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Toward an Ethics of Psychoanalysis: A Critical Reading of

Lacan's Ethics Related

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Lacan's seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960) pursues, from a Freudian perspective, a fundamental philosophical question classically addressed by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: How is human life best lived and fulfilled? Is there is an ethic of this type intrinsic to psychoanalysis? Lacan placed the problem of desire at the center of his *Ethics*. His notorious self-authorized freedom from convention and probable crossing of limits (see **Roudinesco 1993**) may have led mainstream analysts to ignore his admonition: "At every moment we need to know what our effective relationship is to the desire to do good, to the desire to cure" (Lacan 1959-1960, p. 219). This means that the analyst's desire, as well as the patient's, is always in play in his attempt to sustain an ethical position. An examination of Lacan's seminar highlights this link, but also points to a number of unresolved issues. The patient's desire is a complex matter, readily entangled in neurotic compromise, defense, and transference, and the analyst's commitment to it is also problematic because of the inevitable co-presence of his own desire. Lacan suggested that more emphasis be placed in training on the desire of the analyst, but beyond that a proposal is advanced for the institutionalization of a "third" as reviewer and interlocutor in routine analytic practice. Analysis may not be a discipline that can be limited to a dyadic treatment relationship.

To explore the possibility of a renewed psychoanalytic ethics, I will present a critical analysis of Jacques Lacan's seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960). In doing so, I will use the remarkably

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parallel discussion of classic ethical issues by Jonathan Lear (1999, 2000, 2003) as counterpoint to Lacan's arguments. Together, their strong readings of Aristotle and Freud offer implications for psychoanalytic organizational life and practice. I begin with the hypothesis that psychoanalysis as a discipline and as a set of institutions embodies intrinsic ethical problems, some growing out of the work itself and some emerging by virtue of its place within society. By an "ethics," however, I do not mean simply a moral code or list of commandments, with all those terms imply, but a more fundamental statement of the values and goals on which psychoanalysis rests¹ and by which specific rules of behavior can be supported. Without attention to this perspective, institutional lines of force involving ideologies of practice, forms of influence and power, and economic interests will continue to influence the position of the psychoanalyst, just as in the larger society of which he or she is a part. While it must obviously address common moral concerns, therefore, a psychoanalytic ethics should convey its unique vision growing out of analytic experience and knowledge.

Lacan's *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* arguably represents the most far-reaching attempt to derive a comprehensive ethical position from psychoanalysis. In this respect it may meet some of the challenges set forth by Lear (2003) in his essay on psychoanalysis and moral philosophy, focusing mainly on the work of Bernard Williams. In particular, Lear asks, can it supply "a naturalist moral psychology that is rich enough to provide a satisfying account of human ethical life without thereby falling into the trap of becoming a moralized psychology"? (p. 1354). Lear himself (1999, 2000) made a significant contribution to this issue in his Tanner lectures and subsequent book, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, which mentions Lacan's ethics only in a footnote but deals with many of the same sources. Psychoanalytic ethics as presented by Lacan and Lear has to do with a broad conception of what constitutes the nature of human life and character, as most famously illustrated by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which both authors discuss at length (the points for clarity of exposition going to Lear).

Previous philosophical approaches to ethics have proposed the pursuit of happiness, the use of reason, utilitarian goodness, and concern for others as worthwhile life goals to be fostered by enlightened people. Yet

¹ The ethics statement of the American Psychoanalytic Association emphasizes specific behaviors that are deemed unethical for practitioners.

since Freud, Lacan argues, all these worthy aims have become suspect, either as representing rationalizations of disguised unconscious motives or simply as psychologically unrealistic. Here, as in many places in his early seminars, Lacan presents his strong reading of Freud's message, which he believed was being diluted or disregarded by the analysts of his time. Man is a wolf to his fellow man, Freud famously quoted Plautus in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and his neighborly intentions are an amalgam of conflicting motives and fears. The analyst's therapeutic zeal is no exception to this caution, risking as it does the imposition of his own fantasies and beliefs on a vulnerable patient. The ethical form of this Freudian message is reprised by Lear. When trying to intervene to correct a problem, how does the analyst avoid applying his own personal reality and personal desire to his patient? So Lacan's emphasis, while going somewhat further in this direction, was not unique in its insistence that the mere attempt to do good, to help, can lead analysts astray: "At every moment we need to know what our effective relationship is to the desire to do good, to the desire to cure. We have to deal with that as if it were something that is likely to lead us astray, and in many cases to do so instantly. I will even add that one might be paradoxical or trenchant and designate our desire as a non-desire to cure" (1959-1960, p. 219).

Certainly psychoanalysts' own ideas of "the good" become involved in their treatment of patients. The revised ethical principles of the American Psychoanalytic Association state that "psychoanalysts should strive to be aware of their own beliefs, values, needs and limitations and to monitor how these personal interests impact their work." The principles stress the potential for abuse of power by the analyst, but have little to say about positive goals or ideals. The 1975 Principles of Ethics did refer to "a particular contribution to humanity, with full respect for enhancing the dignity of man," though this vague statement is not elaborated. The current APsaA website states that "the purpose of psychoanalytic treatment is to help people change and progress in their lives." It modestly continues by explaining that "treatment gives patients the opportunity to examine [their] assumptions, understand their origins in their lives, modify them if necessary, and make better choices for themselves." The statement sounds a bit like coaching and, while not inaccurate, carries an upbeat tone that does not distinguish psychoanalysis from other therapies. Reading further along, in the section "When to Seek Psychoanalytic Advice," we find the more mundane comparison of the analyst's expertise to that "of a certain kind of accountant or financial planner" or of "a

specialist for a certain type of home improvement project.” The darker but more ambitious formula of Freud's proposal that neurotic misery be exchanged for the unhappiness of everyday life, as well as his more optimistic, if technical, slogan “Where id was, there ego shall be,” have been left behind. Of course, the website takes a public relations posture, but does it also reflect an ethics of conforming to contemporary attitudes about a good life?

As is well known, Lacan criticized mainstream analysis in his time for attempting to remodel the superego of the patient on the model of the analyst's or to foster an ego identification—in sum, to enshrine socially desirable attitudes and behaviors presumably present in the analyst. In his critique of the ego psychology then reigning in the United States, Lacan seemed at first to endorse a return to basic Freudian principles. Not lacking in aphoristic talent himself, he retranslated Freud's goal of replacing id with ego to highlight the emergence of the “I” from the “it”: “Where it was, there shall I come to be.” This principle seems to carry an optimistic message, one not entirely absent from his seminars despite the notorious antihumanism of much Lacanian theory. In the end, Lacan advanced his famous formula *Ne jamais céder sur son désir* (never to cede or give ground on one's desire) as the ethical principle specific to psychoanalysis.

One of Lacan's major contributions was to show the importance of identification via mirroring as a major mode of functioning of the ego in a dyadic relationship. Mirroring raises the possibility of an imitative or borrowed solution to the neurotic conflicts that initially brought the subject into analysis. A variant of this mechanism of therapeutic action was proposed by **Strachey (1934)** in relation to superego conflicts—helping the patient internalize a more flexible and realistic self-critical agency. However, we know that just as the “good” for Aristotle embodied the status quo interests of the dominant social class of his time, so the notion of healthy ego functioning in the psychoanalyst, which was supposed to serve as a model for identification, inevitably carries a normative ideology. Whether goals of treatment are proposed or simply implied, psychoanalysts should ask for whom these good outcomes are so desirable, and what unexamined social forces, unconscious investments, and neurotic compromises in the analyst are involved.

“The question of the good,” Lacan writes, “is situated athwart the pleasure principle and the reality principle” (p. 224). That is, what are

deemed “goods” to be pursued cannot be defined solely in abstract moral or utilitarian terms (their consequences in social reality); they also involve a less rational quest for pleasures unavailable in reality. A notorious example of a self-deceiving analytic “good” objective is provided by Roughton's article (2001) recounting (and decrying) the “successful” treatment of homosexuals at a time when heterosexual whole-object relationships were seen as the goal of treatment. A sense of betrayal clings to these stories of analytic missteps in the service of a putative good life and seems to validate Michel Foucault's suspicion of the disguised social control function of psychiatric treatment. Although blatant examples of clinical practice enforcing a normative social hierarchy were more obvious in the treatment of homosexuals, women, nonmedical mental health professionals, and campus rebels of the past, analysis inevitably touches on issues of parenthood, marriage, and divorce, and norms of behavior, gender, and sexuality that are saturated in countertransference and cultural ideologies.

At the time of his seminar, Lacan was a powerful critic of the emphasis on adaptation he found in ego psychology, in which conventional life roles and an acquiescence in the status quo seemed embedded in the treatment. He pointed out a temptation for early analysts to “naturalize” morality, to see, for instance, the capacity to enjoy instinctual satisfactions as a kind of natural principle or law and, later, to idealize a healthy object relation or the supposed stage of genitality as the goal of treatment. How can the analyst not be touched by the values and assumptions of his society and social class, particularly in the area of health or healthy relationships? Kohut (1973) addressed similar issues with his notion of a “health morality” disguised behind supposedly neutral clinical goals. Lacan's chapter “The Moral Goals of Psychoanalysis” is especially outspoken in its critique of “normalisation” or “psychological harmonisation” or any “possibility of untroubled happiness” (p. 302) as goals of analysis. In Birksted-Breen and Flanders's phrase (2010, p. 9), he and many colleagues saw the pursuit of happiness in American psychoanalysis as having replaced Freud's “ordinary unhappiness.” “There's absolutely no reason why we should make ourselves the guarantors of the bourgeois dream,” Lacan declares (p. 303), referring to a fantasy of perfect happiness as the outcome of a correctly conducted life. To make oneself the guarantor of happiness, he insists, is a form of fraud. Most crucially, it doesn't resolve the problem of the relation of each individual to his own desire (p. 303).

Lacan defined a successful analysis in terms of the process of subjectivation, of the coming to be of the “I,” and asked whether this process should inevitably lead to something unsettling and decentering to the ego. The ego's pursuit of socially desirable goals, he asserts, represents a cover-up of unconscious desires disruptive to the subject: “our daily experience proves to us that beneath what we call the subject's defenses, the paths leading to the pursuit of the good only reveal themselves to us constantly ... in the guise of some alibi on the part of the subject. The whole analytic experience is no more than an invitation to the revelation of his desire” (p. 221).

At one level, this statement is but a rephrasing of Freud's position that the ego is the seat of neurosis, masking the unconscious and its drives with defenses. More profoundly, Lacan points here to the centrality of desire in the constitution of the subject, desire defined in terms not of primitive impulses but of longings that have structured the emergence of the subject as a separate being. As the subject gets in better contact with his desire, the analytic process can lead to profound upheavals in his self-definition, disrupting previous identifications that hitherto have organized his psychic functioning. To cite a few common examples: in a supervised case, a man who had long disdained his family's materialism abandoned a scientific career as a careful investigator in favor of applying his technical skills to the speculative goal of making large sums of money. His leaving behind an identity of conservative laboratory scientist seemed like a reversal of his basic values and beliefs, although he exulted in his new life in the financial world. His analyst and I were initially surprised and wondered whether something in his character had been missed by us. Another patient abandoned a Roman Catholic religious commitment she had long shared with her large ethnic family and moved into a secular life style, causing a painful rupture with her parents, whom she loved. Divorce, though more common than drastic action of this kind, nonetheless often strikes the analyst as ambiguous in its rationale. Although many subjects leave analysis ready to pursue something or someone they love, a decision with which the analyst can usually resonate, the therapeutic pressure to give up impossible fantasies and accept reality has also been a feature of clinical philosophy in the analytic tradition. Perhaps this bias in favor of renunciation is in part an effect of American puritanism's having found in ego psychology a means of reasserting itself.

The focus of Lacan's ethics on the problem of desire proceeds from his deconstruction of Aristotle's hypothesis that happiness is the implicit goal of human desire, not a specific gratification but the happiness that would come from a life of the supreme good, complete in itself. For his part, Lear too shows that Aristotle's argument is problematic. He sees it as a tautology, inserted to seduce the reader into believing that he is about to learn the ultimate goal of the good life—the highest mark aimed at by Aristotle's metaphorical archer. While in one sense Aristotle does propose this elevated goal of life—one devoted to pure contemplation—Lear demonstrates that such a state is unattainable even in Aristotle's own terms. Complete happiness, he concludes, taking a phrase from Jean Laplanche, is an enigmatic signifier, suggesting a chimerical shape that can never be realized. “In achieving the ultimate human happiness,” Lear summarizes, “we thereby become aware of the finite and limited nature of that happiness” (2000, p. 244).

Both Lacan and Lear recognize the impossibility of a realized desire that is beyond any possible exercise of human virtues. By “placing true happiness just beyond the horizon of the ethical life,” Lear writes, “Aristotle introduces a lack into that life. Something is now experienced as missing from it” (p. 245). Although he does not reference Lacan here, Lear's reading brings him remarkably close to Lacan's conclusions on the impossible and unsatisfiable dimension of human desire, based on lack, seeking a *jouissance* “beyond the pleasure principle.” Lear astutely emphasizes the power of the unconscious to undermine any facile solution to the problem of happiness, and we can agree that psychoanalysts should understand this fundamental point, which seems intended more as a corrective to naive philosophical thinking about ethics than as a recommendation for analytic practice. Certainly psychoanalysts from the earliest period have emphasized desire as a complex, largely unconscious force that must be taken into account in considerations of human behavior in ways Aristotle could not have foreseen, but Lacan expanded this notion beyond Freud's metapsychology.

Desire for Lacan has a significance much wider than that of a pleasure principle involving sexual or other drives; rather, it is a constitutive and problematic ingredient in becoming a human subject. For him, the nonsatisfaction of desire is a foundational human problem, installed with the emergence of the subject in early life. Since there is no innate subject of supernatural or biological origin, the beginnings of the self-referential,

aware subject are tied up with a kind of postlapsarian sense of loss specific in form to each subject. The basic condition of lack and the longing for restoration of a lost wholeness it inspires, Lacan proposed, stimulate fantasies connected with what is conceived of as lost. These fantasies and their derivatives invest life with idiosyncratic passion and meaning, even as they may at times disregard or overthrow practical realities. The ethics of psychoanalysis, for Lacan, are based on this new way of conceiving and addressing desire. “To have carried an analysis through to its end,” he writes, “is no more nor less than to have encountered that limit in which the problematic of desire is raised” (p. 300). Lacan's aphorism appears to mean that the analyst should be committed to the analysand's search for his own desire, presumably regardless of the consequences or of conventional morality. Because desire is the kernel of subjective being, he suggests, if psychoanalysis hopes to touch what is most true and most defining of a person, it must open up the path of his desire.

In a turnaround typical of his thinking, Lacan now moves to address explicitly the issue of the analyst's own 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” (p. 300). This comment sounds like an affirmation of Freud's reality principle, reminding us that no one can move beyond the limitations of human subjectivity. However, ordinary human beings do desire the impossible—but as a fantasy, as Lear also concludes. In Lear's interpretation, “the fantasy of a happy life becomes tinged with the suggestion of a life beyond life—a certain kind of living death” (2000, p. 27). His conclusion appears to be that analysis should free the subject from this fantasy to enjoy the tumult of ordinary existence. If a subject pursues impossible fantasies, the analyst must not join him there.

The question of whether the analyst can be neutral with respect to the patient's desire, though crucial, is seldom addressed explicitly. Lacan seemed to assume that the proper analytic attitude could be achieved by the training analysis, a position indirectly reaffirmed in a statement by the contemporary Lacanian school, the *École de la Cause Freudienne*. The analyst, it says, has a relation to the unconscious different from the analysand's, because of the former's passage through the original fantasies. It is this experience that defines the analyst's position, which does not incarnate any of the roles or ideals present in society. “In a sense, the analyst is someone who cannot be assigned to any place other than the

question of desire.”² While such is no doubt the belief of many Lacanian analysts, this is surely not a convincing argument on its face. The claim that the analyst can pass through his fantasies and achieve a privileged relation to his unconscious seems analogous to the expression of enigmatic signifiers promising a final state of satisfaction in Aristotle, as noted by Lear. In brief, by making of the analyst a kind of enlightened exception, it has the ring of the kind of ethical sleight of hand denounced by Lacan throughout his book.

Not attempting the impossible, in Lacanian terms, means that the analyst cannot pretend to know the desire of a patient or his so-called fundamental fantasy, which is by definition unconscious, although figurations of the unconscious certainly can emerge. This point is essential to what follows. When the analyst believes he has grasped the nature of a patient's desire and can articulate it, he is most likely imposing an interpretation compatible with his own theory or personal fantasy about the patient or perhaps about all people, but one that is inevitably, in greater or lesser ways, alienating to the particular subject. **Wilson (2003)** is one of the few American psychoanalysts to have drawn attention to what he sees as an omnipresent source of resistance in the analyst's unconscious desires to experience the treatment process in a particular way. “The analyst does not simply have his or her own point of view (that is, his or her subjectivity) forever at play in the flow of clinical work,” he writes; “the analyst always wants something” (p. 73).

In the French psychoanalytic tradition (**Widlöcher 2001**), silence from the analyst was valued as a fostering the analysand's confrontation with the emptiness of his own neurotic or transference desire, “an experience of disillusionment in favour of the recognition that we are radically obliged to be the subject of a desire which will never find its satisfaction” (p. 82). The “disarray in face of the real” that Lacan (**1959-1960**, p. 294) proposes as a necessary condition of ending analysis is an example of this highly abstract goal (although elsewhere he offers other formulations of the end of an analysis).³ Interpretation plays no role here, as Widlöcher

² Eric Laurent at the Assemblée Générale de l'AMP at its fifth congress, July 16, 2005, in Rome.

³ Lacan elaborated his notion of the analyst's role in his seminar VIII, on the transference (**1960-1961**) and spoke further about the traversing of the fundamental fantasy in his seminar XII, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (**1964**).

observes, only the analyst's maintenance of the frame within which the subject confronts his lack of being and faces the illusions of his transference. We might consider this model of analytic termination as a symptom of a kind of delusional thinking proper to analysts, reluctant to give up a curative explanation for what they do. The overvalorization of silence as a technique has been amply commented on; it may also be a distortion of the ethical position of noninterference. On the other hand, in his early seminars, Lacan did refer to a kind of definitive naming of the analysand's "subjective destitution" (Roudinesco 1993, p. 338), stated in the form: "You are thus" (Lacan 1949, p. 7). Although not evident in his later writings, this prescription may have lingered in the milieu of Lacanian analysis in the form of "naming your desire." Although stated in extreme terms, Lacan's conclusions about the end of analysis are not unrelated to classical Freudian positions, as Widlöcher argues. For example, his conception of therapeutic action is not dissimilar to the classical objective of uncovering the unconscious fantasies motivating a subject's conscious desire, which he defined as "the metonymy of the discourse of demand" (1959-1960, p. 293). This means that beneath the conscious transference wishes of the analysand lie unconscious desires he will have to face (e.g., "You are thus"). On the other hand, whatever profound confrontations with his own insatiable desires the subject may experience in an analysis, attempts to pin them down by interpretation are bound to fall short, as they inevitably depend on the language and tone chosen, which embody a theory, the particular context of delivery, and the analyst's own countertransference desires. At the same time, without some form of engagement by the analyst in which his desire is more overtly in play, and more transparent, a "silent" treatment process is open to covert suggestion, compliance, or an iatrogenic state of confusion or solitude that has little to do with the patient. To summarize this part of the discussion, an unconscious blindness of the analyst to his desire poses an important hazard of interpretation, one underlined by Lacan but not adequately solved by his idealization of a successful analysis of the candidate analyst's desire.

Wilson extends this point by arguing that the analyst's preferred theories of outcome or of human nature or of mind (always based on his own wishes) will influence the symbolic forms of desire articulated by a patient during an analysis. A related obstacle in this respect is a misuse of the concept of intersubjectivity to bypass the irreducible subjectivities of the participants (for a discussion of this point, see **Bohleber 2010**). Of

course, each dyad contains its own specificity, but this observation does not define the two participants except in the most general terms (rules of interacting, common language, a level of agreement about the work, etc.). The notion of an analytic “third” governing the interaction, which certainly has its usefulness, does not necessarily imply a fully shared experience in the here and now that would redefine the singularity of the analysand. Used in this way, the reference to a third seems a wishful construction of the analyst, something like the conflict-free sphere of the ego that in an earlier period was supposed to ground the therapeutic alliance. At its worst, reification of an imaginary third can lead to an uncritical immersion in the present tense, as though the past of the patient can be bypassed in favor of lived reality in a new relationship, what might be called “the hothouse of a dyadic situation.” A potential danger of highlighting the singularity of the dyad in this way is precisely boundary violations of various kinds. Ethical transgressions are often rationalized on the basis that “only we two participants can judge.”

The ethics of psychoanalysis, Lacan continues, reminding us of Kohut's similar affirmation, “implies the dimension of the tragic sense of life” (p. 313). “Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?” he asks (p. 314). At this point in the text, he makes the well-known statement “The only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire” (p. 319). So guilt for Lacan is actually grounded in having ceded one's desire, rather than yielding or wanting to yield to it, as might be the case for an ego psychologist. But here we come across an ambiguity in Lacan's message. In the first instance, desire is the kernel of human action, and analysis has upended traditional ethical thinking by exploring the roots of desire as effects of language on bodily needs and pleasures. As the cause of action, desire moves in speech or monologue, in endless attempts to articulate an always deferred and incomplete satisfaction, and this movement, Lacan says, should be supported by the analyst. The implication is that this vital engagement may have been betrayed or surrendered out of anxiety or for more pedestrian moralistic, even seemingly altruistic, reasons. So far so good. Yet what are we to make of a person who believes he has understood the nature of the desire within him? Perhaps Lacan means only that an intuition of the subject's essentially meaningless pursuit of desire represents facing a kind of Aristotelian truth, a taking ownership of the conditions of one's subjective existence, including one's longings to fill its inherent lack.

Lacan's allusions to this hypothetical endpoint of analysis bring the limit of death into ethical consideration, “a trespassing of death on life” (p. 294), just as it did for Aristotle in Lear's trenchant study. The latter part of Lacan's seminar engages the “sickness unto death” of living matter as Freud portrayed it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* by proposing that the analysand should be afforded at least a glimpse of the empty and impersonal forces that lie beyond his subjective existence. Lacan's theory focuses on the relationship between desire and “the real,” the essential reality beyond any words or concepts. Lacan uses the phenomenological term *das Ding* to describe this real, the unnameable or unknowable “thing” as the impossible final object of desire, hidden behind all its concrete substitutes.⁴ This turn takes him beyond the possible gratifications of the pleasure principle into postulating a foundational human quest for an absolute *jouissance* that structures the subject (and also disguises the futility of the entire operation).⁵ The end of a successful analysis for Lacan seems to involve a state of enlightenment about this ultimate reality, with echoes of a Buddhist satori. Certainly there is more than food for thought in these reflections, which are far from unique to Lacan, but invoking them as an ethics of psychoanalysis raises many questions. Once again, the metaphor of traversing the fundamental fantasy rings a bit too close to Aristotle's imaginary archer's mark, which Lear interprets as a lure or seduction without any actual content. Does such a thing actually occur, and, if so, how would the analyst attempt to implement it without a major imposition on the patient, struggling with the more banal dilemmas of living a life? Perhaps better to support the patient's ongoing struggle with the upheavals of desire, as Lear suggests, than to aim for an ultimate vision of *das Ding*.

To further complicate matters, Lacan postulates another source of desire in a transgenerational transmission or force of destiny that structures the coming-to-be of the subject: “If analysis has a meaning, desire is nothing other than that which supports an unconscious theme, the very articulation of which roots us in a particular destiny, and that destiny demands that the debt be paid” (p. 321).

⁴ **Leavy (1996)** explores the nuances of this concept in his perceptive review of Lacan's ethics.

⁵ Lacan's discussion of desire and “the thing” revolves around the place of the object *a* in relation to the fundamental fantasy, elaborated in seminars VIII and XI, among other places.

In this rather cryptic enunciation, Lacan suggests that desire may be something passed on, a part of the subject's psychic origin, what he calls a "debt" that has to do with one's existence. Moreover, his statement suggests that it is a debt that must be assumed. Lacan's lengthy analysis of Greek myth and drama in the final chapters of his seminar on ethics moves steadily in this direction. But could not analysis be a vehicle for freeing the subject from this kind of debt to past generations? Lacan famously asserted that the die is already cast for us, even before our birth, but that in analysis "we can pick it up again, and throw it anew" (Lacan **1954-1955**, p. 219). How might the insight that subjective existence carries messages from across generations relate to the ethical position of the analyst? On a pragmatic level, it suggests that situating the individual subject, as Freud did in "On Narcissism," as a link between generations, perhaps a carrier of the desire of others, might be a necessary starting position for analysis. It is also a humbling position for the narcissistically prone practitioner. **Luepnitz (2009)** has argued, in fact, that this kind of attention to past generations is a differentiating feature of a Lacanian analysis. Where does the subject fit into the complex chain of generations into which he is born? And what should be his reaction to discovering this connection?

In one sense, generational inheritance is clearly an important but unconscious component of each subject's singularity. Like his driven search for fulfillment beyond the pleasure principle, the subject's function as a carrier of transmission is depersonalizing and undermining of his conscious identity, his limited existence between birth and death. Uncovering the passage to desire, Lacan advances, has to do with a kind of Being unto Death—like the state beyond fear and pity of Sophocles' Antigone, the central character of Lacan's *Ethics*. This state appears to involve an acceptance and clarity about who one is and what one was born for (the content of the transgenerational), of the kind Oedipus gained tragically at Colonus. With this state of knowledge, Lacan asserts, Antigone enters the realm of beauty, beyond any practical or libidinal gratifications, close to the sublime, which is not a part of the usual analytic vocabulary. Pointing to this connotation of an ineffable beyond, toward which he portrays Antigone as moving, Lacan once again seems to reveal a quasi-mystical tendency that **Eigen (1981)** has described.

But can the inhuman (as Lacan admits) radiance of Antigone, beyond fear or guilt, be the sought-after goal of the all-too-human patient in analysis? As we recall, Antigone insists on a ritual burial of her brother, Polyneices, who has been killed as a revolutionary, in defiance of their

uncle, Creon. Her refusal to compromise her duty to her only brother results in her own immurement and death. Accepting this tragic fate and approaching death resolutely represent the “subjective destitution” that Lacan refers to as the end of analysis. As commentators on Sophocles' play have always observed, however, Antigone seems far from an admirable model, closer to a fanatic, someone who conceivably needs an analysis. At best, she is confronted with an impossible choice: in Lacan's language, to betray herself or the other she loves. But often these kinds of either/or conflicts in actual persons seeking analysis can be disarticulated and recast in other, broader terms that offer more options to the subject. Moreover, even if the analyst's desire is to respect the absolute inviolability of the other's desire, a recognition of the gap that separates one subject from any other, it does not necessarily follow that he should refrain from questioning the concrete incarnation of desire. To the contrary, it would seem that the ethics of the analyst in Lacan's terms should involve supporting the movement of desire expressed in the perpetual unfolding of the associative discourse, the restless insistence of desiring life, not its stasis and fixation as a state to be attained.

When a patient undertakes to freeze his desire or sustains a conviction that he has found his true desire, he may be close to delusion, enacting the merger of self with ideal self, and a dangerous acting-out may be at hand.⁶ Perhaps Antigone is an example of this tragic process in which self-certainty of the object of desire spills into delusion and self-destruction. Such seems a common literary theme. We might conclude that for an analytic ethics the path of desire should retain to the end its ambiguous, tempting, and unfinished character without a defined or normative stopping point, because that is the essence of having a subjective life, as Lear compellingly reminds us. And this vital movement should be reflected in the patient's affect, sense of well-being, and purpose, not in any conventional accomplishments or standards of health, as Lacan insists.

Yet, even in this form, the ethics of desire still leaves the analyst with several problems. First, cannot the patient be deceived by pursuing “false” desires, ones constructed defensively, for example? Is not any temporary construction a compromise formation, permitting expression

⁶ Lacan's notion of the *passage à l'acte* involves abandoning a subjective position to become an object-thing, at attempt to enter the domain of the Real, which he elaborates in seminar X (1962-1963, pp. 162-163).

of some unconscious wishes while repressing or disavowing others? Analysts hope to hear patients explore their motivations and to reflect on the possible consequences of their actions from different vantage points over a sufficient period of time to form some idea together of their unconscious dynamic and structural sources, but this introduces an active form of skepticism and engagement into the analytic role that seems alien to Lacan's account. Should the analyst maintain a rigorous hands-off approach? In this regard, can all desires be analytically acceptable? Here is a tricky area that lies between a narrow right-and-wrong morality and broader humanistic values involving the value of human life and principles of living among other people. The basic challenge is to disentangle the human motives of analysts to justify their own positions and their own versions of morality from their institutional and clinical practices.

Can organized psychoanalysis implement a more conscious way to further an ethic of facing the nature of desire? We may agree that not addressing the question of desire in psychoanalysis leaves the door open to massive infusions of unconscious social and economic motivations in its institutional functioning. In his *École Freudienne*, Lacan attempted, in large measure unsuccessfully, to provide an institutional solution, in part through his creation of the "pass" as a way to obtain authorization as an analyst.⁷ The idea was to require the candidate analyst to present the experience of his own analysis in relation to clinical work to two colleagues, who in turn would report to a committee of assessors. This was an attempt at a kind of nonhierarchical transparency within the analytic community that may be worth reconsidering in other forms. In Wilson's terms, the narcissistic investment of analysts in a particular hierarchical structure of idealization, whether as supervisors or a students' committee, fosters hidden agendas of economic power and status, as well as an inflated sense of certainty in institutional practices that has characterized our organization until recently.

From a clinical perspective, Lacan's ethics of desire entails a particular approach to understanding the transference, both the patient's wish to learn (or fantasy of learning) the essence of his desire from the analyst and the analyst's reciprocal false belief that it can be uncovered by correct interpretation. As we have seen, when the analyst implicitly shares either expectation, he is likely to end up by inculcating personal

⁷ For a firsthand account of this procedure, see **Schneiderman 1983**; see also Roudinesco **1993**, pp. 338-339.

or ideological goals. Practitioners of all schools would probably agree that the analyst should act as a support for the patient's desire without being caught up in fantasies or wishes to indicate its precise path or in any movement of reification of desire. But can this objective be feasible, given the postmodern critique by analysts like **Renik (1996)**, who hold neutrality to be an illusion? While we may concur with Lacan that the desire of the psychoanalyst is to sustain the space between two subjects and to accept the absolute difference between his own and the patient's desires, contemporary psychoanalysis recognizes the countertransference as the problematic basis of the therapeutic encounter, one that determines to a great extent the unfolding of the transference and of the patient's desire. In other words—and here Lacan might be forced by his own logic of the unconscious as “voice of the Other” to agree—the appealing ethical notion of sustaining the absolute separation between subjects seems problematic from our contemporary vantage point. The two subjects are inevitably intertwined in the ongoing analytic process, and both are affected by it.

If we believe that the classic position on analytic neutrality, even the admirable goal stated by Anna Freud of equidistance from id, ego, and superego, represents an ideal fiction, we must take seriously another Lacanian position that resistance (read: a restricted field of possible desire) comes from the analyst. The analyst's desire is always in play in every encounter, even if it is bracketed, withheld, or exerts its force only negatively, as Wilson emphasizes. The implication of this precept is that, given what we know about human beings from analytic experience, all relationships tend to be skewed toward dyadic fantasies of the ideal partner, even in the most “well-analyzed.” **Pinsky (2011)** argues that the problem of idealization of the analyst as an exception has been a major blind spot of the profession ever since Freud. In the Lacanian mirror transference, the blindness can be reciprocal, and the analyst's desire actualized in what Pinsky calls “the olympian delusion.” Perhaps this dynamic helps explain Gabbard's description of “the lovesick analyst” to which she refers.

If the training analysis in itself is not a reliable means to ensure an ethical foundation for the analyst's desire, we should consider other ways to address the problem. Lacan's innovation of “the pass” as a requirement for accreditation deserves further examination. Its purpose was to reduce hierarchical power in the group and to bring to the forefront the function

of the candidate's analysis to orient him in relation to his own desire and the ethics of the singularity of subjects. While undoubtedly flawed in its execution, the dialogue with colleagues that Lacan sought to encourage through this method brought a “third” (or “fourth”) into the field of practice, opening the analytic dyad to peer exchange. Mainstream institutes, of course, require that candidates expose their work in supervision, but this pedagogical approach to creating a form of “thirdness” is not quite so straightforward. The role and limits of supervision—particularly the degree to which countertransference will be addressed—has been a topic of debate within analysis, and the dyad of highly unequal participants may not be the best vehicle for this form of learning. Classroom presentations of cases led by senior analysts, while opening up the dialogue to others, present other problems of group process, including risks to reputation, pressures for pseudoconsensus, and the influence of more powerful members. Moreover, the traditional emphasis on the privacy of the work and legitimate concerns about confidentiality may have made analysts reluctant to reveal the content of ongoing cases, while also supporting irrational resistances to openness. Nonetheless, it may be time, at this moment in the evolution of the analytic discipline, to find new ways to involve others as witnesses to analytic practice.

The notion of including a “third” as a normal part of psychoanalytic work may seem cumbersome, but it would not be onerous, for example, to require candidates to share their work in small groups and practitioners to maintain regular contact with peers as part of membership in a society. These would have to be ongoing groups with their own boundaries in order to foster an ethics of disclosure and trust, and many analysts already participate in such activities. Quite often recourse to a “third” happens informally, with colleagues or partners to whom disquieting feelings about an analysand and the manifestations of the analyst's desire may be confided directly or covertly. Yet, in all likelihood, such everyday examples represent situations in which awareness of a potential difficulty has already been aroused. A formalized speaking about one's cases at defined intervals, by contrast, inevitably puts the analyst's desire on the table. Apart from the aspect of openness and exposure to colleagues, the requirement to present one's cases regularly could also contribute to keeping the flow of discourse from becoming a stagnant dyadic exchange in which collusive mirroring can take hold. This type of mirroring with shared unconscious identifications within the analytic couple can promote unending analyses, almost frozen in time.

Perhaps analysts should also consider adopting a formalized practice similar to “the pass,” which might take the form of periodic meetings during retreats or of institutionalized encounters within regional groupings. While not a simple matter, the expectation of presenting work to colleagues in tandem with discussion of personal analytic experience might make for an enriched ethics of practice. Although obviously not a total remedy for professional problems of abandonment of psychoanalytic boundaries or of badly conducted treatments, the step of incorporating others into the role of psychoanalyst would recognize the uniqueness of psychoanalytic work and its fundamental rootedness in an ethical position. This position, as we have seen, implies a renunciation of the position of knowledge—the position of a guru or expert interpreter of desire who holds answers specific to the patient. It also highlights the problem of the analyst's desire as an intrinsic component of treatment, rather than an exceptional interference with his work.

Summary

Lacan's attempt to found a new ethics, based on the revolution in our understanding of human beings brought about by Freud's inaugural project, can be approached through Lear's rather parallel exploration of the historical approach to the traditional problems of moral philosophy. Each argues that past notions of the good and of moral behavior have been undermined by recognition of the importance of unconscious motives, including personal desires of various kinds, institutional setups of power, and economic hierarchies. The central features of Lacan's *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* involve recognizing the absolute separation between singular subjects and the centrality of desire in human experience. Although Lacan does not resolve and in some ways obscures the difficulties involved in dealing with the omnipresence of desire in the practice of psychoanalysis, he does raise questions worthy of reflection by contemporary analysts. Three major implications of Lacan's position are (1) the need to focus analytic education and training more powerfully on the sources and meaning of the desire to become a psychoanalyst and engage in analytic practice; (2) the importance of diminishing authoritarian hierarchies in training; and (3), most problematic, the ethical obligation of the analyst to triangulate his position in relation to a “third,” which can maintain his desire in the foreground of the clinical situation—not the

third of the dyadic process, but an actual other person. These considerations are to a great degree lacking in analytic institutions, in part because psychoanalysts do not yet share a model for a broader ethics of practice. Lacan's proposals can be viewed as a starting point, opening up a field usually neglected in analytic education, and we can be grateful to him for turning our attention to the ethical dimensions of our institutions and practice.

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