self-betrayals. Lacan says:

What I call 'giving ground relative to one's desire' is always accompanied in the destiny of the subject by some betrayal—you will observe it in every case and should note its importance. Either the subject betrays his own way, betrays himself, and the result is significant for him, or, more simply, he tolerates the fact that someone with whom he has more or less vowed to do something betrays his hope and doesn't do for him what their pact entailed—whatever that pact may be, fated or ill-fated, risky, short-sighted, or indeed a matter of rebellion or flight, it doesn't matter. (Lacan 1992, 321)

One can give ground in relation to desire in complicity with others or as a result of a devious association. This is a frequent arrangement that neurotics make in order to justify to themselves the betrayal of their own desire: 'I gave up my desire because I was forced to'.

Lacan's hero (someone like Antigone or Oedipus) is *forced* as well, but only by his or her own desire. At any rate, even for the hero desire is the desire of the Other, not his/her own private project.

The subject has to pay a price to gain access to and to sustain his desire. Determined elsewhere than in the subject himself, desire is the ultimate condition for both the subject's limitations and his margin of freedom.

Analysts have to pay, like anyone else, the satisfaction of their desire with the giving up of other satisfactions. Lacan puts it this way:

Sublimate as much as you like; you have to pay for it with something. And this something is called *jouissance*. I have to pay for that mystical operation with a pound of flesh. That's the object, the good, that one pays for the satisfaction of one's desire. (Lacan 1992, 322)

Sustaining the analyst's desire

You will probably agree that it is not easy to sustain the analyst's desire these days. This is in direct proportion to the erosion of human ethics, increasingly being replaced by a diversity of moralisms, each promising forms of happiness that do not require that one even think about one's desire: a variety of psychotherapies, the formidable psychopharmacological industry, new religions or para-religious practices, and all sorts of regimes to keep us happy and healthy: life is being coached as never before.

In these circumstances it must be acknowledged that there are still a good number of people who, lying on our couches, analysing and doing other things, are prepared to put the service of goods at the service of the psychoanalytic cause.

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