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The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Jun 2, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/what-are-perversions-sergio-benvenuto-answers-and-commentaries/>

Sergio Benvenuto

“What are Perversions?”: Answers and Commentaries – Sergio Benvenuto

First of all, I apologize for replying only now – months after the public presentation – to the questions my colleagues put to me. It took me a long time because I found it difficult, I admit, to supply the answers. No less because the questions were intrinsically mingled with the comments.

Anna Fishzon says “I found striking that the main objects of attention in your book are precisely the behaviors and stories of neurotics preoccupied with perverse fantasies.” In actual fact, I don’t think I talked so much about behaviors, but rather about *acts*, which in perversion are also scenarios. I talk about perverse acts, which always express something beyond mere behavior. I do not see an opposition between acts and structure, because the perverse structure – assuming it really is exclusive of other structures – is precisely the structure of these acts. Using a fundamental distinction by Wittgenstein, I would say that acts can be *said*, while the structure can only be *shown*.

Anna sums up very well the Lacanian position on perversions and points out the extent to which what I develop is not in line with that position. Now, I think I was largely influenced by Lacan, but I am not of a Lacanian “school”. Belonging to a Lacanian school means, for me, belonging to what Lacan called *Master’s Discourse*. I’m not against the fact that one may take part in a Master’s Discourse, but I do not belong to one personally. This simply means that when I find myself before a new case, I do not immediately try to apply Lacanian templates to it, but I consider all the most important approaches to the problem – Kleinian, Kohutian, Bionian, and so on – trying to see which of these comes into contact with the unconscious of the analysand. Each time it is as if I were starting from scratch, as if I were at the beginnings of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is like an architect constructing a new building: it all depends on the land you build it on, on the purpose of the edifice itself, who it’s for and so on. You do not build a church and a theatre in the same way.

This is why I sometimes refer to my approach as minimalistic psychoanalysis. The various analytic theories are important, but I focus on something essential in the psychoanalytic act *before* (and not *beyond*) all analytic theory.

Psychoanalysis, in other words, is an empirical art; empirical not in the sense of positivism, which only takes into account the scientific method. I mean “empirical” in the sense of the practice of an artist, who work after work has to solve problems having no epistemological bearing, guided only by her sensitivity.

In some cases applying particular Lacanian parameters just as they are appears to me as something constraining; a sort of Procrustean bed. Even because, as I said, I only followed perverse neurotics or neurotic perverts. Which is the structure and which are the symptoms? I don’t think Lacan gives us a certain infallible method to distinguish between one and the other. He only signals the need for such a distinction.

I wouldn't be so sure, however, that the difference between perverts and neurotics consists in the difference between oedipal triangulation (neurosis) on the one hand and dyadic completion and regulation of jouissance (perversion) on the other, as Anna argues. Oedipal triangulation, not only according to Lacan, is the basis of all subjectivities and only fails in psychosis (because of the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father). Anna specifies that for Lacanians the pervert continuously pleases the Other; but this Other is precisely what falls outside dyadic completion, it is the fact that there is something of the Other even in the mother-child relation, the most exclusive of all. In the cases I followed, it seems to me that the function of the father was crucial; usually a subjugating father, even as a person he was not authoritarian.

I confess: with regard to Lacan I seek a sort of optimal distance-closeness, which is just what Lacan did with regard to Freud. Lacan, despite his claim of being more Freudian than all other analysts, convinces us precisely because he does not follow Freud *à la lettre*. When we read Lacan we feel in a completely different discursive regime from Freud's. In other words, we can measure the full distance between the "then" of Freud and the "now" of Lacan. Thanks to Lacan, most of the uses many post-Freudians make of Freudian concepts seem naive to us. The naivety consists in believing that the way in which analysts posed questions in the 20s, 30s or 40s can be the same in which we have to pose them today. Precisely because Lacan saw things in a completely new way, by *après coup* Freud appears to us as very different from the Vulgate that Freudians, and Freud himself, have given of psychoanalysis.

Now, I think it is time to do something similar with Lacan. We should read him as our *après coup*. If Lacan (and also Bion, Winnicott, Laplanche...) is a *second time* of psychoanalysis, we should realize that we are now in a *third time*. It is true, however, that I do not see at the moment on the horizon analysts capable of this "shift" towards a third time. But we could try reading what Lacan says about perversions *starting from* the issues that are ours and could not have been Lacan's. In the same way as Lacan taught us not to be *literally* Freudian, we should learn to no longer be *literally* Lacanian.

In short, Lacan's thought should be *discovered*, or re-discovered, precisely by abandoning a certain Lacanian scholastics.

Therefore, even what Lacan says about perversion, in particular of the sadomasochistic kind, should be "interpreted" in the light of what I would call a certain skepticism. A skepticism with regard to psychoanalysis; not in the sense that it should appear to us as useless or in crisis, but in the sense that we no longer believe psychoanalysis to be an *achieved* practice and theory.

In any case, what seems important to me in Lacan's approach to perversion is precisely the fact that he introduces this dimension of the Other's jouissance: i.e. the perverse act always measures itself with a sort of supposed subjectivity of the Other, because only a subject can enjoy pleasure or suffer. I do not entirely share in the idea that the pervert serves the jouissance of the Other, but I do admit that Lacan puts into play the correct concepts to think about perversion.

Anna stresses the role of anxiety in perversion, in the sense that perversion creates anxiety in the other. But the most characteristic affliction for perverts is depression; and it's during their depressive phases that their perverse acts are most frequent. We could even think that perversion is a drug against depression. Perverse acts anguish us in the same way as depression anguishes us. Depression and perversion distress us because they have the flavor of a protest against the world and its order, to which we ourselves belong.

I think Emma Lieber perfectly succeeded in illustrating my project. She also adds: "One of the questions I left the book with was about the place, or the various places, of knowledge in perverse dynamics". She wonders about the relationship between knowledge and revenge.

I did indeed talk about "perverse knowledge", in the sense that the pervert's knowledge is one of desire; "unconscious knowledge", Lacan would call it. Because this was Freud's bet: that desire always implies a certain knowledge, even if it is an unrealistic knowledge. For psychoanalysis, desire always stretches

towards a knowledge, which in turn generates desire. In this sense we can say that post-truth – so talked about today – is for Freud the normal condition of human knowledge, which is always a wishing knowledge. Stepping back to truth – giving up storytelling – is a never-ending process of ascesis.

Lacan talks of knowledge also with regard to transference, which is based on the “supposed knowing subject”. I think a serious mistake an analyst can make is to surreptitiously confirm this supposition, to pose him or herself as “someone who knows”. In this case the risk is that the analysand will no longer count on analysis, but rather on the analyst as person-who-knows. I find that many analyses belong not to the *discourse of the analyst*, but to *university discourse*.

Aleksandra Wagner asks me why perverts are always male. I do actually give several examples of female perversion in my book, and the impression is that in the last decades more and more female perverts have appeared, with the question being asked whether in the past perverted women had only remained “unseen”. Or perhaps perversion is like smoking: at first it was predominantly a male vice, and then it became a feminine one too. (In the same way, transsexuals used to be almost exclusively men who wanted to become women, while today women who want to become men seem to be on the increase.) And if this were true, the visibility of feminine perversion would then be connected to the process of female emancipation, which has been a feature of the last century. An emancipation that, in my opinion, has occurred on a male model, and that above all men themselves wanted: women have become more and more *equals* of men, but not vice versa. Something that has a paradoxical, Orwellian, edge: the more women become equals of men, the more men appear “more equal than others”. All this must have changed the subjective structure of the women of today in relation to sexuality. In the sense that women tend to conceive their sexuality as “masculine”, with the risk of perversion that this masculinization implies. The perverse woman is reminiscent of those transsexuals who become women and then discover they are lesbians and behave like men with women. I wonder whether many female perversions – masochist ones in particular – aren’t a way of “returning” to a femininity that seems outdated, a shame from which to free oneself. Significantly, the masterpiece of feminine perversion is *Story of O*, written by a woman: this novel should be read as a hyperbolic affirmation of a femininity women are supposed to detach themselves from: femininity meant as totally enduring male power.

Semper’s contribution relates my approach to other crucial tendencies of psychoanalysis today. In particular, it interprets my contribution in the light of an opposition between Oedipus and Narcissus, with me supposedly inclined towards the former. Rather, it seems to me that Sam, giving evidence of the fact that we are now supposedly living in the era of Narcissus, sees my book as a (regressive?) return to Oedipus.

In actual fact, Sam asks me, quoting S. Bach, whether I accept the distinction between “those cases where the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal struggle with the parents has been over instinct prohibition and those cases where the struggle has been over recognition of the self”. No, I do not accept the distinction. In the same way as I do not think that Oedipus and Narcissus are two alternative heroes: there is evidently some narcissism in Oedipus, which makes him a *tyrannos*, a tyrant, and something of the Oedipal in Narcissus, who significantly fails in his amorous encounter with the nymph Echo. This means that for me there aren’t two separate worlds, one in which a struggle around “instinct” objects is at play and one where a struggle around recognition of the self is at play. I think this separation is an artifact of analytical theory, but that in clinical reality it is actually impossible to separate the two dimensions. A serious neurosis is very often also a narcissistic breakdown. And a breakdown that may seem merely narcissistic – for example, severe depression – can hide a complex object structure.

Very often, wanting to go beyond Freud, it is just some of his conceptual categories that are taken to the letter. Because Freud distinguished between an object libido and a narcissistic libido, and it is felt that Freud neglected the latter, an object psychoanalysis (one of Oedipal conflict) is opposed to an analysis of the self (of the narcissistic check). But in so doing, it is Freud’s very distinctions that are confirmed, leaving us imprisoned in a Freudian grid with no *après coup*. It is as if Freud had divided things into black and white and, as Freud would seem to have concentrated mainly on the white, we said: “Instead I shall see things from

the black point of view”. But things are never merely in black and white, things are in all sorts of colors.

So Sam, in her clinical vignette, concludes that the image that annihilated her patient cannot be interpreted in terms of Oedipal jealousy, but “The ladybug, the one who has access is also him, perhaps the way he internalized his mother’s view of him, without humanity, disregarded, and discarded”. I presume Sam has elements – despite the “perhaps” – to say that her patient is above all a victim of a mother who looked at him as an animal with no humanity, that she discarded him as a subject. But in many cases, when a subject feels annihilated, it is an arduous enterprise to trace this experience back to an annihilating attitude on behalf of the mother; jealousy can be annihilating too. There is no alternative between the loss of a fundamental object and feelings of self-destruction: if an object carries out a structural function in keeping up a subject, its lack can lead to an authentic subjective breakdown.

In fact, the Oedipus theory is a mythical reconstruction – Freud’s Oedipus is also a myth – of something more fundamental: the triangular structuration of every subjectivity. There’s never just an “I” and a “you”; as I said before, there is always the Other too, somewhere. My-mother-you is not enough for me to recognize myself as a subject-I, it is necessary for my mother to have me recognized by a third party, which may be incarnated or not. The recognition of one’s subjectivity is never a dual process; it is instead like access to an exclusive club: you’re introduced to the club by a person, but the club does not coincide with this person.

In other words, I do not identify the “parent” of a subject’s unconscious set-up with the real parent or her/his real behavior. Therefore, in analysis, terrible castrating father figures emerge, while – as patients themselves often recognize – the real father was everything but condemnatory and actually most indulgent and permissive. One thing is the Father, another is one’s father. In the same way we have the Mother and one’s own mother.

Allow me a clinical vignette. A mature man indulges in masochistic acts and situations with men and women (he is bisexual) and suffers from periodical depressions he calls “my paralyses”, because he is either unable to get out of bed or spends all his time sitting down. He remembers having had masochistic fantasies as early as the age of eight or nine. He had seen a film where the main character was bare-chested and whipped: he identified with this character and dreamt of being whipped too as an adult. He saw another film where the main character was seriously wounded during a duel and was cared for by a girl he would then fall in love with. On the other hand, he also had sadistic fantasies towards figures he felt were repressive. At more or less the same time he had his first depressive crisis, a hypochondria-based one: he was convinced he would go blind, he would cry thinking about his parents’ death, he had delusions regarding the deformation of his body, and so on. From what he could remember, and from the witness accounts he heard, his parents and grandparents loved him very much and he was extremely prized in childhood for his talents. What had happened to trigger off this almost psychotic depression and his earliest masochistic fantasies?

Probably the fact that when he was eight his little sister was born. Hence he was stripped of the privilege of sleeping in his parents’ room. He has no memories of any particular feelings of hatred towards this sister, yet at the time a psychologist who followed him for some time said she thought this birth was the cause of his troubles. It is interesting to note that this trauma took shape as a narcissistic decompensation regarding his body (and partially his sister’s too: at the time he once dreamt of her body disintegrating). Blindness, deformed limbs, wounds like in the film he saw... Lacan would say that the mirror image of his body had become fragmented. The fear of his parents dying staged his helplessness anxiety, having lost the monopoly of his mother’s affection. Also as an adult his depressions take form as a “paralysis”, in other words a disintegration of his unconscious body image. In this context, his precocious masochistic fantasies functioned to eroticize this disintegration, trying in this way to overcome it: the threatened, whipped, wounded body would become an erotic object and lay the foundations of his attraction for certain male bodies. But the stricken body was also the one to identify with, turning “castration” into erotic arousal.

As we see in this case, Oedipal factors, childish jealousy, narcissistic decompensation, perverse eroticization of crises, are intimately interconnected. Object relations and narcissistic recognition imply each other. We

are not forced to choose between Oedipus and Narcissus.

I could provide many more comments to my four colleagues' comments. In any case, I wish to thank them for the attention they devoted to reading my work; I am absolutely flattered by it.

Bio:

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Publication Date:

June 28, 2017