

AN ETHICS FOR THE PSYCHOANALYST

IN THE POSMODERN AGE

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As a theoretical practice psychoanalysis has recognized - since Sullivan wrote about the "illusion of personal individuality" and quoted extensively Sapir's book on *Language* - the importance of the subject's formation through symbolic and linguistic interactions. It has accepted, through the relevance of the determinative value of language, the conception of intersubjectivity and reaffirms that human phenomena, immersed in culture as a field of meanings and values, are not reducible to an "essential core" of biological drives. Overcoming the reductionism to the intrapsychic, it has taken us to the hypothetical construct of an achronic and unknowable unconscious, that is as transsubjective as language. Since the concept of unconscious desire was introduced by Freud, psychoanalysis has renovated hermeneutics with the "narrative-interpretive paradigm" seeking out the process of enunciation, that occurs through *deciphering* as a creative form of experience. By the use of this concept of the unconscious, it differentiates itself from a psychology bound to the conscious dimension, embraces the fields of singularity and contingency, and elicits from its practice in a field of meanings an ethics that differs from the morals in each individual history.

In this way psychoanalysis tells us about a structural determinism and reveals the "dialogism" (Bakhtine) of a ternary logic. that permits the passage from nature to culture and establishes the difference between nature, society and culture. In this symbolic logic, that launches the individual into an intersubjective field of values, we can differentiate between the expression or "presentation" (*Darstellung*) – that is connected to time and the sociocultural context – from the original impressions or "inscriptions" (*eindrücken*), that follow a logic of exclusion and are subordinated to the binary logic of presence or absence. Associated to criticism psychoanalysis relies on the presupposition



of the absence of meaning and denounces any ethics expressed through imperatives and the dominant ideologies that oppose diversity and the movement of culture. In this association to critical thinking psychoanalysis eliminates the imperative propositions, suspending the meaning of traditional ethics that searched for a universality of its formulations totally alienated from a practice; and confronts the philosophical ethics with the function of the unknown to reach the question of freedom in a process of valuation that, like history, does not have a conclusive ending.

Defining this relativism in a field of values that does not reduce itself to an arbitrary individualism, Perelman (1979) speaks of a philosophy of pluralism and of the multiplicity of reasons that form the sociocultural context. He shows how an ontological monism opposes the multiplicity of appearances, disqualifying all the phenomena whose existence is asserted by common experience. All the western cultures influenced by a Jewish-Christian ethics derived from monotheism, are associated to this ontological monism and to the idea of God as warrant of truth and model of human reason. This monism postulates that human knowledge is a replication, pale and imperfect, of divine knowledge that would have the solution for all moral problems. This knowledge is expressed by ethical imperatives that can only be supported in the consciousness of faith, and that tend to eliminate any questioning when confronted with the doctrinal truth of a model of perfection. The search for an ethics with universal values beyond the sociocultural context and historical time, provides a foundation for an axiomatic ethical monism, that would reduce all divergent opinions, all values in their infinite diversity, to only one value conceived in terms of perfection, utility or truth. The phenomena and the multiple values would be different appearances or versions of a transcendental essence that we would have to systematize in an univocal fashion, in search of a universal agreement that would deny individual and cultural differences. This monism of an ethical philosophy of consciousness, disregards the overdetermination of psychical reality and establishes the principle of authority of an ontological monism, thus imposing an ethics that establishes an utopian self-determination of an independent



individuality, denying unconscious determinism and the function of the unknown, the reality of a socio-historical context and the question of autonomy/heteronomy of ethics and pluralism.

Psychoanalysis opposes this homogenization of values, and gives to the interpretative act its singularity, thus implying a relativization of the individualized moral in each personal history. It can think about a widely contextualized ethics surfacing, paradoxically, out of the unawareness of all the values in conflict. This ethics emerges from a basic and unsolvable unconscious conflict; that is described by psychoanalysis as taking place between “*being-for-yourself*” and “*having-to-be-for others*”, between confronting the existing values in a sociocultural context with the values associated to the attributes of this individual existence that can question itself about its desire. Because of this uncovering of the *unconscious desire* within the questioning of values that are at play in each singularity we can state, recognizing the contribution that analytic philosophy have brought into a general theory of values, that ethics – as irreducibly pluralistic as psychoanalysis – cannot be associated with normative and imposing moral imperatives. As R.M. Hare says, in an analysis that is part of Wittgenstein’s tradition, the imperatives are moral propositions that, in their paradigmatic use, are in language and are capable only to *tell* us what we can do. These propositions only say what can be done, summarizing descriptively *what was done* in a process experienced as a singular process within a history. Therefore, ethical judgments cannot be reduced to an empiricism, cannot be reduced to an imperative, and cannot be contained in an explanatory proposition that would be objective enough to justify its universality.

What is simply expected from the psychoanalyst’s ethics, is that he does not attach himself to propositions that aim to be universal, and respects individual differences to the point of postulating a *principle of difference* as part of subjectivity. It is not that he could have a privileged discourse or an exemplary life that would justify his ethical judgment, but that he may *describe morality in such a fashion that it would demonstrate the work of a living discourse in its living practice*. More specifically, he could create a “conceptual map” of the nature and the limits of ethical *justification*,



showing that what is being proposed, in any ethical proposition that tries to be imperative, is a quest for the power of influence. The denouncement of justification as “rationalization” leads us to *recognize* a pluralism in ethics and a consequential *renunciation* to any ambition for power, and to realize that the questioning proposed by psychoanalysis, the contextual questioning of the unconscious desire, is a permanent questioning linked to the concept of an interrogative subject as a function of intersubjectivity, thus undoing any imperative proposition and allowing for diversity in values.

Psychoanalysis, being a field of questioned values, has to refuse a normative ethics that would deny historical individual and cultural differences and the singularity of the psychoanalytic act of interpretation. Even though there is not a psychoanalytic ethics mistaken for a philosophical ethics, there is the ethics of the psychoanalyst who questions his practice and is confronted with the diversity of multiple values hierarchized by the different forms of being in each culture. This interrogation of values can be associated to the ethical philosophies, enriching the critical thinking that leads us to denounce the illusions of desire, and can indicate the limits of psychoanalytic knowledge when it says that this knowledge is as partial and inconclusive as psychoanalysis is only a partial and conjectural knowledge. Because the truth that psychoanalysis discovers is the *partial* truth of desire, all we can do is to help discover the limits of the “sensual and psychic” reality, that is, the impossibilities of the unconscious desire as expressed by the demand and the limits of knowledge established by the attribute of unknowability of the unconscious that Bion refers to as the sign “O”, denoting what is an impossible contradiction, the aspiration of the ideal absolute truth, the transcendental, the pure essence, the “thing in itself” (*Das Ding an Sich*).

Erich Fromm (1947), one of the first psychoanalysts to bring together ethics and psychoanalysis, proposes an opposition between authoritarian ethics and humanistic ethics. As a critic of culture, Fromm emphasizes the value of questioning taken from Freudian theory. He also affirms that the psychoanalytic process is in itself a search for truth and “*neurosis itself, in a final analysis, is a system of moral collapse, although adaptation is not, in any sense, symptom of moral success*”. Fromm



turns psychoanalysis into an ethical proposal associated to a humanistic philosophy using the concept of *biofilia*, the love for life, as the basis for his ethics that does not deny a field of differentiated values and describe the destructive “necrofilic” moral conscience, that allows the destructive impulses to act under the disguise of virtue, making room for a savage capitalism and a culture of cruelty in this informational age that has as its opposite a culture of shame and guilt. This predatory capitalism, in his interpretation of the ethical discussions of master Eckardt, favors “To Have” over “To Be”. It can transform into merchandise any cultural product; deform, under the perspective of immediate profit, the entire cultural project, and maintain the hypocrisy of the distortions of values in the social field that associates justification with an ethics of repression.

Freud had already convincingly demonstrated that interpretation as a symbolic act indicates, through the wish for recognition and the concept of an Ideal of the Ego, that the individual tries to maintain his symbolic identification close to collective values. The inevitable antagonism, postulated by Freud between the “*instinctual demands and the restrictions imposed by culture*”, comes from his recognition of the inclusive opposition that reunites the individual to the collective in the argumentative reason of practical discourse around what he called superego, as one of the instances of his second topology that gave dominance to the structural point of view. This concept clarifies the feeling of guilt, and therefore suggests an ethics which is always oscillating between the individual morals and the collective values of a particular culture. When Freud (1916) suggests that “we should listen to the gentle voice of reason”, he leads us to his ethics of the *signified difference* related to a process which, if put in dialectic terms between “I and the Other”, associates the “gentleness” of reason not to cold reasoning, or to rationality as the epiphenomenon of a human nature, but to skeptical reason that makes the psychoanalyst part of the search for truth. It is this renunciation of the produced meanings that takes us to the interpretative activity in a process which is, according to Levenson, a search for the “relevance of truth” in a field of changing values also determined by the conjuncture, the “here and now” of an intersubjective field. This interpretative practice differentiates the “phenomenological I who-speaks”



from the subject as a function of an intersubjective field, a subject who is an inconclusive “becoming”. The Freudian ethics is built, thus, on a practice and on the structuring genesis of an aphorism which imposes a permanent injunction: “*Wo Es war soll Ich werden*”. This we may translate, recognizing the differentiation between the narcissistic Ego and the Subject as a function of intersubjectivity, in a more extensive manner: “Where It (*Id, Es*) was the I (*Ego, Ich*) as a Subject shall come to be”. This Freudian injunction only indicates a being who can only be “as longing to be” in the structuring void between an It (*Es, Id*) and an I (*Ego, Ich*) condemned to incompleteness; an unsubstantial Subject as a function of an intersubjective field. A subject who poses a permanent question because of death and the unconscious, an I cast as a subject only intended in a field of values where the metonymical displacement of the unconscious desire refers it to an inconclusive process of “coming to be”.

This injunction is directed to the unconscious desire and is different, from Kant’s and Sade’s ethic imperatives which intend to stand as universal norms. The Kantian categorical imperative, as the maxim of Sade, “*gets its authority from the imperative of moral law*”, thus disregarding any value that appears in the singular process of a practice of discovery that can be accepted or rejected. These imperatives deny that the ethical order is equivalent to the symbolic order, and they do not consider the unconscious desire demanding for the realization of the impossible. Lacan, in his article, *Kant avec Sade*, tells us how the death of desire can come about, in Kant, by the the universality of the law that has no object because it refers to the imposing of an ideal of a model subject of humanity; and by the extinction of the law and the disappearance of the subject in the fixation of the desire in an object, as in the “Sadian phantasmatic” which excludes any reciprocity. In Kant, the subject only encounters the law when “*it does not have any object before itself*”, and in Sade’s *Philosophie dans le Boudoir* the object is impossibly reduced to a body as an “orgastic object”, an object of violent “enjoyment“ (*jouissance*). Neither of the two extreme imperatives consider the regulation of individualized desire in a story to be interpreted. These extremes do not consider the Oedipian structure in its value of “normalization” of



unconscious desire that gives dominance to the ternary logic of the symbolic and imposes the creative act in living.

Since we overcame the dream Assman ascribes to Freud of an universal “cosmotheistic ethics” in his book on *Moses and Monotheism*, and accepted the “*nomotropic desire*” (Santner) implicit in the event-structure imposed by a “law of covenant” and the cultural modes of normativity that we find in a moral and political being, we are referred to this desire that is irreducible to any biological conception or to the conscious proffered meaning. This “normalized desire” confront us with the difference and forces the engagement in intersubjectivity where one lives the conflict of values, and it indicates an ethics that implies the “suspension” (*aufhebung*) of the psychoanalyst ambition of power who consequently will not use the power that is given to him by the transference phenomenon, the power of influence that could impose his own values. The psychoanalyst, as the *practitioner of the symbolic function*, does his subjective *ascesis* and places himself as a function of the intersubjective field. He uses the instrument of interpretation and can recognize, the conjunction of an intersubjective field that deconstructs the reiterating meanings of repetition. As the meanings are deconstructed, he facilitates the change of subjective positions, and keeps the metonymic displacement of unconscious desire as imaginary fixations are undone and the accomplishment of the narcissistic destitution of the subject is favored. What is necessary, in a process guaranteed by the “psychoanalytic frame” (Bleger) and by the psychoanalyst’s ethics, is the transit from a primitive world of unconscious fantasies, ruled by a binary logic of exclusion, to a moralized and legalized personal world, directed by a reality principle in the historic and sociocultural context that recognizes the difference between the possible and the impossible, giving credit to the ternary symbolic logic of creativity. This reality principle, in *inclusive* opposition to the pleasure/unpleasure principle, does not do away with the imaginary and does not bring about any numbness of desire, since “psychic reality” itself is a field of values where unconscious desire is inscribed. It is in this field of a differentiated psyche, that we can recognize the ineffable object that Alcibiades looked for in Socrates’s body, as is shown in Lacan’s reading of Plato’s



“Banquet”: the object as a “treasure of image” – *agalma* – defining the relation *éraztes/erómenos* between “To Have” and “To Be”, two manners of relating to the lack of the primary object (the “mother’s image”) which demonstrate that the “lover” substitutes the “loved” and isolate the object itself as the desiring subject. This substitution gives to the subject who desires – the *éraztes*, the “lover” – the possibility of a dynamic “being” instead of a static “having”, bringing another meaning to the subject of desire that may “wish to be desired” as a secondary and intentional wish; and relating the unconscious desire to the radical “otherness” (*alterity*) of the capitalized Other who can say that desire cannot be reduced to the relation subject/object, but desire is desire of another desire, is desire to be desired in the permanent displacement in relation to substitutive objects, symbolic objects which make history.

If psychoanalysis were, in its practice, a mere corrective psychological experience having the psychoanalyst as a model, it would have to state the positivity of an “I” that could, in its unity, tell “all the truth” about its own good. However, if we say that psychoanalysis is associated to critical thinking, and that it is the dialectics between the known and the unknown that brings us close to the language of desire, then we could say that psychoanalysis is hedonism’s own contestation. Thus we could postulate that the “true good” of any subject – its *Wunschvorstellung* or the representation of its desire –, is that the subject does not know what it is, or even if it is. In the discovery of a fundamental dialectic in the field of meanings, the psychoanalyst, recognizing that he is a product of the patient in the psychoanalytic act, may come to formulate an ethics, not for psychoanalysis, since there exists no essence of a “psychoanalytic being”, but for the psychoanalyst in its function, in his practice accepting the narcissistic destitution and being able to undo the equation knowledge/power by the suspension of his judgment, that is, by resisting the narcissistic temptation, to use the power of influence of his own values. This suspension (*aufhebung*) of desire, requires a subjective position where there is a “hesitation of being”, a radical doubt about the attributes of an existence, forcing the psychoanalyst to have at least begun this “mourning of being”, the acceptance of an original “lack of being” (*manque-à-*



être) which indicates the narcissistic destitution or subjective destitution. Through the value of truth, psychoanalysis, can denounce in the post modern condition the “*disenchantment with the spectacle of the world*” (Diggins) of a narcissistic culture that demands the glorification of an “autonomous ego”, in the sense of identifying suffering with failure as it tries to silence “psychical pain”. This value of truth can refer us to a “paradigm of complexity” (Thom), to a demanding “risk society” (Beck) dedicated to the “speed of change” in which we no longer live in compliance with nature or tradition, in which there is no symbolic order in the sense of a “*code of accepted fictions*” (Zizek) that could be permanent, and we are more close to Heraclitus and time as the core of reality than to the static ideas of Plato’s universe. It is in this posmodern age of globalization, of a computerized world in which the formations of the unconscious have lost their innocence, that psychoanalysis can discover its statute as a conjectural science that situates itself between fact and fiction with a “probabilistic style” (Crombie) as it demonstrates the incompleteness of being and the relativization of all knowledge. Differing from the psychotherapies, psychoanalysis can criticize the present meaning of a pragmatism based on the utilitarian value as a value in this informational age defined by an ideology that quantifies information and associates it to the power of influence. The ideology of a neo-pragmatism restablish the equation power/knowledge in a world dominated by the triumph of technology, imposes changes in search of social recognition that dillutes or even disregards entirely the concept of the unconscious and the value of truth, and takes us back to a model of a positivistic science, that is empty of any humanistic value and complies with a social demand for adaptative results. What is required from the psychoanalyst is an ethics that does not deny psychoanalysis when possible and does not take from psychoanalysis its value of truth, its subversive value, its questioning and denunciation value. The specificity of its object places psychoanalysis as a project that does not impose a knowledge and does not cover an exercise of power, not even the benign power of influence that guide, orients and supports, and can prescribe modes of intimacy and relatedness. Intending through interpretation to be accomplished as a process that subverts the subject’s relation with its own history, psychoanalysis, as it undoes the imaginary fixations of the

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subject, confronts with the possibilities of decision and choice of a relative and *finite* freedom. As it establishes itself in a practice, that by its “effects of freedom” transforms the imaginary fixation in conflict in the symbolic, psychoanalysis, reaffirming the principle of negativity of a skeptical reason, renounces the signified and maintains the metonymic displacement of desire. It comes to designate its ideal goal as the narcissistic destitution of the subject, and it confronts with the essentially finite nature of the human scale, points to the subjective destitution and brings up the presence of death between the realized meaning and the total absence of meaning.

The psychoanalyst's ethic at issue is to affirm as a fundamental value the *recognition* of a determinism of the unconscious desire, and to make space for chance and contingency in a narrative-interpretive paradigm as this hypothetical construct, used in interpretative elaborations of an intersubjective field, reveals the limits of a knowledge restricted by the context where the interpretation takes place and makes the differentiation - emphasizing the attribute of incognoscibility of the unconscious - between deciphering and decoding, revealing the *cryptogram*, a cipher designed as an ambiguous puzzle that is not exhausted by the act of interpretation, and refers to the unrepresentable and to the inaccessibility of the real. From this position of recognition of the hypothetical construct of an *alteritarian* unconscious, we are placed in an intersubjective field of meanings that accepts the difference in a limited and ephemeral encounter, and maintains that psychoanalysis with its questioning and subversive value is unable to expect social recognition for obtained results. There is not for the psychoanalyst something beyond the psychoanalytic act as the accomplishment of his own good; and he can only accomplish the psychoanalytic act when he is able to erase his “I (ego) of opinion” if he can, based on the psychoanalytic frame, surpass his narcissism to place himself to be used in a relationship until it is exhausted as a useless object, in a radical “*renouncement ethics*” which is accomplished in the interpretation as a symbolic act.

