

Singularities, saints and analysts

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We are invited to work on the theme of 'The Ethics of Singularity': obviously on the assumption that this will enable us to better focus on the issues at stake in the ethics we consider our own, psychoanalysis. The title, using the determinative article, 'the' ethics, seems to invite us to speak of this ethics in the singular: would there then be only one ethics of singularity? In this case, we should at least show how it is inscribed in the ethics of psychoanalysis, or rather how the ethics of psychoanalysis would be a particular case of this ethics; is the ethics of "singularity" an ethics we could call 'of the singularity'? What if there were more than one ethics of singularity? After all, the question does not seem obviously unfounded.

But, as Lacan argued, before working on the answers, one must situate the questions. How do we situate the one that constitutes our theme?

The path I have chosen is to start from the three registers Real Symbolic Imaginary, in order to interrogate, before the term 'ethics', that of 'singularity'.

A first common meaning of 'singularity', more or less common in our various languages, situates singularity in the Imaginary. Singularity is equivalent to "being" "singular" in the sense of appearing to be so: singularity would concern the way of presenting oneself: to clothe oneself with an image that is "singularly" different from what is common, unprecedented, an image that is "unique" within a field of comparison and serialisation: an eccentricity that results from processes of comparison between different forms; this type of "singularity" can be sought after (as the Italian term "*ricercatezza*" "wanted refinement" also indicates: which, however, has a more aesthetic than ethical meaning). Obtaining this kind of 'singularity' may be proposed to the will as an aim or end, but can we properly say that it grounds or qualifies an ethic? "Originality" is another name for it: one can want to be "original", and become so, in the sense of being able to be considered as such, to be seen as singular: but this claimed singularity requires the gaze of others to be obtained. 'Original' is not the same as 'of origin' [*originaire*].

Another meaning of singularity pertains more to the symbolic register, although it is not foreign to the imaginary: it is the singularity linked to being 'first', to coming 'first', linked to the One as the first and highest value of a series. There is 'singularity' in this sense because 'only' so-and-so has made such-and-such a discovery, only so-and-so has won such-and-such a race or achieved such-and-such record, or because only so-and-so can be president of the republic at such-and-such a time, and so occupies a position or function in a 'unique' way. Thus the 'singularity' joins his own name - which already has the function of singularising him - based on that unique trait that can become part of his own name: the discoverer of America, the inventor of the telephone, the winner of the championship, the discoverer of penicillin, etc. That unique and singular trait can be used as his own name. This 'making a name for oneself' in this way can also be proposed to the subject's will or desire as a fundamental end for him: but in what sense would this desire specify an ethic?

The philosophical and especially theological reflection of the last few millennia has always been measured up against the problem that the singular poses to the thought of totality, of universality and of necessity: the singular has in itself something

that objects to inclusion in necessity just as it objects to inclusion in totality, because it is an exception to both: indeed, it is always to the singular that the question of freedom refers.

The philosophical tradition has struggled with the principle of individuation of realities or of individual beings because the formal principle, the symbolic of form (as opposed to matter) could not produce any knowledge on the singularity of the individual: did not Aristotle say that: of the singular there is no science? The disciples of one of the most committed philosopher-theologians in this quest, Duns Scotus, coined the term "*haecceitas*" ("*this thingness*" [*cettechosité*]) to designate what makes this thing... be this thing, and thus founds its singularity: an operation that is not useless, because in this way it designated a place, the place of this singularity affirmed as proper to the real being. Duns Scotus' question points to singularity not insofar as it could be acquired or acquirable, but to singularity as a precedent, as the real condition of being insofar as it is irreducibly individual: at the cost of being unspeakable or of not producing an articulation of the knowledge that accounts for this irreducible singularity, which remains by the way presupposed.

But I believe that if we psychoanalysts want to interrogate the possible ethical value of the term singularity, we must turn to what it means in the field and register of the real. It is in the field of science that singularity is investigated as real.

As early as the end of the 19th century, especially with Maxwell and Poincaré, at the beginning of that scientific revolution that led to the subversion of the image of the field of physical reality, the mathematical-physical notion of singularity acquired a fundamental place.

In mathematics, 'singularity' is the term used to designate an element of a set, or a point in a field, that does not enjoy the properties common to the generic elements of the set itself: although it belongs to the set, it is not described by the functions that describe the set.

Still in the context of pre-relativistic mechanics, Maxwell gives the example of a rock pushed very slowly over the edge of a ravine: a quasi-static situation that is transformed into a very dynamic one following an imperceptible change: the edge of the ravine is a singularity. Later, in the relativistic reworking of electromagnetism and gravitation, the singularity becomes both an object and an indispensable theoretical tool.

In physics, a singularity represents a point where the equations describing the field lose their meaning: for example, in the theory of general relativity, in the vicinity of singularity, the curvature of spacetime tends to infinity and the density of matter reaches such high values that it causes a gravitational collapse of spacetime.

The most famous example of a singularity in physics is the black hole, which is known as the 'naked singularity': a region where gravity is so strong that it bends space-time so much that nothing from within it can escape, not even light. At the centre of the black hole is a singularity surrounded by the so-called event horizon, a region of no return beyond which it is impossible of going back, let alone communicating with the outside world. A certain form of inaccessibility and irreversibility characterises these singularities of physics.

One can easily guess why a 'theory of catastrophes' has developed from these studies: one moves through a space populated by radical discontinuities in which the common and regular laws of the set do not apply, since the approach to a singularity implies an abrupt discontinuity, a catastrophe in the true sense.

Without wishing to force analogies, I only note that science, then, looks at singularity not as an ideal point, an objective to be constructed, an end to be reached, something to be acquired and that can be at our disposal: it looks at it above all as a structural condition of space in which the subject no longer knows how to move, a point of real in which as subjects or agents we are included and imprisoned, a point of real which we encounter and which imposes on us a reversal (katà-strophé, sub-version) in our way of relating to our own movement. Singularity is the characteristic of all the points where the real grabs us, suspends us, without our being able to act on it because there are no external points on which to lean on or to refer to.

Singularity is the structural characteristic of all that on which we depend as subjects at the point where we cannot seize ourselves because it is the real that takes hold of us, and which does not obey our manoeuvres of sense. It is therefore the point and condition where we are alone and without company, because we discover that this singularity is ourselves. It does not seem difficult at this point to recognise a certain affinity that psychoanalytic discourse, starting from the notion of unconscious, has with this theme of singularity.

If we now read how Lacan introduces the real unconscious in the English Preface:

"When the *esp of a laps*, so be it, since I only write in French, *l'espace d'un lapsus*, no longer has any bearing on sense (or interpretation), only then is one sure that one is in the unconscious. One knows it oneself. But let one just pay attention to it and one comes out of it. Here there is no friendship that sustains this unconscious."

Don't we have the clear impression that he is talking about a singularity: about approaching it, being included in it, coming out of it?

But even long before the introduction of the real unconscious, many psychoanalytic notions that Lacan reinterpreted, reworked or reinvented to account for the real of the structure on which psychoanalysis operates, seem to describe singularities.

First of all, the notion of 'place' - coessential to that of the symbolic - and that of 'occupying a place', the relations between the place and its occupant, touch on the question of singularity.

Then Lacan's frequent recourse to the notion of the hole, which is a type of singularity. In particular the assertion that truth cannot all be said, the point where as he says 'truth touches on the real', obviously designates a singularity.

Then again, the various notions to which Lacan resorted in order to account for the question of identity: the emergence of the subject in the Other, the difficulties encountered in the theorisation of identification, as well as the function of the name, of 'nomination' of 'naming', of receiving a name, of making a name for oneself; but above all the necessity of these functions, their necessary character in relation to the necessity of the division of the subject: do not all these terms constitute the outskirts of a fundamental singularity? Is not the experience of subjective division, the one where the subject stumbles on his own singularity, on the real singularity that he is for himself and not on the imaginary singularity that he is for the gaze of others? And does not the very notion of the coalescence of the subject of the unconscious with the speaking body interrogate these two notions as constituting a single real singularity?

Even the '*Un-tout-seul*', the "One all alone" that he introduces in *Encore*, is hard not to pin down with the term 'singularity': singularities outside the scale, outside the series, outside comparison, outside the class or outside the species.

The very notion, so fundamental, of the *analytic act* would not have the value it has if it did not refer to this field of the singularity of the structure and the subject.

As we know, Lacan's interrogation of the subject-singularity and the analytic discourse-singularity culminates with the notion of the symptom/sinthome, with the function Lacan attributes to it in the singular subjective knotting.

On these themes and in those years, Lacan makes two developments that must well be called 'singular' and that I believe to be unavoidable if we want to think about the question of the ethics of singularity.

The first development is the one concerning Joyce's singularity, which Lacan goes so far as to rename 'Joyce-the-symptom': Lacan devoted at least two lectures to this development in addition to an entire seminar.

The second development, on the other hand, consists only of a few statements, albeit well formulated, which precede the lectures on Joyce, but to which Lacan referred expressly in one of the lectures on Joyce, in order to link the two developments. These are the statements contained in *Television* that 'situate' the psychoanalyst in relation to what was once 'the saint': statements that were taken up and completed in the conference on Joyce: they were, however, preceded by certain other statements made in the Seminar *Encore* regarding Freud and his charity in imputing an unconscious to each one: let us recall that the unconscious that Freud imputes to each one is a singular unconscious, and not a collective one like that of Jung ...

I believe that these developments on the saint, on the psychoanalyst as saint, on his relationship to charity, especially Freud's, etc., deserve to be taken up and interrogated as an important moment in Lacan's work: if only because we find them important as well as rare insights into the relationship between psychoanalytic ethics and singularity. There is no doubt, in fact, that when we speak of the saint/analyst we are in the field of ethics (the ethics - let us remember - of the well-spoken [*bien-dire*]), just as we are in the field of singularity: what could be more singular than the act of the analyst, and what could be more singular than the operation that the saint performs and that deserves the celebration of his name in the calendar? "For there is no canonical path to sanctity despite the will of the saints, there is no path that specifies them, that makes of the saints a species."

There is no canonical path that the saint can follow as a subject, no way, that is to say no method that he can follow in order to attain sanctity: if there were one, saints would constitute a species: whereas they are necessarily singularities. On the contrary, to want to be saints would subject them to the temptation of the 'stepladder', of the *escabeau*: and this would indeed be a way, but the surest way not to be saints - and therefore not to act as such: "There is a saint only if he does not want to be one, only if he renounces sanctity". Lacan said in *Television*: "the saint does not believe himself to have merits, which does not mean that he has no morals": I ask myself: if he believed himself to have merits, would he know how to 'put himself in the position of a piece of trash, of a litter', which would be an operation necessary for the other, the subject of the unconscious to be able to take him as the cause of his desire? For "it is through the abjection of this cause that the subject in question has a chance to be aware of his position at least within the structure". All these statements that Lacan makes also refer

to the saint and the analyst, and their way of operating this reversal, this 'catastrophe' of the subject that enters the singularity of the analytic experience. There is something here that deserves to be explained.

Translation review: Chantal Degril