

**«JACQUES LACAN, RELIGION  
AND ETHICS»**

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In the 50s, the psychologist Lewis S. Feuer wondered if the values of liberal civilization are strengthened or undermined by the methods of psychoanalysis, if ethical philosophy disintegrates under analysis.<sup>1</sup>

A contemporary analysis of social and cultural forms cannot ignore psychoanalytic insights. There is a need to explore the religious and ethical implications of Freud's and Lacan's revolution in thought, to explore how one could incorporate the Lacanian exploits into a speculation about life and one's relations with others and the world, one's fundamental recognition of desire and desire for recognition.

In this paper I explore the religious and ethical implications of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, and demonstrate that psychoanalysis does not exclude religion and ethics; that the loss of identity that Lacan describes does not irredeemably confuse one's ethical role. In the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, for example, Lacan links psychoanalysis to religion by referring to the latter as «the question of existence in the world».<sup>2</sup> Any such implication would prove a religious aspect of psychoanalysis and recognise what Slavoj Žižek says Lacan was doing all the time: «Reading hysteria or obsessional neurosis as a philosophical “attitude of thought towards reality”».<sup>3</sup>

For Lacan, «The gods belong to the field of the real»,<sup>4</sup> the unconscious; God

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1. Samuel L. Feuer, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1955, p. 3.

2. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Ed. Jacques Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. NY: Norton, 1981, p. 265.

3. Slavoj Žižek, «Introduction: Cogito as a Shibboleth», in *Cogito and The Unconscious*. Ed. Slavoj Zizek. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998, p. 2.

4. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 45.

is not dead, but «God is unconscious».<sup>5</sup> In *Book II*, Lacan says: «Some people get very worried when they see me referring to God. However, it is a God we conceive of *ex machina*, unless we extract *machina ex Deo*».<sup>6</sup> Lacan's «God» designates the Other, the unsignifiable as a God by language, what appears to be the *jouissance*, the state between being and nothingness, pleasure and pain, sublime and ridiculous. Lacan does not imply any atheism, but, for him, it appears evident that the Other is a way to exorcize the good old God who exists in a mode that might not please everyone, and particularly not the theologians who are much more able than he to do without God's existence.<sup>7</sup> Lacan also claims that psychoanalysis is «neither for nor against any particular religion».<sup>8</sup> Yet, one could wonder, along with Joseph H. Smith,

...whether his insisting on terms from virtually the literal language of Judeo-Christianity [sic], like «the Other» and «the name of the father», represented his own either conscious or unconscious insight that literal believers might be participants in a wisdom of the ages more attuned to the actualities of movement from birth and symbiosis to adult belonging and death than modern, outside observers could suspect.<sup>9</sup>

Louis Althusser mentions a postcard sent by Lacan from Thessaloniki with the reproduction of a portion of a fresco in the monastery representing the archangel Gabriel.<sup>10</sup> It reads:

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5. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

6. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-55*. Ed. Jacques-Allain Miller. NY: Norton, 1988, p. 47.

7. «L'Autre, l'Autre comme lieu de la vérité, est la seule place, quoiqu' irréductible, que nous pouvons donner au terme de l'être divin, de Dieu pour l'appeler par son nom. Dieu est proprement le lieu où, si vous m'en permettez le jeu, se produit le *dieu-le dieur-le dire*. Pour un rien, le dire ça fait Dieu. Et aussi longtemps que se dira quelque chose, l'hypothèse Dieu sera là. C'est ce qui fait qu'en somme il ne peut y avoir de vraiment athées que les théologiens, c'est à savoir ceux qui, de Dieu, en parlent». Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XX: Encore, 1972-1973*, texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller. (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 44-45.

8. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, p. 316.

9. Joseph H. Smith, «Psychoanalysis and Nondefensive Religion», in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. ed. Smith J. H. and associate ed. Susan A. Handelman. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 37.

10. Louis Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 184, n. 19.

Dear Althusser, This photo comes from Pater Photios –the most hospitable of men– after you... The cell he occupies is in Karies, the principal town of this peninsula, where monks feel at home and which is called the Holy Mountain. There are things to be said about it, and the excursion tears you away from the present.<sup>11</sup>

What Lacan meant by the last sentence might be the feeling of being in a different dimension of time and space, to be taken away from this world. He may be referring to a more or less transcendental experience, when a sense of time disappears.

Yet, elsewhere he seems to have a different attitude for life in monasteries. Žižek notices in Lacan the not very flattering similarities the latter sees between psychoanalytic associations, monasteries, and concentration camps:

The homology between the subjective position of psychoanalysis and that of the saint runs like a thread through the last years of Lacan's teaching: in both cases we assume the position of an object-excrement, of a remainder which embodies the inconsistency of the symbolic order, i.e., of an element which cannot be integrated into the machinery of social *usefulness*, of a point of pure expenditure. True, we often encounter with Lacan also statements which point in the opposite direction, like those which put psychoanalytic associations in the same series as concentration camps – but is the opposition here really insurmountable? Is it not rather that the moment «saints» endeavor to «socialize», to «go march-in' in [sic]» and organize themselves as a social order, we get *monasteries*: a totally regulated world which can serve as a model for concentration camps, with the exception that, instead of torturing their victims, monks torture *themselves*, assuming the heavy burden of abstinence?<sup>12</sup>

For Lacan, language, the symbolic order, is more explicitly in its own order ultimate. Since what is happening within or without can only be communicated through language, the latter has the exclusive power to mold events: «The law of

11. Ibid., p. 169.

12. Žižek, «Why Is Woman a Symptom of Man?» in *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 61.

man has been the law of language... it is the world of words that creates the world of things». <sup>13</sup> Matter and word are the same thing. Similarly, in *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, Lacan says: «The psychoanalytic experience has rediscovered in man the imperative of the Word as the law that has formed him in its image. It manipulates the poetic function of language to give to his desire its symbolic mediation». <sup>14</sup> Ultimacy resides in the words: «(This) is what I mean when I say that no metalanguage can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other». <sup>15</sup> There is no other signifying system beyond the Other, nothing more ultimate than the laws of language.

This Law of Language is not the last word for Lacan. Besides this explicit reference to ultimacy, Lacan's insistence on the priority of difference over sameness reflects an ethical quality of psychoanalysis. In order to enter the symbolic, the subject has to recognize, relate to and respect the other as other. This maturity refers to the awareness of the reciprocal effects of communicative actions and of the beneficial effects of successful human relations. <sup>16</sup> The fact that there is no such thing as self-mastery implies that there is no self-sufficiency either. One actualizes one's life, one «exists» only when one co-exists, when one matters and gratifies his or her need to affect and to make a difference to the other. According to Lacan, precisely because the lack in being makes being fundamentally defective, one identifies with persons, images, and so forth because one lacks innate being and wants to eradicate this loss by bridging the void within and without. The ego, formed from the outside world, is, thus, an imaginary constellation of identifications, added and subtracted throughout life. One even desires what the others desire, while satisfaction is also pursued by way of others: «The subject doesn't have a dual relation with an object with which he is confronted, it is in relation to another subject that his relations with this object acquire their meaning, and... their value». <sup>17</sup> Desiring wholeness, as in love relationships, individuals try to fill each other's lacks and, depending on one another for their «self», they are always already implicated in the other that has a fundamental primacy in the formation of their subjectivity. This is why people who do not know where they belong –the borderline ones– suffer from a feeling of non-being. As

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13. Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 61-65.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

16. J. Ruesch and G. Bateson, *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1951, p. 89.

17. Lacan, *Book II*, p. 255.

Mark Taylor also says, «In negating the other, the self finally negates itself».<sup>18</sup>

This notion of selfhood, therefore, contradicts any isolating individualism. The subject is a social, a «political animal», and rejection, or simply the fear of it, brings frustration and despair. One demands *re-cognition*, confirmation that one exists and that this makes a difference, a place of significance in another's world. As J. Gallop says, Lacan's writing contains an «implicit ethical imperative to break the mirror», to disengage, loosen, unbind from the Imaginary and enter the Symbolic, the register of language and social exchange. What is ultimate, here, is how one decides to make one's «epochal arrangements» based on what one thinks is important, and how one negotiates life in relations to others. The effect of Lacanian discourse is to promote individual as well as social engagement, for the unbearable pain of lack demands connection and comfort in companionship, the development of associations with others. To recognize and be recognized, to give and receive praise, become imperative. Since the self is defined by its actions and its relations with others, the individual affair is also a public issue. One's fate is linked, and, therefore, one needs to be public spirited.

Although analysis, according to Lacan, has a social basis and functions, yet, it does not point to a crude socialization or a collectivism in which the sentiment of responsibility disappears. The ethical religious implications of such a psychoanalysis cannot be restricted to an ethical or moral *attitude of tolerance* of the idiosyncrasies of others, to a «belonging together». Religion is not simply the moral «aspect» of Lacan's psychoanalysis, but an orientation and a dimension of depth that pervades it entirely. It is more than ethical, it is a «*belonging together*», precisely because the subject's orientation is interactive and open-ended, rather than originary and self-enclosed.<sup>19</sup> Good, therefore, refers to the socially responsible sublimations. On the Easter of 1953, in a letter written to his brother, Lacan claimed that his teaching belonged to the Christian tradition: «...in this second half of the twentieth century everything would depend on how men dealt with one another, and this perhaps not only on a secular plane».<sup>20</sup>

Yet, the need for recognition is infinite, and the desire for confirmation of

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18. Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 32.

19. James DiCenso, «Symbolism and Subjectivity: A Lacanian Approach to Religion», in *The Journal of Religion* 74 (January 1994): p 45-64.

20. Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*. Trans. Barbara Bray. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, p 205.

one's presence and importance cannot reach total fulfillment, since one is always uncertain and moves between trust and mistrust, confidence and despondency. The need for a genuine interhuman life and the assurance that one is worthy of love is and will remain tragic; it will be repeatedly spoiled by the suspicion of the other's pretense. Further, some relations of love and sympathy, some strong attachments, may in fact be narcissistic identifications since, when one extends oneself, one may fail or simply refuse to distinguish him or her from an object. Since, in such cases, relations are identifications and the world is not clearly distinguished from self, they are also «mad». It is not only the psychotic who seeks a literal image of himself or herself; lack sends one in search of another to complement oneself. Only when one notices and distinguishes the difference between things is also when one becomes aware of them, and also aware of one's self and its ways. As Gregory Bateson says, «... only where there is difference between two persons in contact is it possible for those persons to achieve a new understanding, a new awareness of the previously unconscious premises which underlie their own habits of communication».<sup>21</sup>

Still, if only subjective realities exist, as according to Lacan, how does one know about the particulars of each other's experience except by verbal communication? If there is no such thing as objective reality out there, that is, since language functions as communication as well as non-communication, in order to be able to approach the other, communicative competence is needed as well as the avoidance of distorted interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. If it is true that, «the condition which the psychiatrist labels «psychosis» is essentially the result of the patient's misinterpretation of messages received»,<sup>22</sup> and that psychopathology is unsuccessful or disturbed communication, one needs to protect one's «sanity» by improving communication within oneself and with others.

For Lacan, culture itself is based on speech and everything is played out in language. Language is «the matrix in which all human activities are embedded»<sup>23</sup> and human relations can be developed only through it. As Bateson also says, thinking is «constituted from the outside world and returns through the symbolic, in words, in images – any action constitutes a message»<sup>24</sup> and «the study of knowing... is inseparable from the study of communication, codification, purpose, and

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21. Ruesch, Jurgen and Gregory Bateson, *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1951, p 229.

22. *Ibid.*, p 88.

23. *Ibid.*, p 13.

24. *Ibid.*, p 34.



values. We have thus modified the study of epistemology towards the inclusion of a specific range of external phenomena...»<sup>25</sup>

However, problems lie in the fact that there are different habits of communication and a lack of a system common to all. The fact that «a signifier is that which represents a subject... not for another subject, but for another signifier «means that the subject cannot be like a sender transmitting a message to a receiver. This implies that the translation of one's language into another's, as well as the possibility of communication, is fundamentally problematic. According to Lacan, there can be no dialogue, no real exchange between two individuals, but only a juxtaposition of monologues.

Nevertheless, even if it communicates nothing, the discourse represents the existence of communication:<sup>26</sup> «Henceforth the decisive function of my own reply appears, and this function is not, as has been said, simply to be received by the subject as acceptance or rejection of his discourse, but really to recognize him or to abolish him as subject. Such is the nature of the analyst's *responsibility* whenever he intervenes by means of speech».<sup>27</sup> As Žižek also holds, speech is the medium of the mutual recognition of the speakers<sup>28</sup> and of human relatedness.

Insisting on the significance of verbal communication and prompting the recognition of the existence of other people with different, even opposing desires, Lacan professed engagement in cultural dialogues, global pluralism, tolerance and generosity. Precisely because there can be no fixed center or identity, there can also be no single symbolic structure and worldview, but multiple modes of human experience of reality. Lacan provided the frame for an intended diversity and, by doing so, he opened a cultural debate, a critical inquiry that marked the collapse of previous modes of thinking. One has no choice but to affirm and celebrate the way things are, the difference of meanings, without taking any sides, an attitude which can also apply to a new way of understanding human and social relations which, believing in the individual and not in a collective being, maximizes originality, idiosyncrasy, style. As long as people are equal but different, none has to look alike.

Still, one has to be very careful how one reads the ethics of social exchange,

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24. Ibid., p 228.

26. Lacan, *Ecrits*, p 43.

27. Ibid., p 87.

28. Žižek, «A Hair of the Dog That Bit You», in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*. Ed. Bracher, M., Marshall W. Alcorn Jr. Ronald J. Corthell, and Françoise Massardier-Kenney. NY: New York University Press, 1994, p 46.

for it can imply exactly the opposite of what it means to say. Like A. Zupancic,<sup>29</sup> one may wonder what exactly the commandment would be: to respect the difference of the other, or the other has the right to be different? To tolerate, or, to love? Even further, should one tolerate or love the ones who do not respect difference? Or should one «kill all the fanatics? When he discussed, in the *Civilization and its Discontents*, the commandment «Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself», which in Lacanian language would correspond with the register of the imaginary, Freud himself saw that it was easy to fall into a conventional morality, based not as much on genuine humanitarian compassion as on a personal insecurity and narcissistic self-love. In *Écrits*, Lacan comments:

...the term primary narcissism... throws light on the dynamic opposition between the libido and the sexual libido, which the first analysts tried to define when they invoked destructive and, indeed, death instincts, in order to explain the evident connection between the narcissistic libido and the alienating function of the *I*, the aggressivity it releases in any relation to the other, even in a relation involving the most Samaritan of aid.<sup>30</sup>

He concludes: «For such a task, we place no trust in altruistic feeling, we who lay bare the aggressivity that underlies the activity of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer».<sup>31</sup> In the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan detected that «it is a fact of experience that what I want is the good of others in the image of my own. That doesn't cost so much. What I want is the good of others provided that it remains in the image of my own».<sup>32</sup> The crucial question is whether one should show respect only if the other is good, which means the same. In the same Seminar, Lacan added another conflict:

My neighbor possesses all the evil Freud speaks about, but it is no different from the evil I retreat in myself. To love him, to love him as myself, is necessarily to move toward some cruelty. His or

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29. A. Zupancic, «The Subject of the Law», in *Cogito and The Unconscious*, Ed. Slavoj Žižek. Durham and London. Duke UP, 1998, p 43.

30. Lacan, *Écrits*, p 6.

31. *Ibid.*, p 7.

32. J. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII*. ed. J-Alain Miller. Norton & Company, 1992, p 187.

mine? you will object. But haven't I just explained to you that nothing indicates that they are distinct? It seems rather that they are the same, on condition that those limits which oblige me to posit myself opposite the other as my fellow man are crossed.<sup>33</sup>

J.-A. Miller sees the delicacy of the examination of the social and ethical implications of Lacan's theory and the danger of taking his assertion too lightly and naively and of falling into the same fallacy of the fanatic enemy. In «Extimite», Miller talks about the Other as the neighbor and discerns the gaps and discrepancies in Lacan himself. He wonders if the difference is cultural, or more important and fundamental: «But if there is no Other of the Other what is the ground of his alterity?» He concludes:

...It is in its relation to *jouissance* that the Other is really Other... Now, what we are attempting to see is what makes the Other other, that is, what makes it particular, different, and in this dimension of alterity of the Other, we find war. Racism, for example, is precisely a question of the relation to an other as such, conceived in its difference. And it does not seem to me that any of the generous and universal discourses on the theme of «we are all fellow beings» have had any effectiveness concerning this question. Why? Because racism calls into play a hatred that is directed precisely toward what grounds the Other's alterity, in other words, its *jouissance*. If no decision, no will, no amount of reasoning is sufficient to wipe out racism, this is indeed because it is founded on the point of extimacy of the Other... racism is founded on what one imagines about the Other's *jouissance*; it is hatred of the particular way, of the Other's own way, of experiencing *jouissance*. We may well think that racism exists because our Islamic neighbor is too noisy when he has parties. However, what is really at stake is that he takes his *jouissance* in a way different from ours. Thus the Other's proximity exacerbates racism: *as soon as there is closeness, there is a confrontation of incompatible modes of jouissance. For it is simple to love one's neighbor when he is distant, but it is different matter in proximity* (italics mine). Racist stories are always about the way in which the Other obtains a *plus-de-jour*: either he does not work enough, or he is useless or a little too useful, but whatever the case may

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33. Ibid., p 198. While Lacan urged the recognition of the existence of other people with different, even opposing, desires, he also pointed to that of the Other within: «Moreover, it is not simply the *jouissance* of the neighbor, of the other, that is strange to me. The kernel of the problem is that I experience my own *jouissance* as strange, dissimilar, other, and hostile... one cannot think the radical otherness... without stumbling against the problem of the Same».

be, he is always endowed with a part of *jouissance* that he does not deserve. Thus true intolerance is the intolerance of the Other's *jouissance*. Of course, we cannot deny that races do exist, but they exist insofar as they are, in Lacan's words, races of discourse, that is, traditions of subjective positions.<sup>34</sup>

Zupancic also agrees that a Lacanian ethics should be reformulated from the perspective of *jouissance*, rather than from the perspective of the sharing of one's goods.<sup>35</sup> Psychoanalysis steps into the field traditionally reserved for ethics precisely because it deals with *jouissance*, the Real, the impossible, the frequently designated as the Evil.

### The Ethics of Psychoanalysis

Lacan's ethics, whose main problem lies on the narcissistic self-deception, is related to the challenges of how to teach analysis and how to change the individual and alleviate suffering. Ethics must not be based on obligation or politics, but on desire.<sup>36</sup> At his *Seminar on The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, delivered in 1959-60, he said: «And it is because we know better than those who went before how to recognize the nature of desire, which is at the heart of this experience [the loss of the mother], that a reconsideration of ethics is possible, that a form of ethical judgment is possible, of a kind that gives this question the force of a Last Judgment: Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?»<sup>37</sup>

As in Freud, it is a moral obligation to restore human dignity to the human condition, for the Cartesian subject, with the asceticism of reason and the obsessive compulsion to think –«if I stop thinking, I will cease to exist»– is a monster.<sup>38</sup> The dream of rationalism that perceived reason as ultimate is a antihumanism that reduces the self to cogito and, thus, betrays human nature and an-

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34. J. A. Miller, «Extimite», *In Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, p 79-80.

35. Zupancic, «The Subject of the Law», in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, p 42.

36. Aristotle relates ethics with politics. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says: «Most people would regard the good as the end pursued by that study which has most authority and control over the rest. Need I say that this is the science of politics?... This is not to deny that the good of the individual is worthwhile. But what is good for a nation or a city has a higher, a diviner, quality. Such being the matters we seek to investigate, the investigation may fairly be represented as the study of politics». *Ethics: Book I*. Trans J. A. Thomson. (New York: Penguin, 1953), (26-27).

37. Lacan, *Book VII*, 314.

38. Žižek, «Introduction», 6.

nounces «the death of man». The Cartesian subject is the excess of the cogito, a hubris in itself and, as Castoriadis said, «... analysis is thereby explicitly opposed to all ethics based on condemnation of desire and therefore on guilt». <sup>39</sup> As part of a culture –an agreed upon system of preferences and a set of exchanges and criteria for action– the concepts of ethics are historically restricted. Ethics usually has to do with systems of value, and its codes are the result of pressure from groups that prescribe the standards of human behaviour and put pressure to conform and blend into the group reinforcement of prevailing cultural values. According to Freud, there is nothing metaphysical about one's values. One always has a certain reason to guard them. Anything that is culturally determined such as norms and values has a functional purpose; it provides a version of reality and the source and justification of actions. Besides, the fundamental paradox of ethics lies in the fact that, in order to found an ethics, one already has to presuppose a certain ethics, that is, a certain notion of the good. Yet, precisely because they are culturally determined, that is, of human origin, ethics are circumstantial, and, therefore, fragile and vulnerable, and as long as there are multiple ways of conceptualising truth, there are as many ways of conceptualising ethics, too.

An important observation that Freud made was that there is a «discontent» precisely because the «good» principles one honours are false or illusory. They are not supreme but, indeed, they are symptoms of one's discontent, the products of one's sublimations, that is, one's attempt to deal with scornful desires such as aggressivity. Lacan insisted that finding out about one's unconscious desires and motives is an ethical obligation. Commenting on Lacan's propositions, John Rajchman wrote: «To return to Freud was to return to these embers in the convent of psychoanalysis. It was to say again what psychoanalysis is, should be, had never stopped being despite its misconceptions of itself: a new ethic». <sup>40</sup>

There are also other forces –besides the moral law– that drive one to act against one's well-being. Lacan insisted that psychosis itself, as the denial of one's desire and one's clinging to the symbolic order, has ethical determinants. If there should be one faith, it is the faith in the unconscious. As J. Kristeva said, there is a desire not to know, as if to know means to suffer. <sup>41</sup> There is a fear of loss, of the void of emptiness at the centre of being, and one tries to keep the ground from shifting. To achieve this, one would idealize objects and false cures and do what

39. Castoriadis, «Psychoanalysis and Politics», 4.

40. Rajchman, *Truth and Eros*, 21.

41. Kristeva, «Psychoanalysis in Times of Distress», in *Speculations After Freud*, 16.

the analyst wishes, the latter's desire being important. Madness is this refusal of responsibility and is a way to relate to the lack, to the lack of lack. None can ignore the implications of Oedipus' ignorance whose sanity depended on it, yet, by not knowing, he committed incest and a plague ruined his city and everyone around him. The unconscious may be a merciless barbarian, but it may also be an intelligent and benevolent deliverer. In fact, one can enjoy no peace until one faces and better understands one's own unconscious sources. Lacan urges one to do so, since desire is so powerful that this task cannot be neglected.

There is a need to reconsider ethos and «... discover the connection between ethics and «pathos»,<sup>42</sup> and aspire to the balance of truth and *jouissance*.<sup>43</sup> In *Ecrits*, Lacan says:

An ethic is yet to be formulated that integrates the Freudian-conquests in the realm of desire: on that would place in the forefront the question of the analyst's desire... analysts on the whole imagine that to understand is an end in itself, and that it can only be a «happy end». The example of the physical sciences may show them, however, that the greatest successes do not require that one knows where one is going. To think, it is often better not to understand, and one can gallop through miles of understanding without the least thought being produced. This, indeed, was how the Behaviourists began: they gave up the attempt to understand...<sup>44</sup>

Yet, the questions remain: How can one base one's ethics on a desiring causality, on what desire decides to do? How can one organize and foresee one's life on the basis of this kind of «beyond»? The question of how one can speak truly of oneself has both epistemological as well as ethical implications, raising the philosophical problem of truth as well as of life. The reconceptualization of subjectivity, along with its ethical implications, interrogates the very possibility of epistemology and demands the reconceptualization of knowledge as well, in this case the knowledge of what is good.

Paradoxically, by choosing to acknowledge epistemic undecidability, one also chooses responsibility for an ethical decidability: «In the recourse of subject that we preserve, psychoanalysis may accompany the patient to the ecstatic lim-

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42. Rajchman, *Truth and Eros*, 31.

43. Kristeva, «Psychoanalysis in Times of Distress», 19.

44. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 252.

it of the «*Thou art that*», in which is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins». <sup>45</sup> J.-P. Vernant agrees that, «The tragic consciousness of responsibility appears when the human and divine levels are sufficiently distinct for them to be opposed while still appearing to be inseparable. The tragic sense of responsibility emerges when human action becomes the object of reflection and debate, while still not being regarded as sufficiently autonomous to be fully self-sufficient». <sup>46</sup> Lacan says: «... the question of responsibility is raised on the subject of a crime somewhat lacking in motivation... by not underlining the responsibility of the person in question, he himself may once again open up the door to a general massacre». <sup>47</sup>

Since ethics refers to a way of life, there is a demand for an ethical response, an ethical responsibility and commitment in everyday life. Yet, in a world of capricious and incomprehensible powers, how should one live? Lacan thought that, «if God doesn't exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer». <sup>48</sup> The questions «how to best live one's life» and «how can one live successfully» demand immediate answers.

When an indeterminate number of random fragments replaced a simple, closed, mechanical «self», it became hard to imagine what it would be like to look down upon the subject and find it good. As soon as the subject became the temporary result of interactions between arbitrary environmental pressures and limitations, it could no longer teach one how to live, for, how could a product of dubious social relations and capricious symbolic orders, instruct, set beliefs and demand that one acts with prediction? If one cannot know oneself, restricted by ontology, how would one expect to decide what is good and how would one set any ideals and live a life based on idealized values? As Zupancic says, there is nothing that can help us guess. <sup>49</sup> As in the case of health, there is great skepticism about who decides whose good is more valuable and about what one's ethical duty is. Ethics cannot be based on good. Zupancic concludes that,

The Freudian blow could be summarized as follows: what philosophy calls the moral law and, more precisely, what Kant calls the

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45. Ibid., 7.

46. Vernant, 27.

47. Lacan, *Book II*, 208.

48. Ibid. 128.

49. Zupancic, «The Subject of the Law», 56-57.

categorical imperative, is in fact nothing other than the superego... to base ethics on «pathological» foundations... «civilization and its discontents»... As far as it has its origins in the constitution of the superego, ethics is nothing more than a convenient tool for any ideology that tries to pass off its own commandments as authentic, spontaneous, and «honourable» inclinations of the subject.<sup>50</sup>

In any case, the complication of Lacanian ethics is not how to find what is good for each and everyone, rationalize it and then adopt it. His psychoanalysis is beyond good and evil. Its aim is not to make a good individual, at least not directly. Neither does he provide any behavioural model. He declares: «I am not engaging you in an *ex cathedra* teaching. I don't think it would befit our object, language and speech, for me to bring something apodictic for you here, something you must just have to record and put in your pocket».<sup>51</sup>

According to Lacan, although the subject is not the agent of its actions, it is responsible for what one refers to as one's duty. For him duty is founded only in itself which allows for the freedom and responsibility of the moral subject. His ethics do not equal virtue and morality<sup>52</sup> based on universalist categories, paradigms of behaviour, rules and laws, since desire is not universal but particular and specified. His ethics is not a way of judging but a way of thinking. Žižek attempts to describe the way Lacan would define an authentic ethical act: «Therein consists the Lacanian definition of the ethical act: an act which reaches the utter limit of the primordial forced choice and repeats it in the reverse sense. Such an act presents the only moment when we are effectively «free»: Antigone is «free» after she has been excommunicated from the community. In our time, such acts seem almost unthinkable: their pendants are usually disqualified as «terrorism».<sup>53</sup>

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50. *Ibid.*, 41.

51. Lacan, Book II. 291.

52. «... if the neurotic is like a private or asocial moral agent, a moral agent is a public, socialized neurotic. If obsession, hysteria and paranoia are like distorted pathological versions of ourselves as moral beings, our images of ourselves as moral beings are like idealized versions of these pathological conditions. And the principle that thus connects duty and pathology, the principle that says that there is no duty without pain is this: our desire is so structured by the Law as to make of us «obligated» or «guilty» sorts of beings *before* we formulate just what our obligations or duties are, and the principles that would govern them. Such would be the great Freudian reversal in morality: we don't repress our desire because we have a conscience; We have a conscience because our desire is always and already repressed». in Rajchman, *Truth and Eros*, 41.

53. Žižek, «Why Is Every Act a Repetition?» in *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 77.



The pertaining question is directed to the amount of choice one has in constituting oneself and in regulating one's life. Desire, not intention is what really is at work within, directing one's fates. The Other decides for us, without us, instead of us. Where the Other reigns there are no causes and effects operating in a mechanistic way and there can be no planned decisions. Desire, the result of absence and lack, is the master of the house. Since desire is always repressed, what one may think that one wants for oneself may not actually coincide with one's desire. It is not reason that makes one autonomous. As in therapy, the aim is not to get better control of one's self and life, but to have insight into one's own inauthentic choices in creating one's self, to analyse one's values, to learn how to be satisfied and to become capable of happiness.

Lacan, precisely because he wants to free the individuals and make them able to choose, does not strictly specify the objective of analysis, precisely because the subjects should develop the ability to make their own statements of preference and select the values which will denote their own choices. The transformation one may experience in psychoanalysis by the release from ego ideals and ideal egos, is both a self-discovery and a liberation. As he says in *Écrits*, «It is my thesis that psychoanalysis is not merely a particular form of psychotherapy; it is at all times also a philosophy of life».<sup>54</sup> As in pedagogy, the intention is «not to teach particular things, but to develop in the subject the capacity to learn, learn to discover, learn to invent».<sup>55</sup> One learns to develop the capacity to become autonomous, animated, de-hypnotized, transformed. The patient becomes the analysand, the one who participates in therapy, in fact, the patient is the main agent of analysis who self-reflects, recalls, re-cognizes, and works through. Psychoanalysis does not teach the meaning of one's existence and life; as Cornelius Castoriadis says, it can only «help the patient to find, invent and create for himself such a meaning... to form his own project for life»<sup>56</sup> and achieve the maturity of the liquidation of illusions and the denial of imaginary fascinations, a maturity that «always involves knowledge of the relativistic value of the meaning of things»<sup>57</sup>. Unlike the “self-alteration” enterprise of Behaviorism, Lacanian psychoanalysis is not a technique, but rather a poetics. It does not aim at social

54. Lacan, *Écrits*, 175.

55. Cornelius Castoriadis, «Psychoanalysis and Politics», in *Speculations After Freud: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and Culture*. Edd. Shamdasani, Sonu and Michael Munchow. New York: Routledge, 1994, p.6.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

57. Ruesch and Bateson, p. 87.

adaptation through inhibition and repression, but at the release from repression from social constructs. Its aim is not a struggle against desire (as traditional moralities dictate, although such a restraint may be seen as a way to gratify it), but against the suffering that breeds defense in the form of illusions and, eventually, more suffering. As Deleuze says, what forces one to think is always a violence<sup>58</sup>, in this case, the violence of one's conflicts and symptoms, the experience of some malfunctioning, of some perturbation. Life rises to consciousness when there is pain and one is ready for change when life becomes unbearable. The result is «one of reintegration and harmony, I could say of reconciliation»<sup>59</sup>. As Freud said, «To tolerate life remains, after all, the first duty of all living beings. Illusion becomes valueless if it makes this harder for us»<sup>60</sup>. In any case, recognizing desire does not mean seeking pleasure-*jouissance* is not synonymous with pleasure, but a form of boundlessness.

Psychoanalysis, according to Lacan, is the theory of the unconscious. In his hands it became not a system of cure, not a treatment one «applies», but a technique and process of listening to the testimony of one's desire and its recognition. Its aim became the investigation of the self, of the reflective status of ones' phenomenal self-awareness and understanding, as well as articulation of one's confusion. The point is to reflect on one's unconscious wishes and their corresponding creations of realities, to be aware of one's fantasies and fictions and to make one's worldview clear. As Castoriadis says, «The flux of associations, punctuated by the analyst's interpretations, brings into action the reflexive activity of the patient; he reflects himself and reflects upon himself...»<sup>61</sup>. This working through, however, demands constant critical thinking, self-criticism and a mature flexibility, an openness to change. Lacan himself had used the following analogy to demonstrate that his teaching was not a dogma but the eroticism of thinking itself: «The master breaks the silence with anything – with a sarcastic remark, with a kick-start. That is how a Buddhist master conducts his search for meaning, according to the technique of Zen. It behooves the students to find out for themselves the answer to their own questions. The master does not teach *ex cathedra* a ready made science»<sup>62</sup>.

58. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Columbia University Press, 1968, p. 139.

59. Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 171.

60. S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. ed. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953-1974, 14. 72, p. 299.

61. Castoriadis, «Psychoanalysis and Politics», p. 5.

62. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*. Ed. J.-Alain Miller. New York: Norton, 1988, p. 1.

According to Lacan, therefore, psychoanalysis has an ethical objective: it should help the individual to recognize the fact that he or she participates in a certain symbolic order, since one's self-understanding is facilitated by a new insight into the symbolic values, those social fictions that structured and determined one's life. The re-collection of free association exposes and elucidates the symbolic system one lived in when experiencing certain traumatic events, and assists one's awareness of the symbolic system that determines the present. One acquires a new perspective and notices the oddness of what is going on. Since madness could be defined as the degree of the ambiguity created by the conflict of one's reality with that of the social system and the extent to which one can endure it, the role of analysis is also to make one aware of this ambiguity and in certain cases, the treatment would be a modification of one's life situation. The subject's health does not depend on any *adjustment* but on the *willingness or ability to conform*, that is, to reconcile to the world in which it finds itself, or on the willingness and ability to move to a different environment, to reorganize one's relations and reshape one's identity:

There is a symbolic circuit external to the subject, tied to a certain group of supports, of human agents, in which the subject, the small circle which is called his destiny, is indeterminately included... Naturally, the subject can spend his entire life without making out what it's about. It is after all what most commonly happens. Analysis is made for him to make out, for him to understand in what circle of speech he is caught, and by the same token into what other circle he must enter<sup>63</sup>.

After the realization of the fact that the so far self-evident fictions, what one considered "natural" and "normal", have no substantial actuality, that they are valid but inexistent, one cannot be the same subject as before. To the ethical question if there is something wrong with oneself or the world, the answer is that there is something wrong with both. In any case, the subject has to accept and lament the unbearable lack of the Other. Since, according to Lacan, the subject's imbalance is constitutive, it is always synonymous to its lack and ultimately doomed to fail. One is always at crossroads, and confusion is converted into better defined conflicts. Desire will always interrupt the regularities of one's life and psychoanalysis will always stay tragic: there is no reconciliation, no cure, no re-

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63. Lacan, *Book II*, p. 98-9.

demption. There is no such thing as peace of mind. Expressing one's desire does not guarantee happiness and, as Freud stated, analysis is to change illness into common suffering and the realization that many of the disappointments are ordinary. As Robert Eisner puts it in *The Road to Daulis*, «we simply have to learn to get along as conscious cripples in a society of unconscious cripples»<sup>64</sup>.

### Communities: A Place for Identity and Difference

What makes one reality more socially acceptable than the other? What determines what will prevail in a specific time and place? The time and place themselves? And what happens when the last two factors are ignored, and a community adopts the intriguing reality of someone else who lives under totally different circumstances? Then there is the clash of two worlds. There is crisis when the Other does not make sense, when its lack appears, when the Symbolic domain can no longer hold the subject.

In Lacan, the Other can be irregular and inconsistent since it does not exist without the human community; in fact, the actual human world is what constitutes it. As everything that is specifically human, it is the «as if» that holds a community together and guarantees the consistency and ultimate meaning of its subjects' experience. But is this «as if» a lie, a necessary illusion, or an unintended compromise, and who are the ones who need to be deceived and why? Yet, if it is an intended lie, and since the liar deceives without deceiving himself, then, the «as if» is not a deception; it is a play, a *ludere*, Nietzsche's «metaphysical comfort».

The subjects presuppose but also pose the Other<sup>65</sup>, they are both the authors and the aftermaths. Individuals are both an effect and an ingredient of the symbolic – we are the creators of significance, and societies are badly unified sets of means that can secure no subordination to them. As J. Hillman says, communities are «constituted of communal contingencies»<sup>66</sup>. Freud wondered whether the living being's fundamental tendency is to conserve or to expand, and he introduced the notion of process: The self is not a structure but a process, and the normal is not static. Life depends on development, variation, mutations, and in-

64. R. Eisner, *The Road to Daulis: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Classical Mythology*, Syracuse University Press, 1987, p. 31.

65. Žižek, «Why Is Woman a Symptom of Man?» 59.

66. Hillman, «Man is by Nature a Political Animal», 35.

ventions, and many of today's truths will become yesterday's. There are no powerful invariants. The changing components belong to a wider system which itself is undergoing continual transformations. Cultures constitute themselves, they do not derive from any metaphysical, mythological, theological realm and<sup>67</sup>, as W.C. Greene says, all periods are transitional: «Now the same event will appear variously as cause, as incident, or as result...»<sup>68</sup>. As in Heraklitus, there is a primacy of change in everything (concepts, values, "reality") and the urge to recognize the inescapable, universal-social and individual-flowing, transitions, transformations, renewals, is strong. The symbolic remains open to constant change and the whole world, in order to assure survival, is subject to the open-endedness of mutations, that is, variations of the same. Nothing assures that one cannot reverse oneself and turn into its opposite, that, in fact, it does not already contain its opposite.

The Other should not be maintained at any cost, unless there is a historical necessity fulfilling a noble mission, a meaning. Lacan would guide people to break the order of security and regularity. New communities should withdraw from the Other, decompose its structure, renounce any support in it and abandon it, risking being accused of madness. They should transform thought, decompose human knowledge and evacuate, empty, restructure and replace it with alternatives. Something else has to bear the burden of the signifying mechanism. Value (from the word *valere*, which means to be in good health, that is, not only comply with but also create values and to decide what has value, what are the things that make life worth living), is what makes a human life good.

But, being in a vast landscape and tormented by the anxieties of multiple choice and lack of direction, one is seduced to dismiss or neglect change or transformation and to settle for any known set of identifications, and cling to cherished pathological relations, illusions and their misery. There will always be a longing for stability and security; there is no life whatsoever without norms, and an engagement in a community of trust and commitment is crucial. In an all-permitting world there are many possibilities for development but also a need for frameworks, limits within which to order life. Some falsifications are needed. There is a need for objectives and customs that would order life. In order to survive, a community must have planning for the future, driving aspirations, points of reference, collective values, identity. It needs principles, some con-promises

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67. S. Shamdasani, «Introduction: The Censure of the Speculative, in *Speculations After Freud*, 1.

68. Greene, 90.

to guide action based on the respect for both difference and identity. One cannot constantly proceed with a suspended step, going out of step. There is need for some predictability. It is not always wise to abandon the old for the new and there will always be a longing for stability and security. The opposite of autihumanitarianism should not be anarchy and there is a need to construct social ethics and loyalties that are not based on ethical imperatives. But how can a community that will suffer from no repression be established, and how should people administer and conduct their activities and live together with overlapping truths? In a culture of plurality of values there are inevitable conflicts, but are cultural disagreements and differences in ethics irreducible? In fact, antagonisms are welcome, and one can simultaneously hold incompatible beliefs since as Lacan claims, «Reality is defined by contradiction»<sup>69</sup>. In such cases there can be no hierarchy of different knowledges, since there is no absolute one. Community offers the space for a play of identity and difference. Criticism should not be an attack, eristic, a strife, a quarrel, and the dominant one should learn by its defeated rivals. Conflicts between different options, choices and freedoms, tensions, disagreements, and confrontations are inevitable and, therefore, there should be some arrangements to contain aggression. Since not all possibilities are to be realized, and since none should be allowed to forbid what one does not like, there is a need for agreement. According to a Greek myth, Zeus sent *aidos* and *dike* as the virtues that would protect communities and individuals from unrestrained selfishness and guard civilization and order. In cultures of rich diversity any reconciliation or equilibrium always rests on interplays of conflict and tensions among differing modalities of thought, various sensitivities, different experiences. As individualism should not be confused with individuality<sup>70</sup>, conflict does not necessarily mean incompatibility, and opposed truths and conflicting perspectives can be parallel and complementary. Any set of terms should remain provisional and open to intervention. Lacan suggests to «blow alternatively hot and cold». Since there are no lasting changes, there should be an interplay of constancy and change. The idea of *nomos* is not wrong, but it is incomplete.

The opposite of a selfish individualism should not be an intrusive communism and a horrendous homogeneity. Communities should be based on a cul-

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69. Lacan, *Book I*, 267.

70. As M. Taylor puts it, «In the very struggle to achieve distinction by standing apart from the other selves, the individual eventually comes to realize an unavoidable commonality, which grows out of inevitable relationships with others» in *Erring*, 132.

ture of relationships, that is, communities that want to listen. The social efficacy of language and speech is its *peitho* and there is a need of *Sevas*, respect, not by force but by persuasion whose medium is language, verbal skill – not, however to be used to make the worse appear the better, since persuasion is not rhetoric. Values are, therefore, preferred channels of «communication or relatedness»<sup>71</sup>. Communication requires to speak well.

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In this paper I explored the religious and ethical sensibilities of Lacan, and tried to demonstrate that he did not deny religion, but, on the contrary, he contributed to its development and maturation. He acknowledged a radical Beyond which he called «the Other». His understanding of religion is not separated from the life of the community as a social and political entity. As he redefined the subject within its community, subsequently, he also defined truth as intersubjective. I also argued that Lacan insists on ethics not based on the sovereign good, but, since the tragic does not necessarily resist the ethical, on tragic ethics. For Lacan, life itself is the interpretive process that arranges one's world: to be human and mature is to live with the ambiguity, to practice a noble resignation before the inevitable, to prefer the aging Penelope over the immortal Calypso. His ethics of sublimation, which refers to the dimension of depth in everything, is connected to the meaning of the beautiful which affirms life and style, that is, difference, and through which one is «taken away from the present»<sup>72</sup>.

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71. Ruesch and Bateson, 8.

72. See L. Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 184, n. 19.