

On not getting what you want¹

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The conference title “How to Act” clearly allows one to evoke a general ethical question which Socrates long ago formulated as “How should one live?” Though this is not what I will focus on I think it is worth recognising that this question is, arguably, more important than ever. For example, today we can no longer share in the illusion of previous generations that somehow the progress of science and “reason” will invariably increase human well-being. Rather we now know that “scientific progress” simply does not have anything to do with what we call the “human good” (though clearly we can and do benefit from it!) - for indeed - in many cases such “progress” has created situations that threaten our existence in new and more devastating ways (e.g. climate change). A second dimension to this question is also pressing, and indeed in common view given the world economic crises, namely, how do we relate to and treat each other as subjects. Here we have the spectre of increasingly narcissistic values becoming dominant in society combined with individualism, hedonism and a “rights based” culture that does not take one’s effect on the other into account, rather it supports the market, in other words capital and its accumulation. Clearly this should give us cause for concern. Perhaps also we should take time to ponder – indeed be shocked by – how, what is denied here is precisely something of our fundamental and primary inter-subjectivity, our necessary connectedness. As we know this inter-subjectivity emerges first as a dependence on the Other/(m)Other, without which, the infant cannot survive nor find its way into a meaningful world. Psychoanalysis has I believe plenty to say about such “big questions”, alongside other voices, though in terms of clinical praxis the emphasis on the ethical is both different and quite specific.

The first point to make here and it is one Lacan often emphasised, is that psychoanalysis is not, and does not embody an ethic of care, in the sense of making someone feel better, of providing comfort, and even - eventually - the promise of contentment. Rather, and to put it in a nutshell, it concerns the

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subject's relation to his or her unconscious desire, which does not mean of course that there are no "therapeutic benefits" to be gained via analysis. Indeed the latter often emerge relatively early on in the work though this can also take time. There is then, symptomatic relief, related for example, to the subject's encounter with the words that have in a past time, and in a formative way, hurt him or her. In other words the subject discovers a root cause to their suffering in how they were spoken to or not spoken to, praised or blamed, represented "in themselves" or represented for another, and, it makes a difference. Here the analyst's desire, functioning as enigma and thus as bearer of transference, rather than as a desire *for* something, as well as his or her act, are central. For example, the analyst must find a way to cut into the speech of the subject and create thus a subjective impact; it is not, as it is sometimes represented, a case of holding a passive position. Indeed Lacan put it well when he stated: "the analyst may not register himself other than through the fruit of his act".

Going further we can say that what psychoanalysis uniquely privileges is something that falls outside the traditional field of ethics in the sense of, for example, a Kantian ethic based on reason or Bentham's utilitarianism based on maximising the overall yield of pleasure or well-being. This difference is related to the fact that, firstly, the psychoanalytic focus is on the individual subject in their absolute particularity and therefore one is here not concerned with the good in general, with the good for everyone, which is the traditional focus in the field of ethics. Secondly, psychoanalysis postulates as primary the pleasure/unpleasure principle, something on which the reality principle is built, though more importantly something that points to a beyond of itself, in other words, something precisely not reducible to pleasure. In Seminar VII Lacan referred to this in terms of "impossible jouissance" later re-formulating this in terms of a "Jouissance one" that is "of- the-body", a contingency, if you like, of evolution, which, as Miller says, implies it is essentially "idiotic and solitary" (p. 45). Indeed it is, arguably, this fact, huge in its implications and seen as essential to the human condition, that shadows all other psychoanalytic concepts from repression to defence mechanisms, from symptom to anxiety and from castration to incurable desire. It is in this way that we can say that for

psychoanalysis jouissance, or in Freud's terminology "drive satisfaction", is "beyond good and evil" - precisely in so far as it represents and is, simply what the human subject has to deal with, to manage with if you like, and moreover go on dealing with, and, one can add, before, during and after an analysis.

So one might ask why bother with analysis in the first place? Well of course one shouldn't if there is not some sense of suffering in one's life, some question in relation to what one wants or desires. What happens next? Well one speaks and this speaking is difficult, annoying, exciting, shaming, teasing, embarrassing, exposing etc. and usually it runs like a river, sometimes smooth enough, sometimes full with dangerous currents. Here as analysand, you find yourself not in the field of a dialogue with the comfort of turn taking, but in the process of creating a personal monologue, a "wall of words", while asking yourself what it all means, what in me insists on these signifiers and on this narrative (no doubt with its repetitions). You notice that the analyst can seemingly change from time to time, incarnating something that is experienced as a "too much" – in the sense of too distant, too intrusive, too cold, too seductive etc. which of course you will come to refer to as transference at some point. Nevertheless what is driving you mad all the while is that you do not know what you feel you need to know, though you indeed ask yourself important questions – am I too vain, too passive, too giving, too withholding, too weak, too strong etc. Unexpected things happen from time to time, you say or do something you never intended to and it puts your desire and the nature of what you enjoy in question, and then there is the unpredictability of dreams. As Miller has put it, eventually what it comes down to, what it's all about, concerns the myriad of ways in which the subject hangs onto, defends, rationalises, conceals, even pleads for his or her "jouissance programme", his or her way of enjoying . Once again to distil or condense things to this point takes time – years – and, for example it has certain "unbearable" quality for the analysand. However, it is here that the analyst must finally find a way for the subject to elaborate on this jouissance and in so doing to give to the subject's desire its value and its importance. It's the point at which the fundamental fantasy is in play and where, as analysand, the subject may finally come to say, with a note of certainty, "I am that" or "that is me, my structure, my mode of

being". To that the subject must be able to add one further thing, namely; "I keep going in the face of "that" - and without undue dependence on the Other".

In reference to the title of this paper I hope it is clear that having reached this point, you have not finally got something, acquired some precious good, but have rather found a way dealing with - what Lacan described as a "knowing how to do with" - the already there. Another way of putting this is to say that you have come face to face with a specifically analytic question, namely: "Do you want what you desire?" Here one is in the field of an ethics particular to psychoanalysis - do you affirm what you desire or do you seek to take your distance from it? It is in the testimonies of the Pass that we can hear how uniquely and singularly this question has been answered by those courageous enough to push themselves to this limit point.

To say a little more about this let me summarise a few points from an article by Graciela Brodsky published in the latest edition of *The International Lacanian Journal of Psychoanalysis*. In this article, entitled "Contemporary Utopias", Brodsky begins by noting how, if happiness is what we seek, then there is no agreement on what it is. Indeed as Jonathan Lear, the American philosopher and psychoanalyst, in his 1999 "Tanner Lecture on Human Values" - on the topic of "Happiness" - points out, this concept, introduced to us by Aristotle as *the* ultimate good, is precisely an enigmatic signifier. In other words he argues that this idea of the ultimate good *deploys* in its very use a power to seduce us, based on the fiction that happiness is that one concept against which ones entire life not only could, but should be evaluated against. As Lear points out what is elided here is the fact that, despite Aristotle's attempts, we as mere humans always come up short and can never reach such an "ultimate good" (e.g. Aristotle's life of contemplation is only truly available to the Gods). This thus points us back to a distinctly analytic question, namely: how should we understand this inevitable and all too human encounter with, not happiness, but discontent?

Despite such conundrums Brodsky notes how in contemporary culture the pursuit of happiness is in fact ever more on the agenda. Here for example we can note how the UK government, in a move that to many appears cynical, now proposes to measure the happiness of its citizens as a complimentary measure to the way GDP measures the economic output of a country – one more effort poor citizen!. More commonly within western culture one finds various utopias on offer, for example, various versions of a “scientific utopia” whereby happiness, if not quite with us now, is just around the corner, available once we can finally eliminate disease and modify the gene pool. Even more dominant is the so-called “hygienist utopia” whereby happiness is available to those who do the right thing; eat well, drink less, exercise, be active and of course avoid those thinking errors that we are so prone to – or indeed if you slip-up, CBT can quickly sort you out. The deep paradox in all of this is, of course, that by 2020 the World Health Organisation has estimated that depression will occupy second place among the illnesses that afflict humanity just below cardiovascular diseases. One must wonder here how the absence of happiness has become such a major disease, indeed on these figures an epidemic, which is not to downplay the suffering the individual subject encounters in depression.

Turning now to Lacan we can see how from his earliest period (*The Direction of the Cure ...*) he was keen to criticise such utopias and indeed they were to be found within psychoanalysis as well as in the wider culture. Thus the notion, for example, that a strong or mature ego, based on nothing less than identification with the analyst, was a route to fulfilment in life, was ridiculed by Lacan and seen as a false end to an analysis. Lacan put this point in various ways, one being that the end of analysis should rather confront one with the “human condition”, meaning a point of absolute uneasiness, and moreover, a point from where one cannot expect to be rescued by the Other.

However Lacan also famously said that happiness is everywhere, that the subject is always happy, and as Brodsky points out we must understand this in a particular way and indexed via the word “Bonheur” in French to the notion of

“good fortune” or “good luck”. Here Lacan loses the moral overtones attached to the concept of happiness as something one *ought to* aim for, it is nothing to do with the question of fulfilment, rather the subject is for Lacan “happy-go-lucky”. What does this mean? It means we can be lucky, as in lucky at cards or lucky in love or be fortunate in having made a good choice – what we cannot do is get away from the randomness of chance. In terms of the psychoanalytic encounter we can note how, yes, one can become freer from the burden of one’s ideals and as mentioned earlier, come to know if one wants what one desires, but this is not happiness even if there may be a satisfaction to be had in reaching this point. In the end what psychoanalysis offers is something pretty simple if at the same time quite distinctive. Like other fictions, namely the hoped for utopias already mentioned, it offers us a means to address the real, or in Freudian terms, the drive, representing what is excessive in human life. It does not however do this on the basis of offering a utopia, nor indeed, as the later Lacan discovered, on the basis of promoting the “law of the father” which as Brodsky points out is “in the end nothing but the traditional way to control bodies and their jouissance” (p. 218). Rather it resources the subject in a particular way, namely; by putting him or her in touch with this real of the unconscious about which one may then be able to speak well of – the tone being, of course, ironic.