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# Masochism and Sexuality: An Interview with Jacque André

## *Summary:*

The author's thesis differs from Freud's theory of a primary non-sexual masochism and of a death drive with a biological nature. For the author, masochism certainly takes on an original position in the field of sexual drives, due to the fundamental anthropological situation which places the infant face to face with an adult who has a sexual unconscious and is, therefore, active in his relationship with him. A sexual masochistic drive results from the infant's attempt to translate the adult messages that overwhelm him. Masochism is at the heart of the human sexual drive, insofar as it seeks tension without discharging it, and it subsists as such in adult sexuality as well (preliminary pleasure).

**Jacques André: You propose a generalizing movement for the theory of seduction based on the primacy of the adult other's unconscious, on the way this unconscious permeates caring gestures from the first moments of life. This generalizing movement brings with it masochism, that thus becomes coextensive with human sexuality: the movement of repression, which is constitutive of unconscious fantasy, the associated excitation, and drives. You say that this movement can only be experienced in a masochistic manner to the extent that the assault of drives, the assault of the ego by an internal foreign body, namely unconscious fantasy, can only be a painful experience on the part of a passive, traumatized ego.**

**My first question is the following: how does this generalizing movement differ from Freud's when he affirms, in the second part of his work, the primacy of masochism with respect to sadism, after having maintained the contrary position for such a long time?**

Jean Laplanche: The difference is essential. Freud claims that primary masochism, a correlate of the death drive, is an endogenous, non-sexual force, which is irreducible to anything else. As for me, I spoke from the very outset of the "originary position of masochism in the area of sexual drives". However well anchored it may be within the origins of human drives, this means that masochism, in my view:

1. cannot be explained in terms of an internal biological force that's inherent to all forms of organization, which could be called the "death drive"
2. is linked to complex processes that give rise to sexual drives resulting from enigmatic messages from the other
3. is intrinsically sexual.

This ties in with my criticism of the "death drive", which I do not consider as constitutional aggression or self-aggression, but as the "soul" of human sexuality itself.

**JA: It's thus an implicit criticism of Freud's biological view of the death drive.**

JL: Yes. I've dedicated a number of books to criticizing the "economic problem of masochism". Freud presents the problem in the following way: if masochism really is basic in man, what then becomes of the pleasure principle, the "guardian of life"? Is it not, as he says, "anesthetized"? For me, this apparent impasse doesn't take into account an underlying difference in Freud, the difference between drive-based sexuality and instinct-based sexuality, or rather, between infantile sexuality, a sexuality that one can call preliminary or pre-and paragenital, on the one hand, and an instinct-based genital sexuality on the other. It's a topic that I was quite happy to find in a recent, unpublished paper by Widlöcher (2000), in which he says quite rightly:

Laplanche and I agree on this point, one needs to recognize that sexuality linked to fantasy, the sexuality that we mainly deal with in analysis, is not a sexuality that functions according to the pleasure principle, one which seeks discharge and a reduction of tension. It is, instead, a sexuality that seeks excitation.

**JA: Does this amount to taking a certain distance with respect to the economic point of view?**

JL: It would be an inverted economic point of view. Let's say that it amounts to taking a certain distance with respect to an economic point of view in which only biological aims come into play. It's the idea that human infantile sexuality goes against biology from the very outset. One finds traces of this in Freud, even if only regarding his reflections on the term Lust. In German, Lust means, on the one hand, "pleasure", in the most ordinary sense of the pleasure principle; hence the pleasure of discharge, that is, the reduction of tension to an optimal level. But on the other hand, one encounters a series of terms in which the opposite notion is introduced; namely, the search for excitation. This is the case for Schaulust—one can't simply say "the pleasure of watching" since there is no discharge in "watching"—in which there is instead an increase of excitation. Here, one's forced to translate the term Lust by something that's either close to "desire" or, if you will, "pleasure-desire". At times, Freud complained about the ambiguity of the term Lust, and at other times he was quite pleased with it. Thus the Lust in Vorlust ("fore-pleasure") and in the majority of infantile pleasures will be found once again in the fore-pleasures of the adult. Now, Lust is a pleasure of charge, a pleasure of tension, and not a pleasure of discharge. One finds the same nuance in Berührungslust, which is the "pleasure-desire of touching". "Touching" of its own doesn't result in discharge; to the contrary, it's an attraction that feeds itself, that tends towards an ever-greater charge. This is clearly found in the fore-pleasures of adults. But in contrast to what occurs in the child, the adult's fore-"pleasure-desires" are subordinated to pleasure in the biological sense of the term, that is, to discharge.

One must thus exclude Freud's biological objection regarding masochism. In fact, once one admits that there is a pleasure of tension, of charge, there is nothing surprising about masochism, except the fact that it acts against life. But there is nothing surprising in the fact that human beings act against life, to the extent that human beings can pursue their pleasure to the detriment of self-preservation.

**JA: But isn't this fundamentally surprising?**

JL: It's no more surprising than the human phenomenon itself. It's no more surprising than mankind in general, who's capable of any number of things, including committing suicide, sticking needles through his cheeks, or lying down on a bed of nails. It's surprising from a biological point of view. "What the devil did he want on that galley?" Molière's question remains universally valid.

**JA: If masochism is at the basis of human psychosexuality, if it's present at the very first moments, how can one clearly define what's designated as masochism—masochism in the strict sense of the word—that which characterizes a particular psychosexual mechanism, whether it be perverse or moral? Would this mean, in light of your theory, that masochistic fantasy is nothing more than a simple derivation of originary masochism?**

JL: Between the two there is still considerable mediation. Originary masochism can be considered as a kind of general category that characterizes the birth of human sexuality. It's the fact that the small human being is, so to speak, attacked from the very outset by the other; the fact that he's very quickly attacked by inner fantasy, which one can consider as an enemy of the ego. Clinical masochism derives from this, but by way

of complex mediations. Nevertheless, I think that in all preliminary sexuality, which is perverse in the Freudian sense, there remains a masochistic element.

**JA: It seems to me that you, more than Freud, insist upon the existence of masochism in fore-pleasure. Spanking can certainly be a fore-pleasure, but all the same it's not the kind of fore-pleasure that's best shared. Is it simply the idea of the increase of tension in fore-pleasure that leads you to speak of masochism?**

JL: I think that it's the rise in tension in itself and the search for this rise in tension that bear witness, like a kind of relic, or archeological ruin, to the exogenetic origin of sexuality.

**JA: It's the pleasure of making the tension rise and maintaining it without discharge?**

JL: Of fueling it oneself without discharge. And fortunately of its being fueled by the other, since the problem, of course, is relating the origin of this back to the other. There is a type of self-masochism or reflexive masochism in all fore-pleasures, but true masochism is one that seeks the other in order to increase tension.

**JA: So, following this movement, if one considers this infant from the beginning, premature, passive, overwhelmed by excitement, assaulted by fantasy...Is this young infant's masochistic position the correlate of the adult's generalized sadism, based on the fact that, to use your words, the adult implants, introduces the sexual, even if done in the name of care, with love, and with no awareness of the cause? In other words, does generalizing the seduction theory amount to locating a sadomasochistic pair at the origins of human psychosexuality? Some of your formulations tend in that direction; for example, when you say that the initial movement of sadomasochism is not centrifugal, but centripetal.**

JL: I'd have some reservations regarding your formulations: first of all, the notion of prematuration. I think that it's subject to certain qualifications. The problem doesn't have to do so much with prematuration as with the gap between the adult and child. It amounts to the same thing, if you will, but one's not obliged to include it within a model of maturity. The adult, who has an unconscious, is not for that reason more mature, he simply has something in addition.

To say that in the adult-child relationship, just because there is masochism, there is necessarily sadism in the adult, would be going too far. It's not a matter of sadism in the adult; one could perhaps say that it's a kind of "sadism in itself", which is intrinsic to the situation. It's not an intended sadism, nor necessarily a perverse sadism. It's the fact that the adult's sexuality is necessarily overwhelming with respect to the message the adult transmits to the child.

**JA: Above you spoke of categories in relation to originary masochism, can the same also be said of the adult's de facto sadism?**

JL: Yes, but it's not a transcendental category. It's simply something that goes beyond the question of whether or not the adult is actually sadistic. The idea of implantation does not imply that the adult is a sadist. Objectively speaking, he is one, due to the fact that his sexuality necessarily overwhelms the abilities of the child who is passive. It's a category that one could call situational. Sadomasochism is located in the essence of the situation itself.

**JA: Despite these clarifications, isn't there still the risk of establishing a sadism-masochism pair at the origin?**

JL: The adult does not occupy a sadistic position. I'd speak in terms of masochism rather than sadism. I never spoke of an originary position of sadomasochism; I spoke of an originary position of masochism. There can be masochism without sadism. After all, someone who would go out and put himself at the risk of storms or volcanoes would risk suffering without having a sadist in front of him telling him to do so.

**JA: Masochism, therefore, on the part of the young child, but not necessarily sadism on the part of the adult. Is the term “masochist” as applied to the child already the result of a translation, is it already an interpretation of what takes place?**

JL: It’s my interpretation, or that of an analyst who thinks as I do, but it’s not initially an interpretation of the child.

**JA: For the child, there is no “masochism”?**

JL: For the child, there is masochism only when the first attempt at translation is made.

**JA: I have in mind a clinical example of masochistic fantasy, which is rather common among men; namely, being spanked by an older man. Underlying this patient’s fantasy there was found to be a representation of the primal scene: noises from the parent’s bedroom; the mother’s laughter; the sound of a bottom being slapped. Doesn’t the view that masochistic fantasy derives from an originary masochistic position, the idea that the foundational element of human sexuality is exacerbated, doesn’t this movement give little weight to the Oedipal story?**

**Doesn’t the idea of originary masochism, which here precedes fantasy, contain some retrospective illusion, some reinterpretation of the beginning in terms of what follows? Doesn’t one find at the basis of “originary masochism” masochistic fantasy? Isn’t it simply through fantasy that one is able to reread the beginning?**

JL: Your question contains a number of things. First, the reference to fantasy, and to something preceding fantasy. In the situation there is, of course, something masochistic “in itself”, something “situational”. That’s to say, the position of activity in the general sense of the term, of activity of the adult world with respect to a certain passivity of the child in the sexual domain. I repeat, though: not in all domains. But fantasy is born very early on; from the moment that the subject begins, what I call, to translate, there is necessarily something that passes by way of fantasy. Clearly, one can’t say that masochistic fantasy exists in the first months; fantasy presupposes a certain ability to translate, which probably can’t be traced to the very first months of life. But the question regarding the age at which fantasies appear remains open.

It’s clear that I’m less Oedipal-focused than you. In particular, I don’t think that it’s necessary to include straightaway the primal scene within the Oedipal scheme. I think that the Oedipal scheme is a way of interpreting the primal scene, but that the primal scene itself, as a presentation of adult coitus and adult orgasm to the child, is something that’s as much pre- and para-Oedipal as Oedipal. And the fact of presenting this orgasmic scene to the child seems to me to be itself a model of seduction. Thus, in my view, it’s not a seduction that is in itself Oedipal. The Oedipal interpretation of the primal scene is a conscious-preconscious interpretation, that is, that mom and dad are making another baby. What arises from the unconscious is the fantasy of the parents joined. A fantasy that, in turn, becomes a fantasy of aggression, of exclusion, that is to say, of the passivation of the child.

**JA: Let’s change to another type of masochism, assuming one can do so. One of the challenges for the psychoanalyst is moral masochism, something which is encountered fairly frequently among patients. Here, the pleasure of pain typically gives way to the pleasure of misfortune: the slightest threat of happiness promises ever-greater misfortune. Moral masochism presents a particularly well-entrenched obstacle to the dynamic of analysis. While it’s already difficult to get the patient to recognize the pleasure he derives from his misfortunes, from the fact that everything goes wrong in his life, this recognition is not enough to remove the obstacle. Is one to consider moral masochism within the framework of the exacerbation of an originary masochistic position? If it’s located entirely within that framework, that is, within the development of unconscious sexuality, how then is one to understand this powerful immobility that it sets up against the process of analysis?**

JL: I’ll take up two points you mentioned: on the one hand, the question of misfortune; and on the other hand, the question of immobility. I’d say that the distinction between misfortune and pain seems to me to be

just a secondary distinction, and perhaps a defensive distinction. That's to say, one of our tasks is to show that misfortune is a kind of pain, that behind misfortune is hidden a search for pain, indeed for a persecutor, a fate, which lies at the roots of this misfortune and hence provokes pain. This is true from the metapsychological point of view, and it's also true simply from the phenomenological point of view. It's rare that misfortune doesn't have some complicity with pain. When confronted with the moral masochist, our task is to locate the, obviously moral, pain—the exquisite and ultimately sexual pain.

As for the question of repetition, of immobility, I don't have any new insights to offer: it's at any rate ostensibly within the ego and the ego's mechanism that one need look for the origins, etc.

**JA: Is one to understand it as an intrication of masochism-narcissism?**

JL: Yes, possibly. Narcissism, of course, lies at the basis, but as part of the defense mechanisms, that's to say, as a kind of encapsulation, a block by the ego. The repetition of misfortune is a desire not to subject pain to a dialectic process.

**JA: Doesn't this more or less amount to relating immobility back to what, according to you, is also fundamentally sexual: namely, narcissism?**

JL: Yes, of course.

**JA: Doesn't the same problem remain, having only been shifted from masochism to narcissism? Sexual fantasy appears to essentially structure something that, however, cannot be dislodged, or only slightly so?**

JL: Yes. In fact, once sexual fantasy becomes narcissistic, it's much more difficult to dislodge it.

**JA: This shifts the question from immobility to narcissism?**

JL: It shifts the question. It doesn't resolve it from a practical point of view. A theoretical problem is one thing, a practical problem is clearly another. As for the theoretical problem, even if one can make out the first outlines of a solution, it does not necessarily provide a solution for the practical problem; it doesn't even prove that there is a "solution" to the practical problem. Explaining a phenomenon doesn't necessarily give us the means for changing it. There are a thousand examples of this, in any number of different areas.

Translated from the French by *Marcel Sima Lieberman*

## **References:**

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