

ON PERVERSIONS

Sergio Benvenuto

Abstract

The author takes a new look at perversions and at the classical psychoanalytic theories on them, proposing an original criteria for determining them. He does not consider perversions as specific sexual behaviors, nor as a certain type of fantasy: he considers perversion above all an ethical illness. Every sexual relationship is perverse in which the subjectivity of the other is used as the Ego's instrument of pleasure. Then, it is not a moral flaw, but a strategy transforming a sufferance (especially jealousy) in an enjoyment maneuvering the other as a subject: the perverse masterpiece consists in transmuting the trauma of one's own exclusion from the others' pleasure in an exclusive way to get sexual enjoyment. In this perspective, the author reconstructs the ethical and subjective phenomenology of voyeurism and exhibitionism, sadism and masochism, fetishism, perverse homosexuals and perverse women.

1. Moral psychopathology

Today, simply using the word “perversion” is not considered politically correct, and rouses suspicions—above all in the USA.

“What is perverse and what is not?”, people ask perplexedly. “Perversion—it is often said—is basically a moral category, which varies according to the customs of each epoch”. The American sexologist John Money no longer speaks of perversions but of *paraphilia*, as distinct from *normophilia*. The latter is defined as “a condition of being heterosexually in conformity with the standard as dictated by customary, religious, or legal authorities”¹. Thus paraphilia is sexual behavior that deviates from the statistical norm.

Nineteenth-century positivist sexology—which produced the term “perversions”—gave itself the ethical-legal mission of distinguishing the “pervert” from

¹ J. Money, *Gay, Straight and Inbetween. The Sexology of Erotic Orientation* (NY-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 214). See P. Verhaege, “Perversion I. Perverse Traits”, *The Letter*, Summer 2001, pp. 59-74.

the “libertine”². The former is a sort of sick person, while the latter is a normal subject to be judged according to moral criteria. Today the distinction between pervert and libertine has been abandoned by modern thought, and replaced by the distinction between “sexuality according to the average standard” and “sexuality deviating from the average standard.” Thus, perversion tends to be considered less and less a disorder, than a variation in sexual orientation.

In Freud’s time, any act was labeled as perverse if it deviated from “orthodox”, procreative heterosexual intercourse: i.e., anal penetration of the woman, homosexual coitus, observation of others’ copulation, couple swapping, and so on. For example, as late as 1956 the anti-conformist psychoanalyst Michael Balint quoted cunnilingus as a perversion!³ These “perversions” today are either performed by the majority of the population, or at least widely accepted as legitimate sexual practices. The civil rights movements in the West have actually forbidden psychiatry from dealing with homosexuality as either a pathology or a perversion. It is impossible to find articles about “homosexual perversion”. Analysts have had to conform—often unwillingly—to the prevailing point of view.

Freud had proposed his early theory of perversion as “the positive of neurosis” (and that of neurosis as “the negative of perversion”)⁴—in a certain sense, perversion as a “natural” and undeveloped state of sexuality, which is later converted into its negative by repression. Perversion appears at that time as a *positive* sexuality, sexuality in its pure state, which invests partial objects; a primary childish sexuality not subjected to the refined demands of love for others, reproduction and responsibility. But with time Freud himself corrected this thesis which was still bound to the belief of his time (perversion as an early sexuality). After all, what can be “natural” or “authentic” in a fetishist who is able to penetrate a woman only if she wears shoes of a certain shape? There is some sophistication, a “negative” aspect in the above sense, even in perverted eroticism.

² See G. Lanteri Laura, *Lecture des perversions. Histoire de leur appropriation médicale* (Paris: Masson, 1979).

³ M. Balint, “Le perversioni e la procreazione,” in *Perversioni sessuali*, M. Balint and S. Lorand eds. (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965, p. 25).

⁴ S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), *SE*, 7, p. 166; *GW*, 5, p. 64. ‘Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness (1908), *SE*, 9, p. 191; *GW*, 7, p. 153.

Undoubtedly, “perversion” is an ethical concept—the term is commonly used as a moral reproach. But this does not mean that psychoanalysis should reject it⁵. On the contrary, it belongs to psychoanalysis *precisely because of* its moral connotation. Even neurosis is in the end an “ethical illness,” which does not mean that neurosis and perversions are moral failures, but rather, that the barrier separating the objective analysis of psychic processes from the moral evaluation of the acts should be lifted, because what we call “neurosis” and “perversion” are in fact a specific way of *being-in-the-world*, as some phenomenological philosophers would say, where affective dynamics, moral positions and esthetic preferences intertwine⁶. Psychoanalysis has in fact weakened—even if unbeknownst to analysts—this dichotomy which hounds modern thought, according to which facts lie on one side (for example, certain “mechanisms” of the human mind) and values lie on the other (according to which certain acts are judged to be good or bad, ugly or beautiful).

In what sense can we say that a behavior is perverse because it is inherently ethical? To answer this, we must abandon the behavioral criterion of perversion: thus *what* one does erotically and *with whom* or *with what* no longer counts; instead, what for me is relevant is *if and how the other, with whom one does it, exists in that which is done*. Psychoanalysts should consider perverse any mode of sexual pleasure where the other subject appears only as *a tool* or *a means* of pleasure, that is, where his/her (especially sexual) pleasure is not an aim.

In so-called normal, irreproachable intercourse (whether hetero- and homo-sexual), the other is also *an end* in so far as I aim to give him/her pleasure as well: what

⁵ When Freud said that neurosis is an unconscious—or repressed—perversion, he implied something which is not generally grasped: that neurosis is the “objective” mask of a moral illness. By unveiling the neurotic—i.e. a patient, somebody cured by a doctor—simply as a failed pervert, Freud has (d)enounced him as a moral subject. Established psychoanalysis generally went in the opposite direction, considering the moral conflicts as though they were neurosis. Current psychoanalysis has neurotized ethics, rather than—in Freud’s wake--ethicized neurosis.

⁶ The classical position of analysts is to “look at neurosis and perversions *objectively*, as scientists, without expressing any moral judgment—by doing so, one will find that in neurosis and perversions *moral conflicts* are [in part] at play”. In other words, classical psychoanalysis sees a-morally neurotic and perverse subjects as “moral objects”. It’s to the merit of hermeneutical and deconstructive thought to have raised serious doubts about that division: on the one hand, the “objective” gaze of the analyst is more moralistic than the classical analyst assumes—and, on the other hand, the problematic of neurotics and perverts, which seems purely moral, concerns objectivity to a much greater degree than analysts thought until now.

gives me pleasure is not only the sensual pleasure I take from the other, or even my pride in my power of giving him/her sensual pleasure, but rather the simple fact that s/he experiences sensual (and other) pleasure with me. From this point of view, even an apparently very normal heterosexual act—for example, coitus with a prostitute—should be considered today as perverse, or at the limit of perversions, since no one normally goes with a prostitute to give her sexual pleasure. Conversely, a homosexual act is not perverse in so far as the two same-sex partners take a mutual pleasure not only from each other, but from each other's pleasure.

But don't misunderstand me: I am not saying that perversion consists in simply considering the other as a simple object! This is the prevailing view in psychoanalysis, according to which "perversion is the use of others as things rather than persons, as objects of envy and desire rather than love... [It's] an act rather than a real relation between persons."⁷ A rather contradictory position: how can one experience desire and envy with respect to things? Instead, perversion is not using the other *as an object*, but *using* the other as a subject. In fact, as we shall see, the subjectivity of the other is very often an essential component in the perverse act. For example, the exhibitionist requires the gaze, admiring or surprised, of the woman to whom he exhibits his penis; the subjectivity of the other then comes into play. But perversion is the exploitation of the other's subjectivity as a means for one's own pleasure. As we all know, ethics for Kant consisted in treating other human beings always as ends in themselves, and never as means.

2. Lack of charity

It is normal for a man to like women's legs, as Gosselin and Wilson⁸ write, but a man is a fetishist "if he prefers to come *on* the legs of his partner rather than *between* her legs." But what makes this difference so decisive? The difference becomes important because the latter is usually something a woman also enjoys, while the former usually does not take into account what she enjoys. It is not the desired

⁷ R.J. Stoller, *op.cit.*, p. 199; M.M.R. Khan, "Foreskin Fetishism and Its Relation to Ego Pathology in a Male Homosexual," *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 46, 1965, pp. 64-80; "The function of Intimacy and Acting Out in the Perversions," in *Sexual Behavior and the Law*, R. Slovenko, ed. (Springfield (Ill.): C.C. Thomas, 1965, pp. 397-412).

⁸ *Sexual Variations: Fetishism, Sadomasochism and Transvestism* (London: Faber, 1980, p. 43).

anatomical object that makes the perversion, but rather the presence or lack of *care for the other as a libidinal subject*.

In short, *the non-perverse sexual act is one in which there is charity for the other*. In the Middle Ages, *caritas* did not imply giving alms to the needy: it meant love as distinct from *amor*, intended as sensual love. *Caritas* was love for God, for the church, for one's neighbor—and even for one's wife, because with her *amor* does not suffice. Of course, a decent act of intercourse requires both *amor* and *caritas*. Charity is to feel com-*passion* for the other's desire, to feel concern for the need and attraction the other has for us, and then to go to his/her aid. Coitus, as compassionate charity, is an ethical act *par excellence*. It is no mere coincidence that the Catholic church made a sacrament out of coitus: when done in the requisite manner, it is called matrimony.

To call coitus an act of compassionate charity risks ridicule. But if we remove our behaviorist blinkers, we soon realize that without compassionate charity, any sexual act—even the most apparently normal kind of heterosexual intercourse—is perversion: the use of the other subject (or of the other's subjectivity) not as an end but as an instrument of pleasure.

Intercourse is com-*passion* because each partner enjoys giving to the other what the other lacks. This enjoyment certainly implies a narcissistic pride in one's power to satisfy the other, but it is not just that: it also entails joining one's satisfaction to the filling of the other's void, to help him/her. This filling of the void is resolved in the excess of orgasm, in which the two opposites which charity joins seem to be united—the *delicium* (delight/crime) of becoming absent to oneself, and the pleasure of finally giving this absence to the other.

It is against this ethical background of sexual intercourse that perverse fantasies and modes of behavior should be analyzed. Perversions are complex ways of being-in-the-world.

3. Perversion shuns jealousy

My thesis here is the following: perversion is a way of warding off the devastating emotions of jealousy and delusion, brought out when the beloved other has sexual relations with another. Classical psychoanalysis has usually dealt with envy and its byproducts. But perverse sexuality has its original root and most powerful trigger in

jealousy (and not only in envy), all of which should sound obvious to many Freudians. By placing the Oedipus complex at the core, Freud placed jealousy at the heart of the psyche⁹—in fact, the Oedipus complex is not only the inadmissible desire of a child for an adult, but also and above all the jealousy for the fact that the beloved (whom he cannot satisfy) is enjoyed by another, and that the beloved enjoys the other. But I think that even such a common feeling as jealousy needs to be clarified.

More or less orthodox analysts usually see jealousy as essentially the fear of losing the beloved object (what matters is the relationship between a subject and its objects of love and hate). From this perspective, I am jealous of my wife only because I am afraid that, by falling in love with another, she might leave me; my ambivalence towards her, or my sadistic fantasies and consequent guilt feelings are all considered as stemming from this. But we all know that this fear of losing the beloved object is only one aspect, and maybe not the essential one, of the theme of jealousy.

Take that most famous jealous man, Othello. We cannot say that his torment lies in his fear of losing Desdemona to Cassio, or in his feeling less loved by her. In fact, we know his jealousy is unjustified and we think that Desdemona loves Othello as much as before—thus we know that the fulcrum of his jealousy cannot be any cooling of passion on Desdemona's part (in fact, Othello in the text never refers to that). Othello's suffering is instead caused by his imaginary scene, in which Desdemona is enjoying sex with Cassio. No one can console him by saying, for example, "but why do you care what Desdemona does when you're not there and whether she has sex with Cassio or not? What matters is that you enjoy her, and that she enjoys you, the rest is her business." This wise discourse does not make sense for the jealous person, who is in his own way even too hetero-centric: foremost in his thoughts is whether and with whom the beloved gets pleasure when he's absent. In short, jealousy is a *realistic passion*: it's suffering for the truth, and not at all an abandonment to the self-sufficient world of fantasies.

This is why all of the dominant psychoanalytic theory—focused on what the others signify for a subject, without taking into consideration this reality-in-itself that others are for us—misses the core of the Oedipal drama. I am of course referring to the *significant others* for each of us. It goes beyond recognizing the importance, for our psychic life, of

⁹ In contrast to Freud, we can consider the Oedipus complex (as do M. Klein and Lacan himself), not as a certain phase of infantile sexual development, but as something "precocious" that determines infantile sexuality from the outset. Or rather, in terms of our framework: envy and jealousy are basic feelings, even in the very first months of life, of every human being.

what significant others (first of all, our mother) do to us, or that our psychic life is conditioned by the image we build up of significant others (again, first of all, our mother). What matters most is that I recognize that my psychic life is focused by the often enigmatic reality of significant others as subjects, and catalyzed by what these others think, enjoy and suffer. This tropism toward the other as a real being is something which Freudian and post-Freudian “psychological” theories tend to repress.

As Othello says clearly to Iago: “[When I did not suspect Desdemona,] I found not Cassio’s kisses on her lips.”¹⁰ Othello is a gentleman and uses a chaste language. We think more crudely that “Cassio’s kisses” are a euphemism for Cassio’s penis which Othello implacably “finds” inside Desdemona. We can describe masculine jealousy as the atrocious doubt that the beloved woman’s cavity is “inhabited” by an other’s phallus, in short, that having sex with one’s own woman is reduced to a kind of homosexual encounter with the other’s phallus¹¹. So, there is some Freudian paranoia¹² in every form of jealousy, even in the most normal and justifiable kind. By that I don’t mean to say that every jealous person is a paranoiac, but that paranoiac persons are more “normal” than we generally think.¹³

However this may be, the jealous person prefers to destroy the loved object to kill Desdemona rather than to accept that s/he might have sexual enjoyment without him. This fact is enough to refute the idea which reduces jealousy to anguish for the loss of the other as object: the jealous person prefers to lose the object rather than recognize its right to enjoy with others (he is anguished not so much by the loss of the object, but rather by his exclusion from the other’s sexual enjoyment). Jealousy is

¹⁰ *Othello*, Act III, scene III.

¹¹ This continued presence of the other *in absentia* within the partner’s body is used by many American Protestant priests in their sermons to dissuade young people from being promiscuous. They say: “If your girlfriend’s been with someone else, you don’t kiss only her lips, but also the lips of the other fellow. And if he’s been with other girls, by kissing your girlfriend’s lips you’re also kissing the lips of all those other girls, who in turn have been kissed by others. In your girlfriend’s mouth are hundreds and thousands of other people’s mouths, tongues and saliva.” I’ve seen kids for whom such baroque descriptions have had quite an effect.

¹² According to Freud, the paranoiac delusion is always a form of unrecognized homosexuality projected onto the other and reversed.

¹³ In fact, the jealous person’s horror for this homosexual dimension of intercourse raises a suspicion: what if the jealous person’s horror were the flip-side of an overly strong and overly repressed homosexual drive?

heterocentric in so far as it is suffering for being excluded from the *jouissance* of the beloved other. Jealousy which is at the center of the Oedipus complex is pain for one's own exile from the other who enjoys sex. And this elementary truth is at the heart of the perverse "choice". As we will see, the perverse masterpiece¹⁴ consists in transforming the trauma of jealousy into an exclusive sexual enjoyment.

This brings us to an aspect that analysts have sometimes highlighted regarding perversion: perverse acts usually betray an anxiety in the face of a *mystery*. It's not anxiety in the face of danger (as in the case of castration), but in front of something mysterious, often linked to sexual difference itself. But why does sexuality continue to appear to be something so enigmatic, puzzling, and mysterious, much more so, for example, than the difference between races, cultures, the young and old, or the past and present? This mystery is probably what hounds every jealous person: *what is the other and what does s/he really feel, especially when having sex with another?* The mystery is the other's subjectivity (and thus his/her suffering and pleasure), something from which we are all, in the end, excluded. The anxiety over the mystery of sexual difference is thus the anxiety over being excluded from what the other is and feels.

4. Exhibitionism and voyeurism

In a well-known joke a sadist and a masochist meet. The kneeling masochist pleads with the sadist and cries: "Beat me, please! Punch me!" To which the smirking sadist replies: "No! Never!" The philosopher Gilles Deleuze¹⁵ remarked that this is an absurd story, because in effect a sadist and a masochist never meet. They belong to two completely separate perverse universes. This is true not only of masochists and sadists, but of all kinds of perverts. In general, we never find complementarity between

¹⁴ R. J. Stoller (*Perversion. The Erotic Form of Hatred*, 1975) remarks that usually the pervert is convinced of having created his perversion himself, as if it were a work of art; what's more, he considers his perversion as his most skillful production, and that "perversion is one of the many masterpieces of the human mind."

¹⁵ G. Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher Masoch. Le froid et le cruel* (Paris : Les Editions de Minuit, 1967).

perversions; moreover, this lack of complementarity constitutes the essence of perversion itself.¹⁶

Even the exhibitionist and the voyeur are never complementary. Take, first, the exhibitionist, a man who, usually in a public space, abruptly shows his penis—either limp or erect—to an unknown woman. The aim of the exhibitionist is never the seduction of the woman: his pleasure derives from the act itself. So, when (rarely) a woman plays along and says to the exhibitionist, “So, shall we go to my place? Do you want to give it to me?”, the exhibitionist turns heel and runs, confused and disappointed. Exhibitionism is a perversion in so far as it does not inaugurate, but substitutes for, a shared sexual action.

In fact, as exhibitionist, I choose for a “victim” a woman who apparently is not seeking an erotic experience: I am interested in capturing her gaze in order to make her see something which should be delightful for her (the exhibitionist generally hopes to excite his victim). But it is not a “charitable” act, as can be the case even in a pornographic show, where voyeurism and exhibitionism are not perverse, because we suppose that both the couple performing the sexual acts and the viewing public derive pleasure from the show (even when the pleasure of the actors consists only in making money). In a porno-show there is in any case an agreement, a conjunction of desires.

Nothing similar happens in perverse exhibitionism, where instead the woman usually reacts by being disgusted, upset, or scared by the performance. What matters for me, an exhibitionist, is to fix the woman’s gaze so that she cannot remain indifferent and free to seek what interests her; I force her gaze to not ignore my penis. A woman’s gaze—like anybody else’s—is like a void trying to be filled by stimulating and delightful objects, but certainly neither I nor my genitals are included among these objects. This woman is not looking for me, she does not desire me, yet she carries her void around with her—a void in which I put, not my penis, but its perception. As an exhibitionist, I wish to “expose” the woman’s desire, what she is supposedly seeking by her wandering gaze, but I do not fulfill it. By imposing the view of my penis on this woman, I unsettle her: what she had excluded (my penis) is imposed upon her.¹⁷ In

¹⁶ Even Freud remarked that sadism is “serious” (and generally involves the police) while masochism is play, a form of make-believe.

¹⁷In this sense the exhibitionist is, like Don Juan, “a punisher of women”. According to many psychopathological studies, the exhibitionist is characterized by a considerable amount of hatred

short, I, as exhibitionist, expose my exclusion from the woman's sexual enjoyment, while getting pleasure from this exclusion by imposing my penis upon her, from which—prior to the perverse act—she was free.

Such exposure of the subject's exclusion is more evident in voyeurism. For us, the voyeur is a pervert in so far as he enjoys lustily watching people engaged in sex or in some intimate activity--without being watched in turn. A voyeur is someone who observes the sexual act of a person who does not desire to be observed. So, what the voyeur really enjoys is not the act of intercourse, but *his exclusion from that intercourse*. This distinction is fundamental. The two lovers don't want to include me at all, not even as an observer, which rather ought to prompt my anger at being excluded. Instead, in the end, it is some times the two actors who suffer, when they realize that they have been "included" in the gaze of an unknown observer. I, the voyeur, transform the suffering resulting from my own exclusion into lustful pleasure, because I have become an active player who overcomes their activity: the two actors, who take pleasure without paying any heed to me, are reduced to simple objects of my enjoying gaze. Unbeknownst to them, I, the voyeur, "possess" them precisely because I have transformed my exclusion into a secret relationship wherein I now include in my gaze the two who excluded me. Thus I, the voyeur, not only vindicate myself against that which my father and mother had imposed upon me—my not participating in their intercourse—but in a devious way I invert the relationship of mastery: now it is the lovers who are excluded from a gaze which "captures" them, and hence from the vision of what they are doing.

5. Masochism and sadism

In masochism, the transformation of exclusion into enjoyment is effected in a spectacular way. I, the masochist, do not demand that the woman love, desire or appreciate me; on the contrary, I wish to be beaten and humiliated, neither desired nor loved by her. The woman's contempt is the masochist's enjoyment. But why this need for such severity?

towards women (and especially towards his mother). His mother generally appears unaffectionate and cold-hearted, and the adult exhibitionist often marries a "maternal wife".

See H. Christoffel, "The masculine genital exhibitionism," in S. Lorand & M. Balint, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-213.

The masochist very often answers in a spiritual tone: "Through humiliation and pain I am uplifted." The masochist's erotic pleasure apes the soul's elevation through mortification—as is explicitly proclaimed in Pauline Réage's novel *Histoire d'O*, which is almost a manifesto of female masochism. It is no coincidence that Italian prostitutes advertise in newspapers their availability for masochist clients by offering "*education*". Education raises the spirit, giving access to a superior enjoyment that comes from sacrifice and humiliation. The important point is that the masochist does not offer himself as the complement of a genuine feminine desire to punish and humiliate: the woman here is only an instrument, she has only to pretend to be severe. The woman's rejection thus becomes a show of which the masochist is the director. The scene of the most painful rejection is played out by the masochist as his pleasurable object.

It is true that the masochist has to make do with prostitutes, but deep down he dreams of a woman who really wants to punish him, a woman who would be truly severe with him. But even if the masochist succeeded in finding this woman—one who would really be angry with him—in this case the charitable complementarity which would cancel the perverse strategy of the act would not take place. In fact, a woman who was really angry with the subject would not have any particular pleasure in being so: after all, what is pleasurable in being indignant at another's behavior? The masochist desires a severe woman, but he does not desire to satisfy her desires: the feelings of his longed-for partner are not an end for him (in the sense that he would have the end of satisfying them), but a means towards obtaining pleasure for himself. In making himself the object of the severity of a woman, he does not aim towards satisfying her desire to be strict, but aims only at egoistically intercepting the effects of this severity. When, for example, the masochist declares himself to be the "slave" of his "mistress", he does not enjoy satisfying the desire of the woman to be the mistress of slaves: he only enjoys his feeling of being her slave.

In a Woody Allen movie, *Take the Money and Run* (1969), Woody as a child lives in a violent and run-down American slum. Skinny and with oversized glasses, he is often, rightly or wrongly, punished by adults who tear off his glasses, throw them on the ground, and crush them underfoot. After so many repetitions of this treatment, the grown-up Woody introduces a variation: just when he feels that the usual attack is coming, he himself tears off his glasses and crushes them on the ground. He self-administrates this violence of which until then he had been a passive victim.

This gag illustrates a process that Freud had already described, when he tackled the mystery of neurotics, who appear to inflict upon themselves pain and sorrow without any (even unconscious) plausible reason. Ultimately, he elaborated his notion of the death drive as a way to account for this mystery. But the introduction of the death drive is more a reformulation of the mystery rather than its solution. Before reaching this conclusion, Freud had hypothesized that the many ways of self-inflicting pain nonetheless obey the Pleasure Principle (*Lustprinzip*), even if indirectly: by transforming himself from a passive victim into an active agent of suffering, the subject consoles himself by reestablishing a certain mastery. Just like Woody Allen, in as much as he cannot avoid being the target of violence, he prefers to inflict it himself and, in doing so, he derives some pride from it. We might suppose that Woody takes a certain pleasure from his “masochism”: he participates in the sadistic pleasure of the persons who punish him, hitting himself as if he were his own sadistic object.

As with every perversion, even masochism is a strategy for deriving pleasure from something initially very unpleasant. Masochism is sublime in Kant’s sense¹⁸: as a displeasure which pleases, or as a pleasure which displeases. This contrivance transforms my masochistic painful exclusion from the other’s enjoyment into a scene, an object, and into my own enjoyment from which the other is excluded (this shows again why perversion is a lack of charity for the other). Freud, however, did not exactly say this in relation to perversion; rather, he spoke about the *Urszene*, or “primal scene”. Many human beings would find it traumatic to witness the coitus of others—or, maybe, even to imagine it. The reasons for which a child’s observation of adult coitus can be traumatic are varied. But certainly it is very painful for the child who thinks: “Adults get a mutually intense, dramatic, happy experience from which I am totally excluded.” The primal scene is first of all a scene of primal exclusion--the subject is outside it. In more formal terms: “I am not the object of my beloved other’s desire or enjoyment.” This betrayal of the other is the matrix of perversion.

As regards sadism, it has too often appeared to analysts as an expression of a primary aggressiveness, of a natural reactive impulse, that is basically a-problematic. They see it as a sort of zero degree on the perversion scale: the most

¹⁸ In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant distinguishes between the sublime and the beautiful, and he analyzes the former as an intersection between pleasure and displeasure.

inadmissible perversion of all would also be the most original, to the extent that we all desire to revenge ourselves against anyone who has made us suffer. But when the primary sadism we all possess becomes sexualized, things get complicated. I, the sadist, get enjoyment from beating a woman in order to punish The Woman for her original “betrayal”, i.e., for her having experienced pleasure with another, and not with me. Sadistic rape is thus in its way an application of the law of retaliation: I (the excluded child) now make “my” original woman pay for the pleasure she took from another man, or from another child, by forcing intercourse on a woman representing the original one.

In a French film (*Code Unknown*) there is a scene that is not infrequent on the Paris subway: a couple of young Arabs are insistently harassing an attractive white girl, who does not respond to the provocation. After a while, one of the two youths spits in her face. The act of sexual refusal on the part of the woman is turned on its head by the physical action of spitting, the oral inverse of the kiss--a very simple dynamic, implicit in every sadistic sexual experience.

The same sadism happens in wars: soldiers of an invading army rape the women of the enemy nation, usually in front of their husbands or fathers who are reduced to a state of impotence. The woman of the enemy must be “punished” because she has enjoyed my enemy. In France and Yugoslavia, the women who had love affairs with German soldiers during the Nazi Occupation had their hair shorn--a softer variation of the gang rape of a woman “who has enjoyed the ‘other man’”.

6. Fetishism

The analysis of fetishism has had an eminent place in psychoanalytic theory, if for no other reason than because Freud dealt with it in order to elaborate his very important theory of *Ichspaltung*, the splitting of the Ego.¹⁹ According to Freud, the fetishist lives in a dual world: in the adult one, he knows that women do not have a penis, and in the other (infantile) world, he does not believe they lack a penis. The fetish of the pervert is in fact a detachable part of the woman—comparable to a penis—which he desires. This is often why fetishists say they feel like homosexuals,²⁰ even if in fact

¹⁹ See *Fetischismus* (1927)(*SE*, 21, pp. 152-157; *GW*, 14, pp. 311-318). See also *Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence* (1938)(*SE*, 23, pp. 275-279; *GW*, 17, pp. 59-62).

²⁰ They generally identify homosexuality as an anal practice. They seem to identify the feminine matrix with an anus.

they are not particularly attracted to men; but for them, the woman is desirable in so far as she has a penis, and the fetish is its metaphorical substitute.

But analysts often ask themselves why shoes and socks are the most common fetishes. Where does this preference for shoes and, secondarily, for feminine feet come from? Lacan wondered how fetishists in ancient times behaved, when few shoes existed.²¹ Of course, in so far as the shoe is something detachable, it has a phallic connotation. But the shoe, the sock, and the corset are also *containers*: they connote the vagina. The fetish has a double face, which makes it so indispensable: as a detachable object, it is the phallus marking the woman; as a container, it is the vagina or the anus that might finally be “given”. Freud, charmed by the phallic metaphor, saw only one side of the coin.

The fetishist thus views the putting on and taking off of shoes as an *analogon* of sexual intercourse. The fetish evokes the inseparable unity of the male and female in an act of intercourse from which the subject is excluded. In so far as the woman puts on and takes off her shoes, she realizes in herself a copulative completeness: in putting on and taking off her shoes, she integrates both sexes, she is the container and the contained, but this integration renders the fetishist subject superfluous.

But in fact it is precisely this completeness that the woman lacks: she lacks the penis and coitus, and the fetishist is unable to adequately give them to her. Probably, at the root of any fetishist conversion, there is an unsatisfied mother, desiring an intercourse that does not arrive. But this woman does not seek what she lacks in her son and even less in his penis—a severe mother, who doesn’t know what to do about her son’s masculinity.

7. The perverse homosexual

Homosexuality, as we have seen, in its most frequent forms is not a perversion. But it can often develop from a perverse core, which later is more or less overcome (heterosexuality can also develop from a perverse core).

Classical psychoanalysis views things in this way: I, the “basic homosexual”, desire an handsome boy with a beautiful penis because, in my view, he is

²¹ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre IV. La relation d’objet* (Paris: Seuil, 1994, p. 42).

what my mother (or the original woman significant to me) wished for, generally without getting him. One thing is certain: the handsome boy with the beautiful penis she was looking for was not me! In this sense, the basic homosexual is narcissistic, in so far as the handsome boy he seeks is what he himself would have wished to be (for his mother), without ever having been it. The basic homosexual is the result of his mother's lack of incestuous desire towards him.

This classical analysis seems to be confirmed by certain aspects of the so-called "homosexual culture". For example, homosexuals often love and worship "beautiful and famous women"—like Madonna or the young Bette Davis—who represent what they themselves would like to be:²² charming persons whom most men desire. Homosexuals worship these female stars because they are their Ego-Ideals: these women can have all the beautiful males they want, since so many men desire them. For this reason, homosexuals often tend to become tailors or hair stylists for women: they enjoy making women desirable for men, thus creating what, in their perception, their own mothers wished to be in order to find the man they sought. In seeking beautiful boys, I, the "basic" male homosexual, fill the void of the woman I first loved, and give her what she never had—because I, as a son, was not up to it.

8. Perverse femininity

How can one explain the fact that perversions are usually male, and almost never female, "weaknesses"? For early psychoanalysis, the woman is almost never perverse, simply because she is so by her very psychic constitution. Freud spoke of *feminine masochism*:²³ *qua* female, the woman is a masochist. Although this thesis has always infuriated feminists, it was a woman, Helen Deutsch, who most developed the thesis of the supposed masochist hard core of women.²⁴ The thesis sounds exaggerated to us

²² On "homosexual culture", see M.S. Weinberg, *Homosexualities. A Study of Diversity among Men and Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

²³ S. Freud, *The Economic Problem of Masochism* (1924), *SE*, 19, pp. 159-170 ; *GW*, 13, pp. 371-383.

²⁴ H. Deutsch, "Der feminine Masochismus und seine Beziehung zur Frigidität", *Internat. Zeitschr. F. Psychoan.*, XVII, 2, 1930. *The Psychology of Women*, vols, 1 and 2 (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1944-5).

today, but we should try to understand its core of truth: just like every pervert, every woman also has to transform humiliation into pleasure. That is, she has to move past the discomfort of being penetrated, invaded by the other, towards pleasure. It suffices to observe children of both sexes in order to realize that being penetrated, in whichever orifice it may be for example when enemas are administered arouses much repulsion in them: they feel dispossessed of their own bodies. Masturbation among pre-adolescent girls is generally clitoral (when a small girl penetrates herself, we have to suspect some psychic disturbance). Every woman must therefore turn this childhood offense into her triumph and re-elaborate the intrusion of herself as a body by turning it into a source of non-clitoral enjoyment. That bizarre pleasure, which strikes us in the case of the (male) pervert, is in this sense similar to the bizarre (vaginal) pleasure of every woman.²⁵ Paradoxically, clitoral sexuality is “normal”, while vaginal sexuality is “perverse” even though our culture (as well as Freud’s) actually considers the latter to be healthy and normal.

The hysterical subject, described by Freud as an imaginary pervert, is in many ways a woman who does not resign herself to female masochism: she does not accept “suffering” from penetration and thus identifies with the central void of her own bodily being, indeed, she does everything in order to protect this void. Analogously, the anorexic rejects both food and the penis as intolerable intrusions that are damaging to the glorious autarchy of her own body. The hysteric and the anorexic, by renouncing femininity as a perversion, renounce femininity *tout court*: they dream of themselves as virgin and mother, like the Madonna. They idealize themselves as women; they abhor themselves as females.

The success of the Marian cults certainly does not mean that all Catholics, for two millennia, have been hysterical. The point is that both the cult of Mary and hysteria try to provide an answer to a difficult problem of femininity: how can a woman accept being invaded, penetrated, “shafted”, while turning all this into her own *sublime* (in the Kantian sense) pleasure? How can she offer her own emptiness to the other, while preventing its being filled from canceling the *female power*, her capacity for production and reproduction?

²⁵ The problem obviously does not arise for clitoral pleasure, which is completely similar to phallic pleasure. Every woman must therefore deal with a double sexuality: one clitoral (“normal”), and another vaginal (“perverse”). Men generally needn’t deal with this.

But if it is true that hysteria is a female weakness, while perversion is a male weakness, there is still no lack of perverse women. We often do not classify these women as being so, probably because women, until a short time ago, had less sexual initiative and therefore their perversion emerged more rarely.

Take the case of Carmen. She was able to obtain real pleasure from sexual relations only if she imagined that the man who was penetrating her was, in his turn, being anally penetrated by another man. She had never revealed this fantasy to any of her sexual partners until, around her fifties, she met a man who accepted both the fantasy and its practice. She greatly enjoyed penetrating him with a large vibrator, both during and outside the time of their coitus. Moreover she had had a life of rather promiscuous sexual activity, had been through various divorces, and had occasionally practiced as a prostitute more for the pleasure of giving herself to men for money than for any real economic need.

This is a clear example of female perversion, because in this case the partner is reduced to a means rather than an end of pleasure: whether or not her companion likes it, Carmen enjoys sex only if she sees him being “sodomized”. At the root of all this, her experience of coitus was a humiliating act for her as a woman; she could therefore concede her own pleasure to a man only if he, in turn, symmetrically suffered this humiliation. This, then, is an erotic flipside of the law of tit-for-tat not “an eye for an eye” but “a shafting for a shafting”. With the man reduced in his turn to a female role, the rancor towards the possessor of a violent phallus was attenuated: coitus thus became a gay retaliation “between equals”. In addition, during her sporadic experiences of prostitution, Carmen obtained a sort of compensation for being female: the act of coitus was in itself an offence to her as a woman, which thus had to be paid for.

A complex affective knot emerges (so complex that it explains the relative rarity of perverse behavior in women): on the one hand, envy of the male for his power to give the woman pleasure; and on the other, the woman’s inability to enjoy coitus normally because of her humiliation and the forced entry into what is hers. Hence her getting back against the intrusive male by imagining (or effecting) his anal penetration.

But it is perhaps cases of this kind that can give us an idea of why women are less inclined towards sexual perversions (and instead more inclined towards hysteria). Just as the pervert obtains pleasure from reliving obliquely a traumatic experience of

betrayal, so does every woman in her own sexual experience, which is labeled as normal. It is as if the little girl experienced a triple trauma: her mother “betrays” her with a man; her beloved father “betrays” her with a woman; and she suffers the “insult” of coitus passively. It is as if behind every real act of coitus the woman risks reliving this triple defeat, while succeeding in making it into an opportunity for pleasure just as in the case of perversions.

But precisely because for every woman her own partner is a substitute, a *pis-aller*, a surrogate for the ideal Man, in the end she opens herself to the care of this “poor man” who desires her and sometimes loves her, dedicating to him that charitable cult destined for the Man who for her will always be lacking.

9. But do others exist?

All that we have said about perversions until now involves compromising the subjectivity of the other as something real that we take into account. But today there is considerable confusion regarding the way of conceiving the other and his/her subjectivity.

Our mentality leads us to believe that when we treat others well we are *ipso facto* looking after their subjectivity, but psychoanalysis should lead us to distrust this overly hasty equation. For example, one often hears it said that “the Nazis treated the Jews not as subjects but as objects, and for this reason they exterminated them.” In reality, if the Nazis had treated the Jews as objects—i.e., as instruments for their own advantage—they would instead have given them a good wage to make them work productively in their factories and industries. Above all, they would have treated exceptionally well the Jewish scientists who could have built the atomic bomb for them. Unfortunately, the Nazis treated Jews as subjects: they enjoyed humiliating them and making them feel to the core that they were sub-human or non-human. But if I enjoy making another human being feel like a beast for slaughter, it is precisely his humiliated subjectivity that causes my enjoyment. For this reason, the Nazis put into effect sadistic perversion on a political scale. The sadist, as we have seen, does not treat his victim at all as if he were an inanimate object; he does not simply express his own rage and aggression., rather he enjoys the other’s suffering, he exploits the other’s pain in order to reach *jouissance*, that is, in order to overcome his own pain. Even when the sadist

limits himself to inflicting pain on animals, it is the other's pain that he needs, that capacity for suffering which makes animals so similar to us.

This is why many view modern society—which tries to guarantee the others welfare and civil rights—as alienating, since it is a society which has realized that only by treating others well is it possible to get the best out of them. It has long been known that a free, well-paid worker does a better job for us than a slave. But the logic is the same: whether he be a slave or a free man, the important thing is that the other should be an instrument of production to be optimized. Paradoxically, it is precisely perversion that leads us to understand, seen against this light, in what sense the subjectivity of the other regards us, and how it is connected to the edification of our own subjectivity.

It is true that certain psychoanalytical schools—some of which today enjoy popularity—have overcome a certain theoretical solipsism of classical metapsychology and have explicitly developed the themes of the reality of the other as something that regards subjective development. This is the case in particular of Winnicott, Lacan and analysts of a hermeneutic tendency.

Winnicott, by distinguishing the mother who is “good enough” from the one who is not, turned the real mother—and not only the mother imagined or hallucinated by the subject—into the protagonist of psychic development. For this reason he emphasizes the mother's ability to “fantasize” and to understand the true desires of her child, etc.

Lacan, by saying that “the desire of man is the desire of the Other,” introduced the dimension of the Other as central: every subject is constituted, not as “a celibate machine” (as Duchamp expressed it) by means of one's own fantasies and internal imaginary processes, but in relation to the desire and enjoyment of the Other. Every subject does not simply want to satisfy his own drives or fantasies, but also wishes to satisfy the Other (first of all the mother), whose desires he is able to detect.

The hermeneutic trends actually dissolve the unity of the subject in the relations between subjects: the phenomenology of the single subject is brought back to inter-subjective relations, which are described as constituting every personal individuation. *Dasein* (the human being in its singularity) is identified with *Mit-sein*, being-with. From this stems the phenomenologists' insistence on the “relationship”, the “field”, the “system of relations”.

And yet, despite these steps forward, I believe that even now psychoanalysis has not really succeeded in focusing upon the reality of the other as a constitutive factor of subjectivity.

For Winnicott, our psychic destiny depends on our mother, but only in so far as she is *our* mother – something for us and in relation to us – not in so far as she is a woman who is and does many other things apart from being our mother. That is, what our mother does and thinks is relevant only as far as her doing and thinking pass through her relationship with us, her children. The reality of both the subject and the other is reduced to their being in relation to each other, to their reciprocal presence or absence, and this reality does not go beyond what each one is *for the* other.

For Lacan, the reality of the Other is confiscated by language: the Other counts, in the final analysis, not in as much as he is a subject different from myself, but in as much as he embodies the instance of the symbolic. The Other blends into the “treasure of the signifiers” in which it consists basically, in the Objective Mind of Hegel. True otherness is no longer one’s mother, father, siblings and friends in flesh and bone, but the signifier which determines us. If in Winnicott the other blends into the “mother who is more or less good for me”, in Lacan it blends into the symbolic Mind which commands its action.

For phenomenology, instead, the subject is freed *d’emblée* from his solitude and appears determined within the irreducible play of his being-with others and being-for others. But in fact, phenomenology axiomatically assumes as resolved a problem which instead remains: our being-with the other is not an immediate, primary, total and unanalyzable reality. Moreover, not all others count for us, and those others who remain **only matter under certain conditions**. Even hermeneutic phenomenology tends to dissolve the reality of the subject and of the other – that which is on this, and on the other, side of the relation – within their own relation, within their ontological interdependence. In this way, the great Freudian discovery--the *force* of drives and biological tensions--is almost cancelled in a sort of disembodied inter-psychism. The neurotics’ problem – his lack of care for others in their reality – becomes instead in phenomenology an absolute datum from which to begin: every one of us is a *cure for others*. If only it were so! In other words, others condition us – not only because they have the power to make us do or not do the things we want, but also because what they feel, think and know about us concerns us to the utmost degree. We live in large part in order to please and gratify others. We are never autonomous or alone.

The experience of perversion ultimately teaches us that some subjects have no concern for the other – they have no compassionate charity for the other’s

sexuality precisely because they have experienced an early trauma: *they have discovered that the other lives a reality which excludes them*. Realizing that the other is not a function of us *the right object for us* but a thing-in-itself-and-for-itself, is highly traumatic for many people. The subject suffers from his exclusion from the other—in the end, from his *limitation* as a (spatially, temporally, and erotically) finite being. The pervert is nostalgic for “a true life” in which he would enjoy the other as if he himself were the other, and to whom he has never had access. And yet he is able to transform his exclusion into his sexual pleasure. While this exclusion haunts the neurotic, despite his will to go beyond the trauma and become included in the life of others.