

Psychoanalysis in the 'posthuman' era

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Most educated people would agree that the experience and the body of knowledge that Freud created have had a significant impact in the Western world. Nearly fifty years ago Jacques Lacan wrote:

[...] Anyone capable of glimpsing the changes we have lived through in our own lives can see that Freudianism, however misunderstood it has been and however nebulous its consequences have been, constitutes an intangible but radical revolution. There is no need to go seeking witnesses to the fact: everything that concerns not just the human sciences, but the destiny of man, politics, metaphysics, literature, the arts, advertising, propaganda—and thus, no doubt, economics—has been affected by it.
(Lacan 2002 [1957], p. 165)

Things have changed since the publication of these remarks by Lacan. Undoubtedly, at least in the clinical field the impact of psychoanalysis is considerably less important than in the late 1950s. The Freudian revolution continues to occur in our culture, but it is even more intangible than in Lacan's days.

What has changed in our culture and in psychoanalysis itself since Freud to produce uncertainty about the future of psychoanalysis? I have reflected on a number of contributing factors, but I am sure that my list is not exhaustive. Others may have thought of different influences. We can compare notes and try to learn together, given our common interest in the progress of psychoanalysis.

In the first place, let us consider the following statements:

During the last few generations mankind has made an extraordinary advance in the natural sciences and in their technical application and has established its control over nature in a way never before imagined. [...] Men are proud of those achievements, and have a right to be. But they seem to have observed that this newly-won power over space and time, this subjugation of the forces of nature, which is the fulfilment of a longing that goes back thousands of years, has not increased the amount of pleasurable satisfaction which they may expect from life and has not made them feel happier. [...] [We] ought not to infer from [this] that technical progress is without value for the economics of our happiness. [...] Does it mean nothing that medicine has succeeded in enormously reducing infant mortality and the danger of infection for women in childbirth, and, indeed, in considerably

lengthening the average life of a civilized man? And there is a long list that might be added to benefits of this kind which we owe to the *much-despised era of scientific and technical advances*.

(Freud 1930a, p. 87–88) [The italics are mine]

This was written by Sigmund Freud (in *Civilization and its Discontents*) seventy-five years ago that is, before penicillin and Microsoft, before jumbo jets and mobile phones; also before Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the extermination camps of Central and Eastern Europe—before, in other words, the twentieth century had progressed enough to deserve the title given to it by the historian Eric Hobsbawm: the title of ‘the most murderous century’, which, as Hobsbawm has pointed out, the twentieth century gained only because of the tremendous scientific and technological advances in weapons and other military equipment. (Hobsbawm 1995, 13) A title (of ‘most murderous century’) that is now being challenged fiercely by our young Twenty-first Century.

Freud’s words in *Civilization and Its Discontents* are still pertinent, but in comparing what he wrote in 1929 with a reflection about our world today, I found the first significant factor in my list. I am referring to the extent to which technology and technological products rule our lives. This is another instance of Freud not being completely wrong (even when he is not quite right), and of his never being completely out of date (even if he cannot possibly be entirely up to date).

Already in 1929 Freud refers to ‘the much despised era of scientific and technical advances’. The contempt for such advances is very much present today: which well-informed and progressive person of our times does not complain bitterly about his or her state of alienation and helpless subjugation to his/her hardware, software, printers, sophisticated mobile telephones and other pieces of machinery, not to mention the compulsory ingestion or avoidance, depending on the dictates of physiological research, of all sorts of substances suddenly found to have either amazingly therapeutic or deleterious effects: mineral water and urine, for instance, being suddenly promoted to the rank of healing agents of the first order, while bread and spaghetti are demoted and relegated to the list of poisonous ingredients.

Yet our own contempt for this ‘era of scientific and technical advances’ is different from Freud’s: we are cynical and hypocritical—we assume the position of a Hegelian beautiful soul—in condemning our submission to the rule of science and technology, in that secretly, and also not so secretly, we enjoy it. We enjoy it in innumerable ways, as virtually no area of our lives is left untouched by technological advances. All known forms of the subject’s *jouissance*—the *jouissance* of the drives, symptoms and the superego—are now affected by science via its technological applications. [For those who are not familiar with psychoanalytic Lacanian terminology: *jouissance* is a term that we prefer to its possible alternative, ‘enjoyment’, as the latter does not convey so well the link between sexual enjoyment and the death drive, or self-destruction. It is originally a French word, but it is also an English word, included in the Oxford Dictionary]

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud identified the destructive effects of scientific and technological progress. Since Freud, those effects (which can be assimilated to the death drive operating in a massive scale) have expanded in extension and deepened in intensity; and this has happened in direct proportion to the extraordinary expansion of the means to obtain satisfaction. It is true that not everybody in this world has access to the ever-increasing forms of *jouissance*. The satisfactions derived from advances in science and technology are restricted to the industrially developed countries and those portions of the underdeveloped countries which

enjoy similar 'benefits'. We should not forget that, as the poet wrote, 'there is another world, and it is in this one'. Even in our own Western, industrially developed societies, there are considerable numbers of people for whom the main source of worry is whether they are going to have anything to eat tomorrow, rather than the computer's crash. But their privations too have to do with science and technology: in their case, with the ownership and administration of science and technology.

Let me be clear on this point. It is not that scientific principles and scientific research as a human endeavour are *per se* on the side of the death drive. After all, psychoanalysis itself and the theories and practices that have derived from it (whether they acknowledge it or not) were inconceivable prior to the advent of modern science, that is to say, prior to the establishment of the principle of sufficient reason—which extended human scientific curiosity and the desire for knowledge and truth to a limitless extent. Psychoanalysis could not have been born before Galileo, Kepler, Descartes and Leibniz, that is, before the whole field of the human—humans as a species, human cultures and all forms of human thinking and belief—became open to scientific enquiry. Although itself not a hard science, psychoanalysis is nevertheless governed by scientific principles, both in its theoretical constructions and in its clinical applications. By 'scientific principles' I mean the principles of rationality, objectivity and verifiability that positivism, following on the path of rationalism, established for modern science. If we acknowledge the contributions of positivism to contemporary thinking and do not reduce it to some of its derivatives, namely, some naive forms of empiricism, then we must also recognize that Freud's creation is inscribed within positive science; and the same thing can be said of the work of Jacques Lacan, and of the work of all psychoanalysts who have attempted to produce a conceptual explanation of their practices. Freud was able to place the theory and practice of the unconscious within the field of science—firstly, because he himself was a scientist and his conceptual and practical formation had the imprinting of science; secondly, because he had the courage to remove the unconscious and its formations (dreams, parapraxes, jokes and neurotic symptoms) from obscurantist theories and practices which relegated the unconscious to being a secret source of *jouissance*, rather than the source of truthful knowledge that it is in the experience that he created.

In order to treat the unconscious conceptually and practically in a scientific way, Freud had to bring it down to this Earth, simply by the usage of language. Far from representing irrationality, the human unconscious that Freud revealed to the world is the very foundation of reason. Without a reference to the unconscious, any conception of human discourse remains abstract and alien to the real lives and desires of human subjects—and it is desire that propels the human subject in all his/her living expressions, including reason.

There is nothing mysterious about the unconscious uncovered by Freud. As he demonstrated, it is only a question of letting the subject talk. It is true that it is not a question of talking in just any manner, but to talk in the peculiar style that Freud called *free association*. It is peculiar in so far as it runs counter to the way in which we are taught to talk, the common discourse in which the emergence of truth is tolerated only under very strict conditions. The purpose of the analytic discourse, as Freud remarks in *The Question of Lay Analysis*, is to allow the subject to end up uttering that which he never imagined would come out of his own mouth (Freud 1926e, 188–189). Anyone who has been involved in both sides of the experience can testify to the fact that this is hard labour—but not an impossible task. It is perfectly possible for those with the little courage necessary to try it; and there are plenty of those, even if they represent only a very small proportion of humankind. Despite all the difficulties that make us worry about the state of psychoanalysis, this dimension of the Freudian experience has not been lost. On the contrary, it

is alive and well, and it is sustained around the world (perhaps beyond the geographical limits that Freud himself could have imagined) by thousands of analysts and analysands who engage in a discourse which is unique, irreducible, and for which there no religious, philosophical or therapeutic substitutes.

For the efficacy of that experience of discourse called psychoanalysis has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt during the 108 years of its existence in many places of this world—and this includes in particular the experience with the most devastating forms of psychopathology, such as the psychoses. Psychoanalysis as a clinical practice is, and has always been, evidence based. With the limitations imposed by professional discretion (and in this psychoanalysis is not different from any healing practice), the psychoanalytic experience and its results are open to scrutiny by anyone who in good faith wants to evaluate it. Our findings, results and data are as extensive as in the most researched clinical practices. We have no ethical or epistemological obligation to submit our practice to modes of evaluation which are not relevant to the aims and methodology of analytic discourse. There is no universal epistemological framework for the evaluation of efficacy and validity that would be applicable across the different scientific disciplines.

Yet there can be no doubt that over the last few decades psychoanalysis has not grown in popularity—not even in those places where it has gained cultural recognition and a place among clinical practices. The main reason for this state of affairs is that in its practice psychoanalysis runs counter to the values and ethical orientation imposed by the discourse that prevails in our times: the discourse that Jacques Lacan called *capitalist*. Already dominant during Freud's life time, the capitalist discourse is now overwhelmingly present in all aspects of human life on this planet, and psychoanalysis itself is under its influence, from the perspective of both the analyst and the analysand. In its contemporary form, the capitalist discourse is only possible because of the extraordinary advances in the technological applications of modern science. Through them this discourse has been able to effectively produce in most domains of human life the reduction of the subject to being a subject of consumption, a consumer who has become convinced that the path to happiness has finally been discovered, in the form of objects that can be obtained without much effort and which offer immediate satisfaction. Correlatively, the capitalist discourse has managed to impose its ethics—ethics governed by a mandate to be happy. This is an ideal of happiness that identifies it with satisfaction—the satisfaction provided by gadgets and, in what concerns us more directly, pharmaceutical agents, drugs, officially sponsored and promoted, endorsed by the prestige of the neurosciences (even if these cannot be held entirely responsible for their industrial and commercial derivatives).

The ethical orientation of the prevailing discourse is directly opposed to the ethics of psychoanalysis, which is, to employ Lacan's expression, an ethics of the well-spoken, or of *speaking well* (*du bien dire*), as distinct from the ethics of *well-being* (*bien être*), which promotes happiness and satisfaction (that is, *jouissance*) as supreme values.

This prevailing discourse is also a major factor in what concerns us more directly, in the re-definition of the nosological categories and psychopathological classifications used in mental health practices, nowadays increasingly dominated by terminology derived from neurobiological theoretical constructions and the interests of the psychopharmacological industry, thus discarding the rationale (and the rationality) that Freud had introduced into psychiatric phenomenology and classifications.

A major component of the discontents of our civilization concerns the state of our mental health

and the services supposedly aimed at assisting it, and in particular the treatment (or rather, the lack of treatment) dispensed to psychotic human beings. The interests of the psychopharmacological approach and industry are increasingly prevailing, at the expense of the scientific and ethical gains which had characterized psychiatric care since the beginnings of the nineteenth century. The function of asylum, which had been established as a first principle in the care of the most vulnerable people in our society, has now been relegated to a secondary plane, if not altogether eliminated as unnecessary by some mental health institutions. The psychotic subject is more and more reduced (in a sense, like anyone else) to the state of being a consumer, a customer for psychiatric centres now organized and managed like shopping centres, where bizarre formulas for the measure of 'outputs' override all ethical, scientific and clinical considerations. This contrasts markedly with the efforts that the pioneers of psychoanalysis everywhere (and starting with Freud himself) made to offer psychoanalysis to the people in public institutions, and creating those institutions when necessary. This contribution to our society and culture is, or should be an integral part of the life and works of individual psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic institutions, and an indispensable investment for the scientific progress of psychoanalysis.

The treatment of *jouissance*—or how to make *jouissance*, including the *jouissance* of the superego, compatible with life—is, ultimately, the aim of psychoanalysis, and is at the same time the primordial task of culture. For clinical psychoanalysis what is at stake is the *jouissance* of singular subjects, while culture deals not only with different forms of the *jouissance* of subjects, but also with factors that affect *jouissance* in different dimensions and which emanate from the family and other institutions, as well as various social and political arrangements. Freud soon realised that the *jouissance* of singular subjects is directly determined by the forms of *jouissance* promoted by culture and its institutions. He thus speaks of a *cultural* superego, a transindividual agency that represents the community's mandates of a historical period; and these mandates regulate the forms of enjoyment that are promoted or discouraged by culture and which are internalized by the individuals (Freud 1930a, 141–144). In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud tackles the question of the culture's treatment of the human pursuit of happiness. His use of the term 'happiness' and my use here of the term '*jouissance*', in the Lacanian sense, do not exactly overlap. Nevertheless, I am considering Freud's use of 'happiness' as referring to a form of *jouissance*, in that it is oriented by signifiers inscribed in the unconscious and has an aim that is beyond the pleasure principle, following a program that does not give priority to the requirements of life—for which reason Freud called it the death drive. Now, in Freud's sense, happiness entails a subjective feeling of happiness, and is in this sense opposed to 'suffering'. This is why I say there is no overlap between the two terms, as *jouissance* does not entail, although it does not necessarily exclude, a subjective feeling of happiness. Happiness can only be transient, Freud argues (and he wrote a short piece on transience which is directly relevant to this discussion). (Freud 1916a) He proceeds to say (always in *Civilization and its Discontents*) that our possibilities of happiness are 'restricted by our constitution'—restricted because 'we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things', and therefore necessarily transient—whereas unhappiness 'is much less difficult to experience'. We are constantly threatened with suffering, Freud continues, from three directions: from our own body, from the external, natural world, and from our relations with other men. (Freud 1930a, 76–77) Life is for us, social speaking beings, a constant threat of suffering. To compensate for this state of affairs, humankind has developed palliative measures—palliative, nothing more, Freud says:

There are [...] many paths which may lead to such happiness as is attainable by men, but there is none which does so for certain. Even religion cannot keep its promise.
(Freud, 1930a, p. 85)

Not only no method offers any guarantee of happiness, but in addition there is no known effective standardization of formulas for happiness. Freud adds:

Happiness, in the reduced sense in which we recognize it as possible, is a problem of the economics of the individual's libido. There is no golden rule which applies to everyone: every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved.
(Freud, 1930a, p. 83)

There are three kinds of palliative measures to bear unhappiness and the disappointments of life:

[...] powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it. [...] Voltaire has [powerful] deflections in mind when he ends *Candide* with the advice to cultivate one's garden; and scientific activity is a deflection of this kind, too. The substitutive satisfactions, as offered by art, are illusions in contrast with reality, but they are none the less psychically effective, thanks to the role which phantasy has assumed in mental life. The intoxicating substances influence our body and alter its chemistry. It is no simple matter to see where religion has its place in this series.
(Freud, 1930a, p. 75)

What has changed since Freud is the place of science in relation to these palliative measures: science and technology are nowadays heavily involved not only among the powerful deflections (which have the capacity to alter reality), but also among the substitutive satisfactions—technology is now almost compulsory in the creation and promotion of all kinds of illusions, religious practices included—and among the intoxicating substances, in particular, if we include the pharmacological substances which are *legally* recognized and promoted, and whose function is not dissimilar to that of the traditional and new forms of *illegal* intoxicating substances.

Not only that; Freud had already advanced that by means of science and technology humans, despite their original state of helplessness, have fulfilled almost every fairy-tale wish. Man has become, Freud says, almost a god himself, embodying himself the omnipotence and omniscience previously attributed to the gods. He points out:

Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times. [...] Future ages will bring with them new and probably unimaginably great advances in this field of civilization and will increase man's likeness to God still more. But in the interests of our investigations, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character.
(Freud, 1930a, p. 92)

This state of affairs, again, has changed since Freud. In our current sociocultural arrangement, dominated as it is by what Colette Soler has named with the neological yet apt term of *narcynicism* (the cynical narcissism of our times), we are not so unhappy about being God, particularly since the decline of the traditional forms of organized religion. Narcynicism is the subjective correlate of the dominant discourse of our times, the *capitalist* discourse, which is in fact an *anti-discourse*, in so far as it does not constitute or promote a social bond (which is an essential feature of any discourse).

The capitalist discourse has been supported by modern science since its advent, but it is only in

the last century that it has become clearly dominant—through the massive expansion of technology. Its effects on the other discourses (the discourses called by Lacan of the hysteric, of the analyst, of the university and of the master) has been their progressive deterioration, in the sense that the capitalist discourse has neglected the establishment and consolidation of human social bonds. The immediate effect of this state of affairs has been what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls the *destruction of experience*, the destruction, that is, of the subjective registration of experience, so that a great deal of our lives is condemned to be inscribed nowhere, not in the unconscious or in our collective history or any other form of memory. Having ascertained that transience is the law of happiness, the capitalist discourse has nevertheless succeeded in making transient happiness appear more and more frequently, which is good for business, as objects of consumption, gadgets and other things, are forever in need of urgent replacement. In this social and political context, science has become the most indispensable component in the machinery of production of *jouissance* for the masses, and we cannot consider it any more, as Freud did, as a tool and an extension of our somatic and psychical functions: we are at its service, since it is our best chance for happiness. And it promises us a world in which we can do better than prosthetic gods, to use Freud's term.

The proliferation of different forms of psychotherapy, all of which use verbal or other symbolic means of expression, can be interpreted as a positive manifestation of the return of the repressed, in so far as they represent attempts to restore discourse and therefore the human subject in the treatment of human miseries; attempts at inscribing our experience in the world, rather than destroying it. Yet we discover that some of the new therapies rely heavily on ready-made formulas which in fact obliterate subjective functions while aiming at the correction of localized dysfunctions, such as phobias, inhibitions, depression, obsessional symptoms or anxiety states, all of which are understood as autonomous conditions that could be treated independently, outside the subject's history and without considering the subject's position in the unconscious.

In a recently published work, entitled *Humain post-humain [Human posthuman]* (PUF 2003), the French philosopher Dominique Lecourt discusses the forecasts and prophecies which have been produced in the fields of artificial intelligence and other scientific disciplines concerning what has been called the *posthuman era*. Lecourt argues that there are two groups of thinkers who have formulated these predictions:

The first includes all those thinkers who consider that artificial intelligence will soon make possible that humankind frees itself from death, getting in this way to know a new life. They announce with enthusiasm and lyricism the era of *posthumanity*. [...] The second group comprises those who are alarmed by recent developments in the biotechnologies. They perceive there the unprecedented possibility now open to man of modifying his own nature. Theologians, philosophers and moralists also speak of 'posthumanity', but in a radically negative sense.
(Lecourt, 2003, p. 35)

The thinkers of the first group, which Lecourt calls *technoprophets*, envisage the creation of robots that will not only have the intellectual capacity of the human brain but will also add new abilities on a prodigious scale. Lecourt says:

They announce the advent of minds without constraints, liberated from bodies, free from passions and with access to immortality.
(Lecourt, 2003, p. 35)

An author of this group predicts that

The advent of artificial life will constitute the most important historical event since the emergence of man. [...] This will be the most significant moment in the history of our planet and perhaps of the entire Universe.
(Lecourt, 2003, p. 36)

The second, and negative, conception of posthumanity, proposed by the authors that Lecourt calls *biocatastrophists*, lately best represented by the work of Francis Fukuyama (author of *Our Posthuman Future*), is concerned with the ethical, social and political effects of the advances in biological sciences and technologies. They predict:

The process of procreation will be mastered. The sex of the infant who arrives in this world will not be aleatoric again. Inherited diseases will never be fatal. The process of aging will be retarded, and death itself will be postponed indefinitely. Neither haphazard nor destiny: in applying his genius to that living being that he is among other living beings, the human being will change the conditions of his own life; he will trespass the limits of what constitutes the essence of its finitude.
(Lecourt, 2003, p. 36)

The selection of the genotype before conception, which would make possible the exclusion of undesirable traits, would affect the social structure itself. Another author, Hans Jonas, predicts that

Different social groups will try to *improve* their descendants; certainly the rich, but also religious sects, and some ethnic groups. [...] The risk of this would be an irreversible differentiation of the genetic patrimony—in other words, the emergence of new forms of discrimination.
(Lecourt, 2003, p. 36)

But all these are only projections onto the future of what is already a daily exercise in megalomaniac jouissance. This is just one of the symptoms of the malaise of our culture. This malaise, the ‘normal’ (in the sense of ‘normative’) psychopathology of our species, is a necessary, and not a contingent, effect of human civilization. Our discontents derive structurally, not from the opposition of the forces of nature but from the workings of culture itself. All of our psychopathological arrangements, in the three clinical structures that psychoanalysis has identified (the neuroses, the psychoses and the perversions), are entirely or dominantly determined by the fact that our being is a cultural being, with the inhibitions, the symptoms and the anxiety that this entails. The traditional and the new forms adopted by our symptoms cannot in any way be reduced to biochemical imbalances, as some imprudently argue on the basis of a tendentious interpretation of the findings in the neurosciences. Hysterical conversions, psychosomatic disorders, phobias, obsessions and compulsions, anorexia, bulimia, the sexual perversions, the form and function of delusions and hallucinations are inconceivable outside human culture. No other animals have been able to develop the complex psychopathologies (and the self-destructiveness that these involve) that we have created—psychopathological complexity which is only paralleled by the ecological destructiveness (also unprecedented in the animal world), in which as a species we have engaged.

If in his seminal essay, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud emphasized the necessary renunciation to a substantial portion of individual enjoyment so that culture can be sustained,

seventy-five years later we are engaged in a cultural movement which proceeds largely in the opposite direction, namely, towards excess and compulsive satisfaction. This is consonant with the mandate to consume imposed by the prevailing discourse, and characterises our modern cultural superego. For Freud the superego was essentially an agency of interdiction, of the prohibition of jouissance—even if Freud was perfectly aware that the exercise and implementation of prohibitions are in themselves modalities of jouissance (for example, the exercise of moralism and the imposition of discipline and punishment). For Lacan, who took into account very seriously Melanie Klein's research on the workings of the superego, the superego transmits a mandate to enjoy—to enjoy no matter what, to enjoy Coca-Cola and the rest of it until it makes you sick. An enjoyment that is compulsively imposed ultimately cannot but produce discontents, typically in the form of the bulimic *Angst* that assaults the young people of Western industrialised societies.

There are two other symptomatic manifestations of the discontents of our contemporary culture to which I would like to refer, as they derive from cultural changes since Freud. I will do so only briefly, as I have referred to these phenomena in previous papers.

Firstly, it is interesting to study what has happened to the function of the father and the mother, and consequently of the child, in our societies. I shall quote from my paper on this question recently published in the *Australasian Journal of Psychotherapy*.

For some time now we have known that a significant proportion of young men in our society (and the same can be said of young men in many other countries) have decided against becoming fathers, in many cases irreversibly (through a vasectomy, for example, and I have seen this situation a few times already in my own practice). It is not only a good number of men that have adopted this stance, but also a high proportion of women. Fair enough, one may argue: people are free to choose. Really? We also know very well that human choices are always forced choices. [...]

The decline in the attraction of motherhood and fatherhood as human endeavours has a direct link with the promotion of adolescence as the favourite age of life. Still regarded by many as a kind of disease, adolescence, at least in Western societies, nowadays starts earlier and earlier and prolongs itself into an age which traditionally was considered as that of adult maturity. Everybody wants to be an adolescent, in appearance and in spirit, and lead a life supposedly devoid of familial obligations and full of hedonistic enjoyments. Claude Lévi-Strauss has pointed out that technological advances in the media have had the impact of promoting 'horizontal' communication across the generations, at the expense of the Vertical axis of traditional transmission: from parents to children. [...]

There is still something else, very present in our lives in our new century, which reveals a decline in the cultural investment of children as the most precious, in fact, the only real asset, of any society. Intimately linked with the mandate to consume, the twentieth century was, as the historian Eric Hobsbawm has put it, a murderous century: two hundred million people died in the wars that took place over those hundred years, and this monstrosity was only possible because of the technological advances in warfare equipment. In addition, those wars were directly responsible for the worse catastrophes in the history of our species: famines, all forms of disease, the destruction of irreplaceable cultural achievements. [...] What is worse, the casualties of war increasingly affect the most vulnerable and defenceless. At the end of the nineteenth century ninety per cent of war casualties comprised military personnel, and the remaining ten per cent were civilians. Today these proportions have reversed: military casualties represent ten per cent of the total, while ninety per cent are civilian casualties, eighty per cent of which are women and

children.

Now, it is not an exaggeration to call this criminal effect of modern war *infanticide*.
(Rodriguez, 2003, p. 47–49)

The second manifestation of current malaise concerns the use of psychotropic drugs with children, which in Australia, as in other countries, has reached alarming proportions. I spoke here about this problem two years ago. Renewed expressions of concern about the matter have appeared in the press more recently. I will not repeat what I said previously, but allow me to insist on one point, since we are dealing here with a major clinical problem and cultural symptom.

In an editorial article published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in August 2000, signed by three directors of child and adolescent mental health services and entitled ‘Psychotropic drugs and preschoolers’, we read:

With little evidence for the safety and effectiveness of these drugs [i.e. psychotropic drugs] in the very young, doctors are in a difficult position’
(Rey et al., 2000)

The authors then express their concern about the prescribing of stimulant, antipsychotic, antidepressant and other psychotropic drugs for very young children, and detail the scientific, ethical and professional reasons for their statements. Yet they say among their conclusions:

With society and families undergoing rapid change, physicians are confronted with growing numbers of young children with severe behavioural problems, with many parents who have limited parenting skills and with an increasingly demanding public. This is compounded by overwhelmed and inadequate social and mental health services for young people. It is not surprising that medication, rightly or wrongly, has become more common in managing problematic behaviour, even in the very young. [...] Clinicians find themselves in an all-too-familiar predicament: urged to prescribe but having no evidence base for doing so
(Rey et al, 2000)

The logical and ethical position implicit in this statement involves a regressive and reactionary step in relation to Freud’s legacy and the cultural and ethical orientation that made the creation of psychoanalysis possible—and, in particular, the work of psychoanalysis with children. The authors of the article that I quoted affirm that ‘It is not surprising that medication, rightly or wrongly, has become more common in managing problematic behaviour, even in the very young’. I quote very briefly from my paper:

Is it not surprising that such a thing happens, really? It is certainly surprising, unless one has lost one’s critical capacity and the capacity to be surprised by human aberrations—unequivocal signs of that position of the contemporary subject which has been [called] *narcynicism* [...].

Analytic discourse offers an alternative, one of the few viable options left for us, as Lacan anticipated more than thirty years ago; an option that will be of use, he added, only if it is not for just a few (Lacan, 1990, p. 16).

And what about psychoanalysis itself in relation to cultural malaise? Has psychoanalysis, in opposition to its creator’s design, contributed to the discontents of our civilization?

There have been applications of psychoanalysis that run counter to the ethics of psychoanalysis—for example, when the knowledge of how the unconscious works is utilised for its manipulation. Psychoanalysts themselves are not exempt from the general mandate to pursue happiness. The subversive nature of psychoanalysis cannot be taken for granted: it depends entirely on the way in which analysts conduct their work and on their ethical stance.

Freud had already cautioned us about one form of *jouissance* that may take possession of the analyst: *furor sanandi*, he called it. The term designates that irresistible passion for curing anyone, under any circumstances, of anything, whether they like it or not. When Lacan wrote ‘On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis’ he had in mind, I think, Freud’s warning, as well as his own experience with psychotics, which taught him precisely of the limitations of any treatment of the psychoses, psychoanalysis included. Then, to this day we have what I would call a passion for deciphering and interpreting, mostly present in the field of so-called *applied psychoanalysis* (not in the sense in which Jacques Lacan used the expression). This involves the wild application of psychoanalysis to human productions which are supposedly in need of explanation through a hermeneutical process—that is to say, practically anything that appears to have some meaning for somebody. This has led to quite a number of excesses and has not contributed to the scientific standing of psychoanalysis, even if it has been a source of *jouissance* for those keen on speculation and the sharing of their own fantasies. Once again, returning to Freud is not a bad idea in this connection either; in particular, when he remarked that as psychoanalysts we cannot offer much to an understanding of the works of art and literature, but, on the other hand, we have much to learn from those works.

Psychoanalysts, like anyone else, have been subjected to the ravages of the capitalist discourse. As Lacan suggested, denouncing it alone is not only *not* good enough, but also actively reinforces that discourse. But we can do better than moaning and whingeing. We can always return to Freud; and to Lacan; and to the others: Klein, Winnicott, Bion. All of whom, each one in a different way, did not have it easy either, and had to overcome, for the sake of our analytic discourse, the temptations of other forms of *jouissance*. They could do this because they remained faithful to their desire, that desire which Jacques Lacan called *the analyst’s desire*, a desire—he said—to obtain absolute difference, that is to say, the opposite of an identification; the desire to obtain the irreproducible singularity of the subject in analysis, of his or her truth, which is the truth of nobody else; truth inscribed in the unconscious, whose dignity analytic experience aims to restore.

What about the future of psychoanalysis? Freud taught us not to indulge in formulating prophecies for the future, as analysis has revealed that the future is a projection of desires grounded in the past. Along a similar line of thought, that witty author of aphorisms, the Duke of La Rochefoucauld, wrote critically of philosophers as always being very good at explaining everything about the past and the future, but being as a rule in trouble when attempting to explain the present. We had better confine ourselves to what happens in the present life of psychoanalysis.

So, to conclude, I would like to say simply that if the psychoanalysis that Freud invented can be considered subversive it is because, firstly, the most modest analytic clinical experience involves turning things upside down. Secondly, because psychoanalysis has challenged the very foundations of philosophical thinking; and it did so by, again, turning things upside down showing that the human subject is not the master of his own house, of his thoughts and actions, but is *subjected* to the unconscious. And thirdly, because it has questioned the basis of religion by analyzing it. It has made a substantial contribution to science, whose methodology and aims

it has shared, but also creatively questioned. On the other hand, psychoanalysis would not be possible without its sources, which include precisely philosophical enquiry, scientific work and religious practices. It must remain open to the findings and advances in other disciplines and practices if it wants to remain as Freud invented it: free from dogma, a down-to-earth practice eminently useful to those who suffer and enjoy as well as those who enjoy and suffer, an instrument of creative thinking and ethical action, respectful of truth and grounded in life itself.

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