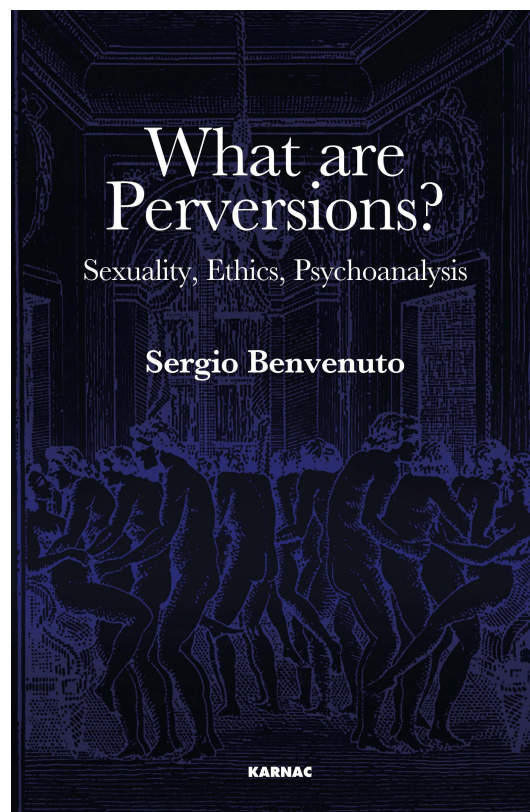


What Are Perversions?

Sexuality, Ethics, Psychoanalysis

Sergio Benvenuto



February 2016

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This book explores what we mean when we use the term “perversion.” Are we dealing with a sexological classification, a mental disturbance, an ethical deviation, a hedonistic style, or an historical-cultural artifact?

The book retraces some of the fundamental stages in the field of psychoanalytic thought—from Freud to Masud Khan, Stoller, and Lacan—and proposes an original approach: that “paraphilias” today are taken as an ethical failure of the sexual relationship with the other. The perversions signal a specific relationship with the other, who is treated not simply as a sexual object, but someone whose subjectivity is ably exploited precisely in order to get a perverse pleasure.

Acts, if considered perverse, are understood as a metaphorical re-edition of a trauma, above all sexual, in which the subject (as a child) suffered the bitter experience of exclusion or jealousy. The book articulates an heterodox hypothesis by drawing on clinical cases, from both the author’s own analytic practice and those of others; but it also draws on cinema, historical episodes, social psychology experiments (for example, Stanley Milgram’s experiment), stories and novels, and philosophical works. The final appendix delves more deeply into Freud’s theory of masochism.

WHAT ARE PERVERSIONS?
Sexuality, Ethics, Psychoanalysis

Sergio Benvenuto

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*To Elvio Fachinelli (1928–1989),
my friend and teacher in psychoanalysis*

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Like every book, even this one was born thanks to several midwives. And since in a certain sense a book is a collective work, I would say that this book was born four times, because each edition (Italian, German, Russian, and now English) had its own readers, commentators, and editors.

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Introduction

Today, the mere use of the word perversion is perceived with growing suspicion and concern. It is not politically correct, especially in the United States.

The perplexing question is, “What constitutes perversion and what does not?” Perversion, it is said, is essentially a moral judgement: a reproach, an insult or a slander. And thus, like every moral judgement, it varies according to the customs of every epoch and culture (On the variability of what is considered sexually acceptable, see Morgenthaler, 1980).

Today one no longer speaks of perversion but rather of *paraphilia*, a term first proposed in 1903 by the German psychiatrist S. F. Krauss. Paranoia is to believe in the wrong things, paraphilia is to covet the wrong objects. But even this reference to *para*, literally “aside”, to the strange, tends to be deleted from more libertarian formulations. The influential sexologist John Money (1988, p. 214) made a distinction between *paraphilia* and *normophilia*, and defined the latter as “the condition of being heterosexually in conformity with the standard as dictated by customary, religious, or legal authorities”. Thus paraphilia would simply be sexual behaviour that deviates from the norm, be it religious, legal, or customary, or at most, from the statistical norm: in short, it is a minority sexuality. And since individuals who carry minority traits within a population are called *mutants*, then why not consider paraphiliacs mutants of sexual desire? It would simply be a question of distinguishing, among these minorities, those whose behaviour is legally acceptable from those whose behaviour is not, such as paedophiles or sadists.

As Karl Kraus said at the beginning of the twentieth century, “The difference between the old and new schools of psychology is that the old school was indignant about any deviation from the norm, while the new one has contributed towards giving a class consciousness to inferiority” (1924, p. 209). Today’s perverts aim to have a sort of class consciousness.

This is patent in a kind of perversion that we will not analyse deeper here for space concerns: paedophilia. Today there is a complete social rejection of paedophiles; even in jail, they risk being killed by other convicts. It was not so until some decades ago: many Catholic and right-thinking parents turned a blind eye upon certain clergymen to whom they entrusted their sons, while knowing their sexual tendencies. Today all paedophiles are tarred with the same brush; they are all “monsters”. Yet many paedophiles are “platonic” lovers of children, who profess the respectability of their desire in several publications. Their claims are reminiscent of those who historically have brought about the acceptance of homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. Sometimes they also

profess a *paedophile pride* on the model of the movement for gay rights. Kraus in the early twentieth century had grasped this historical evolution.

Thus, in today's climate, simply dedicating an entire book to perversions rather than to paraphilias might be seen as a conservative provocation. The only legitimate operation would be that of *deconstructing* the medico-psychological concept of perversion. The task facing the intellectual of the twenty-first century is not to explain, understand, or analyse perversions, but to show how the category of "pervert" was historically formed—in order to abandon it today.

It is true that the concept of perversion was constructed by nineteenth-century positivist sexology, and has thus been around only a little more than a century (Binet, 1887, 1888; Havelock Ellis, 1897; Hirschfeld, 1910, 1914; Krafft-Ebing, 1893; Moll, 1893; and others). Moreover, the pioneering work carried out by Richard Krafft-Ebing was motivated by an ethical-legal mission: to distinguish the libertine from the pervert (Lanieri Laura, 1979). The former was a normal subject to be judged according to moral criteria and to be punished according to the era's penal code; the latter was instead a sick subject.

Modern psychopathology substituted the pervert/libertine distinction with the opposition "sexuality within average standards" versus "sexuality deviating from standards" (with the exception of paedophilia, as we have seen). Perversions thus increasingly tend to be considered as variants in sexual orientation. The fact that psychoanalysts accepted the term perversion without proposing an alternative is seen as indicative of the fact that they were, in the end, accomplices of the "moral epistemology" of the old school of psychiatry.

"Ordered" perversions

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) is by now the diagnostic text on which more and more psychiatrists worldwide base their diagnoses. And the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) regards perversions as *disorders* (I find it significant that *disorders* was preferred to other terms such as ailments, diseases, or illnesses). Based on the dominant (American, that is) medical paradigm, it is imposed as the universal Esperanto of psychiatric practice on students, who thus end up speaking the same (American) language. Every new DSM edition, though, is *de facto* the fruit of shrewd compromises among the established trends in American psychiatry, and it thus informally logs the balance of power and influence among the different tendencies. It is an instrument that allows a homogenising computation of mental abnormalities and a global bureaucratisation of ailments. It is interesting to see how this tool for the creation of universal standards deals with paraphilias. We will soon take a closer look at this fifth edition.

Frankly, the list does not differ greatly from that compiled by the nineteenth-century pioneers who "psychiatrised" perversions: we find exhibitionism and voyeurism,

fetishism, *frotteurism* (to grope), paedophilia, masochism and sexual sadism, and transvestism. DSM-5 would adjoin a quick list of “Other Specified Paraphilic Disorders”, covering phone scatology (obscene telephone calls to women), necrophilia (sex with cadavers), partialism (erotic interest exclusively for certain parts of the body), zoophilia (sex with animals), coprophilia (erotic attraction for faeces), klismaphilia (a passion for enemas), and urophilia (“watersports”).

What is striking about this list is above all the omissions. Of course homosexuality, but also incest, sexual narcissism, and gerontophilia (sexual attraction of the young for the elderly) do not appear in the DSM-5. Today’s romantic precept that the “heart has no age” forbids current psychiatry from seeing anything morbid in love between people separated in age by thirty or more years (as a matter of fact, in the past gerontophiles were only men, almost never women, for reasons easy to understand). And then, are we not living in a world and time in which we all remain youthful? On the other hand, because urinating on one’s girlfriend’s face is not a very romantic sight, this behaviour is listed among paraphilias as urophilia.

Also very interesting is the exclusion of incest, in spite of its recurrence (for example, in France in the 1990s, twenty per cent of legal cases dealt with incest (Lopez, 1997)). What makes the psychiatric establishment feel that parents having sex with their children, even if not underage, is not paraphilic? In fact, sex between close adult relatives is a contentious topic in our epoch, because in some heterogeneous countries incest is not a crime, whereas in other countries it is (For example, in September 2014 the Ethical Council of Germany proposed to the government the *décriminalisation* of sister/brother incest, while parent/ child incest would remain a crime, even if the children were adults. For Germans, Oedipal relations are more incestuous than sex between siblings).

It is easier to list the countries that *don’t* punish incest between adults as a crime, even if many of them nonetheless do not permit marriage between blood relatives: France, Belgium, Luxemburg (in all of which incest had already been decriminalised in 1810 by Napoleon), Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Argentina, Brazil, Turkey, Australia (under federal law), China (but not Hong Kong), India, and the Philippines. In Italy, the law is ambiguous, since incest is illegal only if it causes “public scandal” (an obsolete notion). As is evident, these are countries that differ widely in terms of religious prevalence, social and economic development, and political regime. And then why is incest allowed in Argentina and Brazil while it is a crime in Chile and Mexico?

My impression is that DSM-5 does not include incest among paraphilias because Western laws are slowly going in the direction of decriminalising any form of incest among adults. This is because in Western cultures, a *utilitarianist* philosophy prevails, in jurisprudence and psychiatry (and in almost all political fields), more and more. For utilitarianist ethics—which was formalised by British philosophers like Hume, Bentham, and Mill—good is anything that leads to an increase in the pleasure or happiness of people, and bad is anything that brings about their displeasure or unhappiness. It

is an ethics based on the “pleasure principle” that Freud—who began his system from a utilitarianist paradigm—regarded as the “guardian” of psychic life, as we shall see. As far as the persons who derive pleasure from incestuous intercourse are concerned if they are adults, there is no ethical problem.

We live in an age where we have only recently become aware of the frequency and banality of incestuous acts. By now, some parts of Western culture even depict incest in not a bad light, with many novels and films showing the good side of the incestuous adults (See a list of forty-six important incest movies at <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls050376592/>. I would add *The Celebration* (1998) by T. Vinterberg, and *That Lovely Girl* (2014) by K. Yedaya). On the one hand, many still view incest as a serious moral fault, and thus see its possible inclusion within paraphilia as a way to decrease its sinful weight. On the other hand, anarchic or permissive types make of incest a civil right: “You can’t rule others’ hearts”. Despite their opposing positions, both push for the exclusion of incest from the list of paraphilias.

Above all, the DSM-5 says nothing about why we should consider these paraphilias as mental *disorders*, as behaviour that upsets the *order*.

Order, in Freud’s time, coincided with “orthodox” heterosexual coitus leading to conception, or that would have led to conception if the participants were fertile. All acts which lay outside this order were thus called perverse: anal and oral sex with a woman, homosexual relationships, etc. Kisses and caresses (“preliminaries”) were not perverse only in so far as they did not involve the genitals of one’s partner; any combination other than mission-style sex with the opposite sex was charged with perversion. Even in 1956, an anti-conformist psychoanalyst such as Michael Balint (1956, p. 25) deemed cunnilingus a perversion.

At the end of the nineteenth century, common thinking had apparently freed itself from a certain religious morality, according to which the only legitimate sexuality was in fact that of a married couple with the aim of procreation. However, the lay, positivist, and even atheistic medicine of the era continued to view as *normal* only the complete sexual act, meaning that it should aim to make a woman pregnant, even if this woman were sterile.

Today these “perversions”—such as fellatio, cunnilingus, anal intercourse, etc.—are practised by a large portion of the population, and widely accepted as “non-disorderly” acts. Civil rights movements have in fact forbidden the dominant psychiatry from dealing with homosexuality, gerontophilia, fellatio, or porn shows as pathologies. It is almost impossible today, in Anglo-American cultural circles, to read any article that refers to homosexuality as a perversion. Most psychoanalysts have conformed to this prevailing conception, albeit often with some reluctance. In this book I will not conform. I will continue to talk about *perversions*, and I will explain why.

From “sin” to “pathology”

These changes in psychiatric classification, at least as far as perversions are concerned, obviously evoke the ethical changes that have occurred in Western (Judaean-Christian) societies, in which psychiatry is awash.

Apparently, what today we are willing to classify as “perverse” or “paraphilic” acts largely depend on our own moral criteria and paradigms, and not only as far as sexuality is concerned. It makes no sense to say that our ethical criteria are better or worse than centuries-old ones—they are just different (although we tend to maintain that ours are better precisely because they are ours). Unlike neuroses and psychoses, perversions are tightly correlated to what we consider “good” or “bad” actions.

Acts are good or bad, normal or pathological, in relation to the Law, which I write with a capital L because it refers not only to written civil and criminal laws, but to the basic ethical paradigm of a culture. Now, the criterion that inspired positivist and materialist psychiatry at the end of the nineteenth century was, all things considered, the same as that of Christian churches at the time: it was the Aristotelian opposition between *according to nature* (κτὲρ φύσιν) and *against nature* (ἐκτὸς φύσιν). In this Aristotelian vision, perverse sexuality was “pathological” for the same reasons as homosexuality, that is, because perversions and homosexuality do not lead to the insemination of the woman (This opposition between acts against nature and acts according to nature for official Catholic ethics, for instance, was profoundly moralised, since the “against nature” became “sinful”).

However, we live in a post-Aristotelian age in which the opposition between “against nature” and “according to nature” has less and less significance. According to mainstream philosophy, everything that exists is natural. Nothing can be against nature, because nothing is outside of nature. If today we can speak of perverse acts, it is not because they are *anti-natural*. This is due to the fact that by now in the West—despite the resistance of conservative public opinion—there is an increasing prevalence of a utilitarianist ethics. Laws recognising homosexual marriage are flourishing today, because a homosexual relationship based on mutual pleasure (mutual love is a mutual pleasure for utilitarianism) is a relationship that the state can recognise as “good”.

In this perspective, a perverse act is bad—and thus an indictable offence—*only* when it causes damage (“distress and impairment”, according to the DSM-5), whether patent or alleged, such as with sadism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and paedophilia. It is morally neutral when it does not cause patent damage to the other, such as with fetishism, masochism, transvestism, and urophilia.

What are therefore the criteria that today push psychiatry into classifying “bad” and “neutral” perversions together under the same generic compartment as paraphilias? As we shall try to show, these criteria are still moral.

Let us now see how the DSM-5 deals with the problem.

“Ordered” and “disordered” paraphilias

A careful reading of the way in which the DSM-5 deals with paraphilias eloquently illustrates the impasse of today’s dominant psychiatry.

In the section on *Paraphilic Disorders*, the DSM-5 attempts to establish a fundamental distinction between *simple paraphilia* (in the past we would have called it “non-pathological perversion”) and *paraphilic sexual disorders* (in the past we would have used the term “sexual pathology”). Apparently the DSM has recognised the libertarian/libertine criticism that tends to de-pathologise perverse desire as such, claiming its legitimacy as a variation of sexual desire, unless ... case in point, it damages someone.

In order to perform this “surgical” operation of separating lawful paraphilia from the paraphilic disorder, the DSM proposes two core criteria, A and B:

Criterion A

Over a period of at least six months, recurrent and intense sexual arousal from [... *the paraphilic object or act* ...], as manifested by fantasies, urges or behaviors.

Criterion B

The individual has acted on these sexual urges with a nonconsenting person, or the sexual urges or fantasies cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. (DSM-5, 2013, pp. 685–705)

Now the DSM states that a *paraphilic disorder* can be diagnosed only if criterion B is added to criterion A (there would be no B criterion without A). If we have A without B, there is no “disorder”, but *only paraphilia*. So what are the essential factors of this difference?

If one limits oneself to *desiring and fantasising* about perverse acts, it seems that one is a simple paraphiliac, outside the psychiatrist’s jurisdiction. One enters the “disorder”—and the medical discourse—when one *acts upon* these desires. Yet not all these acts are of interest to the psychiatrist. Three conditions have to be met for the acts to enter the psychiatric jurisdiction:

1. The acts are with a non-consenting person.
2. The acts cause a clinically significant distress.
3. The acts cause an impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (DSM-5, p. 697).

One can easily understand that such criteria to establish the pathologic nature of a paraphilic act do not hold water.

Not all paraphilic acts take place with a non-consenting person. Masochistic and fetishist games usually take place with an indifferent or participating person, often

with prostitutes. Even paedophilic practices do not exclude the other's consent since, as we know, children are often seduced by adults showing tenderness (and some adults even say that they were pushed to paedophilia by a child who once "seduced" them). As a matter of fact, the "Paedophilic Disorder" chapter of the DSM-5 does not add non-consent to criterion B in the case of the "prepubescent child". Hence violence on the other is not a *distinguishing* characteristic of paraphilic pathology in general, only of certain paraphilias.

It would seem that the actual distinguishing characteristics of pathological paraphilia are *personal distress* and *social impairment*, which are, case in point, the paradigmatic condition of mental disorders according to the DSM-5. It is thus the ego-dystonic consequence that places paraphilia in the DSM. This is in line with the dominating utilitarianist philosophy. The core criterion for the latter is the *suffering of or damage to the subject itself*. The DSM-5 speaks of a "*clinically* significant distress or social impairment", but one should ask what should a "distress" or "social impairment" be in order to become "clinical". We have here a logical vicious circle: distress and impairment are "clinical" when we consider them significant, but they are significant because they are clinical.

Do a distress or an impairment become "clinical" only in severe cases, and what would the threshold of severity be for a distress or impairment to become clinical? The DSM does not say. And, in particular, it does not say *who* considers the "impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" really "significant" in order for it to become a criterion of a "disorder". Should the paraphilic person himself complain of it, or is it something that only doctors, relatives, or friends can discern?

This is not hair splitting or nit picking. We simply want to highlight an underlying ethical-political hesitation within the DSM-5. In fact, haziness and inconsistency in the DSM signal a profound indecision that has long been conditioning the psychiatric field in general—that is, an indecision regarding the criteria used to judge whether a behavior can be medicalised or not.

The evolution of psychiatry over the past two centuries reveals the philosophies and the ethical stances that ensued one after the other in the Western world. And this holds particularly true for perversions.

Several perversions may not even entail any "clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" at all. Each case is different. A masochistic fetishist can be entirely satisfied of his paraphilic practices, if he finds an accomplice: is this enough to state that his is not a "paraphilic disorder"?

Would the ultimate criterion therefore become whether the paraphilic person enacts his perverse phantasies or not? But we know that this enactment can depend entirely on the circumstances. Enactment can happen even after years of fantasising. All things considered, the DSM criteria to distinguish paraphilia from paraphilic disorder are ambiguous, confused, and unconvincing.

This ambiguity and confusion emerges in particular when the DSM-5 deals with paedophilia. Even in this case there would be a “normal paedophilia” and a “paedophilic disorder”. Here we have three criteria (my bold italics and strikethrough):

Criterion A

Over a period of at least six months, recurrent and intense sexually arousing fantasies, urges, **or** *behaviors* involving sexual activities with a prepubescent child or children (generally thirteen years of age or younger).

Criterion B

The individual has acted on these sexual urges or phantasies with a nonconsenting person, or [T]he sexual urges or fantasies cause clinically significant *distress* or *impairment* in social, occupational, or other important area of functioning.

Criterion C

The [paedophilic] individual is at least sixteen years of age and at least five years older than the child or children in Criterion A.

I have barred the first sentence of criterion B to highlight its *absence* in the text: the DSM admits that in the paedophilic act there might be consensus (which probably happens in most paedophilic acts).

Criterion C coincides with a legal norm. Psychiatry thus places itself in the position of legislating in matters of criminal law: it determines that from sixteen years onwards one can be a paedophile, which is not too far from the eighteen years that several states consider to be the beginning of adulthood. Since for the DSM there is paedophilia only with children under thirteen, this means that if an eighteen-year-old boy seduces a thirteen-year-old, then the former must be considered a paedophile, but not if he were seventeen and ten months, for instance.

The central issue is: if a subject meets criterion A but not B, should he be considered as a “normal” paedophile? Yet the DSM in criterion A mentions not only “fantasies” and “urges” but also “behaviors”. What should these behaviours *not* be to meet criterion B, the one that sanctions the disorder? Is an adult masturbating while fantasising on a child a *normal* paraphiliac? Is petting children without involving genitalia normal paraphilia? The DSM does not define this at all, leaving the assessment to the psychiatrist’s discretion.

Why does the DSM, which prides itself on its rigorous bases, fall into such vague and sketchy statements?

The problem is that—as we have already said—paedophilia today is regarded by public opinion not as one perversion among many, but as a horror. Today, in the West, one is criminalised if one looks at pictures of naked children on the internet: it is not only the *act* but also the *desire* of the paedophile which tends to be punished. It is

not by chance that some refer to a *paedophile hunt* (well-illustrated in the Danish film *Tië Hunt* (2012) by Thomas Vinterberg). At this point in time and culture, the task force editors of the DSM find themselves in an awkward situation. Because while the criterion of the “disorder” is the enactment of the fantasy that creates subjective distress and/or social impairment, this is not enough to “normalise” paedophilia, which is nevertheless criminalised even if these criteria are not met. Hence the DSM uses a trick: by placing even other unspecified “behaviours” within “normal” paedophilia, it *defacto* paves the way to the criminalisation of the *simple* or *normal* paedophile. The DSM has seemingly left the (implicit) message that “Paedophilia is a terrible thing, even when the psychiatrist cannot intervene because certain thresholds have not been crossed by the paedophile.”

Hence, in general, we could say that, for the DSM-5, a paraphiliac is “disordered” when he becomes a neurotic, which is to say, when his perverse desire makes him suffer and gets him into trouble. A similar shift can also be noticed when the DSM deals with psychoses: even in this case, psychoses often become disorders when they create a serious *distress* to the psychotic or to others. But not all psychoses entail distress for the subject or for others. In manic states, for instance, the subject feels elated. In some forms of erotomania and megalomania the subject does not react with any special anxiety to his own delusion. Hence, should those who rave quietly without bothering others and themselves be excluded from psychiatry? Should psychiatry come into play only when there is explicit *suffering*, whether it is the subject’s or his neighbours’? But in this case, the criteria of the medical pronouncement disconnect entirely from the nature not of the disorder (since this, as has been noted, must entail the subject’s or the other’s distress), but of the *subjective structure*. Diagnosis thus becomes a simple extrinsic criterion of intervention: it prescribes (but on the basis of which legislation?) at which point of a paraphilia or paranoia a doctor can legitimately intervene.

This limit of the DSM-5 is a corollary of the behaviourist approach that dominates psychiatry, where what counts are actions and words that signal some form of suffering. Psychiatry thus gives up questioning the *sense that behaviours have for the subject*. The dominant psychiatry today—unlike psychoanalysis, which also starts from (especially verbal) behaviours, but to reconstruct their sense for a specific subject—excludes any question concerning subjective meaning. What matters for DSM is not that a subject intensely desires having sex with children every day, but the moment that he enacts this desire and harasses a child.

Yet, even behaviourist psychiatry acknowledges that the issue of the subjective meaning of acts and behaviours cannot be entirely excluded from psychiatric considerations. Hence the trick of distinguishing between “paraphilias” and “paraphilic disorders”, and the uncertainty of criteria, so that at times it seems like the primary criterion is the nonconsent of those subjected to the paraphilic act, while at other times it is the subject’s distress, or in other instances, the social and legal consequences of the act. In this way, psychiatry, neither being able nor wanting to question the sub-

jective meaning of perversions, spins around it by setting limits beyond which medical intervention is legitimate.

The soul's starry skies

The fact that a psychiatrist in the end neither knows what is perverse nor even if perversion really exists can be disconcerting for the layman.

“Psychiatric nosography”—the classification of mental disturbances or disorders—harks back to the description of the sky before modern astronomy, where each culture grouped the stars as they saw fit. So there was a Western astrology, a Chinese one, and so on. But today, scientific cosmology can say with precision that two stars, which to the naked eye appear very near, have actually more light years between them than either one of them has from us. Today, the consensus among astronomers convinces us that their way of grouping stars is realistic.

Mental disorders and sexual orientations are like the stars for astrology, in that symptoms can be classified as one wishes—in short, there is no real consensus among specialists on how to group them. One person may complain about being depressed or experiencing dizziness, and depending on our preferred diagnostic system, we will interpret this suffering as a symptom of depression, hysteria, phobia, etc. It is demonstrated that there is a divergence in the ways American, British, and French psychiatrists diagnose the same patient (Cooper, Kendell, Gurland, Sharpe, & Copeland, 1972; Katz, Cole, & Lowery, 1969; Leader, 2012; Pichot, 1982; Shepherd, Brooke, Cooper, & Lin, 1968). The DSMs are only an artefact of universal consensus; they are no less “astrological” than the classic psychopathological paradigms of Krafft-Ebing, Kraepelin, Bleuler, or Ey.

In organic medicine, progress in physiology has allowed us to reconstruct the effective processes *behind* the manifest symptoms. Medicine today succeeds in many cases in describing the morbid processes independently from the complex of semiological data, that is, from what appears on the surface: it can thus securely separate two symptoms which appear similar under clinical observation, ascribing them to completely different processes and lesions. It means that real medical pathology is essentially based on the supposed aetiology of each disorder. But DSM psychiatry did just the opposite: its decision to be “atheoretical” (*Freud-free*, basically) meant in fact that it renounced any aetiological criterion for classifying disorders—a strange choice considering the DSM’s ideal to be a real medical speciality. And yet at the same time, this choice showed a basic flaw of psychiatry in general, since the supposed morbid processes behind the symptoms remain for the most part unknown. An illness—pardon, a *disorder*—is still defined by its symptoms, almost as if in astronomy we continued to stare at the stars with the naked eye. That is, a disorder is defined before all else by what a subject complains about and by his explicit behaviour, as well as today by his reaction to specific psycho-pharmaceuticals. As we have seen, the object of psychiatry, a discipline of the

private world *par excellence*, remains paradoxically *public*: like no other discipline, it depends on public opinion, on the idols of town squares and (pharmaceutical) markets. And this is even truer for perversions. There is no such thing as a schizophrenic behaviour or discourse on one side and a clear schizophrenic lesion (whether physical or mental) marked by that behaviour on the other; or an hysterical reaction on the one hand and real hysteria on the other: in fact, the two things tend to coincide. So psychiatry has ample freedom—or, rather, it used to, before the DSM—to arrange behaviours and symptoms in such a way as to confirm its own beliefs.

And psychoanalysis follows suit: each psychoanalytic school ends up seeing the syndromes and paraphilias that it wants to see. For example, for decades hysterics disappeared from many psychoanalytic studies, partially substituted by the new family of “borderline personalities”. This is because, at the time, attention was focused above all on the supposed structure of the ego, or on the psychotic nuclei of the subject. In this frame, the hysteric configuration disappeared as such. It was a brief jump from here to the conclusion that late nineteenth-century hysteria, from which Freud’s work emerged, was extinct; ingenious theories sprung up to explain its disappearance during the course of the twentieth century. My impression instead is that analytic offices are overflowing with hysterics. But I “see” them because I still give some credit to the psychopathological “constellation” elaborated by Freud (see also Bollas, 2000).

Something similar to the “evaporation” of hysteria has happened with perversions. My work will attempt above all to understand if they do exist and—having ascertained their existence in the sense that I will specify—to understand what they are, and why they exist.

Aberrations and differences

The naturalistic approach to sexuality—which aims at toning down, to the point of cancelling, the differences between the perverse and non-perverse—is in tune with today’s free-market democracy and with its vocation to legitimise differences of any kind, even erotic ones, by flattening them out. The traditional approach enhanced differences, arranging them according to a hierarchical scale: perfect normality, anomaly, abnormality, neurotic, borderline, and, finally, psychotic pathology. According to the naturalistic approach today, in every population a certain characteristic—skin or hair colour, IQ, sexual preferences, etc.—is evened up along a continuum of variables (this is called a *dimensional* approach, opposed to the *categorical* one). This is why the DSM-5 speaks of “autistic spectrum”, for example: all of us are more or less autistic, as all of us are more or less tall. In the end, there are no two persons in the same population with an identical colour of skin: in a given population we can rather observe a spectrum of differences ranging from the dark African to the fair Scandinavian.

Such a “dimensional” criterion, applied to sexuality, frustrates the very “category” of perversion. There can be no clear-cut distinction between perverse and normal acts.

Sexual acts present a wide range of variations, which are probably a sign of the variability of each one's genome, and they can be categorised only at the discretion of the dominant ethics. Just as it is impossible to find two individuals with the same identical DNA—apart from identical twins—it is equally impossible to find two individuals with the same exact sexual orientation.

This naturalistic approach should not be resisted or derided: it serves to remind us of the biological reality that, alas, analysts—who usually have a picky humanistic or spiritualist background—too often tend to remove. Let us assume, for the sake of the argument, that ninety-seven per cent of each of us is determined by our own genome. We could then say that analysts deal with that remaining three per cent which turns out to be historically variable.

I am of course only assuming this for the sake of the argument: some biologists today deny that genes directly determine the various characteristics of an individual (a phenotype), claiming that genetic effects and environmental interactions are always in some way combined (see, for instance, Lewontin, 1995, 1998; Oyama, 1998). Here we are only attempting a thought experiment. Genetic determinism today does not entail the *immutability* but the *inevitability* of a process. The fact that a male human grows a beard, for example, is not in itself an immutable trait, but its appearance in adolescence is inevitable for most of the males because it is genetically determined.

Now, it might happen that—perhaps through a psychoanalytic cure—an individual's sexual preferences change: hence the trait was not inevitable in the first place. Over-fifties “convert” to homosexuality after a lifetime as heterosexuals, and vice versa. By contrast, the skin colour or height of an adult individual does not change. The propensities and changes that depend on genetic and constitutional factors should never be forgotten, but in many ways a person's sexuality has a history.

Hence, even if we cannot define a precise line of demarcation between aberrations and normality, neither can we overlook some key differences between them. For example, some (Roudinesco, 2002, 2009) tend to consider homosexuality as something that we do not need to explain: the inversion would be simply part of one's natural constitution, like being born male or female. Yet even Lacan—an analyst who, unlike his French colleagues, had accepted homosexuals into analysis as far back as the 1930s—took note that it sometimes happened, during the course of analysis, that a homosexual would shift to heterosexuality, while the opposite never took place in his experience. Can analysts confirm this asymmetry today? And, if the answer is in the affirmative, how should it be judged?

Those who believe that homosexuality is definitely a disorder—or at the very least a form of psychic immaturity—will affirm that among the different “homosexualities” there is only a difference in extent: analysis can succeed in dislodging the homosexuality of some but not of others, who would require a longer and more radical analysis. But in the end—it is claimed—all homosexuals should be “healed” from their inversion. This was the dominant stance among American analysts until the 1960s. They maintained that every homosexual was a “latent heterosexual” (Bieber, 1962): homo-

sexuality would have been a pathological bio-social adaptation in reaction to pervasive fears regarding one's own heterosexual impulses. In particular, Socarides (1968) considered homosexuality as a neurosis: a compromise between the exigencies of the ego and the demands of the id, which should be "treated" precisely like any other neurosis.

Going back to perversions, I have observed that after a certain time the perverse analysand often abandons his perversion. (In the wake of many French analysts, I will not call the analysts' clients *patients*—as this recalls a medical paradigm—but *analysands*, since it is they who perform most of the analytical work). If I were to say I knew exactly why this happens, I would be deceiving first of all myself. Does this happen under the impulse of my unconscious desire, and is it thus my own, unbeknown to me, "prescription"? I do not knowingly align myself against perverse acts as such; in other words, I do respect the principle of analytic neutrality, but this neutrality might be an illusion. Another possibility: does the subject, who comes to me precisely because he is unhappy with his own perversion, employ my "neutral" services to rid himself of it? Or yet again, is the abandonment of perverse positions a corollary of the analytic work, that is, of the process of subjectivisation, or of the expression of the true Self, or of metanoia, or of the integration of the Self, etc., depending on the psychoanalytic dialect one employs?

According to Freud, the end of analysis is *Wo es war, soll ich werden*, which the Standard Edition translates as: "Where Id was, there Ego shall be" (1933a, p. 190). I prefer to translate it as "Where *it* was, there *I* should become". But would the perversion then be the "it" (id) that the subject later subdued? In short—as traditional psychoanalysts thought—is the perversion something that is done in the third person neutral (it), while normality would consist in the access to a sexuality in the first person which makes a relationship with a second person, a *you*, possible? But what is it that makes a non-perverse sexual life (as defined at the beginning of the twenty-first century) coincide with subjectivisation? How can we say that a man who sleeps with his wife is a sexual "I", while a man who goes around exposing his penis to girls is the carrier of a sexual "it"? Does not sexuality in general always involve an indispensable dose of id-ity or it-ity, a sort of desubjectivisation which constitutes its strength? Or is there not a perverse kernel even in the most apparently balanced and legal sexuality, which is what both the positivist founders of sexology and Freud thought? This book will not attempt to respond directly to such questions. Rather, I will attempt to slightly modify the questions themselves.

Bricolage

Freud inaugurates a stance that will prove very influential in the twentieth century, by debunking the notion that homosexuality and perversions are pathologies. And this because, according to him, the sexual relationship that we consider normal is in actual fact a successful *bricolage* of perversions.

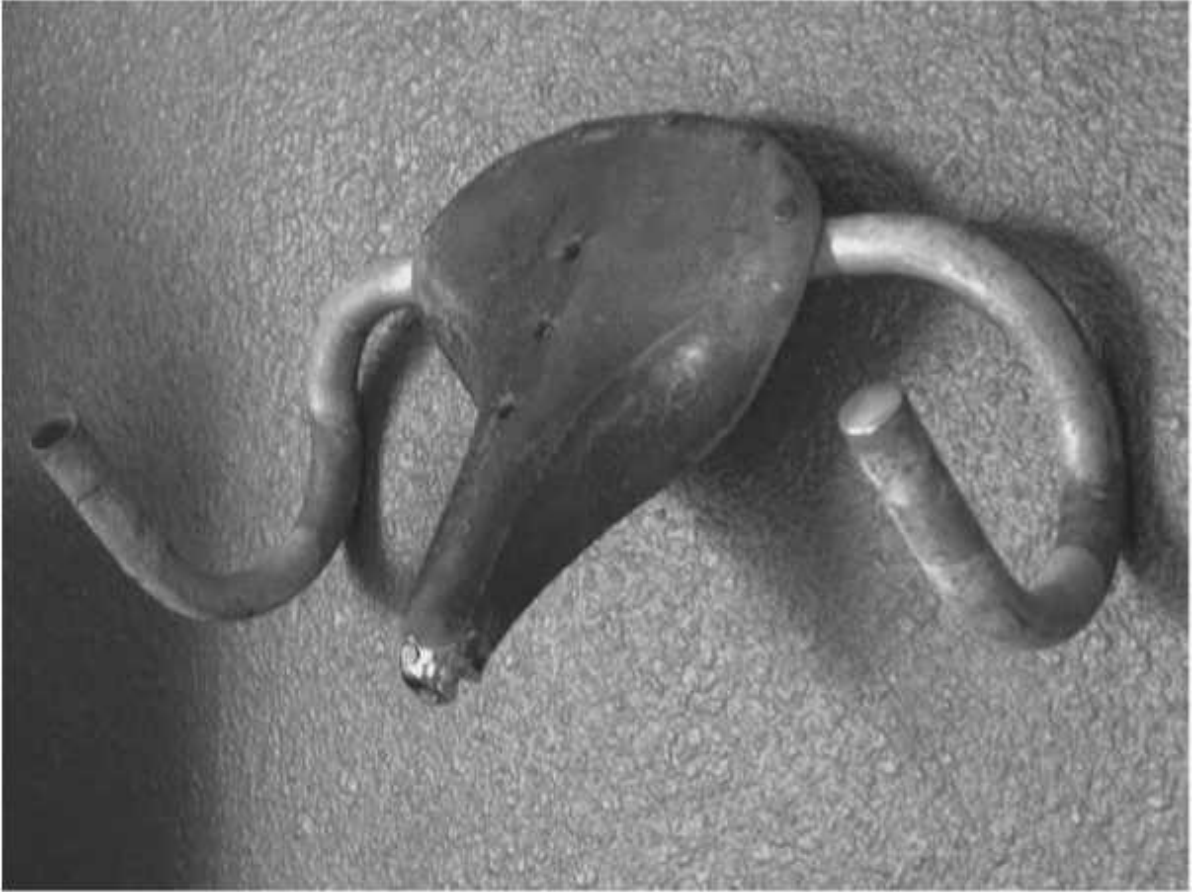
Freud did not use the concept of bricolage, tinkering, which I use in Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1962) and François Jacob's (1977) wake: the former used it to explain conceptualisation in primitive cultures, the latter to describe the biological evolution of species. The concept of tinkering had an extraordinary success in evolutionist biology, even if in this context the term *exaptation*, having a similar meaning but an alternative to *adaptation*, prevailed (Eldredge & Gould, 1972).

The *bricoleur* is different from the engineer because the latter uses *ad hoc* materials to build something *ex novo*. Yet here we use "bricolage" more in Picasso's and the surrealists' sense: to construct a figure by juxtaposing in an ironic way pieces taken from different contexts. Ahuman figure, for example, will be constructed from parts of chairs, coat hooks, utensils, etc. However, the previous functions of the pieces—fragments of chairs, coat hooks, etc.—are recognised as such. In the same way, for Freud, normal coitus is nothing other than a sophisticated engineering of love, that is, a somewhat successful bricolage, an always somehow rickety construction, made of odds and ends, materials deriving from the pre-genital phases, which would thus look "perverse" if taken on their own. I think that this is the reason Lacan proposed the provocative statement, "There is no sexual relationship". Perversions could be compared to the disconnected chords that a musician succeeds in arranging into a symphony.

The aged Prince Salina, nineteenth-century protagonist of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard* (1959), complained that he had never seen his wife's navel, although they had had many children together. Today a sexuality so rigorously limited to reproductive penetration tends to be considered aberrant. In normal coitus, we are keen to introduce once "perverse" forms: today, "anything goes" in a sexual relationship, as long as there is reciprocal desire and consensus. No matter what a couple indulges in, the important thing is that in the end both reach the "blessed" orgasm and enjoyment, which have become sacred to our contemporary culture.

From this perspective, the pervert thus appears *fixed* on a single fragment of the bricolage, so as to reach orgasm only in the presence of an "exact object" (Bollas, 2000). It would be as though for an artist a *bricolée* nude figure of a woman were acceptable *only* if two pink soup bowls represented the breasts, and only that. Even when the pervert in the end composes the complete figure—that is, blessed coitus—what is disturbing about him is the odd specialisation of his desire. The perverse person, far from appearing as the champion of a sexuality which overflows without any inhibitory brakes, appears instead strongly dependent on a restrictive condition. And this is valid for both homosexuality and heterosexuality. For example, a twenty-five-year-old man came to me not because he was gay, but because he had become aware that he chose men only fifty-five years of age or older (sixty being his ideal) and of a lower social class, such as clerks, waiters, plumbers, gravediggers. In the end his gerontophilia appeared morbid to him because of the narrow age range of his sex objects—even though the DSM-5 would not classify it as a disorder.

It is this meaning of "perversion" that analysts must work with. But as it will soon become clear, this is not enough. I shall propose another meaning, based on a somewhat



ethical criterion, which brings the subjectivity of the other into play in a more crucial way than standard analytical theory would predict.

Sexuality, intersubjectivity

The present work gives psychoanalytic theorisation a prominent space on the one hand because the author practises as a psychoanalyst, and, on the other, because the subject of perversions has always been in psychoanalysts', rather than psychologists' or other psychotherapists', strong suit. Many sexologists accurately *describe* perversions, but *theories*, whether right or wrong, emerge *defacto* only from psychoanalysts.

Nonetheless, my preference does not at all imply a disdainful condemnation of other approaches. Many analysts believe themselves modern crusaders: they stand on the side of the good, facing the infidels (cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, relational therapists, attachment psychologists, etc.). On the other side of the field there are the jihadists, psychologists who in their turn consider analysts impostors to unmask and push back. The purpose of my book is not to feed any kind of fundamentalism, be it psychoanalytical or anti-psychoanalytical.

Thus I am not siding with “psychologists” against “neuroscientists”. Neurology and cognitive science will push onward, and they might even propose convincing theories to, who knows, replace the purely psychoanalytic ones. We shall see.

* * *

Perversions remain a fertile territory for analysts for another reason, because in their case the crucial role of sexuality is indisputable.

After the first generation of analysts, psychoanalysis progressively either “mentalised” itself, converging at times with cognitivism, or showed a completely opposite tendency and gaily plunged towards mysticism. Analysts today are almost ashamed of the crude and ultimately rough and even naïve vision that Freud and his first followers had of sexuality. For instance, why does Freud include in the sexual sphere the pleasures connected with defecation, urination, flatulence, and gluttony, and not those connected with ambition, greed, gambling, and will to power? One might suspect that Freud, all things considered, deemed “sexual” that which seemed vulgar and unbecoming to the eyes of the bourgeoisie of late nineteenth-century Vienna's *Gemütlichkeit*—a criterion that is no longer particularly meaningful to us.

It is true that Freud never articulated a coherent and logically rigorous definition of what he believed was the primary factor of spiritual malaise, sexuality that is. Nevertheless, we can say that Freud included in the sexual sphere essentially acts of desire that entail, in one way or another, the Other, or an other, as subject. In gluttony it is a matter of the relationship between the glutton and the food that gives him pleasure, whereas orality is sexualised when for instance we want to kiss someone. Even anality is sexual in so far as the other is involved: for instance when one wants to cover the other

in excrement to humiliate him or her. Today, many would-be post- or anti-Freudian analytical schools confront their own conception, which they deem more correct and modern, with Freud's drive-centred "solipsistic" vision: the relational or intersubjective vision. But I fear that this self-proclaimed originality *vis-à-vis* father-Freud comes from a filial misunderstanding, because even for Freud himself, sexuality always involves the other ("the object").

And it is precisely because the (implicit) intersubjective clause of Freud's sexual theory has escaped even the Freudians, that over time the references to erotic and bodily functions have more and more been assumed as pure metaphors—this is how psychoanalytical theory recycled itself to become respectable. Even Lacan, despite his "return to Freud", has reinterpreted the non-verbal and the not-intellectual in linguistic terms. We will not call into question for the time being such a complex and genial author. Few will deny though that, in re-translating many of Freud's "carnal" aspects as *signifiers*, that is to say as symbols—the penis as the signifier phallus, the Oedipus complex as the Name-of-the-Father, libido as desire, etc.—Lacan also took part in a sort of spiritualisation of the original Freudian psychoanalysis.

As far as the *object relation* trend—from Klein to Bion—is concerned, with time the body and its functions have been transubstantiated into essentially mental metaphors: proto-mental, alpha function, beta elements, Self and non-Self, etc. Klein employed very crude sexual images, while today's Kleinians speak of feelings, emotions, affects, mental states, and theory of thought. Not to mention American ego psychology, that staked everything on the de-sexualisation of the ego. Even if with diverging strategies, many post-Freudians have felt the need to coat in logocentric terms Freud's naked "vulgar materialism". Yet...

Yet perverse phenomena, in spite of the attempts carried out by many analysts to re-educate it to the mentalist's parlour, bring us back to the vulgar reality of some of Freud's ticklish intuitions. As a matter of fact, psychoanalysis is not a respectable discipline—even today it is not de-sexualised enough. Psychoanalysis, after all, grants sexuality the overflowing role that it already has in the life of people. What are most novels, films, songs, rumours, under-the-table deals among neighbours, about, if not love and sex? François Truffaut used to say: "If you could demonstrate that 99.9 per cent of films are about love, I would say it is not enough." Love, Eros, and couple troubles engross an immense part of our lives. Usually, when someone begins to talk about love, our ears cock. Then, Freud simply gave libido, in a register that at the time had the lustre of scientificity, the relevance that people had already given it. Psychoanalysis is, in spite of appearances, a *folk theory*: behind its technical and specialist language, its approach remains very close to everyday expressions and mentality, especially to those of the lower classes. As a matter of fact, psychoanalysis in the twentieth century has given a certain respectability to the knowledge of the common people.

The bodily metaphor

Many think instead that Freud's theories are the expression of a prejudice, according to which bodily parts and functions are the ultimate key to understanding human spiritual problems; in other words, that *the flesh* dominates the *mind*. Today we do not reproach Freud for his pan-sexualism, but rather for his *fleshliness*: his claim that all mental activities—even the most sophisticated ones—can be traced back to matters of tits, touching one's willy, biting the nipples, and the like. Today many see this primacy of bodily functions as a corollary of a metaphysical anthropology, according to which certain fundamental physical functions would be *a truth of the mind*, while other, purely mental functions, would be derivatives, a “superstructure”. The pleasure of playing chess or reading Emmanuel Kant is an *explanandum*, it has to be explained; instead, the pleasure of emptying one's bladder, or of caressing one's girlfriend's skin, needs no explanation. On the contrary, it is an *explicans* of the less material enjoyments. And, actually, Freud created psychoanalysis on the grounds of the metaphysical—broadly speaking—premise that the human being is essentially *caro significans*, flesh that signifies.

Yet why should we consider the pleasure of sucking a nipple as fundamental and regard instead the pleasure of playing chess as a derivative of some more fundamental desire? The fact that some physiological pleasures have a *chronological* precedence in human life does not entail a *logical* or *ontological* primacy.

When I was an adolescent, I used to hang out in the rather sordid milieu of the poor youths of Naples, the *Lumpenproletariat*. I was the scion of an intellectual and bourgeois family but, having converted to communism, I felt the need to “get dirty” by coming into contact with those wretched environments, the redemption of which was glorified. What struck me then was that the base language of this youth from the *vasti* of the Ventaglieri neighbourhood consisted of very crude carnal metaphors. And even in Britain, one is sometimes shocked by how frequently the word “fuck” and other four-letter words appear in working class conversations. In this physiologisation of mental and intersubjective processes—still frequent today among adolescents in general—a reductionist *vis* is at work which, similarly to Freud's, achieves a certain polemical and aggressive impact against the euphemism-varnished bourgeois world. Was there *a fil rouge* between Naples's alleys and Vienna's *Berggasse*?

After all, when we swear in disappointment or excitement, our language is similar to that of those ragamuffins. Christian and Jewish cultures limit the choice of swearwords to either coprolalia or blasphemy, the ultimate swear word being a combination of both. When we are in the grip of a strong emotion, we utter the lowest and the highest words: genitals, excretory organs, and God. It is as if a strong emotion had placed us *outside ourselves*, taking us towards either the celestial sublime or the earthiness of the body. Undoubtedly, psychoanalysis assigns an explicatory privilege to this “being outside ourselves” as opposed to the routine of decency. Sexuality, for Freud, is this “being outside ourselves”.

Analytical theory distinguishes two poles in our psychic life: *sublimation* and *sexualisation*. Many analysts maintain that perversion is sexualisation. If I—being a man—admire another man for his knowledge, follow his teachings, and become his loyal disciple, I am sublimating; if, on the contrary, I take off my pants in front of this admirable man and invite him to sodomise me, I am sexualising. The point is that psychoanalysis preaches sublimation as something better than sexualisation, but this stance clashes with its epistemology: it explains sublimation with sexuality, not the other way around. For instance, it explains a pedantic and mean personality with anality, it does not explain anality with pedantry and avarice. In short, psychoanalytical theory corresponds to a perverse form of life: it sexualises what other human knowledge sublimates.

One can always challenge this sexualisation by saying that there is no reason to think that the smeared language of the lower classes' adolescents is more original or fundamental than that of Proust's characters. However, poverty also entails the curtailment of horizons, in all possible meanings: it brings us back to the *basics* of our being-in-the-world. We suspect that there is an "archaeological" primacy of poverty over wealth: poverty would tell us what are the things we could not live without. We could live without chess and Kant, but certainly not without eating or pissing. Even in ancient tragedies the protagonists—usually kings, queens, or heroes—wonder about honour, ideals, love, or duty, while the characters of the common people are usually comic figures dealing above all with material problems: hunting for food, saving one's skin, laying a woman. From his heights, the educated and wealthy person looks down on the lowlands that the ignorant and poor see from within. Basking in a language and in an epistemology of the flesh is to claim the primacy of one's own short-sightedness and of the comic figure: it is like saying, "*I'm staying at my own place*, I do not distance myself from my own body and my childhood, I remain in the limited circle in which I am positively living." None of us ever distances ourselves from our body, which is always attached to us. The poor, the child, and Freud call us back to our original nest; they take us back to *our own*, egocentric and somato-centric, world, from which we set sail for our centrifugal and abstract adventure. Hence also the ironic and violent effect that this reduction produces inside us: it throws our addiction to the impulses of the flesh into our face, mocking our pretence of flying too high.

It is precisely in perverse eroticism that the reduction of the spiritual to the libidinal-somatic triumphs, in almost farcical ways. A woman, who had successfully embarked on an intellectual career, came to me because she felt limited and humiliated by her constant grudge against men, be they colleagues, superiors, or lovers. "Why can't I be as good as some of them are?" she would ask herself angrily. One evening she attended the lecture of a man she had once met briefly. She was intrigued by his words and all of a sudden she almost screamed to herself: "Isn't he ashamed of showing his dick to everybody?" She interpreted his rhetorical skills as a phallic exhibition. And, while the speaker was delivering the paper, she felt a "wild urge" storming inside her, an urge to open his trouser flap, take his penis in her mouth, and avidly swallow his semen. She

blushed and started shaking. After the lecture, she tidied herself up and seduced him. She was then able to realise the fantasy of fellatio that had seized her in public. After that, she felt both satisfied and shameful.

What might seem perverse in similar desires and actions, is that somehow abstract needs—"It would be nice to assimilate the thoughts and knowledge of this person in a deep dialogical and intersubjective exchange"—are translated into carnal figures: talent is identified with the erect penis, the assimilation of knowledge with swallowing gushes of semen. We should ask ourselves how much of this physiologisation is "lost in translation".

These examples of Naples's scoundrels and the university lecturer assert something of which Freud never ceases to remind us: even if the precedence of the crude sexual figure is chronological or sociological, this metaphor somehow keeps us, at least in part, on a leash. Recognising this primitive anchorage is certainly painful for those who regard themselves as sufficiently free and rich; and when the large diffusion of coprolalia reminds us of it we can react as if it were an aggression.

Now, the translation of intersubjective relationships into bodily metaphors pervades almost all perversions. The fetishist who desires a woman only from her ankles down is theatrically declaring: "I do not desire you for the beautiful lady you are, but only for your appendages." That these pieces/appendages—socks, shoes, feet—are connected with the humble and lowest parts of the body says a lot about what is essential for the fetishist: the marginal and smelly parts of a woman. And it also tells us that, deep inside, the fetishist deems himself marginalised and smelly. In fetishism, this marginality of the erotic object—which reflects the exile of the subject—remains central. And Krafft-Ebing had already noted that fetishist and masochistic impulses usually converge in the same person; we could say that fetishism is a "dialect" of the masochistic tongue.

* * *

However, the pure masochist does not limit himself to enunciating, "I like a strict woman who treats me harshly." He demands that the woman beat him, insists on waiting on her while she amuses herself with another man, requests to drink her urine, and the like. We are not dealing with the mere concept of *humiliation* or of *being punished*, we are dealing with whips, nails hammered into the penis, and bleeding wounds. Perversion is a grotesque—stacy and baroque—farce.

Hence perversion should be read as a moral rhetoric. Deleuze (1967) distinguished between sadistic irony and masochistic humour; and we can also recognise the farcical comic quality of the fetishist, the selfsatire of the exhibitionist, the silent moral condemnation of the voyeur; and the paedophile is the living caricature of those who love angels.

The crude metaphoric character of perversions recalls hysterical conversions. The hysteric also uses her parts and bodily functions as metaphorical instruments. For instance, one of the first hysterics treated by Freud (Freud & Breuer, 1895d), Cäcilie,

complained of a pain in her cheek, which Freud interpreted as the incarnation of the “moral slap” (insult) that she thought her husband had delivered her. Perverts and hysterics do not love euphemisms: they prefer the coarse density of somatic literality. The difference is that the hysterical conversion is a *bodily metaphor* which refers to some abstract concept—in our example, “a painful slap” means “humiliation”. Instead, the pervert *reduces* abstract concepts to *bodily acts*—in masochism, for example, “humiliation” is acted out as “being whipped, or kicked”. The hysteric expresses dramatic meaning through bodily signifiers while the pervert uses signifiers to achieve dramatic enjoyment.

I believe therefore that psychoanalysis still has a hand to play, despite its present mentalist fervours, in so far as, in the midst of the growing dominion of the virtual, it reminds us of our slavery to our real flesh, and brings us back to the point-blank physical connection with our lofty and generous passions. And this is all the more true in the case of perversions that, to a certain extent, manifest some sort of poverty. Because the pervert, even if he is well-read and successful, lives his own perversion as the revenge for an offence from which he had never recovered: after all, he has been forsaken by the other, he is an outcast. The aura of rage in his exquisite pleasures makes him morally miserable.

Three centrifugal lines

Apart from Freud, the three authors I will focus on are Masud Khan, Jacques Lacan, and Robert Stoller. One might ask why, of all the psychoanalysts who have written about perversions, it is these three that made the greatest impression on me.

These three authors could not be more different. Khan (1924–1989), a rich Pakistani who lived in London, was Winnicott’s pupil. Lacan (1901–1981), a Parisian to the bone, gave birth to a psychoanalytic current that today polarises humanities studies in Western universities: along with other post-structuralists, he inspires a vast portion of gender studies, cultural studies, art and literary criticism, cultural history, etc. Stoller (1925–1991) is an American analyst connected to ego psychology.

Yet beyond these vast differences, these three authors have something in common: the three of them have been at the margins of the IPA (International Psychoanalytical Association), the psychoanalytic establishment.

In 1975, Khan was excluded from the British Psychoanalytical Society, being accused of being a pervert and having sex with his patients (he was the author of brilliant contributions on perversions). Lacan in the 1960s broke with the IPA and founded his own school. Stoller, despite being a psychoanalyst, stood out because of his psycho-sociological investigations: outright surveys among perverts, transsexuals, and sado-masochists (SM), with interviews and questionnaires.

In short, these authors embarked, each in his own way, on a centrifugal path which led away from orthodoxy. Has it been the case, then, that they have been among the

few authors, after Freud, who had something original to say about perversions? It is as if the “perverse”—minority, nonconformist, conflictual—position they had towards mainstream psychoanalysis had helped them to extract something non-trivial about perversions.

The diversity of these three authors opens up a threefold possibility of renewal and survival for psychoanalysis in general. Khan, an author of brilliant clinical reconstructions—in which, with time, he abandons all theoretical arrogance—represents a tendency in psychoanalysis that focuses on very personal and unbiased clinical writing, garnished with an elegant literary quality. Lacan, more than any other analyst, opened psychoanalysis up to the horizons of philosophy, of artistic-literary criticism, and of a “humanistic” reinterpretation of logic and mathematics. Stoller’s socio-psychological field work embodies a possible convergence of psychoanalysis and social sciences.

After all, it is in these three directions that we can expect a renewal of psychoanalysis. By avoiding being drawn into a narcissism of its own praxis and theory, psychoanalysis will probably be able to say something new and convincing, by directly investing in its neighbouring forms of knowledge and discourse.

Chapter One: What Are Perversions?

Ethical perversion

The fact that perversion is an ethical term—implying a moral bias—does not in the least imply that the concept must be consequently rejected by psychoanalysis. Rather, I would venture to say that it belongs to psychoanalysis precisely because of its ethical connotation, even when perverse practices do not concern criminal law. All things considered, neurosis itself is an ethical illness.

The typical analytic position is: “We observe neuroses and perversions scientifically, without any expression of moral judgement, and in so doing, we note that they usually express implicit moral conflicts.” Classic psychoanalysis amorally looks at neurotic or perverse subjects as “moral objects”. Now, contemporary philosophical thought has advanced serious doubts concerning the dichotomy persecuting modern thought, that between *facts* and *values*. Facts would be, for example, certain psychic mechanisms (the success of the term *mechanism* is significant: the psyche is considered a machine, described by a mechanics as in physics). Values instead are parameters on the basis of which acts are judged as good or bad, beautiful or ugly, etc.

Psychoanalysis deserves some credit for having weakened the absolute separation of facts *vs.* values: the analyst’s “objective” view is much more moralist than the classic analyst might think, and the apparently exquisitely moral *problématique* of the neurotic or pervert has far more to do with the reality of the other than we thought.

We just observed that an act is perverse because it is carried out within an ethical register. Some even propose to abandon all behavioural criteria for perversion: in fact, what would count is not so much *what* and *with whom* one does erotically, but rather *if*, and *how*, *the other with whom one does it counts for the person carrying out the act*. In short, we ought to consider perverse any act which brings the subject sexual enjoyment while the other subject is involved only as an *instrument* to that enjoyment, and when the first subject does not consider the enjoyment, especially sexual, of this other subject as an end to his act.

In our ideal coitus, be it heterosexual or homosexual, the other is also *an end* for me, in so far as I desire to give him or her enjoyment. What gives me enjoyment is not just the sexual enjoyment that I draw from the other, or even pride in my power to give enjoyment to the other, but the fact that the other takes enjoyment through

me. In this light, even a very trivial act—like having sex with a prostitute—can be considered perverse: one does not frequent prostitutes to give them sexual pleasure.

(We should note that over the last few decades, attitudes towards prostitution have changed; sex with a prostitute is more and more seen as a perverse act. So much so that in Sweden, for example, a prostitute's client can be lawfully indicted. There is a growing intolerance towards the two subjects (the seller and the client) of prostitution, because it is believed that, in an era when women are sexually available, those who frequent prostitutes do so to achieve some *abnormal* enjoyment. Paradoxically, since the cultural revolution that made homosexuality and a number of perversions legitimate, heterosexuality has been more moralised).

I am not saying that perversions amount to regarding the other simply as one's own *object*. The prevailing psychoanalysis sustains that "Perversion is the use of others as things rather than persons, and as objects of envy and desire rather than love ... it is an act rather than a true relation between persons" (Stoller, 1975, p. 212) (cf. also Khan, 1965a, 1965b). But how can one feel envy towards things? And how can there be an act with things? Perversion does not mean to use the other *as object* but *to use* the other *as subject*. In perversion, the other is a "subjective object" as Khan wrote (1979), an individual objectified as a subject. *The subjectivity of the other is an essential component of perverse acts.*

For example, the exhibitionist demands the look, admiring or surprised, of the woman to whom he shows his penis: her subjectivity is thus called upon. The voyeur needs to snatch a scene in which one or more subjects get their sexual pleasure: their enjoyment as subjects is essential for him. The sadist enjoys the begging and pain of his victim: he does not assault *objects*, he aims at making *subjects* suffer. The masochist instead seems satisfied with having an accomplice: but it is the anger and contempt of the Other that the perverse staging wishes to evoke. Here we notice that the "other" subject can have two declinations. One is what I would call "the actual other", the concrete person's subjectivity I use for my enjoyment. The second is what Lacan writes as the Other with capital O, which is not the others who are *actual*, but represents a virtual otherness, a pure "position". According to Lacanians, perversions are ways to assure the enjoyment of the Other. We'll discuss this approach later. Here we are talking mainly about the actual other. In fact, we recognise perversion where the subjectivity of the actual other is exploited as an instrument of enjoyment, rather than elected as an end. Now we all know that for Kant ethics always consists in considering the other human being as an end, and never as a means.

Earlier, Freud had formulated a theory of perversions as "positive for neuroses" and of neuroses as "negative for perversions" (1905d, p. 165; 1908d, p. 190). According to Freud's early writings, the natural state of sexuality is perverse: it then "negativises" itself through repression into neurosis. The "Child is father of the Man", according to both Freud and Wordsworth (*The Rainbow*; see <http://www.bartleby.com/101/532.html>); the child is a polymorphic pervert who does not aim at sexual *bricolage*, because his drives are not hierarchised with coitus

at their end. Infantile, pre-Oedipal sexuality would be a sort of *primary process of eroticism*. In short, perversion appears as a *positive*, authentic sexuality: a sexuality not subject to the more refined exigencies of love for the other and of reproductive responsibility.

Freud himself later corrects this thesis, which derived from a myth of his time (and often of our time too): that perversion is free, unbridled sexuality. But what can be positive or natural about a fetishist who can only have an erection with a woman if she is wearing a pair of high-heeled shoes? There is a certain refined “negativity” even in perverse eroticism. Hence, the ethical issue, which was completely overlooked in early psychoanalysis, little by little inches back into the picture. Freud worked out his concept of perversion at a mature stage, in particular with regard to masochism and fetishism.

As we shall see, Freud (1927e, 1940e) talks of fetishism as a *disavowal*, a denial, a process that is very different from *repression* with whose effects he had identified, until then, the unconscious itself. The model of repression is oblivion. We will dwell later on the model of disavowal (Alan Bass (2000) has shown a shrewd approach to fetishism and disavowal, building an original reconstruction of psychoanalysis).

“Hetero-dystonic “

I have noticed that in francophone countries, many people (nonshrinks) have a rather precise idea of what a perverse person is. They would say, more or less, the perverse is “someone who needs the law in order to achieve enjoyment”—a view that undoubtedly owes to a certain popularisation of Lacanian thought in French culture. For them, a perverse person needs to assume a moral prohibition in order to exploit it for sexual pleasure, because he is above all someone who perverts the moral law, who uses it not to be good but to obtain sexual enjoyment.

Hence perversion is defined within an ethical framework. The sadistic person needs the commandment, “Do not persecute innocents”, precisely to “punish” innocents because, as we shall see, this is the bottom line of his pleasure. The very law is “perverted” by the masochist: he enjoys *being punished for a fault* he himself pretends to have done.

The enjoyment of the exhibitionist requires the norm, “Do not show your genitals to strangers”, precisely to enjoy showing them. And the voyeur needs the norm, “Do not lustfully watch others while they are having sex” to enjoy watching them. The pleasure of the fetishist requires the ethical-sexual rule, “The woman must be desired in her entirety”, in order to desire only certain details of her. All perversions show this *à l’envers* use of ethical norms.

Does this mean that perversions, just as we conceptualise them today, are simple transgressions of sexual norms? Things are not that simple.

An analyst is summoned when one needs to treat something that is *ego-dystonic*—that is, he is called upon to find a remedy for something we do not like. Neuroses

are ego-dystonic by definition. However, what we recognise today as perversion is instead *ego-syntonic*: perversions are a means to achieve enjoyment that the subject would not want to renounce for anything in the world. Certainly, these means to achieve enjoyment are often uncomfortable and dangerous, above all when they involve punishable offences. This is why perverts who are in analysis in most cases are there as a condition of their parole; analysis of perverts is mostly a forensic discipline.

The perverse individual usually complains not about his own impossibility of enjoyment, but about the fact that others dislike, and often suffer for, his enjoyment. But perverse individuals enter analysis because they also have an ego-dystonic side: in short, they are also neurotic. Sometimes, the very perversion can be just their “symptom”.

Thus, perversion is basically *hetero-dystonic*: that is, it is in dystonia— even in the non-aggressive forms of masochism and fetishism—with what an actual other desires. Even non-criminal forms of perversion are in contradiction with the “other”, in so far as masochism and fetishism necessitate a woman accomplice. A woman might even be willing to humiliate, walk on, or beat a masochist, yet she would be doing so for the masochist’s enjoyment and not her own.

All neurotics tell the analyst: “I would like to enjoy, but I can’t.” The perverse individual complains to the analyst, “I enjoy, but unfortunately the other does not enjoy my way of enjoying through her [or him].” The psychotic, instead, can suffer enormously but also enjoy (for example, in forms of paranoiac megalomania or erotomania, or in manic states), and what makes us diagnose him as a psychotic is the dyscrasia of the subject’s ways of behaving and believing with respect to a certain social tolerability. The psychotic is treated because he disturbs the routine of the “public order”; in fact, today, the quiet psychotic is no longer treated. However, also in the case of non-disturbing psychoses, what ultimately urges the judgement that one is mad is the social unintelligibility of his behaviour—his cognitive statements are not socially accepted, they are rejected as *delusions*. Psychosis is, in short, *socio-dystonic*.

Neurosis: ego-dystonic

Perversions: hetero-dystonic

Psychosis: socio-dystonic

The true essence of perversion is thus “enucleated” in an ethical discordance with the other’s enjoyment, in wanting to use the actual other as a subject in order to get pleasure. Not as an object, as a subject.

Has perversion *always* been hetero-dystonic or is this the way we consider perversion today? This is a crucial question.

Against the background of the utilitarianist turn of moral norms in capitalist-democratic societies, which we have considered in the Introduction, the Freudian theory of perversions—that is grounded on the split of the ego—has to be reinterpreted as an ethical split: the perverse needs the other’s subjectivity, but he needs it *only* for his

own enjoyment. The sadist needs the actual other's subjective suffering, the masochist needs the Other's subjective rage and strictness, the voyeur and the exhibitionist need the other's real or assumed sexual enjoyment, the paedophile needs the infant other's erotic drive, the fetishist needs the Other's narcissism, the transvestite needs the actual other's mistaken belief in his own sexual identity. As we can see, it is either a very specific other or the Other in the Lacanian sense. At any rate, every perversion invokes the other's assumed or patent subjectivity. However, this other's subjectivity is not allowed any enjoyment: what matters is that this perverse addiction to the Other or others leads to a solitary enjoyment that sets itself against the indifference or the pain of an other.

I shall state immediately that Lacanians usually reject what I have just said, and often quite strongly. Indeed, as I mentioned, Lacanians believe that the perverse act fulfils the enjoyment of the Other. Let us not forget that for Lacan, the Other does not exist in the strict sense; it is a bit like the line of the horizon, which we inevitably see when we look at the surface of the earth, but which does not exist as a real thing, as we cannot actually touch it. His thesis of the enjoyment of the Other seems inspired above all by sadism and masochism. Indeed, the masochist derives enjoyment from giving enjoyment to the sadistic Other, who punishes and humiliates him, even if this Other is not present, so to speak; a woman who lends herself to a masochistic *mise-en-scène* embodies the Other, just as an actress embodies a character. In the same way, we can consider the sadistic act a way of giving enjoyment to the Other who wants to punish the victim, of whom the sadist is simply an executor. The one thing that is certain is that sadomasochism concerns the enjoyment of the Other.

But which Other derives enjoyment from other perversions, such as paedophilia, fetishism, or voyeurism? In fact, Lacanians themselves ultimately admit that the actual other, even when she (or he) incarnates the Other, emerges from perversions rather the worse for wear; and even in the best of cases, she emerges as nothing more than an instrument of the pervert, for whom she must "play the part" of the Other. It seems to me that the real pathognomonic sign of perversions is this suffering or exclusion of the actual other, and all the more so because providing enjoyment to the Other is not a specificity of perversions. Melancholia, for example, is obviously a form of enjoyment of the Other (which in this case Freud called the superego): here the Other derives sadistic enjoyment from morally demolishing the ego of the subject.

We must also add that this enjoyment of the Other in perversion, in contrast to what happens in neurosis, is always somehow known and recognised by the pervert. In short, the Other who derives enjoyment here is not really unconscious. Let's take masochism: we can certainly say that the masochist derives pleasure from giving enjoyment to the Other, incarnated by a strict contemptuous woman. But the point is that the masochist knows this perfectly well, even though he tries his best to make the "actress" coincide as much as possible with the character, the Other. He hopes for a partner who graduated from the Actor's Studio. The ruthless, scornful woman is the Other in the Lacanian sense, in so far as she doesn't actually exist, in the same way that the hero

of a novel does not exist. The Other is like the essential character in a plot, discussed by all, yet seen by none; or like the entire garrison in Dino Buzzati's novel *Tiie Tartar Steppe* (1940), discussing and awaiting the Tartars who ultimately never show up. The Lacanian Other is very similar.

In my opinion, however, what gives the masochistic game its perverse quality is precisely the fact that the actress (the actual woman) is used only to embody the character (the Other as ruthless woman). In fact, we don't consider as perverse those SM games in which, for example, one partner is chained to the bed and maltreated, but derives pleasure from it all. In such cases, we talk about sexual play, not about perversions, precisely because the actual woman who plays the masochist role coincides subjectively with the Other, the Woman the male lover wants to enslave and brutalise. Perversions as a whole consist of that gap between the actual other and the Other, who is always virtual. At least in our age.

“I don't know that I know”

In the history of psychoanalysis, perversions have assumed a huge theoretical relevance because, in thinking about fetishism, Freud had elaborated the notion of the “split of the ego” (*Ichspaltung*) as a consequence of the *disavowal* (*Verleugnung*) of reality. Fetishism would be the effect of disavowing the woman's lack of a penis (Benvenuto, 2000; Freud, 1927e). Intellectually, the fetishist of course knows that women do not have a penis, yet on another level—that of “desiring knowledge”—he continues to think that the woman has a penis. The fetish is nothing but a female phallus, whose presence makes the woman very desirable to him. Such a coexistence of two “knowledges” defines the split of the ego: on the one hand there is *knowledge*, on the other there is “knowledge”.

Now, many psychoanalysts extend the mechanism of disavowal to all perversions. The process of disavowal is clear in fetishism, but what about other perversions?

In fact, the pervert has a double knowledge: *the subject's supposed knowledge is split from another “knowledge”*.

The sadist gets enjoyment because on the one hand he *knows* very well that his victim does not deserve such severity. But on the other hand, in his erotic practice, the Other “knows” that the victim deserves the torment. As for the masochist, he *knows* well that the woman or the man whom he has put in the role of punisher is only his accomplice; and yet the Other himself “knows” that the woman or the man is right to severely punish him.

In sadism and masochism the roles of guilt and innocence are situated on the opposite sides of the split: on the level of empirical knowledge, the innocence (of the other or of oneself) is acknowledged, while on the level of “knowing in order to enjoy”, the guilt (of the other or of oneself) is asserted.

As to the voyeur, he *knows* that he is excluded from the sexual scene he observes, because the simple fact of having to hide himself excludes him from the act; and yet the Other himself “knows” and “sees” that he *knows* and *sees* that coitus; his enjoyment derives precisely from his feeling included through exclusion, as if he were part of that sexual act which excludes him.

The exhibitionist *knows* very well that the woman is not in the least pleased by his display of the penis; yet nonetheless the exhibitionist Other “knows” that the woman enjoys this, so in short he feels himself a generous provider of a pleasurable show.

Hence in visual perversions, the relation between self-enjoyment and the enjoyment of the other is split: on the one hand the perverse individual *knows* that someone (the perverse himself as peeper or the other as victim of this display) does not in fact take pleasure, yet on the Other side he “knows” that this someone does fully enjoy

With paedophilia, what is disavowed is the common knowledge surrounding childhood (and on which psychoanalysis has cast some doubt), that is, one *knows* that children do not long for genital pleasure as adults do. Yet, the paedophilic Other, through his act, “knows”—convincing himself at times even rationally—that the child enjoys genital sexual games.

As to transvestism, the split regards the difference between two kinds of knowledge, one’s own and that of the actual other: the subject *knows himself as* a man, while others “know” him as a woman. The transvestite enjoys the fact that the Other knows him as a woman.

<i>Perversion</i>	<i>Knowledge necessary for enjoyment</i>	<i>Disavowed knowledge</i>
Fetishism	The woman <i>has</i> a penis	A woman <i>does not</i> have a penis
Sadism	The victim is <i>guilty</i>	The victim is <i>innocent</i>
Masochism	The torturer <i>is furious</i> with me	The torturer is only my <i>accomplice</i>
Voyeurism	I am <i>included</i> in the sex scene	I am <i>excluded</i> from the sex scene
Exhibitionism	The person who watches my genitals <i>enjoys</i> it	The person who watches my genitals is <i>disgusted</i>
Paedophilia	The child <i>sexually desires</i> the adult	The child is <i>horrificed by</i> adult sexuality
Transvestism	The other <i>knows me as</i> woman	I know <i>I am a man</i>

As we can see, with perversions we have to go back to the underpinning question: what is the role of the other subject or of the Other in the sexual act?

Sex and caritas

Gosselin and Wilson (1980, p. 43) wrote that it is normal for a man to like women's legs—but a man is a fetishist “if he prefers to come *on* the legs of his partner rather than *between* those legs”. But what is so determining about this difference? Even here, if we only consider explicit behaviours, we won't go much beyond the distinction between normophilia and paraphilia. The difference gains importance only if we consider that coming *between* the legs is something that, usually, pleasures also the woman, while coming *on* the legs usually means that the man doesn't take the partner's pleasure into consideration. It is not the desired anatomical object that makes the perversion, but what I would call the lack of *care for the other as the subject of desire and enjoyment*.

In short, *the non-perverse sexual act is one wherein one has caritas towards the other*. *Caritas* in the ancient ages did not mean acts of charity, but rather “love” as distinct from *amor*, sexual drive. *Caritas* was love for God, the Church, one's neighbour—and even for one's wife, for whom *amor* is necessary but not sufficient. Full coitus needs both *amor* and *caritas*. *Caritas* is the experience of “com-passion” for the other's desire, it is the need to respond to his desire and his need for us, and to help him. Coitus, as compassionate *caritas*, is the ethical act *par excellence*.

Not by chance Catholic marriage is based on coitus as a sacred act: if not consummated, the sacrament of matrimony has not taken place. Besides, the Catholic Church describes the union between Christ and his Church as a mystical coitus: *caritas* in the fact that Christ, penetrating the woman/Church, fills its void, and the Church, offering itself to His initiative, supplies Christ with that void which He lacked.

Calling coitus an act of compassionate *caritas* risks moving the non-Catholic reader to laughter. But we are soon aware that without compassionate *caritas* every sexual act—even the most normally heterosexual—takes on a perverse shade, and appears as using the other *qua* subject *qua* means of pleasure.

The intersubjective premise of sexual relations is evident: it is to the degree that the other (man or woman) desires me and draws pleasure from me that I am willing to desire and draw pleasure from him or her. Most of the time it is the reflection of one's own desire and pleasure in the other which is erotically exciting; but this reflection implies the *ipso facto* recognition of the desiring subjectivity of the other. It is not by chance that an experienced prostitute feigns excitement and even orgasm with the client, because he would not experience real pleasure without admiring the other's enjoyment.

In non-perverse coitus the male is moved by the desire of the female, who offers her *béant* hole, in need of being filled. And the female is moved to pity by the penis that, despite its erection, seems to demand the void in which to placate itself. In the carnal union, each partner enjoys offering the other what the other lacks: a pleasure that certainly derives from the narcissistic pride in one's power to satisfy the other, but also from one's own satisfaction in filling that void in the other. This filling up is resolved in the excess of the orgasm, whose contortions so closely resemble pain and in

which, thanks to *caritas*, two opposites appear to draw together the *delicium* (which meant at once joy and crime) of lacking to oneself, and the pleasure of finally offering this lack to the other.

Perversion dodges jealousy

Instead, the perverse act lacks *caritas* for the other—and often, for oneself *qua* other—because it is a way to ward off the bitter feelings of jealousy and disappointment arising from the amorous and libidinous relationship of one's loved one with someone else. That is, a perverse sexuality finds its decisive spring in jealousy, and not so much in envy and its by-products on which post-Freudian psychoanalysis appears to have focused.

And yet by putting Oedipus on centre stage, Freud placed jealousy at the core of everyone's psychic history, and not only the pervert's (today we must regard Oedipus as something precocious which determines from the outset infantile pre-genital sexuality). Certainly the Oedipus complex is the inadmissible desire of a child for an adult, and is also the envy provoked by the fact that the parent of the same sex sexually enjoys the other adult. But Oedipus is also and maybe mainly *jealousy* because the beloved adult to whom the child cannot give enjoyment is enjoyed by an other, whom this beloved, in turn, enjoys. However, even such a common feeling as jealousy has to be clarified.

Analysts usually view jealousy essentially as a fear of losing the loved object, in a configuration where what counts is the relation between a subject and its *objects* of love and hatred. For example, in talking about the distinctions between envy, avidity and jealousy, Melanie Klein (1957) says that the origins of jealousy lie in the fear of losing what one has! Jealousy, in short, is summarily reduced to the anguish of losing something. In this perspective, I am jealous of my wife only because I fear that, by falling in love with someone else, she will abandon me; from which spring my ambivalence towards “my sweet enemy” (as Miguel de Cervantes said), my sadist fantasies about her, and my consequent feelings of guilt, attempts at reparation, etc., in short, the whole fantastic panoply that object relation psychoanalysis has not ceased examining from all angles. And yet we know that the fear of losing the loved object is only one aspect of jealousy—and I would even question whether it is an essential one.

Let's take the most famous case of jealousy: Othello. He never says that his torment is the fear of losing Desdemona, or that he no longer feels loved by her. We readers/spectators know that his jealousy is unjustified, and thus believe that the reason for the Moor's jealousy cannot be Desdemona's cooling feelings for him. What makes Othello suffer is instead an imagined scene: Desdemona pleasurably making love with Cassius. No one could console Othello by saying, for example: “What do you care what Desdemona does when you're away? What is important is that you take pleasure from Desdemona, and she from you, the rest is none of your business.” But this wisely egocentric argument has no meaning for the jealous, who is in his own way far too

hetero-centric: it is *z/*and *with whom* his beloved takes enjoyment in his absence, which plagues his thoughts. Jealousy is, in short, a *realistic passion*: it is suffering for the truth, which cannot be placated with autarchic fantasies. A philosopher would call jealousy *ex-static*, sweeping us outside ourselves: it is an affection which invests reality, a relentless need to *truly* know what *actually* happened!

Today the dominant psychoanalytic theory focuses on what others are for a subject, or the object I am for the other, and hardly considers the reality-in-itself that others are for us: but in so doing, it misses the central feature even of the Oedipus's psychic drama. I am referring obviously to our *significant others*. It is not only important to recognise that what significant others—in *primis* our mother—do is fundamental to our psychic life, which is conditioned by the image that we ourselves make of them; it is even more important to recognise that our psychic life is conditioned by the often enigmatic *reality* of significant others as subjects, catalysed by how and why they enjoy and suffer.

Jealous envy goes beyond sexual life. For example, many people envy their colleagues' success for their capacity to give to a public an enjoyment which they cannot give. Narcissism is usually altruistic.

In truth, when Freud (1918b) spoke of the “primary scene”, *Urszene*, he suggested that for many subjects it would have been highly traumatic to observe adult coitus as children—or even only to imagine it. There are various reasons for which observing or imagining adult coitus can end up being traumatic. But certainly it is very unpleasant for a child to realise that adults take an intense, exuberant, and happy experience from each other. The primary scene is essentially one of exclusion: the subject is outside this scene—“I am a source of neither desire nor enjoyment to the others whom I love.” Hence the difficulty in *being a subject*. This betrayal by the other is the matrix of perversions, which always put into play an exclusion of the subject by significant others.

The traumatic exclusion by adults can explain the high degree of group conformism among children. It is important for a child *not to stand out*—not even on his own merits—from his group of peers or reference. Even having an unusual name, wearing glasses, being red-headed, or having elephant ears is experienced as a stigma by the child who compares himself to his peers: in fact, bearing even one of these traits is enough to become the predestined victim of the class or neighbourhood bullies. One reason for this elevated conformism in children—which compensates for their dependence on parents—is children's high sensibility to exclusion. What is important is not to stand out from the group, because the disappointment inflicted by the parents would repeat itself catastrophically in the peer relationship. A child is not just hungry for affection: he is thirsty for inclusion.

The centrality of the subject's exclusion from sexual intercourse also highlights one aspect which some analysts pointed out in perversions: that perverse acts usually show the anguish of being confronted with a *mystery*, very often connected to sexual difference itself. Why, even as adults, does sexuality, the most normal thing in the world, continue to appear to us as so puzzling and disturbing? This mystery is probably

what is so disturbing to the jealous person: *Who is the other I love and what does he really feel? Above all when he acts sexually with an other?* The mystery is really the subjectivity of the other, and thus the other's suffering and enjoyment; because, in the end, each of us is excluded from the other as a subject. This anguish over the mystery of sexual difference is thus also the anguish over our being excluded from what the other feels and is (Transsexualism—"gender dysphoria" according to the DSM—is probably a drastic measure to remedy this exclusion from the other sex's body).

In jealousy, the sense of exclusion is overturned by the sensation that a third party is irremediably included in the relationship of the couple; and that third party, which excludes me, is always including itself in my erotic relationship. Othello suspects finding Cassio's kisses on Desdemona's lips (*Othello*, Act III, Scene III). Othello, a gentleman, uses a chaste expression, while we think of kisses more crudely as euphemisms for Cassio's penis, which Othello finds inside Desdemona. Male jealousy can also be described as the atrocious doubt that the beloved's cavity is "inhabited" by the other's phallus, that making love with one's own woman results in a sort of homosexual encounter with the other's penis. Hence Freud's thesis (1911c) according to which jealousy and homosexuality are deeply connected.

Consider that Othello personally kills Desdemona, while he entrusts Iago to murder Cassio as a lesser job; this means that what matters in jealousy is not hatred for the rival, but rather hatred for the beloved one, the cheater, because she has excluded the subject from her sexual enjoyment.

I myself have witnessed that some American fundamentalist preachers persistently use the presence *in absentia* of the other inside the body of one's partner to dissuade young people from promiscuity. The preacher exhorts: "If your girl has been with someone else, you are kissing not only her lips, but also those of this other. And if he in turn has been with others, you are kissing all the girls whom he has kissed, girls who in turn have been kissed by others ... in short, you find in your girl's mouth hundreds and thousands of other mouths, other tongues, others' saliva ..." Many young people were struck by these hyperboles.

At any rate, the jealous person prefers destroying the beloved object—to kill Desdemona—rather than accepting that she takes erotic enjoyment without him. It is thus a mistake to reduce jealousy to the anguish of possibly losing the other *qua* object, because the jealous person generally prefers losing the object rather than recognising his right to take enjoyment in others; he is anguished mainly by his own exclusion from the erotic enjoyment of the other with an Other. The loss of the beloved is not so much the spring of jealousy as it is, in the end, its solution.

So, jealousy is *heterocentric* because it is grief for one's own exile from the enjoying other. Now it appears to me that this elementary pain lies at the core even of perverse "choices". The masterpiece of perversity consists of transforming the trauma of jealousy into an exclusive way of sexual enjoyment.

Even Stoller (1975) notes that the perverse person is usually convinced of having himself created his perversion, as though it were a work of art. He even "considers

his perversion his highest accomplishment". As a matter of fact, Stoller (1975, p. 106) admits that "... perversion is one of the many masterpieces of the human intellect." There is an aesthetic dimension to perversion connected to its ethical trick.

In effect, psychoanalytic practice has for some time now suggested how much the perverse act is connected to a form of psychic pain, particularly depression and rage. The perversion would thus be a medicine—or, to use analytic language, "a defence"—against depression and rage. The word *defence* is actually the translation of Freud's word *Abwehr*, a military term meaning "shield", "dodge". The pervert dodges depression and rage just as a swordsman dodges a downward blow.

But the point is to understand what causes depression, anger, or both. Today, under the influence of attachment theory, it is believed that what depresses or infuriates the young subject is the absence— physical or mental—of the mother. But I believe that the child is jealous also of the fact that the mother takes enjoyment elsewhere, or that she suffers for a missing pleasure with some other who is not her child. What depresses or infuriates the child more than anything else might not even be that his mother as an object is no longer at his disposition, but that he has not been chosen by her as her object of enjoyment and tenderness. We should say to psychoanalysts who are too much focused today on the mother/child dual relationship: "Remember that a mom is a woman!" A child always discovers, at a certain point, that his mom is also a woman. And this can provoke the perverse revenge, which consists of drawing sexual pleasure precisely by repeating the situation that depresses me and ticks me off.

Take masochism for instance, where I, as a subject, take the stage as a humiliated object, discarded by the woman. My being rejected as an object becomes the spring of a peculiar enjoyment because the pleasure of the other—with others—becomes the cause of my subjective enjoyment. In short, perversions are a special, parodic altruism, certainly not in the sense that one sacrifices one's own enjoyment to give enjoyment to the other, but in the sense that the supposed pleasure of the other or the Other in inflicting displeasure on me becomes my very enjoyment.

The excluding gaze: exhibitionism and voyeurism

An exhibitionist can transform himself into a voyeur and the other way around. But the two can never be complementary: the exhibitionist enjoys exposing himself to a woman as long as the latter is not voyeuristic, and the voyeur draws no perverse pleasure whatsoever from watching exhibitionists "perform".

The exhibitionist is a man who unexpectedly shows his penis—often while he masturbates—to unknown women in inappropriate situations. Now, the scope of the exhibitionistic act is never to seduce the woman: all enjoyment is derived from the exhibitionistic act itself. Because if a woman were to say to him, "So you want to give it to me? OK, let's get on with it," he would beat a quick retreat, confused and

disappointed (e.g., see Swales, 2012, location 4573). Exhibitionism does not initiate a coitus in which another participates, but rather substitutes it.

The exhibitionist chooses as his victim a woman or girl without any apparent erotic desire, because his aim is to capture her gaze so that she sees something that should please her. Usually he hopes to excite the victim. But here we are not dealing with a “charitable” act, such as might take place in a pornographic show, where in fact voyeurism and exhibitionism are not perverse, as it is supposed that the couple on display and the public who admire them are both drawing pleasure from the show (even if the actors take pleasure also from being paid). In the porno show desires are always in agreement: everyone knows what he is going up against.

Nothing similar happens in perverse exhibitionism where, by contrast, the woman or girl’s reaction is usually surprise, disgust, or fear. The exhibitionist tries to “capture” the woman’s gaze so that she cannot remain indifferent, free to seek what interests her. He wants to polarise her gaze so that she cannot ignore his penis. A woman’s, or anyone else’s, gaze is like an emptiness that seeks to be filled by stimulating and pleasurable objects, but certainly neither the exhibitionist nor his genitals are among such objects. That woman who carried her gaze around is not looking for me, she does not desire me, and in her emptiness the exhibitionist introduces not his penis but the perception of it. He thus “denounces” the desire of the woman: he unmasks what she is supposedly seeking with her wandering look, although he neither satisfies nor fulfils it. By imposing the view of his penis on her, he upsets her, in both the positive and negative sense: what she had excluded is imposed upon her by the perverse display. As was Tirso de Molina’s Don Juan, the exhibitionist is a “punisher of women”. And according to many investigations, the exhibitionist is characterised by a good dose of hatred for women—and especially for his mother. The exhibitionist’s mother is very often unaffectionate and hard, and the wife he chooses is usually “maternal” (Christoffel, 1956).

In short, the exhibitionist denounces his exclusion from the woman’s sexual desire, although an exclusion from which he now draws enjoyment by imposing on her the phallus from which she was thus far preserved.

* * *

The subject’s anger for his own exclusion is even more evident in voyeurism. The voyeur is perverse in so far as he enjoys watching a copulating couple—or a woman who masturbates—without being in turn watched, or seen. Thus, what a peeping Tom really enjoys is not the sexual act of someone who does not want to be watched but his own *exclusion from the sexual act*. This distinction is essential.

The two lovers, or the masturbating woman, do not want him included, not even as an observer, which should in effect rather unleash his anger for the exclusion. Yet in the end the anger will belong to the actors when, whether by chance or by design, they become aware of having been “included” in the gaze of a third party. The voyeur transforms the suffering of his own exclusion into enjoyment, because his is now an

active part which overcomes their activity: the two lovers, who take pleasure without any regard for him, are reduced to mere objects of his pleased gaze. Unbeknown to them, the voyeur possesses them, precisely because he has transformed his exclusion into a secret relationship in which now it is he who includes, in his gaze, those who exclude him. Thus not only does he enjoy his revenge against what his father and mother had imposed upon him in his childhood—not to participate in their coitus—but he inverts the relation of mastery: now it is the lovers who are excluded from his gaze that “holds” them, that is, they are excluded from the sight of what they do.

Voyeuristic power can also be hyperbolised. Already in 1979, Japanese photographer Kohei Yoshiyuki became an international celebrity as a voyeur of voyeurs. He exhibits black and white photographs portraying (real) voyeurs in two Tokyo parks. The photos show couples petting, but the main subjects are the park’s voyeurs, who sometimes are bold enough to even touch the “watched” couple. What’s more, the first time he exhibited these photos in a Tokyo gallery, he did so in a totally dark environment and visitors had to look at each photo using electric torches. The audience was thus put in the position of the voyeur “to the nth degree”. As sometimes happens, art exposes the essence of perversions: the supreme enjoyment belongs to the spectators in the gallery, in so far as they enjoy not only their exclusion from the erotic scene, but also their exclusion from the pleasure of he, the voyeur, who is in turn excluded.

But just as the exhibitionist is interested almost exclusively in the woman, analogously the voyeur wants above all to spy on the woman who copulates: it is she who, underneath it all, he desires to put to shame, because he feels excluded from her. Karl Kraus (1924) grasped this aspect when he wrote, “The voyeur goes beyond the trial of strength of natural sensitivity: the taste for seeing the woman with the man overcomes the disgust of seeing the man with the woman.”

My analysis here echoes the famous phenomenological description of the gaze developed by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In this analysis, sadomasochistic and voyeuristic dynamics are used as a key to describe every intersubjective relationship based on the gaze.

A man who wanted to expose himself in churches declared: “I do it so that the woman can take pleasure and say, ‘Nature is beautiful seen this way, without veils!’” (Christoffel, 1956). In various ways, every exhibitionist tends to justify himself by affirming that he wanted to offer the woman a voluptuous, revealing view, almost as though giving pleasure to the Other was the source of his own enjoyment. Here I write Other with a capital O because the exhibitionist takes no account of what pleases the actual other: the other is used by the subject as an Other whose supposed enjoyment he needs in order to take enjoyment himself. In short, the actual other, the unfortunate woman, takes the place of this virtual Other who takes part in an unreal scene in which the subject appears ensnared. The concrete woman is a mere pseudotherness, just as one uses a pseudo-nym.

The exact opposite is produced in voyeurism: here the real others are involved in pleasurable acts, and it is the scopophilic subject who is excluded. But this excluded

subject does not care about giving pleasure to the Other: he takes *ipso facto* his place. While with exhibitionism the subject enjoys giving enjoyment to the Other and making the actual other suffer, with voyeurism the subject enjoys seeing the other in the flesh enjoying, causing the Other who is excluded from the scene to suffer.

After all, the exhibitionist is an altruist, because he claims to offer something pleasurable to the woman, all of which contrasts with the egoism of the voyeur who takes enjoyment in the pleasure of others who are unaware of his enjoyment. But in both cases what counts is how and how much the scopophilic is tied to the others' enjoyment, in particular that of the woman: by both actively invading her gaze (exhibitionism) and by making the woman's enjoyment of the phallus the spectacle that invades him (voyeurism). In short, the perverse person must be *in contact with the enjoyment of the other*, but his behaviour is perverse in so far as the passage from the pleasure of the other to that of the subject is interrupted: the two pleasures do not converge but diverge, to the point of possible prosecution. The Other whom the perverse person seeks to make enjoy or whose enjoyment he enjoys is not the concrete other who can have a say in the matter. It is almost as if the actual other, who could not care less about the perverse subject, were constrained to pleasure just to give enjoyment to the perverse; the other's freedom is coerced in the name of that exclusive enjoyment that the perverse subject demands in order to be able, in his own turn, to take enjoyment.

The perversion of self-consciousness

Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.

(Mark Twain, 1916)

Good psychoanalysis has a strong propensity not so much to "normalise" perversions as to "perversify" normality.

Slavoj Žižek noted that a certain dose of perversity is immanent even in the most normal of sexual relations. When a man makes love to a woman, in the back of his mind he imagines that a third eye is observing him, and, in short, he is having *sex for* someone else, who remains present-absent to the scene.

There exists here a fundamental structure of shame. When you are involved in sexual activity, there is always a fascination/horror about how this would appear to the eyes of the Other. (Žižek & Daly, 2003, p. 140)

Here the Other deserves a capital O because one is dealing precisely with an other that is not real but transcendent, that is to say, with an implicit eye for the enjoyment of which the sexual scene is organised. In other words, even the most banal coitus is stimulated by an at once exhibitionistic and voyeuristic pleasure: exhibitionistic because one shows off all of one's sexual abilities before the Other, voyeuristic because one admires oneself in the act as Other.

In fact, we no longer desire to make love to our partner when we are alone with her or him, without the lascivious scopophilic distance of the Other's eye which, alienating our pleasure, realizes it. This is because, in Žižek's Lacanian optic, in perversion the subject enjoys because the Other enjoys.

We can doubt the universality of such a perverse relation in coitus. What is certain, however, even when we cannot find any trace of it, is that the presence of the Other looms in the background precisely because every sexual act is the act of an animal endowed with self-awareness. But what is this self-awareness, supposedly limited to *Homo sapiens*, on which a good part of modern philosophy, from Descartes onwards, placed so much trust?

Self-awareness is the capacity of the human being to see *herself* as if reflected in a mirror. The higher primates lack this self-awareness, since they have no interest in making a show of themselves for themselves, and even less for others. When the omega chimpanzee, so called because he is the tail end of the pack, is rejected by the umpteenth female, he does not see *himself* as excluded, nor suffers self-pity as the rejected object. The omega male does not view himself as the disgraced outcast. Instead, human beings seem to feel humiliation: the humiliated person is always that me-other-than-me of whom I am aware.

Self-consciousness is thus, in the end, always an awareness of one's own exclusion, to see oneself as object, *ob-jectum*, something tossed out, expelled. Not by chance an ancient Western tradition, the apogee of which is Hamlet, makes self-awareness the illness *par excellence* of the intelligent spirit: the human subject, in becoming a stage for himself, feels the "transitivity" of his desire interrupted, cut in two. When the melancholic Hamlet says, "Thus conscience does make *cowards* of us all" (*Hamlet*, 3,1), he is not distinguishing consciousness with high self-esteem or low self-esteem: self-awareness is essentially handicapping. (Many languages have only one word for conscience and consciousness, for example in French: *conscience*). But why?

The so-called alpha chimpanzee, which mates with the best females of the pack, does not enjoy something which the alpha man (in the sense that he enjoys the same success with the most beautiful women) on the other hand does: self-admiration. Or, the conqueror enjoys the admired object that he is in the eyes of others, and in his own eyes, in the sense that he is other with respect to himself. But this self-admiration should not be too aware, otherwise he would be too inhibited, and might suffer from performance anxiety, as we call it today. Self-assurance should always be a sort of self-infatuation, in that we must *be* totally that which we are for others: in this case, an object of admiration. To accede to this unselfconsciousness which assures success, we must turn a bit of a blind eye to ourselves, leaving to others the task of watching us, because if we were really to look at ourselves, if we truly became objects for ourselves, we would soon feel *split*. This split "make *cowards* of us" in so far as the continuity between what we feel while we are doing it, and what appears of us to our own gaze, is interrupted. To feel ourselves the object of a glance, then, is never really exhilarating: to be ob-jects is, in the end, to be re-jected or, if you prefer, *ob-jected* (*object* comes

from the Latin *obicere*, to throw away or to put in front of). Seeing myself as an object is to object to my pride.

The human being arrives at coitus relatively late. Before being able to make love, the individual has all the time in the world to see *himself* as excluded from adult love: the first image that every human being has of the sexual relation implies his exclusion. We might then say that in normal coitus we adults get revenge for our initial exclusion from the couple: this time the Other can only look at us. The third party who watches me having sex with another is myself *qua* child remaining there, perplexed.

But in perverse acts, whether exhibitionist or voyeuristic, we are still once more, finally, the excluded ones: our exile from others' enjoyment is not avenged but rather put back into play, and in the crudest of forms. Perversions involving the gaze are an erotic use of self-awareness.

Psychoanalysts and homosexuals

Homosexuality, at least in its most common forms, is no longer considered a perversion, nor even a disorder in psychiatry. Both homosexuals and heterosexuals can indulge in perverse practices, but homosexuality in itself is no more perverse than heterosexuality.

In 1974, the DSM-II cancelled homosexuality as a "disorder" (although the ICD-10, the *International Classification of Diseases* of the World Health Organization (WHO) eliminated homosexuality only in 1992). This deletion followed by thirteen years the décriminalisation of homosexuality in the United Kingdom; in fact, the two cancellations—as a crime for the criminal law, and as a "disorder" for psychiatry—almost overlap (Before 1974, homosexuality was decriminalised in some American states, among them Illinois, Connecticut, and Colorado. Homosexuality was de-penalised in East Germany in 1968, in West Germany in 1969, and in France in 1982. On this issue Italy was absolutely in the avant-garde, de-penalising homosexuality in 1889).

In fact, the criminal law system and the psychiatric diagnostical system are strictly related, because both belong to the same culture. The legitimisation of homosexuality is in fact a consequence of the success of the utilitarianist philosophy in Western countries, which is expressed by the principle: "Anyone is free to do anything one likes in one's own bed (except with kids)." I am convinced that psychiatric manuals (above all the DSMs) reflect much more the political-ethical changes in our societies than scientific progress.

We can encounter neurotic homosexuals, for example, men and women who might want to be heterosexual but who only succeed in having relationships with individuals of the same sex, which they experience with shame or a sense of guilt (which can no longer be explained by a social rejection in an epoch where gay marriage is increasingly allowed). Homosexuality can emerge in conjunction with a psychotic crisis, and can

even assume delirious forms, for example, a transsexual alteration of the body, like with President Schreber, Freud's famous case. Or it can even be a form of perversion, such as in some cases of casual or occasional homosexual acts (for example, some transvestites who are heterosexual have sex with men only when they are dressed as a woman; in these cases the homosexual act is part of the transvestism staging).

So the question is: can we think that the origin of homosexuality is the same in all these contexts? Could homosexual desire not have completely different significance and causes according to the subjective contexts in which it appears? Or, do homosexual *behaviours* truly express an identical homosexual *subjectivity*? And what do we mean by "homosexual subjectivity"? Of course, Gay Pride philosophy tends to assume that all homosexualities have the same sense: "Homosexuals of the world, unite!" But in fact, subjective stories can give to each personal sex orientation a completely different meaning.

Yet homosexual orientation can sometimes develop from some perverse core, which is later more or less overcome; but then heterosexuality can also have a perverse core. Nonetheless, Freud believed that both homosexuality and perversions were sexual *aberrations*, albeit distinct from each other.

Classic psychoanalysis presented the homosexual conformation in this way: the homosexual desires the handsome boy with a beautiful penis because it is what, according to the desiring subject, his mother desired, also because she probably was not getting it. In fact, her man, and the father of the subject, did not matter much and was rarely present. One thing is certain: that the boy with the beautiful penis whom she was seeking was not the subject! Basic homosexuality is narcissistic in so far as the beautiful boy whom the homosexual is looking for is what he would have wanted to be (to his mother) but never was. Basic homosexuality would result from the mother's missed incestuous desire.

Another classic analytic theory focused instead on the father-son relationship. The son, in seeking to emancipate himself from maternal ties, would find great difficulty in establishing a relationship, above all emotional, with the father; hence his availability to "give ass" to the father to gain his attention and interest. It is as though the subject, the future homosexual, in his imagination took the place of the mother in the relationship with the father: he desires to satisfy him as the mother does. I have the impression that this desire to please the father by feminising oneself is more typical of the "passive" homosexual, or of the so-called bisexual who indulges in passive homosexual escapades.

The first thesis apparently finds an indirect confirmation in certain aspects of gay culture. For example, among male homosexuals there is a real cult of beautiful famous women, who represent precisely what they, in certain ways, would like to be: fascinating women whom men universally desire (on "homosexual culture", see Bell and Weinberg, 1978; Pollak, 1982; Summers, 2004). These women seem to be their ego ideals because these stars can have all the men they want. But they are their ideals, and not what they are: they are desirable *women*, not men. Hence the propensity for many homosexuals to be dressmakers or hairdressers for women: they find satisfaction in making women

desirable to men, that is, helping women to achieve an appearance that they felt the woman from their childhoods had sought, in order to have men. In finding handsome young men, the basic homosexual fills the void of his original woman, giving her (the Other) what she did not have because he himself as a child was not up to it in a phallic sense.

These psychoanalytic hypotheses on homosexuality were consolidated in America, to the point of becoming clichés, at least until 1986. American psychoanalysis has been generally more conservative than American DSM psychiatry. So that in 1983, the American Psychoanalytic Association's glossary was still teaching homosexuality in the following terms:

Many homosexual men experienced an overly strong attachment to the mother during the early oedipal relationship. Remaining "faithful" to her, they were unable to transfer sexual feelings to other women without experiencing incest fantasies and accompanying prohibitions—thus they changed their orientation from women to men. Castration fears also contribute to a negative oedipal resolution with partial regression to oral and anal levels of integration and fixation [...] The negative Oedipus complex favouring an homosexual outcome is also usually related to problems in the early pre-oedipal relationship to the mother that contribute to overattachment to the father.

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The [homosexual] girl idealizes her mother, but the mother is sometimes revealed during analysis to have been aloof, intrusive, controlling of bodily function, and prohibiting of infantile sexual gratifications, including masturbation. In this context the partner becomes a substitute "good mother", and the homosexual activity is thought to act out a blissful symbiotic relationship that attempts to deny the oedipal conflict: the daughter does not hate her mother but loves her, and her mother gratifies sexual wishes rather than frustrating them. (Moore & Fine, 1983)

This sort of arid catechism of analytic orthodoxy was finally called into question in 1986. From that moment, homosexuality ceased to be considered a pathology even by IPA analysts. Many analysts dared to affirm that an essential component of homosexuality is innate (theses that signal the progress of innate and genetic theories in common thinking). Stoller (1991b) will deny that homosexuality even exists. This change in mentality thus put pressure on psychoanalytic theory itself, which has since then, in a more or less sophisticated way, sought to adapt to the new moral precepts based on the utilitarianist philosophy. Be that as it may, I would not exclude the impact on American psychoanalysis of extra-analytic field research carried out with empirical methodologies, which usually aim at showing that there is no significant

correlation between the childhood family dynamics and future homosexuality in the adult (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981). This is one of the factors that, since the 1970s, has increasingly motivated the challenge to the explicative power of analytic theories.

Without going into the complex issue of homosexuality, I will simply say that the whole question is poorly situated by many psychoanalysts. It makes no sense to decide whether or not homosexuality is a pathology for the simple reason that in general the distinction between pathology and normality has no sense. Freud's *magnum opus* was precisely to erase at the core the distinction between normal and pathological. If, as Freud thought, identifications and sexual acts are the fruit of a subject's history, to say that neurosis, homosexuality, or perversions are pathologies is like saying that mass conversions from Islam to Christianity, or capital punishment in certain countries are pathological. One can deprecate Christianity, Islam, or the death penalty, but not because they are pathologies: the very concept of pathology implies in fact a definition of normality that is far from being clear or indisputable (The philosophical debate about the essence or even the existence of "diseases" or "disorders", especially about mental diseases or disorders, sees completely divergent approaches. For a review of this debate, see E. Giroux & M. Lemoine (2012)). Furthermore, the thesis according to which certain persons are born homosexual is as little proven as is the thesis according to which the cause is their individual specific history: there is no definitive proof one way or the other. In fact, a certain decline in classic psychoanalytic explanations has not given way to stronger or better theories, but rather to a void. Today, no one can claim to hold a strong theory that would explain the origins of sexual orientation (or of neurosis, of psychoses, of autism, etc.)).

There is no space here to deconstruct the analytic theories that we have touched upon, theories which would aim to *explain*—as a scientific theory would—the "choice" of homosexuality. Suffice it to raise some serious doubts on *narcissism* used as a *passe-partout*. To say that the homosexual makes a narcissistic object-choice in desiring someone like himself, or like herself, has the appearance of an authentic explanation, while it is rather a linguistic re-elaboration, a paraphrase, of the *explanandum*, of what it is necessary to explain. Why does a man desire another man? Because he is narcissistic. And who is narcissistic? Anyone who prefers to love someone who resembles him—or herself. In short, an explanation based on narcissism dangerously resembles Molière's doctors' famous derisory theory that: "Opium causes sleep owing to the *virtus dormitiva* [sleeping virtue] that it contains" (Molière, 1673, Act III, sc. iii). Even today we often accept as legitimate explanations merely a paraphrase or a translation of the phenomenon that needs to be explained. *Narcissism*, when left without any real elaboration, is often the *virtus dormitiva* of analysts. Besides, one would need to explain *why* some make this kind of narcissistic choice and others don't: the enigma remains.

I certainly don't mean that the notion of narcissism, if handled with a critical eye, should be jettisoned (For a reconstruction of Freud's notion of narcissism, see Benvenuto, 1995, 2014). But it is certainly not enough to explain a homosexual destiny.

Demographic data suggest in fact that the greater part of sexual choices are in some way narcissistic: the greater percentage of a population mates with men and women of their own nation, often from the same city or region, race, religion, cultural and social class, and age. This inherent endogamy of our life is not only the fruit of circumstances: we understand well that a man usually seeks a woman who resembles him and whom he would like to resemble, and vice versa. If for an entire generation of Latin males the female erotic ideal was the tall, blonde, rich Scandinavian girl, it is because the Latin male would himself have wanted to be, if he could, tall, blond, and rich. The opposite sex is certainly attractive for its differences (not only physical) but only to the degree that these differences are emphasised by a background resemblance: in this sense every sexual desire remains mostly narcissistic. Nearly everyone desires his or her own mirror image, be it real or ideal.

Besides, look at the strong diffidence any familiar environment demonstrates towards unlikely pairings, even at present: if a young woman takes up with an older man, she will be called a gerontophile and he will be called an old leech. Our predominant sexual values in some way promote narcissism and condemn—albeit tacitly—any deviation. “Like goes with like.”

So the difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals seems to consist not so much in the choice of a more or less narcissistic object, but in the different way of assigning identification and difference. While the heterosexual eroticises sexual difference starting from an identification with his likeness (of his same sex), the homosexual eroticises his likeness starting from an identification with someone who is different (the desirer of the opposite sex).

It is true that the heterosexual—especially in adolescence—tends to view the opposite sex as radically Other, as if it were a different species towering above, and does not appear to be at all seduced by a “narcissism of small differences”. And yet, if we examine closely the heterosexual appeal, what leaps out is that the appealing parts of the body or personality of the opposite sex are points of notable difference which stand out against the background of a corporeal (mirror) image of oneself: what attracts in the other is anything that, emerging from a human figure which is completely isomorphic to our own, stands out as different. Thus the heterosexual person values differences in the “object” based on an identificatory homology. It is the degree to which the individual of the opposite sex resembles us that we are seduced by the differences between this *similis* and our image. In homosexuality the glove is essentially the same, but turned inside out: the difference is no longer along the lines of the object, but of the (mirror) image of oneself, which in the case of the male homosexual is female. The male homosexual mostly “identifies” with a female figure, and it is as a desiring female that he is attracted by an object not so similar to himself as it might appear from the outside. Thus homosexuals are not more narcissistic than heterosexuals, but rather narcissistic in a different way: while for the former difference lies along identificatory lines and the narcissism is objectual, in the latter narcissism is identificatory and the difference is objectual. Homosexuality is a narcissism of the object based on

hetero-identification, while heterosexuality is a narcissism of identification based on the hetero-object.

There is much to say even on the notion of *identification*, which complements that of narcissism. Psychoanalytic theory systematically links the processes of identification and of object desire, so much so that seemingly an *en abyme* effect takes place, as when one mirror is placed in front of another with the potentially infinite reflection of the object therein. In the same way, if I love roses, the psychoanalyst will tend to say that the roses outside me reflect the roses I love within me, that is, roses with which I identified and which I have identified with me: I love the roses-that-I-am. But these roses within, in which I have identified myself, in their turn were outside once: I metaphorically “ate” them because they were outside me. But why would I have introjected them if they were not already internal objects projected outwards by me? And so on. For example, some schools consider the maternal breast as the primary object: but this external breast, coveted by the nursing baby, could be the object of one’s own investment in so far as it was already introjected, and the nursing baby had already identified himself with it; and so on.

Thus, every attempt to interrupt this cycle of processes and to establish an absolute, inaugural, mythical beginning of a projective or identificatory process assumes an aura of arbitrariness. One realises a certain manufacturing defect in psychoanalytic theory: it describes certain psychic processes in a theoretical form which traces the very processes which it describes. So that the analytic theory of narcissism itself appears narcissistic: the object and its reflex are entailed one in the other, without being able to arrive at any “thing” which existed before all else. It is as though here, as elsewhere, the theory took on precisely the structure of what it aims to explain.

For this reason the analyst is urged to involve cognitive sciences, neurosciences, genetics, etc. in seeking an explicative theory for homosexuality, or anything else, considering that the analysts’ field is not precisely one of scientific theories, which can be falsified or corroborated, but one of ethical practice. The fact that the analyst seeks to render homosexuality intelligible does not necessarily imply that he is capable of explaining it, in the sense that science, in fact, explains.

The perverse homosexual

In many male homosexual environments, especially starting from the 1970s, perversion seems to have worked its way into Sadomasochist practices, in the golden rain (a shower of urine), “fist fucking”, and in anonymous encounters between groups of disguised homosexuals.

Regarding homosexual sadomasochism, Foucault observed (1982–1983, p. 20):

S&M is not a relationship between he (or she) who suffers and he (or she) who inflicts suffering, but between the master and the one on whom he

exercises his mastery. What interests the practitioners of S&M is that the relationship is at the same time regulated and open. It resembles a chess game in the sense that one can win and the other lose. The master can lose in the S&M game if he finds he is unable to respond to the needs and trials of his victim. Conversely, the servant can lose if he fails to meet or can't stand meeting the challenge thrown at him by the master. This mixture of rules and openness has the effect of intensifying sexual relations by introducing a perpetual novelty, a perpetual tension and a perpetual uncertainty which the simple consummation of the act lacks. The idea is also to make use of every part of the body as a sexual instrument.

Precisely because we are dealing with shared, albeit competitive games, one cannot really speak here of perversion intended as using the other as subject but without any reciprocity. The idea of one single game that brings into play complementary roles is contained in Foucault's own definition when he speaks of "somasochism" in one single word. The problem remains open as to why so many homosexuals today devote themselves to practices that have perverse connotations. One could think that, since Christian culture always considered the homosexual act as sinful and criminal, once the ban was lifted, there were no longer any limits to polymorphous sexuality; while the heterosexual relation, precisely because it was always inscribed in recognised and sanctified social roles, inhibits a freer expressivity. The homosexual intercourses would thus be so uninhibited as a paradoxical by-product of the secular condemnation of homosexuality.

But these near-perverse practices could also be an attempt to let emerge a non-complementarity that is difficult to achieve in homosexuality, even more than in heterosexuality. In the end, what makes the heterosexual relation at once arduous and exquisite is the fact that men and women, despite their anatomical appearance, are actually not that complementary, and usually have incommensurable structures of desire, as the following type would confirm for instance: "A man loves because he desires, a woman desires because she loves", or "A man can't understand how a woman can be so perverse as to desire a man, and vice versa". Man and woman are reciprocally a mystery to each other, precisely because they are not the mirror or complement the one of the other (let us recall once again Lacan's aphorism: "There is no sexual relationship"). The complexity of courting between the sexes arises from this, as literature and cinema never cease to recount: the web of desire which in the end binds a man and a woman is discontinuous, and needs a constant work of often convoluted stitching. This does not detract from the importance of courting as an historic product deriving from the ethics and aesthetics of courtesan love, of medieval *fin amor*. In ancient Greece, for example, the courting of boys—the way a mature man might conquer an adolescent—had a crucial importance, while women were considered too easy a conquest (See Cantarella, 2002; Foucault, 1984).

With respect to the “confusion of languages” between a man and woman, the homosexual relationship appears much easier, quick, and understandable: suffice it to send the right signals. In our culture, a casual sexual relation between homosexuals is easier and simpler than it is between heterosexuals (by contrast, a lengthy couple relationship even today is easier between heterosexuals than between homosexuals). In many gay venues, a code is even developed to communicate one’s preferences and availability: a certain coloured handkerchief in a pocket of one’s trousers means that the subject is specialised in passive anal relations, a scarf worn in a certain manner means that the subject is available for sadomasochistic games, and so on. Lengthy courting times are reduced to a minimum, far more than in the heterosexual relationship; the gay relationship among men tends to be efficient, economic, and maximised. At least until the AIDS epidemic hit, modern homosexuality seemed *rationalised*, almost like a well-oiled machine. Not because homosexuals are more rational than heterosexuals, but because there is more of an understanding among similar people.

And yet the excessive ease and banality of the male homosexual relationships is also a threat to desire, which needs the Other in its incommensurability, or, in short, needs a certain dose of trauma. In the previous paragraph I stated that there is even a certain amount of narcissism in the heterosexual relationship, although heterosexual narcissism does not block a sort of clash with the other in *qua* biologically and affectively *other*. Hence perverse games play the paradoxical function of “heterosexualising” the gay relationship, by introducing elements of risk, threat, and incomprehensibility. It is as though the homosexual tends to suffer for lack of otherness: the risky or repulsive game thus allows him to build a distance from the other, which, by complicating the satisfaction of desire, exasperates it. The homosexual who makes his partner urinate in his mouth, for example, mocking the role of delicious female passivity, thus establishes a dramatic distance between himself and his alter ego. The risky game, in short, tends to introduce the tragic pleasure of the relation between the two sexes into the intense complicity between homosexuals.

On the other hand, it is precisely this rationalising and efficient aspect of male homosexual relations that tends to promote, indirectly, modern homosexuality as a model even for heterosexuals. Not by chance, in the 1980s and early 1990s, cinema and literature were inundated by works that featured homosexual relations: for a certain number of years, the only significant love stories around, especially in cinema, were gay. Thus, it is not enough to say that over the last decades tolerance towards homosexuals has made great advances; in certain ways, our culture has elected the homosexual relationship as the model of any *erotic* (not couple) relationship. Besides, influential sexologists such as Masters and Johnson (1979) were already speaking in the 1970s about the erotic homosexual relationship as an ideal for any heterosexual couple.

The perverse couple

... in some intelligent melodramas that show how true love is never simply a symmetrical relationship between two people seeing eye to eye and forgetting about the world. It is what Berthold Brecht called *das Lob der dritten Sache*, the praise of the third thing [...] In order to have a happy love relationship, you must have a third common cause. You don't see eye to eye—rather, you both look to the common cause, and this is how you can be happy in your interpersonal relationship. (Zizek & Daly, 2004, p. 115)

The joke in which a sadist and a masochist meet is well known. The masochist falls to his knees and implores the sadist: “Hit me!” And the sadist answers: “Never!”

Gilles Deleuze (1967) found this joke really stupid, because, in his opinion, a sadist and a masochist as a matter of fact never meet. They belong to two separate universes. But this holds true for all perverts. There is rarely a complementarity between two perversions. On the contrary, it is the lack of complementarity that characterises perversion.

Yet we could encounter perverse couples. In Chapter Five, we will dwell on a sado-masochistic couple, described by Masud Khan. By perverse couple I don't mean one in which one of the partners pleases the other for love, compassion, or calculated interest. Usually it is the woman who complains about her partner's perversion, with which she has to comply—a cross she bears in the name of love. But we have good reason to doubt it. Isn't there something in the specific perversion that pleases the pervert's partner? The paraphilic person's accomplice is compassionate in so far as he understands the paraphilic's lack of compassion. Borrowing La Rochefoucauld's (1678) words—“Hypocrisy is the homage which vice pays to virtue”—we could say that the accomplice of the pervert is the homage that virtue pays to vice.

By perverse couple, I mean the one in which two perverts seem to reciprocally please each other: she might be a sadist and he a masochist or the other way around, she might be a nymphomaniac and he might enjoy admiring her during intercourse with others, he might enjoy enemas and she might enjoy doing enemas and so on. The crucial questions are: does this couple *really exist*? Isn't Deleuze right when he is sceptical about a possible encounter between two perverts? Between two paraphilic people there can certainly be complicity but can there be a true encounter?

These questions converge in another one: can a relationship between two perverts be really a *love* relationship? Usually we say that theirs is sheer passion: they could be indispensable to each other, but there would lack the dimension of the *caritas* that distinguishes a love relationship from reciprocal erotic addiction. Could these distinctions be a projection of an outdated conception of love, inherited through the Platonic-Christian tradition?

Many think that what we call a “normal couple”—be it hetero- or homosexual—is nothing but a successful wedging of perversions. The love for which the edifying morality longs, then, would not exist: the non-pervert is only a “pervert” who has found his (or her) complementary. Perhaps the labelled pervert would only be an unfortunate who, because of his specific paraphilia, cannot find his complementary. Hence, not only would the perverse couple exist but, in fact, we could say that every couple is secretly perverse to a certain extent.

Another point of view, on the other hand, denies that there could be real complementarity between perverts, even when they form an apparently harmonious couple. Because, if perversion is *amor* without *caritas*, how could there be a couple without mutual *caritas*?

We could, as a matter of fact, consider every “proper” couple as a triangle: a *third* has to be present, even virtually, so that the two partners can recognise themselves as a couple. The most blatant case is marriage: the third—society, church—ratifies and recognises the relationship of the couple, changing in this way the marital status of both. Instead of asking ourselves why we believe less in marriage today (and in Western countries we marry less and less), we should be asking ourselves why we even get married, especially since in many countries now an unmarried couple has almost the same rights as the married one. It is probably because two people who consider themselves in love need to summon “the public eye” as witness and guarantor of their being a couple. Even without a legal registration, every couple seems to call on an *in absentia* third party not only to observe (Žižek’s Other *qua* voyeur) but also as a form of support. So, it is essential even for the unmarried couple to be recognised as a couple in the circle of relatives and friends.

Clavreul (1967) notes that this third party enters in the perverse couple precisely to be excluded from it: instead of a wedding contract, between the perverts a “contract of secrecy” is in force. In fact, the true transgression in a couple of perverts is precisely to divulge the secret—an unforgivable act for the betrayed partner. The pervert’s other can be unfaithful, can insult the pervert in any form, but cannot *reveal* the perverse relationship. To make it public means to let a third party enter the game. For authors of Lacanian inspiration such as Clavreul, the perverse couple is a couple only as a figure of speech and precisely because it is *only* a couple: there is no transcendental reference to a third party as Other.

What strikes us is the impressive disparity between the two members of the perverse couple:

Thus we find the athlete linked with a puny little kid, the refined intellectual with the hillbilly, the massive woman with an angel of femininity, the immoral alcoholic with a saint, the vicious dirty old man with the prepubescent adolescent, the sociably respectable person with the hobo. (Clavreul, 1967, p. 99)

These dissimilarities are perhaps only the picturesque sign of a more essential disparity, which makes of the perverse couple a pseudocouple: what keeps the two actors together is not a charitable reciprocity but, in a best case scenario, a double parallel complicity: a successful wedging of two solitudes.

Such a heterogeneity of subjects was patent, or, rather, theorised, in the pederastie relationship in Ancient Greece. In this couple there was no reciprocity of eroticisms: the adult man (*erastès*), who passionately desired the adolescent (*eromenòs*) before his beard cropped up around eighteen, did not expect to be himself desired by the boy. It was acceptable and decent for the boy to respond with the friendship (*philia*) of someone who wants to learn, with a desire to know rather than Eros. The adult lover enjoyed sodomising the boy, who enjoyed being schooled by the lover—being with the pederast was for ancient Greek adolescents the same as what going to high school is for youths today.

Granted, a perfect reciprocity does not exist in any couple, however far it may be from perversion. Here we can grasp the importance of the third party—whether it is embodied by the civil officer or not—in the construction of the couple: the third party, as a witness, acknowledger, and guarantor, places the private relationship between two people in an ideal field of reciprocity that assigns rights and duties, in a world of roles and norms in which individual quirks are bracketed. The third party certifies that there is or there has been a relationship.

The exclusion of the third party, the witness, seems essential in perversion: *the matrix of every perversion is perhaps precisely the exclusion of the third party, who was, originally, the subject itself as the witness of a couple's love*. The secrecy that the pervert wants to maintain is therefore the repetition of an ignorance in which the subject, possibly as a child, confined himself. A non-perverse couple, instead, builds itself only in so far as this excluded third—the Other—is included in the act itself because its virtual presence makes the other's enjoyment become at the same time the cause and the end of one's own enjoyment.

Chapter Two: The Pervert's Pain

Sex and gender

Like Clavreul, Robert J. Stoller also believes that the perverse couple is only illusory. He has shown how perversions are a way of expressing— but also of controlling and softening—a profound hostility towards the other. This hatred, evident in sadistic acts, permeates every form of perversion, which is always the result of an interaction between hostility and sexual desire. The pervert's partner—accomplice or victim—is a replacement for the parent, against whom paraphilic individuals manifest their resentment.

The angry hostility at play in perversions depends on the fact that at least one of the reference adults decided to deny a child's *gender identity*—most commonly masculinity. In short, mum and dad didn't like having a boy (or, perhaps—I would add to Stoller's hypothesis— they didn't like *that* boy).

Clinical experience with perverts confirms this denial of gender identity. Perverts often say that a parent—usually the mother—did not want a boy, and that they were combed or dressed up as girls. And if a mother did not already have a daughter as well, she would express the ardent desire to have one.

But what are masculinity and femininity? Now, it's not enough to have a penis to be a man or a vagina to be a woman. All sexual *déviances*, ranging from the various forms of homosexuality to transsexualism, prove that more is needed for a subject of a particular sex to accept to be a member of a particular gender. This is the founding gamble of psychoanalysis.

But it is precisely on this crucial point that psychoanalysis as a whole torments itself in a problematic hesitation. One of Freud's dogmas, that analysts generally accept, is the fundamentally bisexual constitution of every human being. Being a "normal" woman or man means that one of the two halves, male or female, prevails over the other. The other gender is not usually abolished, but, as in a bricolage, it merges into the predominant sexual identification. The psychoanalytical theory of both neuroses and perversions hinges on a dialectics between masculine and feminine. For example, hysterics—male and female alike—are subjects who have great trouble accepting their feminine side.

The problem, however, is that Freud never really clarified what masculine and feminine meant for him—it is not clear, therefore, what this bisexuality is made up of (On the ambiguity of the notion of bisexuality, and of sexuality in general, in psychoanaly-

sis, see the entries “Activity-Passivity”, “Bisexuality”, and “Sexuality” in Laplanche and Pontalis (1988)). First of all, for psychoanalysis, sexual desire (libido) is not specifically masculine or feminine: sexual drives have no sex. What seems to count here about the difference between masculine or feminine is not the difference between convex and concave, but rather the role taken in an activity.

In biology today, masculine and feminine are identified not by whether one has a penis or not (among frogs, neither sex possesses a penis), but to the type of gametes, sexual cells, which one has. An individual with a high number of small gametes is called male, and an individual with a limited number of large gametes is called female—hence the authoritative theory whereby many of the psychic and cultural characteristics of males and females depend on this difference in the number of gametes (Dawkins, 1976). Females, having a small number of gametes, have to be very selective of the males with whom to proliferate.

Freud, instead, says that *in a certain sense* we can identify the masculine with activity and the feminine with passivity (1905d, 1915c). He thought that every drive (*Trieb*) has both an active and passive form: sucking and being sucked, defecating and receiving the excrements of others, looking and being looked at, attacking and being attacked, and so on. By “femininity” could we then mean the passive version of the drive?

But Freud also says that every drive, as such, is in a certain sense active, it is a *doing* (consider that the German *Trieb* is a masculine word). Every drive would therefore be masculine, including sexuality in women. The passive version of the drive, as Lacan suggests (1973, Chapter XV), should thus be described as: being sucked, being defecated on, being looked at, being penetrated, being attacked, and so on. Man gives and takes, while woman gives herself and lets herself be taken. Femininity is thus for Freud a specialisation of the masculine: *having something done to you*. But does all this have anything to do with the anatomical aspects of males and females?

In recent decades, reflections—historical, anthropological, psychological, philosophical—on gender difference have flourished dramatically. It appears to me that this type of literature tends to converge towards the following conclusion: apart from the anatomical and hormonal reality, *no one really knows what gender difference consists of* and so no one really knows what masculine or feminine *identity* means. Sexual identity and difference are radically historicised by gender studies, according to which each culture or epoch “interprets” in its own specific way what it means to be a man or a woman. There is an abyss between an Afghan woman with a burqa and Lady Gaga: yet both are somehow paradigms of femininity. It would be an abuse to say that the Afghani illustrates the *naturalness* of woman, while Lady Gaga represents a *cultural* femininity, or vice versa. Between physical evidence, which clearly distinguishes between the two types of sexual organs, and cultural history, which gives this distinction such different meanings, there is therefore a colossal hiatus.

Freud’s project was somewhat daring. On the one hand he wanted to create psychoanalysis as a science; he wanted, in other words, to advance universally valid expla-

nations on all human beings, past, present, and future. His refusal of anthropological relativism led from the very start to his tense relations with cultural anthropologists. The latter soon accused him of universalising the ways of being, and the sexual ways of being in particular, of industrialised Western society (This debate started with Bronislaw Malinowski's considerations (1924) on the Oedipus among the inhabitants of Trobriand Islands. On the historical debate between anthropologists and psychoanalysts, see *Journal des Anthropologues*, 1996).

Yet Freud's gamble was at the same time to historicise what we call identity, health, normality, pathology—and in particular gender identity. In short, one is not born male or female, one becomes it. For Freud, balanced men and women are those who seem to have followed a precept inspired from Nietzsche: "Become what you are." Psychoanalysis is therefore historicist, in the sense that it aims at the history of each individual—hence the analytical theories of libido evolution, of relation to castration, of the Oedipus and its destruction, and so on. These theories aim to show how a being with a certain type of body will psychically become a man or a woman or something else via an historical process marked by struggles, disappointments, individual myths, and traumas.

In this history anatomy does indeed play an essential role, but mainly as an experience of objective confrontation with the other's anatomy: it is essential, at a certain point, for the boy to discover that girls have no "willy" and for the girl to discover that boys have something she does not, and for both to discover at one point that their parents do strange things with each other's bodies. In any case, for psychoanalysis, anatomy is not destiny, it remains just one of the variables.

This gamble by psychoanalysis on the historicity of every subject leads to somewhat risky theories. For example, maternal love would not then derive from an innate instinct in (many) women for maternity, but from a symbolic shift: the child as the phallus every woman would like to have, and that she aspires to produce and possess. The desire to be a mother would not be inscribed in the genetic and hormonal destiny of the female, but rather would be the product of a transformation of feminine desire.

This project is in obvious contrast to common sense, even that of biologists. It is difficult for a scientist to accept the idea that what differentiates males and females is only an anatomical difference, and that everything else is a history of desire; for the biologist sexual differences are also, and above all, hormonal.

As we know, females have XX chromosomes and males XY chromosomes. Now, the X chromosome has been discovered to have a great number of genes—over ninety—while in the Y chromosome that determines masculinity, no genes have been found. This means that male and female genes are the same—in fact, we could even say that at the genetic level all of us, women and men, are female. The presence of the Y chromosome limits itself to developing the hormones that produce evident effects from the very start: the Y chromosome activates the masculine hormone, testosterone, to which tissues respond by creating male genitals. The hormonal difference is not between everything and nothing, it is between more and less: women develop far more oestro-

gens than men, and men develop far more testosterone than women. In conclusion, the biological differences between men and women, even psychic ones, derive directly from hormonal variations; while for psychoanalysis what counts most is the visible anatomical difference.

Whatever the origin of the difference, the fact remains that the results of today's sophisticated tests, despite being equal for many registers—intelligence levels, for example—differ greatly between women and men in several abilities (As we know, psychologists who administer intelligence tests often like to define the intelligence they are measuring as “the thing our intelligence tests measure”). Is it possible to explain this difference in terms of different paths of psychic formation? We have two contrasting points of view on this. Some scholars tend to go well beyond Freud, radically historicising gender identity, while others tend instead to universalise and naturalise the differences between males and females. For the latter, the historical and cultural variations we are able to document, however spectacular, are ultimately of little relevance, and depend only on different adaptations to different environments (One of the best-known popularisers of this naturalistic approach is Steven Pinker (2002)).

Now, the Freudian theory seduces precisely because it never really makes up its mind between the two approaches, the historicist and the naturalist. On the one hand, it aims at enunciating what is universal in humankind, and therefore refers everything back to the constitution—what today we call genetics—of *Homo sapiens*. On the other, it reconstructs the formation of sexual identity as an individual historical process. The original psychoanalytical theory oscillates between historical and genetic elements. For example, the development in Freud of the various libidinal phases—oral, anal, phallic—seems to depend on a genetic inscription. Thus is the Oedipus inscribed in the psychobiological destiny of every human being, or is it the milestone of an individual history? And if it were a product of individual history, how could it then occur universally and necessarily?

Hence the need for the Lamarckian credo for Freud. According to Lamarck, in animal species acquired characteristics can also be passed on to descendants. Today, biologists have completely abandoned Lamarckism, but it was useful to Freud to keep his scientific-universalistic cake and eat the historicist one too: if it is possible to transmit acquired characteristics to our descendants, then the difference between nature and culture disappears.

Freud (1912–1913) was to rationalise this ambiguity in his famous myth of the origins illustrated in *Totem and Taboo*: humankind as we know it is the effect of the murder of the primal father of the primitive horde by the coalition of male brothers. Civilisation is the product of a successful masculine plot machinated to kill and eat the father. Being something that human beings have acted out and experienced at least once, this event is not inscribed in the human DNA; but in so far as our very psyche is the consequence of this structuring event, it has become part of our nature, at least of our psychic one. The murder of the primal father is the mythical projection of Freud's scientific myth: going beyond the barrier between culture and nature, between

history and genotype, a barrier on which neo-Darwinism insists. In fact, neoDarwinism's "central dogma" is the following: no event that occurs to the phenotype (to the individual) influences the genotype (what is biologically passed on to descendants)—in other words, historical and cultural evolution has nothing to do with the evolutionary logic of nature, that is, with our genes.

But how can we juggle between these two apparently contradictory paradigms, between the historicist paradigm that relativises gender identities, and the naturalist one that instead stresses genetic determinism? Are we forced to make a clear choice, or alternatively to adopt a shallow eclecticism that can patch everything up? Freud's project was to explain sexuality, and the human being in general, at once as an individual historical construction and in terms of a rootedness to drives: is the project still viable in the light of progress made in biology?; or should it be abandoned as a lost gamble, just like Lamarckism in biology or behaviourism in psychology? This is one of the great problems where psychoanalysis' survival is at stake.

Primary femininity. Robert Stoller's theory

Stoller measures himself against the overwhelming issue of the relation between sexuality and individual history.

As an answer to the enigma of bisexuality he hypothesises, in contrast to Freud, a *primary* femininity, that is, as he defines it himself, a "nuclear gender identity". This identity does not depend on individual historical vicissitudes, but is inborn. Stoller (1975) felt that, were it not for Freud's theorizing, the existence of primary femininity would have been in doubt (In actual fact, many distinguished biologists do doubt it, for example Lewontin (1995)).

According to Stoller, however, femininity, not masculinity, is primary: initially we are all female. Then some of us acquire masculinity, usually individuals with a penis, but there can be interesting exceptions (what DSM calls gender dysphorias). In Stoller's psycho-embryology, femininity is what we all inherit and masculinity is something only some of us acquire. We are all born female, but some can become male. Therefore Stoller thinks, even though he dares not say it explicitly, that we are women because we *remain* females: femininity is a failed development. And, indeed, to become men we need substantial help from our mothers.

We are all originally females because the first person we're in relation to is a woman: in the symbiotic, fusional relationship established between baby and mother, the former adopts the latter's femininity as a primary identity. Our first sex is our mother's.

But at this point Stoller becomes tangled up in his own strings. This primary femininity is apparently acquired in the relationship with the mother, but then he speaks of a biological masculinity too. This nuclear identity is supposedly to be seen in all the precocious differences in aptitude between males and females, differences that do not, therefore, derive from external influences. For example, newborn baby boys

are abler than girls at raising their head from the lying position; at thirteen months girls are more reluctant than boys to separate from their mothers; boys tend to fling their toys, girls to gather them together; baby girls eat more if a sweetener is added to their food, something not true for boys, and so on.

Now, these and other examples concern acts or aptitudes *more or less* present in males and females, but that do not differentiate them category-wise. Is a lower or greater tendency to do something enough to determine a gender difference? And when, as an adult, a man is attracted only to women and a woman only to men, is this sharp divarication based on more or less marked aptitudes?

Though he asserts the presence of a primary sexual identity, Stoller is still a psychoanalyst, so what really counts remains the mental history of an individual, through which, though born a male, he can become an effeminate homosexual, or transvestite or transsexual. And for there to be a history—and hence the abandonment or betrayal of primary gender identity—there must be an intervention by the Other. This Other, in mainstream psychoanalysis, is the mom. If the individual abandons what she or he originally was, it is because the mother has *distorted* something primal.

As for the primitive relationship of the subject with the Other, psychoanalysis, particularly American psychoanalysis, starts from an equally mythical assumption: *primal symbiosis with the mother*. The theory of symbiosis—according to which the infant's Self is initially not differentiated from that of the mother—was developed by some analysts (for example, by Margaret Mahler & Jane G. Goldberg) to replace another no less mythical assumption by Freud: that of *primary narcissism*, that is, of an infant originally preoccupied only with her or his body and its needs. According to many analysts, the substantial progress in the psychoanalytic knowledge of small children over one hundred years has been to understand that we were not originally closed into ourselves, but merged with the mother, and hence that maturing does not mean so much gradually opening up to others (as Freud thought), but rather separating and distinguishing oneself from the mother. My impression is that by moving from the primal myth of primary narcissism to that of symbiosis with the mother, psychoanalysis has jumped out of the frying pan into the fire.

Actually, our everyday experiences with very young children give us no evidence of this famous symbiosis. If we approach a few-months-old child appropriately, we can easily be promoted to mother in the field, even in the presence of the real mother. Small children are attracted to the external world at a very early stage; they are intrigued by bouncing balls and strange sounds, they accept to be rocked by strangers, and so on. And if they have no external stimuli, they cry out of boredom, even in the presence of the mother (Ultimately, even as adults we don't stop being children: we spend most of our time avoiding boredom). Of course an absolutely privileged relationship is established with the mother, but why define it as fusional? The theory of primal symbiosis does not therefore derive from direct observation, it is a genealogical axiom certain analysts use to interpret the history of the child. It is a theoretical fiction that

preforms experience. I am not saying it is false. Every theory more or less does violence to observation and is based on a priori assumptions.

Now, this mythical primary symbiosis is invoked by Stoller to explain masculine homosexuality and transsexualism. In the symbiotic phase, the infant thinks *he or she is the mother*: the infant feels a part of the mother, and the mother is a part of her or him. And, because the mother is a female, the subject feels female. This would be a primal femininity, considered not as something in opposition to masculinity, but as an *ápeiron*, an unlimited or indefinite something from which both females and males derive. Therefore, the fact that later in life a male feels feminine is a relic of this primal femininity based on maternal imprinting. It is a charming interpretation, but it encounters serious difficulties.

First of all, the fact that the mother is a woman does not *ipso facto* imply that maternal functions are feminine. Feminine functions and motherly functions do not coincide. If, like Freud, we think of masculinity as activity, we should qualify maternal functions as masculine: who is more active than a mother, who is more passive than a newborn? Far from being a symbiosis, the mother-infant relation appears as a complementary relationship where the mother plays the active role. If the infant identified with the mother, he would identify with eminently active functions. Unless Stoller means that the infant identifies—or psychologically fuses—not with the mother as a mother, but with the mother as a woman. In this case, we would adopt an entirely different perspective, because the infant would then be able to see the mother as a woman too, that is, as someone outside their dual relationship. In short, the primary mother-child relationship would be Oedipal *ab initio*. And this seems to me the right path: as in jealousy, the relationship with the other goes well beyond the specific relationship with this other.

After all, an adult who does not emerge from the symbiotic phase, who cannot differentiate himself as an autonomous Self, would be a thoroughly backward individual or a schizophrenic, while effeminate men and transsexuals are of course usually by no means backward or schizophrenic. How to deal, then, with the theory of primary symbiosis?

Greenacre (1959) comes to our aid with her theory of *focal symbiosis*: the effeminate homosexual's or the transsexual's mother is unable to solve a symbiosis focused on sexual traits. But why continue to use the term symbiosis, which always implies something total and pervasive and by no means something focal? A focal symbiosis is an oxymoron. But if analysts feel they have to use similar weird expressions, it is to pay a non-evadable toll to the theory (read: the dogma) that requires a reference to the primal symbiotic stage.

The transsexual experiment

According to Stoller, the pervert—and even more the effeminate homosexual and the transsexual—is a male whose mother did not help him to overcome his primary femininity: the primal symbiotic phase with the mother lasted too long or was too intense. In short, the pervert is a mummy's boy. This would also explain why perversions are a predominantly male domain.

Stoller is at his best when he analyses male transsexualism (today re-baptised as transgenderism), which is not at all a perversion. The transsexual is a subject with a male body who has, since his earliest memories of his self, always considered himself a female, and often by his family as well. “I have a female soul trapped in a male body.” He is not effeminate, he behaves as a woman with great naturalness. And very often he takes steps, sooner or later, to surgically correct the error and have his gender changed. He is not fond of women, on the contrary he is consciously, openly, and often desperately envious of them. He has intercourse with absolutely virile men—transsexuals abhor homosexual men—and generally lives a very female life, in love and in work. The jobs he chooses are mainly those with typically female connotations: model, elementary school teacher, babysitter, prostitute. Once he has undergone a sex change, he suffers from neurotic disorders no more than the average population.

(We have to distinguish this *true* transsexual or transgender from another type of “transsexual” which is closer to the neurotic structure, that is, a man—less frequently a woman—who claims to have felt himself a woman since his adolescence, not before. I would call these cases “imaginary transgenders”).

Now, Stoller tries to prove that the transsexual is a male infant who *remains* female: a natural experiment that would confirm his theory.

The transsexual's mother herself never enjoyed being a female, because her own mother had in turn treated her as a sexually neuter being and her father had encouraged her to identify with him. Up until puberty, the future transsexual's mother had wished to be male, wearing male clothes and playing with boys, but with the onset of adolescence, she had given up her masculinity and built herself a feminine exterior of marriage and maternity. The man she married (the transsexual's father) was passive and detached, a generally weak family figure. His wife mocked him in front of their children. If this woman had more than one child, the future transsexual would be the one she considers “handsome and refined”, her masterpiece, her narcissistic mirror. A fictitious parthenogenetic product, this preferred son is “the perfect phallus”. The breast-feeding period is idyllic, a perfect symbiosis is established, perpetuated by this failed male of a mother as a compensation and cure for her fundamental unhappiness. When the young transsexual—transsexualism emerges early—visits a psychologist accompanied by his mother, the pair offers a display of perfect, happy harmony. Stoller writes:

Its outstanding feature [of the mother-transsexual boy relationship] is the lack of conflict. The boy never develops a heterosexual relationship with his mother (without treatment) and as a result never develops an oedipal conflict. The two of them are so much one, are so free upon each other's bodies, that no sexual tension develops. (1975, p. 143)

For Stoller transsexualism is not a perversion, but an experiment of nature—and an ultimately successful one—that tests the lack of development of masculinity in a child who only happened to have a penis hanging between his legs. Where the transsexual succeeds, the pervert fails. The pervert too is a product of an excessive, far too prolonged, symbiosis with his mother and of her rejection of masculinity. However, in contrast to the transsexual, who remains a female, the pervert does develop masculinity, but at the price of perversion. The latter metaphorically stages his hostility towards the mother, in so far as she has denied, debased or crippled his being male. In short, the pervert rebels against the transsexual destiny his mother has unconsciously set for him.

Stoller's theory does not lack elegance or plausibility. It has the merit of giving us an explanation for the (today contested) male predominance in perversions, something few theories manage to account for. Unfortunately, Stoller ends up invalidating his very arguments when he considers this hostile drive and hatred towards the other the necessary condition for any sexual excitement, even the least perverse. According to him, in sexual attraction the amorous and tender tides always merge with the aggressive ones: desiring the other always expresses, as well as a readiness for love and abnegation, also a vengeance for the resentment the seducing other excites. Humans are not a very loving species—especially when they make love. Hostility is the spice of sexuality—and of many other forms of pleasure, for example, the artistic. In true art too, a destructive hatred needs to be expressed: According to Stoller, art is demolition; kitsch is the corpse left when art loses its anger (Stoller, 1975). Perversion denounces normal sexuality as being something kitsch.

But if every sexual desire implies destructive hostility, the specificity of perversion collapses. In a certain sense, Stoller returns to Freud's original theory: perversions are ultimately components of mature genital sexuality. A pure and merely constructive love desire is dull and insipid.

Freud had at first mitigated the difference between perversions and normal sexuality, making the latter a bricolage of the former. Stoller goes further, to the point of turning perversion into the key of any form of sexual excitement.

Playing trauma

Whether they agree with Stoller's theses or not, many analysts tend in any case to think that the cause of perversions is a *chronic trauma*. The trauma is the historical

event: something that breaks into a subject's life and changes its course. In the genetic story of object relations theory, the primal event is a delay or absence of the maternal breast, the source and model of every future trauma. Usually, however, analysts do not believe this event to be fixed in time, but rather that it unravels during the extended relation with the nourisher. Perversion, like every other structure of desire, is supposedly the answer to something *eventful* for the subject: the succession of breakaways and disappointments in the relationship with the significant other. But in what way does this event—whatever it may be—cause fantasies and perverse acts? According to Freud, our psyche is continuously turning what traumatises us into representations. The elementary trauma is an event that, even when it does not strike us materially, still wounds us (the Greek word *trauma* meant *wound*). If the car I'm travelling in flips over, I am a passive victim of the accident. Psychic elaboration will consist in managing to somehow *dominate* what reduced me to a suffering patient. According to Freud, this psychic mastery (*Bemächtigung*) of the threatening or wounding event takes shape through a playful repetition. Through play and fantasy, human beings dominate traumas repeating them as simulations.

First of all, the psyche turns *the fright into fear*: the latter is no longer the pure unpredictable event that traumatised me, but has a representation as its object. In our example, after the car tipped over, I will be scared to travel by car for a while. The fright was related to the present event, while fear is related to the mental representation of a possible future event.

The most famous example of early representation given by Freud (1920g) is the "spool game". At the age of one and a half, Freud's grandson enjoyed throwing various objects under the furniture. According to Freud, this game was a transformation of a game the child had played when he was younger: in front of his cradle he would throw a piece of wood tied to a string over the side of the cradle exclaiming o-o-o (German *fort*: away!), then he would pull it back making it reappear before him and exclaiming *da* (German for "there!"). Interpretation: with this game the infant grandson was restaging what had been one of his most traumatic events, his mother going away. But this game had a happy ending, because the spool—read mother—came back. In short, mastering the traumatic event—here an absence—consists in transforming the traumatic singularity by reiterating its representation. The trauma is overcome by theatricalising it.

Games like the spool are the root of every happy-ending comedy, where the hero we identify with passes through an array of perils—*fort!*—but ultimately triumphs—*da!* However, the later game where the child throws the objects without making them reappear, seems a primitive tragedy: there is no happy ending, and the hero ultimately succumbs. Now, what pushes us adults—in the wake of us as children—to seek pleasure not only in works of fiction with a happy ending, but also in those with an unhappy one?

Working class audiences and children are notoriously averse to tragic endings, which is why many films with an inauspicious plot have a makeshift happy ending stuck on at

the end. *Da! after fort!* For this reason we tend to think that mass audiences are rather childish, while audiences with a taste for the tragic are more mature, sophisticated, and strong persons. Our civilisation is proud of its tragic enjoyment: it is something noble to find enjoyment in defeat. I would say that in Western history, from Aristotle to Lars von Trier (director of the movie *Melancholia*), the noblest possible figure is always “the melancholic”, the depressed and sceptical subject; and it is not by chance that what is considered the “highest” tragedy of the Western canon is *Hamlet*, the story of a melancholic.

Yet, as we have seen, a certain slipping from comedy to tragedy already takes place in the games of a small child.

But what kind of pleasure do we obtain from witnessing our hero’s suffering and ruin? Is there not, in short, some perversity in our taste for the tragic or even melancholy?

The most important answers to this enigma of tragic enjoyment come from Aristotle and Freud. Let’s begin with the latter.

For Freud, we master traumas by elaborating fear and turning it into anxiety (I use here “anxiety”, and not the word I would prefer, “anguish”, because the first has established itself as the current translation of *Angst*. Regarding this choice, see Castrellón & Benvenuto (2014)). For example, Freud questioned himself on the purpose of traumatic dreams: do these recurring dreams, in which we re-experience the true trauma we underwent, not confute his theory of dreams as an imaginary fulfilment of our desires? How can a trauma be desirable? But nightmares do have their function: by repeating the scene of the trauma oneirically, the subject *ties up* the event and turns it into a representation. It is no longer the real car flipping over, but its image. What the psyche had suffered passively now becomes, thanks to the repetition of its representation, a threatening figure that the subject can control; it is easier to manoeuvre representations than real events. This representation may become unconscious too, and in this case the fear evolves into anxiety. But even anxiety for an unconscious representation—as when we’re anxious but do not seem to know why—belongs to this progressive *Bindung*, this tying up of the event that made us suffer.

Therefore, the passage from fright to anxiety is also a passage from event to representation:

1. *Fright (Schreck)* is the effect of an event lacking any sort of representation, and therefore, also for this very reason, highly traumatic.
2. *Fear (Furcht)* is the awe before an event that is this time represented as something possible in the future.
3. *Anxiety (Angst)* is the awe of a representation that at this point does not refer to any event.

We can schematise this elaboration as a chart, where “+” designates the presence of the trait in question and “-” its absence.

	<i>EVENT</i>		<i>REPRESENTATION</i>	
	<i>Present</i>	<i>Future</i>	<i>Conscious</i>	<i>Unconscious</i>
<i>Schreck</i>	+	+	-	-
<i>Furcht</i>	-	+	+	-
<i>Angst</i>	-	-	+	+

Anxiety, as we can see, regards both conscious and unconscious representations, and the difference between the two can be quite subtle. The agoraphobic, for example, is anxious about a conscious representation: public spaces. But at the same time, according to Freud, the phobic situation is a substitute for another representation, an unconscious one. Anxiety is then a fear, the original object of which slips into the unconscious.

Anxiety is therefore a lesser evil for the subject: what makes us suffer becomes something that can be represented, hence something predictable and, within certain limits, something that can be psychically elaborated and, therefore, avoided. I cannot get rid of the traumatic event—it has already happened—but I can get rid of its representations. In the labour of mourning I separate myself from the loved one I have lost; in the same way, in the labour of anxiety, I slowly separate myself from what terrorises me and can thus avoid it. Of course we don't like anxiety, which is like a medicine that can give us plenty of benefits, but it remains a bitter pill.

The perverse tragedy

Let's return to tragic enjoyment. What do we find of beauty or the sublime in the representation of our hero's suffering without redemption? Is it not masochistic to take pleasure in a mournful representation? Indeed, masochism is a pleasure drawn from the representation of something tragic—thus, to say that the pleasure given by a tragic performance is masochistic is as if to say that the tragic performance arouses ... a tragic pleasure.

For Aristotle, the tragic representation was an imitation or simulation of action (*mimesis práxeos*) (*Poetics*, 49b.24). This simulation of actions produces in the spectator the contrary of action: *pátios*. *Patitos* for the Greeks opposed action (*praxis*): it signified passion, suffering, passivity, and affection. Tragedies did not always have catastrophic endings, but the spectator, precisely because he saw the hero's errors and already knew the pitiful destiny which awaited him, was affected by two emotions or passions: pity (*óleos*) and anxiety (*pítobos*) towards the hero. As Thomas Aquinas was to say about the subject who suffers for the woes of others, the tragic spectator is *merciful*. And mercy too is a passion.

In any case, why do pity and anxiety, which would only cause us to suffer if we felt them for a real friend, become pleasurable sufferings when they are aroused by a simulation? Evidently the awareness that it is only a fiction has the power to transform

these feelings from unpleasant to enjoyable. And in fact children, for whom the distinction between reality and imaginary is not so clear, often cannot tolerate works that elicit pity and anxiety. But in the end, Aristotle adds, the spectator, faced with this tragic dissolution, “evacuates” these emotions of pity and anxiety, liberating himself from mercy. Aristotle named this liberation *kátharsis*.

For centuries we have tried to understand what Aristotle really meant by catharsis, and the debate continues today. All meanings of this Greek term have been evoked in order to interpret this Aristotelian concept: catharsis as purification, purge, separation, cleansing, liberation, bloodletting, menstruation (On Aristotelian catharsis see Lear (1992) and Janko (1992)). Without delving into the maze of this centuries-old debate, we could say that for Aristotle catharsis is a pleasure, but one that bears the mark of the pain of which it is the liberation. Just as when a neuralgic point is touched during a massage, the ache caused by the stimulation of this point produces a liberating, bittersweet pleasure, an exquisitely pleasant pain. Because a knot has been loosened.

We experience a similar rigidity in boredom, which pushes us to watch representations that arouse pity and anxiety in us. The abbot Jean-Baptiste Dubos (1719) had already connected the tragic and boredom: better to be stirred by the pain of a representation than to be bored to death. Boredom is a pure potentiality of pity and anxiety that, unable to actualise itself in relation to the events, returns to us like a boomerang: pure desire of enjoyment which does not find any suffering to enjoy (We can say that in boredom we have the affective experience of what Freud called *Triebe*, *drives*: we are bored when our drives, which never leave us, don’t find an object to invest in, so we perceive the pure drives’ “bust”).

So, amusements—including tragic dramas—are defences against boredom. In Italian or Spanish, the words used for *to amuse oneself* (*divertirsi*, *divertirse*) come from the Latin *divertere*, so *to divert*, to digress, to deviate: amusing representations divert us from depression.

A connection between perverse actions and depressions is often underlined: the pervert is often an endemically depressed person. And those who go into depression are sometimes capable of perverse actions they would never engage in when in a normal mood. They suffer mainly from the so-called “empty depressions”, the feeling of “an empty self”: these subjects complain of a void that makes their lives meaningless, their existence grey. This *blank self* does not lament failures or feelings of guilt, it laments a feeling of barrenness, of almost not existing. Now, all of us can perceive the beginnings of this kind of depression: it is that vague looming boredom that pushes us to turn to exciting representations to give new life to life. It is what makes most of us go to the theatres, or nails us to the television—in others, it leads to a perverse acting out. As we are all split, all of us are potentially perverse: otherwise there would be no need for us to amuse ourselves, and things like art, literature, and drama would never have seen the light.

Plays with sad endings therefore give us a paradoxical pleasure—catharsis, a shiatsu for our soul. Comedies or adventure stories are genres which can also arouse pity and

anxiety—here too our hero goes through hell—but in the end, it always comes down to much ado about nothing. Instead, in the tragic spectacle, the evacuation of these pitiful affects is produced by confirming the reasons for pity and anxiety: tragic enjoyment originates from this confirmation.

We've seen how for Freud the psyche processes traumatic events by transubstantiating them into anxiety. But this anxiety—and the accompanying pity or compassion—is recreated artificially by performances that stage dangers that we, through the figure of the hero, dread. Representation and play do something the psyche alone cannot manage: they dissolve, they *analyse* (a term that comes from the Greek *anahiein*, untie) that which gives us anxiety. Thanks to this putting into action, the subject is ravished by enjoyment.

In order that there be cathartic enjoyment, passions must first be mobilised. Passions in the sense of what we suffer, endure, and are unable to react to (in the very sense of Latin *passio*). Pity and anxiety are in some ways the opposite of jealousy and envy, which are also passions. Pity means suffering for the present suffering of the other; anxiety means suffering for the possible future suffering of the other. Jealousy means suffering for the pleasure of the other I love; envy means suffering for the pleasure of the other I don't love.

In the perverse staging something similar to the tragic manoeuvre occurs, though in the presence of different passions: the paraphilic act *represents* the trauma of jealousy, and in so doing the subject frees itself of it, even if only temporarily. Tragic pleasure is also temporary: we can enjoy tragic performances for a lifetime, because, fortunately, we are never cured from what makes them enjoyable to us. Aristotle's catharsis is not a permanent healing, but rather a massage we need periodically. That is why we end up returning to the cinema, theatre, concerts, and so on. And of what does it consist, this "wound" that the tragic heals through a purgative and liberating massage?

We have here considered depressive boredom. Boredom (this experienced strength of our drives, as we noted) is probably a response to the primal injustice of the human condition—the frustration every subject sooner or later feels towards a promise that the earliest cares by parents seemed to imply, that in life we are gratified without any merits on our behalf, in short, that grace is with us. The promise that we will be helped merely out of love, graciously, is contradicted by reality—and first of all, sooner than later, by the parents themselves. Furthermore, it is not true that we enjoy pleasure or suffer because we deserve it. This unfair, nonsensical pain humans suffer is the tight knot that the arts are ceaselessly trying to dissolve.

So, perversions are cathartic tragedies to cast away jealousy—they are representations that give us enjoyment because they have a fatal content. Perversion is like a massage of the erotic soul: a dull pain situated just underneath the fold of our consciousness fuels the delicious emotion of perverse performance.

The psychoanalytical cure is also tragic, because analysis aims at re-actualising trauma to eliminate its impact. Doubters may question paying an analyst good money for years for a practice that has no scientific consensus, and accuse it of exploiting

masochism rather than curing it. Analysis reopens old wounds, but despite everything, like tragedy gives enjoyment.

Imposture

Perverts can have the most diverse personalities, yet they all have their own specific style of being-in-the-world, as could be said of even non-perverse individuals. They are spurred by a sort of *vocation for disenchantment*, which often takes the form of a *denunciation of social life as an imposture*. Those who indulge in perverse acts are usually people who somehow “do not believe”—but what is it that they do not believe in?

Perverts notably are often found to work for highly moral institutions such as the magistrature, police, church, and schools. But we should ask whether their attraction for these ethical entities isn't rather an overcompensating for their fundamental scepticism towards the goodness of human beings or their good intentions. Perverts pursue a moral dimension that—rightly so—they find lacking in their sexual desire. But these perverts who are also guardians of the law make a mistake: ethics cannot be reduced to moral norms.

Perverts do not believe—not in God, not in good laws, not in the goodness of human nature. And furthermore, deep down they are convinced that anyone who uses sublime terms to discuss such things as altruism, spiritual exaltation, self-sacrifice for a Cause, and coherence between words and actions—in short, anyone who believes in the propensity for Good—is actually an impostor. This doesn't necessarily imply that sexual perverts are more evil than most, though perhaps they fall foul of the law more often than most; but even when perverts are upright *citizens*, deep down they don't believe in the *City's* values. Hence their tendency to ironise, to denounce the hypocrisy of those honourable individuals with lofty sentiments, or to guffaw at big words that extol virtue. This is the moral aspect of what traditional analysts have attributed to the pervert's anality: “The world is shit” (The idea of anal primacy in perversions was developed by Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985)).

Sometimes perverts clearly say that ultimately *everyone is perverse*. A bit like some male homosexuals who are convinced that underneath a heterosexual gloss, all men are gay. Sexual perverts trust no one, and they know others should not trust them. And if perversion interests us so much today, this is because under many aspects our secularised society makes the pervert's point of view its own: it believes less and less in the benevolent essence of humankind and in the absolute value of just causes. For this reason, psychoanalyst Serge André (1993) could write that the pervert is the moralist of our age.

This figure was already described by Molière in his *Don Juan*, which at the time greatly shocked bigots and prigs. Apparently Don Juan is not a pervert, he is only a womaniser, but Molière's is also a philosopher: his libertinage is the inevitable ethical

corollary of an atheistic, disenchanted vision of the world. “So if I understand you correctly, your religion is arithmetic?” the servant Sganarelle shouts to him—a question to which any modern scientific materialist would answer affirmatively (Molière, 1682, act III, scene I). Don Juan’s passion was viewed by the Catholic world as the sexual consequence of the Enlightenment: secularised disenchanted modernity is essentially perverse. But this is the very reason why Don Juan, the martyr of the right to pleasure with no ethical limits, oozes with moralism. Heroically, Don Juan doesn’t yield even in the presence of the stone guest and the promise of eternal suffering. His morality is that of modern science, that has given itself the mission of deconstructing good intentions: is altruism not a collage of perverse egoisms? And specifically, of selfish genes?

Undoubtedly, this perverse denunciation against hypocrisy and the fake altruism of good folk fascinates many of us. Hence the appeal of authors like Choderlos de Laclos, Sade, Sacher-Masoch, Wilde, Bataille, Mishima, Céline, Jouhandeau, Genet, Anne Déselos, Pasolini, Houellebecq, and various others. Authors who have represented, often in paradigmatic ways, certain perversions, who have often *borne witness* to them—in a martyrological sense of the word—at the expense of their own life.

But what is it that, despite its charm, leaves us perplexed about the perverse act, as defined here? It is the fact that these subjects, as long as they act as perverts, remain somehow tied to the same imposture they denounce, an imposture that they do not really overcome. They are like some Voltaire figure who, after denouncing every religious belief as a fraud, cannot help dressing up as a priest every time he visits his lover: for him, the sexual act is enjoyable only if he can also unmask the lust of the clergyman. Such a masquerade can amuse us as a one-off, but we certainly cannot appreciate it as a necessary condition for making love. In substance, the perverse act is a denunciation, but one that never leads to forgiveness for the denounced abuse. Perverts are moralists who need the impostor they are denouncing in order to authentically enjoy pleasure. They never get over the anger that makes up at once the barrier and the spring of their pleasures.

The exhibitionist can find enjoyment only in denouncing women’s lubricious desire; the voyeur only in denouncing women who want to hide their sex. The fetishist can find enjoyment only in allegorically denouncing the desire for the phallus that agitates women in so far as they dress up to seduce. The transvestite satirises the superficiality of male eroticism, which only needs deceitful fetishes of femininity—a short skirt, a lace bra, trifles—to desire a woman; the transvestite is a great caricaturist of heterosexual male desire. The sadist denounces his woman-victim who doesn’t want to recognise the pain of which she was the cause; the masochist denounces his woman torturer, who crushes him. The paedophile denounces that infantile sexuality which nests behind the cultural myths of childish purity. In short, a pervert can enjoy the other only by denouncing her, directly or indirectly. But in denouncing her, he cannot love her.

How can the analyst then divert them from this eternal passion for the unmasking of imposture? We shall try to find an answer to this crucial question in Chapter Six.

Chapter Three: Masochism: Ways to Power

I, Imazato Masukichi, shall commit suicide.

I know that my wife, Imazato Murako, has a lover. I also know she wishes to marry him. Because I love her to the point of scarifying myself, it is freely and willingly that I shall kill myself, with the aim of guaranteeing her happiness. People may think that my death is actually a murder and that Murako has killed me. Precisely because such conjectures would cause her suffering, and because they go in the opposite direction from what is my will, I have hence drawn up the following testament, with the aim in mind to do away with any such suspicions.

I affirm that I shall die administering a toxic product to myself. I demand that there be no doubts on the matter. But given the unusual, singular, character of my way of committing suicide, people will think, despite everything I have already written, that I have been murdered (...) Though my suicide aims at assuring the happiness of my wife, it is, however, accompanied by a precise condition, one my wife will have to imperatively satisfy.

The condition is the following. I shall die by swallowing a poison that I shall, of course, administer to myself, but I want it to be a poison of the kind that will inflict a considerable amount of suffering on myself. My requirement is that, after swallowing the poison, death will arise only after two or three hours of atrocious pains. I absolutely want Murako, for the full length of my sufferings and until the moment of my death, to sit motionlessly opposite me, without taking her eyes off me. It is absolutely not necessary for her to help me in my suicide; but I demand that she watch me perish until the very last. To imagine myself dying while seized by atrocious pains and with my wife staring at me, I find there could be no pleasanter death. I shall feel ten times happier than living loved by her. To die in these conditions is for me the highest pleasure life could have had in store for me. My wife has agreed and has given me her word that she will respect this clause.

—*Imazato Masukichi*, July 1953

This last will and testament appears in Jun'ichirô Tanizaki's novel, *Inhuman Chronicles* (cited in Aisenstein, 2000). The protagonist Masukichi had managed to find his young wife among the ruins of Hiroshima in the aftermath of the atomic bomb, only to discover that he had lost his sexual potency. His plan to commit this horrific suicide would be the grand finale to this loss of virility. I have quoted it here because the scene he imagines, a man suffering before the eyes of a woman in love with someone else, is the classic setting of what I call the *elementary masochistic fantasy*; that is, a man takes pleasure in the suffering caused by the woman he loves. This type of suffering is associated with an original betrayal: *My cruel woman prefers another man*. Yet, strangely, the pain she inflicts does not inspire hatred. On the contrary, the pain and suffering the masochist endures somehow manage to exalt the woman's supposed enjoyment.

Masochism and exclusion

In masochism, exclusion is turned to enjoyment in the most dramatic manner. I, the masochist, do not want the woman to love, desire, or respect me; on the contrary, I want to be beaten and humiliated. She should show contempt for me, and I will enjoy her contempt. But why?

The masochist often answers this question in a quasi-spiritual vein: "Through humiliation and pain I am uplifted." Similarly, Italian prostitutes advertising their availability for "d'Annunzio-style games"—that is, for masochistic clients—place on line and newspaper ads that refer to "education" and "martinet". Intransigent education elevates the soul, opening the way to a superior pleasure born out of sacrifice and humiliation. Indeed, the masochist's erotic pleasure is often likened to the devotee's spiritual uplifting through mortification, while it is a commonplace to see masochism in those forms of voluntary self-abasement in which a saint or philanthropist goes beyond assisting society's rejects and actually also makes a reject of himself, a human wreck.

What rendered St. Francis of Assisi so fascinating but at the same time so disturbing was that it was not enough for him to live in poverty, he also needed to live as a beggar and to inflict himself with pain. What he called "perfect joy" could be achieved only through sufferance, and above all, humiliation (Ugolino Brunforte, 1913, in particular Chapter Eight).

Actually, the masochist does not experience pleasure from physical pain as such. Outside the masochistic script, pain is just as unpleasant for him as it is for anyone else; within an erotic context, however, it is imbued with special value and transformed into a vehicle of extraordinary pleasure. The masochist enjoys such pain in so far as it is associated with humiliation and punishment, thereby becoming a moral sign.

Hence we could say that, unlike normal "fine" pleasures, masochistic ones—like perverse pleasures in general—are *sublime*. Kant dealt with the problematic distinction between the *beautiful* and the *sublime* in his *Critique of Judgment*, although he did so

from an aesthetic point of view (1790, part 1, section 1. Books I and II). In his day, certain romantic works were considered “sublime”—those which broke away from the classic criteria of “fine arts”, portraying intense, wild scenes and, in general, a sense of something colossal and immeasurable. For Kant, the sublime included experiences of unpleasant pleasure or of pleasant displeasure, distinguishing between the “mathematical sublime” (arousing a pleasure that displeases) and the “dynamic sublime” (arousing a displeasure that pleases). We could say that perversions and neuroses are to beautiful normality what Kant’s sublime is to the beautiful; that is, triumphs of pleasure that must make room for an unshakeable will for displeasure.

The mathematical sublime—an untimely and impudent enjoyment—is the form of the sublime typical of neuroses: enjoyment experienced through fantasy generates a sense of guilt and hence of displeasure. On the other hand, the dynamic sublime is observable in perversions, where the repetition of an unpleasant act becomes a source of authentic pleasure.

It should not be thought, however, that the masochist offers himself up as the complement of a woman’s desire to punish and humiliate. The woman is nothing more than an instrument for him and need only pretend to be harsh. Her show of rejection is, for all intents and purposes, a *mise-en-scène* directed by the masochist himself.

Although the masochist often has to make do with prostitutes, deep down he dreams of a woman who truly wishes to punish him, who is infuriated with him. But even if he were to succeed in finding such a woman, the charitable complementarity that could annul the perverse strategy of the act would not necessarily occur. In fact, a woman who was truly enraged against the subject would take no particular pleasure in being so. After all, where is the pleasure in being furious with someone? The subdued subject/masochist desires an “intransigent woman”, but has no desire to satisfy her desires: indeed his partner’s feelings are not *an end* for him (in so far as his aim might be to satisfy them), but simply *a means* to procure pleasure for himself. In making himself the victim of a woman’s severity, he is not seeking to satisfy her desire to be severe, but only to tap into the effects of that severity for hedonistic purposes. When, for example, the masochist declares himself to be the “slave” of his “mistress”, his pleasure stems from his own feeling of being her slave, not from having satisfied the woman’s desire to be a mistress of slaves.

The act of seeking humiliation reveals the essential irony of masochism because, in the end, the woman who does the humiliating turns out to be the real object-subject of humiliation.

The masochistic protest

A forty-something analysand was involved with Giulietta, a woman his age with whom he had a wild sexual relationship, bordering on total frenzy. It did not take long, however, before he started to accuse her of being a narrow-minded and egotistical

social climber, an hysterical, ignorant nag. Thereafter, he began a much more sober relationship with another woman whom he respected, though he continued to see Giulietta. Things went well with this new woman who supposedly deserved his respect, and yet the pleasure he experienced with Giulietta was “something else!”. Upon learning of his affair, Giulietta took revenge by refusing him a special favour that would have caused her no great effort to satisfy. He broke off from “that rancorous old hag”, only to take up with her again a few months later.

In the past, he had occasionally nursed masochistic fantasies, but he had never put them into practice. From this time on, however, his sexual relationship with Giulietta took a new twist: he had her urinate and defecate on him. He would lick her vulva as she pissed on his face, savouring mouthfuls of her urine. Kissing her vulva when she was menstruating took him to ecstasy. Only after these games—laced with other masochistic “services”—did they have normal intercourse. At times he would stop seeing her completely for weeks, or even months, until he was overcome once again by the desire to “be treated like a toilet”, as he himself put it.

It is worth noting that this only occurred with Giulietta: he did not even fantasise such exploits with other women. Apparently, these masochistic games served both as a means of revenge against Giulietta and as a kind of mourning for his inexcusable love. They were the flip-side of the disrespect he felt for his partner—who had never performed such acts before and found them fascinating. He himself had only discovered this source of amusement after recognising that it was impossible for him to have a normal love affair with “that witch”. The mere fact that he continued to see Giulietta made him feel contemptible, but their excremental games managed to recast his humiliation as pleasure. His abasement, however, was nothing other than a specular reflection of the sordid image he had of his partner, who eventually realised that his requests for her to piss on him were actually a form of reflexive vengeance. In the end she left him saying, “You treated me like real shit!”

The truth is that all masochistic games play out a similar vengeance: when the masochist gets his partner to humiliate him, it is ultimately the partner who is being humiliated by the masochist. From this perspective, masochism can be seen as a subtle form of sadism in which the roles are ironically inverted. In short, *masochism is a form of protest against the other*, usually against the woman. It is a protest that is satisfied without delay, given that the subject proffers his own body as a readily available substitute for the original object of humiliation. Masochism is actually a “do it yourself” way of punishing the other.

We should not, however, be misled by the case described above: the sadistic urges of masochists generally have male, not female, figures as their object. Common sense may lead us to assume that the true object of the masochist’s hostility is the woman by whom he seeks to be crushed or humiliated. Perversions, however, are neither linear nor Cartesian; if anything, they are baroque (so much so that I wonder if an analyst who does not appreciate the baroque and its dizzying brilliance can truly understand them). In point of fact, the masochist often champions the rights of women, and his

bitterness tends to be directed against powerful male figures, paternal ones we could say. From this we can deduce that when the subject lets himself be abused by a woman, he is offering up his own body in order to see the figure of an inadequate man (his father?) abused and humiliated through the wrath of a woman.

The masochist often delights in fantasies of making a prostitute out of his partner, and sometimes does so in reality. Again, however, it would be a mistake to interpret this simply as a display of aggression directed exclusively against women. Significantly, it is important to the masochist that the role of prostitute be taken by an honest woman, by “the mother as good mother” (Deleuze, 1967, p. 57). Sacher-Masoch goaded his wife Wanda into seeking out lovers by answering newspaper ads, and prostituting herself for money. “It is a wonderful thing,” wrote Masoch, “to discover in *one’s own good, honest woman* the sensual pleasure one must usually seek in libertine women.” Whereas Wanda did all this to gratify her slave/master, Masoch saw it as a way to fulfil what he understood as the desire of the woman (the mother?); that is, to have many lovers and to prostitute herself. In other words, the masochist believes he is fulfilling a woman’s forbidden fantasies—and sometimes he is. His way of manipulating women is *gynephilic*, not necessarily hostile.

Many masochists have a weakness for sweet, rather angelic women. What really excites them is to uncover the lascivious female, the woman in heat, beneath a veil of old-fashioned charm. For men with masochistic tendencies, the very thing that must have upset them as children—the discovery of maternal sexuality, not directed towards them—becomes the quintessentially arousing scene.

Watching his own woman offer her body to others is a “tragic” representation of the original trauma: the scene of the mother’s primordial betrayal. In fact, he practises a sort of “negative jealousy”, but jealousy nonetheless. “Men who like to be cuckolded” sweeten their bitter jealousy with honeyed perversion. But—in another baroque oxymoron—the promiscuity of a masochist’s woman is also, paradoxically, his retaliation against the men who enjoy her favours: he, the masochist, *knows*, while the others do not. He directs the scene, and the men who ignorantly enjoy his beloved are poor bastards, to whom the woman’s body is offered as easy bait. The other men are mere puppets in the hands of the *maître du jeu*. It is essential for the masochist, however, that the woman be his accomplice, thus enacting the opposite of his experience long ago when he himself was “the other”, when his parents regarded him as that “stupid kid who doesn’t know”.

In conclusion, masochism is an expedient that transforms the very unpleasant exclusion from the significant other’s enjoyment into a scene, an object, into one’s own enjoyment, from which the other is now excluded.

From passion to action

In the Woody Allen film, *Take the Money and Run* (1969), the young Woody lives in a violent, run-down slum. Being a puny kid, he is often beaten up: bullies tear off his glasses, throw them onto the ground and crush them underfoot. Years later, as a man all-too-familiar with this treatment, Woody introduces a variation: as soon as he senses an imminent attack of this nature, he tears off his own glasses and crushes them on the ground. Thus he self-administers the violence of which he had previously been a passive victim.

This gag illustrates what psychoanalysis has defined as “identification with the aggressor” (Ferenczi, 1932; Anna Freud, 1936), which in turn illustrates a process that Sigmund Freud had described to explain the mystery of neurotics, who seem to inflict pain and suffering on themselves for no plausible reason—at times not even an unconscious one. Ultimately, Freud elaborated his notion of a primary masochism—and underlying death drive—to account for this mysterious behaviour (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920g). The introduction of this root masochism, however, only served to reformulate the mystery, not to solve it.

As we saw in Chapter One, before reaching this conclusion, Freud had theorised that many ways of self-inflicting pain still obey the pleasure principle (*Lustprinzip*), albeit indirectly: by transforming the subject from a passive victim into an active agent of suffering, such pain offers consolation by restoring a certain *mastery*. Just like Woody Allen, inasmuch as he cannot avoid being the target of violence, the masochist prefers to inflict it upon himself—and in this manner extract a kind of desperate pride. This self-destructive behaviour is enjoyable because, through the act of attacking himself as his own sadistic object, he is able to participate in the sadistic enjoyment of the person abusing him.

As with all perversions, masochism is also a strategy for deriving pleasure from something that was once extremely unpleasant. The masochist repeats the painful experience, but he eroticises it. This process is clearly illustrated in a number of cases from the SM community of Los Angeles as reported by Stoller (1991a). The four extreme masochists he encountered, all of whom sought out physical pain, had one trait in common. As children, they had all suffered from a serious, lingering illness. The pain could not be alleviated at first and eventually required agonizing surgical operations. As a result, all four are persons who were forced to bear long periods of confinement without ever having the chance to openly and appropriately express the frustration, desperation and rage consuming them.

For example, as a young girl, one of the masochists had suffered from a spinal disease so acute that the pain would not allow her to sit down for days on end. Another man suffered from cystic fibrosis as a child and underwent a series of medical penetrations during his prolonged period of hospitalisation, including injections, IV’s, incisions, and bloodletting, which he then re-enacted as an adult for pleasure. Admittedly, it is more difficult to trace back forms of masochism involving humiliation and punishment to

specific, original traumas, and yet such traumas almost always come to light through analytic reconstruction.

In conclusion, while the masochist needs to ensure mastery over the other, it is even more imperative for him to master his own passivity. As in the case of an artist who creates a representation of his own failure, it is in the active representation of the masochist's abjection that his mastery prevails.

Contracts

One of the classic features of masochism is the use of contracts. Indeed, it is quite common for masochists to draw up contracts prescribing submission and then to present them to their mistress-tormentor to sign. Here, for example, is one drawn up by Sacher-Masoch for his lover Fanny von Pistor.

Contract between Fanny von Pistor and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

Herr Leopold von Sacher-Masoch gives his word of honour to Fran Pistor to become her slave and to comply unreservedly for six months, with every one of her desires and commands. For her part, Fran Pistor

cannot demand anything dishonorable of him—anything that would make him disreputable as a human being and a citizen. Furthermore, she is to allow him to devote six hours a day to his professional work, and agrees never to read his correspondence or his literary compositions. At even/offense or negligence or lèse-majesté, the Mistress (Fanny Pistor) may punish her slave (Sacher-Masoch) as she sees fit and at her own discretion. In short, her subject must display slavish submission to his Mistress, take any bestowal of her favour as a delightful gift and make no demand of her love, or assert any right as her lover. Frau Pistor, on her side, promises to wear furs as often as practical, and especially when being cruel.

After a period of six months, this slavery intermezzo is to be regarded by both sides as having never happened, and no serious allusion is to be made to it. Everything is to be viewed as forgotten, and both sides are to return to their earlier amorous relationship. [Later deleted]

These six months need not to be in direct sequence; they can be interrupted for long periods of time, according to the Mistress's whim.

This contract is confirmed by the signatures of the participants.

Taking effect on 8 December 1869

Fanny von Pistor Baganow

Sir Leopold, Knight of Sacher-Masoch

(<http://humanitiesunderground.org/coldness-and-cruelty-two-contracts-of-von-sac>)

At first sight, a contract of this nature seems simply to express the masochist's preoccupation with controlling the game by keeping it within the realm of "play". By naming himself a slave, while simultaneously setting limits to his slavery, he maintains control over the situation. Thanks to the contract, the "mistress" is mastered: her supremacy only prevails within the precise limits determined by the one enjoying the subjection.

Years later, however, Masoch wrote yet another contract, this time with his wife Wanda.

My Slave,

The conditions under which I accept you as my slave and tolerate you at my side are as follows:

You shall renounce your identity completely.

You shall submit totally to my will.

In my hands you are a blind instrument that carries out all my orders without discussion. If you should ever forget that you are my slave and do not obey me implicitly in all matters, I shall have the right to punish and correct you as I please, without your daring to complain.

Anything pleasant and enjoyable that I shall grant you will be a favor on my part which you must acknowledge with gratitude. I shall always behave faultlessly towards you but shall have no obligation to do so.

You shall be neither a son nor a brother nor a friend; you shall be no more than my slave grovelling in the dust.

Your body and your soul shall belong to me, and even if this causes you great suffering, you shall submit your feelings and sentiments to my authority.

I shall be allowed to exercise the greatest cruelty, and if I should mutilate you, you shall bear it without complaint. You shall work for me like a slave and although I may wallow in luxury whilst leaving you in privation and treading you underfoot, you shall kiss the foot that tramples you without a murmur. I shall have the right to dismiss you at any time, but you shall not be allowed to leave me against my will, and if you should escape, you hereby recognize that I have the power and the right to torture you to death by the most horrible methods imaginable.

You have nothing save me; for you I am everything, your life, your future, your happiness, your unhappiness, your torment and your joy.

You shall command/ out everything I demand of you, whether it is good or evil, and if I should demand that you commit a crime, you shall turn criminal to obey my will.

Your honour belongs to me, as does your blood, your mind and your ability to work.

Should you ever find my domination unendurable, and should your chains ever become too heavy, you will be obliged to kill yourself, for I will never set you free.

“I undertake, on my word of honour, to be the slave of Mrs. Wanda von Dunajew in the exact way [demanded], and to submit myself without resistance to even/thing [imposed] upon me.”

Dr. Leopold, Knight of Sacher-Masoch

(<http://humanitiesunderground.org/coldness-and-cruelty-two-contracts-of-von-sach>)

Compared to the first contract, the submission prescribed here reaches much greater extremes. There are no limits to this game of subjection; in fact the contract establishes a subjection with no constraints whatsoever. At first glance, it seems that Masoch had passed the point of no return, but as Theodor Reik wrote, “[T]he masochist loses all battles, except the last one” (1953, p. 363). This “last battle” does not refer to a chronological reality but is rather an ultimatum of mastery. *In the end*, it is the masochist who wins.

The opening act—the drafting of a contract in the first place—expresses what will be the final victory. In effect, legally speaking, a written contract serves as a guarantee for the two parties, particularly for the weaker of the two. Drawing up a contract, in and of itself, sets limits to power. A true slave never has the benefit of a contract with his master: if he had, *ipso facto* he would cease to be a slave. A “slavery contract” is thus an ironic paradox.

It is also worth examining the form of Masoch’s contract with Wanda. Even if Wanda is the subject, the I, of the contractual statement, there is no doubt that the author, that is, the real subject, is Leopold himself. This makes the final signature rather ambiguous. Does it mean that the writer accepts the last paragraph appearing in quotation marks (“I undertake on my word of honour ...”), or that he admits to being the author of a text in which Wanda imposes her will? But if Leopold is the true creator of the contract establishing his slavery, who then is the real master? Is the contract only this last paragraph—in which Leopold accepts his slavery—or, in some subtle way, is it the entire text, despite its *performative* form, as philosophers of language would say, of imposing the rules? (“Performative proposition” refers to a statement that does not merely describe a fact but whose very utterance is tantamount to an intersubjective act. For example, if I say, “I promise to come to your house tomorrow”, by the simple utterance of these words I perform an act of promising).

In linguistics “statement” (*énoncé*) refers to the explicit words spoken, while “proposition” (*énonciation*) is the act itself of which the statement is the verbal manifestation. In actual fact, even though the subject of the *statement* (Wanda) proposes unconditional submission to the subject of the *proposition* (Leopold), conditions are nonetheless

being placed: the masochistic subject must accept the condition that, *witiiin tiie game*, his submission will be unconditional. Its unconditional nature is contained, protected, by the contractual condition. This serves a dual purpose for the masochist: it keeps his mortification within the limits of the game (of the perversion), while the act of setting the limits to his unlimited servitude gives him enjoyment in and of itself. Undoubtedly, the masochist is already enjoying drafting a contract, because the act of setting limits and conditions to his own submission gives him a foretaste of this experience. Writing a masochistic contract is itself a masochistic enjoyment, in so far as the contract anticipates and promotes the masochist's submission, it gives him enjoyment, while in so far as it is an act-proposition of ultimate mastery, it provides the triumphant setting for his subjugation-statement.

It seems that Sacher-Masoch's approach evolved after his contract with Fanny. By the time he drafted the contract with Wanda, he had become so adroit and self-assured with perversion that he could allow himself to play the slave with ever increasing verisimilitude. What is important is that the real servitude—not inside the game, but in “social life”—be touched upon yet kept beyond a subtle boundary that should absolutely never be crossed. Leopold makes Wanda write as if she were his pitiless mistress, yet it is always he—the famous, respected author, member of the reigning elite of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—who remains master of the game. Thanks to the masochistic antithesis, the subject fully savours, through the ironic hyperbole of his slavery, his consummate domination over the woman.

Pain and closure: on a case reported by Serge André

The masochist's need to suffer is well-illustrated in a case reported by the Belgian analyst Serge André (1993, pp. 43–57). His patient, Blaise, had been suffering for five years, since his marriage, from an extremely painful facial neuralgia on his left cheek. No organic cause could be determined and yet the shooting pains were so severe that he had contemplated suicide. “Ah! A case of conversion hysteria,” one might claim. Well, yes, that would be true in part, but only in part.

A latecomer during his parents' marriage, Blaise was born when his brothers and sisters were already in their teens. His father had died when he was five, and Blaise had almost no memory of him at all. Only as an adult did he learn that his father had committed suicide (the source of his own fantasies of suicide?), although he could never get anyone to tell him why. He continued to live with his mother; his brothers and sisters had left the house at a young age while he stayed on alone with her for many years, her sole consolation. Furthermore, all this took place in the context of a disastrous economic situation, since the father's death had plunged the previously prosperous family into a life of poverty.

There is a particular scene associated with the sudden, spectacular healing of his hysterical neuralgia. When Blaise was seven, he witnessed a ten-year-old African girl urinating. Peeking from under the bathroom door, he clearly saw the girl's genitals, still free of pubic hair. He was held in thrall by the outline of the two joined lips of her sex and the shining spray of urine. From then on, he was *hanté*, haunted by this vision of the line of the hairless female sexual organ, and indeed became a fetishist of this sign. To gaze at the clean-shaven and unaroused sexual organ of a woman—to witness the clenched line once again—was the object of maximum erotic arousal for him. But this fetish-sign extended its power well beyond the genital object: a woman looking at him with tight lips (in French, *pincées*) or with a stiff or angry (*pincée*) expression was enough to give him an erection. He even had to stop using a pen because the mere sight of the line created when he closed his pen case set off masturbatory fantasies.

He would regularly frequent prostitutes until he found one with the type of genitals he liked. Then he would stare at the closed lips of her sex, masturbate to orgasm, and finally lie down in her arms. His wife had agreed to shave her pubes and let him contemplate the line of her closed lips, but the moment she began to get aroused, they would turn off the light so that he would not have to see the horrible slit of her slightly open vagina. He was completely revolted by even the tiniest opening of the lips. In short, his was a fetishism of the *slit line*, which extended from the original split vulva to a whole series of objects with the same shape.

If we keep to the Freudian theory of fetishism—the fetish as representing the woman's missing penis—we can conclude that the sign of the slit was fetishised, even if it represents an extreme case since the *something* in place of the penis is here a pure lack. This case could be described as a sort of zero degree on the scale of fetishism, in that the fetish is not an object that stands for the absent penis but the sign of absence itself.

One day, once more describing the famous scene of the little girl urinating, Blaise remembered that his left cheek had been touching the ground as he looked up at her. He recalled standing up and feeling the tingle of the gravel on which his cheek had been resting. Once he remembered this episode, his neuralgic pains disappeared quite suddenly. This healing recalls the cathartic method practised by Freud in the 1800s, in which reliving the crucial scene does away with the symptom. Anyway, once relieved of the symptom, Blaise gave free rein to his fetishism. "He could finally abandon himself to his masturbatory fantasies without having to pay for them with suffering."

This led to a plan to get a tattoo on his back, which he believed would mark the termination of his analysis. The tattoo would represent a dragon-woman lying on her back with her legs apart. "He planned to have this mask of skin tattooed on his back in such a way that the slit of the woman's sex would match up with the crack between his buttocks" (S. André, 1993, p. 51). Blaise would become like the dual male and female human described by Aristophanes in the famous myth in Plato's *Symposium*—man on one side and girl on the other. He wanted to wear his fetish on his body, which only the person behind him would be able to see, however. The analyst objected, calling

the plan a masquerade, to which Blaise replied that such scorn for the mask-tattoo solution failed to take into account the fact that he would be forced to bear the pain from the needle for months, or even years. Blaise was not entirely wrong on this point, in so far as it manifested his need for the symptom: in other words, the tattoo would replace the neuralgia from which he had been freed. Finally, Blaise did indeed walk out on his analyst to put himself in the hands of the skin engraver.

This last point—the subject’s need to suffer, first from a hysterical symptom and then from a tattoo—is crucial. Against a background of fetishistic phantasmagoria, Blaise’s masochism stands out clearly in relief. The inevitability of pain can be seen as the price to pay for a *lack of openness to the other*, a lack of openness that is repeated within the analysis as well.

In the end, every perversion has something of the masochistic about it. Blaise’s masochistic passion is revealed in the numerous writings he supplied to his analyst, where he speaks of himself as “a personification of the ridiculous”, “a heap of broken sausage meat”, “a particular variety of sodomized man”, “a pure product of pollution”, “a fruit rind”, etc.

But what is behind this need for pain and self-humiliation? And what connection is there between his fetish—the sign of the slit—and his need to suffer, almost as if this were the price to pay for his pleasure? André is dead and cannot answer these questions, but it’s not very hard to recognise some things that André did not discuss.

The vaginal slit as a fetish seems not only to refer to a woman’s *something* that takes the place of the missing penis, as suggested by Freud’s classic theory, but also to signify *closure*, in general. What is essential here is that the vagina does not open nor even seem to open to him. Actually, it is not just a matter of a desire for the sign of closure: as we have seen, Blaise himself does not “open up” the prostitutes he frequents. But where does this fixation with a woman’s closure come from?

Let us not forget that he lived for years with a mother who had *closed up* after her husband’s suicide, closed up in both her pain and her chastity. The mother had no lovers and her son was certainly not her lover. The mother’s lips remained closed (*pincées*) regarding the motives for the father’s death, while the mother herself seemed to be *pincée*, which in French also has the sense of resentful and angry. Blaise’s behaviour with prostitutes is telling in this regard: after enjoying the sight of their vaginal “closure”, he lies chastely in their embrace, re-enacting the childhood situation.

Furthermore, the nature of Blaise’s transference indicates how this closure—for which the slit is both metaphor and metonym—is typical of his relations with the other. For a long time he was even horrified by his analyst, recalling the horror inspired by the gaping, open vagina. To escape from the vampire-like sucking he felt in his transference with the analyst, he came up with the idea of covering himself completely with a kind of protective helmet that would disguise him from the analyst’s gaze. “On the outside of the helmet,” he wrote, “as a kind of decoy, I will have painted the gory intestinal convolutions of a smashed fluorescent brain. This helmet will be my accessory with me wherever I go, my imaginary protection” (S. André, 1993, p. 51). Apparently, Blaise

feels that the psychological *penetration* he attributes to the analyst is sucking him up, dispossessing him, and thus he fantasises about a helmet that will *close him up* against such intrusion.

But the analyst's listening can also be a substitute for the vaginal opening—all-encompassing and taking in. Rather than let his penisbrain be sucked up, Blaise responds with the apotropaic image of a smashed brain, which at the same time, however, represents his guts. The intestines and the brain are both internal organs, which he evidently wants to protect from any analytic tampering (Americans may have something like this in mind when they call analysts brain shrinkers). It is as if Blaise had to ensure the closure of his own mind, just as it was essential to ensure his mother's sexual closure, and hence his utter horror of being open, even to the gaze of another man. Thus the tattoo with which he interrupts the analysis brands him with an indelible closure: the Other can enjoy him by looking from behind—but just looking. Blaise does not want to be sodomised: in fact his anus will remain closed. Did he not refer to himself as “a particular variety of sodomised man”? In this case, one who is sodomised virtually, not physically. Hence the fetish here does not so much represent the surrogate of an imaginary female phallus but rather confirms the woman's closure to phallic intrusion. More generally, it connotes his own closure towards the Other, his disconnection from the *nomos*, from the law as dictated by the Other.

His devastating neuralgia had its onset following his marriage. As a husband, it was no longer enough to merely contemplate the woman's closed sex: he had to open it, to penetrate it. By marrying her, Blaise committed himself to renouncing his fetishism, at least partially. He did manage to perform his duty as a husband, but at the price of his neuralgic pain, and now, at the price of the pain of the tattoo needle, he hopes to find a new equilibrium. Yet everything seems to indicate that this pain, which is so indispensable for him, was nothing other than his own and his mother's pain in the miserable, chaste life they shared for so many years, alone, her mouth sealed shut about his father's fatal torments. Blaise's pain is not only the penalty to pay for opening a woman who should stay closed—according to the rules of the family—but it is also the condition for his own enjoyment: perhaps it is the same pain that led his father to suicide, that same father who had enjoyed his mother and given her several children. Enjoyment, pain, and suicide are thus tightly intertwined: if enjoyment does not make a virtue out of necessity (that is, of closure)—in this case, if the subject allows himself to enjoy an opening—then a fatal pain, and possibly suicide, will follow him like his shadow.

As a general rule, suffering brings the masochist back to reality, which is first and foremost the reality of our living-with-others. Lacking a real ethic—that is, a *causa vivendi*, which in the end is always the search of giving enjoyment or happiness to the other—the masochist must settle for the reality of suffering. He lives out the punishment in the absence of any cause or goal to guide him, existing as a human simulacrum of a law that means nothing to him (This topic will be dealt with in greater depth in the Appendix, “Freud and Masochism”).

Masochism and fetishism: Antonio's rage

Lastly, foot fetishism appertains as a subspecies to masochism, which is connected with the relationship to man and woman.

(S. Freud, 1914)

Freud describes fetishism as an illusion. Every perversion is an illusion. And the fetishist's self-deception is to ascribe to women a penis, whose representation would be the fetish.

But fetishism has another function for the subject, that of reevaluating a base, vulgar side. In short, it appears as a way to transform a "humiliated and offended" life into erotic pleasure. And here emerges fetishism's contiguity to masochism.

In fact, there is another reason for which the fetishist shows a weakness for shoes and feet: they stink. This is the masochistic implication of the fetish. This correlation dates back to even the earliest reflections on fetishism, as we can see from Freud's quote above.

* * *

Antonio came to me at the age of thirty-five, immediately labelling himself as a masochistic fetishist. He can manage to copulate with his girlfriend but only if she walks over him, wearing certain chosen shoes, as if he were a rug, and only if her shoes played the starring role in their sexual trade. On top of this, he also asks her to urinate on his face. These fantasies have dominated his sexuality since adolescence. "How could I possibly manage to be a real husband and father with such a sexuality!" he laments.

From our first meeting he recounted "the mother of all scenes" which would lie at the origin of his exclusive erotic specialisation. At five years of age he was playing with his younger brother and hit him, not seriously, with a toy pistol, at which point his mother—seized by an outburst of rage which he finds excessive for the incident—grabs his pistol and crushes it with her feet. That scene still haunts him in all its details, like a series of flashbacks: the blue shoes which crush his "*pistolino*" (a term which in Italian means both a small pistol and a child's penis), the flesh-coloured stockings, the vivid colours in the surroundings—all of which together still dominate the scene which makes him prick up, otherwise no erection. His lover should tread on him just as his mother trod on the small pistol, and the blue shoes are for him the erotic apex.

Every now and then he is struck by furious attacks which he calls "small trips". These occur when he is confronted by injustices, whether real or imaginary, and almost always committed by male figures: the swindling government, managers in his workplace, bullies in films, serials, or newscasts, the police, his landlord ... for him, these men, arrogant with power, commit abuses.

At first glance one might think that since the masochistic staging features a woman-oppressor, then the original object of resentment would be his mother. But I have said

that this is not the case. Antonio is a “feminist”. All of Antonio’s rage is taken out explicitly on men who hold power over him and over women. It will only be later that Antonio will come to understand that these furious “trips” are, in the end, a reedition of his mother’s unexpected fury in the “mother of all fantasies”.

Certainly we can read the penis into what the woman crushes under her feet. Antonio’s rare recollections of his childhood, in effect, head in this phallic sense. There is the scene in which his mother gives him an injection on his thigh while he, still a small boy, lies against his father as he would against a small cushion. Another flashback: as a child he slept in his parents’ bedroom, but one night he awakens with a terrible “stomach ache” and is taken care of by his father who, he recalls, was sleeping on the side of the bed closest to his crib, the side where usually his mother slept.

In these flashbacks, the sexual roles appear inverted: the “stinging” woman above, the passive father below—and he himself in the middle, a psychic hermaphrodite at once pierced and piercing. When as a small child he wakes up achy (for having witnessed his parents’ coitus?), it is the father “on the mother’s side” who helps him. In short, all this leaves us thinking of a phallic mother, while the father is reduced to being a mattress or small rug.

But do these screen-scenes—like a projected film—photograph the interpersonal relations of that family? Nothing of the sort.

The father of our subject was actually an authoritative, but not authoritarian, figure both within and outside the family. He had married a woman of a lower social and cultural level (as the son will also do). According to Antonio, his father, absorbed by his work as a physician, neglects his wife, who continuously laments the fact. In the original outburst the mother seems to say, “I’m stomping not just on your little pistol, but also on your father’s.” It is as if with his “little trips” Antonio took on the maternal rage against male power. Would one call this “identification with his mother”?

Antonio describes himself as a “Stollerian” pervert. According to him, his mother had wanted a daughter, and failing that, as a child treated him like a little girl. It was his father, instead, who reacted to the girlish hairstyles his mother gave him, insisting on a more boyish style. Antonio’s father rather recalls the father of Sacher-Masoch, chief of the Austro-Hungarian police: all man, untouchable legislator, not very affectionate. Antonio has taken on not just the paternal law with its solid values, but also the angry female rebellion of his mother against the superior man. Even seeing women harassed by bad men on a TV programme is enough to set Antonio off on one of his “small trips”.

Obsessional neurosis and masochism

But little by little, I become aware that Antonio’s subjective structure, while bringing him onto the stage of fantasies and perverse acts, is obsessional neurotic. After all, the profession he chose, advanced research in computer science, is wellsuited to his

obsessive character. And his analysis will be somewhat lengthy, as often happens with obsessives— because rationalisation, the principal weapon of obsessives, obstructs the unconscious with logic and systematically delays any insight into their own desire.

Two characterising elements push me to conclude that this subject is obsessional: his being dominated by a sense of blame and penance, and his refusal to assume himself as a subject of desire.

The obsessive-compulsive symptom always brings forth a conflict between two opposing impulses, which the subject satisfies in an alternating way, thus obtaining a sort of algebraic zero between the two. It is usually a conflict between a law that is broadly speaking ethical, and the drives that transgress it, with the obsessional subject who can never decide between the two. Hence the obsessional's exceeding sense of self-blame, and his tendency to punish himself.

In effect, while Antonio may be very careful and anxious with money, in order to purchase a house he embarks on a rather risky property deal which goes wrong and threatens, over the long run, to bring him to ruin. It is as if he wanted to live with Damacles' sword hanging over his head. He leaves the girlfriend with whom he "played" masochist and initiates a relation, albeit unenthusiastically, with a woman of about forty. Soon afterwards the woman reveals to him that she has multiple sclerosis, even if the symptoms of her illness have not yet manifested themselves. "After having told me something like this," he said, "for me it was impossible to leave her! Abandoning her because she is ill would be an unacceptable mean and cowardly act, even if my first impulse was to cut the cord." Yet this woman in no way corresponds to his ideal companion: she has a level of education much inferior to his, she is Catholic and conservative while he is an atheist and belongs to the radical Left, she doesn't enjoy looking at paintings while he does; and, more seriously, she will be diagnosed as not being able to have children.

Now, the poor woman does not ask him explicitly to marry her in the church and have children, yet he takes it for granted that this is what she wishes. The result: he will marry her in church, and given her infertility, she will go abroad for artificial insemination, which will result in the birth of a baby girl. All of this might seem a long series of acts of profound love for this woman, with whom after all he has a tranquil, unimpeachable relation.

But all of this can be read in a key of penance: to mar his life by buying a house which risks never legally being his own; by marrying a woman with a degenerative illness whom he says he does not love. He declares himself a coward, but arranges himself in such a way as to live a life in its own way heroic. But what is the guilt for which he must atone?

Certainly his aggressive impulses, which found an outlet in his bothersome little brother, are at fault: even today he still needs a woman's punishment to atone for these drives. However, Antonio avoids in part the obsessional penalty by eroticising it as a perverse ritual.

But the guilt is also his father's, who on the one hand is the guardian of a chivalrous moral law that obliges him to satisfy the woman at his cost, while on the other he is the cause of the woman's dissatisfaction. Antonio's impasse is that the guardian of the moral law—the paternal instance and not the father in flesh and blood—is also the guilty one in his fantasy, given that he “brutalises” the woman or leaves her unsatisfied. It is like being judged by a judge who is himself a criminal, as we see in the final part of Fritz Lang's film *M* (1931).

As an obsessive, Antonio does not know what he desires. He claims to be doing analysis in order to become a real husband and father—and in effect the analysis satisfies his demands, and yet he says he is unsatisfied because, in the end, he asks himself, “Is this really what I desire to be?” The doubt arrives quickly: “Do I want this thing, or does an other?” Like a Haitian zombie, he seems subject to the will of the other.

Since his wife refuses any type of fetishist or masochistic game, he is resigned to a normal sexual relation. Yet Antonio is convinced that he doesn't really love this woman. “I only did what she wanted!” And when I point out to him that instead it was he who did everything, he repeats, “Yes, but because I knew *she wanted* a church wedding and kids.” This is his *Leitmotif*: “Everything I do is not what *I* want, it is what the *Otlier* wants.”

For example, it was he who chose to take up a career in computer science given his passion for mathematics, but he speaks about his work almost as if he were constrained to do it. And which job did he *really* want, then? He can't say. He seems to desire only certain “damaging” pleasures that he allows himself to indulge: smoking a pipe and masturbating every morning when he awakes, unbeknown to his wife. He has always masturbated in the morning in an unsatisfactory, compulsive way: “It's like punching a time card.” On 16 August, the night of San Lorenzo, he and a group of friends were out looking at falling stars when one of them said, “Everyone make a wish.” And Antonio said, “A wish? But I have no wishes.”

Through an analytic reconstruction, Antonio becomes aware that he is looking to rebel against a severe, punitive paternal figure that he transfers onto men who hold power. One dream made an impression on him: “I have a physical problem, my father (who is a physician) takes a look at me and puts a sort of helmet on my head. I ask him how long I have to wear it, and he tells me, ‘Your whole life’.” This is the image he has of himself: of being constrained by a “paternal” mental helmet which oppresses and protects him at the same time, and which he cannot escape. And yet his real father is the opposite of that *padre padrone*, that coercive “master-father” whom he “lives” in his dreams and symptoms. His real father is indulgent, and has never punished him. Yet in his unconscious, the Father—often identified in his dreams with the pope (in Italian, the term *papa*, pope, is very close to *papà*, daddy), whom he detests—is the oppressor. This seems to me to be one of the clinical cases which confute the psychoanalytic relationism: nothing in his “real” relation with his father explains this

profound rancour when confronted with a paternal figure identified as a tyrant towards women.

After all, his relation with me is often marked by acts of rebellion against what he considers my unbearable abuses of power. For example, when I am forced to shift our meeting time due to extenuating circumstances, he reproaches me for months for this “breaking of our pact” and complains about having been forced into this change. The obsessional subject does not tolerate any change in the rules; flexibility is interpreted for the most part as cheating. Even after some years of analysis, he often reproaches me because, according to him, I don’t let him finish his analysis (in reality I have never pushed him to continue his analysis at any cost). In short, he can finish analysis *only if the Other* (here, the analyst) *desires this end*. The analyst, like the father, tends to incarnate this signifier (Lacan would say) of the master-father. As Lacan said of obsessionals, they pass their lives awaiting the death of their master. But this waiting renders them immobile and half-dead in so far as being devoid of desires to assert.

He ended his analysis only after he was finally able to tell me something that he had never said before. His torment—he confessed—had always been that of having a smaller-than-average penis, and hence his conviction to never be able to sexually satisfy a woman. Thanks to this revelation, made to me after the birth of his adored daughter, like a feedback his imaginary world assumed an almost completed form: the “mother of all scenes” put on display the mother’s rage for his too small and unsatisfying penis (as unsatisfying as the “absentee” penis of her husband). From that moment it was as if he had been subjugated to an indisputable law: to seek to satisfy all the desires of an unsatisfied woman. He himself, with his small penis the cause of her dissatisfaction, thus had to make himself the object of feminine rage. All he could do was to make amends for this unsatisfied female desire. And his woman’s sclerosis and sterility embodied this female deficiency. In Italian, the word *fallo* signifies both phallus and fault, a play on words which Antonio indulges: “My phallus is at fault.” Unable to desire, he felt obliged to extinguish his dawning desire every morning by masturbating, that is, by enjoying imaginarily the humiliating scene for his not being able to satisfy a woman.

Here we see how—in a particularly complex twist—maso-fetishist perversion and obsessional structure mesh. What Antonio must avoid is his ruthlessness towards women, by offering them a sort of playful, preventive revenge for this cruelty. He spends his life seeking to compensate women for the suffering caused by men, yet he never really succeeds owing to the insufficiency of his penis, given his imaginary impossibility to give her what she lacks.

His neurosis is resolved when he manages to tell me something that is a real fact and not an imaginary construction—having a small penis. It was the first time he had ever confessed it to another person. *Antonio’s ability to say what he lacks* succeeds in dissolving the impasse in which he had been living. Finally, he can make a decision according to his own desire: to end his analysis.

Erotic socialism

Shoes bring us back to the feet that, together with the anus, are the humblest part of the human body. But the feet, unlike the excretory organs, are for the most part excluded from the erotic part of life. The foot and shoe fetishist, in his own way, delivers an evangelical justice: “The last, feet and shoes, shall be first in my love life.” By means of shoes, the lowest part of the body touches the dirty ground. And it is not by chance that so many humiliating expressions and metaphors in many languages regard the feet and the anus: “Kiss my feet”, “Kneel before my feet”, “I am not worthy enough to even tie your shoes”, “Let me put my feet on you”, “You can shine my boots”, “Kiss my ass”, “Lick my ass”, “to be treated like a piece of shit”, “grab him in the ass”, etc. After all, it is not by chance that scatological fantasies and exchanges abound among shoe and foot fetishists. In Antonio’s case, this humiliation assumed social and political aspects as well: to be on the side of the persecuted and underdogs. As he told me, since childhood he himself had always felt distanced from his mother’s love, both because he was male, and because she was taken up by the arrival of a second child—a new baby brother. How banal! It happens to a lot of children, but they don’t necessarily become neurotic or perverted. And yet with Antonio, his humiliation and his being ignored led precisely in this direction—a fetishist within an obsessional-compulsive subjectivity.

It is as if the original humiliation dominated his eros. But this was not because his mother or father had humiliated him—on the contrary, as the firstborn, “I had been put on a pedestal,” he said. The word in Italian for “pedestal” is *pedistallo*, a combination of *piede* (foot) and *stallo* (stall, place, seat). He appears to have been crushed by the foot of the pedestal on which as a child he had been placed.

The shoe or the foot *cause* his desire because shoes and feet are his Cause, the same way one would speak of “the Cause of socialism”. These objects, not at all ideal, ironically become his ideal objects. Fetishists are the socialists of Eros.

In effect, the shoe is not only the penis which the woman lacks, but also—in so far as the shoe is a container—her vagina which retreats; in any case, the fetishist Eros orbits entirely around a *poverty*. The fetishist, to the degree that he is always in some way masochistic, is more infatuated less with misery than with what represents it.

Krafft-Ebing (1893) had addressed “negative fetishism” when he said that some subjects are excited not by a part of a woman’s body, but by what she is missing. For example, one subject was able to have sex with women only if they were missing a leg, or visibly crippled, another only with cross-eyed women. And as we have seen, Antonio was able to overcome the maso-fetishist *conditio sine qua non* for having sex with a woman only when he found a sterile woman with multiple sclerosis. It is the lack of something that makes a woman desirable.

This fetishism of lack is apparently the “objectified” face of the body integrity identity disorder (BIID), whereby certain persons feel that they are uncomfortable with a certain body part, which they try to have amputated on the basis of more or less imaginary diseases, because only this lack can remove their discomfort and make them feel

“whole”; it is akin to finally paying off a debt. We see an outline of these two mirrored syndromes in Antonio, who can only have sex with a “mutilated” woman because he himself lives as a mutilated man, his penis being too small.

But perhaps negative fetishism is a way to overcome the fetishism itself, given that, according to Freud, the fetish is always in some way negative: the fetish takes the place of what is missing. And the lack can itself be fetishised. Thus, for example, a woman’s missing leg renders her desirable because her lack represents yet another lack. It is a hyperbolic, ironic representation of what the woman lacks (the penis).

But does not what excites the fetishist in any case always represent a penury in the woman, or in the subject himself? It is as if that compassion for the other, which is never lacking in sex between true lovers, were deflected from the other onto something supplementary—or something missing—which illustrates, by giving it some lustre, its penury. So that instead of “com-passion”, of sharing sufferance and enjoyment with the other, the fetishist enjoys what the other would have enjoyed had this latter not suffered this lack.

Chapter Four: Sadism: “Punishing Women”

Apathetic sadistic passion

Sadism is sometimes seen as a sort of zero degree on the scale of perversion: we have sadistic impulses to the extent that we all desire to take revenge on those who have made us suffer. Every situation of enraged retaliation against another brings us face to face with sadism.

So I, the sadist, enjoy beating a woman in order to punish The Woman for her original “betrayal”, that is, for having experienced pleasure with another and not with me. Sadistic rape is thus in its way an application of the law of retaliation: I (the excluded child) will now make my original woman (my mother) pay for the pleasure she enjoyed with her husband or another child, by beating and forcing sexual intercourse on “that whore” for having refused to enjoy me when I was a child. The driving force behind sadism is resentment.

In Michael Haneke’s film *Code Unknown* (2001), there is a scene that takes place in the Paris Metro where a couple of young Arabs are harassing a white girl, who does not respond to their provocation. After a while, one of the two youths spits in her face. Thus, retaliation for the woman’s sexual refusal is taken through the act of spitting, the oral inverse of kissing. This very simple dynamic is in fact implicit in every sadistic experience.

And yet, true sexual sadism is actually much more complicated. It does not appear to be a form of revenge because the sadist feels no rancour against his victim. This *apathy* of the tormentor—which can be found throughout the works of the Marquis de Sade—is characteristic of sadism. The sadist seems to be following Bertolt Brecht’s rule for the theatre: *distantiation* from the source of excitement. But in what way is the true sadist apathetic? Sadism is, in effect, a *pàthos*, a passion, put simply, a way to obtain pleasure. So how can a *patitos* be apathetic?

Jean Clavreul (1967, p. 100) cites the testimony of a couple of sadistic murderers during their trial in the mid-1970s. The peak of their pleasure did not come so much from seeing their victim suffer as from the *certainty of his or her innocence*. “Much more than the victims’ cries of pain,” writes Clavreul, “the sadist is concerned with their protests of innocence and pleading for mercy.” In other words, the sadist puts himself in the place of one punishing a guilty person who needs to seek forgiveness.

Put another way, *a sadistic act is a moral act*, and not just a vigorous expression of rage. The concepts of innocence and guilt imply a penal system, a moral law. In effect, the sadist is staging a kind of punishment ritual. On the one hand, he may experience the sadistic act as inflicting a just punishment. And thus, like any self-respecting executioner, he must not feel any personal animosity towards his victim: he remains indifferent, he has a *“laide indifférence”*. Alternatively, and this applies to the kind of sadist I would call the “unjust avenger”, he may enjoy the manifest injustice of which he is the agent, which is punishing an innocent person. While such action may give vent to his own original resentment, it seems primarily intended to cause resentment in the other. It is as if he made himself a hero of injustice. In this sense, the sadist manoeuvres within the quasi-philosophical scenario so methodically elaborated by Sade: the sadist makes himself the instrument, an earthly medium, of Nature’s fundamental, metaphysical cruelty. In an era when God was still important, the sadist denounced God’s boundless cruelty, staging a philosophical/moral protest against God or Nature or both.

In a 1947 essay, the essayist and novelist Pierre Klossowski provided an enlightening interpretation of Sade’s world, defining it as permeated with “male cruelty against the mother”. In this view, sadism does not manifest the usual Oedipus complex, but rather a configuration we could call an Orestes complex, in which the hero kills the shameless mother in order to vindicate the father. While it is true that the victims of Sade’s heroes were both male and female, all of them nonetheless have a feminine quality about them. The virtuous Justine, for instance, Sade’s chosen victim for his most phantasmagorical torments, can be seen as the very paradigm of a Sade victim.

Sade’s tormentor displays all the traits of an anarchic, lawless, arbitrary father who allies himself with filial female figures—such as the rogue Juliette—to intensify his relentless persecution of the mother. Perhaps this idea of an anti-mother—and thus, anti-feminine—constellation might look strange, since sadists can also strike men, of course. Yet in most cases, the ferocious killing of men has a “meaning”, such as revenge. The masculine victim is *one particular hated* person, while more often than not, the sadistic murderer does not know his female victims personally and his act is purely “erotic”. So, Klossowski’s suggestion can shed some light on cases of real sensational sadism.

The “greatest” (for the number of victims) serial killer of modern times is the Colombian Pedro López, alias “The Monster of the Andes”, still alive in 2015. He is supposed to have raped and killed—in Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador—more than 300 girls aged between nine and twelve (Boar & Blundell, 1983, pp. 116–118). It is true, they were not women yet, but... The son of a prostitute, Pedro nearly died from starvation after being kicked out by his mother and left alone on the streets of a degraded suburb. I wonder if a deeper reconstruction of the case would show that these girls represented for him both his awful rejecting mother and the cast-away child.

Even the six victims kidnapped, tortured, and raped between 1995 and 1996 by the notorious Belgian paedophile and murderer, Marc Dutroux, were in fact all young or adolescent girls between the ages of eight and nineteen.

Anyway, the most notorious—and I would say, significant—sadist of all times was certainly Jack the Ripper. In 1888, in the seedy district of Whitechapel, between five and seven prostitutes were found murdered, their bodies horribly mutilated. The skill with which they were cut up suggested that the assassin was some kind of butcher or surgeon. And yet Jack the Ripper was never caught.

Were all his victims prostitutes simply because prostitutes were the most accessible and defenceless targets? Actually, comparison with analogous cases suggests that massacres committed with this ritual meticulousness hinge on the relation between sexuality and morality. Assuming Jack the Ripper really had seven victims, might this number be intended to evoke the seven capital sins? In other words, was it just for convenience's sake that he chose women victims who just happened to also be prostitutes? Or do these ferocious crimes not carry the imprint of some execratory punitive, purifying passion? Behind these meticulous murders lurks the misogynist shadow of Raskol'nikov, the hero of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, who kills an old female loan shark and her sister as a form of moral protest against human wickedness. This is the essential point.

Crucified whores

The Florentine plumber Riccardo Viti brutalised approximately a dozen street whores over fifteen years. His last victim, a twenty-six-year-old Romanian, Andreea Cristina Zamfir, was found dead in May 2014 in Florence's Cascine area, the city's main prostitution zone, after being raped, tortured, and abandoned naked with a broomstick stuck up her vagina. She had been fixed to a rod to evoke a crucifixion.

Why do Jack the Ripper, the crucifying Florentine plumber, and many others choose prostitutes as their victims? It would seem that this type of sadist has something against "courtesans", particularly the poorer ones. If the sadistic act is essentially an act against woman—as Klossowski argues—it is even more so if the woman victim was someone who sold her body.

When Riccardo confessed his crime to the homicide squad chief, he whispered, "I feel sorry for my parents." The police officer could only ask, "But don't you feel sorry for the girl?" No, the sadist does not "feel sorry" for his victims, quite the contrary; he has chosen them precisely to make *tiiem* feel pain. All he was concerned about was his mum and dad not finding out about his paraphilia.

Like Jack the Ripper, the proceedings of Riccardo's trial revealed a shocking moral purpose, a desire to purify "lost women".

Another dark criminal case involved murders perpetrated by another "Monster of Florence", who killed eight couples in the province of Florence between 1968 and 1985,

often violating the corpses. He would murder young couples in secluded areas, often when they were about to have sex. In four of the eight cases, he removed the pubis of the female victim, and in two he also severed the female victim's left breast. He would usually kill the man first, then drag the girl out of the car or tent and torture her—by creating a physical separation between the male and female bodies, he symbolically cancelled their carnal union. The abscission of pubis and breast proclaimed a desexualisation of the woman which reminds us of depictions of punishment in hell for crimes of lust as frescoed on the walls of certain medieval cathedrals, including that of San Gimignano in Tuscany. Did the murderer only kill out of envy for the young couples enjoying an erotic or amorous idyll, or was he moved by a hyperbolic, punitive mission against youthful “sins of the flesh”?

The key to these crimes would seem elementary, the murderer being a rough man rejected by the opposite sex and hence full of resentment against women. In fact, Riccardo told the cop, “I killed them out of vengeance.” Apparently non-prostitutes had often rejected him, even though he was actually married to a Ukrainian. Indeed, at the age of fifty-five, he was stocky and overweight, with a prominent belly and a receding hairline. The neighbours described him as “childish” and “a mummy’s boy” (he actually lived in osmosis with his mother). Had women also rejected him when he was younger? I think women tend to reject a handsome man too if they feel hated. And the reason they are hated is because they hold the power whether to satisfy a man’s sexual hunger or not. And yet, Riccardo tortured and murdered the very women who were ready to satisfy that hunger. Under questioning, he said that he had normal sexual intercourse with the prostitutes he liked, only torturing “the ones I don’t like”. As if certain women needed punishment for a threefold blame: being women, being whores, and being unattractive. Indeed, regular drug use had given Cristina, a skinny desperate woman, a hollow face.

In sadistic crimes against women, which are significantly often serial crimes—in other words, they could continue on for ever—the sadist wishes to inflict suffering to the very end on *all women*, or, if we prefer, on Woman. This is the metaphysical and moral mark of true sadism.

As a young man Riccardo had been a member of the local Youth Communist Club, and had made a pilgrimage to socialist East Germany— a true “comrade” who apparently nourished emancipating political ideals. Religious and political morals are both blooming branches of the same tree that bears the fruits of sadistic evil.

Riccardo’s hobbies reveal something about him: he is a karate enthusiast and is fascinated by the Second World War. This attraction to violence reveals an aggressive charge behind the façade of an accommodating “mummy’s darling”. Above all, this case features an essential sadistic logic: *a political act of vengeance against Woman as the dominant gender*. For Riccardo, women seemed to replace capitalism.

Then why take it out against a girl who represented nothing but human weaknesses? An immigrant, drug addict, poor and unattractive, Cristina would sell herself occasionally in order to buy drugs and send some money to her two kids, left behind

in Romania with their grandparents. In any case, Cristina—crucified for thirty euros, evoking the thirty pieces of silver offered to Judas—was prepared to give Riccardo her vagina—so easy to obtain, but so difficult to receive as a gift. Rather than give her his penis, he gave her a mortal broomstick.

The martyred saint

Sadistic resentment elects the prostitute because she is the most innocent of women. Marta, another prostitute Riccardo had tried to torture, was a troubled Romanian in her fifties, the mother of ten children. The sadist takes pleasure not in punishing the “guilty”, that is, the beautiful women who look down on him, but rather the guiltless. He overthrows moral logic, yet his act is a moral one. The sadist is the ironic avenger of injustice.

Poor prostitutes probably roused in Riccardo a *peniaphobia* (from *penia*, poverty in Ancient Greek), wrongly referred to as xenophobia, since this hatred for immigrants is rarely roused by the presence of wealthy foreigners. In Italy, racists are riled against Moroccans, Bangladeshis, Albanians, Roma, and Romanians precisely because they are poor and weak. Xenophobia is commonly a terror of the poor.

We notice a malicious hatred in many people when in the street they encounter vagrants, beggars, and immigrants in rags. The *visible* presence of paupers is an attack to the heart of decent folks’ respectability, as if finding themselves side by side with the poor degraded or impoverished them too. Poverty is something the peniaphobic fears as “infectious”, a condition that could become his own.

But peniaphobia cannot be admitted, because a “correct” religious or political morality demands an idealisation of the poor. The Christian philanthropist will say that “in the face of every poor person I see the face of Christ”. Our culture experiences a rending contradiction. Therefore, it is quite significant that Riccardo crucifies poor Cristina as if she were Christ.

My impression is that in sadists like Riccardo, peniaphobia is only the preliminary condition of a more sophisticated passion. The sadist knows that “a poor hooker” is the most sacred among the poor.

For centuries, our culture has experienced a deep ambivalence towards the poor, but even more towards prostitution. When enraged against a woman, the first insult that comes to mind against her is something like “damn whore”. If someone gossips and badmouths, we say they’re “bitching”. And while peniaphobia is silent, hypocritically unconfessed, pornophobia (*porne* is the Greek for prostitute) is acceptable and thrives as a good substitute for blasphemy. The term “whore” deftly replaces the word God, but somehow absorbing the majesty of the latter. Indeed, Christian culture has always sanctified prostitutes, starting from Mary Magdalene, who in the Gospels was by no means a prostitute, but a possessed woman from whom Jesus removed seven devils. Yet for over a thousand years, Christians have absolutely wanted to believe that Christ’s

main female disciple was a whore. In fact, prostitutes who become nuns and saints in edifying Christian literature are too numerous to be counted. For centuries in the Western world, a low-class prostitute in a novel or film or song will surely turn out to be morally superior to the “righteous” who surround her. Significantly, the Romanian Cristina—whose name already bears the mark of the divine—is symbolically crucified: innocent and “divine”. To torture the prostitute is to do violence to the holy face of Woman. Sadistic pleasure not only consists in seeing a woman suffering, but even more in the knowledge that the suffering will turn the victim into a martyr. Only through an unfair punishment against poverty and innocence does the sadist renew and actualise the deep damage around which his lasciviousness is unleashed: being a male rejected by women.

In Quentin Tarantino’s movie, *Death Proof* (2007), the protagonist is a scarred stunt man who stalks young women before murdering them in staged car accidents using his “death-proof” stunt car. This is another example of the fact that often good artists grasp the core of perversions better than clinicians.

Lacan and Sade’s fantasy

The exclusion of resentment, *distantiation*, is a central aspect in both masochism and sadism. The masochist feels no animosity towards the woman who torments him, just as the true sadist is never angry with his victim and on the contrary, is immensely serene. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis suggests that resentment, even if unperceived, is the driving force behind the SM machine; *the act* replaces the original anger or resentment.

This is true in all forms of perversion, which cancel out the affect (passivity) in favour of activity. In Aristotelian terms, perversion transforms what was originally experienced as impotent passivity (*pàthos*) into activity (*enérghēia*). In fact, rage, spite, and resentment are still affects and sufferings; but perversion is a paradoxical passion that excludes passivity. As we have seen, even the masochist is supremely active: it is he who *gets himself beaten* or humiliated, he who holds the reins, even if he strangles himself with them.

Lacan (1966b) developed an original theory on sadomasochism inspired by the Marquis de Sade (for other contributions on a Lacanian perspective, see Feher-Gurewich, 2002; Nobus & Downing, 2006; Swales, 2012; Verhaeghe, 2008).

Outside France, Sade is usually considered little more than a pornographic writer, while in France he is instead held to be one of the most prominent writers and thinkers, about whom authors of the calibre of Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Klossowski, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Lacan have dedicated writings. It is not by chance that in France Sade is called “the Divine Marquis”.

Lacan says: we must distinguish between the heroes of Sade's novels—who act out a hyperbolically sadist desire—from the marquis himself, whose existence actually makes him a champion of masochism.

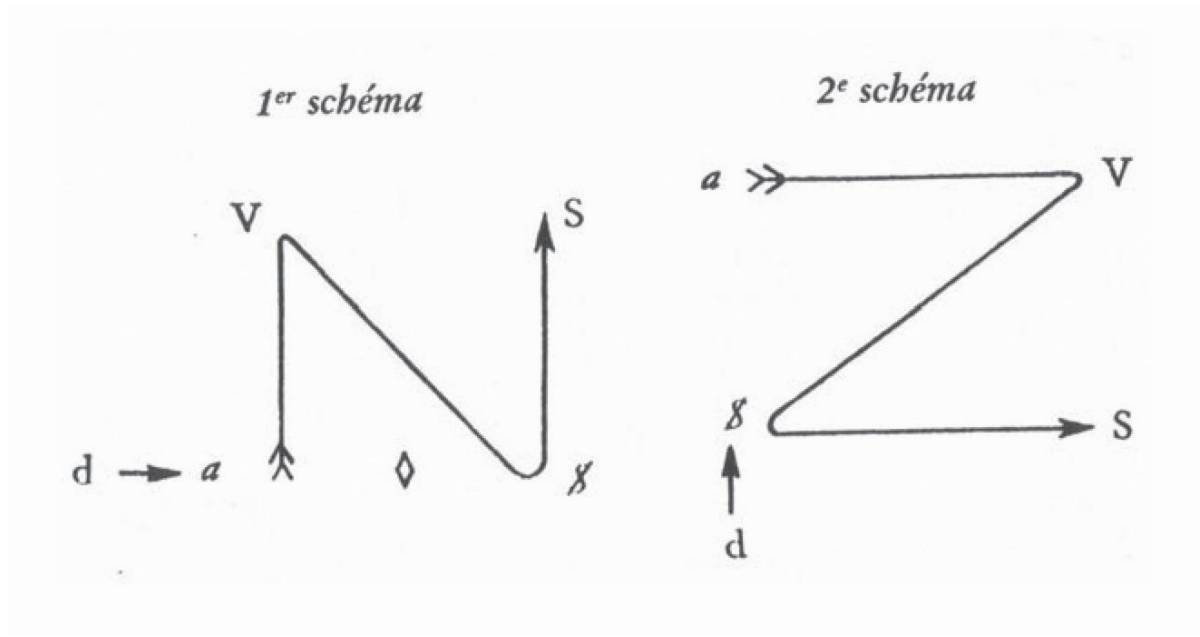
In the wake of psychoanalytical tradition, Lacan thinks, in disagreement with Deleuze (1967), that sadism and masochism are correlated. Sadist and masochist exchange roles just as a stage actor can play headsman or victim as the case may be. Lacan evoked on this occasion a quip which was quite well-known in the Soviet Union at the time. Question: "What is capitalism?" Correct answer: "Man exploiting man." Question: "What about socialism?" Answer: "The opposite." Sadism and masochism are then the same act where actors can change their roles. After all, in Sade's novels the sadist torturers sooner or later become victims themselves of other sadists who have the better of them.

Sade was thrown in jail for libertine games that were after all rather tame, effectively falling victim to the revenge of his mother-in-law, Mme de Montreuil, who had reported him apparently because she was in love with him, but this love was unrequited. The point is that Sade did his very best to remain a recluse for most of his life: twelve years in jail (in the Bastille of all places) and another twelve years in the Charenton mental asylum. After the destruction of the Bastille he was again released, but he always spoke and wrote in such a way that most of the regimes that followed one another in France found it necessary to lock him up. He died in a mental asylum in 1814.

According to Lacan, Sade overturns Kant; Lacan is probably thinking of the materialist upsetting of Hegelianism carried out by Marx. The Kantian universal law, irrelevant to the subject's interest, becomes for Sade the law of Nature. The Divine Marquis identifies Nature with *the obligation of enjoyment*, above all in the sense that it is the enjoyment by Nature (subjective genitive: Nature enjoys something): it needs to destroy living beings, preferably humans, in order to recreate living beings. But also in the sense that Nature obliges us to enjoyment even if it means the destruction of the other. Sadist enjoyment is a "categorical imperative" in the Kantian sense: it does not aim at the well-being or comfort of subjects, it does not tend to preserve their life, but forces anyone to unconditionally become the object of the other's enjoyment. Is the sadist then the agent performer of the ruthless law of Nature. Today we would say that for Sade, nature is Nazi: yet, to submit to the law of Nature is the only true freedom that is worth something.

In every perversion, we must distinguish between the character in the *mise en scène* and its author or director: Sade's staging is clearly sadistic, but its director is a masochist. To describe this gap Lacan presents two almost identical schemas.

In both graphs, the "game" begins with *a*, which stands for *the other as object*: the sadist torturing his victims. It is the representation of these sadistic acts that attracts us to a film's scenes of cruelty, for example. In Eastwood's 2014 film, *American Sniper*, we draw some "aesthetic" pleasure even from the scene in which the sniper kills a small Iraqi child, using the alibi that we enjoyed it because of the masterful cinematography. And yet that scene both moves and excites us because it taps on the horror that is



the other face of sadistic enjoyment. We draw enjoyment from art precisely because it brings our own drives to the limits of their tolerability.

So many violent films or stories claim to be tools to expose misdeeds or to give moral edification, but in practice they appeal to our sadomasochistic enjoyment, albeit not because we desired such cruelties before seeing them. The fact is that *they split us* into two. One part of us experiences the horrifying scenes as if we were witnessing them in real life, and thus rejects them; another part of us, the “aesthetical” part, appreciates them as strong effective scenes. A part of us rebels against the torture, another part finds pleasure in it. By delegating to an evil fictional agent the task of acting out violence, we allow ourselves to be excited by the sadistic act, considering ourselves potential victims who rejoice in not being the actual victims.

Take a film like Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), highly rated and recommended by the upper levels of the ecclesiastical Christian hierarchy. Even conservative churchgoers brought their children to see it. Yet even its intent of pious propaganda cannot mask the trigger of SM impulses that made the film for many enjoyable. For one and a half hours we witness Christ’s every torment, not sparing even the most minute and horrific details, leaving us hardly able to catch our breath. Sade’s work at least gives us some breathing space, given that the brutal scenes are often alternated with sophisticated philosophical disquisitions. One might ask if the success of this genre of film among believers does not unveil in many the other sadistic face of the ideals of fraternity and kindness at the base of evangelical faith.

Lacan (who *always* takes us by surprise with his unexpected arguments) describes the sadist agent as an object, and not as a subject as one would expect, because for him the true subject (\$) is the victim. A subject is almost by definition subjugated. Just

as in the many crucifixion scenes found in art, the subject we identify with is Christ on the cross, not his executioners. This split that Lacan addresses clearly permeates the Christian drama of the torture on the cross. The tormentors are only instruments-objects for the Passion of Christ.

Now, for Lacan, the subject, like Christ on the cross, is fundamentally split. In Sade's meaning, it is split because on the one hand the subject subjugates himself to his torturer, he submits to the law telling him: "Make yourself the object of the Other's, the torturer's, enjoyment." Indeed, Sade's paradoxical law is that any person, no matter who, must become the object of the other's enjoyment, even at the cost of undergoing the most atrocious torments. And yet, on the other hand, everything in the subject rebels against suffering.

On the one hand, Christ does not rebel against death, because it is the will of the Father that he must make himself a sacrificial lamb; on the other, as a human being, Christ rebels against the idea of his dreadful suffering and in Gethsemane prays to the Father: "Will Thou remove this bitter cup?" On the cross he cries: "My Father, why have You abandoned me?" In the end we are subjects, in so far as we are all split like a "poor Christ" (*"povero Cristo"* is a commonly used expression in Italy to describe someone humble and unfortunate, a "poor beggar").

The Gospels and Sade are sublime examples. At a more prosaic level, prostitutes recount customers who want to enact a rape. The "mercenary" must pretend that she is being forced into sex by the customer, and scream with fear and repulsion (the acting out of a sadistic fantasy). But usually the man also asks the woman to cry with pleasure during the simulated rape. It is a somewhat tame form of sadism that aims at extracting an extraordinary orgasm from the victim. The point is that both suffering and enjoyment split the subject: in both cases, subjects go outside themselves, somehow contradict themselves. Crying out, whether with pleasure or with pain, arouses those who, like sadists, cannot bear the other subject in so far as he is "into himself". In the case of simulated rape, the split is between the role of victim and the embarrassing and contradictory orgasm.

This simulation is different from real rape, where the rapist, alone or in a group, seems not to care in the least about the victim's affects. The victim seems to be a pure object of pleasure. But a subtler analysis of real rape would lead us to distinguish between various types of aggression. Group abuse seems to rotate around an almost ritual punishment of the woman. But what is the woman guilty of? Apparently of not submitting to Sade's law, which prescribes that everyone become the object of the other's enjoyment. Instead, women have the power of choosing with whom to take pleasure. Sexuality puts every subject at the mercy of the other. Unlike other pleasures, sexual pleasure for the most part demands the participation of the other, which is why Freud gave sexuality such a high significance. Freud already was a "relational" analyst.

Alas, every love relation, apart from the pure, but short-lived idyll of merging bodies, is also often the scene of power struggles. The other may have the power to give me pleasure and happiness, but I also wield this power over this other. Which one of us

desires or loves the other most? If I realise that ultimately I am more important to him or her than she or he is to me, there arises a strong temptation to take advantage of this difference and blackmail the other.

This background of a power struggle renders male rape an act of war against female power; sexual violence is a political act, because every act of sadism is self-authorised by a law as foul as that dictated by Sade, which legitimises the torture of the guilty other. For the rapist, the woman is guilty of innocence.

Lacan says something similar when he states that the sadist agent («) does not act directly on the subject-victim, his abuse obeying a Will (V) that is somehow transcendent. In fact, Lacan is convinced that the libertine marquis was a Kantian, albeit a perverted Kant. For Kant, the essence of moral law has nothing to do with the pathos of subjects; it does not concern their desire and enjoyment, that is, their affects, but is the law of pure duty. The moral law is a categorical imperative, that is, unconditioned by the subject's affects. The ethical imperative tells me "Thou shalt not steal", even if I am starving, poor, and have kids to feed. Given its universal validity, the law allows no "pathological" exceptions, that is, it does not take into consideration the affects. For Kant, ethics is *apathetic*, almost sadistic, and ultimately indifferent even towards the subject the ethical act should favour. Submitting to moral law is thus for Kant true freedom, because not my desire, not my pleasure, or my suffering induces me or obliges me to obey it. I freely choose to do my duty, while pathos forces me to do what pleases me. For Kant, the only really *autonomous* human being, independent from passionate will, is the ethical being.

But, there is a utopian perspective to the victim's suffering through the Will of an unscrupulous Nature. The victim is split because just at that point where he has been reduced to pure suffering, an inarticulate scream where both dignity and humanity are annihilated—hyperbolic suffering leads first to the death of the victim's subjectivity and then to his physical death—the sadistic action yearns for the annihilation of suffering itself. As the final result of Sade's fantasy, we potentially have (S), a mythical subject of pure pleasure.

This (S) is, incidentally, the subject that all the great salvation ideologies promise us. I would take (S) to stand for Salvation as well. Many psychotherapies, New Age practices, liberation techniques, meditations, massages, and diet therapies promise the individual happiness on earth. But (S) is also the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim promise of heavenly happiness after death, the Marxist promise of a communist society where everyone's needs will be met, or the liberalist one of a prosperous world the day the invisible hand of the free market will be allowed to give each one his due. The nationalist promise of a joyful reappropriation of one's "ethnic" identity, finally freed from the "other", the impure, the inferior or damned races, street people, imperialism or communism—in short, freed from evil—aims to S. The subject of pure pleasure, the New Human Being authorises the sacrifices, struggles, wars, persecutions, and massacres, and even makes them indispensable. From the stakes of the Inquisition to the Soviet gulags and right up to today's Islamic State decapitations and burnings,

history repeats itself. Heaven on earth (the affirmation of the subject of pure pleasure) is announced, followed by the sadistic trail of the extermination of others—a necessary measure as long as the other resists.

The heroes of injustice

The difference between Lacan's two identical schemas lies in their rotation with respect to desire (d). Who desires what? Unlike the crucifixion scene where the focus is on the victim, in Sade's works the focus is on the executioner, who takes pleasure in making his victim suffer, causing a split in him or her. But the psychological interpretation is only one of the many possible. Let us suppose that Bin Laden organised 9/11 because it also gave him pleasure. When we watch the destruction of the Twin Towers, we are at once horrified and fascinated. From a masochistic point of view, we identify with the many victims trapped in that inferno. The many Hollywood disaster films that anticipated the 9/11 scenario played on both the public's masochistic willingness to put themselves in the shoes of the victims, and on the unavowable sadism that makes us enjoy watching it. If our identification with the victims were only to make us suffer, we certainly wouldn't be going to see these films. But we can also read 9/11 in non-psychological terms as the product of a transcendent Will (V) that goes beyond Al Qaida and its leaders: the supposed Will of Allah himself who demands jihad. For those fundamentalists, 9/11 was by no means a sadistic scene, but a glorious moment that will lead on a planetary scale to the triumph of Islam and to a virtuous and happy society. The sadistic and masochistic "ecstasies" are only moments of this super-fantasy. So, the sadist is an agent of the law, of both the just law and the evil one.

A subject in analysis would often tell me how he loathed children, especially boys. This caused problems within his marriage since his wife wanted a child, while the mere idea sickened him. They were once on the verge of breaking up when, after seeing a mother and child in the street, he exclaimed to his wife how he would have liked to kick that child's head in until his brains spurted out. At first I thought that he was staging his aggressiveness against his younger sister since he hadn't been at all happy when she was born. Yet the fact that it was mainly boys who were the target of his horrific fantasies didn't seem to agree with this supposed fixation on the trauma of his sister's birth.

He said he hated children because he considered them selfish, whimsical, demanding, unmindful of the needs of others, and "strong with the weak and weak with the strong". As he listed his grievances, it became clear to me that, in a sense, the child he was describing was actually himself, as he still remained as an adult. I realised that the hateful child to torture was like a mirror image of himself, even if he didn't recognise him as such.

Is it then enough to argue that these sadistic fantasies referred here to actual masochistic experiences? But it is not by inverting the roles that we find the essential

dynamics of sadism. In fact, he was aware of the sadistic fantasies that he had nourished since he was a child, also with regard to that spoilsport of a little sister. In short, his sadistic fantasies were sadism to the second degree: they undertook to punish a selfish, mean, substantially sadistic, and not entirely innocent child. Generally, sadistically torturing the innocent is the reversed reflection of guilt: the sadist never ceases to persecute his own sadism, which he enjoys.

But at the root of this guilt there is an almost metaphysical injustice, one that Sade theorised in his own way in a wild philosophy: the cosmic injustice of a cruel stepmother, Nature. The sadist wants to somehow satiate Nature's evil hunger, even though he is himself its victim. At the core of sadism we have a thirst for revenge against a loathsome mother who has let us down—except that the sadist adapts to this maternal injustice, to her sovereign arbitrariness, by tormenting innocent and guilty creatures like himself.

Jorge Luis Borges would not have been displeased with the screenplay of the 1995 David Fincher movie, *Seven*. In an unspecified grimy American metropolis (we see the shadow of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah), a series of murders take place, with no apparent connection among the victims, yet all seemingly murdered by the same hand, with each victim killed after suffering some brutal torture. The detective is an irascible young man, angry with everyone except his lovely young wife whom he adores. From the writing left at each of the crime scenes, it soon becomes apparent that each victim impersonates one of the seven deadly sins: a rich, unscrupulous lawyer for Greed; an obese man for Gluttony; a prostitute for Lust; a small-time drug dealer for Sloth; a beautiful model for Pride. With two sins left, Wrath and Envy, the murderer, a Protestant fundamentalist with a shaved head, abruptly gives himself up to the police, boasting about his deeds as the implementation of divine justice.

The murderer claims to have already carried out the other two homicides and asks to be taken to an empty piece of desert, where a postman delivers a strange parcel.

In that the detective discovers the head of his beloved wife, the killer having had the time to go to their place and behead her. "This", the murderer says, "is the punishment for your sin, Wrath. Now go ahead and kill me, for I am a sinner too: I envy you." In fact, the detective's wrath once again gets the better of him: he kills the murderer and ruins himself in the process. The series of punishments is complete.

In this plot, we see the shift of the sadistic fantasy towards the masochistic result that Lacan described in the passage from Sade's works to his life. This serial killer is undoubtedly a sadist, yet he insists on the lofty moral aim of his crimes. It is interesting that the murderer finally confesses to being a sinner, but an envious one, not sadistic. In fact, sadism is not mentioned among the seven deadly sins, but, after all, the modern positivist notion of sadism has its roots in two of them, Wrath and Envy (even if in sadism they are not perceived consciously). Wrath is the fury against the other when the subject feels unsatisfied; Envy is the root of every sadistic vendetta carried out on the envied one.

The murderer, in so far as he offers himself as a victim to the cop, ultimately ends up in a masochistic position. Or rather, he was always in this position. All his crimes converge towards the immolation of the biggest sinner of all: himself. Is not Envy—which ruined Satan and which, according to Melanie Klein, ruins us all—the most radical of the sins? The sadistic path is ultimately revealed to be a masochistic construction. For this reason, when a detective tries to unmask him by saying, “You *enjoyed* punishing these sinners,” the pious killer denies he is a sadist: “There’s nothing wrong if I enjoy doing my job.” He was only labouring away at the will of God. Had this killer been a Lacanian, he would have said: “The enjoyment wasn’t really mine, but the Other’s” (that of God or the ethical law). In a certain sense, *the sadist does not exist as a subject*. Many sadistic acts are certainly performed, but for the most part, the sadistic agent will deny his personal enjoyment as the primary reason for his actions. This is in contrast with masochistic recognition. All masochists like to admit it. Masochism always belongs to *me*, sadism always belongs to the *other*.

But it would be a mistake to try to get away with a trite psychology and say that the sadist denies he is one because his sense of guilt leads him to rationalise his actions. Would presenting himself as an avenger for justice—or injustice—only be his moral alibi? But why does the sadist, unlike so many other types of perverse subjects, have a particular vocation for rationalisation or escaping blame? Exhibitionists or voyeurs, if caught, won’t try to justify their actions. In short, the sadist is never *pure*. Being instrumental to a law—even Sade’s unjust, cruel law of nature—is one of sadism’s constitutive elements. This is what Lacan indicates with V, as a sort of transcendental will of which the sadist becomes at once the performer, executor, and instrument. In *Seven*, this will is divine, but in other cases it can be the will of the state, or even the will of Man himself.

The Third Reich tried to find consensus around its policies of eliminating the mentally ill, by means of a series of films¹ revolving around the following theme: a nice, very Arian neurologist realises that a degenerative brain disease will soon result in the irreversible degradation of his mind. He thus asks his colleagues the favour of killing him. The moral of the movie is that in killing the mentally ill (for Nazi psychiatry, just as for today’s dominant psychiatry, all mental illnesses are due to cerebral lesions), the state is merely following the will of the individual ego, in so far as it is still an ego. This chapter of Nazi atrocities is presented as an act of merciful euthanasia. It would be naïve to say that even here, “It was only propaganda to make a ruthless measure morally acceptable.” It is more likely that Hitler’s reasoning more closely followed that of these films: the extermination of the weak is carried out in the name of a sublime will, that of the fair-haired, blue-eyed man in possession of his full mental faculties.

When Lacan writes that the sadist is an object (*a*) while the masochist, the victim, is a barred subject (\$), he is saying, in his language, that the subject is by definition subjugated, and a victim. The sadist is the object/cause of the masochist, in the same

¹ Many thanks to the late Fulvio Marone for bringing these films to my notice.

way that the enemy constitutes the warrior—there would be no warriors were there no enemies. But the roles can shift: those who commit sadistic acts often find themselves victims.

Let us return to *Seven*. The murderer in schema 1 is in the *a* position, and one obviously presumes he is moved by a sadistic desire: he tortures and kills sinners to fulfil a divine will (V). But to triumph, this will needs a hell for the evil, or better, a hell on earth that the murderer takes it upon himself to impose. However, in turn, this suffering of the sinner-victim goes back to the Utopia of a limitless bliss (S). It is a world finally freed of evil, of suffering.

This circuit can also be inverted, as history has shown: from S (absolute bliss) comes *a* (sadism). I point out this inversion of the path as favouring a political critique of Utopias. I am not saying that the great millenarianisms that offer to eradicate suffering from the world are an alibi for sadists; it would be fairer to say that the millenarian ideologies produce sadism. Sadistic desire is more the *effect* of an ambition of absolute liberation from evil than it is the *cause* of so many crimes. We believe that there are just as many sadists in peaceful, wealthy countries as there are in Syria or Nigeria today, yet they have fewer opportunities to act sadistically in the former. Nevertheless, in July 2011 in Norway, one of the richest and most tolerant countries in the world, a thirty-two-year-old Norwegian killed seventy-seven people in one day.

When in *Seven* the murderer puts himself forward as a victim, the detective, the repressive hand of the law, becomes the executioner (*a*): the desire that nourishes sadistic torture in schema 1 now nourishes the masochistic request for punishment in schema 2. Yet the picture as a whole has not changed by any means. Masochism is the subjectivisation of sadism.

A perverse theory of perversions?

There are many theories on sadomasochism, but Lacan's represents an important development on the subject. It satisfies the needs of those who, having a philosophical background, are wary of psychology. Sadistic and masochistic drives are reconsidered by Lacan in terms of forces transcending the individual's pathos, appealing to something beyond the individual, like Will and the ideal Subject. Ultimately, Lacan's theory tries to provide clinical substance for what to Hegel was the *objective spirit*: a subjectivity that does not identify with the individual mind but that determines it, while at the same time being anonymous, collective, logical, and formal. A nation's constitution, for example, or its judicial system, are moments of objective spirit.

Lacan, unlike the dominating psychologism in psychoanalysis, brings to light the truly ethical dimension of perversions. In short, the perverse are not animals who get up to all sorts of things with no laws; on the contrary, they take pleasure in submitting to the law. The sadist does not break the law in the same way a petty thief would, just to make a living. Indeed, we recognise a perversion in sadism but not in stealing

(except in the case of kleptomania, where a perverse pleasure does emerge). In a non-psychologistic perspective, the torturer enjoys pleasure because he interprets the law sadistically: to him the law is the Other's enjoyment.

This thesis should not surprise us beyond measure, because the history of Western thought is full of theories regarding the law that make this very argument: legal systems are actually a way to assure enjoyment for the privileged few. The Greek sophists—Polus, Callicles, Thrasymachus—were already questioning whether City laws were not issued by the strongest, by which they maintained their hold on power; or whether they were not a gimmick of the weak to actually protect themselves from the power of the strong. And Marxism interpreted the legal system of capitalistic societies as a device to guarantee the wishes of those who own the means of production. Often the law, as it is written and applied, is interpreted as a way to give enjoyment to the strong Other.

But the point is that the law is not ethics. Today, in many languages, ethics is distinct from morals, a distinction parallel to that between legitimacy and legality. Legality is the system of laws, while legitimacy is an order that transcends the legal system: it is an unwritten principle that in turn judges the laws and recognises whether they are legitimate or not. The concept of legitimacy—of a Law that judges the laws—evokes the ethical dimension of laws, while morals are ephemeral like norms, which vary from society to society (often “morality” is despised as just conservative sexual habits). Of course, the managers of Nazi concentration camps acted legally, but could anyone say they were ethical? Now, according to Lacan's reconstruction, the ethical dimension is missing in sadomasochism. Lacan's perverse are moralists at heart, but this is the very reason why their setback is ethical.

So in the Sadomasochist fantasies reconstructed by Lacan, what is missing is the concrete other as subject for itself. One may wonder whether this lack characterises the perverse, or Lacan's theory as a whole. By not speaking of the other subject, is Lacan perspicuously describing the perverse life form or is he himself in the end participating in this perverse elimination of the concrete other? Is Lacan's a perverse theory on perversions as Sade's was, after all? I am not saying this to revile them: there can be magnificent perverse theories on perversion, just as there are, for example, excellent Christian theories on Christianity. But what makes us suspicious of the Lacanian theory of perversion?

In effect, in this theory the other is either the Other or an object (»). The other is either the law, language, the treasure of signifiers, or Sade's will of nature (in short, something that transcends every subject), or it is the small object (») that arouses and seduces me. In both cases, the other as subject for itself does not exist. The other exists either as an object (and thus not really other from me, or other with respect to me, given that one is always an object-for-a-subject), or it doesn't exist (given that it is Other from every self). According to Lacan, the Other in fact only exists for the psychotic, who really thinks that the Other (alias the persecutor, for example, or the VIP as love object in erotomania) dominates him, suggests or controls his thoughts,

penetrates his body, and so on. In short, for Lacan, to believe that the Other exists is a delusion. Whether it be a position, a place, or an agent, does not imply its actual existence, because were it to exist, it would be “itself” and no longer Other. For Lacan, the Other exists just like the line of the horizon exists: if we want it to enter into our horizon it is no longer the line of the horizon, which is always ours. The Other is like the inside of a glove: we can turn it inside out and make it visible, but there will always in an inside, invisible. The Lacanian Other is a place in a relation, a topological area, and not a specific place or thing in the world. Yet the ethical dimension of life makes us assume that the other exists, even if, obviously, we can never hold the ultimate evidence of this existence. What we see, or rather what we view outside ourselves as evidence, is only the other’s behaviour. But we enter an ethical dimension in so far as we consider the subject who manifests himself in these behaviours as existent—an existence that limits us and obliges us.

(What I have just stated will be rejected by neuroscientists who support the mirror neurones theory, which is inspired by the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty: according to Rizzolatti’s well-known research, it is in fact through mirror neurones that we have a direct, immediate perception of the other’s subjectivity, and are always in touch with subjects rather than with their behaviour. But this is not the place to delve into a discussion on such important issues, and I will limit myself to stating that our perception of the other as a subject is in any case triggered by visible data; this is why we perceive even fictional entities, cartoon heroes, and robots, etc. as subjects. We grasp that another wants to drink only if we observe him getting a glass full of water).

Now, in sadomasochism, the other is only “legal”, but how the perverse person uses him is always illegitimate, even if that particular use is not punishable by law. Precisely in so far as the Sadomasochist submits to the law (otherwise he would be unable to enjoy his acts), he lacks an ethical relation with the other. Indeed, we could not say that the murderer in *Seven* or the Caliph Al-Baghdadi are ethical spirits, because ethics is above all *caritas* towards the other (I would say that in order to make the Other enjoy, they inflict pain to others). And for us a law is legitimate, that is, ethical, in so far as it makes the other present to us as real, and not like the inside of a glove whose exterior side is us.

The sadist, everyman: Arendt and Milgram

When considering sadism, it is difficult for us today not to evoke the horrors of Nazism. When a filmmaker tries to adapt a work by Sade, she or he feels almost obliged to set the sadistic abuses in the context of the Holocaust. Liliana Cavani set her 1974 film *The Night Porter* in a Nazi concentration camp and in post-Nazi Vienna for her reflections on sadomasochistic complicity. Pasolini, bringing to the screen Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom* (1975), set it in the Nazi-Fascist republic of Salò. We view Nazi

atrocities as the political, planned application of a system that the Divine Marquis had merely fantasised.

Two contrasting viewpoints confront themselves today as far as Nazi crimes are concerned. One, put forward mainly by Hannah Arendt (1963), addresses the “banality of evil”, and tends to strip the twentieth-century atrocities of their romantic aura as expressions of the “genius of evil”. The Nazi torturer is not one of Sade’s hyperbolically evil heroes, but simply a grim and servile bureaucrat. Adolf Eichmann as described by Arendt is only a dull agent of orders, the epigone of a morality of pure duty, degraded to blind obedience to the hierarchy. The bureaucratic machine of the modern state, in so far as it does not hold the subject responsible and deflates the legitimacy of an action on pure legality, sometimes leads to atrocities.

It is remarkable that when Arendt’s thesis was first exposed, it triggered scandalous reactions, especially from the Jews (Arendt herself was a Jew). The Jewish opinion wished to believe that the orchestrators of the Shoah were “geniuses of evil”, special supermen. In fact, Arendt’s thesis looked dangerous because it implied that a slaughterer could be anybody, a common person ... even a Jew.

Over time, the banality of evil thesis has become popular also thanks to a famous experiment by Stanley Milgram (1983), who wondered whether his fellow Americans would also have behaved like the German torturers during the Second World War had they found themselves in similar circumstances. He staged the following situation: a group of randomly chosen people (we shall call them “teachers”) was invited to take part in an experiment aimed—so they were told—at verifying the impact of pain in learning processes. Every time a “pupil” (actually an actor), locked in an adjoining room, got a question wrong, the “teacher” punished him with an electric shock. As the experiment progressed, the “teachers” found themselves having to administer more and more powerful shocks, beyond the limits of tolerability. Obviously the shocks were fake, as were the “pupils’” agonising cries. The real subjects of the experiment were the “teachers”, and the point was to discover to what extent they would have tortured their “pupils” just to obey the protocol.

This experiment owes its fame to the fact that the vast majority of “teachers” obeyed up to the extreme consequences. The real experimenters pushed them to torment the “pupils” by invoking the lofty requirements of scientific research, and they obeyed. Hence the conviction that anyone, even your next-door neighbour, could be transformed into a barbaric torturer should any authority incite him to do so.

The credibility of this experiment has been decisively overrated; it is not the ultimate proof of the potential cruelty of the common human being. Milgram did not take into account the Freudian split ego, by which a part of the subject did believe it was taking part in a real experiment on learning, while another part had a sixth sense that the whole thing was a game or imposture. The experiment thus does not tell us anything about how the same people would have reacted in an authentic situation.

The experiment has, however, contributed to the popularity of the banality-of-evil theory, which has its counterpoint in the theory of political atrocities taken up from

Freud and Bataille (1949). According to this latter theory, the Nazi system gave legality and organisation to widespread and historical sadistic drives. The Nazi, Stalinist, or ISIS torturer may be just a petty clerk of horror, but insisting drives certainly made possible the fulfilment of something that had heretofore been only an individual fantasy.

In fact, if we consider the Milgram experiment from another point of view (despite its limits), it nevertheless tells us something, obliquely, about sadistic dynamics. The electric shocks were ordered as *punishments* for learning mistakes. In other words, it is the punitive, in short moral, objective that pushed most subjects to act (whether really or virtually) sadistically. It is important to observe that the “teachers” were apathetic: they had no sadistic desires, yet they acted sadistically. The sadist is an avenger of the evil the other represents—or as is clear in Sade, he sadistically punishes those who sadistically perpetrate evil. The apathy of the ruthless bureaucrat or magistrate is the true stamp of sadism.

The idea that God is the very prototype of the sadist has travelled a long path in the cellars and sewers of monotheistic cultures (after all, without these cellars and sewers, monotheisms could not survive, just as heroic armies could not survive without the contribution of their soldiers’ aggressiveness and even cruelty). It is not by chance that over the last decades *The Book of Job* has garnered such particular attention, where the God of Israel seems to offer proof of an open-faced cruelty, so to speak. In the end, however, the Christian who suffers enjoys a great consolation: that God, even if responsible for the pains he suffers, is still touched by his suffering. The Christian God may indeed have created nefarious things, but He is not apathetic. (And this renders Christian faith less noble, so to speak, than the Jewish or Islamic faith, where God does not appear at all loving.) What if apathy were then the true, sadistic cruelty, the extreme pain to inflict on the victim?

Chapter Five: Perverse Women

Is femininity a perversion?

In general one thinks that perversions are a masculine “weakness”, although some today deny this (Welldon, 1995, 1996).

According to early psychoanalysis, woman is seldom perverse because she is constitutively so. Freud spoke of *feminine masochism*: “being female” is in itself something masochistic (Freud, 1924c, “The Economic Problem of Masochism”). Not surprisingly, the examples of womanly masochism he described were mostly male cases, because it is in men that masochism becomes worthy of note.

Yet, despite the rejection of Freud’s theory by feminist scholars, it was a woman, Helene Deutsch (1930,1944,1945), who fully developed this supposed masochist essence of woman. Freud had limited himself to talking of *feminine* masochism, and therefore not something specific to women. More royalist than the king, Deutsch states that women are essentially masochistic. She argues that what triggers off feminine pleasure in coitus is above all fantasies of being the victim of rape, or violence, or of the pains of childbirth. The experience of childbirth, she argues, is a masochistic orgy for a woman, and it is during labour that her deepest wishes come true. While her thesis sounds excessive, we should seize its possible core truth: like all perverts, women too need to turn humiliation into pleasure. In other words, they must slide from the distress of being penetrated, of being invaded by something ‘other’, to “sublime” pleasure. But is being penetrated really a humiliation?

In children of both sexes, being penetrated in any orifice (e.g., for an enema) generates a strong repulsion; they feel dispossessed of their bodies. Indeed, girls largely practise *eli to ral* masturbation, and when a prepubescent girl penetrates herself, developmental psychologists immediately suspect some psychic disorder. In fact, some analysts (Horney, 1967) denied the fact that girls only discover the vagina during adolescence, arguing that during puberty it is “rediscovered”, because infant girls usually repress any memory of it. In any case, whether unknown or repressed, for the prepubertal girl the vaginal cavity “represents a problem”.

As we know, Women’s Studies has often attacked Freud’s insistence on vaginal orgasm as “truly” feminine. This claim to clitoral enjoyment is in line with a phallic ideal of femininity—“We women have our own phallus too”—and undermines many aspects of the classic vision of femininity, such as passivity, receptiveness, abnegation, and so on. But does this attack against the Freudian thesis not betray a primary shame

of femininity as passivity, which feminist students share, to the point of “phallicising” women as much as possible? However, it is a “shame” from which the majority of women manage to draw an exquisite pleasure.

In fact, every woman needs to turn this “insult”—being penetrated, along with all its connotation of dispossession—into her triumph. She has to turn a passive intrusion inside her into an active source of non-clitoral pleasure. The bizarre pleasure that strikes us in male perverts is ultimately very similar to the vaginal pleasure of a woman. Paradoxically, today clitoral sexuality is considered “normal”, while vaginal sexuality is considered “perverse”—even if our tradition, including Freud, has always considered the opposite to be the truth.

Olga, a thirty-eight-year-old patient, had been married for fifteen years to a man whom, so she would say, at bottom she had never loved, and with whom she’d had two children. She is a handsome, successful career woman whose job has made her wealthy. But she married—only rarely betraying him—a man she considers intellectually and socially inferior, and whom she actually has to “bankroll” because his ambitious and fanciful business ventures have all failed. “All he wants is my money,” she repeats. Her husband accuses her of being frigid, and she admits that sexual intercourse gives her little satisfaction. She sometimes reaches orgasm by having her clitoris touched.

Then Olga discovers that her “loser” husband has been seeing a younger woman for years, and that he has even used her money to indulge in romantic trips to Paris and other locations with his young lover. She instantly considers divorce, but immediately after the revelation something peculiar happens: during sex with her unfaithful husband she achieves for the first time, she claims, “a *real* vaginal orgasm”, an orgasm that, according to (certain) biologists, does not exist. In other words, she comes intensely—for the first time in her life—while being penetrated. She goes ahead with the divorce procedure on the one hand, but on the other she also engages in a sexual activity with her husband which is, by her standards, “wild”, with an average of two coituses a day and a constant pleasure in sex that she had never really experienced before.

It is obvious that Olga has discovered her femininity—intended as giving oneself completely to a man—thanks to a triangle: the knowledge that her husband has a young and beautiful lover stokes her “vaginal orgasm” (an old-fashioned Freudian would say that she can only find pleasure in an Oedipal triangle). Through the humiliation of being cheated on, and of being the wife of a man she essentially despises, she can redeem as an exquisite enjoyment what she had until then considered, like all hysterics, the shame of being a woman (considering that she, and not her husband—confined to the role of mothering their offspring—was the phallic figure in the family).

* * *

Historically, Western attitudes towards male and female homosexuality have always differed. While female homosexuality has been discussed sparingly and with a certain indulgence, male homosexuality has been the object of harsh condemnation and at

times dramatic debate. Male homosexuality, until at least recently, provoked reactions of horror and disgust in most people. Indeed, sexology in the strict sense of the term was established in the late nineteenth century and was obsessed by male homosexuality as the gravest of perversions, while paedophilia, for example, was considered a relatively venial pathology (Roudinesco, 2009). In less than a century, the medical and scientific world's judgement on homosexuality has been almost completely overturned (and not because of any commendable scientific advancement, but simply because our sexual ethics have changed).

It was not so much the active role in male homosexual intercourse that was found disturbing; in fact, in many traditional Western cultures and among many male adolescents, sodomising a man was and is considered a show of virility and something to be proud of. It was above all the passive man who was despised, "the womanish man", the "sissy". Instead, it somehow appeared comprehensible that in a lesbian relationship one of the two women should play the male role. These double standards show how much passivity, in our secular cultural tradition, is actually associated with derogative judgements, though these cannot be stated explicitly in the case of women. Calling someone "passive" is never a compliment, even today. Every woman must then reckon with this bad reputation of passivity. The hysteric usually reacts by waiving sexual intercourse, or experiencing it traumatically or paroxysmally. On the other hand, the non-hysteric woman can, like the pervert, find pleasure and self-esteem in this embarrassing passivity, as in Olga's case.

The hysteric, whom Freud considered an imaginary pervert, is in many ways a woman who will not accept feminine masochism. She will not resign herself to "suffering" penetration, and thus identifies herself with the central void of her bodily being, a void she does all she can to protect (Nasio, 1995). In the same way, the anorexic girl rejects both food and the penis as intolerable bodily intrusions that damage the glorious autarchy of her own body. The hysteric and the anorexic, by relinquishing their femininity *in so far as* it is a perversion, relinquish femininity *tout court*: they imagine themselves as virgins and mothers, like a Madonna. They idealise themselves as women and abhor themselves as females: they are rather *womanists*, not feminists.

Note that female Christian mystics, such as Saint Teresa of Avila, exalt not their femininity, but their "womanliness". They reject the use of the vagina as a passive organ and exalt the state of *being a woman* as a spiritual privilege, because their void remains *unfilled*. On the other hand, one never reads of male mystics who sing the praises of their maleness, which would appear irrelevant, and even an obstacle, on the path towards a successful relationship with God. The woman mystic idealises the state of being a woman in so far as she renounces being penetrated, being a female (as I have tried to prove (Benvenuto, 2006), in particular by analysing the dramas of the medieval German writer Hrotsvitha around the year 1,000).

Indeed, both the cult of the Virgin Mary and hysteria attempt to answer a thorny problem of femininity: how can a woman accept being invaded, penetrated, and "bro-

ken” and turn it all into her very own pleasure? How can she offer her own void to the other without annihilating *her feminine power*, the “possibilities” of her vagina?

Feminine sexual pleasure reminds us of perverse pleasure in so far as normal women often seem to imitate erotic masochists. The man *plays* the part of the sadist aggressor and the woman that of the victim. In bed, the pleasure of many women grows if the man insults them and addresses them with humiliating obscenities—as long, of course, as it all remains a game. The reverse, a man who enjoys being insulted by his female partner, is much rarer (A patient complained he had a smaller than average penis, but claimed he reached ultimate pleasure in bed when his woman openly jeered him because of his “shortage”, derisively comparing his organ to the bigger ones of other men she had had sex with. But in this case we are speaking of a perversion). In my experience, I have found that the more women are socially emancipated, the more they enjoy the masochistic delight of being insulted while having sex.

Is this humiliation of women only a spicy condiment of sexual love, or is something essential about coitus involved? Many acknowledge that there is no fun in bed if sex does not mimic an SM relationship. Is this playing the roles of “shatterer” and “shattered” the real, even tacit, background, to the relationship between a woman and a man?

If it is true that hysteria is mostly a female inclination, while perversion is mainly a male one, I would say that we increasingly come across perverse women. When Elfriede Jelinek published her novel *The Piano Teacher* (*Die Klavierspielerin* (1983), brought to the screen by Haneke, *La pianiste* (2001)), the masochist woman she described failed to convince many sexologists, who wondered, “Can such a perverse woman really exist?” Why not?

Carmen’s retaliation

Carmen—a woman I had in treatment when already in her fifties—could only obtain authentic pleasure from intercourse if she imagined that the man penetrating her was in turn being anally penetrated by another man. She had never revealed to any of her lovers that this fantasy was the *conditio sine qua non* for her to reach orgasm. Carmen’s sex life had been quite promiscuous. She had gone through two divorces and occasionally prostituted herself, more for the pleasure of selling herself than for the actual money. Then, one day, as a mature adult, she met a man who liked both her fantasy and the idea of putting it into practice. Carmen immensely enjoyed penetrating him with a large vibrator, both during intercourse and in other situations.

We can talk of perversion here too, because the partner is being used essentially as a tool for pleasure rather than being the aim of pleasure; whether he enjoys it or not, Carmen can obtain enjoyment from her partner only if she imagines him being sodomised and enjoying being sodomised. She takes pleasure in the fact that her partner’s enjoyment specifically derives from being sodomised, not in her partner’s enjoyment itself.

It later became clear that the source of this special form of enjoyment was her experience of coitus as a form of humiliation, and she could therefore only grant her man her pleasure if he was in turn symmetrically subjected to the same—an erotic law of retaliation. Once the man is reduced to a feminine role, her voiceless resentment against the holder of a violent phallus softens and intercourse becomes a playful retaliation between peers. On the other hand, through her occasional experiences as a prostitute, Carmen obtained a sort of redress for her being female: intercourse became an affront to herself as a woman and something for which she needed to be indemnified.

“On the one hand, as a woman, I envy the male for his power to give me enjoyment, but on the other I find it impossible to enjoy coitus normally, because it is my humiliation, because it violates the ownership of my own body. I therefore gain enjoyment from my reprisal against the intrusive male by imagining and acting out his passive penetration; and I gain enjoyment from the compensation of the humiliating violence I suffered through a mercenary tit for tat.”

A complex affective knot emerges: on the one hand, envying the male for his power to give a woman pleasure, and on the other the woman’s inability to enjoy coitus normally, because of her humiliation and the forced entry into what is hers. Hence, she gets back at the intrusive male by imagining (or effecting) his anal penetration.

But it is perhaps cases of this kind that can give us an idea of why women are less inclined to sexual perversions (and instead more inclined to hysteria). Just as the pervert obtains pleasure from reliving obliquely a traumatic experience of betrayal, so does every woman in her sexual experiences that we label as normal. It is as if the young female experienced a triple trauma: her mother “betrays” her with a man, her beloved father “betrays” her with a woman, and what’s more, she has to suffer the “insult” of coitus passively. It is as if behind every real act of coitus the woman risks reliving this triple defeat, while succeeding in turning it into an opportunity for enjoyment—just like in perversions.

In the novel *Two Women* (*La ciociara* (1957), brought to the screen by Vittorio De Sica in 1960, Alberto Moravia tells the story of the adolescent girl Rosetta and her mother, who both evacuate Rome in 1944 at the end of the Second World War. Rosetta is pious, honest, and a virgin, “a little saint of heaven”. But when she is raped by a group of Moroccan allied soldiers serving in the French Army, her reaction to the trauma is not hysterical. Rather than a disgust for sex, she finds a perverse solution instead. She gives herself to all the boys who desire her, is willing to engage in any sexual play suggested, behaves as a “slave” of her various lovers, in short, she accepts to become an ever-available sexual object. Moravia underlines the masochistic vein of her promiscuity: it is as if she needed to repeat over and over what the Moroccans had done to her.

But is there not something of Rosetta in every woman? Does not every woman need to transform a secret defeat into a paradoxical triumph? To transform the displeasure of being a passive object into the pleasure of being one for the beloved other? In any case, what distinguishes the typical feminine solution from perversion is the fact that

she offers her pleasure—more sublime than beautiful—to the pleasure of the other (On the Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, see “Masochism and exclusion” in Chapter Three, “Masochism”).

It has often been noted that girls seriously fall in love with celebrities, whether famous singers, actors, sports champions, or DJs (see Alberoni (1992)). Instead, as a norm, boys do not actually fall in love with the female celebrities they sexually desire. At least in our European culture, a woman aspires to an ideal man; she is drawn to an imaginary or real man who has an *erotic ranking* superior to her—in terms of beauty, wealth, prestige, age, or a combination of these qualities. More than men, women are seemingly social climbers of love. And while a woman may actually settle for someone mediocre, deep down she dreams of a love affair with a god (On this subject, inspired by Plautus’ comedy *Amphitryon*, see Lacan (1978, Chapter XXI)). This pushes many women, in the absence of anyone better, to deify their very average companion. I wonder whether this is not something that could explain, at least partially, women’s domestic or political subjection to males for so many centuries. Because women are more selective than men in their choice of partner, as a global population they tend to remain in a position of inferiority to men (instead, in our culture, a woman’s beauty is enough for men, they don’t demand more).

But precisely because a woman’s real partner can be a surrogate of this ideal man—or god—the woman ends up taking care of this “poor wretch”, who desires and often even loves her, dedicating to him the charitable cult originally destined to the man or god she will always lack.

We have already seen that the basic assumption of psychoanalytic theory is a fundamental human bisexuality. We have also seen that femininity, in both women and men, can be described as a passive activity: *to let oneself be penetrated*. But in this description we once again come across what we proposed as a (near) definition of perversion: *to make the other reject me* and enjoy this rejection. From simply *being* excluded or cheated on, I move on to actually *making* an other exclude me or cheat on me. We might say that perversions are a way by which certain males (and certain women too, of course) try to be females—that is, they are ways by which they try to slip from the masculine “beautiful” to the feminine “sublime”. For example, a subject in analysis, heterosexual and something of a ladies’ man, occasionally felt the need to have a man (necessarily with a large penis) penetrate his mouth or anus, though he was not a homosexual in the current sense of the word. Appropriately, he defined these episodes, which he experienced as a kind of masochistic pleasure, as “attacks of femininity”. I wonder whether most perversions could not be defined as attacks of femininity.

We have seen that the Greeks called passivity *pathos*, affect. An affect is the passive effect of an active cause. Freud thought that because drives are “masculine”, in a certain sense man is the cause of the woman, in the same way as the act is the cause of an effect. This is why masochism comes across as something feminine: it means taking the position of the subject who suffers, who under-goes, the other’s act.

But at the same time, as we have seen, all masochisms are a staging: the real other is not *the Cause*—*in the sense* of the “cause of the oppressed people”—of the subject and of his or her enjoyment. The real other is only the surrogate of the enjoying subject, the ersatz of this other-cause that cannot be found, or that one has evaded.

The subject(ed) beauty: a case from M. M. R. Khan

There is a grandeur and there is a joy as well in abandoning oneself to the will of others (lovers and mystics are familiar with this sense of grandeur, this taste of joy) and in finding oneself, “at last!, rid of the weight of one’s own pleasures, interests and personal complexes. (Jean Paulhan, 1954, “Du bonheur dans l’esclavage”)

M. M. R. Khan (1979) tells the story of one of his patients, a beautiful young married woman. Here is a summary of her story.

When she—I shall call her the Subjected Beauty—was around twenty-three years old, she was living with a young man with whom she had a quite serious commitment. One day, at an elegant lunch she had been invited to in London, she found herself seated next to an unattractive and rather aged man.

He overheard her telling the person on her other side that she was leaving for Rome next morning to model there. [...] This man casually enquired from her when she was leaving and by what flight. She was utterly astounded to find him at the airport waiting for her. With ceremonious casualness and unintrusive ease he told her he had decided to go to Rome for a day since he loved that city. [...] On arrival in Rome he escorted her to her hotel; left her to get on with her work and invited her to join him for lunch. They lunched together and at the end of it he let it be known to her that he had not booked himself in any hotel because he was returning to London that evening. [...] She felt obliged to invite him back to her hotel. He had made no passes at her and she felt very intrigued by his conversation and interest in her. When they reached her hotel room she felt herself curiously sexually aroused and desired to fuck him desperately. She took it for granted that he must have wished to “screw” her (to use the patient’s phrase), otherwise why would he have gone to all the trouble? She let her desire be known to him and was taken aback by his polite and gentle refusal with the discreet explanation that he had met her by accident and it was all too much of a good thing [...]: he would not seduce her *but* if they met again in London and she agreed to spending a weekend in Rome with him he would not fail her. (pp. 197–198)

They do not meet for six months. Then one day he suddenly calls her to invite her to a restaurant in Rome. She accepts. This time she is horrified to see how ugly and repulsive he is. After lunch, they remain together until dinner, and then go to his hotel, where “he fucked her all night as she had never been fucked before”. She is subjected to his authority. He tells her he is *happily* married, but that “no marriage could survive if there wasn’t the *third* to increment it”. (Olga, my patient, could have said the very same thing.) In fact, he tells her that he is using her to strengthen his marriage. They have a sexual orgy of calculated pleasure for a week.

Later, her lover—whom I shall call the Ugly Master—changes tactics. He keeps her in a constant state of uncertainty, until one day he suddenly phones her to invite her to lunch and make love, only to vanish again. For her these are uncontrollable and delightful intrusions into her life.

Gradually he managed to break up her relationship with her steady boyfriend, who was a rather quiet and sad youth. Then he set her up in a small flat but his availability was never predictable. He insisted on the one hand that she sustain her professional work and yet on the other hand he mocked and denigrated her efforts to work. Thus he achieved his aim: he succeeded in demoralising her vis-à-vis her professional ability and made her utterly dependent on him [...] Being his mistress was not a role she cherished; yet she accepted it with the same passivity as other roles he capered her through. [...] Passion alone ruled their ways. (pp. 198–199)

She is struck by the fact that he requires her *to resist him a little*. It would seem to be the condition for him to have sex with her: the Ugly Master needs to feel some form of resistance on her behalf—a resistance that his power will shatter. By subtly humiliating her, he unleashes both his own and her sexual enjoyment. She reacts to his mortifications with violent attacks of rage, but is ultimately satisfied when she can tame them with her will and sexual desire. With time she becomes more and more addicted to her role as dependent victim. One day the Ugly Master forces her to participate in threesomes: it is up to him to choose the third person, a man, with the only criterion being that he be particularly disgusting. After a year or so of submission, she wakes up “from her trance of abject fascination” and leaves him for good.

Telling this story to her analyst many years later, our Subjected Beauty evokes the Pauline Réage novel *Story of O*, which she had read with her lover during that bizarre year. “Only pornographic literature is truly instructive and idealistic!” she comments. She questions how she could ever have become caught up in such an extraordinary period of erotic masochism.

When our heroine was still a child, the Second World War had broken up her family environment. Her father had gone off to join the army, and she, her mother, and her brothers had wandered from one house to the next in a constant state of uncertainty. When she was sent to boarding school, she found refuge in books, so that, as a child, reading ended up representing nearly all her reality.

Just prior to starting university, she had gone through an eightmonth depressive crisis, but once there, her lifestyle changed dramatically. She neglected her studies and threw herself into an intense social life and erotic promiscuity. Emerging from her depressive phase, she had entered into a sort of manic state; she felt *forced* into sexual exploits.

Our Subjected Beauty tended towards cyclothymia, so that after her finals, she once again sank into a state of apathy, and her intellectual interests fizzled. She feared falling into another heavy depression and, wanting to keep herself busy, and being a very beautiful young woman, she started to work as a model. It was at this point that she built her first stable relationship with the aforementioned quiet young man. But given his gloominess and her apathy and near depression, their relationship lacked enthusiasm. And so it was that during this phase— when she clung to her partner to escape a paralysing depression—the perverse episode with the Ugly Master occurred.

But even today, in certain situations, the stimulating memory of that sensual and unmentionable enjoyment resurfaces. One day, “... her children had been fractious and demanding. They had a lot of house-guests over the weekend and her husband had irritated and provoked her into a terrible temper by teasing her about her not being able to enjoy the company of their guests” (p. 200). She had almost exploded into a rage, and when she retired to bed, she dreamt: “I was with my lover and he was ferociously fucking me.” She enjoyed it intensely in her dream. After telling all this to Khan, she started describing her childhood after her father had left for the war. More particularly, she talked about her *rage* at the time. She would easily flare up into a temper, and her mother would punish her. She would argue with her older brothers, and usually came off the worse for it. In short, she was a little shrew. But suddenly at the age of five or six, she changed into a docile and subdued child who was devoted to reading.

It was at this point that Khan helped her to notice how in childhood, just as in her current family life, she experiences intense feelings of rage towards her loved ones, which would lead one to think that her whole masochistic affair had simply been an antidote to her rage towards everyone she loved. Our belle then revealed that between the ages of fourteen and seventeen she had engaged in “frantic masturbation”, though it was mechanical and unsatisfying. She would fantasise about “being coerced into sexual intercourse by a physically unattractive person” (p. 203). Sometimes there were others watching her while she was being “humiliated in this way”. Thus, the analyst concluded, her adventure with the Ugly Master was actually a re-enactment of her teenage erotic fantasy.

A drug for aphanisis

At this stage of his case presentation, Khan, in the style of Conan Doyle, finally reveals to us why this lady had come to him. This “wilful and determined woman” (p.

204) had been happily married for ten years to a man of high standing, gentle and generous, and thanks to whom our heroine had felt she belonged to someone and to a home. Yet she was in a state of acute agitated depression and feared a breakdown. This crisis was very similar to the one she had suffered before university. At the time she felt it was impossible for her to relate to anyone or anything. “She would withdraw into a global apathy in which she experienced a dead sort of pain and burnt out rage.” The perverse affair had instead allowed her to feel an *actual suffering* related to a real person. With the Ugly Master, pain and rage had finally found an object, and had thus become bearable, also because spiced up by sexual pleasure. “Her relationship to her lover allowed her to initiate experiences; it gave her an anchorage in her life,” Khan notes. At this point Khan’s text slips towards an unconcealed apology of perversion. After all, the entire book, in which the case in question is described, ultimately aims at illustrating the beneficial aspects of perversion, which is depicted not as a malady, but rather as a more or less successful artifice to emerge from it—until at a certain point the author, as we shall see further on, clearly states the analogy between the perverse situation and the analytical one.

Why does the magic of the perverse relation end when the Beast forces Beauty into having intercourse with other men? After all, had she not, as a teenager, already imagined similar situations while masturbating? Yet intercourse with these gentlemen whom her lover had imposed on her gave her neither pleasure nor pain, but only a dull revulsion. Her resistance had led the Ugly Master to feel truly *powerless* before her, and this had broken the sadomasochistic spell. Now void of power, the lover counted for nothing. Indeed, “The active will of the pervert operates only in an area of illusion where his victim, through her passive will, demands and endorses his active will” (p. 206). By pervert, Khan here means the lover of the Subjected Beauty.

According to the author, the spell is broken because the other loses power. He fails to explain, however, why this offering of the Beauty to other men leads to this loss of power. I propose a game: let us imagine an answer to this question, basing ourselves on what Khan has told us.

I imagine our belle finally discovering, in this phase of the game, the ugly man’s masochism. She realises that his aim is to have others fuck her not only to humiliate *her*, but *himself too*. In this way, however, he has given up his sadistic charisma. She can read in this, beyond his sadistic freedom, her master’s all-consuming passion for his own bondage: he is a slave to his perversion. Behind the Olympian indifference that had so seduced her, she now sees her master’s impassioned and passive side. The enchanting interlocking between a sadistic mastery and a masochistic condescension comes undone in the cacophonous collision between two masochisms. This is a structure we have already seen: the sadist is ultimately always the other, the “I” is always masochistic.

Khan leaves to us the task of imagining the reasons behind those awful raging depressions that had led first to promiscuity, then to the perverse episode, and finally to the analytic relation. Was the source of it all her father’s abandonment? After all, by leaving for the army, he had abandoned her to a mother who was unable to guarantee

her stability and safety. Let's move on. Let's imagine that back then our Beauty was already furious against her absent father but that the only way—which Khan calls *necessary*—to compensate for this fury was to imagine herself being possessed by her father, “this disgusting man”. Her perverse lover did indeed have a series of paternal features: older, habitually absent, married. It was impossible to think he would be completely devoted to her. In this case too, therefore, the efficient effect of a trauma looms: the lack of a father. This trauma is experienced again through depressive crises with a paralysing apathy steeped in rage.

We have already noticed the connection between depression and perversion (see “Perversion dodges jealousy” in Chapter One). Now, depression can be described as a painful impossibility to enjoy pleasure, pleasure in life above all. It is like an *apiánisis*—a wiping away— Jones (1927, 1933) would say. According to Jones, *apiánisis* is the true meaning of Freud's castration anxiety, considering we cannot coherently apply the latter to females. What Freud calls the horror of castration is actually the fear—of both women and men—of losing the ability to enjoy pleasure.

Against this impotence to enjoy life, perversion vivifies the subject through forms of enjoyment. A compulsion for sexual enjoyment is the indispensable substitute for a life experienced as a burden. Perverse pleasure, however, consists precisely in simulating that lack or loss that has cast its grim shadow on the ego in depression—and in controlling this simulation. In fact, by leaving for war, our heroine's father had relinquished wielding his power on the family. The girl's suffering would seem the effect of a lack of paternal power. The classic Oedipal delusion, “My father enjoys my mother, he doesn't care for me!”, is replaced by a different sort of delusion: a father who is powerless, because absent. It would then appear that in her masturbatory fantasies a paternal figure, identified in an unpleasant man, returns and wields his full power. The other men who in our heroine's youthful fantasy watch the rape—but rarely copulate with her—seem to impersonate the distance the subject lasciviously keeps from her own dramatisation. In fact, if a subject is to choose a perverse solution to pain, a critical distance is required, an ability to throw a personal trauma on the stage. This is a little like Goethe, who could free himself from the trauma of his real-life fiasco by writing *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (The unsuccessful relationship between Goethe and the young Charlotte Buff, whom he had met in Wetzlar, inspired the novel written in 1774). In the book, both Goethe and his readers derive pleasure from the fact that Werther kills himself in the end, but it is thanks to this masochistic enjoyment that not only did Goethe not kill himself, but he also became rich and famous. It is as if, in any pervert's private novel, the character who suffers takes away, as a scapegoat, all of the subject's pain, even when the masochist subject lends his own body to the suffering character as cannon fodder, so to speak.

In this way, the particular erotic enjoyment in a perverse relation contrasts aphani-sis. Many perverts describe the pleasure induced by the perverse act in hyperbolic terms: their orgasms in normal situations bear no comparison to the very special quality of perverse pleasure. It is a remarkable enjoyment sharpened by a sense of

danger, by a trepidation intertwined with sensuousness. This incomparable trepidatious *Lust* (in German, desire and enjoyment) comes from the fact that it plays on an underlying, though not always actually felt, pain while at the same time soothing it—a wound the subject only feels when it is touched by perversion. Now, in the case of Khan's analysand, it would seem that the exceptional pleasure enjoyed with the Ugly Master was the other side of her pain—apathy, depression, and rage. To a breakdown caused by a crucial lack—the loss of a father during childhood, according to our hypothesis—perversion responds by somehow re-heightening the lack, but also by delightfully massaging it.

In addition, Khan explicitly tells us that our Beauty was able to overcome the barrier of aphanisis—her depressive inability to enjoy— thanks to an external, masculine presence. Of necessity, a “man” must come out of somewhere to save her: first the Ugly Master, then her husband, and finally her analyst. Only when a man has enough authority to “take her” does our heroine break the barrier. In other words, though a free, cosmopolitan woman, she cannot make it on her own, she needs an *out-of-the-ordinary man* to exert power over her and save her from her senseless void. But then, one might ask, why does our heroine, who ultimately has a positive relationship with her family, fall back into depressive aphanisis? Khan does not give us enough information on the subject. But a comparison with similar situations allows us to “play” with some general hypotheses.

Our Beauty, the subject, paints an idyllic image of her married life to her analyst, attributing her sufferance to the fact that she does not always feel up to her husband's high-ranking social relations. In a certain sense, she has turned her husband into *tier cause*—a bit like when she turned into a “docile and subdued” child from the shrew that she was. We should recall the episode that led to her dreaming of intercourse with the Ugly Master, when her husband “provoked her into a terrible temper” by reminding her that she was not able to *enjoy* the company of guests. We can look at this taunt as a slanted description of her married life: loving and happy, but without any real enjoyment. She may belong to a man who gives her security and a sense to her life, but her lack of something crucial, that her man cannot give her, leads her into a depressive chasm. And it seems to me that this lack can only be one thing: *her own lack*. In fact, as Khan suggests between the lines, in her relationship with the analyst she finally finds, so it would seem, the lack she was lacking: you cannot have sex with your analyst. You cannot belong to your analyst.

Our heroine, apart from her perverse episodes, suffers as an hysteric. Now, Freud had noticed that hysterics, like all neurotics, feed on perverse fantasies. Except that, unlike accomplished perverts, hysterics suffer instead of enjoying pleasure. Or the pleasure they allow themselves is somehow ruined, spoilt, or corrupted by an underlying bitterness. Freud had always wondered: why does the hysteric inflict upon herself pains and losses she could easily do without? Every neurosis is ultimately masochistic, in so far as subjects seem to inflict it upon themselves. The entire history of psychoanalytic

theory is marked by an attempt to give an answer to this enigma: why do neurotics seem to do everything they can to be unsatisfied, and to suffer? (Laplanche, 2000).

I don't know whether it's possible to give a definitive answer to this enigma, but one thing is nevertheless clear: the hysteric cannot do without that void that torments her. In other words, the hysteric cannot resolve herself to mourn and get over that void she seems to depend on as the primary source of both her pain and a promised enjoyment, a definitive one, which she does not want to renounce. That exclusion that gives the pervert pleasure by putting it on stage, is generally experienced by the neurotic as an exclusion from the normal, breathless, and vividly passionate world of those who really live. The neurotic feels exiled in the seclusion of her own void, even when she apparently leads a brilliant social life.

Khan's Belle, therefore, apparently needs to regret that catastrophic absence of paternal power. While she experiences from time to time periods of delightful submission—which she devotes to reading or leading a happy married life—sooner or later, the wound suppurates again, causing more depression and rage. Because this trauma is also the promise of a particular pleasure: the father will return and will love her, and everything will be joyful and right again. But this promise cannot be kept, not just because the father never lay with her, but because the promise is fine only as long as it remains as such. Its actuation is disappointing, because the actuation of desire defers true enjoyment. It is only in fantasies or in perverse adventures that the dream comes true—hence the pain and the rage.

Analysis as a perversion?

As I have said, this clinical case resolves itself in a tribute by Khan to perversion as invigorating. For a Winnicottian like himself, perversion and psychoanalysis belong to the same area of *transitional phenomena*. Indeed, Khan quotes Winnicott (1971, p. 38): “Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together.”

But even the perversion described earlier—the sexual encounter between a master and his subject—was a game. In the same way that art and all forms of illusion, whether tempered or excessive, starting from religion, are also games. Now, according to Winnicott and Khan, art, perversion, and analysis are all illusions. Hence the paradox: in order to *truly* live, a subject has to go through plays and illusions. Lacan said something very similar when he used the term *semblant*, semblance, as something essential to the subjective arrangement.

Khan notes that his patient had committed herself to three contracts: one with the Ugly Master, one with her husband, and one with her analyst. In other words, analysis stands halfway between a perverse relationship and a marriage. These three “contracts”—which Khan thinks have led to therapeutic effects—are all based on a

powerful man. Even “the analytic situation is a highly sophisticated and artificial construction, where the analyst plays a very fateful role, using both will and power” (p. 207). Khan does not agree with the ultimately hypocritical image of the analyst who neither acts nor exerts power over the analysand, reserving for himself the role of purely contemplative listener. A common stereotype among analysts opposes the Olympian neutrality of the analyst to prescriptive—such as cognitive and behavioural— psychotherapies. According to this commonplace view, analysts, unlike doctors, do not prescribe anything; they exert no conditioning force, they are mere disembodied conversers who leave any decision as to what to do to the other.

But it is quite evident that analysts absolutely do prescribe! For a start, they prescribe the setting, which is already saying a lot. They prescribe the rhythm of the sessions, the unpleasant rules like having to pay for missed sessions, and whether one should lie on the couch or not. If you think that the analytic setting is responsible for most of the effects of analysis, then you must also think that the analyst’s imposition of rules is essential. Significantly, the crucial moments of an analysis often coincide with the subject’s questioning the setting, challenging the analyst’s regulating power. Because it is in the setting itself that the analysand captures the analyst’s contradictions, it is over the setting that analysts exert their power. In short, in the setting *they manifest their desire or will*.

One has to be quite naive to believe that analysts, because they do not prescribe anything explicitly, prescribe nothing. We know well that a cough, a yawn, an overlapping of the legs, an *hmmm*, is enough for “prescribing” to patients what they should say, how they should say it, or whether they should say it at all. In his later supervisions, Bion set out to show analysts that their patients said and did just what their analyst deep down wished to hear or see. “How Kleinian are the dreams of your patients!”, he would repeat sarcastically to the analysts in training who reported their own cases to him in group sessions (I owe this account to Bice Benvenuto, at the time a trainee at the Tavistock in London). Analysands—like all subjects involved in a dense relationship—have a sixth sense that helps them realise what the analyst desires or loathes. There is much talk of analysand resistance, but the problem is that they usually put up far too little resistance. Psychoanalysis is therefore ultimately prescriptive too, except that it prescribes in a more refined, more ethically correct and somewhat hypocritical way. Analysis actually works thanks to suggestion, like almost everything in social relations. The point is seeing whether this suggestion leads to some sort of analysis or not.

Analysis, Khan stresses, is a power game. Analysts, in order to be “fateful”—using Khan’s ambiguous term—aim at exerting a form of power; for example, they require that their interpretations be taken as true. The analysand-subject is thus faced with two alternatives: either submitting and becoming an accessory to this power, thus playing “the good analysand”, or opposing it by putting up resistance. In clinical experience, we are actually confronted with the entire spectrum of possible reactions to this power: from a joyful submission to the analyst’s word, in an attitude of reverential trust, to

the most extreme forms of rejection, with the analyst reduced to someone “who’s all talk” (this reaction being the one preferred by perverts). But to call the subject’s reaction to power *resistance* is misleading: in reality, the subject who doesn’t swallow it all, who asks the analyst for a lot more than mannered or textbook interpretations, brings to the analytic relation a sceptical mode of challenging power that certainly excites him even in life. Perverts thus resist the analyst just as they tend to resist all forms of power. They are all too aware of the imposture of all power.

Chapter Six: Weaning From Perversion?

Is a cure for perversions possible?

The fact that the difference between *care*, *cure*, and *treatment* has been the subject of so much debate reveals an uncertainty among analysts over the essence of their practice. While I shall not enter into this debate, my position will be clearer to readers by the end of this chapter. I shall therefore use the term *analytic cure* with all its ambiguity.

A cure for perversions?

Some analysts claim that, unlike neuroses, perversions are incurable, simply because there is nothing to cure. It is impossible to modify, they say, a subjective structure that assures intense pleasures. In fact, analysts rarely really deal with pure perverts, since someone solely perverse would not be seeking a cure in the first place. And if they themselves do seek psychotherapy, it is because they are uncomfortable with a sort of neurotic ego-dystonia. And this unhappiness about their perversion makes it potentially curable. In practice, analysts only come into analytical contact with neurotic perverts, or with neurotics who indulge in perverse fantasies and acts.

Some perverts never give up their perverse fantasies, even after analysis, yet we cannot consider their cure a failure, because analysis allows them to adopt their perversion in a non-neurotic, non-selfdestructive way, and in adjusting to their perverse enjoyment, they gain access to an *amor fati*: their fate is their perversion. They can usually achieve a non-perverse sex life as well, sometimes alternating between “normal” sexual relations and “perverse” bliss. To cite once more the distinction by Krafft-Ebing, from the perverts they were they become libertines.

Others, instead, give up perversion altogether. What then happened during analysis? What was the cause of this conversion?

Analysts explain the effects of analysis according to the patterns and theoretical grids of their own school. These patterns and grids are often called *meta-psychology*. Even when they exchange ideas (quite rarely, unfortunately) with colleagues from other schools, they interpret the effects their colleagues induced upon their analysands according to the meta-psychology of their own school. In the best of cases, they believe that their colleagues from a rival school, when they do achieve a positive effect, have

done so without really knowing what they were doing. I too prefer the explanatory grids of certain schools compared to others, but here I shall attempt an *ascesis*, or, as Husserl would say, an *epoche*—a putting between parenthesis of all the most popular theoretical reconstructions among analysts—and limit myself to a minimalist reconstruction of what I think happens between someone who follows the so-called analytic protocol and a perverse subject.

Every analytic school also has its “healing” criteria, of course. For some, the cure consists in the *reparation* of internal objects that have been attacked and damaged by sadistic drives and fantasies (Kleinism). For others, it consists in accessing the *creative dimension of play* intended as the ludic ability in life (Winnicott). Others think a cure lies in the *reinforcement of the ego* to help individuals adapt to a pressing reality (ego psychology), or in the *integration of split parts into a cohesive Self* (self psychology). For others still, the cure is in the *advent of full speech* to replace the empty speech of alienation (early Lacan), or in the “adjustment of one’s relation to the real” (the more mature Lacan), and so on. It still remains to be seen, however, *if, to what extent, and how* these different concepts between schools express, at least in part, fundamental ethical and technical divarications in practice, or whether they are not simply ways of putting very similar concepts into the jargon of each school. One basic doubt remains when we deal with psychoanalytical literature: do entirely different strategies really exist between schools, or is the analytic strategy basically the same, with analysts simply lacking a shared theoretic language?

I think that what counts in analysis is *not* the content of any interpretations. Analysts often fall into this intellectualistic naivety of believing that their analysands have changed because the analyst rattled off some interpretation in one key rather than in another. In practice, analysts obtain effects no matter what their metapsychological reference. The modifications produced are not the effects of the conceptual content of one’s interpretations. They are not *hermeneutic effects*. In fact, many today have undertaken to describe the real agents of change implicit in the analytic setting, beyond the tactics of any particular school (Some noted research applies sociological methods to compare the effects of psychotherapy, analytic or otherwise; see Kächele, 2001; Luborsky Singer, & Luborsky, 1975; Luborsky et al., 1993). To question pure practice—setting aside, at least provisionally, the metapsychologies—is an enormous but indispensable task.

The splitting of the ego

The therapeutic strategy that aims at the cohesion of the subject, or *Self* derives from the Freudian theory of *Ichspaltung*, splitting of the ego (1927e, 1940e), already discussed in Chapter One.

If every perversion illustrates a splitting of the ego, as if two different subjects with different forms of knowledge about reality were at play, we can then deduce that the

analytic cure aims at removing this split and integrating the two parts. In other words, it has to make sure that the (adult) subject, who is aware of objective reality, and the (infant) subject, who desires, coincide. In the paradigmatic case—fetishism—the subject needs to desire a woman precisely because she does not have a penis, not because, *via* a fetish, she would have one (In the case of male homosexual fetishism, we could say that the subject needs to accept the fact that there is no man with a super-phallus to whom he can submit to). The cure for perversion would then be an integration of the parts of the Self, leading to a *single* subject where knowledge and desire coincide.

But are we really sure that this ultimate integration actually occurs in normal women and men? And are we really sure that such an integration or cohesion is always desirable?

In “Fetishism”, Freud quotes a non-fetishist case that he puts forward as a paradigm of what he would later call *splitting of the ego*. Two young men had lost their father when they were children, but refused to acknowledge the fact. Yet this denial of reality, Freud notes, did not make them sink into psychosis.

It was only one current in their mental life that had not recognized their father’s death; there was another current which took full account of that fact. The attitude which fitted in with the wish and the attitude which fitted in with reality existed side by side. (1927e, p. 156)

In one of the two boys, the situation had led to an obsessive neurosis: the subject would fluctuate between the belief that his father was still alive and that he was standing in his way, and the belief that his father was dead and that he had become his inheritor (I note that this case opens up the question of the analogies between fetishism and obsessive neurosis, as we have seen with the case of Antonio in Chapter Four. Ultimately, the obsessive neurotic is also split: obsessive compulsion is so precisely because it expresses a conflict between two contradictory instances).

As I have stated, according to Freud the ego of fetishists is split, in so far as they at once believe and do not believe in a female phallus. But is this not the condition of every *believer*, in a religion or anything else? If we read works by the great mystics, this is exactly what we find: they are often harrowed by the doubt inherent in believing in God. A part of them believes in God, another contradicts this belief. And it is precisely this game of hide and seek between faith and disbelief that gives the divine figure its extraordinary luminance.

In fact, religious belief more than anything else gives us a good idea of the normalisation of this split that Freud sees at work in fetishism and obsessive neurosis. For example, a Dorze Ethiopian believes that the leopard is a Christian animal and that it therefore fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays, the days when Coptic Orthodox Christians fast. But in practice the Dorze people protect their livestock from leopard attacks on Wednesdays and Fridays too. They believe that leopards fast on the same days as

Coptic Christians (according to the tradition), but also that they eat every single day (according to their daily experience). Modern life is also imbued with double beliefs, or with beliefs accompanied by a shadow of disbelief. According to public opinion surveys, the majority of Westerners believe in life after death (fifty-five per cent of Britons according to a 2008 survey in the UK seventy-two per cent of American adults according to a 2014 survey), but in practice, they are no less afraid of death than someone who does not believe in the hereafter.

In the criminal codes of many countries, only those who commit a crime of their own volition can be punished, so that any proven mental illness at the time of committing the crime can preclude punishment. But we are also convinced that criminal behaviour is determined by several factors: socio-economic conditions, family history, ethnic or religious membership, genetic factors, and so on. How do we reconcile these two outlooks on crime: one that accepts the Cartesian and Kantian presupposition of moral freedom, and the other that considers the historical and social determinations of an individual? Theoretically, we cannot reconcile them in any way, but in practice we reconcile them through compromises: by punishing criminals but granting extenuation for psychosociological reasons, or even waiving the penalty on grounds of mental infirmity.

We all find forms of compromise between our irreconcilable visions more or less in the same way that fetishists find in their fetishes a compromise between the presence and absence of the penis.

As we have said, the splitting of the ego to which Freud refers consists in a difference between what we know rationally and a different “knowledge”, one that expresses itself in desires and erotic acts (Indeed, Freud’s bet consists in tracing affective and erotic gravitations back to *unconscious* beliefs). As we saw earlier, perverts seem to have two forms of knowledge: one that we might call evolved, for practical cognitive life, and an archaic one for sexual life. Here we gather the aforementioned difference between obsessive neurosis and perversion. While the two subjects of the pervert amicably share their kingdom, the two subjects of the obsessive are in a continual state of conflict as they contending, we might say, for the same kingdom. Perversion is a successful compromise, obsession an impossible one.

But double subjectivity is not something unique to perverts and obsessives. As we have already noted, every time we take pleasure in a film or novel, we make the most of the *Ichspaltung*. We rationally know that a film hero’s ordeals are pure invention, yet a childish part of us takes it all as real; if we didn’t have something of this gullible child in us, we wouldn’t quiver for our hero’s perils, nor be touched when he falls in love, or delight in his success. Every aesthetic enjoyment is always structurally perverse, as Winnicott (1971) had in many respects pointed out.

We are all far more split than we are willing to admit. I may not believe in superstitions, but I still think twice when a black cat crosses the road in front of me. A superstitious niche still lurks even in the most enlightened people. About superstitions,

Italians are wont to say, “It’s not true, but I believe it,” or, as the French psychoanalyst Marmoni (1969) put it, “I know full well ... but nonetheless ...”

I would say that some form of splitting of the ego is actually providential, for example, for the terminally ill. They are often quite aware on an intellectual level that there is no hope, yet they continue to talk and behave as if they had a long life ahead of them. They may start following alternative medicine they would have scorned before their illness, as the key to their healing process—a recovery the other part of their self knows to be impossible. I have seen sophisticated people die with a smile on their lips, because they “knew” they were on their way to recovery. Awareness of our approaching death splits us more than anything else. In fact, we should wonder whether the true source of the splitting of the ego actually lies in the consciousness of our mortality, more than in observing the absence of a penis in women. We all know that we are mortal, but there is a part in all of us that (fortunately?) disavows the fact. For Freud, the unconscious ignores death.

This is something expressed by a common Italian motto, which Antonio Gramsci borrowed from Georges Sorel: the “pessimism of reason and optimism of the will”. How often has this split between will and reason, optimism and pessimism, hope and desperation, turned out to be the wisest way to deal with life? I would go so far as to say that it is the only condition that allows us that minimal degree of humanity that certain situations make possible. Many of us have the ultimately delirious sensation that nothing bad can happen to us, and that we are safe (a sensation reported by Wittgenstein (1930))—an unjustified feeling of security that is the condition for all our moments of courage. Heroism ultimately feeds on secret magical presuppositions.

In short, the splitting of the ego is the wisest response to several life situations. It is a response which goes against all those analytic theories that promote the ideal of the *cohesive Self*, according to which mental pathology is a splitting, a dissociation, and a subjective pluralisation, while the ideal of normality is a Self that integrates various instances into a global cohesion.

Italo Calvino’s novel, *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959), involuntarily gives us a caricature of the cohesive Self. In the Middle Ages, knights were shut inside hermetic armours, but one of them, Agilulf, is quite peculiar: his beautiful cohesive armour contains nothing. Agilulf speaks, fights, he is even the object of a woman’s amorous passion—she is attracted precisely by the knight’s enigmatic cohesiveness—but he does not exist. This could be a literary emblem of the *blank Self described* by certain psychoanalysts (Giovacchini, 1975; Green & Donnet, 1973).

It is thanks to a split that we all cooperate socially. We need to put between parenthesis our certainties and beliefs. Were we not capable of splits, we would either be fanatics, or completely hypocritical. In other words, we need to firmly believe in something, but at the same time, we should *not* believe in this something entirely. We need to believe in ourselves, of course, but not too much; a part of us has to be able to doubt and listen to those who are not us and see things differently. Too much cohesiveness leads to arrogance, to deafness towards the reasons and requests of others.

A degree of splitting is therefore essential in order to open up to others, and to be accepted by others and even by ourselves. This should apply to psychoanalysts too: to function at their best, they should not “entirely” believe in their metapsychological paradigm.

Hetero-dystonia

Hence, the splitting of the ego or Self is not only something that accompanies pathologies and perversions, it also promotes creativity and tolerance. The splitting of the ego, proposed by Freud as a psychic mechanism distinct from repression, is present in all human beings and is indispensable.

This is what Winnicott (1971) saw when he developed his theory of transitional objects and phenomena. A typical transitional object is a child’s teddy bear, or Linus’s security blanket, something that is not part of oneself, yet is at once inseparable from oneself. Here, Winnicott is re-elaborating Freud’s thesis on the splitting of the ego, but transferring it to the register of the difference between “self” and “not self”. Perversions are certainly transitional experiences in adult life, but so are religion, art, plays ... and analysis.

According to Freud, curing neurosis was equivalent to getting rid of *certain* repressions (not all, of course—we cannot dry up the unconscious). Analogously, curing perversions is equivalent to getting rid of *certain* splits—but which ones specifically?

We said that what characterises perversions is their *hetero-dystonia*. In other words, the perverse subject is ultimately in friction with others, at least in sexual acts. At times it would seem that this conflict is the external effect of the perversion, but on closer examination, we notice that it is its cause. Perverts generally have a strong aggressive charge towards others. They are usually furious not against everybody, but only against certain significant and crucial others. In short, they are still devoured by jealousy—and the perverse scene, which re-edits the jealous trauma, is the only way to truly take enjoyment. Perverse subjects are split. Their anger or jealousy is not harboured particularly in their current life, but rather in their childhood, which still determines their sexual desire. A part of their self is (or appears to be) reconciled with the world, while another, which emerges in their lustfulness, cannot help picking at an open wound. The pervert *is freshly* disillusioned. Perversion is the medication for a pain of which the pervert has lost all memory, but which is still a pain that demands the perverse act in order to carry on medicating itself. These subjects who suffer—and thus stand against this world of disillusion—fail in their erotic life in so far as it does not agree with the other’s desire. Hence, the ethical and aesthetical divergence from the other.

Mourning and weaning

If this is how things stand, what makes it possible for the analytic process to lead to a dissolution of this hetero-dystonia?

The analytic process leads subjects to abandon their perverse acts and fantasies in so far as it has the characteristics of *mourning* and *weaning*. Mourning and weaning are *workings*, processes that lead to producing something: separation. The process of grief leads us in time to separating from something we held dear; weaning leads the infant to separating from a source of enjoyment, the mother's milk and breast. Like weaning someone off a drug, it is a painful reconversion process of someone's pleasure system, of their libidinal rhythms, to help them do without the voluptuousness the psychoactive substance offers. Perverse fantasies and acts are like a drug, a source of exquisite pleasure from which subjects find it extremely hard to separate. Perverse pleasure is a "monkey on someone's back", if, as Freud thinks, we are "under round-the-clock surveillance" by the enjoyment-desire principle (*Lustprinzip*). We all risk having a monkey on our backs, and we often do, even if we do not admit it. After all, as we have seen, the "monkey" of perversion re-presents and represents a climactic scene and fundamental suffering because the subject feels shunned by the significant other's enjoyment. Separating from one's perversion, therefore, also features all the characteristics of mourning.

How does the analytic setting manage to make this process of mourning and weaning—of detachment from perversion—work? By analytic setting, I mean regular sessions with a therapist who neither judges nor prescribes, who displays a certain benign neutrality, and who does not react countertransferentially. A recurring content of these conversations is the subject's childhood vicissitudes. I do not consider delivering interpretations (whether with a psychoanalytical slant or any other) to be a specificity of what we call psychoanalysis today. Indeed, some psychoanalytical schools forego interpretations. The analytic device gradually leads subjects to a sort of decantation of perverse enjoyment: they abandon it because it has lost the charm it once had.

In fact, analysts are such because their only wish is to reconstruct their subjects' histories, and thanks to transference, this wish infects the subjects themselves. There is a motto by Bion that is very popular today, particularly in Italy, which says "The analyst should eschew memory and desire" (Bion, 1991). But I don't think the analyst can or should eschew *any* desire. For one thing, he cannot eschew the desire to analyse, or, as some say, to "construct". By reconstructing or constructing their history, subjects dredge up their traumas, which are the source of their perverse play-acting. In short, analysis twists the knife in the unhealed wound, which is precisely what happens in mourning. Grievers, far from diverting their minds from the "thing" they have just lost, tirelessly turn their thoughts to episodes and situations where the "thing" shone for them. Paradoxically, mourning is an exacerbated attachment to what has been lost (Essentially, the fact that Homo sapiens reacts to loss with mourning and depression

is a confutation of radical Darwinism: all mourning is biologically non-adaptive). This regressive investment in the past, in which the lost “thing” becomes more than ever the subject’s object of love and hate, is indispensable. Indeed, we often reconstruct certain psychic sufferings as the very effect of a *failed mourning* (on a case of “failed mourning” that resulted in chronic depression, see Khan, 1979, Chapter Ten). The subject experiences a sort of eternal objectless grieving precisely because she or he did not duly yield to the paradox and waste of mourning. Now, in what is considered normal mourning, subjects—precisely by overinvesting in the missing object—eventually free themselves of it. The more they keep it in mind as the object of their tenderness, the more they *recognise* it as missing in the real. Mourning converts the subject to the ethical acceptance of the real, of which the analyst is the bellwether. The ethical principle of analysis is that a subject must bond above all to the existent.

Thus, analysis stirs up the subject’s past suffering in the same way a tragic representation does, and it does so in a perverse manner: in dredging up this traumatic past, the subject is thrashed by enjoyment. Analysis somehow makes one also draw pleasure from the very suffering that is reactualised in analysis, and this, then, is the very structure of perversion. Analysis makes it possible to overcome perversion by somehow borrowing its dynamics, just as Khan had actually sensed (Chapter Five).

The cure of the other

But why does this process of detachment from a trauma—of which perversion is ultimately the representation that makes it possible to derive pleasure from it—imply a kind of ethical conversion? How does the fetishist, for example, who once only loved women’s feet or shoes, manage at one point to desire women above the ankles too? This ethical conversion does not occur because analysts preach it; analysts are amoral, and may even seem apathetic. They cure not because they desire to cure, but because they desire to analyse. And in any case, analytic amorality by no means implies a lack of ethics, since strangely, their apathy is able to modify, over time, the *patitos* of the perverse analysand.

Some explain this conversion by the fact that all human beings, if they do not suffer excessively, would tend to be spontaneously ethical; in other words, they tend to care about others as subjects. This is what is now referred to as natural “empathy”, a concept very fashionable today since the discovery of mirror neurons. Even in sexual life, a subject from the very beginning invests the other not as a personal object, but as another subject who suffers, enjoys, and knows. A certain spontaneous, instinctive ethics—to care about the other as subject—is considered a trait selected by biological evolution, designed to facilitate the survival of *Homo sapiens* as a species. The selfish and the evil often prevail, it is true, but they usually prosper only when they are anyway ethical within the group they belong to. Without ethics, without an invigorating Cause, and lacking the sex appeal of altruism, one is marginalised, unappealing, a loser.

But don't get me wrong: psychoanalysis is quite right to stress that every subject—even a saint—is a nest of selfishness, hate, narcissistic self-conceit, and resentment; in other words, evil broods in every human being. But the opposite is also true. There is something ethical even in a rogue, some form of interest in others not just as an instrument for self-satisfaction. Perception adjusts every subject to an external sensitive reality, even if there is always the risk of perceptive distortions and aberrations, as in a mirage. In the same way, our ethical instinct adjusts us to a convivial reality with others. In this sense, perversions are an ethical mirage: just as in the desert our eyes may mistake sand for water, so in erotic life do our drives mistake the other subject for our instrument.

It is here that perversion finds a link to neurosis—in narcissism. Narcissism is another Freudian term that has become more and more obscure over time precisely because of its extraordinary success. Today it is used to explain anything and everything. But who is ultimately the most elementary narcissist? Freud (1914c) states clearly that it is someone who suffers, even physically. With a toothache, the world around us fades, and our focus is only our molar. There is no need to suppose whether the subject is evil or selfish. Narcissism is our biologically predisposed reaction to suffering. In the same way, drug addicts take no interest in the world or in others if they cannot get their fix. Every neurosis is therefore narcissistic, because in so far as it makes us suffer, it makes us forget the supremacy that reality has for us and over us. But perverts, too, are narcissists, in so far as their perverse enjoyment is a device to medicate a fundamental suffering: the suffering caused by their exclusion from the other's or Other's enjoyment. Perverts would appear to be dominated by their own enjoyment—an enjoyment others can only be subjected to—because the primordial suffering of their subjective exile has dulled their ethical abilities.

Indeed, the analytic relationship, by making subjects focus on their pain, helps them to separate from the cause of this pain, in the same way that in mourning a subject focuses on the lost object to separate from it in the name of an ethical primacy—that of reality. Analysis, like mourning and weaning, is above all *a cure through time*. Analysis, in contrast to brief psychotherapies that concentrate on a specific symptom, makes duration curative. Freud (1926e) said that analysis is a slow magic (pp. 187–188). Analysis, when it succeeds, manages to turn iterative time, a time without history where everything repeats itself, into an historical time where we change and transform ourselves. It takes time for perverts to disinvest themselves of their traumas, and gradually let their perverse acts—the sense of which fades as the re-actualised power of their pain grows fainter—slide away.

But this separation is a weaning also because perverts separate themselves, over time, from a form of enjoyment, and to be able to do so, they need someone (an analyst) who in turn also gives up certain enjoyment. But exactly who is the analyst? What kind of subject is he? Obviously there are many different kinds of analyst. But is there not a trait that perhaps at least some of them, if not all, have in common—a trait that enables them to function as analysts?

It is probably no coincidence that one of the most widespread treatments against alcohol abuse is the strategy of Alcoholics Anonymous, an association of former alcoholics who help other alcoholics to recover. It has been noted that sobriety endures when subjects dedicate themselves to the recovery of other alcoholics. Curing others becomes also a cure for themselves. Something similar happens with regard to analysts: they are also often former narcissists, or perverts, etc., who seek a cure through caring about other people's narcissism. And by taking care of others, they open up to them the prospect of caring for others, of abandoning their narcissism. Thus analysis is not just a psychotherapeutic technique, even if with Freud it arose as a psychotherapeutic technique within a medical context. Analysis is above all an ethical *cure* that aims at *caring* for the other.

Perverts, as we have noted, show no care for the other's enjoyment because of their experience of an early trauma, that is, the discovery that the other lives in a reality from which they are excluded. For many subjects, it is highly traumatic to realise that the other is not a function of theirs, *the right object for them*, but rather something in-and-for-itself, and as such inaccessible. The subject suffers because of this exclusion from the other—and ultimately because of this *limitation* as a finite being in space, time, and Eros. Perverts are nostalgic about a “true life”—a life where they would enjoy the other as if they were themselves the other—that they have never been able to access. And yet they manage to transform this exclusion into enjoyment. Neurotics, on the other hand, are hounded by this exclusion, despite their will to overcome their trauma and take part in the life of others.

Appendix: Freud and Masochism

Masochism was a problem for the mature Freud, as we know. It was not only a problem of an “economic” nature, but also a puzzle for his general project of a new science.

Any very ambitious author—which Freud certainly was—concentrates on the very themes that create the greatest difficulties and that are at odds with the puzzle of the research programme to which he adheres (I say “research programme” in the sense given by Lakatos, 1978). Masochism was enigmatic for psychoanalytical theory, and still appears to be so (also from the title given to a psychoanalytic book on the subject, *The Enigma of Masochism* (André, 2000)).

But what is the enigma of masochism? What is the *essential* point of Freudian theory that creates the most friction with the multicoloured reality of the various masochisms (since there are more than one)? To answer this question, it is necessary to answer another: *what is essential in Freudian theory?* This theory is certainly a complex and intricate construction, which evolved over time. But what is the basic presupposition upon which Freud constructed this labyrinthine monument?

Freud’s focal thought

Heidegger (1961) said that every great thinker constructed his work around a *single focal thought*. Thus, if Freud was a great thinker, one must ask what made up the focal, or essential, thought of his work.

For me, psychoanalytic theory in its entirety is a system for understanding manhood which was founded *at the start*—but, as we shall see, no longer *at the end*—on what was for Freud the essential truth of human beings (and basically of every living being): *die Lust*. Freud left a lasting mark on the previous century by his decision, of a metaphysical nature, that the fundamental force that moves human beings, the force at the beginning and at the end of their vicissitudes, is *Lust* (Every scientific research programme is based on a metaphysical decision. But this in no way implies that every scientific project that is based on a metaphysical decision evolves as a mature science).

The term *Lust* is usually translated in English as *pleasure*, in French as *plaisir*, in Spanish as *placer*, etc. But in German, *Lust* has an erotic connotation that is not found in the English *pleasure*: *Lust* derives from *Vollust*, as in the English “lust” or “concupiscence”. It was probably for this reason that Freud preferred this term to others also meaning pleasure: *Freude*, *Gefallen*, *Genuss*, *Vergnügen*, *Wonne*. Polysemantically,

it means desire and pleasure, concupiscence and enjoyment (The ambiguity of this term was underlined many times by Laplanche (1972, p. 157) and by Derrida (1980, p. 293)).

In German one can say, for example, *Ich habe Lust zu schlafen*, “I want to sleep”. *Lust* is thus not only pleasure, but also what incites us towards pleasure, the pleasure of tending towards pleasure, the unpleasant sting of desire which seems pleasurable in so far as it leads us towards pleasure. I would thus tend to translate *Lustprinzip* in English as *Lust Principle*.

Due to this very ambiguity of the term, Freud was reluctant to adopt it at first. Having proposed the term *libido* in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905d), he added a footnote in 1910, stating: “The only appropriate word in the German language, *Lust*, is unfortunately ambiguous, and is used to denote the experience both of a need (*Bedürfnis*) and of a gratification (*Befriedigung*)” (p. 135, note). And yet, everything leads us to believe that Freud later adopted the term, not *despite* this ambiguity, but *because* of it, even though over time the adoption of the term made it impossible for him to remain faithful to the conception that motivated his project: utilitarianist philosophy.

Regarding this point, it is useful to consider the distinctions made by Aristotle (in *Physics*) concerning causality. If *Lust* is the general force that moves the living being, “libido” as desiring tension is the efficient cause of *Lust*, while enjoyment or satisfaction (*Genuss* and *Befriedigung*) is the final cause. We shall look at the other Aristotelian causes, the material and the formal, later.

Jeremy Bentham (1970, p. 1) clearly summarised the utilitarianist theory in his famous maxim: “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.”

As we can see, this principle is inherently ambiguous: it at once establishes *what we do* (our being: the fact that humans always try to maximise pleasure and minimise unpleasure) and *what we should do* (having to be). But what should be, for this very reason, in some way is not. For any science with the human being as object, integrating being and having to be is problematic. If seeking pleasure is the common goal of every human being, then this aim is an integral part of its being—indeed, it is its essence. In other words, the being of humans, inasmuch as they are living beings, consists in *having to enjoy*. Thus, from the utilitarianist point of view, the ethics from one period or geography can greatly differ from that of another time or place, but *all of them* in some way prescribe to the subject to “enjoy”. This is why for Lacan—who certainly understood that the superego is utilitarianist—the Freudian superego always gives the order “Enjoy!” The only essential *obligation*, universally present in every human being, is to enjoy. Single individuals in specific cultures and periods are “free” to determine modes and conditions for enjoying and being happy, but they are certainly not free to decide the essential obligation of every human being: that of enjoyment and/or happiness.

The two sovereign masters according to utilitarianism—the avoidance of pain and the pursuit of pleasure—are condensed by Freud (the consequences of which will not be analysed here) in a single *Herr*, or master: the *Lustprinzip* (henceforth, *LP*).

In fact, for Freud, pleasure is equivalent to the reduction or annulment of unpleasure, and unpleasure is only aimless, unsatisfied desire (*Trieb*, drive, *libido*). In Freud's view, however, pleasure and unpleasure are affective effects of *Lust* as the *essential cause* of psychic life: they are the affective side effects of psychic energy.

This energy, according to Freud, can be free (in the primary process) or bound (in the secondary process). Unpleasure corresponds to an increase, and pleasure to a decrease, in the quantity of free energy. But Laplanche (1972) showed that, due to the principle of constancy, one cannot say that the increase of excitement is in itself either unpleasant or pleasant: the important thing is whether the excitement or liberation moves towards the constant level or not.

Using the terminology of ancient metaphysics, we could say that free energy is like the *hylé* (matter) of energy—in itself without form—which, when connected to a *morphé* (form), becomes “bound”, that is actual. The Freudian subject is potential energy that has become subjectivity in action: it is an energetic material that has assumed a form.

Freud often returns to this *Herrschaft* (lordship, mastery) of the *LP*. For Freud, the *LP* is our master because the sensations of pleasure and unpleasure, which manifest this energy, are for us “imperative” and “imperious”. But the *LP* is precisely *Lust* as a *Prinzip* or, in other words, as the aim (and thus as the hoped for end). The *LP* is what *regulates* psychic life—it is both the rule and its measure.

The psychic apparatus is governed by *LP* in so far as the former tries to maintain the quantity of excitement present within itself at the lowest, as well as the most constant, level possible: this is its aim. But Freud's self has two externalities, excitements, that come from both the external world and from the subject's organism. These excitements—*disturbances* of equilibrium—appear to the human consciousness as *Spannung*: an unpleasant tension. The *LP* as pleasure is *Lust* as a final cause of psychic life, while the desires (libido, drives, and tensions) are *Lust* as the efficient cause of psychic life. I follow here the four Aristotelian causes; efficient and final, and material and formal (Even Lacan (1966a) used the four causes to determine the substantial differences between magic, religion, science, and psychoanalysis). In other words, Freud initially posits the subject not as a simple *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, but rather as a *tense tabula rasa*, which must therefore learn how to rid itself of this tension.

But the picture becomes complicated because desire in the living being is not homogeneous: it is arrayed in a myriad of drives (which are divided between drives of the ego and object drives), in a confusion of often contrasting or contradictory desires that are never truly consistent. For this reason, one's drives often enter into conflict, leading to the need, on behalf of the ego, to select among them, which means repressing (*verdrängen*, displacing) some representations which represent some drives.

The repressed (displaced) representations of the drives nevertheless return, in the sense that they *press* towards the outside, they seek to be *ex-pressed*, and in expressing themselves are satisfied, even if only surreptitiously. But it does not suffice to say that Freudian theory is one of conflict, since a conflict can be expressed in various ways, and can be resolved by destroying one or more competitors. Instead, for Freud, repressed drives are always in any case satisfied: it could not be otherwise, since the *LP* dominates and directs them. *Lust*, the final aim and end of everything that lives, commands every *Trieb* to satisfy itself all the same. However, when this satisfaction is ego-dystonic, it is perceived by the ego as *Unlust*. For example, neurotic symptoms, persecutory beliefs, or anxiety dreams are unpleasant for the ego. *Lust*, in fact, is manifested within the ego not only as lust, but also as *Unlust*. Hence, the essential libidinal tension, the *Unlust* that it represents for the ego, obeys the *LP* in so far as the ego is aware of *Unlust*.

To summarise: the application—the phenomenology, I would say—of *LP* leads to sensations that are both pleasant and unpleasant for the ego. Using Aristotelian terminology, we could say that pleasure is the final cause of psychic processes; unpleasure is instead the efficient cause. But the unpleasure of the ego is also an effect of the conflict between drives, each of them ruled by the pleasure principle. *Unlust* is also the price paid for a pluralism of drives. The ego is analogous to holding an executive power in a nation—at risk of being paralysed by the conflicts of parties within the parliament. The ego, the executive subjectivity, tries to protect the organism from an excess of enjoyment that could lead to its death, meaning the cessation of every form of enjoyment.

Beyond the subject principle

The fact that this single, or circular, truth of human beings (the *LP*) is defined in terms of effects and affects is rooted in the ambiguity of *Lust*. This ambiguity consists in the fact that, according to Freud, pleasure and desire are, on the one hand, the same thing (*Lust*), and on the other hand, contradictory, since desire is the unpleasure that causes in us the desire for pleasure, while pleasure is the aim (and the end, the death) of desire. Desire is the psychic form that the unpleasant *endogene Reize* (internal tensions) assume, and these always seek to be discharged. When desire is in fact aimless, unbound, and ill-timed, it is perceived and *cognised* (but not recognised) as anguish (*Angst*)—anguish is an urge, *Lust*, that the ego is unable to bind, it is an im-pertinent and idle desire. Thus, inasmuch as the aim of *Lust* as desire is its own end in *Lust* as pleasure, *Lust* should tend towards its own extinction. This fundamental tendency of *Lust* to limit itself and, ultimately, to annul or destroy itself—to reach Nirvana—is later interpreted by Freud himself as the expression of a drive that regulates *Lust*'s rule: *Todestrieb*, the death drive.

We should therefore not be surprised that the *LP* very often appears in one's life as the deferment of pleasure *sine die*, or even—for example, in masochism—as the

quest for pleasure by means of unpleasure. Thus, *Lust* can take as its own goal its very opposite, and in some cases—why not?—it may express itself as the desire for desire itself.

For example, the Lacanian theory of hysteria and anorexia interprets them as the “desire for desire”, as if being desirous, and to desire, were the aim of the hysteric or anorexic subject. This thesis certainly exploits the ambiguity of the *LP*.

Freud’s great challenge thus consisted in showing that, precisely because every living being tends towards pleasure, even when the subject quite strangely seems to be inflicting unpleasure upon himself, the mastery of the *Lust* principle is still being affirmed. This is the case for neurotic symptoms, paranoia, inhibition, and anxiety, and perhaps also for masochism. Almost all of Freud’s famous “discoveries”—the theory of the dream as the imaginary satisfaction of a desire, of neurosis as an expression of a conflict between the drives of the ego and sexual drives, of psychosis and melancholia as narcissistic regressions, etc.—are basically rigorous inferences from his principle according to which *die Lust* is the beginning and end of psychic life.

We should finally abandon the naive, “empiricist” idea that Freud inferred his theory directly from his clinical practice, free from any preconceptions. In fact, he applied his basic preconceived paradigm in a very clever and systematic way to his clinical observation.

Anxiety and neurosis, if derived from a supposed trauma, are thus to be explained as the effects of a drive to mastery that, by internalising the trauma, subjectivises the senseless and alien trauma. However, once the subjectivating function of this mastering drive has been shown, the problem remains: is this drive towards mastery in turn subject to the *LP*, or does it escape it? Freud was mainly interested in knowing whether the repetition compulsion, once its function of psychic *Bindung* (binding) had been recognised, completely obeyed the lust principle, or whether it manifested an automatism that could not be reduced to it.

Freud’s final reply, which was somewhat unpalatable for nearly all psychoanalysts, was that even the *Bindung* (the subjectivisation of the trauma through anxiety) is irreducible to the *LP*. The binding manifests the ever-interconnected life and death drives that, in themselves, are not at all subjective, but rather, “biological”.

(French psychoanalysis was the first to raise the flag of a de-biologisation of Freud. Thus, his theory supposedly always dealt with drives (something subjective) and not instincts (something biological). In my opinion, this is a spiritualistic misinterpretation of Freud’s programme. For him, subjectivity is incomprehensible without any reference to something that is not subjective, the traumatic reality and the supposed biological instincts. The life and death drives are effectively trans-subjective precisely in so far as they are at the root of subjectivity; we can thus consider them as the biological grounds of the subjective history).

Because the death drive leads to the annihilation of the subject, while the life drive leads every subject towards the other, both thus lead the subject *out of himself*. In the end, something that post-Freudian psychoanalysis has tried at all costs to discard

emerges, something that decentralises every subjectivity and binds it to something that is not subjective. In other words, at the very heart of a rigorous theory of the subject, there emerges a transcendental that displaces every subject. This transcendental, or *ekstasis*—the decentralisation of the subject outside itself—is paradoxically both the condition of the analytical bond (which otherwise would be reduced to an interpersonal strategy, a “cognitive” therapy) as well as the limit of analytical power, and of what lies beyond it.

Ethics and the Lust Principle

But what is the relationship between this *LP* that Freud posited as the foundation of his work and what we call ethics?

We know that *Homo sapiens* differs from the “lower” species, which act according to “programmed” behaviour that is rigidly determined by their genes. The arrival of the mating season for birds triggers the programme: ritual courtship, behaviour patterns that automatically lead to copulation, nest building, the raising and care of the young, etc. With the right external stimulus, the sequence proceeds until it encounters the endpoint, written in the bird’s DNA. The ethics of these animals, if that is what we can call it, is an automatism with a minimal subjectivity.

Over the course of evolution, increasingly *open* programs are set up in which genetic determinism becomes weaker. Higher mammals do not possess an inexorable program that assures their reproduction; for them there is the *strategy of pleasure*. This does not predetermine, for example, a series of sexual behaviour patterns; rather, it is limited to *motivating* the animal. The individual must invent the ways and means for reaching coitus. The lust principle is therefore an expedient that pushes each primate, in particular, to come up with the strategies that make it possible for him or her to reproduce; and we all know how hard and ineffective this art of seduction often is! But in the end, can the behaviour, including sexual behaviour, of *Homo sapiens* be reduced to strategies of pleasure?

It is a fact that human beings do not always seek pleasure. Do even the ascetic monk who lives alone in the desert, or the suicide terrorist who voluntarily sacrifices his life for the cause, yearn for pleasure? The answer is not so obvious. Lacan distinguished between pleasure and enjoyment in order to show that even in actively seeking unpleasure, one enjoys. Some would say that with *ánthropos*, evolution has taken a step closer towards something which was once called liberty, and which now is called flexibility. In going beyond pleasure, seeking more than pleasure, and doing without pleasure, the human being seems to search basically for happiness, a state of mental well-being that is less bound to sensory enjoyment, something more ethereal than pleasure. The state of happiness is seen as being “higher” than the pleasurable sensations, because it presupposes a “liberty” that animals, apparently, do not enjoy to the same extent. It is seen as a sign of the fact that human beings are partly free from the domination

of *LP*. Pleasure is thus more connected to the realm of the senses, while happiness is more connected to the realm of the intelligible.

The Greeks discussed the connections between *edoné* and *eudaimonia*, between pleasure and happiness. Is eudaemonism a more “liberal” form of hedonism? For the eudaemonist, Don Juan and the hermit of antiquity who lived in the Thebaid desert have something essential in common: *they both aspire to happiness*. Each of us may search for happiness in the most diverse and opposite forms, but no one can do otherwise than yearn for happiness. Thus, if man is not always a slave to pleasure, he is nevertheless always *a slave to happiness*. The search for happiness is therefore something essential to humanity. This is the hard core of utilitarianism.

If having to be happy or enjoying is the essence of human beings, then the quest for happiness or enjoyment expresses a universal ethic, which it is impossible to evade.

Enjoyment as consolation

We could see, however, the relationship between ethics and *pàthos* in a rather different way. Is ethics only an economic calculation for maximising pleasure or happiness? The argument of the utilitarianist is, “Whoever performs his own duty, even at the price of his own life or of great unpleasure, does it because not doing so would lead to even greater suffering. Thus the pleasure and/or happiness principle guides him in any case, even in the supreme sacrifice.” For this reason, the inevitable quest for happiness usually consists in avoiding being too unhappy.

But this utilitarianist point of view neglects an essential part of the ethical *content*: what counts is the fact that the subject is willing to pay a price for *that* enjoyment rather than for another. The utilitarianist levels the differences, he takes for granted that the happiness the libertine enjoys after an orgy is basically the same happiness of a patriot who sacrifices himself in a war; but does the fact that today we give a common name to these two sensations (both are “happy”) imply *ipso facto* that they are the same? Are we not confusing homonymy with an identity?

Today we hope that the neurosciences, by recording cerebral processes, will be able to reveal whether or not it is simply a case of homonymy. If the fMRI or PET scans to certain areas of the brain of two people who claim to be “happy” turn out to be very similar, then we can say that they have the same sensations of happiness. This is not the right occasion to discuss the plausibility of such expectations. It is nevertheless true that any comparative imaging or tomography reveals certain analogies between cerebral processes, as well as certain differences. The language we use neglects these differences, which can instead be essential.

In short, utilitarianism takes as *art absolute goal* of human beings something that is only a consolation: happiness and/or pleasure console us because we did what we had to do. In Naples, the phrase “*me song’ cunsulato*” (“I have consoled myself”) is used to express having enjoyed something, for example a very good meal, enjoyment having

consoled us of the pitiable condition in which we usually live. But is the fact that doing our duty (if this specific duty is worth something to us) gives us pleasure or happiness enough for us to conclude that we do our duty only in order to attain pleasure and happiness for ourselves? Or rather, are pleasure and happiness not a prize for having done what we had to do? Hence, we do not do our duty in order to be happy, even though it often makes us happy as a result. We could say, with the behaviourists, that pleasure and happiness *reinforce* our ethical behaviour.

The pleasure, the intimate satisfaction, attained by the ethical act is not the aim of this act, but a reward, a treat. The ethical person feels that *a certain tiling has to be done*, even at the price of risking one's life.

When we have carried out our duty, we feel that we have conformed to our *nomós* (norm). *Nómoi*, the norms, can differ from one person to another, from one culture to another, etc. But the question is whether every *nomós* can in turn be reduced to the principle of pleasure and/or happiness. This is the question that Freud posed to himself, and it is the one truly great question—everything else is mere detail.

“The economic problem of masochism”

Freud wondered whether we can say that every human being, without exception, always necessarily seeks pleasure (We set aside the aim of happiness in order to simplify the argument here).

Could there not exist at least one Kantian man—or a Kantian corner in every human being—that obeys the categorical imperative in the Kantian sense, and not the conditional imperative of pleasure?

It is significant that Freud—starting from the utilitarianist idea that the *LP* totally dominates human existence—was strongly impressed by masochism: does this not in fact contradict the assumption that human beings are slaves of pleasure?

Freud distinguishes three types of masochism: *erotic*, *feminine*, and *moral*. Erotic masochism is the sexual perversion. Feminine masochism, which attains pleasure, even orgasm, by means of unpleasure—which is a means and not an end—is found more typically in men than in women. Neither poses any serious problem to the theory, inasmuch as they are both ways, however contorted, of procuring pleasure for oneself. It is moral masochism (MM), as we shall see, that is the real serious problem, because it is more difficult to explain by means of the Lust Principle (LP). In MM, it is not a case of obtaining the usual final pleasure by means of the winding and complicated route of pain; instead, it reveals a radical, unshakable bent towards unhappiness even more than towards unpleasure. MM thus seems to go beyond the “beautiful” and the “sublime” according to Kant (as we have seen in Chapter Three); it appears more similar to Dadaism, which was intended as a form of anti-art, a non-art *tout court*. MM, as a break with the LP, is a Dadaism of enjoyment.

Let us see how Freud confronts the radical challenge of MM in an essay of a dozen pages, “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924c, pp. 159–170). He clearly says here that the enigma of masochism consists in the fact that masochistic unpleasure is no longer a means for reaching pleasure, but is itself an aim: “The *Lustprinzip* is paralyzed; it is as though the watchman over our mental life were put out of action by a drug” (p. 159). It should be noted how LP is described here, not as a *master* of psychic life (later in the essay, Freud will say it is a master of life in general), but simply as its *watchman* (*Wächter*), that which preserves and protects it. Biological life is *protected* by LP, which, like every watchman, is wise. With MM, this guardian is drugged and paralysed, but by whom, and for what purpose?

Freud presents as the primary example of MM the negative therapeutic reaction: the refusal to overcome a neurosis despite analysis. For these patients, “... the suffering involved in neuroses is precisely the factor that makes them valuable [*wertvoll*] to the masochistic tendency” (p. 166). The moral masochist does not simply renounce the pleasures of the flesh, nor does he wear a hair shirt in order to reach, like Saint Francis, the state of “perfect joy”: he secretly yearns for unhappiness. I would emphasise *secretly*: the subject does not know that he is seeking unhappiness, since he consciously continues to invoke the LP. As long as one keeps happiness as one’s ultimate, and compulsory, aim along the path of unpleasure, the LP is reaffirmed: but in the case of MM, it is precisely the aim of “joy” that is missing.

Freud nevertheless seems to attempt to bring enigmatic masochism back within an economy of *Lust*, while vainly trying to defend his position within the psychical dialectic. In other words, he attempts to bring MM back to the erotic and feminine forms of masochism—and so tries, once again, to locate it within the LP. But he himself, just a few years earlier, had admitted that not everything in the psyche is subject to the principle or prince of pleasure. Is Freud here not backtracking with respect to the position he had already taken? Not exactly, because to the very end, Freud always tried to appeal to the mastery of *Lust* as much as and as far as it could be valid: what lies beyond the LP always remains a limit, a margin, something that exceeds. Freud therefore never renounced his own (utilitarianist) paradigm based on the LP; what goes beyond it emerges as a limit or paradox of pleasure, and not as something that completely passes through it, breaks it, or hinders it. Freud always keeps the LP as his fundamental interpretative rule; the beyond—the drives of life and death—always appears hidden between the lines. “The beyond” (the non-subjective) always remains an explicative *ultimatum*, never a *primatum*.

In fact, the moral masochist is not someone who seeks pleasure through unpleasure, but one who arranges things so as to be forever unsatisfied and unhappy. The moral masochist is someone for whom everything goes wrong, “the unlucky one” for whom even analysis fails. “What matters is suffering in itself,” as Freud says:

I pointed out the sign by which such people [masochists] can be recognized (a “negative therapeutic reaction”) ... The satisfaction (*Befriedigung*) of

this unconscious sense of guilt (Schuldgefühl) is perhaps the most powerful bastion in the subject's (...) personal gain from illness—in the sum of forces which struggle against his recovery and refuse to surrender his state of illness. The suffering (Leiden) entailed by neuroses is precisely the factor that makes them valuable to the masochistic trend. It is instructive, too, to find, contrary to all theory and expectation, that a neurosis which has defied every therapeutic effort may vanish if the subject becomes involved in the misery of an unhappy marriage, or loses all his money, or develops a dangerous organic disease. In such instances one form of suffering has been replaced by another; and we see that all that mattered was that it should be possible to maintain a certain amount of suffering. (1924c, p. 166)

How can we once again locate these disquieting forms of life within the mastery of *Lust*?

Freud's first reply is that this suffering in some way satisfies something or someone in the subject, and thus produces an enjoyment somewhere else; it satisfies an unconscious sense of guilt. But, immediately after proposing this term, "guilt", Freud regrets it: the sense of guilt is in fact a feeling, an affection, and hence something conscious (Unlike many post-Freudians, Freud never believed that feelings could be unconscious, and that we need to interpret their efficacy). The specificity of the MM consists, instead, precisely in not being conscious of this sense of guilt. How can one have a feeling of which one is not conscious? For this reason, Freud prefers the term *need for punishment* (*Strafbedürfnis*): the need is something less subjective, indeed, something biological. MM nevertheless satisfies a need, but is this need ruled by LP or not? And if it is ruled by LP, why is it a case of *need* and not of desire or drive? And where does this need for punishment come from? In other words, who is the subject of this need?

Freud replies that this need for punishment can be divided into two needs. One is the sadistic need of the superego to punish and humiliate the subject; the other is the masochistic need of the ego to be punished and humiliated. In this way an SM idyll is created between two sides or instances of the subject: that famous meeting between the sadist and the masochist—which Deleuze thinks is impossible (I refer to the joke I reported in Chapter One, "The Perverse Couple")—is finally realised within subjectivity itself. MM is thus a kind of perfect perverse relationship! In this way, once again, the scandalous search for suffering is brought back under the aegis of LP. The final product—suffering—is the result of the composition of two enjoyments, one sadistic and the other masochistic, inside the same person.

This hypothesis allows Freud to say that MM is not at all moral, but rather a sexualisation of morality. Unlike perversions, it is not so much an exploitation of moral norms to obtain sexual pleasure, but an enjoyment of moral punishment as if it were a sexual satisfaction. In this way, Freud tries once again to bring MM back within the rubric of perversions, even though it is not a case here of sexual behaviour, but of a way of being. According to Freud, precisely because the moral masochist avoids sexual

satisfaction, he sexualises his own life. He is thus a moral rather than sexual pervert, precisely in so far as morality is here sexualised.

But for which fault must the superego, as the representative within the subject of the parents' strict commands, punish the ego? And what must the ego, which masochistically enjoys being punished, atone for? Freud is reticent regarding this fault—supposed, imagined, or unequal to the punishment, whatever it may be. One might say that it could be anything. Freud takes up a widespread conception typical of the positivist culture of his time. Like Jean Rostand (1938), he seems to think that “the moral is that which remains of fear when it has been forgotten”; in other words, the moral consists of the interiorised prohibitions of adults. If, when you were two years old, a parent shouted at you because you were making too much noise, this, too, is a fault to expiate. In fact, the faults that appear trivial to adults can be perceived as capital sins by the child. But if this is the case, why don't we all become moral masochists? What subjective quality is needed for a human being to continue throughout life to atone for faults that are imaginary (even if Freud does not tell us whether this need for punishment is necessarily connected to specific fantasies), unimportant, or non-existent?

The masochist's fault

How can we interpret Freud's silence regarding all of this today? Personally, I think that with his silence, Freud intended that we should think about something that he perhaps could not say: that the true fault that the masochist must atone for is ... being subject to the blows of ethics. As in the case of Herr K, the protagonist of Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), the moral masochist is punished for a mysterious, perhaps nonexistent, fault.

A conventional psychoanalytical interpretation of Kafka's novel is this: “K has repressed the offence that motivates the nightmarish trial and the final death sentence.” But is it really a forgotten offence, about which his consciousness wished to know nothing? Or does the offence not consist precisely ... in being subject to the blows of the judiciary machine? In fact, Kafka does not concentrate so much on the final punishment as he does on the process of the *Prozess* (*The Trial*): on the judiciary machine that appears incomprehensible and estranged from life. Also, in the case of moral masochism, what matters is the guilt-making machine, not the specific offence.

But is it true that the moral masochist is not guilty? Is a compulsion to repeat the original punishment that the parents inflicted on the child enough to explain this (perhaps lifetime) entanglement in this self-punishing strategy? Is the reliance on the repetition compulsion, and thus on the death drive, not an elliptical way of saying that this repetition cannot be explained? Is turning repetition into a drive not an explicative mask for the fact of not being able—and perhaps not wanting—to explain masochism? By referring to the death drive, that which cannot be explained in terms of the impulse to live better, Freud seems to repeat the explicative exploit of Molière's

doctors about opium and its *virtus dormitiva*. Anyway, the repetition drive also pushes us to repeat pleasure, perhaps also under compulsion, as in the case of drug addiction and irrepressible sexual activism. But in the case of MM, why does the repetition compulsion prefer to repeat the suffering? If renewing the same pleasure is often itself sufficiently pernicious, why is this deadly repetition aggravated in some people by the reiteration of unpleasure?

Perhaps we can try to break free from the impasse in which Freud finds himself by supposing that, possibly, the moral masochist *really atones for a fault*. In this case, there would be no need to resort to the arbitrary sadistic enjoyment of the superego—a sort of *deus ex machina* that makes the theory work out satisfactorily, because it brings the LP back to work. In fact, we see the punishing superego speaking in the first person in melancholia: the depressive subject, who reproaches himself for terrible offences or inabilities, speaks from the position of a severe and pitiless judge. In melancholia, the superego is not unconscious, but speaks out loud, and we are also able to sense its enjoyment because something within the melancholic subject certainly enjoys maligning itself. It is the only enjoyment left to him.

Is MM thus an unconscious melancholia? In the first case, in fact, the superego does not speak out loud; Freud reads its supposed traces only in behaviour. He posits the force of a sadistic superego that does not express itself in the first person. Yet, there is a dissymmetry between depression and MM. Freud tries to explain why, in melancholia, the superego attacks the ego; it is because the latter has taken the place of the disappointing object, and so the superego attacks the object, *the one who* has disappointed the ego. One should ask a melancholic, “*Against whom* are you depressed?” Melancholia is a bit like suicide in China, at least until recent times, where the usual question was not, like in the West, “*Why* did he commit suicide?” but rather “*Against whom* did he commit suicide?” (Wolf, 1988).

Somewhere, then, there has been an offence, and depression is thus simply a mistake in identifying the subject of the offence and the object of punishment. In MM, instead, one cannot see an offence or fault, but only the sadistic and masochistic enjoyments. MM is Kafkaesque: the punishment can be seen, but not the crime. Where then should we look for it?

Noting that the moral masochist does not experience any remorse could put us on the right path. Someone’s remorse and shame over a fault are the affective traces of repentance, and thus of the offence one regrets. Even the melancholic subject, in his own way, feels remorse, although it is rather the impassioned zeal of his accuser that appears up front. Instead, the moral masochist, who never ceases being punished, seemingly never repents. After all, what should he repent? But if Freud’s line of explanation is nevertheless correct, what does the moral masochist *not* repent? A fault, clearly. In the case of Antonio, the obsessional masochist, the guilt consists in having hated his younger brother, as well as his father (for having (imaginarily) tormented his mother). But, in general, what characteristics must this fault have in order to become the cause of masochistic moral self-punishment?

The fault is against the Other

“But I’m not guilty,” said K. “There’s been a mistake. How is it even possible for a man to be guilty? We’re all human beings here, one like the other.”

“That is true,” said the priest, “but that is how the guilty speak.”

Kafka (1925) *The Trial*

We must thus ask: *what essentially is a fault*, beyond the differences between our moral codes? A question of this nature is complementary to another philosophical question: what is, in general, a moral norm for a subject? A guilty person is someone who does not meet the standards of the norm of one’s social group.

The commandments that we consider ethical (i.e., the Ten Commandments) actually seem to revolve around a single, essential point: *the other matters*. The animal automatisms of the lower species, precisely because they are not subject to the LP, are basically schematic relations with other members of their same species. In human beings, besides such automatisms, we also have moral rules, because ethics, at least at the explicit level, regards my relationship with my fellow beings. Depending on the culture, my fellow being can be my countryman, or god, or every human being, or even animals as well. The Mosaic law tells me that, if the other is a fellow being, I must not kill him, nor rob him, nor harm him by bearing false witness, etc. If the other is God, I must recognise that He is mine, that I cannot worship other gods, that I must not use His name in vain, and that I must honour Him on the holy days. Ethics *in any case* regards the other or the Other: it tells me that his subjectivity (that which loves and hates, that which thinks and wishes) regards me. Hence, to be guilty, in any culture, always means to lack *respect* for the other, to not treat him as the other-than-me with whom I maintain a normatively reciprocal relationship.

But how should we consider the “Puritan” commandments, such as those prohibiting fornication or masturbation? Where is the concern here for the other? Yet, at the source of these norms which only concern the subject—from which modern ethics, inspired by utilitarianist philosophy, is trying to free itself—there is nevertheless an interest in, and for, the other. In the Judaeo-Christian culture of the Ten Commandments, in fact, sex does not belong to the individual, but rather to the wife and husband. In their moral systems, certain erotic activities are forbidden, not in order to make life more difficult for the single person, but because they conceive of the body as essentially belonging to God and on loan, so to speak, to the spouse. To use our sex as we like is to defraud the legitimate owner of our sex. In fact, even in our modern secular culture of free sex, the law in Western countries remains essentially monogamous. It is significant that when one part of the couple is unfaithful, we say that he or she *cheated* on the other. Being a couple implies a right to sexual exclusivity.

Thus, in every culture, the limits and territory of the other vary, but the ethical quality of a command or norm implies a relationship to the other.

Freud writes, “The super-ego is as much a representative [*Vertreter*] of the id as of the external world” (1924c, p. 167). *Vertreter* (literally, “he who walks for”) means representative in the sense of a “commercial representative”, that is, an “agent”, “substitute”, “delegate”, “sponsor”, and “exponent”.

This external world [*Aussenwelt*] is first of all the world of others, the social *home* in which we dwell. Others, the external world, and social life—originally represented by our parents—are what limit us from the outset, and what oblige and constrain us. In the end, we are “good persons” when we make what others desire our own rule. In other words, what Freud calls the superego is the eroticised figure of the Other’s or others’ transcendence, with whom we accept to share a social bond.

Freud gave the name of Eros, or life drive, to this transcendental inclination of me the subject: my going towards the other to make me *one* with him. Eros is making the other the finality of my subjectivity. Eros—the primacy of the other—is the genuine “beyond” of the LP because at this point my rule ceases to be my own enjoyment but rather the other’s enjoyment. Clearly, it seems that this is precisely what the moral masochist lacks; he is unable to enjoy because he lacks erotic transcendence, and does not live in relation to the other’s or Other’s enjoyment. Living only *in* the LP, he lacks a “cause” to live for, whence derives his surprising suffering.

I would say that the sociopath (the completely unethical person) and the moral masochist show two different ways of missing otherness. The sociopath, a completely selfish subject, lacks any linking tension towards *actual others*, that is, the people around him. And the price he often pays is a social punishment of criminal conviction, jail, and possibly death. For him, others are not invested as “real” subjects, towards whom to be bound by moral links. The moral masochist, instead, lacks any linking tension towards the Other—God in religious ethics, the symbolic Other in Lacan’s theory, or the virtual Other to whom each of us should feel obliged. In his case, punishment does not come from social institutions, but through “destiny”.

But here we shall not delve into the complex question of otherness in psychoanalysis, which is also central to several phenomenological reinterpretations of psychoanalysis. I shall simply state here that, when I say, “the other should count”, I do so in the sense that Freud speaks about it on the subject of Eros: that the other is what has the power to arouse my desire and my love. In short, it is the *cause* of my being what I am—and for Freud, I am desire and drives. Then, the other is the cause of my being.

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