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Book Review Essay: The Limits and Gifts of Psychoanalysis, on “On Freud” by Elvio Fachinelli

Review of *On Freud*, by Elvio Fachinelli, The MIT Press, 2022, 152 pp.

In this review, I amplify and elaborate one of Elvio Fachinelli's (2012/2022) recurrent concerns: “the anthropological and historical limit of psychoanalysis” (p. 60). Fachinelli's essays in *On Freud* are flush with provocative insights that foretoken contemporary research projects and investigations in the fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy, anthropology, and others. This is due to Fachinelli's remarkable ability to see past dogma and doctrine into the epistemological and cultural problematics that underlie psychoanalysis as a body of knowledge or regime of thought, as a practice for interpreters, critics, and clinicians, and as an object that has a definitive place in the popular imagination. My goal is to highlight where and how we can begin with one of these suggestions. To that end, I focus on three essays in the collection: “The Emperor's Gift,” “Psychoanalysis”, and “The Unexpected and Surprise in Analysis”. Additionally, I compare Fachinelli's suggestions and arguments to those of two seminal anthropological thinkers, Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, in order to demonstrate how Fachinelli's texts are well poised for us to incorporate them into canonical discussions that remain vexatious and tantalizing. The starting point – a common feature of each of the essays in *On Freud* (2012/2022) – is Freud: Freud as a bourgeois, Viennese man; as a medical student; as a researcher; as a writer with a particular style; as a troubling and dubious case-study of the limits of self-analysis; as a person with their own neuroses, foibles, and quirks; and, of course, as the founder of psychoanalysis.

In “The Emperor's Gift,” Fachinelli reconstructs Freud's self-analysis of a dream, and then offers further biographical analysis of Freud and his relation to gifts, debts, and exchange in general. Fachinelli appears to suggest that the impersonal relationship of analysis depends upon the hierarchies and standards of the first psychoanalytic association. In turn, these hierarchies and standards originate in Freud's own bourgeois attitudes towards money, gifts, and obligation. At bottom, Freud was always a conservative of his era and he remained so until the end. Fachinelli's suggestion prompts a broader investigation of the political-economic operations that allow analysis to function and even thrive (at least in the mid-twentieth century) as well as a critique of any normative claims about the anthropology and history of obligation and gift-giving. Thus, one can say that “The Emperor's Gift” opens a more specific field regarding psychoanalysis as an historical-form.

The “obvious” starting point would seem to be Marcel Mauss's *The Gift: Forms and Reasons for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925/2002). Originally published in 1925, the work is contemporary to Freud's later research and status as a public intellectual; it no doubt drew comparisons to Freud's own speculative psycho-anthropological texts. The primary object of *The Gift* is a demonstration of the invariance of reciprocal exchange amongst so-called archaic societies and kinship groups. However, the implicit object of *The Gift* is arguably to demonstrate how anthropological evidence denies the attribution of inevitability or destiny to the

capitalist mode of production (Mauss was a well-known and ardent socialist in his time, another interesting difference with Freud perhaps). Perhaps the most well-known evidence of such a practice that Mauss provides is that of the *potlatch* in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia of what is now the United States and Canada. The *potlatch* is a practice whereby clans or different kin-groups engage in an excessive ritual of gift-giving. The result here is not an accumulation of wealth, since it is almost guaranteed that one or more groups will almost certainly give more than the others, coming out “worse” from the standpoint of someone who may believe that economic activity is and ought to be self-centered (Mauss, 1925/2002, p. 59). Of course, there are cases of less extreme or apparent reciprocal, gift-based “economies”, but nonetheless Mauss’s formal analysis ends in a claim that the origins of inter-clan relationships, and thus human relationships in general, depend on reciprocal gift-giving rather than utilitarian accumulation, competition, or even natural selection in a puerile “survival-of-the-fittest” rationale.

The picture becomes more complex and more directly related to the ontogenesis of subjectivity and regimes of thought in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s intensification of Mauss’s research. In *La pensée sauvage*, recently re-translated into English as *Wild Thought* (1962/2021), Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that these social instantiations of reciprocity must depend on classifications of kin relationships and determinations of what constitutes consanguinity since one needs to know who an appropriate recipient of the gift is. Underlying these classification systems is an invariant analytic reason (Lévi-Strauss, 1962/2021, pp. 41-2). So, what Mauss identifies as invariant in the practices of reciprocal economies is only an effect of an even more profound invariant, something akin to a transcendental faculty in more philosophical vocabulary. Therefore, exchange has even less to do with presumed “material” conditions of scarcity and more to do with the architecture of reason.

In light of the findings of structural anthropology, and regardless of debates internal to the discipline itself which might verify one interpretation of field observations over another, Fachinelli’s suggestion becomes glossed in further urgency. Does the historical-form of psychoanalysis overly depend on its founder’s socially mediated attitudes and neuroses towards gifts, and furthermore do they exist in direct contradistinction to the architecture of human reason? Freud disavowed what he called “metaphysics”, and ever more increasingly as he tried to find refuge in the supposed certainty of the biological and medical sciences. However, the possibility of a “metaphysical” or “ontological” invariant at the heart of human consciousness is unavoidable to us.

In regard to the logic of exchange and reciprocity, Fachinelli’s analysis of Freud’s dream provides one potential avenue for furthering this investigation into gift giving, social bonds, and relationality. Fachinelli (2012/2022) writes that the

gift is a burden for Freud because he is unable to experience gratitude; but ingratitude is a fault [...]. In this light, the indiscretion of the dream is in giving something to someone, but something that is not ours, of which we only have the custody. It is a manner that *imitates* the behavior of authority and its mode of giving, but is stealthy, illicit, and therefore guilty. (p. 83)

Fachinelli then asks, “How does Freud try to get out of this situation?” An *à propos* question given that in Freud’s dream he “kills” his debtor with the Latin phrase “NON VIXIT” or “he did not live”. The tense is crucial here; this dream-utterance implies that the creditor, Joseph Paneth, either failed to survive some annihilating catastrophe or simply never lived. In both cases, the dreamer negates the figure of authority and power, sentencing him to a dream-death, playing at monarchical sovereignty. Freud himself obscures the connection between negation and sovereignty or representations of authority and power. As Fachinelli reminds us, the Latin signifier, NON VIXIT, curiously reverses a well-known inscription on a statue of Joseph II in Vienna. The introduction of an association with the emperor is not a stretch of the reader’s imagination since Fachinelli highlights the strange and infrequent references to Joseph in relation to discussions of money, poverty, and charity across Freud’s texts (pp. 79-80). In Freud’s analysis of the dream, the *statement* of execution refers only to his friends and associates who appear as enemies to Freud’s own will to exercise authority and power over his fledgling field. Personal and filial representations of power

thus take precedence in the dreamer's self-interpretation, and these institutional or so-called structural instantiations of power and sovereignty disappear into the background. The disavowed association is suspiciously convenient as it allows Freud to retain strict models according to which neurotic discourse can "always" conform. (Moreover, it also conveniently justifies the importance Freud gave to monetary exchange for analysis.) Thus, Freud seems to ignore the more general question about sovereignty's potential relationship to the formation of human consciousness.

What significance does the dreamer's mime of a monarch sentencing someone to death have then? Alternatively put, does negation logically depend upon an assumption of authority? This is the curious paradox and contradiction of negation. For the enunciated "No" always produces something else, some affirmation that is either implied or displaced, and in that latter instance this affirmation is even implicitly disavowed thus setting off another series of negations, negations of negations, affirmations, substitutions, *et cetera*. Thus, the effect of the enunciated "No" escapes the speaker, especially in the case of Freud as the dreamer, for his "NON VIXIT" results not only in the supposed negation of someone who holds power over him but is the negation of any supposition of sovereignty or authority over negation and its consequent productions. Therefore, negation entails a suicidal sovereignty. In the context of a reflection on monarchical or institutional authority, the conclusion we must reach is that these forms of authority depend upon a contradiction with no dialectical recuperation or resolution.

Returning to Mauss and Lévi-Strauss's respective discussions of structural reciprocity and its dependence on an analytic logic of classification, we can locate how this logic of negation features in the *potlatch* and other modes of reciprocity. In giving beyond so excessively that one potentially ruins their clan's gains from a harvest or hunt, one materially removes the clan's possible survival.

Moreover, and perhaps more tellingly, Lévi-Strauss (1962/2021) observes and extrapolates from anthropological research into naming practices in order to attribute a structural character to negation. This structural character emerges in the context of cultures' attempts to determine concrete relations, and therefore involves an implicit logic of relationality that is more abstract and general, indeed structural, than these concrete kinship relations. Lévi-Strauss introduces some general patterns in naming practices thusly:

In broad strokes, the system can be defined by three kinds of periodicity: in relation to his ascendants, an individual goes from necronym to necronym; in relation to his siblings, from autonym (a term that is convenient for designating proper names in this kind of a system) to necronym; in relation to his children, finally, from tekronym to necronym. (p. 216)

To clarify: a necronym is a name gained by the death of kin, and specifically the death of an ascendant. An autonym is a proper name belonging to an individual. Finally, a tekronym designates one's relationship to a living relative (father of So-and-so, for example). As Lévi-Strauss tells us, what fascinates are not the features of these three types of names but the systems that govern name-changes and initial nominations.

Of these three kinds of periodicity, Lévi-Strauss (1962/2021) asks, "But what is the logical relation among these three types of terms? And what is the logical relation between the three types of periodicity" (p. 216)? The explanatory "key" is the use or lack of negation in the determination of different concrete relations. A tekronym and a necronym refer to a bond of kinship and are thus "relational" terms. The autonym does not have this characteristic, and from this point of view it is opposed to the preceding forms: it determines only a "self" in contrast with other "selves." This opposition (implicit in the autonym) between self and other makes it possible to distinguish the tekronym from the necronym. The former, which includes a proper name (which is not that of the subject), can be defined as expressing a *relation to an other self* (p. 216; Lévi-Strauss' emphasis).

The negative relation between self and other is the "effect" of an autonym; it delimits a self from other selves; this is a form of negation in that "Patrick" stands opposed to "Marilyn" and *vice versa* through the operation of an implied statement: 'Patrick-is-not-Marilyn' or "Marilyn-is-not-Patrick". With this in mind,

Lévi-Strauss is able to claim that the teknonym involves a proper name but in a different way from the autonym since it is the proper name of someone else. Thus, negation subtends the relationship named by the teknonym in that the proper name does not refer to the individual it names. As for the necronym, it

does not involve any proper name, [and it] consists in the statement of a kinship relation, which is that of an other, unnamed, with a self, equally unnamed. We can, then, define it as *an other relation*. Finally, this relation is negative since the necronym mentions it only to declare it abolished. (Lévi-Strauss, 1962/2021, p. 216)

What curiously differentiates the necronym is thus not a proper name since there is no named individual or self in the necronym. It defines an other relation insofar as that relationship is quite different from the relationships implied by autonoms and teknonyms: the system abolishes the relationship to the dead ascendant or kin.

Now, comparison of the use of necronyms and Fachinelli's analysis of Freud's NON VIXIT reinforces the argument that negation plays some ontogenetic role in the formation of social bonds and self-understanding. Both refer to a logic of relationality based on discontinuity:

[E]ither the system of proper names forms the finest mesh of the filter, with which it is consequently solidary; or it is left outside [in the case of the necronym and Freud's NON VIXIT], but still with the function of individuating the continuous, and in this way sets up a discontinuity that is a preliminary condition for classification. (Fachinelli, 2012/2022 p. 224)

In this manner, we can arguably claim that for Fachinelli and Lévi-Strauss individuation, as negatively related to other individuals and relationality itself, requires the abolition of those other individuals or one's relationship to them. The *potlatch* is just one concrete and ritualized instance of an attempt to "kill" the other by removing any relation of obligation to them *qua* excessive gift giving.

As I have already argued, the anthropological research into gift giving and kinship in general strongly repudiate naïve and baldly ideological claims about the "natural-ness" of capitalism, commerce, and competition. However, this does not mean that reciprocity is more "natural". Quite the contrary, this analysis of negation suggests that despite the presence of extreme forms of reciprocity and the manner in which it conditions individuation and establishes kinship relationships on an anthropogenetic level, we do not have the means or reasons to derive the thesis "communal ways of life are natural or more natural than competitive societies". This is because discontinuity or individuation necessarily conditions encyclopedic or classificatory systems, which are themselves artifices of human thought and not natural objects.

This raises the question of psychoanalysis as a knowledge and a system that relies on classifications, however particular or idiosyncratic those classifications may sometimes appear in case histories. Fachinelli identified the necessity of the question, no doubt in the wake of Jacques Lacan's teaching on science and psychoanalysis (see Jacques Lacan, 1966, pp. 493-528). Yet, we should not underestimate the originality of Fachinelli's invitation to think of psychoanalysis as a historical-form, much in the same way the structural anthropologist would treat the naming-system of the Penan of Borneo.

First, let us take stock of the reasons for psychoanalysis becoming an object of theoretical knowledge as an historical-form. Fachinelli (2012/2022) provides at least five reasons for this transformation.

1. "[T]his discipline, directly or through techniques derived from it, has reached an almost planetary spread" (p. 49).
2. This "is a type of diffusion that recalls the expansion of an ideological movement, or equally of a religion in the traditional sense" (p. 50).
3. Moreover, "[i]t is not the diffusion... of a strictly scientific discovery. Therefore, in this respect, psychoanalysis is closer to the traditional humanistic discipline than to, say, molecular biology" (p. 50).

4. There is little disagreement amongst psychoanalysts regarding a type of “‘experimental’ frame” for analysis. Yet “disagreement arises as soon as we pass from the plane of repeatable, individual-typical experience to an attempt at general comprehension or explanation of experience itself, of its presuppositions and implications” (p. 54).
5. Finally, it is incontrovertible that an entire culture identified itself with emblematic figures in Freud’s case studies, like the Wolf Man and Judge Schreber. Thus, “[w]e must suppose that something characteristic of Freud acts upon or acted within this culture” (pp. 58-9).

Put simply, psychoanalysis actively changed and continues to change culture. In so doing, psychoanalysis warrants investigations as if it is a regime of thought akin to the classificatory and encyclopedic regimes of wild thought identified by Lévi-Strauss. At this juncture, the question shifts from “Is psychoanalysis a religious *techne* or a science (natural, human, social, or chimerical)?” to “As a system of thought, what is the structure that determines the effects of psychoanalysis in a given culture?” That question touches on “the anthropological and historical limit of Freudian psychoanalysis” (p. 60). Of course, I have already provided one means of advancing this inquiry beyond the question Fachinelli closes “Psychoanalysis” on, i.e. a study of invariant structures that precondition thought itself. After all, psychoanalysis is a thought or a regime of thinking, and it constitutes a knowledge, albeit an idiosyncratic one, that problematizes “conventional” and “easy” distinctions made amongst different sciences or disciplines.

Note, however, that I have not characterized my elaboration of Fachinelli’s question as a turn to structural anthropology or an attempt to privilege structural anthropology as a study of regimes of thought as historical-forms. If anything we should mime Fachinelli’s gesture in the face of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss’ provocative claims by grasping them in light of the fundamental insight of psychoanalysis, no matter the branch, school, or movement: unconscious desire betrays a fundamental discontinuity *within* individual subjects. We know not our desires transparently, therefore we know not ourselves transparently. This “mixture”, crude as it may be here, allows us to move a step beyond the point of view of the anthropologists and psychoanalysts together, allowing us to ask that more general question about invariant structures and their relation or non-relation, continuity or discontinuity, with thought. Therefore, the anthropologists’ indices and encyclopedias of classificatory systems does not provide us the means of investigating the limits of these systems.

So, what “discipline” or *other* regime of thought allows us to hold anthropology and psychoanalysis side-by-side and at the same time allow us to study their historical limits? The temptation in some circles may be to turn towards hermeneutics, which prides itself on its inherent “interdisciplinarity”. However, hermeneutics, more so than either anthropology or psychoanalysis, relies upon a defined methodology: interpretation. Hermeneutics is, on the one hand, the crown jewel in the diadem of the humanistic disciplines. On the other hand, it is also the sign of the ultimate limit of these regimes of thought since interpretation alone cannot provide the tool or pathway through which one could trace or outline the invariant structure that determines the effects of historical-forms, like psychoanalysis. Interpretation always remains within the cultural mythology, sometimes precipitating novel and compelling results, but none that sublimate a historical or anthropological limit. In remaining within and on the terms of its objects, interpretation by definition can at best only modify those objects rather than find their preconditions or immanent structures. Additionally, interpretation cannot call into question the status of the subject who interprets or the subject who is supposed to come to knowledge *qua* interpretation. This is partially Fachinelli’s criticism of analysts and theorists who identify psychoanalysis with hermeneutics (and interpretation more broadly understood, to boot). Interpretation is not up to the task of putting psychoanalysis, anthropology, and other regimes of thought in unilateral positions.

Furthermore, interpretation is insufficient and even inappropriate in psychoanalysis because one cannot plan an analysis, and interpretation requires a plan, even in a loose sense. In a more rigid sense, interpretation entails the application of models and schemata, which means that the “plan” is just more explicit in these interpretative approaches than in their “looser” counterparts (see Todorov, 1970/1973 for an example of

interpretation enacted in this rigid sense). In “The Unexpected and Surprise in Analysis”, Fachinelli (2012/2022) explains that

[s]urprising oneself and letting oneself be surprised, in both interlocutors, seems necessary so that the analysis can proceed; or I would say, instead that there can be psychoanalysis *tout court*. Otherwise, there is just a ministering and administering of knowledge, repetition of the already known[.] (p. 94)

As I have presented it, interpretation requires this repetition of the already known in both its rigid and loose sense. Therefore, hermeneutics does not provide us the means of studying regimes of thought unilaterally and at the same time allow us (potentially) to surpass their historical and anthropological limits. It does not even have a firm position within psychoanalysis, let alone any regime of thought.

Yet, what of surprise in Fachinelli’s in formulation? Does this other regime of thought require surprise in some form to emerge? Certainly, for Fachinelli (2012/2022) at least, surprise is ever-present in every analysis, and surprise is even that which determines an analyst and analysand’s “discoveries” (p. 95-6). Fachinelli goes so far as to defend the variable-length session championed by Lacan as a means of facilitating surprise and unexpected punctuations in the speech of the analysand. Of course, the peril with adopting this as a standard approach is that it may turn psychoanalysts into “professionals of surprise, people who at every moment draw a new rabbit out of a hat” (p. 94). This would repeat the mistake of stultified approaches to analysis and, in my brief investigation here, to thought itself. The question remains unanswerable in this review, but suggestive comparison provides an orientation, I believe.

The essays that compose *On Freud* (2012/2022) are full of suggestions ripe for elaboration. I have demonstrated the beginnings and stakes of one such elaboration here in amplifying the question of the historical and anthropological limits of psychoanalysis. The attempt to bring psychoanalysis (and structural anthropology in turn) to the level of so-called wild thought returns us to the perennial question of the conditions of thought and the ontogenesis of a thing that thinks. This requires demystifying the mythologies surrounding Freud as founder and ‘man of science’. Indeed, Fachinelli demonstrates a remarkable talent for reducing the mythology of the founding father of psychoanalysis. He convincingly gestures towards the necessity of questioning Freud and taking his discourse to its limits. *On Freud* is thus a helpful resource for those who wish to think and rethink not only what psychoanalysis can be today. Of course, this will require us to go beyond, under, and around the historical and anthropological boundaries endemic to the limited gift of psychoanalysis.

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