

LACK OF BEING, DENIAL OF GOOD

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*whether phobic, hysterical, or obsessive, neurosis
is a question that being raises for the subject*

— Jacques Lacan¹

THE AIMS AND ETHICS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Lacan asks, "Should the theoretical and practical purpose of our [psychoanalytic] action be limited to the ideal of psychological harmonization?"² His answer: no. Lacan rejects the claims that psychoanalysis aims at cure, claims that would reduce psychoanalysis to "a form of psychological normalization [that] implies what might be called rationalizing moralization."³ This would position analysts as "guarantors of the bourgeois dream" — necessarily *fraudulent* guarantors because "it is only too obvious that [the analysand's] aspiration to happiness will always imply a place where miracles happen."⁴

Fair enough. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory places the object of longing out of reach, in some only-ever-postulated instant before or beyond socially informed subjectivity. If the happiness that the analysand seeks requires putting longing to rest by securing the object, then happiness cannot be the achievable aim of any human undertaking, psychoanalysis included. But what of lesser satisfaction? What of the "individual comfort linked to that well-founded and legitimate function we might call the service of goods? Private goods, family goods, domestic goods, other goods that solicit us, the goods of our trade or our profession, the goods of the city, etc."⁵ Curing (ordinarily middle-class) analysands would involve helping those discontent with the repetitive, stultifying deadness of severe neuroses become simultaneously alive to and satisfied by that measure of pleasure afforded by the goods of heteronormative middle-class life (or with *less* than that, if one's analysands are not in any position to claim the best things).⁶ Psychoanalytic practice aimed at normalization looks suspiciously like cosmetic surgery *without* the quick results and *without* comparable success rates.⁷

It gets worse. Lacan conducted training analyses the same way he conducted other analyses (in some significant sense of "same" — analyses are, of course, otherwise unique), treating wanting to become an analyst

as a kind of presenting problem. His concerns with the aim of analysis inevitably point with special concern to the aim of training analyses. His question is not whether it is worth it for an unhappy person to go into analysis in order to be able to inhabit a life that she has spent years putting into place for herself. He asks how undertaking to become a psychoanalyst might answer to a wish to earn a living by doing some good for others through a sufficiently interesting form of professional practice. Note that this question leaves it up to those who never entertain the thought of becoming analysts themselves to enter analysis or not, to stay a course or not, and to take or leave whatever individualized path of experience engagement in psychoanalytic speech situations might bring. Their interest is not the issue. The issue is: why hang out one's shingle for them? What sort of responsibility is involved in practicing psychoanalysis, given that the theoretical orientation is radically disarming (that is, if the theory that informs the practice is any guide, then one cannot know *exactly* what one is doing)? What sort of service do psychoanalysts render?

Lacan is very clear about what psychoanalysis does not do. The analyst does *not*:

- 1) teach the analysand to return to some kind of "natural," instinctual spontaneity in order to counteract neurotic deadness (or the florid sterility of psychosis, for that matter): "[I]n making [the instincts] the natural law of the realization of harmony, psychoanalysis takes on the guise of a rather disturbing alibi, of a moralizing hustle or a bluff, whose dangers cannot be exaggerated."⁸
- 2) enlist the aid of the superego in propping up the analysand's moral conscience and so prepare the analysand for a smoother social life: "It is possible that the superego serves as a support for the moral conscience, but everyone knows that it has nothing to do with the moral conscience as far as its most obligatory demands are concerned. What the superego demands has nothing to do with that which we would be right in making the universal rule of our actions."⁹
- 3) give the analysand tools for functioning smoothly in daily life; Lacan links this suggestion with conceiving psychoanalytic practice as that which supports life in the service of goods, and to a "morality of power" that is bound up in everydayness: "The morality of power, of the service of goods, is as follows: 'As far as desires are concerned, come back later. Make them wait.'"¹⁰

It is notoriously difficult to give a concise account of Lacan's positive view of the aim of psychoanalysis. It is unclear to me whether Lacan had a singular *account* to offer. If I understand him, the art of Lacanian psychoanalysis turns on taking advantage of disruptive episodes in psychoanalytic speech situations in order to brush up against the traumatic kernel never articulated in psychoanalytic speech. Any such kernel marks sites of bereavement in a very

peculiar sense: nothing was in place to be lost. The analyst listens for the disruptiveness of a wound, puncture, or rupture where, initially, there was no smooth surface in place for the rupturing. Associative speech (together with gestures, movements, facial expressions, and silences — the matter of the psychoanalytic session) is composed of signifiers carrying something of the subject's relation to lack in the twisted insistence of the signifying chain, itself “the chain of a dead desire.”¹¹ Such a chain works itself around and toward an empty signifier, a signifier of lack. This becomes a kind of nodal point for interpretation under certain circumstances. Whether we describe the result of interventions guided by openness to the negative spaces circumscribed by psychoanalytic speech as untying knots of desire, as tracking relations to jouissance and the drive, or as traversing the fantasy, the Lacanian analyst appears to be casting his net across emptiness — *real* emptiness (the difference in the shape of nets appears to be no more than different ways of construing the inarticulate in the disruption of psychoanalytic speech). What sort of service is that? How could there be an ethics of such a practice?

I will suggest that Lacanian practice points to a site of genuine ethical crisis: the evacuation of legitimate ethical authority in modernity. The sense in which active or potential analysands (in training or not) find themselves in the same boat, lack-of-being-wise, also suggests this: ethical groundlessness disturbs, and part of privilege is life in the throes of ethical groundlessness. Accordingly, Lacan's work charts the costs of groundlessness spectacularly, and any service rendered by the analyst will bear the weight of staging an encounter with both ontological and normative emptiness.

DENIAL

In his reading of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Lacan puts his finger on the philosophical trouble with any ethics of psychoanalytic practice: “the good as such — something that has been the eternal object of the philosophical quest in the sphere of ethics, the philosopher's stone of all the moralists — the good is radically denied by Freud.”¹² Even if we leave aside the question of whether or not “the good as such...has been the eternal object of the philosophical quest,” it is still unclear how to understand *the good as such*. Lacan traffics in Kant's writings (where the good as such would be unconditional good), the text of Aristotle (where there could be no such thing as Kantian unconditional good), some Christian theology (where the good as such might be conditioned — good for man, good for angels — or might be uncreated), Sade (where thought about uncreated good seems to have shifted toward the demand that the person of God the Father respond), and other European writers of a more or less philosophical bent.

Traditionally, European philosophers who trafficked in the good as such would smuggle in god and revelation at some point. Christian ethics between the ancients and the moderns, for

example, often involved thought about divine law promulgated through the ongoing creation (with the caveat that, while a god might command that one of us, say, sacrifice his only son, even a god couldn't make son-sacrifice a principle of law for created human life — there were limits to the laws the god could write into the book of nature). It is worth mentioning — if only because secular ethics has survived godlessness for so long that we may no longer recall how that worked — that views based on divine law *do* ground ethics in an appeal to good. In Christian moral philosophy, the whole structure of god's past gifts to men enters into thought about reason in human action. We can owe each other things directly, on such views, because we are joint participants in a form of social life made possible by the god's providential magnificence, which gives us a place in the world we share. Promises and gifts from the god structure that life. The hand of the god secures the goodness of the goods that shared life brings. Past-, present-, and future-directed practical considerations receive their due from the place we have in the larger, god-made scheme of things. While none of this guarantees individual happiness to those who struggle to be good in the course of their maturity, the struggle brings reward in the larger scheme of things. In Aquinas, for instance, what Denis Bradley calls “the natural endlessness of human nature”¹³ insures that, however hard the lot of virtuous people in this life, and however many the mortal rewards of vice, it befits every man in a position to hear the word of god to struggle to meet the challenge of (theologically informed) ethics. One way of reading Lacan's point about Freud, then, is by saying that, in Freud, this sort of god is gone.

Nowadays, by unspoken gentlemen's agreement, North Atlantic intellectuals do not use revealed truths outside the confines of specifically religious intellectual activity (theological disputes, for example). More precisely, while we might mention such matters in the course of, say, deploring the impact of believers' activities, or else arguing that attacks on religious influence are misguided, we do not use doctrine as such. Whether or not the good as such “has been the eternal object of the philosophical quest in the sphere of ethics,” contemporary North Atlantic philosophical ethicists *do* continue to rely upon thought about good. There is no contradiction involved in refusing to advert to doctrine while discussing good.¹⁴ Secularism simply turns away from theological accounts that purport to ground ethics in uncreated good. I take it that this is obvious and untroubling to secular philosophers. Most of us managed to wrest ethics from the hands of gods when we learned to generalize standard undergraduate readings of Plato: the good cannot be good because it is god-beloved; rather, it must be god-beloved because it is good; otherwise, the regularities of good would be accidental or arbitrary. We cannot ground ethics on whims, even the whims of gods. For all that, we rely upon the discussion of good in thinking about the foundations of ethical practice.

Grounding ethics in good requires coming up with some account of the point of ethical practice that ties it to good. Just as secular ethicists take questions of good out of the hands of divinities,

they take these questions out of the hands of mere human wanting. On any standard North Atlantic (neo- or post-) Kantian account of morality, for example, we have already left the sphere of morality when wanting has entered the picture.¹⁵ The source of right action, the source of the rightness of right action, is not supposed to be a matter of satisfying wants (one's own, or those of one's cherished fellows). Take, for example, normal-person promise-keeping. "I am *A*-ing because I promised to *A*" is supposed to explain why you *A* when you'd prefer *not* to *A*, as when you explain leaving off doing something productive or pleasant in order to keep a dull appointment. Promises serve to get people to do things in the *absence* of any clear want to do them and in the *presence* of purposes that will be thwarted or delayed by promise-keeping. Elizabeth Anscombe makes the point this way:

What ways are there of getting human beings to do things? You can make a man fall over by pushing him; you cannot usefully make his hand write a letter or mix concrete by pushing; for in general if you have to push his hand in the right way, you might as well not use him at all. You can order him to do what you want, and if you have authority he will perhaps obey you. Again if you have power to hurt him or help him according as he disregards or obeys your orders, or if he loves you so as to accord with your requests, you have a way of getting him to do things...Now getting one another to do things without the application of physical force is a necessity for human life, and that far beyond what could be secured by those other means.¹⁶

If I love you or fear you, then these facts about me will lead me to want to do what you would have me do. There is no need to get me to promise to do anything. You need only let me know what you would have me do, and if I can do it without unduly injuring myself, I will. I will do it for your sake if I love you. I will do it for my own sake if I fear you. Whatever the case, how things are between the two of us makes it possible for you to get me to do things. But if you are instead relying upon extracting promises to get me to do something, and if this technique is effective, then your strategy depends upon the assumption that sometimes people keep promises when acting on their word will involve thwarting or delaying some of their purposes. (Notice that, as Anscombe also pointed out, "one constantly has such purposes," that is, purposes that are defeated or delayed by promise-keeping.¹⁷) The problem of justifying duty in secular ethics, then, is the problem of grounding obligation understood in these terms. Anscombe suggests that there is some hope of touching ground by considering the way a practice like promising makes goods of social life possible — for example, by giving you some reason to expect that someone will do as he says when you have no reason to expect that the joint forces of love and fear would so incline him. In effect, this offers a task-based account of the point of ethical practice. We need ethics in order to accomplish shared tasks that belong to our lot as social beings. Ethics is the often individually costly means to a collective end.

Such accounts have three inherent sources of potential weakness. First, arguably, some of the very same qualities of practice and person that enable the attainment of excellent collective ends

(for example, everyone doing his bit for the common weal), would seem to enable the attainment of hideous collective ends (everyone doing his bit for systematic feats of impersonal evil, such as bureaucratized genocide or the waging of an unjust war). Second, the account is only as good as the story about what is needed in a shared form of social life, which can, if pushed, make the account seem too finely tuned to the detail of particular social formations to support the ethical generally. And anyway, third, it is unclear that we need to resort to duty to give a principled account of non-accidentally sound social life. Non-specific threats, for instance, may be sufficient to get people to behave well enough often enough with each other (the threat of the random audit, for example, may keep many more people than will ever be audited reasonably honest when doing their U.S. federal income taxes).¹⁸

A task-based account of the point of an ethical practice places the practice in the service of social goods. Lacan — a man noted for keeping his word, by the way — *explicitly* removes the ethics of psychoanalytic practice from this sphere by both critiquing life in the service of goods and pointing out that the kinds of ordinary goods made possible for analysands through analysis are mere side effects. Denying that psychoanalysis aims at cure is tantamount to denying that it is, by its very nature, useful to life in the service of goods. It might seem as though this puzzling insistence involves some kind of idiosyncratic ethical stance tied to political fashions of the mid-twentieth century. Perhaps Lacan had a principled objection to middle-class life (rooted in some vaguely Marxist sympathies — they were common enough in those days), and laminated these sympathies to his account of psychoanalytic theory and practice. If this were the case, then analysts could help themselves to Lacanian techniques and theoretical insights, ignore the proclamations about cure, understand Lacanian psychoanalysis as one among many psychotherapeutic practices, and then evaluate its usefulness in light of its positive, life-enhancing results for analysands. In this sense, Lacan's denials would amount to thinly disguised appeals to his own ethical or political convictions. We could take them or leave them. I think that Lacan closes off this possibility. If I understand him, the insistence that psychoanalysis does not aim at normalization is rooted in a peculiarly austere insistence on psychoanalytic theoretical consistency and in how consistent theorization norms practice.

Lacan *agrees* with Freud about the absence of foundational appeals to good in psychoanalysis:

The question of the Sovereign Good is one that man has asked himself since time immemorial, but the analyst knows that it is a question that is closed. Not only doesn't he have that Sovereign Good that is asked of him, but he also knows there isn't any. To have carried an analysis through to its end is no more nor less than to have encountered that limit in which the problematic of desire is raised.

That this problematic is central for access to any realization of oneself whatsoever constitutes the novelty of the analysis. There is no doubt that in the course of this process the subject will encounter much that is good for him, all the good he can do for himself, in fact, but let us not forget what we know

so well because we say it everyday of our lives in the clearest terms: he will only encounter that good if at every moment he eliminates from his wishes the false goods, if he exhausts not only the vanity of his demands, given that they are all no more than regressive demands, but also the vanity of his gifts.¹⁹

Sovereign Good, the good as such, small goods, false goods — Lacan links the problematic of desire (relation to lack) to various forms of good, suggesting that the Big Absence is related to a lack of *something to do with good*. It isn't just that the god of Christian theological ethics has retreated from the scene of psychoanalysis; even the *secular* ground for ethics has fallen away. Not only do we find ourselves unable to appeal to doctrine, we lack a social task-based account of the good of psychoanalytic practice. We inherit a love-and-fear picture of the efficacy of social practices generally, of psychoanalytic practice in particular, and any good of psychoanalysis will be caught up in the good of tracing out the effects of the Big Absence in a life with no claim that such activity is otherwise, in any obvious way, socially useful.

DIAGNOSES

The easiest way to grasp the depth of the denial of good in Lacanian psychoanalysis is to step away from the texture of the seminar on ethics and consider Lacan's diagnostic categories. There are three of these — psychosis, neurosis, and perversion — and, in developing the grounds for differential diagnoses, Lacan provides a distinctively psychoanalytic account of the modes of modern subjectivity. This account offers a decided advance over Freud, taking up Freud's suggestion that there is no clear distinction between pathological and normal modes of psychic functioning and presenting a general account of the modern subject. There are many ways to discuss Lacanian diagnostic categories. Bruce Fink provides an especially elegant summary of some of them:

Whereas the psychotic may suffer from what is experienced as an invasion of *jouissance* in his or her body, and the neurotic attempts above all to avoid *jouissance* (maintaining an unsatisfied or impossible desire), the pervert gets off on the very attempt to draw limits to his *jouissance*. Whereas in psychosis the Other does not exist (since its principal anchoring point, the Name-of-the-Father, is not instated), and in neurosis the Other exists only too ponderously (the neurotic wishing to get the Other off his or her back), in perversion the Other must be made to exist: the pervert has to stage the Other's existence by propping up the Other's desire or will with his own...Let us turn now to the mOther, the imaginary or real mother. In psychosis she is never barred by the Name-of-the-Father, and the psychotic never emerges from her as a separate subject; in neurosis she is effectively barred by the Name-of-the-Father, and the neurotic *does* emerge as a separate subject; in perversion the Other must be made to exist so that the mOther can be barred and the pervert can emerge as something other than an imaginary object of her desire.²⁰

These three categories are very nearly exhaustive (there is some suggestion in Lacan's later work that it might be possible for the neurotic to attain a different relation to her or his world by traversing the fantasy — but this relation would not appear to have the characteristics of therapeutic “adjustment” in any usual sense of that term). If we step back from these categories (leaving to one side the possible fourth, which will not in any case repair the breach that I have tried to mark as the site where the god of St. Thomas left the scene and no account of social goods stepped into its place), something extraordinary appears.

The place of normative authority (moral, linguistic, or otherwise) in Lacan's diagnostic categories is occupied by the Other. As Slavoj Žižek reminds us, “[t]he topic of the ‘other’ must be submitted to a kind of spectral analysis that renders visible its imaginary, symbolic, and real aspects...First there is the imaginary other — other people ‘like me,’ my fellow human beings with whom I am engaged in mirrorlike relationships of competition, mutual recognition, and so on. Then there is the symbolic ‘big Other’ — the ‘substance’ of our social existence, the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our coexistence. Finally there is the Other qua Real, the impossible Thing, the ‘inhuman partner,’ the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Order, is possible.”²¹ It is clear enough that the secular philosophical problem of grounding ethics will find no solution in imaginary otherness. Imaginary otherness is just the domesticated, coherent, charted otherness of other people. The point of the puzzle about ethical grounding isn't, say, to figure out how to get other people to do things by getting them to say that they will. The point is, rather, to explain why anyone *should* abide by his word when he doesn't want to (given that he only needs to *give* his word when he does not expect to want to do it). Similarly, one form of symbolic otherness is the otherness of the moral rules by which we live. Pointing out that there *are* some rules cannot answer the philosophical question of whether we *ought* to follow them. *Real* otherness would thus have to be the place within which we sought something like ethical grounding. Unhappily, real otherness, for Lacan, far from giving the imprimatur of goodness to the rules we live by, is monstrous. It marks a limit that cannot be taken up into moral theory. Accordingly, the diagnostic categories take shape as subjective configurations in relation to desire, which is, on this view, a relation to lack, and one aspect of that lack is lack of normative grounding.

What does hearing the call of normative authority become on this picture? It amounts to a brush up against the profound *inadequacy* of the normative prohibitions that shape the emerging subject. Consider Lacan's description of the *successful* easing of Oedipal struggles:

[T]he real father is elevated to the rank of Great Fucker — though not, believe me, in the face of the Eternal, which isn't even around to count the number of times. Yet doesn't this real and mythical father fade at the moment of the decline of the Oedipus complex into the one whom the child may easily have already discovered at the relatively advanced age of five years old, namely, the imaginary father, the father who has fucked the kid up.

Isn't that what the theoreticians of analytical experience say as they mumble away? And doesn't one find the point of difference there? Isn't it in connection with the experience of privation the small child undergoes — not because he is small but because he is human — in connection with what the child experiences as privation, that the mourning for the imaginary father is forged? — that is a mourning for someone who would really be someone. The perpetual reproach that is born at that moment, in a way that is more or less definitive and well-formed depending on the individual case, remains fundamental in the structure of the subject. It is this imaginary father and not the real one which is the basis of the providential image of God. And the function of the superego in the end, from its final point of view, is hatred for God, the reproach that God has handled things so badly.²²

The figures of these fathers are partly products of Lacan's reading of *Totem and Taboo*. The real father, godlike, has access to all women. His murder installs the symbolic, the Name-of-the-Father as the mark of a mythical social compact built around the incest taboo (the incest taboo here has the status of the primary prohibition at the root of social order). The real father is a nonexistent, monstrous Other. The symbolic father occupies the dead zone that turns on installing the No/Name-of-the-(dead)-Father in the child, and thereby writing the child as subject into the social order through prohibition. The imaginary father was the individual charged with performing the paternal function — installing the symbolic order through appropriate prohibitions, separating child from mother — and is, as mere person, inadequate to the task of legitimating this operation. He gets his way because he is bigger and stronger than the child and because the mother does not oppose him effectively. He is elevated, enshrined, worshipped, and hated through ego-ideals and superego orientation.

In this story, there is no such thing as a coincidence of voice of authority with authoritative source. There is no coincidence of prohibition and ethical ground. There is no social configuration that could underwrite its own rules. No mere mortal *could* fill the shoes of "someone who would really be someone." In short, there is no legitimate source of moral authority cut free from the love-and-fear modes of getting humans to do things. In Anscombe's useful sketch, this is tantamount to claiming that there is no source of moral authority. Notice that the philosophical puzzle about grounding morality cannot even be formulated coherently on this view — there is love, hate, and fear; there are commands and demands; there is privation and sacrifice; but there could not be a story about the force of the rules we live by cut free from the subjective ground of action. For my purposes, what is crucial about this picture is that middle-class ethical groundlessness lines up with the split in the subject instated at the entry point of the symbolic order. It is not just that there is privation; it is that the privation sets the subject in motion as a want-to-be in the face of groundless prohibitions. Subjects emerge from traumatic encounters that effect an apparent transmogrification of an economy of love and fear into an economy of duty. Because the transmogrification is a kind of parental conjuring trick, rooted in mere desire, it can never be complete or entirely successful. The suffering of analysands becomes a mark of the *groundlessness* of the very system that makes possible their emergence as subjects. There is

“a lack in the Other, a lack inherent in the Other’s very function as the treasure trove of signifiers. And this is so insofar as the Other is called upon (*ché voui*) to answer for the *value* of this treasure.”²³

Secular North Atlantic ethicists will doubtless protest that Lacan falls prey to a genetic fallacy. Even if it were true that some prohibitions were instated well before we reached the age of reason, and even if it were true that the voice of normative authority in most of our experience is nothing but the echo of a parental voice, this would in no way compromise normative authority. For example, while most middle-class people acquired toilet know-how well before they could think out the kind of good at issue in widespread reliance upon modern sewage disposal and treatment technologies, and while many of us will never wonder what it would be like if things were otherwise, the practice is *grounded* in considerations of collective health. We can offer a task-based account of the *point* of the practice even if no task-based rationale accompanied toilet training. We may be able to offer still more splendid accounts of why we *should* keep our word, tell the truth, refrain from hitting, and so on. Why shouldn’t analysts leave the couch and take a course in moral theory instead of mistaking ethical prohibitions for groundless demands issued from the mouths of dubious sources?

Lacan seems never to entertain such an objection. I do not think that it can be formulated from inside his account anyway, which suggests that the account may be question-begging. Perhaps it is. There are, however, at least three reasons for not leaving the interior of the theory to answer the philosophical objection. First, if acceptance of some prohibition or requirement is rooted in an appeal to individual reason (or even an appeal to the bland common sense in task-based accounts of ethics), then a single mechanism — acceptance — will explain how you get both a sound *and* an unsound principle into you. (This is a cartoon version of one of Hegel’s objections to the Kantian scheme — an objection that seems to me to underlie Lacan’s magnificently perverse reading of Kant.) While this point is unlikely to move an obsessive (who is devoted to self-containment), it will certainly weigh with the rest of us. That a prohibition makes sense to you is no guarantee that it has a solid foundation. Accordingly, the fact that a modern subject has a prohibition in him *should not* be enough to satisfy him that the prohibition is sound, even if he is beholden to the prohibition.

Second, insofar as philosophical accounts of normative authority are meant to explain the felt weight or urgency of the call of duty, Lacan offers a compelling alternate account, one discovered through the history of psychoanalytic experience. For example, the desperation that a properly middle-class person experiences when she needs to go and no restroom is available is *not* an effect of the communal point of having waste disposal technologies in order. If her training was entirely successful, she may have trouble going outside even if she is in the middle of nowhere and the water table will not be threatened by her relieving herself, just this once, behind the

bushes. From the point of view of justifying morality, things are on even shakier ground. Moral considerations famously leave people cold at times and may not provide the best account of some action even when the individual agent is hot for morality. Kant never tired of pointing out that it is impossible to tell, in one's own case or anyone else's, whether one does as one should from and for the sake of an ethical motive or from some other source (the dead weight of one's upbringing, for example). Since, as Lacan stresses repeatedly, a middle-class person's initial and defining access to ethical practice is in the hands of parents, both the substance and force of ethics enters into any individual person *through* another person. It is not as though ethics subsists somewhere else, waiting to come upon us. We are at the mercy of our caretakers. Even if the practices admit of some grander justification, the bit of the practice that informs my conduct, as it informs my conduct, may lack suitable justification. Consider the following: my father may have told me true things only by accident (he did not know they were true; he thought he was deceiving me; it was a cruel joke). I accepted what he said. It may be that others can see the grounds of the views, but the views are not mine because they are well founded. They are mine because my father told me so.

Moreover, third, a modern, secular, and democratic social order is *predicated* on the thought that determining what matters in life is an individual task, collectivized only to the extent that we have to get along with others who do not share our private sensibilities in these matters, and so must be minimally decent toward unsympathetic strangers. There is no uncontroversial, singular account of the good as such in secular ethics nowadays. This is, if you like, the *sine qua non* of liberal, democratic philosophical accounts of the rational grounding of ethical practice. Because secular, liberal philosophy throws the foundations of ethics back upon the shoulders of individuals, it is very much to the point to query the origins of basic ethical prohibitions and requirements in the individual soul.

On my reading of Lacan, some such question mark is at the heart of neurosis. The question neurosis poses to being is at one and the same time a question neurosis poses to purported sources of normative authority. If we are consistent in leaving it up to reasonably well-behaved people how they will answer that question, then their implicit insistence that it has not been adequately answered ought to weigh with us. Any hysteric worth her salt, at least, will suspect that producing moral theory is one technique among many devoted to placing thinly disguised demands on people, demands that are illegitimate, even if they are appealing and even if they won her allegiance long ago.

Small wonder that the hysteric finds it unbearable when voices of authority enjoy ordering people about. The hysteric goes right at the Other, insistently, disruptively demonstrating that the Other is lacking something. (Think of Freud's hysterics who seduced him into developing psychoanalysis as theory and practice only to demonstrate, repeatedly, that he missed their

point.) Aggressive, hysterical doubt tends to carry a libidinal strategy in which the hysteric simultaneously sets herself up as the object of another's desire, and withholds herself from the other. The ambivalence of the operation makes a kind of sense if the lack of being is, at root, a lack of legitimate authority. Having a primary orientation toward debunking any claim to normative authority (epistemic or ethical) only works if something *else* will hold water. If nothing holds water, and if the only thing that can hold *you* is something that would hold water, you live from a relentlessly social stance of unanswerable challenge. You maneuver the lack out into the open. Meanwhile, your own position as a want-to-be cannot very well rest content in the newly exposed hole in the Other (now demoted to mere other). You succeed in forcing recognition of lack (often by presenting yourself as what might fill it) just in case there is no point in actually serving as the object that might fill it. Overlapping holes do not make a whole.

While the hysteric is willing to fade as a subject, to position herself as the cause of the Other's desire, she has a certain aversion to *jouissance*. Hysteria involves a complex parody of being and withholding an object on which the Other might get off. As Colette Soler puts it, "[t]he hysteric is someone who is always absent at the right moment, who always fails the partner."²⁴ But if the lacks in question line up along the normative vector that I have been describing, we could as easily say that the hysteric is someone who knows that there is no proper Partner, who acknowledges both her irreducible dependence on a partner and the fact that any partner will fail her, and who will be tempted always to head off that disappointment at the pass, all the while demonstrating the failure by exposing the lack in the Other.

The obsessive, by contrast, is content to get off on objects, but flees any hint that his objects are such because of their relation to the Other. Like his hysteric counterpart, he senses the lack in the Other. Unlike the hysteric, however, who takes some pleasure in enacting her various dramas of dependence (for example, in insisting that the failure is always on the side of the partner), he finds his dependence on the (inadequate) Other unbearable. If hysteria is discursive, social, and by its nature addressed to others, obsession is a kind of guilt-ridden, authority-saturated, rebellious monologue. The obsessive staves off the Other in order to avoid contact with the Other's desire/lack (again, registered psychically as a demand). Because obsession is isolating, propped up by an ill-concealed illusion of transparent self-adequacy, it wears its deadness on its sleeve. The hysteric is split, and from her lack turns to the Other; the obsessive, writes Soler, "manages to suture his subjective division."²⁵

You can sense an obsessive cast to Descartes' Meditator in the fact that the Meditator thinks he can doubt the existence of any human person — his own included — under his own steam, but that he needs to postulate a malicious demon to make room to doubt the laws of arithmetic, the laws governing symbolic order. Notice that the Meditator is able to dissolve his demon postulate only by arguing that nothing *that* powerful could lack anything. Since it would *have* to lack

something if it wanted to deceive him, the monstrous postulate *must* be false. Unlike the hysteric, the obsessive props up the Other by fleeing the possibility of its lack.

Meanwhile, the phobic (the third variety of neurotic) attempts to prop up the Other by making up some of the difference in an imperfectly performed paternal function (a lack of appropriate prohibition on the part of the father) by developing a rich symbolic system that turns on indeterminate fear of possible agents of the Law.²⁶ The pervert, for his part, goes through his whole maturity attempting to seduce the world into providing a law that he can respect. The quest is hopeless, of course, and the psychotic is lost in the whirl of invasion by imaginary otherness, having already foreclosed the question of legitimate authority.

Because psychosis, neurosis, and perversion are the *only* modes of modern subjectivity on this view, there is no way out of the joint (and mutually reinforcing) crises in being and authority in the Lacanian accounts of subjectivity. It is not the case that those of us who get by without ever thematizing the problem *have* something that analysands lack. Rather, we manage to hold at bay chronic absences at the center of things. Asking whether we might be better off for this is like asking whether the boy in the story would be better off pretending that the emperor was, in fact, wearing new clothes.

BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

It is certainly true that all of the figures of modern subjectivity in Lacan suffer from a lack in being. I am urging that this lack in being involves, crucially, a crisis in authority.

The psychic strategies for coping with the crisis — sublimation, say, or the development of a strong superego that manages not to run amok²⁷ — involve casting one's lot with cultural constraints and developing effective screens against the blankness at the heart of the disconnected normative systems one inhabits serially and lives by more or less. In this sense, insisting that psychoanalytic practice serve the ends of heteronormalization does an injustice to both the theoretical insight gathered from the practice and the acuity of the mark of illegitimacy taken up in the psychic system of anyone in serious enough trouble to seek psychoanalysis. While analysands often exaggerate their difficulties, theirs is not mere psychic malingering. On Lacan's readings, analysands are in the grip of a crisis — a crisis in normative authority — that most of us are able to dodge most of the time. I take it that Lacan charts this crisis in a way that gives theoretical punch to Nietzsche's cry that god is dead by pointing to the ways in which psychoanalysis rests on a denial of the good as such.

The denial is no mere Freudian quirk inherited by generations of analysts from their atheistic founding father. Lacan reads the denial as itself a conclusion founded on the experience of psychoanalytic practice. The denial of good is a positive *gain* to psychoanalytic theory from

psychoanalytic practice. Rat Man collapses when the Captain takes pleasure in inflicting pain, when the surrogate Other betrays an all-too-human desire. Little Hans' horse will bite or fall, injure or be injured, in incompatible dramas of power and impotence, and Hans makes up for the absence of effective paternal functioning by resolutely, fearfully spinning out a symbolic system that will not let the law go missing entirely. Anna O. swells up with Breuer's "child" at exactly the moment that Freud and Breuer are busily congratulating themselves on the effectiveness of their "talking cure" (as she names it for them). Schreber is at the mercy of a sex-crazed and abusive god. The classic analysands (whether known through the work of analysts in session or known only from their textual remains) — those figures from whom we learn the theory — teach Lacan that they bear witness in their suffering to an ongoing and acute crisis in normative authority. Their efforts to get the Other off their backs, or to bring the Other on board somehow, testify to the depth and severity of the crisis.

I realize that it is hard even to raise a serious question about normative authority these days. What makes it difficult to begin to address the psychoanalytic denial of good as such is that the authority question has a tendency to moot itself before it ever raises its head. In psychoanalytic work, the question moots itself whenever theorists are more inclined to diagnose the questioner than to answer the question. (On my reading, Lacan *does* diagnose the questioner rather than answering the question, but this is because he relies on the history of psychoanalytic findings to argue that the question has no answer, and that this *is* crucial to our topic.) More generally, most sufficiently cosmopolitan secular intellectuals either do not think that there could be any grounding for legitimate moral authority, or else assume that the basis for ethics involves the conditions conducive to non-accidentally sound human social life. Since what *counts* as non-accidentally sound human social life varies with the goods made possible and available by the relevant social formations, the latter approach looks to ground ethics in something like local color. The classic analysands could not rest content with this, and Lacan is faithful to them.

The first principle of an ethics of Lacanian psychoanalytic practice becomes a principle of fidelity to the coinciding absences in being and authority that shape subjectivity from its emergence and that are rendered acute in the suffering of analysands. Accordingly, refusing to see psychoanalysis as directed at promoting intrapsychic harmony amounts to refusing to downplay the impact of the crises in question. You can't *cure* lack of being. You can't cure lack of legitimating normative authority either. Analysands are not *wrong* to flee the brush against abyssal contact with such absences. The question is rather one about how to live with them, and I take it that Lacan's otherwise puzzling remarks about beauty, sublimity, comedy, and tragedy point to the precarious business of doing so. The relay from desire to jouissance to fantasy in the various descriptions of technique represent, on this reading, three strategies for remaining faithful to the problem in the service of non-destructive human vitality played out from some position other than demand, insistent subordination to a sense of lack, or moral high ground.

If I understand the possibility of a neurotic traversing the fantasy, going beyond neurosis, its trajectory will break the neurotic's submission to the Other, permitting complete separation. Separation could not answer the normative question, of course. Nevertheless, it may well ease the acuity of the crises of being and normative authority. Separation might, for example, put a halt to implicitly directing the normative and ontological questions to other individuals, thereby allowing the analysand the space needed to turn away from pointless efforts to conjure something that could repair the damage from the stuff of mere sociality. Turning away from the inherent, structural imperfections of an economy of desire toward satisfactions associated with the drives (which comprise a capacity to enjoy enjoyment) would certainly count as a kind of personal gain for a neurotic analysand. Whether and how it might count as a gain for ethics is another question, one Lacan leaves unanswered: "This is the beyond of analysis, and has never been approached."²⁸



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1. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 159.
2. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 302.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 303.
5. Ibid.
6. See *ibid.*, 303, 304, 305, 313-15, 318-19, 321, and 324.
7. Now, we might object that entering analysis is more like taking out an unusually expensive health club membership than it is like getting a face-lift. However, Lacan's remarks cast doubt on whether heteronormalization counts as "health," which is why it seems more apt to liken heteronormalization to the results of liposuction than to aerobic fitness.
8. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 312.
9. Ibid., 310.
10. Ibid., 315.
11. Lacan, *Écrits*, 158.
12. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 96.
13. As Bradley puts it, "the thrust of Aquinas's authentic doctrine...leads to an *aporia*: any moral philosophy inspired by Aquinas cannot legitimately return to a quasi-Aristotelian form of eudaimonism; but neither can it, as [secular] philosophy, go forward to a theological affirmation of man's ultimate supernatural end." Denis J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), xiii.
14. One way of understanding Lacan's insistence that psychoanalysis does not aim at normalization, for example, is as an insistence that normalization is not, as such, good. The point (that is, *the good*) of psychoanalysis is *not* that it aims at such an end. Rather, adaptation to one's life circumstances might be one side effect of psychoanalysis.
15. I use "wanting" to mark a distinction between contemporary North Atlantic mainstream philosophical accounts of the relevant aspect of motive and "desire" in a properly Lacanian sense of the term. The philosophers will take it that wanting relates us to objects, understood in any of several senses. The closest fit to this usage in Lacan comes through discussion of demand, not desire, and even there the overlap is not precise since demand is never fully articulated.
16. G. E. M. Anscombe, "On Promising and its Justice, and Whether it Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*," in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, vol. 3, *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 18.
17. Ibid., 19.
18. The most common philosophical technique for grounding ethics has nothing to do with the task-based approach; rather, it lies in grounding ethical practice in an appeal to individual rationality. The founding father of this approach is, of course, Kant, although there are very many neo-Kantian and some neo-Hobbesian approaches as well. The neo-Hobbesian approaches will fail only in the case of an individual who cares nothing for her own long-term well being and wants very much to injure as many people as she can while she's able, or who is boundlessly altruistic. In the former case, positive anti-sociality will defeat any appeal to it being in her interest to behave decently with her fellows. She will prefer to prey upon them, should the heavens fall. In the latter, she is already so willingly self-sacrificial in her dealings with her fellows that there is no reason for *them* to refrain from preying upon her. The neo-Kantian approaches depend upon such matters as our susceptibility to the call of others and to the insistence that we will to be only as happy as we are good. This is all well and good in a reasonably sound social formation with

reasonably sociable participants. Nevertheless: (1) even Kant thought that postulation in a divine order of justice was needed to render it reasonable to suppose that a virtuous and dutiful life would bring some happiness to the good man (a good soul is no insurance against natural or man-made catastrophe, after all) because (2) no individual can bring it about by her own actions that she inhabits a social world sufficiently well-ordered to provide a fitting context for the neo-Kantian appeal to reason. Since, moreover, the Lacanian analysand is acutely aware that no individual person could conjure up a sufficient guarantee of the soundness of a normative system, the appeal to individual reason ought not move her. What no one can do alone cannot be done through the mere aggregation of loci of individual practical reason, and certainly cannot be accomplished by stripping the agent down to a bare point of rationality, without an appeal to her own needs and wants or to the needs and wants of beings like her. The Lacanian analysand is not just involved in a Hegelian drama of intersubjective dependence. She is involved in a relay of intersubjective dependence in a system of relations that revolve around illegitimacy and lack.

19. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 300.
20. Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 193-94.
21. Slavoj Žižek, "The Real of Sexual Difference," in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 70.
22. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 307-308.
23. Lacan, *Écrits*, 303; emphasis added.
24. Colette Soler, "Hysteria and Obsession," in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 269.
25. *Ibid.*, 274.
26. See Lacan's reading of Little Hans in *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre IV: La relation d'objet, 1956-1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 212, 230, 245-46, and 284.
27. It is unclear, incidentally, how there could be a non-accidental way of keeping a strong superego tucked in enough to make life possible. On Lacan's reading, the Freudian superego — the mode of psychic disruptiveness that insists in the name of some misplaced law — will not let up. "According to Lacan," writes Žižek, "this 'feeling of guilt' [associated with superego] is not a self-deception to be dispelled in the course of the psychoanalytic cure — we really *are* guilty: superego draws the energy of the pressure it exerts upon the subject from the fact that the subject was not faithful to his desire, that he gave it up. Our sacrificing to the superego, our paying tribute to it, only corroborates our guilt. For that reason our debt to the superego is unredeemable: the more we pay it off, the more we owe" (*The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* [London: Verso, 1994], 67-68). Through an extraordinary misreading of Kant (a performed, elaborate misunderstanding of Kantian moral law worthy of a theorist of the superego, perhaps), Lacan at once analogizes the operations of the Kantian motive of duty to the operations of the Freudian superego *and* denies that the Freudian superego is a capacity for ethical or moral agency. Instead, the superego is a residue of Oedipal compromise, an insistent, unreconciled disruptiveness that catches and perpetuates the tone of voice that lays down the law and enjoys the business of prohibition — wildly, gleefully promulgating law, often in retrospect, for the sake of the guilt. Accordingly, superego operation is not particularly beholden to the limits and permissions of customary ethics. Its alibis ("You have to do this for your own good," "You owe this to the group," "This hurts you more than it hurts him," for example) are just that — alibis. The Kantian categorical imperative becomes: Enjoy. The disaster is that there are no clear and principled limits on this enjoyment.
28. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 273.