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Resistance and Revelation: Lacan on Defense

Summary:

One might gather from a reading of Lacan's *oeuvre* that he never advanced an explicit and systematic theory of resistance and defense, his early critique of IPA methods notwithstanding. Indeed, the combativeness of this critique may lead readers to think that any talk of defense analysis is non-Lacanian. Yet such an omission of a key psychic phenomenon presents a puzzle for clinicians and theorists alike, insofar as it disallows a reckoning with a real-life phenomenon. Taking as its focus Lacan's remarks in Seminars 1 and 2, this article pushes beyond Lacan's critique of Ego Psychology, claiming that it is possible to establish a positive Lacanian theory of defenses and of defense analysis in the clinical context. To this end, the article offers a systematic and standardized reconstruction of a positive – distinctively Lacanian – view of what defenses are, where they come from, and how analysts should handle them. In so doing, it presents his startling claim that resistance itself was ultimately a red herring, an artificial problem occasioned by the analyst's erred handling of the transindividual defenses speaking through the analysand.

“Whoever applies force provokes resistance.” [1]

In this paper, I explore the claim that Jacques Lacan did not formulate a theory of individual unconscious defense. I show, rather, that Lacan rejected the value of such an approach and opted instead to think the issue of defense and resistance from a structural “symbolic” perspective. In so doing, Lacan marks a decisive break with at least that aspect of mainstream psychoanalytic thought that, beginning with Sigmund Freud, found the theorization of unconscious ego defenses a fundamental task for the psychoanalytic thinker.

It is curious to defend a claim about an absence, a non-theorization, because the evidence that would ordinarily justify a claim is effectively absent. That is the point. So, in this paper, I turn to Lacan's theoretical critique of these post-Freudian developments, before finally turning to a positive account of Lacan's theory of defense and resistance, which I show departs decisively from the preceding tradition of thought. Namely, I argue that Lacan, despite lacking a unified and systematic theory of defense, does provide a handful of interesting starting points for thinking about the problem of resistance and defense.

Let us begin by first establishing the importance of this sort of investigation. The theorization of defense, that is, the acknowledgement and scientific elaboration of this clinical phenomenon, is a cornerstone of psychoanalysis as such. [2] It is in view of this importance that understanding the way different thinkers deal with this issue itself becomes crucial, both at the level of theory as well as practice. At the most basic level, classical psychoanalysis arose historically as a practice for interpreting and treating not just ‘psychic’ conflicts, but unconscious, disavowed conflicts more specifically. [3] Already at this level, one can appreciate the vitality of an understanding of unconscious individual defenses. It is precisely defense against desire that characterizes the neurotic conflicts that seeded Freud's discovery of the unconscious. [4] Indeed, going further, one can observe that it is through the discovery of defense that the unconscious can properly

emerge as an object of psychoanalytic science. In other words, the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious and that of defense against desires, wishes, and drives, are historically of one piece. Thus, as long as the psychoanalytic theory of the neuroses remains committed to the unconscious, it must likewise remain committed to the study of individual unconscious defense.

Setting the Stage

It is impossible to get a good sense for Lacan's gestures and their significance without examining the background and context for his interventions. Fundamentally, Lacan's interventions are compensatory, if not hyperbolic. By compensatory, I mean that Lacan's critiques of his contemporaries, as well as the unique choices of emphasis that accompany his "restorationist" discourse, are not self-standing. Rather, they can only be unlocked when they are read with and against their targets. This is most clearly the case in the early texts and seminars, and for our purposes, *Seminar I* and *Seminar II*. It is here that the core of Lacan's critique of contemporary psychoanalysis lies. Importantly, I believe that insofar as this struggle was formative for Lacan, the battle he wages here against what he calls "ego psychology," which may or may not always capture the real work of the American ego psychologists, would remain an ambient background for both him and for his followers, even to the present day. What exactly is this critique? It certainly seems that one must understand it clearly – without jargon and without labyrinthine self-referentiality – if one wishes to understand both Lacan as well as his place in the history of psychoanalysis. Let me attempt such an exegesis now.

It is precisely this question, "what exactly is this critique?" that is posed to Lacan by one of the attendees to his lecture of May 11th, 1955. Here a certain Mademoiselle Amnoux poses the question by way of an attempted summary. She says:

After having read Freud's chapter, I managed to get some idea for myself of a defence-function which would have to be located at the surface and not in the depths, and which would be operative on two fronts, simultaneously against traumas which come from without, and against impulses that come from within...after your lectures I can no longer think of it like that. And I ask myself which is a better definition. (Lacan 1988b, p. 208)

I think the simplicity and directness of this question gives it power, and makes it worthy of our attention. So does Lacan's attempt at a response. He says (1988b): "To install the ego at the centre of the perspective, as is done in the present approach in analysis, is only one of those reversals to which any questioning of the position of man is exposed" (208). Lacan follows this comment up by stating: "The return to the ego as the centre and common measure is not in any way implied by Freud's discourse. Quite the opposite in fact..." (p. 209). One is struck by the flimsiness of this answer. Here is a perfect didactic opportunity for clarification wasted; it seems, with the repetition of one of early Lacan's main dictums: the Freudian revolution has been betrayed, and the betrayal consists in a return to the ego. [5] But how can this be applied to the issue of "defence functions"? How can we make sense, if at all, of Lacan's response here? Why does he wander off? To begin to answer these questions, it helps to return to the first clear statement of purpose within *Seminar I*, entitled *Freud's Papers on Technique*.

The "Egologists" on Trial

In his preliminary presentation of the central problem of this seminar, Lacan takes as his target Margaret Little, an analyst of the British "Middle Group," who despite her geographical remove nonetheless serves as a representative of the hegemony Lacan so vehemently fights, and of which the American ego psychologists are the greatest expression.

Lacan (1988a) writes of Little: “nothing else matters [for Little] but the recognition by the subject, *hic et nunc*, of the intentions of his discourse. And his intentions only ever have value in their implications *hic et nunc*, in the immediate exchange” (p. 30). In other words, Lacan is claiming that for the major IPA thinkers of the time, “the whole of analysis must unfold in the *hic et nunc* [in the here and now of the session]” (ibid). The idea here is that psychoanalysis is dominated, in the early 1950s, by a focus on the analysis of the patient’s defenses as the royal road to uncovering the unconscious intentions of their discourse, which is the basic mechanism by which psychoanalysis heals. In order to properly analyze defenses, then, the things said by the patient must be interpreted assuming that their meaning is always found with the immediate situation, the consulting room and the listening analyst, in mind. This trend is described as a move towards emphasizing the ego of the second topology as the crux of analytic technique. As he puts it: “the practice that Freud initiated [got] transformed into a manipulation of the analyst-analysand relationship” (Lacan, 1988a, p. 15).

In contrast to Freud’s conception of analysis, then, contemporary (1950s) psychoanalysis is conceived as a “sort of homeopathic discharge” of repressed unconscious desires by means of which the patient can “achieve a new equilibrium” (Lacan 1988a, 14). This adequation takes place through a gradual transformation within the consulting room, a transformation centered on the interpretation of the patient’s investment in their “missed adaptation” to the external world. With this goal in mind, Lacan continues, his contemporaries adopt a narrow focus on the ego as the sole focus of their technique.

For Anna Freud and Fenichel, Lacan (1988a) says, “everything is channeled via the ego” (p. 16). At the same time, these analysts take the ego to be, for the purpose of clinical technique, an amalgamation of defenses. In other words, everything is channeled via the defenses. These defenses are played out as “resistances” in the course of analysis, in the confines of the consulting room, and it is through these transference playing-outs that the analyst can delve into the unconscious desires peering from behind the ego’s defenses. The analyst keeps an ear out for these defensive resistances, and when appropriate, interprets them, gradually wearing them away and allowing the analysand, or patient, to adapt to the reality against which they have become pathologically shielded. This, in brief, is Lacan’s account of the way the table is set just as he is sitting down to eat.

What Lacan (1988a) will argue, in his own language, is that this approach strays from Freud, for whom the analysis of content (as opposed to the resistances to the disclosure of that content in the clinical setting) *is* itself an interpretation of defense (p. 29). In different words, Lacan emphasizes that psychoanalysis cannot function without “respecting the person,” which, in his view, is the opposite of what the theorists of resistance analysis recommend. Indeed, Lacan claims that the analysts of his day adopt a “policeman’s approach” to their patients, engaging with those patients only by casting them as defensive, resistant, fugitive from the work of the analysis. This entails a certain bad faith approach – “what defence has he come up with now?” (p. 29).

Given this context, Lacan (1988a) frames his intervention as follows: “The question is to know whether this *way of understanding* the analysis of defenses doesn’t land us in a technique which specifically generates a certain sort of error” (p. 33). The error is, as I emphasize with italics, not so much in thinking that defenses should be analyzed, but rather with the kind of understanding we have about how it is that this analyzing must take place. In his view, the dominant understanding, based on the interaction of two egos in a consulting room is lacking, and needs to be overcome. What is the error at issue here, and what is to be done?

From Ego to “Discourse”

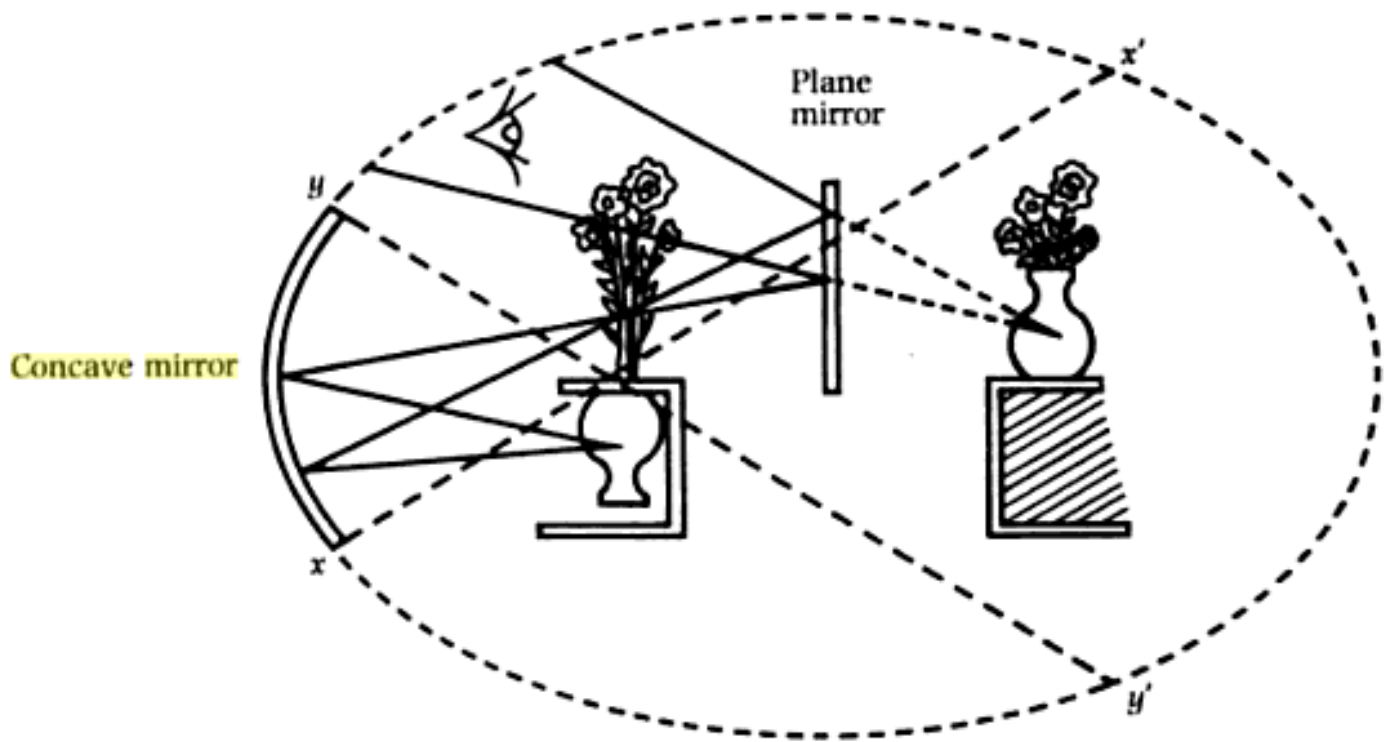
The answer to this question, and the place where we can really start arriving at the crux of Lacan’s whole gesture in these texts, is found a few chapters into the same seminar. It is here that Lacan begins to make the most fundamental distinction of his early seminar period (keep in mind Lacan did not begin giving seminars

until 20 years after his first publications), which is the distinction between the imaginary realm of the ego and that of the symbolic or discursive realm or “register.” This distinction is important for Lacan not just because it disambiguates between two phenomena that ego psychology might run together, but also because it provides a microcosm of Lacan’s key theoretical gesture. That is the distinction between two aspects of clinical practice: the imaginary and the symbolic. This distinction will be further explored by looking at *Seminar II* in the section that follows this one, but it’s most helpful to stick with *Seminar I* for now. It’s important to stay close to these texts, but readers must also appreciate that Lacan seldom proceeds linearly, so a bit of skipping around is necessary to produce a more fluid argumentative structure.

That said, Lacan wishes to supplant the distinction usually made between analysis of contents and analysis of resistances, with the distinction between analysis of discourse and analysis of the ego. In other words, the benefit of this new distinction is that it will allow Lacan to place resistances not just within the ego, but also within “discourse,” or language, itself. Such a move directly contravenes the Anna Freudian dictum cited above that analysis only ever works through the agency of the ego. In effect, then, Lacan is urging analysts to judiciously bypass the ego, and go straight for the content, that is, the history of desire occluded by the defenses embedded in language itself. Referring to Anna Freud, Lacan (1988a) says: “she says the ego is only made manifest through its defenses, that is to say in so far as it is opposed to the work of analysis” (p. 63). He then follows up with the rhetorical move: “does that amount to saying that everything which is opposed to the work of analysis is a defense of the ego?” (ibid). The answer is clearly “no,” and the task is to specify this other place wherefrom resistance might originate. This reorients the course of Lacanian thought, and makes sense out of the critique of defense analysis conceived as ego analysis. For Lacan, the right way to conceive of defense analysis is to think of it as the analysis of discourse, *not* of the ego.

The key, it is argued, is to move beyond the interpretation of the speech of the patient in the here and now of the clinic, as speech taking place between two egos, and to reframe the situation “in the direction of the symbolic structuration of the subject...located beyond the present structure of his ego” (Lacan, 1988a, p. 65). The idea, in other words, is that proper defense analysis doesn’t focus on the ways the patient might be defensive against the intrusions of the analyst by hiding away content, but on the way that the patient unknowingly lacks the words to express their truth, against their very wishes. It follows that the task of the analyst is less that of an interrogator than that of a midwife. [6] Doing this involves moving toward analyzing the symbolic complexes that structure the patient’s unconscious subjectivity. As Lacan (1988a) puts it, “we encounter...structured, organized, complex situations” (p. 65).

In order to advance the analysis, the therapist does not look to understand the patient in terms of their own conception of themselves, their ideal ego, but must look beyond the patient’s own self-image, to try to uncover something else that has been left out. This approach is obviously not unusual for psychoanalytic thinkers, but the devil is in the details. Lacan (1988a) goes on: “it’s the symbolic relation which defines the position of the subject as seeing. It is speech, the symbolic relation, which determines the greater or lesser degree of perfection, of completeness...of the imaginary” (p. 141). In simpler terms, “it is through the exchange of symbols that we locate our different selves in relation to one another...and we have a certain symbolic relation, which is complex, according to the different planes on which we are placed...” (140). In other words, who we are, and how we see ourselves, is dependent upon our place within a pre-existing and extensive “symbolic” network of relations. It is the aggregate of these different relations, which Lacan names as “planes,” that yields our overall sense of self, our “imaginary structuration.” Getting a grip on the way Lacan conceives the imaginary goes far in helping us understand his early theorizations and to ground his antipathy towards ego psychology. Allow me to approach this theorization with a focus on the difference between real and virtual images, and then on his distinction between empty and full speech, both introduced in *Seminar I*.



Schema with two mirrors

To illustrate his conception of the ego as an image that is undergirded by a symbolic structure, Lacan offers the mirror schema, included above (Lacan, 1998a, p. 124). The schema is a drawing of an eye looking at a flat mirror that is collecting the images from a curved mirror. Between them is a contraption that has flowers on top, by themselves, and an empty vase hanging upside down directly below them. At the right distance from the curved mirror, the concave surface takes the photons bouncing from the vase and the flowers and, through its angled surface, combines them into the image of the vase superimposed onto the flowers, such that the flowers look like they are in the vase. This new image is then reflected on the flat mirror and seen by the eye.

The key to this whole setup is that that image of a vase with flowers in it, which again, is a 'false' composite image can only be seen with the right combination of mirrors, angles, and position of the eye. If one shifts one's feet a few centimeters in either direction, the illusion is broken and the flowers and the vase come apart again. On the one hand, we have an image, on the far right of the schema, that is somehow illusory, a composite formation of fragments that through a distorted surface come to be seen as one. On the other, we have an invisible series of angles, bits of glass and silver leaf, and invisible formulas and optical laws, all of which come together to yield that composite image. Shift the eye somewhat, change the distance between the props and the mirrors, alter the angles of the surfaces, and the image decomposes.

Lacan thinks this is an apt metaphor for how we conceive of ourselves. We have a unified image of self, a self that is in actuality a fragmented and conflicted specter, but given the right series of supporting structures, the fragmented self comes to appear whole. This imaginary capture is what Lacan refers to as the ideal ego, a sense of unity and self-enclosure, the German *selbständig*. This is the realm of the imaginary, a realm of identification with images and depictions of self-standing integers, in the secondary sense. But in order for this play of photons and mirrors to work, we need a series of supporting structures. This is the realm of the symbolic. Here we have language, the law, invisible social codes and structures that provide the context in which such images can appear and retain their consistency and value. In this very straightforward sense, your ego is not yours, but is better understood as an effect of the structural context you inhabit with which you come to identify.

This is the key insight for Lacan (1988a): “in man, no truly effective and complete imaginary regulation can be set up without the intervention of another dimension. Which is what analysis, mythically at least, aims at” (p. 141). This ensemble of elements yields the image of self, the ego, but also the image of external reality as a whole (p. 125). The task of analysis is to find a way to bring the whole ensemble into view, to render the image on the flat mirror suspect by exposing it as a result of an external set of instruments whose articulation undermine its sense of obvious naturalness. To harken back to Marx, one can only maintain this idealized and integral image of self so long as one remains dissociated from the concrete network of social structures that invisibly condition and sustain the subject’s position. But, as the Freud of that chapter discovered, the destabilization of such an expose is not something that the subject comes to seamlessly. It is the hard-won task of analytic skill and roving personal curiosity that enable it. Articulating that task is the job of theory of technique. Articulating that technique is the remit of these initial seminars.

One helpful way to make our initial approach is to explore the distinction Lacan introduces between empty speech and full speech in the analytic situation. Empty speech is the name for the kind of talk that stays inside the bounds of linguistic and imaginal convention, the psychoanalytic version of small talk, idle chatter. In empty speech, the subject speaks to an audience of one, from the perspective of someone who naively identifies with the roles and attributes given to them by their society. This speech is empty because it fails to break through these assigned roles and categories to reveal the unacknowledged, unarticulated truth of the subject. Full speech “realizes the truth of the subject,” whatever that might be in each case. In empty speech, on the other hand, “the subject loses [themselves] in the machinations of the system of language, in the labyrinth of referential systems made available to him by the state of cultural affairs” (Lacan, 1988a, p. 50).

As we have seen, the truth of the subject is to be found by taking distance from the imaginary fixations that constitute the individual’s identity, by loosening the grip of the ego. Psychoanalysis becomes a method for achieving such a revelatory loosening. By shifting the axis of the subject’s discourse towards the symbolic register, talking in terms of language and structure rather than self-evident identity. To reach revelation is to move past superficial identifications and to “make connection again with a deeper plane, and to recognize the subject’s position in the symbolic order” (Lacan, 1988a, p. 67). The method of analysis, as much as its aim, is to shift the analysand from empty to full, or plain, speech. Doing so means exposing the contingent history of the subject’s successive identifications, and the determination of those identifications by symbolic factors. Carrying out that task requires that the analyst and analysand wade through the ego’s defenses in order to enable such an unveiling of the hidden discourses it dominates. What is involved in analysis? “That the subject be able to totalize the various accidents the memory of which is retained in [their ego], in a form closed off to [them]” (Lacan, 1988a, p. 283).

From Resistance to Censorship

It is in *Seminar II*, entitled “The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis,” that Lacan will make a crucial distinction between “resistance,” a term psychoanalysis is familiar with, and “censorship,” a term that was originally used by Freud but to which Lacan gives a new use (Freud, 2010, p. 574)[1]. To cut to the chase, this distinction will make up Lacan’s effort to both diagnose and correct the “error” of bad defense analysis by moving from the two-person psychology of the ego psychologists towards a “three-term relation,” one in which the analyst and the patient are insufficient to understand everything that goes on inside the consulting room (Lacan, 1988a, p. 11). Here, defensiveness is not assumed to be aimed at the analyst.

If the imaginary reading of the clinical situation sees only two egos seated atop two individuals, the symbolic reading incorporates the structures of language and the law, which help to shape the subjectivities of the two individuals, but which also organize the space in which the individuals’ “imaginary” identities can gain traction. In order to make this move analytically, Lacan introduces the more specialized category of

“censorship,” which is nested under the general heading of “resistances,” but is importantly different. Unlike “ego resistances,” censorship impedes the free unfolding of the analysis not at the behest of the analysand’s ego, but as a result of the way our language and laws are organized to inhibit access to certain kinds of truths. In this reading the cut off bits of experience are not seen as a result of the ego, but as a result of culture. These are of course related, insofar as the ego serves as partial representative of external reality demanding concessions from the subject, but they remain distinct. Thus, the idea is that when faced with this kind of resistance, it does no good to address the patient’s ego, but rather one must illuminate and pick apart the symbolic structures that underpin the social condition – the clinic included – itself.

Lacan (1988b) starts this discussion with a familiar sounding thought: “the neurotic symptom...puts into play the structure of language in general, more precisely the relation of man to language” (p. 123). In other words, where Freud had turned away from ideas about constitutive decay and towards subjective meaning, Lacan turns the screw further by turning his diagnoses to how individual psychology interfaces with the general “structure” of language. Anchoring himself in the seventh chapter of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Lacan (1988b) begins to unfurl an argument about what really interests Freud: “What interests Freud...is the message as such...it is the message as interrupted, but insistent, discourse.” (p. 125). It is at this point that the distinction between resistance and censorship begins to take shape. Lacan makes the provocative claim that “what [Freud] is concerned with isn’t of the order of the psychological phenomena” (Ibid). By this, Lacan means that Freud’s interest in the working of the unconscious goes beyond the individual mind, and latches onto something bigger and deeper. To focus on the individual patient, or on their ego, is to turn psychoanalysis back into a psychology. [7] However, the importance of Freud’s insight, as far as Lacan is concerned, is that he went beyond the “conventional” psychology of the individual. In fact, with all the talk of the ego and resistance analysis, Lacan warns, we risk losing the fundamental insight made by Freud, which has to do with the problematic relationship of the patient to themselves insofar as that relationship is structured in and through language and images. It is for this same reason that Lacan, inspired by his particular reading of Heidegger and Levi-Strauss, makes a move away from internalism. The clues to the patient’s symptoms are not found someplace on the inside, but rather somewhere out there. It’s for this reason that Lacan (1988b) can say something like the following: “resistance is not thought of as being internal to the subject” (p. 127).

At this stage, Lacan’s (1988b) re-categorization starts sounding more like a cut: “Censorship isn’t located on the same level as resistance. It is part of the interrupted character of the discourse” (p. 127). In the context of a discussion with a member of his audience – and it would be good for us to be reminded that these things are always said before and for an audience – Lacan suggests a definitive break with the analysis of resistance as it is conventionally understood. In his terms, resistance emanates, as the post-Freudians rightly claim, from the ego and its “imaginary,” whereas censorship is not the work of an ego covering up a pathogenic nucleus, but is, instead, “always related to whatever...is linked to the law in so far as it is not understood” (Lacan, 1988b, p. 127). Just a few moments later, Lacan changes tack slightly, claiming that the relationship between the subject and the law is not one of misunderstanding (indeed, this sounds more like what he has to say about the ego’s “imaginary” relation), but one of, well, censorship proper. He states “the subject is caught up in the necessity of having to eliminate, to extract from the discourse everything pertaining to what the law *forbids* one to say” (Lacan, 1988b, p. 129). In other words, censure is the obverse face of symbolic structuration of the subject. Insofar as the symbolic order structures the subject, it also shapes what it cannot be. [8] Here one might cite that famous phrase of Lacan’s from *Television*: “There’s no way to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible. Words fail” (p. 1). Perhaps then, at last, a new gloss can be given to the gestures discussed over the past few sections. Let us collect the thought.

Whereas resistance is defined (too broadly) as anything that impedes the linear progress of an analysis, censorship pertains to those roadblocks that don’t originate from the ego but from the social norm itself. In other words, censorship refers to resistance without a resistor, or, at the very least, one where the resistor is unwittingly resisting. In contrast, traditional resistance assumes that the analysand is resisting in order to guard off the deconstruction of its adaptive defensive complexes. In censorship is not the individual patient that is withholding, but their society. It is a socially sanctioned form of dissociative self-mutilation. This is

not resistance that calls for confrontation and conquest, but for a more nuanced attentiveness to the series of linguistic and legal complexes mandating the suppression of content. Again, the prescription for dealing with this sort of situation is, to Lacan's mind, the very opposite of any kind of duel between the egos inside a consulting room.

Over and over again, Lacan defines the goal of analysis as "revelation" of the subject's sedimented history. Given that goal we can apprehend another line of critique towards ego psychology: "we can't reveal the subject's history if we are looking in the wrong place," in the ego, so to speak.

Against the Orthopedics of the Ego

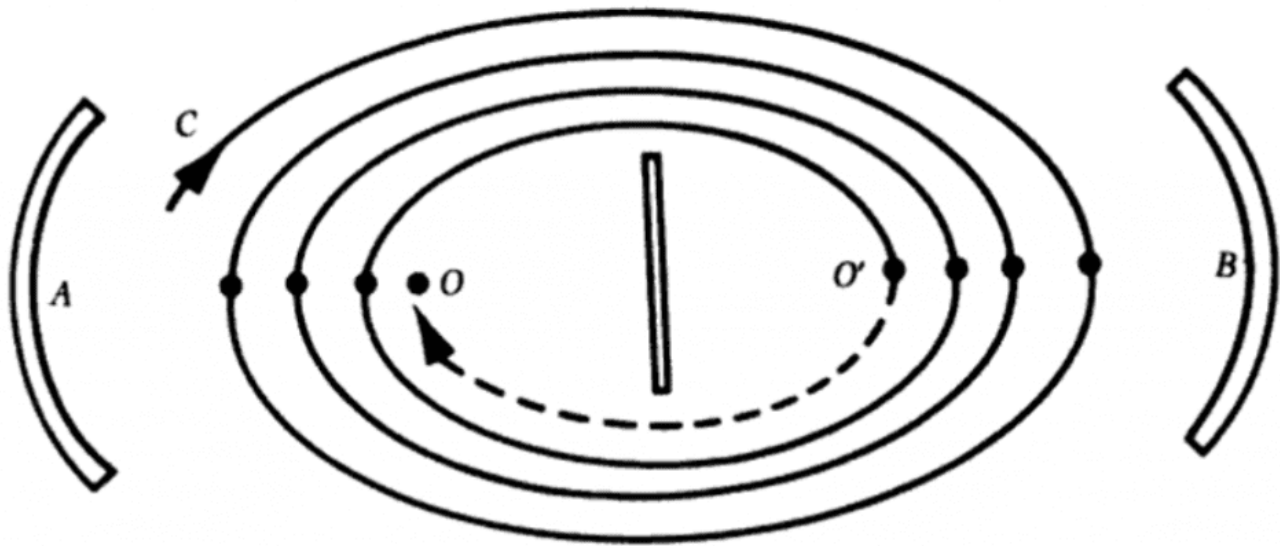
If a large part of the withholding does not come from the patient's ego, but from the symbolic structures that undergird and underwrite it, then where do the defenses and resistance so popularized by Lacan's contemporaries come from? His answer is clear here: from the analysts themselves. As he states succinctly at some point of *Seminar II*: "there's no point looking for resistance anywhere else than within ourselves. Whosoever applies force provokes resistance" (Lacan, 1988b, p. 210). [9] Defense only arises in response to the hostile pressure to move too far too fast.

As I say, this line we have traced leads one to think that Lacan is objecting not so much to defense and resistance analysis as such. Rather, he is critical of a certain conception of defense analysis, namely, one that isn't "symbolic." In other words, he is critical of an analysis of defense that assumes that defense comes from the Ego and is aimed at another Ego within the clinical frame. [10] We can see, then, why Ego Psychology becomes such a juicy target. The proper Lacanian analysis of defense aims at something that is precisely beyond of the clinical frame, and it's something like the broader symbolic frame that structures the unconscious subject. It is by aiming at that frame that subjective revelation can happen.

The essence of the clinical critique of conventional resistance analysis is that it is too much in a hurry to get to the good stuff. It is "too much in a hurry to unveil for the subject the patterns of the ego, its defences, hideaways" (Lacan, 1988a, p. 286). The idea here is that defense analysis should *not* work by bringing the patient's attention to their own defenses. Indeed, this approach causes the patient to not "take one more step," or become entrenched even further in their defensiveness. Instead, Lacan (1988a) suggests, "you have to wait as long as it takes for the subject to realize the dimension at stake on the plane of the symbol" (p. 286). In short, Lacan's general recommendation is "be patient!" The defensiveness of the ego is not to be overpowered, it is to be sieged and rendered irrelevant. A frontal assault on the resistances will only make things worse, with potentially disastrous consequences for the analysis.

Lacan's answer is to simply focus on the content rather than the patient's defense against it, and to evade the defenses without engaging them. His idea is to not bring attention to the resistances, but rather to note them internally, and then name – that is, interpret – the subject's desire for them. In fact, Lacan (1988a) claims that "interpretation of contents has for Freud the role of interpretation of defense" (28). In other words, the theoretical shift to an emphasis on isolating and dissecting defensiveness as such is a later development within the tradition, a revisionism that strays from the source. The point however, is to know exactly *when* to make this kind of interpretation. To get the timing right, and this is vital for Lacan in *Seminar I*, one has to have a good understanding of the rhythm of the transference. The issue is timing.

Towards the very end of the seminar, Lacan places an image on the board that is simply captioned "A schema of analysis." It looks like this:



A schema of analysis

Legend. A: Analysand, O: Analysand's "unconscious" ego. B: Analyst, O': Analyst's ego. C: A's Subject.

This image is meant to illustrate Lacan's doctrine of defense. For Lacan, the defense can only be worked through by the analyst's repeated interpretations of the analysand's desire when the latter's desire is "focused" upon the former's ego, in the transference. Let me say this again. For Lacan, defense is worked through not by confronting or interpreting it, but by naming the desire of the patient as it is expressed through the transference. In the terms of the graph just above these words, the interpretation must take place when "C," the discourse of the unconscious subject, coincides with "O'," the analyst's ego. This must be done many, many times, and gradually, says Lacan, the unacknowledged elements of the patient's subjectivity reveal themselves, as the patient very gradually absorbs their desire as projected onto the analyst's ego and as it is reflected back to them. Though the delicateness of this timing may seem impractical, leading to an interminable waiting game, Lacan seems confident that patience is a worthy price to pay when compared with the cost of an ill-timed intervention. It is crucial, Lacan maintains, that this process be understood as long winded, cyclical, and extremely fragile. One off-base, or ill-timed interpretation can bring the analysis to a screeching halt, as supposedly happened in the case of Dora (Lacan, 1988a, pp. 184-5).

Piecing this together requires that we return to the matter of the imaginary we touched on before. As we saw, Lacan makes a characteristic distinction between the Subject and the ego. There is one more comment worth bringing up in this context. He asserts: "Each time the subject apprehends himself as form and as ego...his desire is projected outside" (Lacan, 1988a, p. 170). This can be restated in a way that is much more obviously relevant to the question of the transference. Every time that the subject is captivated not just by their own ego, but even by another's ego (say, the analyst's) "the desire revives in the subject. But it is revived verbally" (Lacan, 1988a, p. 170). In other words: you can hear it. Anytime that the patient is trying to identify, or cement his idealized (imaginary) perception of themselves, especially vis-à-vis another, something happens on the register of speech to give away a desire that has been sidelined in order to make the idealized ego possible. The manufacture of an ego thus involves the purging of an excess, an expulsion of the non-conforming bits of the self. The word for this revival is transference. As Lacan will say later that year, "the transference is established in and through the dimension of speech," but, crucially, "it only brings about the revelation of this imaginary relation at certain crucial points in the spoken encounter with the other" (Lacan, 1988a, p. 282). [11] This is where we can really begin to make sense of the graphic above. Thanks to the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis, discourse begins to circulate freely in the therapy. It goes

around and around, oscillating between “deception” and “revelation,” between what Lacan calls “empty” and “full” speech, between an analysand who undoes their Self by going to pieces, and periodically collects those pieces back up in a moment of affirmation of unified selfhood. Yet this rhythmic movement of opening and closure opens the possibility to “the fertile error.” How so we ask? Because anytime the patient affirms themselves as ego, “holes” in their history open up where what has been repressed or excluded should be.

As I’ve said, the ego is at best an incomplete, selective rendering of what the patient is, and thus of the kinds of history the patient can tell about themselves, symbolic gaps and rents scatter themselves in the patient’s affirmations of self-coherence. To unscramble a bit of Lacan’s (1988a) words, “It is through the spoken assumption of [their] history that the subject becomes committed to the path of bringing into being...those imaginary fixations which were unassimilable to the symbolic development of his history...[that which] the subject fails to recognize in his structuring image” (p. 283).

It is here that we make the move from the other as other plain and simple, to the realm of transference proper, when the presence of the other becomes the ground for self-disclosure. The presence of and echoing by the other of the patient’s narrative is of the essence: “What is on the side of O passes over to the side of O” (Lacan, 1988a, p. 283). The unconscious undergirding of the patient’s idealized self-understanding comes to rest upon the analyst. Everything that the ego doesn’t know about itself is drawn out by this process. This is how we can make sense of the perplexingly anti-Lacanian phrasing that Lacan uses to name point O: “the unconscious notion of the ego.” In other words, “O” contains everything that must be disavowed in order to sustain the conscious ego. A disturbing presence is doubled here – there is the presence of the analyst, and that of the repressed. In each case the experience of presence appears as an “abrupt perception,” which “isn’t very easy to define” (Lacan, 1988a, p. 42).

Through therapy, through this “revolving dialogue,” the patient speaks from their initial point of view, that of the conscious, and eventually, via transference identification with the analyst. By means of the very act of directing words at the analyst while receiving the analyst’s echoes, the analysand may come to slowly assume (aver, avow) the unconscious supports of their ego: their history, and their constitutive symbolic constellation. We have to say “may” because this process is delicate. If the echoes of the [disavowed, unconscious] discourse come together too quickly, Lacan warns, then that’s when resistance may come into play. This might take the form of silence, or another form. But, as we will see in the next session, this resistance is not a result of anything other than the analysis moving too quickly. In this sense, we can admit that transference is both the engine and the resistance of the ideal progress of analysis. Good analyses must slow down in these moments, the truth has become too much to bear, discourse must move along in a different direction, it will return to where it must soon enough. [12] This is the technical error of resistance analysis: it makes an organic part of the process, what might be a minor tack or added twist into an obstacle, and in trying to force the patient back onto a pre-defined linear path, only further aggravates the situation. So that’s the meaning of the “schema” graph.

Yet Lacan’s critique of “egology,” or, as he says elsewhere of an “orthopedics of the ego” is just as much an ethical as it is a clinical critique. It’s worth mentioning that Lacan explores the full ethical dimension of his thinking in *Seminar VII*, but some hints of it are already firmly established in *Seminar I*. Paying attention to these threads in the text give perhaps the most clear and lucid picture of his technical critique, which will allow us to return to the place from where we started.

What follows from the technical recommendations of resistance-analysis is, on Lacan’s view, an insidious corruption of psychoanalysis: the cure becomes understood as the patient’s identification with the analysts’ ego. How does this follow? The conclusion is reached in two steps. Firstly, Lacan argues that, within the resistance-analysis mode, it is “no longer a question of analyzing the symbolic character of the defenses, but of lifting them” for the sake of steadying progress to a hazy beyond or behind of the defenses (the cure, the repressed).

This leads not just to the aforementioned impatience, and to the antagonistic attitude discussed in connection to Margaret Little, but also to a kind of projective identification, to use a Kleinian term, from the analyst towards the patient. In other words: by treating the patient as if they were defensive, the analyst prompts the patient to indeed become defensive. Conversely, the analyst's behaving as a 'defense adjuster' effectively reinforces the patient's projection of the analyst as the subject-supposed-to-know. [13] "Centering analytic intervention on the dissipation of [defensive] patterns which hide this beyond, the analyst has no other guide than his own conception[s]...this will always be a modeling of one ego by another ego" (Lacan, 1988a, p. 285). Lacan finds vindication of this in the moments where his adversaries speak of strengthening, or of adapting, the ego. To Lacan's ears, adapting the ego means strengthening and normalizing the ego. We can see Lacan inveigh against this kind of thinking throughout his early work. For him, and for his followers, to work with the ego is to work with the symptom rather than addressing the root cause, as analysis must. I mean this literally; Lacan (1988a) refers to the ego itself as nothing but a symptom. "The human symptom *par excellence*, the mental illness of man" (p. 16).

But there is a more pernicious dimension to this approach. In Lacan's view, it is impossible to cure the ego without holding at least an implicit sense of what the ego ought to look like. What is needed, Lacan says, is a "guide," or a standard for therapeutic action. As we see in the last quoted passage, Lacan argues that in the context of the clinic, there is no other guide for the therapist to rely on other than their very own ego. Again: "the analyst has no other guide than" his own ego. This is the crux of the ethical critique, I think. Whatever authoritarianism one might accuse Freud of, the theorists who followed him have made it worse. "I am rather inclined to believe that someone who...attempts to make an object [or ego] of the subject, his thing, to make him as supple as a glove so as to give him any form that he chooses...is, more so than Freud, driven by a need to dominate..." (Lacan, 1988a, p. 27). In other words, healing the ego requires a conception of what a healthy ego might look like and in a room with two egos, there's only one model available.

An illustrative case may be of help here; let us look at Lacan's (1988a) appraisal of Freud's Dora case, to which he devotes great attention in *Seminar I* (p. 184). Lacan understands Freud's missteps in that case in line with the ideas just mentioned. Freud essentially failed to recognize the proper object O', Frau K., instead assuming that the object of Dora's desire must have been Herr K. The reason for this misconstrual of Dora's discourse is that Freud was improperly inserting his own ego into the situation in two senses. Firstly, he was allowing his own prejudice, i.e. heteronormativity, to blind him to the fact that Dora's struggle was not with her desire for the older man, but for the older woman. Secondly, and consequently, Freud rendered an interpretation that assumed the *hic et nunc* frame: Dora's refusal to admit her desire for Herr K. was related to her putative shameful desire for Freud himself. This did not reveal Dora's desire, but colluded to sequester it.

Here we can connect the two vectors of the ethical critique: the presumption of a weak or maladapted ego, combined with a faith in the very possibility of adaptation, leads to a focus on the goal of adaptation, which then casts any pause or tangent as deviant and resistant, which in turn makes the ego appear even more maladapted. At the same time, the measure of adaptability is an inherently alter ego, which by its very alterity makes the patient's ego appear deviant, and resistant. Even worse, the criteria for improvement centers on the improved performance of the ego, which is, in Lacan's eyes, itself a symptom. Utilizing the analyst's ego as a guide or model therefore places the analysis at a double remove from the content upon which it should be working. In sum, the analysis leads the patient astray from the kind of work that would be helpful, and punishes them for not getting better as a result of it.

Thus, the prevailing ego-centered tendencies were bad ethically, insofar as they relied implicitly on the remaking of the patient in the analyst's ego image instead of helping them come to terms with their most difficult idiosyncrasies. They were suspect politically, insofar as they made its objective adaptation to the conditions of a society that went hand in hand with the continued repression of the patient's unconscious. Finally, they were clinically misdirected insofar as they didn't help the patient move towards the unacknowledged structures undergirding their unconscious, but rather moved the patient away from that most fruitful of the clinical achievements: "revelation" of the same. In fact, in misunderstanding the source

of less-than-full-cooperation in the clinic by remaining on the imaginary level of a one or two-body psychology, these analysts did not help the patient disentangle themselves from the true source of their symptoms, which was, if anything, an ego that was too strong. This was no way to reach towards a cure, Lacan thought, especially when any indication of hesitation on the part of the patient was rewarded with suspicion and added pressure.

That said, my hope is that the foregoing account can not only make good on the claim that Lacan does have a theory of defense after all, but that it can also help readers of Lacan to make sense of the stubborn emphasis on ego psychology as the whipping boy of the early period of his work. As we have seen, Lacan has his own theory of defense, among other things, and it carries with it vastly different practical recommendations for how to handle everything from the transference to resistances in the clinic. But we can also see why the emphasis on defense and resistance analysis, let alone a whole line of thinking called “ego psychology” would have been so anathema to his thinking, and as far as Lacan is concerned, also to Freud’s thinking.

Something interesting happens in Lacan’s analysis of the Dora case, though. When critiquing Freud for misconstruing the situation and making ill-timed interventions in the wrong direction, Lacan (1988a) says the following thing: “If he had at that time been initiated into what we call the analysis of resistances, he would have spoon fed her slowly, he would have started by teaching her which things in her were defenses, and, by dint of this, he would in fact have removed an entire set of minor defenses” (p. 184). Lacan (1988a) soon adds: “There is no reason why analysis, conceived of as a process of fleecing, of peeling away the systems of defence, should not work” (p. 185). In this remark, Lacan appears to approvingly cite the analysis of resistances that he is ostensibly arguing against. In fact, his emphasis on the revelation of the ego’s symbolic coordinates in an effort to loosen its maladaptive grip can make him sound like an ego psychologist. Think also of his emphasis on the ego as the sickness of humanity, does this not rhyme with the conviction that everything is channeled through the ego? Is this a case of *ignoratio elenchi*, or worse, a flat contradiction? The problem, Lacan contends, and here is the rub, is that the defense cannot be *explicitly named* by the analyst, the analyst cannot place themselves into a didactic role of psychology teacher. Rather, they must simply wait for the opportune time for the analysand to name their own so that this desire is both articulated and recognized by an other, the analyst. In short, the layers of resistance must be peeled away, but the agent of that fleecing must be the analysand themselves. This doesn’t mean that the analyst doesn’t track or evaluate the defense, it’s just that they don’t engage it, looking around it, instead.

Before concluding our discussion, I would like to return to a question that opened this section: if resistance doesn’t emerge from the ego, nor from language (that being censure), where does resistance come from? Lacan’s answer, in short, is that it comes from the analyst; but not just any analyst. Rather, it comes from an analyst who adopts an impatient approach to the defenses expressing themselves in the patient’s speech. Rather than taking these defenses, censures, and occlusions as obstacles to be torn down and worked through, Lacan counsels a seemingly more open and elliptical approach to the manifestations of hesitation, withdrawal, and reticence on the part of the analysand. The task, for Lacan, is not to bring attention to these moments, and to identify the patient’s ego with them, but to try to reframe the discourse in those moments, to try to illuminate the symbolic constellation that shapes them. In truth, it could be said, and this is the provocative thesis, it is possible that resistance as conceived by the ego analysts *should not arise* in properly conducted psychoanalysis. As long as the analyst remains inquisitive and symbolically minded, moments of defense should not count as obstacles or detours and should certainly not transform into battles of will between knowing analyst and defiant analysand.

Conclusion

It is in this sense that we can say that Lacan’s ethical and technical critiques of American Ego Psychology come together. All of the ethical problems raised by the ways Ego Psychology handles the resistances are doubly problematic given that they are created by a technical misconstrual of what resistance is and where it

comes from. Ego Psychology reduces all the speech in the consulting room to imaginary speech taking place in the here-and-now, and mistakes symbolic censure as ego resistance. In other words, Ego Psychology creates a problem where there is not one and then botches its solution to that problem. Against this Lacan revitalizes our psychoanalytic understanding of censure and resistance, shifting the frame of interpretation from the ego to the broader transindividual discourses.

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Notes:

[1] (Lacan 1988b, p. 210).

[2] Freud asserted three cornerstones of psychoanalytic theory: the unconscious, repression and resistance, and a belief in the importance of sexuality and the Oedipus complex. He maintained that “no one who cannot accept them all should count himself a psychoanalyst.” Standard Edition, Vol. 18, p. 237.

[3] I might add that contemporary developments of analysis have supplanted a reliance on repression with a reliance on dissociation between self-states as etiological model for mental pathology. These strands of

thinking, the interpersonal and relational especially, have also introduced crucial alterations to the classical theory of technique, and embraced an expansion of the kinds of patients that psychoanalysis might benefit. These schools have also updated the diagnostic categories, shifting away from the classical neurosis, psychosis, perversion to embrace a wider set of descriptive categories, such as borderline, or attachment-based descriptions, or leaving diagnostic thinking behind altogether. Finally, they have sought to replace Freud's tragic individualism with a comic communitarian conception of the self. For an study of this dichotomy: see Dmitri Nikulin, *Comedy, Seriously*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Nikulin basically argues that the Western tradition has put too much emphasis on the tragic model, wherein things end badly and we face the consequences alone. He contrasts this to a comedic model where the conflict occurs earlier in the plot but things ultimately end well, typically as a result of comedic collaboration between characters. Nikulin argues that this latter model may be a better one for politics than the tragic one. I might suggest the same for psychoanalysis.

[4] Correlatively, there has been a shift away from the classical diagnostic categories: neurosis, psychosis, perversion, to embrace a wider set of character structures.

[5] I am here reminded of the linguistic distinction highlighted by Samo Tomšič between psychology and psychoanalysis. *Psyche logos* attempts to find a unifying logic of the Soul, while *psyche analysis* attempts to chart the division and disharmonies constituting the soul. In this sense, psychoanalysis can be understood non-trivially as an anti-psychology. To return to unity, consistence, harmony, can thus be cast as a retrocession. Samo Tomšič, *The Labour of Enjoyment: Towards a Critique of Libidinal Economy*, (Berlin: August Verlag, 2019), 107-8.

[6] This metaphor, in use since at least Plato's Socrates, takes on new meaning indeed within this clinical context. Here, the truth is, though always-returning, constantly defended against and can be quite painful to realize. The analyst's 'impossible' task is to facilitate this difficult process of truth's emergence in tandem with an analysand whose ego will do anything it can to prevent it. The complications of such an operation are the very stuff of defense handling in analysis, and the subject of Lacan's theorizations here.

[7] See footnote 5.

[8] One might rightly wonder what place was accorded to the superego in this description. Lacan certainly included that agency in his discussions in Seminars 1 and 2. Most prominently, Lacan associates the superego with the introjection of the law, or of the totality of dictates embedded in one's cultural system. Specifically, he repeatedly refers to it as the aspects of the law within which one is embedded but about which one does not know. Thus, if the ego is taken to be an introjection of the imaginary, the superego is the unwitting introjection of the symbolic law, or as he says elsewhere, "a secondary introjection of the ideal ego." Lacan also distinguishes the superego as assumed but unwitting law from resistance, tending to frame the latter as a red herring, as I presently argue. For more, see: Lacan, *Seminar 1*, 83, 196-8; Lacan, *Seminar 2*, 127-30. See also: Adrian Johnston, *Irrepressible Truth*, (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 141.

[9] Here he isn't contradicting himself on the issue of internalism, as it might appear. By "ourselves," Lacan just means "psychoanalysts."

[10] He refers to the analysand's ego as "a" and to the analyst's ego as "a'." This is not to be confused with the later theorization of something called "objet a."

[11] The other refers both to "A" and to "O."

[12] In a refrain that would later become cliché, the analyst must "meet the analysand where they are," and stay with them, becoming less the driver and more the copilot to the process. Ethically speaking, one can't be judging or humiliating people for how they confront the defeats of castration.

[13] For another gloss on this dynamic, see Johnston, *Irrepressible Truth*, 6, 96-7.

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