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Marcus Coelen & Jamieson Webster

12 Questions about Psychoanalysis: Answers by Marcus Coelen and Jamieson Webster

I – As a philosopher, what is it that interests you in psychoanalysis, and why?

We can answer this question probably because we both hesitate answering it, not knowing whether it is addressed to us. Not that two “half”-philosophers would make one complete one, or that two hesitations would lead to a decision, but it helps in keeping something suspended. It is a specific kind of *suspension* that is of interest for philosophy but also for the philosopher. We can only answer together because we could not answer individually “as philosophers” – and this possibility of suspension – suspended answer, suspended address, voice suspended between one and two – is what interests us in psychoanalysis. For psychoanalysis suspension cannot amount to an indefinite non-act, to the failure of decision. If the suspension of movement between two times, two voices, amounted to this ‘nothing’ even as it described the nothing in exquisite detail, the best poetic language, psychoanalysis would be mere philosophy, pure abstraction. So, between the two of us, and between philosophy and psychoanalysis, something else has to take place. This was something Badiou took from Lacan and named the “event”; one thing to name it, define its structure philosophically, another to create the conditions for it, working with a patient’s body, desire and speech, as a psychoanalyst. And as an analyst one has to know how to lay one’s hands on it, to put one’s ‘soul’—if you will allow us this vulgar expression—on the line there, with and for another.

II – What is the most significant contribution that philosophy has made to psychoanalysis, at least from your personal approach to psychoanalysis?

We would say the theories of the subject. Something has been absolutely critical here for psychoanalysis and marks a certain turn in post-Freudian thinking. This is of course absolutely crucial to the work of Jacques Lacan, but in order to not be sectarian about it, or banal, this is also true for interpersonal psychoanalysis, relational psychoanalysis, Winnicott (who was no fool), existential modes of thinking psychoanalytically, all of which meant driving the psychoanalysts out of any comfortable home in psychology which is not about the subject. This is a lesson many of us are still catching up to; and it makes for a very different understanding of Freud than what you find in the watered down versions of analysis that appeared in the 1950s in the United States and a lot of what passes for “dynamic” psychology. Is there anything less dynamic than psychoanalysis without the philosophical theory of the subject? Once we’ve got that down, maybe, just maybe, we can say something interesting about an object, or objects. The verdict is out. All bets are in.

III – Apart from Freud, what other psychoanalyst, according to you, has contributed significantly to a philosophical reflection on psychoanalysis?

Jose Rizal. He wrote a book that is very difficult to translate but means something like “Don’t touch me!” He was from the Philippines, almost no one has read this book of course; but he died courageously defending his political and ethical position that is present in all his work, and of course is considered to have flamed the fires of the Philippine’s quest for independence. One has to hear in this title both the neurotic battle-cry of the patient and the peculiar stance of abstinence that the psychoanalyst abides by. Freud of course began by touching his patients, pressing on their foreheads, examining them medically, hypnotizing them—and the hysterics cried out “Don’t touch me!” which on the one hand is the neurotic repression of sexuality and desire, and on the other hand the very condition of speech, of Freud having to sit back and listen to what these women were saying and stop touching them. “Noli Me Tangere”, was also used by ophthalmologists as a name for cancer of the eyelids. It’s important that the cancer is of the eyelids, not the eyes, what closes this orifice, or what allows us to turn away from reality, this strange envelope. Rizal, a doctor and writer like Freud, prophetically plays on the border between physical and mental suffering, the problem with the visual field in a society of vain spectacle and violent surveillance, and in inability to locate the ‘cancer’ in a civilization, especially in post-colonial ones. The trauma has traumatized our eyelids. Where is the trauma? Where is the discontent? Where is agency? As now many would say about the 21st century, the problem isn’t trauma per se, it’s that trauma is now everywhere and nowhere—it cannot be located, cannot be given its locale or decisive day. It is a cancer of the eyelids.

IV – If you have undertaken psychoanalytic training, or if you are a practicing psychoanalyst, might we ask how you view what transpires in a clinical analytic practice? In other words, *what is it that really happens during a cure*?

Do you want to take the repetition-in-transference route? Do you want to take the-elaboration-of-the-masturbation phantasy route? Do you want to take the not-for-everybody, destroy-your-life route? Do you want to take the deconstruction-of-your-family-and-personal-myths route? Do you want to take the speaking route? Which one do you want to take? All of them. And another one.

This is the really the most difficult thing to say, and perhaps we might want to follow Lacan’s late thesis that appears in his impossible-to-read text “L’Etourdit”: “That one might be saying remains forgotten behind what is said in what is heard.” If we told you what we heard, or what patients said, or even said something about what we heard, as what happened, as what brought about termination, it would somehow be a betrayal of precisely what psychoanalysis does, even of psychoanalysis itself. We think this is why the question of cure creates platitudes that while not wrong (common human unhappiness, working through, dis-being, fall, reconciliation with one’s desire, integration, mourning, etc.) sound like post-cards or internet memes. So we should be very careful here. It’s perhaps also important to note that in Freud’s one late paper on termination, he basically said its impossible—the unconscious, resistance, its never-ending—and yet, not-terminating was an equally impossible figure. Add all the mourning you would like to this. Following Derrida, it is not clear which is the greatest violence, moving on, or never moving on.

V – Nietzsche and Freud. Freud admitted having never really read Nietzsche, because he feared discovering that Nietzsche had already said everything essential that Freud himself thought he had said. How do you view the relation between Freud and Nietzsche?

That relation has become a complicated and mostly unexploited love triangle with Lou Andreas-Salomé. The answer must therefore be found in Freud’s contributions to the psychology and psychoanalysis of love.

VI – From its start, psychoanalysis—including Fenichel, Bernfeld, Reich, Fromm, and others—developed a Freudian-Marxist current among both analysts and philosophers, which still flourishes today. How should we view today the relation amongst Marx, Marxists, and psychoanalysis?

Three answers: We don't think it's flourishing except for a very small group of unknown but smart and crazy people from Cleveland who created their own society. Second, if the question refers to the Badiouian and Post-Badiouian current, its authors saturated the market with publications and ended up disappointing many. Third, psychoanalysis doesn't have anything to say about politics. This last statement may sound cruel, but we don't consciously intend it that way. We hand the field over to the political theorists and politicians. Psychoanalysis is a specific praxis of speech, desire, suffering, sometimes with patients, the political implications of which are for those who wish to practice politics (wish often we also do, but in this role we don't feel interpellated here.)

VII – Do you believe that psychoanalysis can be a useful tool for interpreting political and social phenomena and customs today? And especially for interpreting gender issues and sexual orientations debate? And if yes, in what way?

Freud was interested not in civilization but in its discontent. We would follow this orientation. Not phenomena but disturbance. The peculiarity of the sexual. That there might be a lot to say here, even a kind of 'tool' one could use or manipulate or put into action is certainly true, but not necessarily so. What would it mean to create a tool of interpretation out of the fact of disturbing sexuality and the peculiarities of an erogenous body? Isn't interpretation outside of the consulting room, i.e. the creation of discourse, precisely a defense against sexual disturbance? As Serge Leclair commented on many occasions, the discourse of psychoanalysis is strictly impossible, and yet, as analysts, still, we must try to say something.

VIII – A part of philosophical phenomenology has dealt with psychoanalysis. Even those in Heidegger's and hermeneutics' wake have often theorized on psychoanalysis. How do you feel about this phenomenological "appropriation" of psychoanalysis?

We feel very bad about it.

IX – Starting with Popper, over the past decades a trend of radical criticism of psychoanalysis has developed that denies its scientific plausibility, comparing it to a mythology, and contesting any validity of the analytic practice. Where do you fit in this debate, if you do at all?

We find this "debate" worthy of neither philosophical nor psychoanalytic attention. This criticism is to psychoanalysis what a certain boyish belief in the uniqueness and absoluteness of the penis is to the exposition of desire and affect in a certain phantasmatic experience of the little girl—exclusive certainty and measure for everyone and everything. If you take up the other side of the debate, then you risk a mysticism and mythology of the feminine. While we would certainly choose the latter over the former, this is not a choice either. In any case, to be analysts then means not to engage in the debate but to work with what emerges as we get closer to phantasmatic experience, hopefully averting the possibility of a reaction of pure violence, though we would expect as much, which is why 'radical' criticism of psychoanalysis under many auspices occurs decade after decade. "A Psychoanalyst is Being Beaten". We look forward to the criticisms-to-come and their unique, indefatigable means for measuring us.

X – Do you find it important that psychoanalysis today confronts itself with biological knowledge (evolutionary sciences, neuroscience), and with science in general?

Yes, because it is the mythology of our age, a real sexual disturbance, and something that is moving at lightning speed. We often confront the strangest ideas, even most radical ideas of the sexual in the guise of biological knowledge, and what is more, these ideas are having the most profound effect on our patients. The countless times a young girl goes to meet her gynecologist for the first time and the strange pronouncements from this doctor's mouth regarding reproduction and the many available technologies, so little understood, come to mark her, to mix with infantile sexual beliefs, is profound and staggering. So it is not just important as a confrontation by analysts with science, but the very fact that we do nothing but encounter it in our work, again and again, and we learn something about where we are headed; or perhaps not to sound too Christopher Columbus or Kurtz about it, we see the void that is opening up, the heart of darkness that is knowledge of the body.

XI – Today, psychoanalysis compares itself with rival psychotherapies and theories—behavioral and/or cognitive psychotherapy, systemic-relational psychotherapy, and an assortment of other types of cures. Where do you situate psychoanalysis in all of this? And in particular, can we say that psychoanalysis is a psychotherapy, and if it is, in what sense?

It would probably be more correct to say that psychoanalysis is being compared with these “rival psychotherapies and theories” which is perhaps unavoidable. The most simple answer might still be the best: whereas a psychoanalytic process has therapeutic effects that vary in kind and strength it is not its direct goal to better the psyche, the mind, or the life of a person. The programmatic name “psycho-analysis” can be taken in a strong sense: its process takes what is called “psyche” apart and renders it anew, by exposing it to heteroclitic, composite, and fragmented nature. This process is remedying the false belief in the homogenous and substantial consistency of a psyche that itself attempts to remedy the heterogeneous and unsubstantial inconsistency of the sexual as such. Simple, yes?!

Perhaps a less simple answer then. The other day an old, very New York, analyst remarked that back in the day when they developed this idea of psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy, he thought a better name would be psychoanalytically disoriented psychotherapy. What was nice was that he meant this as a snarky critical comment, i.e. it's a disoriented analysis, a false or frustrated psychoanalysis. But we think his unconscious was smarter than this quip, psychoanalysis is about disorientation, other therapies are wonderfully and woefully, quite oriented. We envy them.

XII – Many philosophers are particularly interested in the thought of Jacques Lacan. What value or meaning do you attribute to the Lacanian *après-coup*?

A last, heart-wrenching story: in a recent issue of the Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association (JAPA) there was an article on *après-coup* and Jean Laplanche which credited Laplanche with the concept, stating that Lacan's unearthing it was important though he never elaborated on it more than a few times. This statement is patently false as many of us may know; Lacan worked on this concept throughout his life. In Seminar V which we worked on recently for a publication, he went over the concept for several hundred pages in order to work out the various dialectical reversals and movements within the unfolding of the Oedipus complex. It was brought to our attention by another colleague that JAPA was alerted to this “fake news” and did nothing about it. Isn't this mythic violence part of *après-coup* itself, where on one side you have a work that aims to radically close elements of the past, and another that, without having willed it, breaks it open; that any idea of historical progression, linearity, indeed ‘progress’ itself, is impossible, which is on the one hand a blessing, and on the other hand a curse? Of course Lacan is a curse, a curse for having unearthed something as diabolical as Freud's concept of *après-coup*, and left us with it, without any

protection, even the beautiful protection of an idea like translation. We understand the psychoanalytic institution's wish to bury him once and for all. But the unconscious is not translatable away; it is an infernal machine where everything returns and nothing is simply in the past.

Bios:

Marcus Coelen is a psychoanalyst and analytic supervisor in private practice in Berlin and New York. He also teaches literature and literary theory and currently has an appointment at the *Psychoanalytic Study Program* at Columbia University. He has translated into German and edited several volumes of texts by the French novelist and theoretician Maurice Blanchot. His academic research focuses on modern French thought and the intersection of literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis as well as on the place of madness in analytic practice and theory. He is currently preparing, together with Jamieson Webster, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jacques Lacan*.

Jamieson Webster is a psychoanalyst in New York City; she teaches at The New School, is a founding member of Das Unbehagen, and a graduate of The Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research. Her first book is *The Life and Death of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 2011). She is also co-author of *Stay Illusion! The Hamlet Doctrine* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013). She has written for "Apology", "Cabinet", "The Guardian", "The New York Times", "Playboy", and many psychoanalytic publications. [jamieson.websterphd@gmail.com]

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