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Anna Fishzon

“What are Perversions?” – Anna Fishzon

The purpose of my comments tonight is to invite Sergio to explore and clarify his views vis-à-vis those of Lacan, with whom he shares much conceptual terrain. Despite many convergences, What Are Perversions? seems at critical moments not only to stray from the Lacanian position but to radically question its ethics and political effects. At stake here is no small matter: the presence of the other as breathing, feeling human being, both in the mind of the perverse subject and in the theoretical approach of the analyst treating him.The principal question of your book, Sergio, is whether we ought to treat perversion as a psychic structure or as a set of sexual practices and behaviors. Though you come down emphatically on the side of structure in your Introduction, the clinical material and theoretical claims of the remaining chapters significantly complicate your answer. Lacan’s stance — and I have no choice but to state it schematically here in the interest of time — is that perversion is first and foremost a structure characterized by a rigid libidinal positioning. The perverse subject repeatedly puts himself on the stage for the Other qua symbolic order, offering himself wholly to the Other’s jouissance. Put another way, the pervert disavows castration by eliciting and then plugging up the lack in the big Other.The subject of perversion, therefore, operates according to a version of Kantian ethics. He essentially says to the Law: in order for you to use me I will ruthlessly use others. The pervert pays no heed to the personal, acting not in the interest of obtaining pleasure for himself but in procuring pleasure for the Other. He instrumentalizes others (with a small o) in the service of universalist objectives.

The perverse structure, finally, is dominated by certain affects, perhaps the least obvious but most crucial of which is anxiety. According to Lacan, the pervert is interested in making the other anxious. The anxiety induced in the partner of the sadist, for example, reveals the presence of the Other’s desire (or lack), thereby proving that the castrating, lawgiving Other exists. If anxiety is aroused, it follows that the Other is demanding an important sacrifice. The pervert’s aim, therefore, is not anxiety in itself but what it signals and effects – the object to which the Law applies, the existence of the lawmaker – and perhaps something else, too: a much needed separation.

With such structural features in mind, we can dispense with the notion that there are behaviors specific to the pervert. Of course some perverts are masochists and sadists while others are fetishists, voyeurs, and exhibitionists. Yet still others engage in vanilla sex and lead uneventful lives in sleepy suburbs. Many neurotics, on the other hand, are votaries of the sorts of paraphilias I just named. Neurotics suffer from perverse fantasies; perverts suffer from the failure entailed in their enactment.

Sergio, it seems to me that you follow Lacan but only so far, distinguishing your position in some important ways. Of course you do not offer a behaviorist definition of perversion but you do at moments question whether the perverse structure is totalizing.
In other words, some chapters suggest that perversion as a libidinal position or mode of functioning often exists alongside or within a neurotic organization — that perverse subjects can accommodate neurotic elements and that the neurotic and perverse structures might reside in the same person. I would like you to clarify your point regarding continuities between neurosis and perversion because it has significant clinical

implications. Is my characterization here correct, and how does your, one might say, partial view of perversion affect the direction of the cure?

In this vein, I found striking that the main objects of attention in your book are precisely behaviors and the stories of neurotics preoccupied with perverse fantasies. You seem compelled by them and I was as well. I wonder, then, if there is something in perverse clinical material that pulls the neurotic into acts of narration. Does the pervert's dualistic knowledge arrest the analyst, impelling him to transpose perversion into fantasy, or into narrative. I am interested, too, in the affects perverts induce in you as an analyst and in me as a reader. Though you do not dwell on anxiety, I question its pathways and function in your book and in the clinic: narratives about perverse acts makes me anxious, and doubly so when I recognize that my angst is the pervert's main objective.

But your account of perversion attempts to direct our explicit focus away from anxiety and disavowal, and toward the motifs of exclusion, jealousy, and revenge. For Lacan, the pervert's problem is the weakness or instability of the paternal function. The Father's 'No!' is inadequately installed between the perverse subject and the mOther. The maternal figure, for her part, treats the little pervert as a phallic object – a narcissistic extension of herself. Whereas neurotics live in a world of triangulations and enigmatic desire, perverts struggle with dyadic completion and the regulation of jouissance. I find surprising that your perverts, Sergio, appear trapped in the Oedipal dynamics that typically vex and define neurotics. If we make jealousy, revenge, and exclusion the hallmarks of perversion, what happens to our understanding of the perverse structure – a structure that for many denotes precisely an insufficient exclusion or subjective barring.

How do we then find a place for the pervert's sense of urgency, his adherence to the logic of the drive and repetition rather than the register of desire and love?

This brings me back to one of the other great themes of the book: ethics. In an effort to remove the taint of moral judgment from assessments of perversion, Lacanians are fond of declaring that perverse subjects do not turn away from the Other but rather do everything for the Other's sake. This seems to me a rather obvious rhetorical sleight of hand — an elision of the big Other as objective 'spirit' or agency with its homonym, the other as peer, citizen, or sexual partner. Sergio, you pivot from this, "perverse theory of perversion," stressing instead the pervert's lack of concern and care for others. The pervert enjoys through (and not with) the subjectivity of the other.

Given such structural features one might well ask: can perverts love? And if perverts have trouble loving, as you suggest, what happens in the clinic and in the transference? In your penultimate chapter you offer thoughts on the treatment of perversion and focus not on love but on mourning and weaning. I want to push you again on this point: is there, in your view, a significant distinction between an analysis with a pervert and an analysis with a neurotic? I would like you to elaborate, if you can, a stronger comparison of the analytic treatments of perverts and neurotics.

A final point about love and perversion. Transference love in the Lacanian formulation is the neurotic analysand's perception of the analyst as a subject-supposed- to-know. The analysand requests knowledge about herself and the analyst responds with an offer of lack – a refusal to make herself into an ideal object of identification. The analysand's desire emerges at the place where the Other is barred or split. By declining the demand for love, the analyst presents him or herself as pure emptiness – an enigmatic object a, compelling the analysand to cope with his or her own desire. If transference love is directed toward knowledge, what does it mean for the analyst's position that the pervert already knows he completes the Other, that he doesn't seek to answer questions of identity at the level of being? In which direction does the transference flow? Why would the pervert seek analysis in the first place and what therapeutic results would be possible? Is the analyst destined to prop up the paternal function of the perverse subject, acting as the lawgiving 'No!' that limits or regulates jouissance? And, if the pervert's currency is anxiety rather than knowledge, how might the analyst utilize his or her own and the pervert's anxiety to alter the latter's

expectations of the Other?

Bio:

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