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# The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960

## The Seminar of Jacques *Lacan*

Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller

BOOK VII

Translated with notes  
by Dennis Porter

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The Seminar of Jacques Lacan

BOOK VII

'Given all that is implied by the phrase, the ethics of psychoanalysis will allow me, far more than anything else, to test the categories that I believe enable me to give you through my teaching the most suitable instruments for understanding what is new both in Freud's work and in the experience of psychoanalysis that derives from it.'

With these words Jacques Lacan begins his famous seminar on ethics, in which he discusses the problem of sublimation, the paradox of *jouissance*, the essence of tragedy (a reading of Sophocles's *Antigone*), and the tragic dimension of analytical experience. Delving into the psychoanalyst's inevitable involvement with ethical questions and the 'attraction of transgression', Lacan clarifies many of his key concepts, as well as his criticisms of certain trends in psychoanalysis. One of the most influential French intellectuals of this century, Lacan is seen here at the height of his powers.

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*By Jacques Lacan*

TELEVISION

THE SEMINAR OF JACQUES LACAN BOOK I

THE SEMINAR OF JACQUES LACAN BOOK

II

ECRITS: A SELECTION

FEMININE SEXUALITY

THE FOUR FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS

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THE ETHICS OF  
**PSYCHOANALYSIS**  
1959-1960  
The Seminar of Jacques Lacan

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TAVISTOCK/ROUTLEDGE

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Some of the problems of translating Jacques Lacan's *Seminars* into English have already been pointed out by the translators of *Seminars I* and *II*, John Forester and Sylvana Tomaselli, and there is no point in repeating their helpful comments here. It is, however, important to recall that the *Seminars* now in the process of being translated were delivered from notes to an audience that for the most part had been following the progress of Lacan's thought over many years and was composed to a great extent of psychoanalysts or psychoanalysts in training. These circumstances account in part for his non-academic mode of exposition and the frequent complexity of the syntax. They also explain the closeness Lacan apparently felt to his audience, the assumptions he was able to make about the knowledge his listeners possessed, the frequent references to previous *Seminars* or to other activities of the *Société Française de Psychanalyse*, and the apparent allusiveness of some of his remarks. The latter in particular seems to derive both from what he felt he could take for granted among those who knew his work well and from a pedagogical style that made great demands on a listener.

Jacques-Alain Miller's French edition of the *Ethique de la Psychanalyse* is without a critical apparatus, like the other Lacan *Seminars* that have so far been published. Miller reproduces Lacan's lectures virtually unmediated, and it seemed proper to model the English edition of the work on the French. As a consequence, footnotes have been kept to a minimum; they are chiefly limited to linguistic difficulties where for one reason or another English is unable to render fully the significance of the French—the most obvious of such cases is Lacan's not infrequent plays on words. However, a bibliography of authors and works cited by Lacan in the course of the *Seminar* is included. I have also followed the French edition in leaving German and Greek words in the original where Lacan did so in the context of analyzing German or Greek texts; in most cases, he gave at the same time a French equivalent or a para-

phrase of a concept's meaning. Only in the case of titles have I given the English translation in brackets after the first occurrence.

The task of the translator is, I take it, a critically self-effacing one that insofar as possible avoids the temptation to play editor by reducing ambiguities or by "naturalizing" the strangeness of an original in its passage into the native idiom. Thus, the goals I gave myself were accuracy rather than elegance and a flexibility of tone that matches the different registers of Lacan's expository style. The excitement for those who encounter his *Seminars* in the original French is in the experience of a thought in the making. And it is important to render in the English this liveliness of a distinguished mind at work before an audience, even at the occasional cost of some awkwardnesses. The difficulty was in trying to render in a different linguistic code a captivating spoken word that sometimes meanders, throws out asides, refers backwards or anticipates future problems, moves through passages dense with difficult ideas, narrates an illustrative comic anecdote, draws out the forgotten etymological significance of a word or resorts suddenly to popular speech. The pleasure for the translator is in discovering equivalents for such movements within the very different resources of his own language.

It is for the most part not Lacan's psychoanalytic or philosophical discourse that causes difficulties, but his syntax and, given that the Norton edition of the *Seminars* has as its potential audience the English-speaking world as a whole, his use of familiar language and colloquialisms. As far as the former is concerned, Lacan frequently uses French prepositions and prepositional phrases in startlingly new ways; thus one of the most difficult words to translate turned out to be "de." As for Lacan's colloquialisms, it seemed to me important wherever possible to find equivalents that were not too obviously recognizable as "Americanisms" or as "Britishisms," but have a more general currency. Finally, a few minor errors in the French have been corrected in the translation.

I would like to thank my colleague Edward S. Phinney for help with the Greek and Susan Barrows both for her editorial support and for a careful reading of the manuscript.

DENNIS PORTER

*Amherst, Massachusetts, October 1991*



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# I

## Outline of the seminar

THE ATTRACTION OF TRANSGRESSION<sup>1</sup>

FROM ARISTOTLE TO FREUD

THE REAL

THE THREE IDEALS

I announced that the title of my seminar this year was *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. I do not think that this is a subject whose choice is in any way surprising in itself, although it does leave open for some of you the question of what I might have in mind.

It was certainly not without some hesitation and even trepidation that I decided to tackle it. I, in fact, decided to do so because the subject follows directly from my seminar of last year, if it is true that we can consider that work as completely finished.

In any case, we must move forward. Given all that is implied by the phrase, the ethics of psychoanalysis will allow me, far more than anything else, to test the categories that I believe enable me, through my teaching, to give you the most suitable instruments for understanding what is new both in Freud's work and in the experience of psychoanalysis that derives from it.

New in relation to what? In relation to something that is both very general and very specific. Very general to the extent that the experience of psychoanalysis is highly significant for a certain moment in the history of man, namely, the one we are living in, although this does not imply we are able - far from it - to specify what the collective work we are engaged in means. Very specific, on the other hand, like our daily work, namely, in the way in which we have to respond in experience to what I have taught you to articulate as a demand, a patient's demand, to which our response gives an exact meaning. And in our response itself we must maintain the strictest discipline, so as not to let its deeply unconscious meaning be adulterated by that demand.

<sup>1</sup> Lacan's word here, "la fame," is particularly difficult to put into English because of the great range of its potential equivalents - from wrong, error, mistake to blame, misconduct and offense - and because the most obvious choice does not have the moral resonances of the French. "The Attraction of the Fault" not only does not suggest anything, but even manages to sound like pidgin English. And the same is true of "The Universe of the Fault."

In speaking of the ethics of psychoanalysis, I chose a word which to my mind was no accident. I might have said "morality" instead. If I say "ethics," you will soon see why. It is not because I take pleasure in using a term that is less common.

## 1

Let us begin by noting this - something that, in a word, makes the subject eminently accessible and even tempting. It is my belief that no one who is involved with psychoanalysis has not been drawn to treat the subject of its ethics. I am not the one who created the expression. Moreover, it is impossible not to acknowledge that we are submerged in what are strictly speaking moral problems.

Our experience has led us to explore further than has been attempted before the universe of transgression. That is the expression which, with an extra adjective, my colleague Hesnard uses. He refers to the morbid universe of transgression. And it is doubtless from this morbid point of view that we approach it at its highest point.

In truth, that point of view is impossible to dissociate from the universe of transgression as such. And the link between transgression and morbidity has not failed in our time to mark with its seal all thought about morals. It is even strange sometimes - something I have drawn your attention to before in my asides - to see in religious circles a certain vertigo seize those who are engaged in thinking about moral questions when they come face to face with what our experience has to offer. It is remarkable to see how they, as it were, give in to the temptation of an excessive and even comic optimism, and start to think that a decline of morbidity might lead transgression to vanish.

In fact, what we are dealing with is nothing less than the attraction of transgression.

And what is this transgression? It is certainly not the same as the one the patient commits with the expectation of being punished or punishing himself. When we speak of the need for punishment, we are certainly referring to a transgression which is on the path of this need and which is sought out to obtain this punishment. But that way we are only carried a little further toward some yet more obscure transgression which calls for punishment.

Is it the transgression that Freud's work points to from the beginning, the murder of the father, the great myth that he places at the origin of the development of civilization? Or is it that even more obscure and original transgression for which he finds a name at the end of his work, in a word, the death instinct, to the extent that man finds himself anchored deep within to its formidable dialectic?

It is between these two terms that one finds in Freud a body of thought, a

development whose precise significance it will be our task to determine. But it is not, in truth, in the sphere either of practice or of theory that is to be found all that which makes me emphasize the importance of the ethical dimension in my experience and my teaching of Freud. In effect, as has been quite properly pointed out, not everything in ethics is simply related to the sense of obligation.

Moral experience as such, that is to say, the reference to sanctions, puts man in a certain relation to his own action that concerns not only an articulated law but also a direction, a trajectory, in a word, a good that he appeals to, thereby engendering an ideal of conduct. All that, too, properly speaking constitutes the dimension of ethics and is situated beyond the notion of a command, beyond what offers itself with a sense of obligation. That is why I believe it necessary to relate the dimension of our experience to the contribution of those who have attempted in our time to advance moral thought - I am, in fact, alluding to Fritz Rauh, whom we will be concerned with as one of our reference points in this exercise.

But I am certainly not one of those who gladly sets the sense of obligation aside. If there is, in fact, something that psychoanalysis has drawn attention to, it is, beyond the sense of obligation properly speaking, the importance, I would even say the omnipresence, of a sense of guilt. Certain internal tendencies of ethical thought attempt to evade what it must be said is this disagreeable aspect of moral experience. If I am certainly not one of those who attempt to soften, blunt, or attenuate the sense of guilt, it is because in my daily experience I am too insistently brought back to it and reminded of it.

It nevertheless remains true that analysis is the experience which has restored to favor in the strongest possible way the productive function of desire as such. This is so evidently the case that one can, in short, say that the genesis of the moral dimension in Freud's theoretical elaboration is located nowhere else than in desire itself. It is from the energy of desire that that agency is detached which at the end of its development will take the form of the censor.

Thus something is enclosed in a circle that was imposed on us, deduced from what is most characteristic in our experience.

A certain philosophy - it immediately preceded the one which is the nearest relative to the Freudian enterprise, the one which was transmitted to us in the nineteenth century - a certain eighteenth-century philosophy assumed as its task what might be called the naturalist liberation of desire. One might characterize this thought, this particularly practical thought, as that of the man of pleasure. Now the naturalist liberation of desire has failed. The more the theory, the more the work of social criticism, the more the sieve of that experience, which tended to limit obligation to certain precise functions in the social order, have raised in us the hope of relativizing the imperative, the contrary, or, in a word, conflictual character of moral experience, the more

we have, in fact, witnessed a growth in the incidence of genuine pathologies. The naturalist liberation of desire has failed historically. We do not find ourselves in the presence of a man less weighed down with laws and duties than before the great critical experience of so-called libertine thought.

If we find ourselves led to consider even in retrospect the experience of that man of pleasure - through reflection on what psychoanalysis has contributed to the knowledge and the circumstances of perverse experience - we will soon see that in truth everything in this moral theory was to destine it to failure.

In effect, although the experience of the man of pleasure presents itself with an ideal of naturalist liberation, one has only to read the major authors -I mean those who in expressing themselves on the subject have adopted the boldest approaches to libertinage, and even to eroticism itself- to realize that this experience contains a note of defiance, a kind of trial by ordeal in relation to that which remains the terminal point of this argument, an undoubtedly diminished but nevertheless fixed term. And that is nothing less than the divine term.

As the creator of nature, God is summoned to account for the extreme anomalies whose existence the Marquis de Sade, Mirabeau, and Diderot, among others, have drawn our attention to. This challenge, this summoning, this trial by ordeal ought not to allow any other way out than the one that was, in effect, realized historically. He who submits himself to the ordeal finds at the end its premises, namely, the Other to whom this ordeal is addressed, in the last analysis its Judge. That is precisely what gives its special tone to this literature, which presents us with the dimension of the erotic in a way that has never been achieved since, never equaled. In the course of our investigation, we definitely must submit to our judgment that which in analysis has retained an affinity with, a relationship to, and a common root with, such an experience.

Here we are touching on a perspective that has been little explored in analysis. It seems that from the moment of those first soundings, from the sudden flash of light that the Freudian experience cast on the paradoxical origins of desire, on the polymorphously perverse character of its infantile forms, a general tendency has led psychoanalysts to reduce the paradoxical origins in order to show their convergence in a harmonious conclusion. This movement has on the whole characterized the progress of analytical thought to the point where it is worth asking if this theoretical progress was not leading in the end to an even more all-embracing moralism than any that has previously existed. Psychoanalysis would seem to have as its sole goal the calming of guilt - although we know well through our practical experience the difficulties and obstacles, indeed the reactions, that such an approach entails. This approach involves the taming of perverse *jouissance*, which is assumed to emerge from

the demonstration of its universality, on the one hand, and its function, on the other.

No doubt the term "component," used for designating the perverse drive, is in this situation given its full weight. Last year we explored the expression "component drive"; in a whole section of our remarks we were concerned with the insights that analysis affords concerning the function of desire and with the deep finality of that really remarkable diversity, which explains the value of the catalogue of human instincts that analysis has allowed us to draw up.

Perhaps the question will only be seen in sharp relief, when one compares the position that our point of view of the term desire has led us to, with that which is, for example, articulated in the work of Aristotle in connection with ethics. I will give him an important place in my discussion, including particularly that work which lays out Aristotelian ethics in its most elaborate form, the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There are two points in Aristotle's work in which he shows how a whole register of desire is literally situated by him outside of the field of morality.

Where a certain category of desires is involved, there is, in effect, no ethical problem for Aristotle. Yet these very desires are nothing less than those notions that are situated in the forefront of our experience. A whole large field of what constitutes for us the sphere of sexual desires is simply classed by Aristotle in the realm of monstrous anomalies - he uses the term "bestiality" with reference to them. What occurs at this level has nothing to do with moral evaluation. The ethical questions that Aristotle raises are located altogether elsewhere - I will give you an idea later of their thrust and essence. That is a point of special importance.

On the other hand, if one believes that the whole of Aristotle's morality has lost none of its relevance for moral theory, then one can measure from that fact how subversive our experience is, since it serves to render his theory surprising, primitive, paradoxical and, in truth, incomprehensible.

But all that is just a stop on our journey. What I really want to do this morning is to give you an outline of this seminar.

## 2

We are faced with the question of what analysis allows us to formulate concerning the origin of morality.

Is its contribution limited to the elaboration of a mythology that is more credible and more secular than that which claims to be revealed? I have in mind the reconstructed mythology of *Totem and Taboo*, which starts out from the experience of the original murder of the father, from the circumstances that give rise to it and its consequences. From this point of view, it is the

transformation of the energy of desire which makes possible the idea of the genesis of its repression. As a result, the transgression is not in this instance just something which is imposed on us in a formal way; it is instead something worthy of our praise, *felix culpa*, since it is at the origin of a higher complexity, something to which the realm of civilization owes its development.

In short, is everything limited to the genesis of the superego whose description is formulated, perfected, deepened, and made more complex as Freud's work progresses? We will see that this genesis of the superego is not simply a psychogenesis and a sociogenesis. Indeed, it is impossible to articulate it by limiting oneself merely to the register of collective needs. Something is imposed there whose jurisdiction is to be distinguished from pure and simple social necessity - it is properly speaking something whose unique scope I am trying to make you appreciate here in terms of the relation to the signifier and to the law of discourse. We must maintain the autonomy of this term if we want to be able to locate our experience precisely or simply correctly.

Here no doubt the distinction between culture and society contains something that might appear new or even divergent in comparison with what is found in a certain kind of teaching of the analytical experience. I hope, in fact, to point out to you the references to such a distinction and the scope they occupy in Freud himself, a distinction whose authority I am far from alone in promoting or emphasizing the need for.

And in order to draw your attention immediately to the work in which we will take up the problem, I refer you to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, published in 1922 and written by Freud after the working out of his second topic, that is to say after he had placed in the foreground the highly problematic notion of the death instinct. You will find expressed there in striking phrases the idea that what, in brief, happens in the progress of civilization, those discontents that are to be explored, is situated, as far as man is concerned, far above him - the man involved here being the one who finds himself at that turning point in history where Freud himself and his work are situated. We will come back to the significance of Freud's formula and I will draw your attention to its significance in the text. But I believe it to be important enough for me to point it out to you right away, and already sufficiently illuminated in my teaching, where I show the originality of the Freudian conversion in the relation of man to the logos.

This *Civilization and Its Discontents* that I invite you to get to know or to reread in the context of Freud's work is not just a set of notes. It is not the kind of thing one grants a practitioner or a scientist somewhat indulgently, as his way of making an excursion into philosophical inquiry without our giving it all the technical importance one would accord to such a thought coming from someone who considers himself to belong to the category of

philosopher. Such a view of this work of Freud's is widespread among psychoanalysts and is definitely to be rejected. *Civilization and Its Discontents* is an indispensable work, unsurpassed for an understanding of Freud's thought and the summation of his experience. It illuminates, emphasizes, dissipates the ambiguities of wholly distinct points of the analytical experience and of what our view of man should be - given that it is with man, with an immemorial human demand, that we have to deal on a daily basis in our experience.

As I have already said, moral experience is not limited to that acceptance of necessity, to that form in which such experience presents itself in every individual case. Moral experience is not simply linked to that slow recognition of the function that was defined and made autonomous by Freud under the term of superego, nor to that exploration of its paradoxes, to what I have called the obscene and ferocious figure in which the moral agency appears when we seek it at its root.

The moral experience involved in psychoanalysis is the one that is summed up in the original imperative proposed in what might be called the Freudian ascetic experience, namely, that *Wo es war, soll Ich werden* with which Freud concludes the second part of his *Vorlesungen (Introductory Lectures)* on psychoanalysis. The root of this is given in an experience that deserves the term "moral experience," and is found at the very beginning of the entry of **the** patient into analysis.

That "I" which is supposed to come to be where "it" was, and which analysis has taught us to evaluate, is nothing more than that whose root we already found in the "I" which asks itself what it wants. It is not only questioned, but as it progresses in its experience, it asks itself that question and asks it precisely in the place where strange, paradoxical, and cruel commands are suggested to it by its morbid experience.

Will it or will it not submit itself to the duty that it feels within like a stranger, beyond, at another level? Should it or should it not submit itself to the half-unconscious, paradoxical, and morbid command of the superego, whose jurisdiction is moreover revealed increasingly as the analytical exploration goes forward and the patient sees that he is committed to its path?

If I may put it thus, isn't its true duty to oppose that command? One finds here something which belongs to the givens of our experience as well as to the givens of preanalysis. It is enough to see how the experience of an obsessional is structured at the beginning to know that the enigma concerning the term "duty" as such is always already formulated even before he formulates me demand for help, which is what he goes into analysis for.

In truth, although the response to the problem that we are proposing here is obviously illustrated in the conflict of an obsessional, it nevertheless has a universal validity; that is why there are different ethics and there is ethical

thought. It is not simply the philosopher's thought alone that seeks to justify duty, that duty on which we have shed a variety of light - genetical and onginary, for example. The justification of mat which presents itself with an immediate feeling of obligation, the justification of duty as such - not simply in one or other of its commands, but in the form imposed - is at the heart of an inquiry that is universal.

Are we analysts simply something that welcomes the suppliant then, something that gives him a place of refuge? Are we simply, but it is already a lot, something that must respond to a demand, to the demand not to suffer, at least without understanding why? - in the hope that through understanding the subject will be freed not only from his ignorance, but also from suffering itself.

Isn't it obvious that analytical ideals are normally to be found here? They are certainly not lacking. They grow in abundance. The evaluation, location, situation, and organization of values, as they say in a certain register of moral thought, that we propose to our patients, and around which we organize the assessments of their progress and the transformation of their way into a path, is supposed to be pan of our work. For the moment I will mention three of these ideals.

The first is the ideal of human love.

Do I need to emphasize the role that we attribute to a certain idea of "love fulfilled"? That is an expression you must have learned to recognize and not only here, since, in truth, there is hardly an analyst who writes who has not drawn attention to it. And you know that I have often taken aim at the approximative and vague character, so tainted with an optimistic moralism, which marks the original articulations taking the form of the genitalization of desire. That is the ideal of genital love - a love that is supposed to be itself alone the model of a satisfying object relation: doctor-love, I would say if I wanted to emphasize in a comical way the tone of this ideology; love as hygiene, I would say, to suggest what analytical ambition seems to be limited to here. It is a problem that I will not expand on indefinitely, since I have not stopped making you dunk about it since this seminar began. But so as to give it a more marked emphasis, I will point out that analytical thought seems to shirk its task when faced with the convergent character of our experience. This character is certainly not deniable, but the analyst seems to find in it a limit beyond which it is difficult for him to go. To say that the problems of moral experience are entirely resolved as far as monogamous union is concerned would be a formulation that is imprudent, excessive, and inadequate. Analysis has brought a very important change of perspective on love by placing it at the center of ethical experience; it has also brought an original note, which was certainly different from the way in which love had previously been viewed by the *moralistes* and the philosophers in the economy of inter-



human relations. Why then has analysis not gone further in the direction of the investigation of what should properly be called an erotics? That is something that deserves reflection.

In this connection the topic I have placed on the agenda of our forthcoming conference, namely, feminine sexuality, is one of the clearest of signs in the development of analysis of the lack I am referring to with regard to such an investigation. It is hardly necessary to recall what Jones learned from a source that to my mind is not especially qualified, but which, believe it or not, is nevertheless supposed at the very least to have transmitted in his exact words what it heard from Freud's own mouth. Jones tells us that this person told him confidentially that one day Freud said something like "After some thirty years of experience and thought, there is still one question to which I am still unable to find an answer; it is 'Was will das Weib?' " What does woman want? Or more precisely, "What does she desire?" The term "will" in this expression may have that meaning in German.

Have we gone much further on that subject? It will not be a waste of time if I show you the kind of avoidance that the progress of research in analysis has practiced in answering a question that cannot be said to have been invented by it. Let us just say that analysis, and the thought of Freud in particular, is connected to a time that articulated this question with a special emphasis. The Ibsenian context of the end of the nineteenth century in which Freud's thought matured cannot be overlooked here. And it is, in brief, very strange that analytical experience has if anything stifled, silenced, and evaded those areas of the problem of sexuality which relate to the point of view of feminine demand.

The second ideal, which is equally as remarkable in analytical experience, is what I shall call the ideal of authenticity.

I do not think I need to emphasize it particularly. It will not have escaped you that if psychoanalysis is a technique of unmasking, it presupposes such a point of view. But, in fact, it goes further than that.

It is not simply as a path, stage, or measure of progress that authenticity suggests itself to us; it is also quite simply as a certain norm for the finished product, as something desirable and, therefore, as a value. It is an ideal, but one on which we are led to impose clinical norms that are very precise. I will illustrate the point in the very subtle observations of Helene Deutsch concerning a type of character and of personality that one cannot describe as maladjusted or as failing to meet any of the norms demanded by social relations, but whose whole attitude and behavior are visible in the recognition - of whom? - of the other, of others, as if marked by that note that she calls in English "as if," and which in German is "als ob." I am touching here on the Point that a certain register - which is not defined and is not simple and cannot be situated other than from a moral perspective - is present, control-

ling, insisted on in all our experience, and that it is necessary to calculate to what extent we are adequate to it.

That something harmonious, that full presence whose lack we as clinicians can so precisely gauge - doesn't our technique stop half-way toward what is required to achieve it, the technique that I have christened "unmasking"? Wouldn't it be interesting to wonder about the significance of our absence from the field of what might be called a science of virtues, a practical reason, the sphere of common sense? For in truth one cannot say that we ever intervene in the field of any virtue. We clear ways and paths, and we hope that what is called virtue will take root there.

Similarly, we have recently forged a third ideal, which I am not sure belongs to the original space of analytical experience, the ideal of non-dependence or, more precisely, of a kind of prophylaxis of dependence.

Isn't there a limit there, too, a fine boundary, which separates what we indicate to an adult subject as desirable in this register and the means we accord ourselves in our interventions so that he achieves it?

It is enough to remember the fundamental, constitutive reservations of the Freuthan position concerning education in the broad sense. There is no doubt that all of us, and child analysts in particular, are led to encroach on this domain, to practice in the space of what I have called elsewhere an orthopedics in its etymological sense. But it is nevertheless striking that both in the means we employ and in the theoretical competence we insist on, the ethics of analysis - for there is one - involves effacement, setting aside, withdrawal, indeed, the absence of a dimension that one only has to mention in order to realize how much separates us from all ethical thought that preceded us. I mean the dimension of habits, good and bad habits.

It is something we refer to very little because psychoanalytic thought defines itself in very different terms, in terms of traumas and their persistence. We have obviously learned to decompose a given trauma, impression, or mark, but the very essence of the unconscious is defined in a different register from the one which Aristotle emphasizes in the *Ethics* in a play on words, *iθoς* / *ἦθoς*

There are extremely subtle distinctions that may be centered on the notion of character. Ethics for Aristotle is a science of character: the building of character, the dynamics of habits and, even more, action with relation to habits, training, education. You must take a look at his exemplary work, if only to understand the difference between our modes of thought and those of one of the most eminent forms of ethical thought.

<sup>2</sup> Both *ἦθoς* and *iθoς* derive from a Greek verb meaning "to repeat." Their meanings came to be differentiated insofar as *ἦθoς* is active and refers to the capacity of creatures to form habits, whereas *iθoς* connotes a condition in a passive sense.

**3**

So as to emphasize what today's premises are leading us toward, I will simply note that although the topics on which I have attempted to open up different perspectives are varied, I will try next time to start from a radical position. In order to point out the originality of the Freuthan position in ethical matters, I must underline a slippage or a change of attitude relative to the question of morality as such.

In Aristotle the problem is that of a good, of a Sovereign Good. We will have to consider why he emphasized the problem of pleasure, its function in the mental economy of ethics from the beginning. It is something that we cannot avoid, not least because it is the reference point of the Freuthan theory concerning the two systems  $\varphi$  and  $\psi$ , the two psychical agencies that he called the primary and secondary processes.

Is the same pleasure function at work in both of these articulations? It is almost impossible to isolate this difference if we do not realize what took place in the interval. Even if it is not my role and if the place I occupy here doesn't seem to make it obligatory, I will not, in fact, be able to avoid a certain inquiry into historical progress.

It is at this point that I must refer to those guiding terms, those terms of reference which I use, namely, the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real.

More than once at the time when I was discussing the symbolic and the imaginary and their reciprocal interaction, some of you wondered what after all was "the real." Well, as odd as it may seem to that superficial opinion which assumes any inquiry into ethics must concern the field of the ideal, if not of the unreal, I, on the contrary, will proceed instead from the other direction by going more deeply into the notion of the real. Insofar as Freud's position constitutes progress here, the question of ethics is to be articulated from the point of view of the location of man in relation to the real. To appreciate this, one has to look at what occurred in the interval between Aristotle and Freud.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was the utilitarian conversion or reversion. We can define this moment - one that was no doubt fully conditioned historically - in terms of a radical decline of the function of the master, a function that obviously governs all of Aristotle's thought and determines its persistence over the centuries. It is in Hegel that we find expressed an extreme devalorization of the position of the master, since Hegel turns him into the great dupe, the magnificent cuckold of historical development, given that the virtue of progress passes by way of the vanquished, which is to say, of the slave, and his work. Originally, when he existed in his plenitude in Aristotle's time, the master was something very different from

the Hegelian fiction, which is nothing more than his obverse, his negation, the sign of his disappearance. It is shortly before that terminal moment that in the wake of a certain revolution affecting interhuman relations, so-called utilitarian thought arose, and it is far from being made up of the pure and simple platitudes one imagines.

It is not just a matter of a thought that asks which goods are available on the market to be distributed and the best way to effect the distribution. One finds there an investigation of something of which Mr. Jakobson, who is here today, first found the key, the little latch, in a hint he gave me concerning the interest of a work of Jeremy Bentham's that is ordinarily neglected in the summary of his contribution traditionally given.

This personage is far from meriting the discredit, indeed the ridicule, which a certain critical philosophy might formulate concerning his role in the history of the development of ethics. We will see that it is in relation to a critical philosophy or, more properly, a linguistic one that his thought is developed. It is impossible to measure so well anywhere else the emphasis given in the course of this revolution to the term real, which in his thought is placed in opposition to the English term "fictitious."<sup>3</sup>

"Fictitious" does not mean illusory or deceptive as such. It is far from being translatable into French by "fictif," although this is something that the man who was the key to his success on the continent, Etienne Dumont, did not fail to do - he was also responsible for popularizing Bentham's thought. "Fictif" means "fictif" but, as I have already explained to you, in the sense that every truth has the structure of fiction.

Bentham's effort is located in the dialectic of the relationship of language to the real so as to situate the good - pleasure in this case, which, as we will see, he articulates in a manner that is very different from Aristotle - on the side of the real. And it is within this opposition between fiction and reality that is to be found the rocking motion of Freudian experience.

Once the separation between the fictitious and the real has been effected, things are no longer situated where one might expect. In Freud the characteristic of pleasure, as that dimension which binds man, is to be found on the side of the fictitious. The fictitious is not, in effect, in its essence that which deceives, but is precisely what I call the symbolic.

That the unconscious is structured as a function of the symbolic, that it is the return of a sign that the pleasure principle makes man seek out, that the pleasurable element in that which directs man in his behavior without his knowledge (namely, that which gives him pleasure, because it is a form of euphony), that that which one seeks and finds again is the trace rather than the trail - one has to appreciate the great importance of all of this in Freud's

In English in the original.

thought, if one is to understand the function of reality.

Certainly Freud leaves no doubt, any more than Aristotle, that what man is seeking, his goal, is happiness. It's odd that in almost all languages happiness offers itself in terms of a meeting - *τυχη*. Except in English and even there it's very close. A kind of favorable divinity is involved. *Bonheur* in French suggests to us *augurum*, a good sign and a fortunate encounter. *Gluck* is the same as *geluck*. "Happiness" is after all "happen"<sup>4</sup>; it, too, is an encounter, even if one does not feel the need to add the prefix, which strictly speaking indicates the happy character of the thing.

It is nevertheless not clear that all these terms are synonyms - I hardly need to remind you of the story of the individual who emigrated from Germany to America and who was asked, "Are you happy?" "Oh, yes, I am very happy," he answered, "I am really very, very happy, *aber nicht glücklich!*"

It does not escape Freud's attention that happiness as far as we are concerned is what must be offered as the goal of our striving, however ethical it might be. But what stands out clearly - in spite of the fact that it is not given sufficient importance on the grounds that we cease to listen to a man as soon as he steps outside his sphere of expertise - is that I prefer to read in *Civilization and Its Discontents* the idea Freud expresses there concerning happiness, namely, that absolutely nothing is prepared for it, either in the macrocosm or the microcosm.

That is the point which is completely new. Aristotle's thought on the subject of pleasure embodies the idea that pleasure has something irrefutable about it, and that it is situated at the guiding pole of human fulfillment, insofar as if there is something divine in man, it is in his bond to nature.

You should consider how far that notion of nature is different from ours, since it involves the exclusion of all bestial desires from what is properly speaking human fulfillment. Since Aristotle's time we have experienced a complete reversal of point of view. As far as Freud is concerned, everything that moves toward reality requires a certain tempering, a lowering of tone, of what is properly speaking the energy of pleasure.

That has a huge importance, although it may seem to you as men of our time rather banal. I have even heard it said that Lacan doesn't say much more than "The king is naked." Perhaps after all I was the one referred to, but let us assume the best, namely, that it had to do with my teaching. Of course, I do teach in a somewhat more humorous way than my critic thinks - I don't under the circumstances have to reflect on his hidden intentions. If I do say "The king is naked," it is not in the same way as the child who is supposed to have exposed the universal illusion, but more in the manner of Alphonse Allais, who gathered a crowd around him by announcing in a sono-

<sup>4</sup> In English in the original.

rous voice, "How shocking! Look at that woman! Beneath her dress she's stark naked!" Yet in truth I don't even say that.

If the king is, in fact, naked, it is only insofar as he is so beneath a certain number of clothes - no doubt fictitious but nevertheless essential to his nudity. And in connection with these clothes, as another good story of Alphonse Allais demonstrates, his very nakedness might never be naked enough. After all, a king can be skinned alive as easily as a female dancer.

In truth, the point of view of this absolutely closed character reminds us of the way in which the fictions of desire are organized. It is in this respect that the formulas I gave you last year on the fantasm are significant and that the notion of desire as desire of the Other assumes its full weight.

I will end today with a note concerning the *Traumdeutung (The Interpretation of Dreams)* taken from the *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. A second factor that guides us, writes Freud, one that is much more important and is completely overlooked by the layman, is the following. It is certainly true that the satisfaction of a wish does give pleasure but, as is well known, the dreamer - I don't think I am going too far when I find here a Lacanian emphasis in a certain way of posing the problem - does not have a simple and unambiguous relationship to his wish. He rejects it, he censures it, he doesn't want it. Here we encounter the essential dimension of desire - it is always desire in the second degree, desire of desire.

In truth, we can expect Freudian analysis to create a little order in that sphere to which critical thought has turned in recent years, namely, the famous, indeed over-famous, theory of values - the very one that allows one of its proponents to say that the value of a thing is its desirability. Pay attention now - the point is to know if it is worthy of being desired, if it is desirable for one to desire it. The result is a kind of catalogue that in many ways might be compared to a second-hand clothes store in which one finds piled up the different judgments that down through the ages and up to our time have dominated human aspirations in their diversity and even their chaos.

The structure embodied in the imaginary relation as such, by reason of the fact that narcissistic man enters as a double into the dialectic of fiction, will perhaps find its explanation at the end of the inquiry we are conducting this year into the ethics of psychoanalysis. In the end you will see emerge the question posed by the fundamental character of masochism in the economy of the instincts.

No doubt something should remain open relative to the place we currently occupy in the development of erotics and to the treatment to be given, not simply to one individual or other, but to civilization and its discontents. Perhaps we should give up the hope of any genuine innovation in the field of ethics - and to a certain extent one might say that a sign of this is to be found

in the fact that, in spite of all our theoretical progress, we haven't even been able to create a single new perversion. But it would be a definite sign that we have really arrived at the heart of the problem of existing perversions, if we managed to deepen our understanding of the economic role of masochism.

Since it is useful to give oneself a goal that is attainable, that will, I hope, in the end be the point with which we will conclude this year.

*November 18, 1959*

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE THING



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