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Prelude 2

A Practice Without Value

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When Lacan invites us to think about the ethics of psychoanalysis in Seminar VII, he begins with nothing less than a meticulous examination of ethics as such—not to refute its concepts, but to explore their implications and consequences. From the outset, he makes it clear that, to conceive an ethics proper to our practice, we must follow a path as paradoxical as it is radical. And the very terms encountered along this path are equivocal—just as is Lacan’s much later assertion: “A practice without value, that is what we must institute.”¹ It is no accident that this conclusion emerges through the comparison of our way of speaking—the saying of interpretation—with the structure of the *witz*.

One of the first equivocal terms Lacan highlights is an ancient one: the very distinction already raised by Aristotle, ἔθος [éthos] – ἦθος [êthos].² An ethics is not an ethos—a habit. Or, as a contemporary dictionary would put it: the spirit of a culture as expressed through attitudes, behaviors, aspirations, customs and habits. This distinction invites us to reflect on what it means today to “join the subjectivity of our time,” with regard to the ethics of the analyst. The ethics of psychoanalysis demands that we set aside all notions of habit, good or bad,³ in order to study habit itself—if, under that term, we seek the real of symptom and repetition.

¹ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIX, L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue s’aile à mourre*, unpublished, lesson of 19 April 1977.

² J. Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (trans. Dennis Porter). New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992, lesson of 18 November 1959, p. 10.

³ J. Lacan, *Op. cit*

Here lies the radicality of the path before us: to seek the origin of every ethics, to search for its cause. The first cause of any ethics is the subjective cause: *the Thing*, or “that which, in the real, suffers from the signifier,”⁴ of which the subject is the effect. From the very entry into language, through the implacable and paradoxical effects of demand, this cause asserts itself. Thus, *a response*—and not *the answer*—is the true domain of ethics. Even if forced, the choice marks a stance in relation to lack: the lack of the unrepresentable of *jouissance* and of being. This is the foundation of each subject’s ethics—a response that slips away in fantasy and delusion. To what extent can the ethics of psychoanalysis—rather than an axiology—intervene in these fundamental responses, if fantasy itself functions as the subject’s axiom? Could these singular ethics also be the “others” evoked in our theme? It is a question to ponder. Yet, subjective ethics cannot be reduced to an “unfathomable decision of being,” nor derived directly from clinical structure, without making us fall back into the segregative passion of diagnosis.

An ethics reduced to silence, as Sandra Berta emphasizes, is the site of that response which each analysis reinvents. But for the analyst, merely remaining silent is not enough—let us not forget that the superego thrives as a speechless discourse.⁵ The operative silence in question—the silence that interrogates, that cuts—empties the space of values as ends, so as to point toward cause: castration. In this light, we might recall Lacan’s later remark: “Ethics is of the order of the gesture.” A gesture must be *made*, a mark of signifying recognition. And Lacan adds: “One makes a gesture and then behaves like everyone else—that is, like the rest of the scoundrels.”⁶ A sharp reminder that ethics is neither an ideal of conduct nor the consistency of a moral stance that would make the analyst into a *Someone*.

To institute a practice without value is a challenge, for practice can so easily deviate. It is not simply a matter of avoiding therapeutic re-education. It is also a matter of resisting the use of psychoanalytic theory to promote ideals—thereby reintroducing the very axiology that psychoanalytic ethics repudiates.

The idea that “the ethics of psychoanalysis is the praxis of its theory”⁷ can itself encourage such deviation. Sexuality seems especially susceptible to it—who has not heard of a supposed promotion of the so-called feminine position over the hysteric’s? As for the analyst—the one who “pays with his most intimate judgment”⁸—can he detach from that judgment in his ideals of... sexuality? Perhaps, if paying does not mean only giving, but also consenting to loss. Positioning oneself as an owner, one of the wealthy with psychoanalytic theory risks coupling with misuse of the analyst’s position in the cure—one for which it is, indeed, the loss of the place of a saying that matters most.⁹

And if the “praxis of theory” instead means the continual reinvention of theory behind our act, how can we refrain from imposing theoretical concepts in our interventions, which would make us deaf to the subject? Freud himself, as a pioneer, made this mistake early on—but his practice had not yet become doctrine.

“What should I do?” The analyst’s duty is a duty of interpretation. And this is also our good fortune, for interpretation does not belong solely to the analyst—the analysand’s speech also sustains this shared discourse, dependent on both parties. A telling example: as I was reflecting on the use of theory, during a session, I felt I was about to say too much—a sign that I was already thinking. An

⁴ J. Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, lesson of 27 January 1960, p. 118.

⁵ J. Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (trans. Russell Grigg). New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007, lesson of 26 November 1969, p. 13.

⁶ J. Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XX Encore* (trans. Bruce Fink). New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998, session of 10 April 1973, p. 101

⁷ J. Lacan, Act of Foundation, republished in *Annuaire 1977 de l’École Freudienne de Paris*, p.80

⁸ J. Lacan, *The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power, Écrits* (trans. Bruce Fink). New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 490-491 (French p. 587).

⁹ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIX, L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue s’aile à mourre*, intervention by Alain Didier-Weil, unpublished, lesson of 8 February 1977.

analysis and spoke of her compulsion to make things go badly, of the comfort and discomfort in her relationship. “So it’s comfortable when things are bad?” I said—reducing her words to a typically hysterical position. She immediately corrected: “It’s uncomfortable when things are good!”—thus pronouncing it herself, what castration meant for her.

I return to Lacan’s proposition. As psychoanalysts, we have “nothing beautiful to say,” since beauty could serve as a way of exalting contradictions, in order to mediate them. Any other value, conceived as an end, would also serve that function, of aiming toward wholeness. Our way of “resolving contradictions” lies in the *economy*—as in the careful management of available resources—of the signifier, in the flash of its equivocations. To find another resonance, of that which suffers from the signifier. It is precisely with regard to *economy*—which also connotes the production of goods—that Lacan concludes, faithful to his humor: that we must institute “a practice without value.” Which is so precious.