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Lou Rose

The Dilemma of Dialogue in Lacan

Summary:

The author discusses the idea of dialogue in the works of Sergio Benvenuto and Jacques Lacan. As the essay emphasizes, Benvenuto's writing includes an exploration of the meaning of dialogue both for Lacan in particular and for Lacanian thought in general. Benvenuto indicates how Lacan's approach to dialogue was reflected both in his mode of teaching and in his theory. Benvenuto's work points to ways in which dialogue can be widened between Lacanians and other psychoanalysts and psychologists.

I

It is a privilege and pleasure to participate in this symposium on Sergio Benvenuto's book, *Conversations with Lacan: Seven Lectures for Understanding Lacan*. It creates an opportunity I have been looking forward to for a long time. I worked with Sergio on the translation of articles that he contributed to *American Imago*—the psychoanalytic journal that I edited for several years—but we were never able to meet and talk in person. Although this virtual symposium is still not a meeting in the full sense, I am now finally able to see and hear Sergio. I am very pleased to have the chance.

One of the reasons I was pleased to see Sergio's book was its title. From the title I could see that the book dealt with what has always been for me a key issue in the work of Jacques Lacan: the problem of dialogue. My presentation here focuses on how Sergio explores that problem throughout his book.

At the outset of my presentation, I want to make two clarifications. First, when I speak of dialogue in Lacan, I am not referring to any particularities or difficulties associated with Lacan's terminology or with his methods of presentation. Instead, I use the term in a very wide, everyday sense—as the mutual exchange and discussion of ideas, insights, and information within a shared community. I want to emphasize, however, both aspects of that ordinary usage of the term: not only the role of exchange and discussion but also the significance of shared community. In ancient Athens, for example, what we now refer to as free speech meant, as the ancient historian M.I. Finley pointed out, free speech *within the Athenian assembly*. Engaging in speech and engaging in citizenship were linked to each other.

Secondly, I want to clarify that I think Sergio's title did more than simply announce the question of dialogue as an important theme in his book. The first part of the title—before the colon—refers to *conversations with Lacan*; the subtitle, however, shifts the focus to *lectures on Lacan*. That distinction, I argue, is no accident. The contrast between what comes before and after the colon—between conversations and lectures—points to the question of dialogue as a crucial dilemma in Lacan's theory. That dilemma, I would argue, is present as an underlying concern throughout Sergio's book. At most points, the issue of dialogue remains implicit, but at one point, I will argue, it emerges explicitly as one of the book's defining questions.

The problem of dialogue in Lacan—or the problem of how dialogue functions in Lacan’s theory—has implications, I think, for how we interpret and apply Lacan’s ideas. Those implications can be stark. As far back as the ancient world, the study and use of dialogue has provided a foundation for radical thought. Ossification sets in when dialogue ceases.

II

Sergio’s first chapter introduces his concern with the dilemma of dialogue in Lacan. Here Sergio describes Lacan’s conviction that theoretical formulations should have the immediate impact of actions. Sergio writes: “Lacan considers his own theory a *performative analytical act*” (Benvenuto, 2020, p. 4). He characterizes Lacan’s conception of theorizing as “theory-action” (p. 4). Further, Sergio explains that in Lacanian theory, healing occurs not through the relation between therapist and patient, as in relational theories, but instead through an experience of sudden clarification or wordless illumination. In other contexts, we might characterize such an experience as a moment of epiphany or even shock. Lacan would describe that experience as the patient confronting the inevitable “opaqueness” of language or signifiers (p. 11). As Sergio explains this phenomenon, patients in that moment encounter the surplus of meanings that attach to their mental lives. In this regard, as Sergio points out, Lacanian theory shows a similarity to other non-Freudian approaches that also emphasize therapy as in part an “ineffable” exchange, or an exchange in which the “word is diminished” (p. 19).

Lacan’s conception of theory as action and his emphasis on moments of illumination have a close connection. They reflect Lacan’s theoretical emphasis on immediate experience, or on an experience that cannot be conveyed meaningfully through speech. They de-emphasize, or even devalue, theorizing as a stimulus to dialogue. Further, they reflect Lacan’s understanding of human freedom as necessarily involving a condition of isolation. These theoretical implications of the dilemma of dialogue in Lacan remain among the core concerns in Sergio’s book.

III

I began by saying that the concern with the meaning of dialogue in Lacan remains chiefly implicit throughout much of Sergio’s book. How then is that concern evident in the book’s following chapters? First, I think it appears as part of the overall organization of the book. Each chapter, I would argue, is shaped around a question that centers on dialogue. The second chapter, for example, deals with whether dialogue about Lacan, given the condition of psychoanalysis as a whole, still has relevance for current cultural and intellectual debates. The third chapter explores whether Lacanians and contemporary scientists, in particular cognitive scientists, can maintain a productive dialogue with each other. The book then shifts from questions concerning communication within or between professions to questions that apply to communication between individuals—whether as analysts, as patients, or as social and political creatures. Most importantly, however, throughout the book Sergio explores how Lacan understands subjectivity, how that understanding manifests itself in various aspects of Lacan’s theory, and how subjectivity as a concept guides Lacanian research, clinical therapy, and philosophic reflection. In the background to Sergio’s discussion of subjectivity, I would argue, is a concern with the dilemma of dialogue in Lacan.

In the chapter on the Lacanian division between the symbolic and imaginary orders, Sergio provides a succinct statement of the importance of subjectivity in Lacan’s psychological work: “He [Lacan] is interested in reconstructing the history and structure of each subjectivity” (p. 89). Sergio stresses the strictness with which Lacan confined himself to that project: “The others that we take for granted—all the others who are not myself—actually have no place in this [Lacan’s] system” (p. 89). In the chapter on *après-coup* and alienation, Sergio examines the connection between language and subjectivity in Lacan’s theory.

According to Lacan, persons use language to identify and comprehend the connections between the disparate events in their lives. In this way, language not only offers the means to establish a coherent connection to external events, but also sustains a sense of inward, psychological coherence. For Lacan, language produces in us the consciousness of our independent subjective relation to the world and to others, and it keeps the consciousness of our subjectivity at the center of our experience. By doing so, it establishes a structure within which we perceive and carry on our lives. It instills in us what could also be described as a sense of personal destiny. As Sergio explains, according to Lacan “it is impossible to stand outside language” (p. 113). Yet, as Sergio points out in the book’s concluding chapter, that emphasis on language does not lead Lacan to emphasize the psychological or intellectual significance of dialogue between people. Thus, with regard to Lacan’s interpretation of letters and letter writing, Sergio writes: “Here Lacan seems to fall back into a ‘communicational’ vision of language by which human beings exchange messages. Yet the ‘pure’ Lacanian signifier is by no means a message” (p. 170). At this point Sergio’s concern with the dilemma of dialogue in Lacan becomes explicit.

IV

On the final page of his book, Sergio recounts the story of how Heraclitus responded to strangers who were taken aback by the philosopher’s poverty: he did not reject or ignore them, but instead convinced them to stay and speak with him by his hearth. Sergio describes the psychoanalytic movement as, at its origins, an encounter between “strangers,” and as an example of that early encounter, he recalls the case of Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud: “Even Einstein wanted to meet Freud and the two began a famous correspondence on the subject of peace and war” (p. 179). Their exchange, as Sergio indicates, built on what concerned them both as citizens. The conclusion of Sergio’s book, however, draws attention to the dilemma of dialogue not only within Lacan’s theory in particular, but within the Lacanian and psychoanalytic movement as a whole. It calls for Lacanians, psychoanalysts, and psychological scientists to engage in a new dialogue. Such dialogue must overcome the sense of being strangers to each other.

Sergio’s book both indicates the openings for dialogue and warns of the obstacles to it. Based on Sergio’s approach to Lacan, what would I see as important openings for dialogue? First, I for one think that neuroscience has provided a healthy shock to the system of psychological theory and research. Now Lacanians, as well as other psychoanalytic psychologists, can demonstrate how the concept of subjectivity is intellectually meaningful and practically useful in various types of research and therapy. Second, Lacanians can continue to help psychologists along the path of studying the structural foundations of thought and emotion, and help keep them on that path. Finally, Lacanians, as well as other practicing psychoanalysts, can continue to advance dialogue about the most effective and productive methods of clinical intervention.

Where do obstacles to dialogue exist? I focus here on issues that Sergio raised in connection with Lacan. First, a tendency toward intellectual self-isolation should not be equated with a concern for subjectivity, either in theory or in practice. Second, a focus on language as providing the structural framework of interaction with the world and with others, should not devalue the social significance and transformative potential of dialogue within that structure. Finally, Lacanians should continue to explore, as Sergio does, the nature of our engagement with the world and with others. Advancing such engagement is one of the crucial goals of both theory and therapy. As the ancient Greeks understood, dialogue reflected, reaffirmed, and widened a sense of shared community.

Conversations with Lacan crystallizes not only the essential insights of Jacques Lacan, but also, and just as importantly, the insights of Sergio Benvenuto. Sergio is one of those contemporary psychologists and thinkers, among whom I would include Élisabeth Roudinesco, who has adapted or even rescued Lacan for later generations, and he has done so in part by reviving the concept of dialogue. He has shown that the Lacanian emphasis on the significance of language and subjectivity need not exclude a concern for the meaning of engagement with the world or an interest in the significance of dialogue with others. As I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, I can attest to the value of dialogue with Sergio.

Bibliography:

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Bio:

Louis Rose is Professor of Modern European History at Otterbein University and Executive Director of the Sigmund Freud Archives. His most recent book is *Psychology, Art, and Antifascism: Ernst Kris, E. H. Gombrich, and the Politics of Caricature* (Yale, 2016), for which a Chinese translation is now in preparation. His first book, *The Freudian Calling: Early Viennese Psychoanalysis and the Pursuit of Cultural Science* (Wayne State, 1998), received the 1999 Austrian Cultural Institute Prize for Best Book in Austrian Studies. It was followed by *The Survival of Images: Art Historians, Psychoanalysts, and the Ancients* (Wayne State, 2001). From 2011-2018, he was Editor of the interdisciplinary psychoanalytic journal *American Imago*. He is a member of the History of Psychoanalysis Committee of the International Psychoanalytical Association. In 2017, he received Honorary Membership in the American Psychoanalytic Association.