

“CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS” TO THE ETHICS OF A SINGULARITY

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Lacan alone in his time will put forward, not only his explanation of the threat, of the discontent which weighs on our civilization, but also of the way in which we might find ourselves lightened by it as the ancient tragedy was able of provoking a catharsis, a cleansing effect on the spectator. In this perspective, Lacan will largely rely on Freud's text: “Civilization and Its Discontents”. And first, like Freud, he does not hesitate to deliver a certain truth of human relationships, as it is revealed in our experience, and to try to account for it theoretically. In this context and considering the different historical circumstances (we are in 1930) the last paragraph of “Civilization and Its Discontents” is in the same order of ethical responsibility as the beginning of the lesson of 18 May 1960 of the seminar called “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis”.

In the same vein, Lacan, like Freud, will be led, from the ethical positions imposed on him by the practice of psychoanalytic experience, to address his fellow analysts and the intellectuals of his time. Concerning psychoanalysts, Lacan repeatedly denounces what he calls the analytical pastoral, the advocates of genital love, of a natural harmony with the object that psychoanalysis would allow to recover. In “Civilization and Its Discontents” Freud asks the analysts to consider, based on experience, what seems to him unmistakable, namely the death drive. Intellectuals outside the field of psychoanalysis are also questioned by Freud and Lacan on their public stances and the responsibility that lies with them. Freud mocks those he calls nursery nurse, who want to tame Eros and Thanatos and stop their eternal struggle by singing lullabies. Lacan highlights what he calls “knavery”, right-wing scoundrelry, and “foolery”, left-wing stupidity. In my opinion the meaning of these criticisms can be grasped more clearly if we bear in mind the historical context of the time.

On the ‘Development of civilization’, Freud explains at the outset, “that it is a process which “appears to us as a peculiar process which mankind undergoes, and in which several things strike us as familiar. We may characterise this process with reference to the changes which it brings about in the familiar instinctual dispositions of human beings, to satisfy which is, after all, the great economic task of our life”. These changes can be summed up in the setting up a double conflict.

First, there is a conflict concerning the sexual drive, between the demands of the individual and those of society that wants to use part of this drive for sublimated purposes. This conflict does not seem insoluble to Freud, who

compares it to the distribution likely to occur in the individual between the object libido and the narcissistic libido.

On the other hand, and above all, there is a conflict between Eros and the death drive, the destruction drive. And Freud tells us that this conflict seems insoluble to him. It is the need for this destructive impulse to be repressed, which is paid for by the subject with a feeling of guilt and which is translated at the social ladder in the form of discomfort, discontent. And Freud develops on this point the theory of the superego which allows him to explain the need for punishment, the reversal of the aggressive drive against the subject himself. This perspective - the moral conscience - is the consequence of the renunciation of the drive. This explains the paradox that renunciation begets the superego which then demands therefore requires other renunciation. This is what Lacan will call the structural greed of the superego.

Another point about "Civilization and Its Discontents" since Lacan is led to develop it extensively in a lesson of the seminar and which concerns the commandment "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" which, as we know, is unacceptable to Freud. He explains, after having challenged the consequences, that a commandment of such absurdity testifies to the major importance of the destructive drive and the need to repress it. On this point of love of neighbour, Lacan will be led to prolong Freud's thought and in a certain way to detach himself from him? Lacan states that if Freud's remarks concerning this commandment are correct, he nevertheless eludes the essential point, that is, access to jouissance. On this matter I quote Lacan « We can found our case on the following, namely, that every time that Freud stops short in horror at the consequences of the commandment to love one's neighbor, we see evoked the presence of that fundamental evil which dwells within this neighbor » *The Ethics of psychoanalysis*, translated by Dennis Porter. Jouissance is confused here with evil, the natural tendency of the human being - Lacan quotes Freud in "Civilization and Its Discontents" - wickedness, aggression, destruction, cruelty, exploitation and humiliation of the other, its use for sexual purposes, and the tendency to martyr and kill him. Hence the (Freudian) inhumanity of the Christian commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself, a particularly cruel commandment since it involves loving cruelty.

For Lacan, this unique commandment of Christianity results from the death of God. God has always been dead, only he did not know it. What Lacan symbolises as S (A barred). The resistance to this command is the same as the resistance to access to jouissance. See seminar: "The Ethics of Psychoanalysis".

And what is closer to me than this heart within myself which is that of my jouissance, which I dare not approach. Because as soon as I approach it - this is the meaning of the discontent in civilization. All this allows us to take

up with Lacan the reason for the discontent in civilization and at the same time to open up the singularity.

Lacan ends his seminar "The Ethics of Psychoanalysis" by arguing that what Freud left pending was the question of jouissance correlative to the commandment of love of neighbour. All of this is in an attempt to find the reasons for the discontent in civilisation.

It is through the signifier, which is decomposed by the articulation of the word that sets up the field of Das Ding as immediately lost and always to be found again (field of the sexual non-relation, of the real, of the hole, of the nothing) that the analyst - this is one of the conclusions of the seminar on Ethics - must allow the analyst to move forward and to find his bearings from what comes to present himself with regard to the signifier.

More than the reason for the discontent in civilization, the analyst's task will be, among other things, to allow the subject to consent to speak on his behalf, to make his words heard to begin the jouissance that he "has accepted" from his discontent. In other words, he recovers his place as a subject divided by the signifier.

Translators: Amélie Billa and Anna Boisgillot