

THERE IS NO ETHICS OF THE REAL

On a Widespread Misconception of the Ethics of Psychoanalysis

Defined as 'Ethics of Enjoyment' or 'Ethics of the Real'

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“Psychology & the Other”. Can a title be more Lacanian? Where exactly is the ‘logos’ of the ‘psyche’ to be located? In the Other. What ages ago was called “psyche”, what we still call “psyche” (while in fact we don’t know what we say then) is to be located, not in the body, not in the mind, not even with us, but with what we share among us, i.e. with the logos/language we share, and of which (with more tricks and ruses than you can imagine) we constitute ourselves as subject/subjectum/hypokeimenon/bearer.

It should have been the topic of my paper, since the thing least understood in the ‘Lacanian Field’ is perhaps what Lacan means by ‘subject’.

But I will talk about another of the many misconceptions in Lacanian theory. About the ethics of psychoanalysis and the widespread idea that this ethics is an “ethics of the real”, an “ethics of *enjoyment*” or, in another formula, an ethics in which one “does not give way to one’s desire”. I will explain that, indeed, the ethics Lacan puts forward in the seminar entitled

“the ethics of psychoanalysis” is an ethics of *desire*. But that ethics is not promoting the imperative that one should not give way to his desire. It is not an ethics of which the basic moral commandment is to follow your desire without any compromise. Not an injunction to enjoyment/*jouissance*.

And yet, it is true, according to Lacan, ethics is basically an ethics of desire. Is his seminar on “the ethics of psychoanalysis”, the seventh one in the row, not the follow-up to the sixth, the one on “desire and its interpretation”? At least for Lacan, it is clear that the two seminars form one entity and that ethics *does* rise in relation to desire, including the desire for the Good. It is everywhere in his seminar. This, however, does not mean that ethics arises *from* the Good. It only arises from *desire* (for the Good, or for whatever).

This is a crucial point. Since Plato and Aristotle, ethics has been based on desire, with desire itself being based on its object, which is supposed to be the Good. I desire the Good because it feels good, and this is so because both my desire and my feeling are based on that which satisfies them, and actualizes me as the being I am. This is the classical, *ontological* theory of desire and ethics. Since modernity, so Lacan argues, we are no longer able to have knowledge of being as it is based on being *as such*, as based in the *real*. We have to give up the idea that we can relate to the world from any *ontological* foundation. We certainly keep *longing* for such foundation, but that longing – that desire – can never be satisfied.

This goes for the ethical Good as well. The Good we long for no longer provides the foundation for our longing, for our desire. This is why ethics is based on desire, and *only* on desire. As libidinal being we are the subject/bearer of the desire for the Other, a desire that originates in others than us. And this is also the reason why desire, to the libidinal beings we

are, manifests itself as a law. We *have to* desire, and shall always have to desire, because we will never be satisfied in that desire. This is why, according to Lacan, the “ethics of psychoanalysis” – and modern ethics in general – has to approve the Kantian view that ethics cannot but have the form of a law.

According to Lacan, however, Kant’s moral law has not the last word with respect to ethics. It is one thing that man will never be satisfied in his desire for the good and that he will never really have the good he desires; it is another thing that, being a subject of desire, he is not capable of full satisfaction. To be more precise, the subject *does* experience moments of total satisfaction (Lacan’s word here is “*jouissance*”, enjoyment), but that *jouissance* is never a *real* one. It is so to say a “fake” one; it is only *as if* the libidinal being has taken possession (for this is what “*jouissance*” literally means) of its ultimate object of desire. In reality, however, the subject has lost himself in that moment of *jouissance*: his libidinal economy at that moment is only supported by a series of signifiers (which Lacan conceptualizes as the “phantasm”).

Jouissance is the concept for the central thesis in Lacan’s ethics seminar. Human desire, including the ethical desire for the Good, is in reality a desire for what is located beyond the Good, i.e. beyond that which contributes to the self-realization of the moral being. Consciously man wants the Good and that which realizes him as full subject, but in fact – i.e. unconsciously – he longs to stop being a subject and to disappear in the object of his desire. This is what he experiences in his moments of *jouissance*: a loss of himself, a loss of the subject (of desire) he is. And thanks to the fact that he is nothing but signifiers, or, more precisely, thanks to that signifier formation which is the phantasm, this loss of “self” is not real, but “symbolic”, a loss that the libidinal being survives, a loss only

noticed in the impossibility to be present in the very moment of *jouissance* – as the French erotic trope of “la petite mort” perfectly illustrates.

The aim that guides ethical desire is not to be thought of as fulfillment or realization of the desiring subject, but as the loss of it. This is why, for Lacan, the aim of ethics is not the Good. It is not even that which is beyond Good and Evil (as Nietzsche stated). The aim of ethics, what ethics is striving for, is ultimate evil, radical evil. It aims at the disappearing, the ‘death’ of the subject of ethical desire. The ultimate drive of our ethical aspirations is a death drive.

That is why “law” profoundly marks the ethical, for ethics has to protect us from the evil toward which it unconsciously leads us. But ethics cannot stick only to this. It has to acknowledge as well its ultimate, impossible aim. It has to provide some space to the transgression of the law, to the *jouissance* in which the ethical loses itself at the moments all ethical aspirations are fulfilled.

So, it is correct that ethics has to be thought in relation to *jouissance*, in relation to the object which is beyond all that guarantees to the libidinal being the “stuff” of its life (i.e. signifiers) and which, for that very reason, is radical evil. Ethics’ ultimate source is evil. However it is not the thing in relation to which ethics arises. Ethics arises from desire, from unquenchable desire, which therefore manifests itself as a law. That law protects us from desire’s unconscious aim, which is the destruction of ourselves as the subject of the desire for the Good.

Yet – and here lies the crux of what Lacan calls the “ethics of psychoanalysis” – this moral protection must at the same time respect ethics’ ultimate, *unethical* aim. Though beyond the realm of the ethical law, “evil” *jouissance* must be given “*droit de cité*”, to use Lacan’s expression

(Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, 229; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 194). The beyond of the ethical must be given a certain right to exist *in the very name of ethics*. Man must be given room to be in trouble with the law he cannot but live by. He is the subject of the ethical law in the sense that he is subjected to it, but not *solely* in that sense. His position is that of “the subversion of the subject”, as Lacan entitles one of his major essays: although unable to live by something other than the law, he keeps his distance towards it, a distance which is shown by both his mental symptoms and by the *jouissance* he lives while transgressing (symbolically) all laws. In a psychoanalytical cure, man is seeking the Good and fights his fight with the law, leading his desire in that direction. But the aim of the cure is not the Good, but to lead the *analysant* to face his own desire and leave him at the point where he must be left alone in order to confront himself with the radical non-conformity in relation to the ethical law he is subjected to – or, which amounts to the same thing, in relation to the ultimate object of his desire, to his *jouissance*.

This is what mental therapy is about. When someone is in trouble with himself, when he has lost that “self”, he ultimately will have to find himself back as the subject/bearer of desire – a desire which originates in the Other and which ultimately is the desire to lose his “self” and fade away into *jouissance*.

Is the “ethics of psychoanalysis” as Lacan conceives it “an ethics of *jouissance*”. Is it, which amounts to the same thing, an “ethics of transgression”? This is certainly not the point that Lacan makes. On the contrary, Lacan explicitly says that we “perhaps should give up the hope of any genuine innovation in the field of ethics” (Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, 24; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 14). The only – but far from insignificant – thing psychoanalysis does is to confront ethics with its limits,

and elaborate the consequences of a genuine ethical attitude, i.e. an attitude taking these limits into account.

This certainly goes for mental health care. Mental health care ethics must be based on the acknowledgment of its limits, if not to say its impossibility. The analyst (or doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist, etc.) is asked to give his patient the “good”, and he has to take into account that there is one thing he cannot give him, which is precisely the “good” he asked for. The object of desire – *jouissance* – cannot be the content of a universal ethical rule. From a Lacanian perspective, expressions such as “ethics of *jouissance*” or “ethics of the real” are strictly speaking nonsense. If “*jouissance* is the most insistent ethical question and conundrum for psychoanalysis”, as a Lacan scholar writes (Freeland, *Antigone*, 32), it is precisely because it *escapes* ethics and, in that very quality, has to be recognized as ethics’ center – its “extimate” center, as Lacan puts it with a neologism (Lacan, *L’éthique de la psychanalyse*, 167; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 139).

What then is the “ethics of psychoanalysis”? In what *new* sense is psychoanalytic practice ethical? According to Lacan, it is the first “ethical” practice to take into account the “extimate” core of the ethical desire, i.e. of the desire for the Good. This is to say that the analyst is aware of the fact that the Good the patient asks for (doctor, I feel bad, please give me the “good” I am missing) is precisely something he is unable to provide, since the “good” the patient desires is *jouissance*, which is situated beyond any good. The only thing the analyst can provide to the patient is the patient’s own *desire* for the Good. For he knows that the demand the patient addresses to him is a tricky way to pretend that his desire may be satisfied, for his mere demand implies that the analyst possesses the satisfaction his

patient lacks. It is the patient's way to deny his desire, i.e. to deny he *is* desire, unquenchable desire. In the strange dialectics of the cure, the analyst must lead the patient back to his desire, i.e. back to his fight with the unsatisfiability of his desire, the impossibility to appropriate the moment of *jouissance* in which he loses himself in the ultimate object of desire.

This is why the ethical concern in the cure is not to be situated in the moral values by which the Good is realized. This is not to say that these values are not important, but psychoanalysis focuses on the way the patient's desire *relates* to them, and it acknowledges that the relation is inherently *dubious*: the patient at the same time desires what is at stake in these values *and* desires to go beyond them and to get rid of them (and of himself) in the "evil" of *jouissance*.

In this context Lacan mentions the only ethical question that must be leading in the patient's analytical process: "Have you acted in conformity to your desire?" (Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, 362; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 314). We find that quote in many comments on Lacan, where it is usually read as an imperative: "thou shalt not give way on your desire" (Freeland, *Antigone*, 172; 156). And this is precisely what it is not. It is nothing but a piece of practical advice: in the analytical cure, one has to focus on desire, whatever it is that one desires. It is here that Lacan's ethics, despite its acknowledgment of the Law, is not simply Kantian. For, according to Lacan, desire cannot be reduced to the "form" in which it operates. In the end, desire is oriented to leave all form and all conformity behind and to lose even its subject (in the moments of *jouissance*). If we were to be obedient to the imperative "thou shalt not give way on your desire", we would end up in a situation where any law was constantly transgressed, a situation most accurately described in the works of Marquis de Sade. No wonder Sade is a main point of reference in Lacan's seventh

seminar, but precisely not as the one who provides the ethics of psychoanalysis.

You want to know what an “ethics of the Real” means? Read Sade. Must I add it is not what Lacan means with “the ethics of psychoanalysis?”

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