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Lacan's Ambiguous Relation to the Perversions: A Response to Karen Ror Malone

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to the perversions, Lacan's attitude is ambiguous and this ambiguity is linked to the influence of the French psychiatric heritage and more particularly the influence of Ernest Dupré. This thematic cannot be properly understood without taking the problematic relation between the psychiatric traditions and psychoanalysis into account.

In her response to my article Karen Ror Malone (this issue) gives some very pertinent and valuable arguments as to why we shouldn't dismiss psychoanalysis (and more particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis) too easily on the basis of the fact that it would have become at least implicitly an ally of the normative goals of psychiatry and psychotherapy. I am grateful for this comment because it counterbalances my approach, which could appear all too forceful. Malone's reply is detailed and rich. Rather than trying to answer her argument point by point, I try to articulate my own purpose once again while taking into account some of Malone's remarks.

In my article I wanted to address what I consider a "psychiatric, nosological attitude" among many (orthodox) Lacanian psychoanalysts (how can we otherwise qualify books that claim to introduce a psychoanalytic "differential diagnosis"?) and more particularly the status and systematic reference to a "perverse structure" in the same textbooks. I wanted to make clear in what way this reference goes against some of the most valuable insights of Freudian psychoanalysis. I refer in this context to the first edition of the "Three Essays" in which Freud (1905) breaks away from what Davidson called a "psychiatric style of reasoning" (Davidson, 2001) that consists in creating specific "identities" (such as the perversions) that are essentially different from other "identities." This already shows, I argued, that it was not my intention to simply dismiss psychoanalytic or Lacanian thinking. Rather I wanted to mobilize Freud or certain Freudian texts against Lacan or at least against a specific way of interpreting his thinking. My point then was that the authors under consideration re-connect with the psychiatric way of thinking that Freud initially dismissed. However, that is not all. Even if it is difficult to deny that Freud himself returned to this "psychiatric style" in his later work, he always took care—as a true student of the sexologists of his days—not to disqualify the perverse subject as ethically or otherwise inferior, let alone to link perversion to evil, as the old theological conceptions of it did. This is clearly not the case in Lacanian circles. It is quite possible that the situation in the Anglo-Saxon world is not identical to the situation in continental Europe, but it strikes me over and over again that my Lacanian colleagues often speak of perversion and the "classical" sexual perversions in negative terms. The same negative attitude characterizes the texts I discussed in my article. My question then was where this negative attitude comes from and I wondered whether this is not the (inevitable) effect of thematizing perversion as a (structural) denial of the law of sexual difference that is itself seen or interpreted as the basic law of human society. In this way perversion becomes an active danger to human society and the "perverted subject" threatens to become once again intrinsically "evil."

I linked this "neo-moralism" (Lantéri-Laura, 2012) to an implicit influence of the French psychiatric tradition on the work of Lacan. Indeed, even if Lacan cannot be reduced to the readings

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of the authors whom I discussed, one cannot say, in my opinion, that they just betray Lacan's inspiration either. When it comes to the perversions, Lacan's attitude is ambiguous and this ambiguity is, in my mind, linked to the influence of the French psychiatric heritage and more particularly the influence of Dupré. However, this raises a more fundamental problem that transcends the scope of my article but that Kareen Ror Malone rightly mentions. I am thinking here of the problematic relation between psychiatry, or the psychiatric traditions, and psychoanalysis. I cannot go into detail in this short response, but it is worth mentioning that maybe already the privileging of fetishism as a paradigm for the sexual perversions in Freud, Lacan, and others (e.g., Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1984) continues a psychiatric tradition that goes back to Charcot and Magnan (Charcot and Magnan, 1873). This clearly indicates that we shouldn't be too naive about the influence of psychiatric thinking on psychoanalytic metapsychology and that this influence might be much more profound than we sometimes think.

It is not just in the Lacanian tradition that we find a disqualification of the sexual perversions. Lacan and the Lacanians are, in this, completely in line with most post-Freudian theories on perversion (e.g., Stoller, 1975; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1984; Kernberg, 1997). These theories consider perversion intrinsically destructive and for that reason tend to link it to "evil" once again. Freud never linked perversion in general to the more aggressive and destructive aspects of sexuality. It was only after Freud's death that these aspects became an essential element of the psychoanalytic concept of perversion as such. Perversion was at the same time thought—just as in the Lacanian tradition—a specific "possibility of personhood" (Hacking, 2002) that characterizes some people (a specific *kind* of people) and not others. In this way "the pervert" tends once again to become an incarnation of evil, just as in the darkest psychiatric traditions. I am not implying that this is inevitable, but one has to be very attentive to these influences in order to avoid them and articulate an alternative, just as Freud did in his early work.

Here it is also important to clarify my references to Foucault, Deleuze, and queer theory at the end of my article. It is true, as Kareen Ror Malone rightly indicates, that these references could be read as a pure dismissal of psychoanalytic metapsychology. That was definitely not my intention. Rather I wanted to suggest a possible alliance with these authors on the basis of a return to Freud's basic intuitions that we find in the first edition of his "Three Essays." My hypothesis would be that precisely a dialogue between psychoanalysis and these authors—much more than a dialogue between psychoanalysis and the neuro-sciences that is so popular these days—allows for a renewal of psychoanalytic theory that gives it back, or better still reinvigorates, its revolutionary potential.

Malone both defends and elucidates in a very subtle way Lacan's phallicism. However, this defense does not answer what I personally consider the most problematic aspect of this theory. Lacan thinks that phallicism characterizes the symbolic as such. Laplanche's critical position is in this context very interesting. He writes that the central role of the phallus in the symbolic (just as the Oedipus complex) has a historical (and hence contingent) character. It only characterizes certain types of society and not the symbolic as such. Some societies have more complex and less binary ways to symbolize sexual difference (Laplanche, 1980, p. 264). The Oedipus and castration complex, Laplanche continues, are historical and contingent narratives that lead away from the unconscious rather than characterize its most fundamental structure. They allow us to cope with (and give a place to) what emanates from the unconscious. Not only is this Laplanchean approach more appealing to me than Lacanian theory, in which the phallus seems to have an almost transcendental status, but I also believe that this approach is much easier to reconcile with the work of Foucault, Deleuze, and queer thinkers such as Bersani. This reconciliation and dialogue remains very programmatic for me—I am really not sure where this dialogue will take us—but it is obviously much more about thinking psychoanalysis against psychoanalysis than just dismissing psychoanalysis. Kareen Ror Malone's comments convince me in this respect that there might be a more important place for Lacan in this project than I originally thought.

Notes on contributor

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