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Cathartic Ethics in Psychoanalysis

Dylan Timothy O'Brien

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, dobrie5@lsu.edu

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CATHARTIC ETHICS IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Philosophy

by
Dylan Timothy O'Brien
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I dedicate this thesis to Oanh, without whom I would still operate under the comforting assumption that I had achieved a complete realization, thinking of ethics as little more than a tragic joke.

“Life doesn’t want to be healed. The negative therapeutic reaction is fundamental to it. Anyway, what is healing? The realization of the subject through a speech which comes from elsewhere, traversing it.”

-Jacques Lacan, Seminar II, p. 233

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the complex role of ethics within Psychoanalytic theory, finding not a prescriptive ethics, but a reference to ethics in the cathartic methodology that I argue underpinned Psychoanalytic thought from the very beginning. The introduction provides the reader with the necessary background to the material to be covered. The first chapter examines the neglectful attitude found throughout the foundational writings of Psychoanalytic theory in the work of Sigmund Freud, as well as covering two different methods by which ethics are often reduced, and which Freud successfully avoided. The second chapter seeks the origin of an alternative ethics in the traditional locus of freedom and agency: the ego, and explains how this assumption is problematic. The ego is shown to be surmounted through the cathartic method. The final chapter examines the processes of post-egoic ethics, shows their role in the Psychoanalytic relationship, and summarizes the entire project in the last two pages.

INTRODUCTION: THE PLACE OF CATHARSIS IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

We may characterize Psychoanalysis as a cathartic practice¹, insofar as it seeks to discharge the pathologies of everyday life in order that free activity and association might take their place². “Catharsis” is a Greek term, which translates to “purification” or “purging”, and refers in the context of Psychoanalysis to an abreaction/discharge of a fundamental and pathogenic trauma (Laplanche & Pontalis, p. 60). This method, although discarded in later formulations of Psychoanalytic theory, remained implicit in all of them, insofar as they continued to emphasize the direction of Psychoanalysis as guided by a desire for exteriority; a desire to exit a closed and stifling circuit. The oppressiveness of psychoanalytic theory is precisely an attempt to escape this element of experience by delineating it. Sigmund Freud’s notorious emphasis on sexuality and familial relations was a result of his discovery that the ossifications of desire, in pathological states, follow certain patterns that lead to pathology through their constant repetition. In the case of neurotics, who make up the vast majority of psychoanalytic subjects, certain thought and behavioral patterns, often solidified at a young age, are repeated incessantly, and this leads to psychological disturbance. The goal of Psychoanalysis was (and is) not to inculcate these patterns, but to offer a path beyond them, towards a true relation with the world and others in their exteriority, and without sacrificing interior life to do so.

Psychoanalysis, like any meaningful system, has the potential to take us well beyond impersonal duty and personal compulsion into a more broad, responsible, and

¹ In spite of Freud’s surpassing of the cathartic method to form the method later referred to as the “talking cure”, an emphasis on the curative potential of catharsis, re-named “abreaction”, remained in his later work, and remained a core principle of psychoanalysis.

² Although Psychoanalysis achieves its cure through free association, free association is also a sign that it has succeeded. Pathological states always impose their schema on discourse, making relation itself impossible.

open-ended universe. This, as I will put forth in the pages that follow, lays the groundwork for a true ethical practice and eliminates the twin possibilities of false ethics, dedicated to top-down moralistic injunction, as well as to the bottom-up interior drives which form a kind of “private despotism” reigning over the interior life of the afflicted.

If there is a process by which ethical spaces are opened up through psychoanalysis, it would be through catharsis. The cathartic abreaction, which empties the psyche of its excess cathexes, is a terrifying prospect for many who are initially exposed to Psychoanalytic theory and method, in that it makes explicit many of the less comfortable processes and objects involved in our day-to-day lives. The insights provided us by its theory of pathology (in this singular focus on pathology, Psychoanalysis was from its beginning a primarily *negative* theory, delineating pathological states, with ideals always remaining on the periphery), have a tremendous potential to arouse the fear of the philosopher or the philosophically minded. With its scalpel, it peers under the goodness that is assumed to be provided us by our loyalty to prescriptive formulas of ethics, to see if there is a hidden pattern of unconscious activity. The possibility of a *return of the repressed*, or a perceptible uprising of unconscious patterns, is a constant threat, and the higher we value our ideals, the more inaccessible their sources seem, the less likely we are to acknowledge the possibility of this occurring. Layers of distortion often cover the activity of the unconscious, placed as they are with the goal of preventing disruptive material from entering conscious awareness. When they do enter consciousness, they are often cloaked in reversals, denials, and other means of obfuscating their true nature. The only way to peer beneath these obfuscations is through interpretation. Ethical action itself often serves as one of the

most common “masks” of unconscious activity, because it allows one to continue one’s activities unmodified while reassuring oneself of the justification of one’s practices within greater society. Ethics easily takes on a ritualistic character, becoming a form of sacrifice of freedom encoded in widespread discourse. Through ritualistic compulsion, the neurotic gives up their agency in order to reach regress comfortably to a stage of primal dependency or omnipotence (this will be discussed at length in Chapter 3). The language of the unconscious, however, stands out from these distortions involved in traditional ethical discourse in that it “[...] speaks all by itself [...]” (OSP, p. 70), while traditional discursive ethics speak *for* us, offering us a static means to measure our level of conformity to its codes and prescriptions. Although it is clear that ethics must involve autonomy on one level or another, most ethical systems end up undermining this autonomy by bringing them entirely into the domain of representational consciousness. Pathology represents a troubling surfacing of this autonomy, this lack of representation.

Yet the goal of Psychoanalysis is not to decompose ethics by revealing its roots in pathology. Instead, Psychoanalysis as it was initially set forth by Sigmund Freud and further developed by Jacques Lacan, allows for the expansion of the study of ethics beyond their usual confinement to conscious representation and into the domain of the non-representational unconscious. By exploring the relationship of the unconscious to ethical behavior, we can illustrate the possibility of ethics beyond prescriptivity, beyond the rules that limit freedom. As is indicated by Freud throughout his writings, we may find the inverse of what we would expect in the ethical by studying their practice and their pathos, in that it is easy to sweep ethics up into the pre-ethical desires of the individual. The unconscious has its own motives, and unless these are properly

understood, we cannot make any assumptions about the veracity of any ethical system supposedly subscribed to by an individual:

If anyone were to put forward the paradoxical proposition that normal man is not only far more immoral than he believes but also far more moral than he knows, Psycho-analysis, on whose findings the first half of the assertion rests, would have no objection to raise against the second half (EI, p. 42).

Although the engagement psychoanalysis and ethics throughout Freud's work is almost exclusively negative, with him mounting sophisticated critiques and exposés of the embarrassing failures of ethics, it seems clear in the above quotation that he is not unilaterally opposed to a positive ethics, as long as it can account for the unconscious dynamics involved. One can speculate that Freud himself avoided going too far in this direction on account of his fear of making his work susceptible to a construction of a positive ethics capable of undoing his work on the unconscious. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I have chosen to focus on a positive element in Freud's thought, namely the cathartic underpinning of his theory's trajectory, which I see as linked to an unspoken ethical impulse contained in the theory itself.

The cathartic method, utilized in early Freudian theory, provides us with a vital path towards an explication, however paradoxical this may seem, of a powerful, positive gesture towards ethics in the practice of Psychoanalysis, and this gesture may in fact turn out to be more important than the specific elements of ethical practice itself³. After all, we find good and bad people who subscribe to the entire spectrum of ethical beliefs.

³ It is important to note that the reference towards ethics does not imply either a positive or negative conception of ethics, but rather discovers the ethical as the space which opens up during the course of psychoanalytic treatment in which a previously inconceivable relation becomes possible between the ideal and the concrete, the universal and the particular. Catharsis is the means by which this space opens.

It would seem then, that what matters in the practice of goodness is not specifically *which* rules are followed, but *how* they are followed, in what context, and this, the virtuousness, the goodness, which is directly connected to the ideal that drives it, cannot be taught (as Socrates so thoroughly describes in the *Meno* dialogue). We find this gesture, or this reference towards ethics with a noteworthy absence of didacticism, throughout the Psychoanalytic literature, but most noticeably in the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. It remains an aporetic gesture, pointing towards something hopelessly irresolvable, from a position which is even more irresolvable.

In what follows, I will attempt to continue this gesture, this reference, and emphasize its profound significance for both the practice of Psychoanalysis as well as ethical discourse in general. As a gesture, however, it is entirely different from the prescriptive injunction provided throughout the ages in almost all post-Platonic philosophy. It indicates that Psychoanalysis itself is not an ethical institution, and yet every aspect of its practice and theory tends in this direction. As is the case with any therapeutic system, it seeks to bring its analysands (clients) out of a “bad” state and into a good one. Naturally, these concepts, of “bad” and “good” are rife with presumptions, hopes, failures, and fantasies. The important factor is that clients, whether clients of therapy of a psychological or medical nature, have acknowledged that something has gone wrong, something is “in a bad way”. One does not seek treatment because everything is good. Through therapy, a resolution the client seeks a resolution to this trouble, and this resolution has as a guide, some notion of health, whether correct or incorrect. The analyst, the therapist, is able find agency to cure precisely to the degree that his or her notion of health is able to connect with concrete reality. It is important to

remember, however, that psychological health is not to be expected of analysts and psychologists any more than physical health is to be expected of physicians. All therapies tend towards the good (the ethical) without being themselves good. Therapy orients itself towards the good (as health), but there is no guarantee that such a good can be secured. Doctors still get sick, and Psychoanalysts still lose their sanity. It is this fact which reveals the deeply flawed nature of therapies.

The qualitative nature of the mind makes it more difficult to identify and treat than the body. Any psychological theory then must resort to unusual measures to get at its subject. This is especially the case with Psychoanalysis. The unconscious, by its very nature, seems always to disappear into obscurity or distortion when approached directly. To bring it into consciousness involves a lengthy and painstaking translation process. The first step is to *catch* it. Hence, Psychoanalytic inquiry must typically approach its subject matter from an unexpected angle, to *surprise* unconscious processes during their routine activities, and take note of their patterns. Such strategies are necessary for any study or treatment of the common neuroses. Work in the area of psychosis calls for a different approach to the unconscious, which is readily apparent on the level of consciousness, which has collapsed to a singular egoic plane.

Psychoanalytic practice thus operates in a topsy-turvy twilight zone, in which neither traditional ethics nor meaning-structures can readily find direct application, and in which the most primal of desires may find cathartic (i.e. purgative) expression. Psychoanalytic catharsis would give the impression, in this case, of providing an escape from ethics. It would follow from this that Psychoanalysis is either un-ethical or anti-ethical. This

conclusion, however, in its haste, looks for ethics in the wrong way, and finding none, concludes that there is none available to find.

The limitation of freedom through conformity to prescriptions provided by a master (or master code) has little to do with the relation of Psychoanalysis to the ethical. It should be clear that the analyst does not function as a kind of master in relation to the analysand (client). Neither does it promote an unproblematic model of freedom that would easily hypostatize into un-freedom. Such would suspend the possibility of ethics occurring at all. There can be no ethical model, no formula capable of offering homogenous responses to “trolley problem” style ethical questions which proliferate in contemporary ethical discourse, and which presuppose subjects stripped of the agency to make ethical decisions. If ethics is openly discussed by a Analyst, it can only be in a highly tentative tone. One can only hope that the Analyst has a clear idea of what is good. Just the same as any other therapeutic practice, confounding factors almost always make an entrance at some point. These confounding factors cannot be eliminated, but they can be thrown off balance, to prevent them from taking on an authoritarian character which would suspend agency.

The relation between freedom and ethics is always aporetic, as opposed to negative or positive. We cannot say that ethics suspends freedom, but neither can we say that it enforces it. As Emmanuel Levinas pointed out, ethics begin where “freedom, instead of justifying itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent” (TI, p. 84). In the Psychoanalytic situation, there must first be an acknowledged freedom (in the form of free association, a necessity for Psychoanalytic practice), and secondly, there must be something *beyond* freedom which remains undefined by it, an Other, for which one is

responsible. This Other is not found within analysis, but beyond it. If there is indeed such a thing as Psychoanalytic ethics, it is not in posited norms, but in its promotion of self-transcendence, in the sense that transcendence is never self-contained, but always points beyond itself without positing the essence of this beyondness. Transcendence is always transcendence towards an ideal never fully disclosed, but only approached as a limit, much as in the incremental manner of a calculus.

In order to discover the ethical dimension of Psychoanalysis, however, we must first learn to remove the veneer of that which falsely presents itself as ethics. Although Psychoanalytic literature typically pays more attention to the unconscious as a transgressive force, acting from below, there are at least as many unconscious elements that function normatively, acting “from above”. Freud tells us “not only what is lowest, but also what is highest in the ego can be unconscious” (GS, p. 217). The “highest” portion of the ego (or that portion which approaches the superego) can easily end up goading the “lowest” portion into taking action, and thus providing more opportunities for future goading dynamics. This dynamic is easy to misinterpret as ethics, while it is in reality little more than another twist in the libidinal organization of its practitioner, allowing for the enjoyment of objects only in a closed system that posits objects as simultaneously condemned as immoral and promoted as tantalizingly transgressive. These “ethics”, bound by rules or a ruler, displace the agency of the actor to the rules s/he follows, which *determine* the actor’s acts. This pathological dynamic may be distinguished from *ethics proper* which function not to promote tantalizingly transgressive acts or to impose guilt (and punishment) upon them, but instead to free

unconscious desire from undue reliance⁴ on cathected (i.e. predetermined) objects, thereby allowing the subject to freely acknowledge its relation to the Other, or exteriority. There is, however, a horde of factors that serve to prevent ethical relation from occurring, the chief being confusion between cathected objects and exteriority.

Cathexis is the process through which “psychical energy is attached to an idea or group of ideas, to a part of the body, to an object, etc.” (Laplanche & Pontalis, p. 62). Through cathexis, the world of consciousness becomes invested with meaning and desire. Without cathexis, desire would be free-floating, unattached to objects. It would operate chaotically, without rhyme or reason. The cathectic process is a normal part of the formation of an operative libidinal organization (in that it provides a structure for desire to follow), but should not be mistaken for ethical practice, or the externalization of desire. Only when released from an unmitigated focus on its own cathected structures, does the relation of the self to the Other become explicit. But for any relation to occur at all, there must first be a cathartic “purging” of any unnecessary cathectic dross, which provides not true relations but imaginary ones, and leads to painfully nonsensical ritualistic behavior and pathology. This behavior is characteristic of neurosis, and can clearly be observed in Freud’s “Rat Man” case history, as when the Rat Man becomes fixated on cathected processes such as moving items off the road as well as with providing the correct payment for a pair of replacement glasses to the correct party.

As Freud notes in his case study of the “Rat Man”, the Rat Man’s neurosis causes him to be:

⁴ The definition of “undue reliance on cathexis” is a matter of interpretation by the analyst or ethicist in conjunction with the subject of the analysis or inquiry. It is my observation that “undue reliance on cathexis” almost always produces a pathological complaint or ethical problem.

[...] at once superstitious and not superstitious, there was a clear distinction between his attitude and the superstition of uneducated people who feel themselves at one with their belief. He seemed to understand that his superstition was dependent upon his obsessional thinking, although at times he gave way to it completely (TCH, p. 65).

Although the Rat Man has surpassed a stage of primordial dependency on and reduction of the other (at which the ego is generated, and regression to which produces psychosis), he remains fixated at this stage, bound to refer back to it, and is often unable to think outside his ego without reference to superstitious apparatuses. These apparatuses are antithetical to true relationality, in that their original purpose was to reduce stimulation by reifying it.

Relationality can involve objects, but does not fixate upon them, as fixation always implies a leveling, a desire to reduce an object from its exteriority, to force it prematurely into immanence. The relational object must remain transcendental. Non-transcendental, or immanent experience can only involve actors seamlessly involved in their milieu and which flow together and apart without boundaries. Relationality must simultaneously involve boundaries as well as their transcendence, whereas immanence collapses both boundaries and transcendence.

Only once relationality has become explicit, and not subordinated to imaginary interests, can ethics become a possibility. Thus, catharsis leads, through its purgation of the imagination, in the direction of a true ethics, which are impossible insofar as they restrict the freedom of either the self or the other. This cathartic relation to ethics has gone unacknowledged in a great deal of the Philosophical literature, which traditionally

defines ethics as either a normative *prescription* of transcendental objects to be desired and avoided or a purely theoretical *description* of ethical action which makes the entirety of ethics into an immanent system, incapable of dealing with exteriority without reducing it. The former definition of ethics provides guidelines for action, but suspends the freedom of the actor, whereas the latter delineates and categorizes the kinds of ethical action from which one can choose, posing ethics as a limited number of possibilities (e.g., the trolley problems and other similarly contrived thought experiments that run rampant throughout the ethical literature).

Philosophically, I do not seek to destroy traditional notions of ethics in this thesis, but rather to highlight this cathartic dimension, which would allow for their meaningful activity, by bringing ethical discussion out of fixation on paradoxical and decontextualized problems. I am not interested in delineating a new ethical system to compete with or replace the old ones, but instead of offering a standpoint through which we may deepen our appreciation for and understanding of ethical theories and prepare to put them meaningfully into practice. The practice of Psychoanalysis offers us a unique perspective on the theory and practice of ethics in that it is not the role of Psychoanalysis to teach its Analysands (i.e. clients/patients) ethics, while at the same time retaining its ethicality. Though its employment of the cathartic method, it provides its Analysands with the agency and ability to *choose* to be ethical (or not), instead of being compelled helplessly in this way or that, compulsively carrying out ill-understood actions. It is this process of bringing the Analysand to the point wherein s/he may *choose* to live ethically that, in and of itself, constitutes the cathartic dimension of ethics of Psychoanalysis.

In spite of its cynical appearance, Psychoanalysis does not toss ethics aside in favor of a sensual hedonism or tyranny of physical pleasure. Anyone who steps out in the world, or studies pathology and/or criminality can easily observe the tyranny of hedonism. Psychoanalysis merely describes this in detail. Ethics involves not wallowing or basking in their enjoyment, but becoming able to see beyond them. We will only learn to see beyond a thing if we first understand it. Understanding, even of the pathological, can lead towards health, which is undeniably a good. Jacques Lacan, as an orthodox Freudian Psychoanalyst, told us directly that ethics is of central importance to understanding the root concerns of Psychoanalysis:

Given all that is implied in this phrase, the ethics of Psychoanalysis will allow me [...] to give you the most suitable instruments for understanding what is new both in Freud's work and in the experience of Psychoanalysis that derives from it.”
(EP, p. 1).

Our understanding of the ethical dimension inherent to Psychoanalytic method will allow us to understand the function of Psychoanalysis in a broader context. Analysis, as a particular discipline, does not teach ethics (as this would be the role of philosophers, clergy, and/or sages), yet everything in it points toward a purification of ethical practice by focusing in on those elements which are most easily neglected, or instrumentalized in the name of some higher good. The statements we find littered throughout Freud's writings on the baseness of human life, inevitability of violence, barbaric sexuality, &c, I understand to serve primarily as an acknowledgment of the overwhelming excess of human failure and misery, while implicitly highlighting the miracle of the good, whenever it occurs. It's not insignificant to note that catharsis most frequently occurs through

tragedy, and this was the original context in which Aristotle discussed it. The pity excited by tragedy exposes one's own fears. As Bernays wrote, the spectator of the tragedy "beholds himself in the mirror of a being who is similar in kind to himself, and the pity that he feels for the represented sorrow can throw back the reflex of fear into his own inwardness" (p. 340). Tragedy thus has potential to expose latent pathology by exposing the fears and insecurities that drive it, allowing it to be more easily treated. In the same way that a body's convalescent response is the most painful aspect of injury or sickness, tragedy can lead to psychological convalescence, if it is not indulged in for its own sake (a tendency which, if not kept in check, can easily run rampant and lead to its own pathologies). The horrors of Psychoanalytic theory offer us a unique opportunity to confront the tragedies which are part and parcel of human existence. There is no known human being, at any time in the past or present, regardless of their social status or character, who has gone through life without sickness, tragedy, or death. Tragedy would seem then to be inevitable. Nevertheless, it need not evolve into cynicism or melancholy. Through the often-disturbing theories found in the Freudian corpus, we can move towards something that may encompass this tragic nature of reality.

This does not mean, however, that there is a Psychoanalytic "prescription" to give in ethical matters. The cathartic abreaction allows for the possibility of ethics, which are impossible to practice in all but the most favorable circumstances, without forcing their implementation or formalization. Of course, this is easier to describe than to practice. True ideological neutrality is difficult, if not impossible to achieve. As Laplanche & Pontalis note, "[...] neutrality, is, obviously, an ideal to be aimed at rather than an absolute injunction." (p. 272). It is to the degree that this very ideal is actualized,

however, that catharsis (or purgation) of excessive cathectic elements can occur, allowing for the possibility of the Analysand reaching the position of being confronted with the ethical relation. The Analyst can only treat Analysands to the degree that s/he has completed her/his analysis.

In the section titled “The Problem of a Psychoanalytic Ethics”, I will address the cathartic dimension of ethics in Psychoanalysis by firstly dispelling the notion of Psychoanalysis as a either a destruction of ethics or an ethical “education”, by surveying Freud’s thoughts on these matters. In the section titled “Formation of the Ego”, I will lay out the developmental processes that occur during the formation of the ego, leading to the ego’s fantasized relations, which prevent ethics from occurring by focusing on the work of Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein. Finally, in the section titled “The Cathartic Dimension of Ethics in Psychoanalysis”, I will summarize my main points and try to wrap the paper up neatly. Theoretically, I attempt to build mainly from the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, though I include some others as well. My definition of “ethics”, I have inherited largely from Emmanuel Levinas, insofar as I define this as a primordial relation of responsibility to the Other, experienced only as exteriority. Psychoanalysis is not to *be* this relation (and neither can any *practice*), but ideally lays the groundwork for it, by cathartically working-through the systematic fantasies which obstruct relation to the Other.

THE PROBLEM OF A PSYCHOANALYTIC ETHICS, FREUD'S AVOIDANCE OF IDEALISM

Finding the place of ethics in Psychoanalysis, is difficult, as we've seen. It is equally difficult to find them in any philosophy of mind. We may schematize this difficulty as a tension between two poles. Firstly, we can, following the cynical path which half-interested observers never fail to mistakenly discern in Freud's work, reduce ethics to a naturalistic function or drive by explaining them entirely in terms of the promotion of life and death in a biological organism (i.e., interpret ethics only as merely an expression of drives for life/libido or death/thanatos). Secondly, we can attempt to sidestep Freud's descriptions of the pitfalls of moralism, and interpret ethics as a purely prescriptive duty, which, if followed renders us "good", and if violated renders us "guilty". The former interpretation over-particularizes ethics, restricting its concerns to those concrete variables affecting a particular organism only in relation to the concerns of its biological function, causing ethics as a whole to approach atomistic imperceptibility, whereas the latter over-generalizes it, making the application of ethics to particular situations inapplicable to any concrete situation.

To the degree that one of these methods (of over-particularization or over-generalization) is favored over the other, an ethicist becomes a spokesperson for the biological drives against the conscience, or the conscience against the biological drives. The tension between these two poles is what makes ethics into a hypostatized system, which makes no allowance for exteriority. Relation to the Other (or others) is not a completely structured, systematic discourse, as structure itself always implies a deferral of relation. Completed discourse is a safety net for true relation, which is a prerequisite

for any ethical activity. Instead of attempting to mediate between these two poles or synthesize them, I will, in what follows, attempt to show the place for an ethics of the Other in Psychoanalysis, which is implied in the process of catharsis. Jacques Lacan has laid the groundwork for this inquiry, as he has gone at least as far as any other Psychoanalytic theorist (or philosopher) in taking Freudian theory to its furthest reaches and beyond, while maintaining the centrality of ethical relation. So then, what I write has origins in Freud's Psychoanalytic theory, but I am attempting to pick up a kernel of it, deposited at the threshold of Psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan, and take this even further into the murky but fertile grounds of philosophical inquiry that surrounds every discipline in its particularity.

If ethics is a problematic and highly disputed area of Philosophy, this is even more the case in Psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud described his view of ethics in *Civilization and Its Discontents* as

[...] an endeavor to achieve, by means of a command of the super-ego⁵, something which has so far not been achieved by means of any other cultural activities. As we already know, the problem before us is how to get rid of the greatest hindrance to civilization-namely, the constitutional inclination of human beings to be aggressive towards one another; and for that very reason we are especially interested in what is probably the most recent of the cultural commands of the superego, the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself." (p. 108).

⁵ Freud usually uses the term "superego" to refer to the reactive, authoritarian aspects of the conscience. These are the aspects that serve to impose punishments on the conscious awareness of troubling impulses.

This frames ethics as either hopeless, insofar as human aggressivity is unavoidable or undesirable, insofar as it would only be achieved only through the meta-aggressions⁶ of the super-ego. Indeed, morality itself, throughout the whole of Freud's work, is understood to be highly problematic, and very often pathological. This, however, does not indicate that Psychoanalytic theory is amoral, but that it is concerned with mapping the subtle twists of desire, which can easily pollute even the most outwardly moral actions. Ethics has often served as little more than a safe haven for many of the most aggressive and chaotic impulses in human nature.

Perhaps one of Sigmund Freud's most enduring insights is that moralistic behavior often functions as a cover for impulses one has learned to disown as "immoral". Our everyday desires have the capacity to produce within us a tremendous conflict. This can lead us to construct rigid moral laws (enforced by what Freud referred to as the "superego") to prevent these deviant desires from finding expression detectable by others who will recognize it as abnormal. This process of disavowal of the drives leads to the construction of the superego that presides over the conscious mind as a moral authority. It is impossible to ignore, however, that many of the cruelest historical events have occurred under the guise of law. As Jacques Lacan wrote, "Whoever attempts to submit to the moral law sees the demands of his superego grow increasingly meticulous and cruel" (EP, p. 176). This cruelty is, in and of itself, a warped expression for the impulses, which the superego dams up in the form of guilt. This shows us that morality is a topic independent of the relation of authority to rebellion,

⁶ By this term, I attempt to designate Freud's concern that any removal of aggression will only occur through its displacement above or beyond what it used to be. Superegoic aggression is still aggression, only with an authoritarian character

both of which can be either moral or immoral. Authority is no more inherently moral than rebellion against it is.

Neither can we equate guilt and innocence with morality. An overwhelming sense of guilt can impel aggressive behavior at least as easily as an unshakeable sense of innocence. Although we hear about immoral acts carried out in the name of some purportedly innocent cause on a regular basis, this is far from being a universal phenomenon. Many “wrongdoers” are capable of admitting that they know that what they are doing is wrong, but that for one reason or another, they merely find their impulses irresistible. The impulse to do things one knows is wrong can often find strength in the sense that it is somehow transgressive, as Freud describes in the following quote from *The Ego and the Id*:

It was a surprise to find that an increase in [an] unconscious sense of guilt can turn people into criminals. But it is undoubtedly a fact. In many criminals, especially youthful ones, it is possible to detect a very powerful sense of guilt, which existed before the crime, and is therefore not its result but its motive. It is as if it was a relief to be able to fasten this unconscious sense of guilt onto something real and immediate (EI, p. 42).

If the feeling that one’s impulse(s) have transgressed a moral law were an effective way to prevent their active expression, one would think that guilty feelings, as an acknowledgment of crossing a boundary, would act as a deterrent against carrying them out. In many cases, however, we can see that guilt does precisely the opposite, and produces a more robust buildup of tension to be resolved only through actualization. This actualization would in turn feed the sense of guilt, which would yearn for

actualization even more persistently in the future. This is what we may refer to as the feedback loop of guilt, which oscillates between authoritarian morality and rebellious immorality.

We may also trace desires back to their biological roots, and attempt to minimize their repression by giving these supposed roots free rein to act as they please. By accounting for desires naturalistically, normative, duty-based ethics begin to look more and more like a system of repression aimed at inherent tendencies, which produce tension through their very existence and will find relief through outward expression in one way or another. This interpretation of ethics, taken to its limit leads to their reduction under the heading of fully isolated and particularized biological impulses, which, insofar as they are “natural”, must find recognition as what they truly are without the superimposition of moralistic/ethical desires on top of them.

Following from this interpretation of ethical desire, ethical tension is a result of the authoritarian nature of ethics itself, which denies the more primal impulses of a living being. Pathology thus finds its origins in a primordial denial of natural inclinations that are undeniable insofar as one participates in nature. Nature thus takes on the form of a completed totality. The resolution of pathologies is then simple: liberate these natural inclinations, let them flow freely. However, as in the literature of naturalistic liberation (i.e. in the literature of libertines such as the Marquis de Sade), we do not find not a natural agency liberated from oppressive morality. Instead, in libertinism, we find “[...] a note of defiance, a kind of trial by ordeal in relation to that which remains the terminal point of this argument, an undoubtedly diminished but nevertheless fixed term” (EP, p.4). Libertinism depends not only upon an affirmation of a total(ized) naturalism, but

also upon a rebellion against what is perceived to fall outside of it, thereby remaining dependent upon it. It is more of a reaction to a perceived tendency towards ascetic martyrdom, as Leupin points out in the work of Jacques Lacan, which “stresses the complete failure of all experiences of sexual liberation, which have missed the renewal of guilt inevitably associated with the emphasis on pleasure” (p. 65). This is not only the case with sexual hedonism, but applies to all forms of naturalistic hedonism so well typified in libertinism. Affirmation of nature, even as a totality leads even more to the denial of what is seen as un-natural. Pleasure, insofar as it operates through rebellion, confines itself to guilt, even in the act of disavowing it. Transgression of the moral order takes on its meaning only in relation to the fixed term of the very order it escapes, or else attempts to escape from. This means that, as something created, the moral order only takes on meaning through continual creation. If it did not matter, there would be no point in rebelling against it. This is part of the paradoxical insight that those who rebel against an institution are often more convinced of its reality than the institution’s own members are.

It is true; however, that Psychoanalysis is easy to interpret as a theory of the reduction of ethics through the naturalistic liberation of desire. If we define ethics as an unleashing of biological desires for pleasure, Freud would seem to be in agreement with us. He saw *true pleasure* as orgasmic, in the biological sense. He described intellectual pleasure as “mild compared with that derived from the sating of crude and primary instinctual impulses, [as] it does not convulse our physical being.” (CD, p. 30). *Crude and primary instinct* is the phrase we ought to hold on to in this passage. For Freud, what is crude is primary, and what is primary is crude, in that it precedes any structured

reflection. Physiological processes “happen” before we have any structured framework to “hang” them on. Similarly, the often-crude subject matter of Freud’s writings, full of sexual and violent themes, is less of a *model* for the practice of psychoanalysis (Freud did not go out hunting for sexuality and violence, he merely listened for trends in the complaints of his patients) than a *lesson*. These “crude” aspects of the mind are easy to ignore, whether through prudishness, or through the methods of repression and disavowal. Freud’s work is as a testament to the ongoing importance of these issues, and their role in the formation of pathologies. Psychoanalysis does not aim at reducing the rest of life to desires for sexuality and violence (the life and death drives respectively), but at delineating the ways in which we may easily become caught in the throes of them. It shows us the manifold ways in which all meaning can be reduced to a function, which exerts a tyrannical control over us, preventing us from freely participating in the world of meaning.

Psychoanalytic theory differs from other psychological theories in that it does not directly disclose the truth, nor does it provide a truth to believe or reject, but rather seeks to find truth’s location, in places overinvested with meaning. If Psychoanalysis seems confronts the most strange and uncomfortable issues, this is precisely because it is these issues which tend to be the most oversaturated with meaning. The anxiety surrounding issues of “base drives” is precisely what is most telling about them. In his seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan tells us that “for analysis, anxiety is a crucial form of reference, because in effect anxiety is that which does not deceive. But anxiety may be lacking.” (p. 41). This is especially true in our media-saturated culture in which sexuality and violence have come to be the most

common form of entertainment. It is easy to remain as a sleepwalking observer, following along with things that would be incredibly anxiety provoking were they to take on personal implications. On a literal level, when one wakes up from a dream during sleep, it is the result of anxiety as Freud notes:

Anxiety dreams are mostly those whose material has undergone the least distortion. If the demand made by the unconscious is too great, so that the sleeping ego is not in a position to ward it off by the means at its disposal, it abandons the wish to sleep and returns to waking life.” (OP, p. 56).

Like these anxiety-dreams, the work of Psychoanalysis is to show us the truth, wherever it may be, without imposing a prepackaged meaning on our lives, or to suggest a path down which we ought to walk. This *anxiety* brought on by Psychoanalytic theory is nothing other than the anxiety of finally awakening from a slumber.

Although Freud’s work is often disturbing in terms of its contents, I understand this not as directly indicative of its metaphysical structure but as a method to jolt us awake from the numbed-out apathy (or jadedness) towards life which constitutes the surface layer of the long-term neurosis. His disturbing images of the animalistic, violent, and incestuous human being are not models, but lessons. The first lesson in psychoanalysis then, is that meaning isn’t easy to maintain, and that truth is difficult to face. Desire’s trajectories are not for the faint of heart, as Lacan says, “what is called desire suffices to make life meaningless if it turns someone into a coward” (EC, p. 660). Just when one thinks one has been freely saying exactly what one wanted, there turns out to be not only a structure, but an order to one’s words. It is the pursuit of this order to its point of genesis, which constitutes the real challenge. Although there is no

psychoanalytic prescription as to how one is to behave, no moralizing suggestion as to what one should enhance or remove in one's life, one is encouraged, first of all, to look directly at it, owning up to any anxiety that arises.

The operation of ethics in Psychoanalysis, then, lies not in its revelation of naturalistic functions of desire, nor in its discoveries regarding the function of guilt. There is no prescription either to carry out one's moral duties, or to give free rein to a subset of one's desires. Instead, the interrelation between transgressive desires and the guilt that represses them finds exposure through the discovery of truth beyond illusion. Only after this has occurred, will we be able to distinguish between what is truly ethical and what merely appears as such. Both *sociality* (in the forms of guilt and shame) as well as *biology* (in the form of naturalistic drives) as hypostatized in the form of ego-images obscure our situation and thereby undermine our freedom to make ethical decisions in reality. If we are to move beyond their unmitigated influence, we must find a way to give them freedom of expression, without giving one authority over the other. In order to do this, we must look to the ego, as the locus of the conflict between transgression and guilt.

THE FORMATION OF THE EGO, A SYNTHESIS OF LACAN AND KLEIN'S DISCUSSIONS OF THE EGO WITH MY OWN OBSERVATIONS

If we were to ask a phenomenologist what it is that makes us free, the reply would certainly be that if there is any freedom to be had, it would be in the ego (which, understood as the most basic unit of consciousness, is merely another term for it). It is a pity then, that the free ego always seems to turn out to be subject(ed) to something else, whether its own desires, to public discourse, to neurology, or other static variables. In spite of its freedom, consciousness, as Levinas writes in *Otherwise than Being*, “is affected, then, before forming an image of what is coming to it, affected in spite of itself” (OB, p. 102). Before we are able to produce an image of what affects our awareness, whether neurological, social, or political, &c, we are affected on a more primordial level. At early stages of physical development, affectedness is particularly difficult to understand, due to its intensity and unpredictability. This results in the formation of egoic objects through a process of cathexis. The undeveloped ego deduces from its vulnerability the presence of unpredictable and often threatening forces outside of itself. These forces eventually solidify into objects through the process of cathexis, which makes the environment seem more predictable at the cost of free relation to it. Reality takes on a spectral quality, populated largely by self-referential, cathectic affectivity⁷.

⁷ Even highly complex and nuanced discourses can take on this character (of spectral self-reference), insofar as they purport to either reduce all possibility to actuality or provide the method to do so, requiring no reference to exteriority. It is important not to generalize our fear of interiority, however. It would be easy to accuse GWF Hegel, for example, of promoting a system of totalizing enclosure, but the often-neglected higher levels of his dialectic deal primarily in the realm of possibility. Paradoxically, fear of totalization can easily encourage the complete enclosure of relations.

These cathexes, however, must be purged cathartically if true relation is to be recognized⁸.

This interaction of the ego with what it is not (i.e. the Other) can lead to different conclusions regarding its freedom. Often, when things are going smoothly, consciousness seems free from superimposed structures, free to define itself however it pleases, unobstructed by its affectedness. This state, however, is impossible to maintain. Obstacles arise all too easily, if not in the form of our own miscalculations regarding exterior events which subsequently illuminates the contingency of whatever agency we experience, then in the form of raw, unvarnished misfortune. There may indeed be such a thing as freedom, but if there is, it would seem to be a very delicate state, difficult to acquire, and easy to fall out of. Once it's fallen out of, not only is the contingency of our egoic agency revealed, but we often tighten the knot of dependency ourselves by imagining all kinds of novel dependencies. As Freud reminds us:

As long as things go well with a man, his conscience is lenient and lets the ego do all sorts of things; but when misfortune befalls him, he searches his soul, acknowledges his sinfulness, heightens the demands of his conscience, imposes abstinences on himself and punishes himself with penances (CD, p. 87).

The ego may have some notion of freedom, but is ultimately bound to circumstances over which it has no control. This is a result of the fact that the ego itself is not an original presence but is itself as much of an illusion as the objects it uses to stabilize its world, and is generated through a specific process, tied up with specific worldly

⁸ This is where I differ from both Freud and Lacan, upon whose thought I have developed my own views. I assert all cathexes to be egoic, and that what Freud referred to as the "superego" is merely a reaction to instinctual functioning. I do not prioritize the ego metaphysically, but I do prioritize it as the universal locus of pathological structuration. The goal of analysis is to move beyond purely egoic relations, which are by nature pseudo-relations, through the method of catharsis. Analytic treatment targets the ego, but does not occur through the ego.

conditions. This conditionality of the ego's genesis creates a profound schism with itself. It experiences its essence as freedom, yet its origin is contingent. Thus, the ego is, at its core, an illusion. It is surrounded by contingencies falsely understood as freedom and freedoms falsely understood as contingency.

The illusion of the ego is provided through the medium of reflection. In his early essay on the mirror stage, Lacan describes the ego's genesis as a moment of truly narcissistic reflection (EC, p. 79). The ego arises out of a process in which an image returns to itself, producing an identity or selfsameness. The ego is thus spectral or illusory; it does not exist outside of the reflective medium. It is identity in the logical sense of "a=a", in which the "a" on the left is distinguished from the "a" on the right. At early stages of life, this kind of experience may only occur in front of surfaces which are reflective in a literal sense. Later, one may come to learn to see "reflections" everywhere.

The atom reflects the cosmos, the self reflects the other, the child becomes the parent, and the student becomes the teacher. "You" often becomes little more than a reflected reversal of "I". Although this may be comforting insofar as it allows for the creation of a stable identity, it also creates the armor of alienation (EC, p. 78). One may see reflections of oneself in other people, animals or even inanimate objects, yet discover an inability to relate to any of them. We may, like G.W. Leibniz, desire to think like an atom, while losing the ability to understand the relations that occur in our own lives. After all, anyone can imagine an atom, but it is impossible to imagine the other. The unbinding of the ego's reflectivity is also the unbinding of reflective distortion. It is easy to read all kinds of personal meaning into things not intended for us, because the

function of egoic consciousness is essentially identification and nothing else. The self wants to see itself in the other and reflect the other in itself. This process leads every experience to solipsistically reflect back to the ego. Unbounded reflectivity allows consciousness to imagine that it is everywhere. As Sass observes: “The mirror experience, whether real or imagined, can be read as the ultimate fantasy of solipsistic self-sufficiency- one that transcends solipsism’s lived contradictions” (pgs. 129-130). Mirroring allows one to think that even though one may remain dependent upon others in many respects both psychological and physical, these others are in some way identical with the self.

There is, then, in the genesis of the ego, a simultaneous dissolution of the self into the other and the other into the self. In his famous “Memoirs of My Nervous Illness”, Daniel Paul Schreber first describes the inessentiality of every individual soul, or self:

It was granted to no human soul to remain aware for all eternity of having been this or that human being. It was rather the destiny of all souls to merge with other souls, and to integrate with higher entities, remaining only aware of being part of God (p. 52).

Nonetheless, in spite of all of the intertwining of selves, reflection ensures that the final image will be given narcissistically. After all, if the self were truly to absorb otherness, the result would be omnipresence and omnipotence, in brief, godhood. Although he speaks of the dissolution of individual self, Schreber finds his personal individuality swollen to unprecedented proportions, claiming that

[...] everything that happens is in reference to me. Writing this sentence, I am fully aware that other people may be tempted to think I am pathologically

conceited; I know very well that this tendency to relate everything to oneself, to bring everything that happens into connection with one's own person, is a common phenomenon among mental patients. But in my case the very reverse obtains.

At the genesis of the ego, regressed to in psychosis, notably as it is recounted in Schreber's memoir, boundaries between self and other are both nonexistent and omnipresent. Schreber himself is fully aware that what he is describing is a common symptom of psychosis (thoughts of reference), yet he cannot shake the feeling that this experience is his in particular. His experience is irreducible to that of others, and others to himself. At the same time, he acknowledges the inevitability of merging on a metaphysical level with others. Reflectivity, when universalized, becomes little more than an exercise in futility. No reflective medium can ever perfectly reflect the original content, and the more mediums involved, the more damage is done to the original message. The universe becomes a house of mirrors with no escape. The ego's genesis in reflection thus points to an obfuscation of communication, an inability to allow for relationality, which requires both individuals and their transcendence without dissolution.

This reflection is an empty exercise because the ego is itself devoid of content. Because it *is* by nature this very reflective process, it does not take on substance or depth. As much as we repeat the "a=a" identity, it is impossible to shake the sense that there is more than one "a" present. The larger the portion of reality that the ego takes up, the more reality takes on a spectral, illusory quality. This illusory quality implies a kind of neutrality, insofar as one is unaffected by experiences understood to be illusions. As Lacan puts it, "The ego experiences reality not only insofar as it lives it, but insofar

as it neutralizes it as much as possible” (EFT, p. 100). Just as a mirror with too many cracks becomes useless, any unpredictability or reminder of the outside world (whether misfortune or surprise) makes obvious the ego’s illusory nature.

Just as the mythical figure Narcissus peered ever more closely into the pond reflecting his image until he drowned, the reflective ego moves ever closer to the surfaces that reflect it, and will eventually discover its discrepancy with them, or else lose its self in them. This discovery of discrepancy exposes the imaginary nature of the ego, and thereby is not only experienced as an act of aggression, but also provokes it to re-disguise itself. As Lacan notes, the ego aggression⁹ is “[...] linked to the narcissistic relationship and to the structures of systematic misrecognition and objectification that characterize ego formation” (EC, p. 94). The genesis of the ego occurs when one first identifies one’s own reflection (this “a=a” identification), and begins to refer the world to oneself, however, in spite of reflectivity’s de-intensification of primary (instinctual) processes, needs, and desires, danger and chaos remain present. As Sass writes, “[...] even the achievement of absolute epistemological centrality cannot bring total serenity” (p. 123). Un-bounding the process of identification and making everything into a reflection of one’s self can only occur after the process of identification has taken place, and as such can do nothing to interfere with the identification process of which it is a mere epiphenomenon.

Although the ego subsists only as a reflective image, it is surrounded by other images as well, which are either swept up in its self-identification process (as objects), or else are disavowed (disowned), subsequently becoming adversaries in the ego’s

⁹ The ego, as both imaginary and secondary, is not the *source* of this aggression. Rather, ego aggression has its origins in primary (instinctual) processes channeled through the ego.

“struggle” against what it is not, and drowns it in its own image. As Lacan wrote, “the ego appears, for its part, in the world of objects, as an object, though a privileged one to be sure” (EFT, p. 177). The important thing to note is that these objects, while distinct from the ego, are not *outside* of the ego in any meaningful sense. In the same manner in which the solipsist believes that everything in the world is a product of his or her imagination, the ego’s objects are nothing but (often distorted) surfaces upon which it projects itself. A reflection implies two images: one an original, and the other a copy. The genesis of the ego involves not only limitless projection outwards (aggression in pathological states), but limitless receptivity inwards (paranoia in pathological states). This dynamic is what, if left unvarnished, leads to psychosis, in which all boundaries between self and other are collapsed. It is typified in Daniel Paul Schreber’s “Memoirs of My Nervous Illness”, in which he painstakingly describes not only extreme narcissistic agency (projection) but suspension of all freedom (receptivity), becoming a mere puppet of an Other’s will: “since my nervous illness took [a] critical turn, my nerves have been set in motion *from without* incessantly and without respite” (p. 47). The ego’s generation produces a dialectic between aggression and paranoia. This can only be superseded through further developments which serve to contextualize the ego.

All that I discussed above served to highlight the ego as a fertile ground for pathology and for all manner of destructiveness to find expression through. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that although pathology makes its most obvious appearance in the egoic plane (or imaginary register), we may illustrate metaphorically the revelation of pathology in the ego as the appearance of the organisms which cause a disease under a microscope. The ego is a medium through

which pathological elements become legible, treatable, and comprehensible. In their original state, they were blind(ing) impulses, which the growing child could not handle. The ego thus serves a purpose other than the mere distortion of relations through reflective illusion. It reduces the intensity which flows freely throughout the world, and which one comes into contact with as time progresses. As Laplanche writes, it is “the agency whose function is precisely to moderate the frenetic circulation of affect in which the primary process consists [...]” (p. 39). It arises in early childhood to allow for the management of disruptive impulses, which affect the child from without. This leads to an oversimplification of the world, experienced only as imaginary, but it also leads to an ability to grapple with the world without the blind impulse of mechanical force. This early stage, in which the ego presides unilaterally over a world of image-object receptacles, is *structurally analogous to psychosis, in which the universe becomes a grand unified mirror*. In both cases, the line between reality and imagination is blurred, or absent. This ambiguity between imagination and reality gives rise to fear and paranoia. When the ego is undisturbed in its rule over life, it experiences any weakness in the potency of its fantasy as the product of outside aggression.

In at the point of the ego’s genesis, Otherness functions as a threat to the solitude of the imaginary ego, plagued by constant anxiety about an invasion from the outside. Defenses are built up to counter the “persecutory” forces of the Other which the ego has been unable to integrate. As Klein wrote, “the characteristic defenses are chiefly aimed at annihilating the ‘persecutors’, while anxiety on the ego’s account occupies a prominent place in the picture” (p. 264). Inversely, paranoia and aggression are increased by the thought that one could serve as the Other *for* an other. Similarly,

Lacan stated in his seminar on *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* that “All acts of bastardry are based on the fact of wishing to be someone’s Other, I mean someone’s big Other, in which the figures by which his desire will be captivated are drawn.” (p. 61). Paranoia while seemingly directed at objects, is always undergirded by an anxiety which is itself objectless, and which, as I noted earlier, is an indicator of close proximity to reality. As disturbing and dangerous as paranoid acts can be, consciousness receives its foundation in this state, insofar as it occurs at all. A child’s fear of monsters lurking in hiding spots bears an uncanny resemblance to paranoid delusions of persecutors acting through elaborate means (as, for instance, in Schreber’s description of God’s manipulation of his nervous system). Psychosis is never an entirely novel development, but a regression to the ego’s formation. Even the more common pathologies (neuroses) which have a subtler symptomatology do not involve an active regress to the formation of the ego, but an insufficient transcendence of it. As Freud notes in his study on Schreber, and his most thorough inquiry into the nature of psychosis, in the case of Psychotics, “[...] the patients themselves [...] possess the peculiarity of betraying (in a distorted form, it is true) precisely those things which other neurotics keep hidden as a secret.” (TCH, p. 83). As Juan-David Nasio tells us, “we all have a seed of insanity that does not affect our stability; a localized madness we ignore” (p. 82). Although the ego is typically not the primary means of functioning in most healthy adults, it is always present, and insofar as it is present, so will be the fantasies which make it what it is.

The ethical is completely out of the question in the register of the ego. Before anything else, ethics are always relational, and as such cannot occur in any state in which relation is a mere illusion, as in the ego, which exists only in a phantasmic

identity-relation to itself. The ego, however, is not un-ethical, but pre-ethical. It does not operate (even in its aggression) as a testament to immorality, but to pre-morality. The ego clearly displays what it is that prevents ethics from occurring insofar as it arises out of an excessive instinctual frustration. The ego does not *tell* us where to find pathology, but instead *shows* us through its very existence.

In order to move beyond this primordial psychosis rooted in the ego, *a catharsis must occur*. Through catharsis, the psyche jettisons the cathectic residue that remains in the ego. This requires an ability to purge the images that repetitively define its activity. Moving beyond the ego means the discovery of transcendence in the Other, the noumena, the unthinkable. Instead of seeing the world as object-receptacle for it to fill in with its imaginative projections, or of itself as a receptacle for the world, a revelation occurs that the ego is inadequate to produce relationality, in that it follows a specific circuit defined by the primary process of which it is epiphenomenon. With this discovery, the pre-ethical nature of egoic life becomes explicit. Responsibility and guilt often arise, as Klein wrote, “the ego comes to a realization of its love for a good object, a whole object, and in addition a real object, together with an overwhelming feeling of guilt towards it” (p. 270). An object, as Klein refers to it, is not merely another reflective surface. We may question somewhat whether the term “object” is even appropriate for it, as an object is typically instrumentalizable. What Klein describes as the good, whole object is no longer thinkable as a mere image-receptacle for the projections of the ego, or as an interrogator with a direct line to the innermost recesses of the mind. The good, whole object, is necessarily exterior to the ego. It does not need the ego to take on its own meaning. The ego then realizes the invasive and even violent nature of its previous

relations with objects (both actively and passively), which brings on (as cited in Klein above) feelings of profound guilt. This guilt is of a unique kind, however, in that it is simultaneously guilt for aggression, as well as guilt for paranoia, neither of which need to have had any relation to reality. Up to this point, the behavior of the ego is a-moral. It can be neither good nor bad, because *no true relation is capable of occurring* (other than reflection, which operates as a kind of deferral of relation).

Although the passive/active, solipsistic ego in its early stages seeks out a narcissistic pleasure in all of its object-reflections, the ego, after discovering the good, whole object (which is in fact the Other), ceases or at least tempers its delusional objectification process. This suspension or tempering of projective-objectification, I interpret as the essence of what Freud referred to as the latency period. This period of latency following the exclusive predominance of egoic function can also be interpreted as the stage of mourning, referred to by Klein as “the depressive position”. In the depressive position, the ego is

made to realize that the loved [good] object is at the same time the hated one (which through its persecution inspired paranoia); and in addition to this, that the real objects and imaginary figures, both external and internal, are bound up with each other” (Klein, p. 285-6).

The grandiose yet volatile egoic relations of the past are transformed into responsibility to allow for a genuine relation to an object that is complete in itself and has no need for the intervention of the ego. Similarly, during the stage of latency described by Freud, sexuality becomes unconscious, and no apparently hedonistic behavior can be

detected. The point to be derived here is that with the ego's discovery of an irreducible exterior, its instrumental attitude withers.

Relation with the whole object (which can also be described as Otherness or Noumena), unencumbered by projection and other imaginary processes can only take place through the symbolic: "It is necessary for the symbolic system to intervene in the system conditioned by the image of the ego so that an exchange can take place, something which isn't knowledge, but recognition" (EFT, p. 52). Instead of *knowing* what it relates to, as in earlier stages, the ego *recognizes* its place in symbolic relation to the whole object, this first true Other. A symbol is merely something which is given, and which is subsequently interpreted. The ego, at this stage, can even discover itself as a symbol, as well as symbolizable, which previously would have been unthinkable due to its reflectiveness, as Lacan notes, "The ego isn't just a function. From the moment when the symbolic system is instituted, it can itself be used as a symbol, and that is what we are considering" (EFT, p. 52). If solipsism is incapable of one thing, it would be symbolization, which requires a clear distinction between self and other. In order for solipsism to be surpassed, the ego must overcome its status as mere reflector and reflected. It must become a symbol.

With the ego held in place by its symbolic position for the first time, it can, finally meaningfully engage in symbolic discourse, both producing symbols as well as interpreting them. *Whereas during previous stages of development, the ego could only encounter partial objects capable of producing feelings of either paranoia or grandiosity, the ego can now differentiate between objects and the discourses in which they participate.* At this point, communication is dialogical: the ego enters into a symbolic

exchange with the Other. Only at this point is there a true relation, and thereby ethics is capable of taking place. Ethical language is dialogical¹⁰, a free relation, but with symbols taking on contextual meaning.

¹⁰ I take this position contrary to the position of Jacques Lacan, for whom the dialogue is always on the cusp of breaking down. This may be true, but the fact remains that any subordination of dialogue to discourse prevents the free circulation of symbols, and thus returns us to a hierarchical system awaiting a rebellion, not a situation in which the other may be freely responded to.

THE CATHARTIC REFERENCE TO ETHICS IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

In a lucid moment, Sigmund Freud wrote, “it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be” (EI, p. 44). Following from this, it would initially have made the greatest amount of sense for us to look for Psychoanalytic ethics in the place of the ego, if not in actuality then at least in potentiality. Upon closer inspection, however, we have discovered the ego to be the locus of a primordial illusion, thereby unable to relate to anything outside itself, except through its own narcissistic apparatuses. Only in working through the reflectivity of the ego can we discover the possibility of true relation, and therefore ethics. The goal of Psychoanalytic ethics is to bring about a paradigm shift: a decentralization of the ego. We produce this shift by the cathartic process of purging excessive imaginary object-cathexes, which act as artificial barriers to true relationality, which by nature respects the integrity of all involved parties. Between the transgressions of the unconscious id and the transcendence of the superego’s moral law, a space opens up in the place of the ego, through catharsis, in which immanent relation to the Other becomes possible: it is this which references ethics. It references ethics because it is not yet ethics itself. Catharsis leads to the possibility of ethics, a move beyond the pre-ethical, not their consummation, which cannot occur in the context of psychoanalysis. While therapy of every kind targets the pathological, it does not and cannot produce health, which occurs freely and of its own accord when pathological influences have subsided.

Psychoanalysis has been critical, historically (as in Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*), of the field of ethics insofar as they are profoundly easy to abuse

and/or misunderstand. Given the fact that people subscribing to all manner of ethical theories (or lack thereof) are afflicted with pathological states, it would be completely uncalled for, for Psychoanalysis to endorse or condemn any of them¹¹. The ethical undercurrent of Psychoanalysis thus remained unspoken, inheriting the signature cynicism of Sigmund Freud, who denied any formalizable relation of human goodness to actuality. Like all cynics, however, Freud was a fallen idealist. His hopes for humanity remained too fragile to withstand the severe and degrading blows dealt to them by the cruelty of historical contingency. Reality is blighted, impossible to reconcile with goodness and truth, leading to its interpretation as inherently unjust and/or incommensurable with ideality, safely concealed behind a curtain of obscurity. Although he refers in a letter to Oskar Pfister to his often-disappointed “high ideal”, Freud mentions nothing but disappointment as to its actualization:

I do not break my head very much about good and evil, but I have found little that is ‘good’ about human beings on the whole [...] no matter whether they publicly subscribe to this or that ethical doctrine or to none at all. [...] If we are to talk of ethics, I subscribe to a high ideal from which most of the human beings I have come across depart most lamentably (PF, p. 61-2).

¹¹It will be argued in response that certain ethical positions are associated more closely with pathological states than others, and this may indeed be the case. When confronting a concrete situation in which morality has taken on a pathological character, however, we must always remember that pathological ethics *are not un-ethical, but pre-ethical*. Any attempt to uproot or encourage specific ethical doctrines would lead to the creation of interminable political and/or religious entanglements, which do a great deal to prevent any therapeutic effect from occurring, and discredit Psychoanalytic practice in general. Rather, in the same sense that bodily medicine is both politically and religiously neutral, so should Psychoanalysis be. Freud’s writing on religion, for instance, should not be taken as advocacy for atheism but as a diagnosis of the potentially destructive aspects of religion when it is blended with psychopathology. This is why I have focused on the treatment of pathological egoism in this thesis. The ego, treated as an imaginary construct, provides a neutral meeting ground for the psychological treatment of all individuals regardless of political or spiritual persuasion.

Here, we see perhaps the most explicit mention in the entire Freudian corpus of Freud's underlying moral idealism and its obscure but undeniable relation to his far more easily identifiable pessimism about humanity. It's no secret that Freud held out little hope that humans would ever recover from their conniving, chaotic, and hedonistic ways. For one reason or another, he chose to keep his hopes to himself. Perhaps we thought that expressing them would have been unprofessional. I propose that this idealism is in reality a silent precursor to Psychoanalysis writ large, and has its clearest manifestation in the cathartic method Freud employed at early stages. Later, his increasing concern with the delineation of pathological states resulted in a neglect of his motivating aims, which would likely have guided his work in a different direction. This ideality continued in latency throughout psychoanalytic thought to this day, in the form of an unspoken idealism, a reluctant idealism that, in its hesitancy to misrepresent reality, has given the impression of being a cynicism which has led to a great deal of unwarranted backlash from critics. I am attempting to develop this idealistic direction to bring it out into the open a little more, in order to produce a therapeutic effect on ethical thought, which is in our times caught in a deadlock between various conflicting prescriptive schemas.

The catharsis of the ego leads us beyond deadlock. What it does lead us to has various titles in the literature (alterity, exteriority, difference, otherness, the absolute, the good, &c), all of them easily hypostatized, folded into new ego-objects, but never failing to stimulate the hopes of humanity for a better future, and faith in the necessity of progress. The process of hypostasis of ideality is predictable, even in its more playful variations, for instance, as in the case of alterity, as Levinas points out: "Right off, a stakes, money or honor, is attached to it" (OB, p. 6). Money and honor, both being

solidifications of radical desires aimed in the first place beyond their source. In the ego, these desires find a stable place to enter the repetitive circuit of identity, in which they can return eternally, giving off the illusion of being different each time. This illusion must persist, to obscure the irreducible banality of an all-encompassing stasis.

Even the term “catharsis” itself has often become little more than a catchphrase referring first and foremost to a specific spectrum of violent and/or sexual expression, whose supposedly transgressive content has become more acceptable for the masses than the activity which supposedly repressed it. The life and death instincts, universalized in the forms of violent and sexual entertainment, reduced to trite predictability, offer no outlet for the infinitely aporetic processes of the human mind. Catharsis, if it is to live up to its title, must present us with a route towards a true alternative, and a plausible one. It must not merely accelerate the frequency at which one suppressive schema replaces another, sweeping everything up in its process. It must not merely find a more stable schematic to more smoothly accommodate the world. It must open out onto reality itself.

In the context of our material lives, in a literal sense, nothing is ever supposed to be the same. No two shapes or numbers are identical as soon as they are materially inscribed. Yet banality comes forth so easily. If all were purely material, there would only be difference, (or otherness, exteriority &c), and banality would be impossible to detect. It is only the persistence of the embodied ego, which allows for a feeling of return, the very return which Freud termed “cathexis”. It has long been known, however, that this ego is imaginary, and the only dispute appears to revolve around how necessary it is to preserve it. Materialists reduce it to neurological functioning, while spiritualists

universalize it, turning the entirety of the cosmos into its mirror (called “the holographic universe”, by Michael Talbot). The genesis of the cathexes, which make the ego identifiable, does not itself occur in the ego, which is by nature contentless.

Catharsis involves a reference or gesture towards ethics because the purging of the ego’s hermetic self-enclosure results in a confrontation with reality as a newfound exteriority, which is undeniably an opening on to the possibility of the good. It is on this level that I make a departure from traditional psychoanalytic theory, which posits reality as inherently traumatic, in a morally neutral sense. If one is willing to set aside the biases inherent to cynicism that run rampant throughout theories of the mind, it is easy to understand. The argument I put forth against this perennially fashionable cynical impulse towards reality is very simple, but I believe it is effective.

It is always a safe assumption to make, that reality (truth) is always better than illusion (falsity). Naturally, the rebuttal to this claim will be that sometimes it is preferable for the truth to remain hidden. Contained within this rebuttal, there is a deep misunderstanding. One’s reason for hiding the truth is always in the interest of something thought to be better. Now imagine, hypothetically, that this hiding of the truth were not necessary to achieve the desired end. Would it not then be preferable to reach this end without concealing the truth? In the classic example of a murderer who comes to one’s house in search of victims, who asks where to find them, for instance, would it not be preferable to tell the truth to the murderer, but in such a manner that no violence would result? If such a thing were possible, it would be a miracle in the truest sense, and the highest form of morality, being all the better for having involved no lies. Once we set aside the cynical arguments concerning the supposedly tyrannical nature of

reality, which supposedly forces us to constantly make moral compromises, it is easy to see that truth/reality is a virtue and a good before it is an abusive trauma. Now, I do not intend to go so far as to argue that truth/reality is the *highest* good, but merely that it is a good wherever it occurred. No degradation has ever occurred through the discovery of truth/reality. If the discovery of truth/reality activates an immoral chain of events, the truth-teller cannot be blamed for the immoral outcome, but only perhaps for not having told *enough* of the truth, which includes not only the factual details of a situation, but the meaning of it as a whole. Partial truths can, it is doubtless, be harmful, but they are precisely harmful because of their partiality, not because of their truthfulness.

It is only when truth and reality are separated from meaning that they become fearsomely traumatic or evil, and solidify into pathology. This is the reason why events are often so much more horrifying before we discover the context in which they occurred. Contextualization always has the effect of producing meaning, and at its best, of remedying the chasms that open up in the course of life. With the passage of time, even things that seemed meaningless as they occurred gradually take on a well-defined role in the flow of things. This does not diminish the absurd trauma that overwhelmed the mind, but shows that even traumatism has a place in the development of the world.

Of course, trauma can be expanded to cosmic proportions, but so can anything else. It is only in the context of the infinite that meaning becomes truly problematic. The reasons we discover to account for events become in this context flimsy and unconvincing. Especially in the context of Philosophical thought, which, from its very origins, has sought the eternal in the temporal, everything comes to take on an infinite reality, which leads to a mood that is simultaneously ecstatic and traumatic. When this

infinite reality is separated from infinite meaning, it opens up the possibility for infinite trauma. The paradigm example of this phenomenon is post-idealistic modern philosophy, which, in both its existentialist and positivistic variants, denies any association between meaning and reality, in favor of an independent ego, immune to absorption by any categories larger than it is.

As I discussed in chapter two, however, the ego comes into being in the first place at the site of a trauma, brought about by an excess of affectedness at an immature stage before the proper apparatuses are in place to allow for a meaningful response. The ego then forms imaginary cathexes in order to account for this helpless affectedness. These cathexes, however, hypostatize meaning, keep it self-referential, and prevent it from connecting to exteriority, or otherness. This leads to the whole of reality becoming potentially traumatic, because it is only encountered non-relationally.

Wherever illusion is transcended, there is an opportunity to encounter reality. This is why catharsis, as purgative of the illusions of the ego, leads directly to the door of ethics. In order for ethics to function, it is obvious that there must first be contact with reality. Any ethics unrelated to reality would be rendered completely incomprehensible, as reality itself is a necessary predicate of any fully developed ethics. The egoic imaginary, with its unified and illusive reflectivity is by nature pre-ethical. If ethics are to become possible, there must be a reference beyond this. There are perhaps many ways that this can be done, but I have found that the tactic which most adequately leads in this direction is that which has been described as “catharsis”. Through catharsis, the ego, following its purgation, can come to serve as a lens for the mind, which is all too easily mistaken for the ego, especially in the case of those who would have us believe

that the mind is the same entity as consciousness. The truth is quite the contrary. The unconscious mind is still the mind, and the ego represents an infinitesimal vanishing point in comparison to the entities encountered mentally, whether consciously or not.

CONCLUSION

I will use the last few paragraphs here, to sum up the ground I have covered. In the first section of this paper (“The Problem of a Psychoanalytic Ethics”), I explored the possible misunderstandings of the nature of ethics, which lead to the erroneous conclusion that either Psychoanalytic theory is without an ethics, or what is worse, attempts to do away with them. I described two theoretical poles, which lead to this mistake. One pole leads to error through overparticularization of the ends of desire, refusing to recognize any desires other than those that have their origins in the object-oriented drives of the individual, aimed at completing a particularity. This theoretical structure, typically attributed to Psychoanalysis (in some cases with good reason), leads to the reduction of ethics to a vanishing point. Following this approach, everything, whether idea, emotion, desire, or drive, is reduced to an atomistic component. It is unilaterally opposed to any thought of universality or cosmology. These atomistic components are incomprehensible, in every respect other than the pull they exert on the subject, which we can think of as the *drive*, the givenness of a predefined lack. On the opposite end of the spectrum, we see ethics expanded to a superstructure that perfectly delineates ethical norms and imposes guilt on any violations of them. This superstructure, by delimiting freedoms, also limits them to such a great degree that ethics can no longer be practiced freely, and consequently become impossible. Finally, it becomes clear that both of these methods for defining ethics ultimately diminish them. In the case of the universal and the particular, as well as any combination of the two, we find ourselves trapped in determinism, with no hope of understanding either what produces the determination (the universal) or what is determined (the particular). I thus

looked for ethics elsewhere, discovering that the relation between these two poles is one of anxiety, and this anxiety will point us to the location of a non-reductive ethics (beyond over-abstraction and over-particulation).

In the second section of the paper (“The Formation of the Ego”), I explored the genesis of the ego, illustrating how the ego is in itself incapable of ethics, being in its essence pre-ethical. At early stages of development, the ego is incapable of functioning ethically, in that it oscillates between states of passivity and solipsism, and thereby cannot enter into any true relation outside of the imaginary superstructure that it either imposes or is imposed upon it. I understand the ego’s genesis as revolving around the process of reflectivity, as described in the work of Jacques Lacan.

The ego is generated to, through cathexes, reflect, and deflect excess impulses, but this very reflection and deflection can easily fill the entire ego. Eventually, however, the ego discovers the presence of a complete “object” outside of itself, which allows it to purge itself or else to be purged of cathexes, which allows for an encounter with otherness, instead of imaginatively imposing on it or receiving its impressions. The ego, purged of cathectic dross becomes less of a mirror than a space through which relationality occurs. This relationality freely flows between the universal and the particular, capable not only of interacting hierarchically, but immanently as well. It is this possibility of immanence which allows for ethical practice to be distinguished from mere authoritarianism (top-down ethic) or rebellion (bottom-up ethics). Similarly, it is what allows Psychoanalysis as a practice to *be* ethical without *teaching* ethics. The analysand, like any individual, must discover what goodness is for his or her self, for virtue cannot be taught. It can only be given, as a gift, free of obligations and subscript.

If the analyst were to give a gift the analysand, it would be a gift the analysand has paid for, and not only with money, but with time, effort, and perhaps a great deal of psychological trauma. One does not pay for a gift. The giver can expect nothing in return.

In the third and final section of the paper, I discuss the role of ethicality in general. After the catharsis (purgation) of the ego, we come to a confrontation with ethics itself. The role of Psychoanalysis then, concerning ethics is to reference to them through its very ethicality. In truth, this reference towards ethics is not strictly the work of Psychoanalysis, but any work that seeks what is good. At the end of the completion of any good work, one finds oneself together with the other, *facing* the other, as Levinas wrote in *Ethics and Infinity*: “in the interpersonal relationship it is not a matter of thinking the ego and the other together, but to be facing. The true union or true togetherness is not a togetherness of synthesis but a togetherness of the face to face” (p. 77). Ethics cannot make choices for us, but rather puts us in the position of being able to make ethical decisions, in the same way that, more broadly, Philosophy at large “does not indicate a choice, but articulates the situation of being ‘in the position of making a choice’” (Raffoul, p. 2).

Every institution, whether university, psychoanalytic, business, politics, family, &c, is incapable of enforcing ethicality, but must instead aim towards bringing its subjects to the point at which they may come to the position of being able to practice ethics in the true sense. Ethical practice must not force goodness out into the world, but promote the building of a capacity to receive goodness from wherever it may come, all the while recognizing that it can never be owned. What is good can only be given freely and it

likewise can only be truly received through a willingness to give. Ego-fixation results in an inability to do either. A young child cannot do good or evil, because s/he remains fixated on the reversibility of relation. It is the goal of ethicality to bring us to maturity, and the ability to act freely. Although Psychoanalysis is far from being the only theory and/or institution to be ethical in this sense, it is through our exploration of its bleak and often unnerving implications that we may learn to confront the greater traumas we can expect to face in life, without sugarcoating them.

ABBREVIATION KEY

- CD: Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents"
- EC: Jacques Lacan, "Ecrits"
- EFT: Jacques Lacan, "Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and the Technique of Psychoanalysis"
- EI: Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id"
- EO: Jean Laplanche, "Essays on Otherness"
- EP: Jacques Lacan, "Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis"
- FFC: Jacques Lacan, "The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis"
- OB Emmanuel Levinas, "Otherwise than Being"
- OP: Sigmund Freud, "Outline of Psychoanalysis"
- OSP: Jacques Lacan, "Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis"
- PF: Psycho-Analysis and Faith: The Letters of Sigmund Freud & Oskar Pfister
- TCH: Sigmund Freud, "Three Case Histories"
- TI: Emmanuel Levinas, "Totality and Infinity"

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VITA

Dylan O'Brien is a scholar of philosophy with interests in Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology, German Idealism, and Neoplatonism. During his time at Louisiana State University, he expanded these interests and looks forward to continuing to pursue them non-academically after graduation. After receiving his Master's degree, Dylan will return to his home state and go back to working in the field of mental health, which he also did before attending Louisiana State University.