Do Perversions exist?

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Abstract

The author questions the very existence of sexual perversions as a consistent “disorder”, as described in the DSMs. He discusses the link between the notion of perversion and the sexual morality of a culture and epoch. The author believes that perversions could exist as a consistent category if we were to develop a psychoanalytic view of them rather than use a purely descriptive and behavioral approach. The author demonstrates his point by using the seminal Freudian idea of the disavowal (Verleugnung) of reality to explain that perversions have sense today. The author goes on to develop his own approach to perversions, as basically ethical failures in the use of the other's and Other’s subjectivity; in this sense, perversions are linked to the (not only sexual) morality of each culture and epoch because they consist in an exploitation of the ethical law in order to obtain exclusively a particular enjoyment.

La perversión existe-t-elle?

L’auteur questionne l’existence même des perversions sexuelles en tant que “troubles” cohérents et substantiels, tels que les DSM les décrivent. Il discute le lien entre la notion psychiatrique de perversion d’une part et la moralité d’une culture et d’une époque de l’autre. L’auteur pense que les perversions peuvent être reçues comme catégorie nosographique dans la mesure où nous serions en état de développer une approche psychanalytique à celles-ci plutôt que de nous limiter à une approche purement descriptive et comportementaliste. L’auteur établit cette thèse en montrant de quelle manière le recours à l’idée freudienne de désaveu (Verleugnung) de la réalité peut expliquer que les perversions ont un sens et une utilité aujourd’hui. De plus, il articule sa propre approche aux perversions, en tant qu’elles seraient essentiellement des échecs éthiques dans l’usage de la subjectivité de l’autre et de l’Autre; cela permet de montrer combien les perversions sont liées à la moralité (non pas seulement sexuelle) de chaque culture et de chaque époque, en tant qu’elles exploitent la loi éthique dans le but exclusif d’obtenir une jouissance tout à fait spéciale.
Many deny, of course, that perversions exist, even if the dominant psychiatry has re-baptized them as “paraphilias.” (see American Psychiatric Association, 2013) A name change attributable to political correctness, considering that the term “pervert” is today an insult. In Greek, paraphilia means “wrong love”. After all, it’s better to insult a pervert in Ancient Greek than in Modern English.

Some note that we call perverse those sexual acts we don’t consider “normal.” But the criteria for sexual normality has varied from one era to another, and today even more quickly. And then, the picture is complicated by the fact that many perversions—such as masochism, urophilia or fetishism—have no criminal implications, while others lead to very serious incriminations. So we cannot reduce perversions to simply illegal sexual activities. In any case, critics apply to paraphilias the same arguments made by Thomas Szasz (1974, 1989) against the existence of mental illness in general, that is, that perversions are erotic variants that our society considers sick, although it is not always clear why. For example, why is klismaphilia, an enjoyment and arousal from enemas, perverse?

In fact, when positivist sexology created the concept of perversion in the late 19th century, the main perversion was homosexuality, and male homosexuality in particular (Roudinesco 2009, 2013). Moreover, physicians at the time believed that masturbation was very harmful and had to be repressed at all costs, even using sadistic measures. Pedophilia, on the other hand, was not particularly taken into consideration at the time. In fact, when I was a boy in Naples in the 1960s I was sent for two years to a Catholic school run by the Barnabite Fathers. Everyone, even my parents, knew that some monks were either pedophiles or frotteurs; but it didn’t shock anyone, it was considered a “test” that boys needed to overcome.

Our views on all of this have completely changed.

Yet, psychoanalysts usually believe that perversions do exist. Analysts are not nominalists. I shall explain in what sense I, too, believe that they exist.

Many analysts who do believe in perversions, however, fall into what I would call an ontological error. They say: “The physicians of the 19th century were wrong to consider homosexuality, or oral and anal sex, as perversions. Thanks to Freud and Lacan, we, on the other hand, really know what perversion means. Today we know who is perverse and who isn’t.” But this naive position means that they believe that we can scientifically determine what a perversion is, and that we can state as a truth, regardless of history and culture, what is perverse and what isn’t.

For some time I have been following the philosophical debate on medicine and psychiatry (for example, Sedgwick 1982, Wakefield 1992, Giroux & Lemoine 2012). A rather boring one, I must say, because philosophers tend to remain fossilized around the question: “How can we rigorously define what a mental illness is and what it isn’t?” Foucault (1961, 2003), however, had taught us to pose ourselves a different question: “What do we really mean, in a certain epoch by mental illness – for example, today, in the industrial societies of 2015?” The interesting question is then not “what is perversion?” but rather “what do we really mean today when we qualify someone as paraphilic?”

It’s a bit like when we discuss whether to allow marriages between gays, or between siblings. The point is to understand what “matrimony” means today. Until about 50 years ago,
matrimony was a legal recognition mainly regarding the raising of offspring. From matri (mother) monium (munus, the task), “task of the mother.” In recent decades, the sense of marriage has radically changed. Marriage today, even between heterosexuals, is a legal protection for each member of the couple. The function of raising children takes second place. It is this change in the sense of the concept of marriage that has introduced the question of whether it should be granted to homosexuals or close relatives as well.

So, what do psychiatry and psychoanalysis consider perverse or paraphilic today? Because on this point, the diagnostics of analysts, even Lacanians, coincides with the diagnostics of the DSM-5. And yet we can easily show how incoherent this type of diagnostics is today, considering that it applies contemporaneously two conflicting philosophies: one is utilitarianism and the other a form of Aristotelian-Darwinian functionalism.

The philosophy of Utilitarianism (Hume 1739, 1751; Bentham 1789; etc.) is based on the criterion of individual pleasure or displeasure. Whatever enhances the pleasure or reduces the displeasure of myself or others is good; whatever does the opposite is bad. Indeed, the DSM’s basic diagnostic criterion is whether or not a subject suffers from Distress or Social Impairment.

The other philosophy is a form of functionalism which used to be Aristotelian, but which today adopts and adapts more of a Darwinian language: illness is something that doesn’t correspond to the function that the biological evolution of life would have selected. This philosophy, however, should lead to considering homosexuality a disorder, since it does not favor reproduction. But this is something that cannot be said. For example, it should lead to considering male gerontophilia, that is, attraction to menopausal women, as paraphilia. Because according to so-called “evolutionist psychology,” whatever is not geared to reproduction is supposedly an evolutionary dead end. In short, a perversion. In practical terms, when today’s diagnostics addresses paraphilias, it doesn’t really know what it’s talking about. But, can analysts say that they do know?

Let’s set aside naturalist functionalism and focus on the utilitarianist ethical criterion, which is after all what Freud started from. Freud’s Lustprinzip [pleasure-desire principle] is a utilitarianist paradigm. A subtle analysis would lead us to conclude that perversion is not egodystonic as all neuroses are, but that it is rather a hetero-dystonic sexuality. That is, the pervert derives a “special” sexual enjoyment by in some way using the other’s subjectivity. To clarify: he does not use the other as object, but as subject. What we mean today by perversion is solitary sex practiced with the willing or unwilling help of the other subject.

Today, the term “other” is more than ever problematic. Lacan, as you know, distinguishes between three “others” — the symbolic, the imaginary and the real.

Here I shall limit myself to distinguish between what I would call the “actual others”—the concrete subjects I am dealing with—and what Lacan calls the Other with a capital A or O, which is not actual or existent, but “symbolic.” I shall call it here the capital Other. The perverse use of the subjectivity of the actual other, or of the capital Other, is dystonic with the desire or the enjoyment of the actual other. As we can see, the concept of “perversion”—far more than the vapid idea of “paraphilia”—is ultimately an ethical concept. And perversion is seen as an unethical sexuality, insofar as it does not adjust to the other as ethically defined by utilitarianism, the dominant philosophy in our Western societies.
The point is that the pervert needs this actual other and/or this capital Other. Some perversions seem above all to exploit the other concrete subjects. The sadist needs the victim’s suffering; the exhibitionist needs the woman’s shocked or disgusted reaction; the voyeur needs the sexual pleasure of the lovers he is peeping on; the pedophile needs the child’s sexual desire or need for love; and the transvestite needs others to desire him as a woman. In other perversions, on the other hand, the actual other is only called upon as an accomplice, and the subjectivity that is supposedly exploited is that of the capital Other, like in fetishism or masochism, two orientations that very often converge in the same individual. The masochist needs the wrath and the suffering of the Woman—with a capital W, while the fetishist ultimately presents himself as the savior of the Woman—here too with a capital W. We can say, as Freud grasped, that the fetishist returns to the Woman (the capital W) her phallus and power. The concrete women who lend themselves to fetishist and masochist games are actresses playing the powerful phallic capital Other.

Analysts usually fail to recognize the truly ethical character of perversion, or recognize it only indirectly. They see perversion as a subjective structure dominated by a process other than repression, Verleugnung, denial or disavowal. Repression and disavowal are both fundamental processes of anyone’s unconscious. Freud developed the concept of disavowal to explain fetishism. As we know, the fetishist—specialized mainly in feet and shoes—would unconsciously deny what he actually knows, that women lack a penis. Through his fetish, a male desires a feminine penis, the lack of which he disavows. How then to extend this disavowal mechanism to all so-called perversions? What does a sadist or voyeur disavow?

We can say that in every perversion recognized as such today, two knowledges are at play, one I would call “empirical and collective,” and the other “erotic and private.” Perversion consists in the fact that the latter knowledge disavows the former. To make things clearer, I would suggest the following schema.
**Psychoanalytic Discourse**

Do Perversions exist?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perversion</th>
<th>Enjoyment’s Knowledge</th>
<th>Disavowed Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fetishism</td>
<td>The woman has a penis</td>
<td>A woman does not have a penis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadism</td>
<td>The victim is guilty</td>
<td>The victim is innocent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masochism</td>
<td>The torturer is furious with me</td>
<td>The torturer is only my accomplice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voyeurism</td>
<td>I am included in the sex scene</td>
<td>I am excluded from the sex scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibitionism</td>
<td>The person who watches my genitals enjoys it</td>
<td>The person who watches my genitals is disgusted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedophilia</td>
<td>The child sexually desires the adult</td>
<td>The child is horrified by adult sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transvestism</td>
<td>The other knows me as woman</td>
<td>I know I am a man</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this way we can see why, for analysts, disavowal structures all perversions.

Now, this disavowal leads to a specific relation with the Law. French psychoanalysts state it clearly: the pervert is someone who utilizes the Law, and the ethical command, to capture his own pleasure. In other words, he needs the Law so that he can transgress it. If there is no law to transgress, he finds no pleasure. Perversion thus perverts the sense of the Law, which is no longer something that regulates and limits our enjoyments, but rather becomes the specific condition to obtain enjoyment.

This is why perversion is not really a paraphilia—desiring wrong things—but rather a paraethics, a distortion of sexual ethics, today defined by utilitarianist principles. Let’s see how the pervert interprets his relationship to the Law.

As we know, in both Saint Paul (in his Epistle to the Romans, 7,7 – 8) and in Lacan, the Law not only limits the satisfaction of our desires, but is also the matrix of our desires. I desire something precisely because the Law forbids it. We can say that the pervert also makes use of the Law in order to desire—not to block his enjoyment, but to ensure that he gets it.

And, since the Law is the relationship with the sufferings and enjoyments of the actual others and/or the capital Other, perversion is a specific modality for the sexual use of others and of the capital Other.

Let us consider visual perversions. The exhibitionist needs the gaze of the actual other to shock her into reawakening her desire and horror. The voyeur needs the gaze of the capital Other: he does not enjoy simply by seeing others enjoy—something he could get from any porn show—but enjoys instead his very exclusion from the scene he is attending as the capital Other. While in exhibitionism the perverse subject produces something uncertain, half way between enjoyment and suffering, in the actual other, in voyeurism, he exploits the suffering of the capital Other.

In fetishism, the perverse subject derives enjoyment not from the pleasure of the woman—who usually lends herself to the game, often, without finding any pleasure herself—but from
the pleasure of the capital W Woman, as we have seen. As for the masochist, the game usually consists of a woman who lends herself to playing out the suffering of the capital Other furious with the subject. The masochist lends himself as the suffering actual other, who pays the penalty of the capital Other’s suffering and, by occupying these places, can enjoy as a subject.

In transvestism, the actual other enjoys seeing a woman; but the capital Other knows the subject is not a woman, and the transvestite subject takes part in this pleasure enjoyed by the capital Other. The transvestite’s erotic aim is to be desired as a woman.

And lastly, in pedophilia, the child is assumed to find pleasure as the sexual partner of the pedophile. But we know that this is hardly ever the case. In pedophilia, the child derives pleasure from sex only as the capital Other, but this Other does not exist. Indeed, most pedophiles claim to have been “seduced” the first time by an actual child (which is often true). The pedophile, it would seem to me, derives pleasure from the disconnection between two “othernesses”. On the one hand, the naive child who knows nothing about sex, and on the other, like in an oxymoron, the revelation of sexuality in the child. The pedophile doesn’t believe in any confusion of languages between adults and children, but in a delightful convergence of the two languages—the lustful angel.

We can therefore say that the perverse subject finds enjoyment always thanks to the suffering or irrelevance of the actual other. If the actual other suffers, then the capital Other will enjoy. This is why a book on perversions by the Belgian psychoanalyst Serge André (1993) is actually called L’imposture perverse, “The Perverse Imposture.” Perversions are impostures, in the same sense, for example, that many Ancients considered theatre, even tragic theatre, an imposture; that is, a play.

However, when I say that perversion today is a perverse use of the Law, and that we are dealing with an ethical dystonia, a doubt assails me. If this is actually what we mean today by perversion, can we say that an entity, something that represents a perverse structure, corresponds to this at once moral and psychiatric judgment? For example, if we take all those who have no religious faith, does this common feature designate a specific subjective entity? Homosexuals are another example: beyond the big differences between individual homosexuals, is there a quid, something that corresponds to the homosexual subject? When we say that all perverts basically use the Law—that is, the other’s subjectivity—to enjoy without having the actual other’s enjoyment as their goal, are we saying, then, that there is a thing that is perversion?

In short, do we call fantasies and sexual acts perverse because we judge them morally? Or are perverts subjects who use moral judgments to enjoy specific fantasies and perverse acts?

Formulated differently, the question is: does it make sense to talk of a common etiology for all perversions?

From my clinical practice with perverts, or neurotics with perverse traits, I have come to the conclusion that the perverse act generally serves to transform a fundamental trauma in relation to the other into an exquisite pleasure. Every perverse act repeats a trauma—in most cases an exclusion from the pleasure or desire of the big Other. This is why perversions are reminiscent of tragic dramas in theatre, film or literature: just as a tragedy gives us pleasure by representing and repeating the suffering and defeat of the hero, so do perverse fantasies and acts represent and repeat a scene of suffering and defeat, transubstantiating it into an act of pleasure.
An anecdote about an obsessive patient of mine with a fetishist and masochist sexuality might provide a particularly good example of this.

Antonio came to me at the age of thirty-five, and immediately labeled himself as a masochistic fetishist. He can manage to copulate with his girlfriend only if she walks over him, wearing certain chosen shoes, as if he were a rug, and only if her shoes play the starring role in their sexual scene. These fantasies have dominated his sexuality since adolescence.

From our first meeting he recounted “the mother of all scenes,” which lay at the origin of his exclusive erotic specialization. At the age of five, while playing with his younger brother, Antonio hit him, not seriously, with a toy pistol, at which point his mother—seized by an outburst of rage that he finds excessive for the incident—grabbed his pistol and crushed it underfoot. That scene still haunts him in all its details, like a series of flashbacks: the blue shoes that crush his “pistolino” (a term that in Italian can mean both a small pistol and a child’s penis), the flesh-colored stockings, the vivid colors of the surroundings—taken together, they all still dominate the scene that arouses him. His lover must tread on him just as his mother trod on the small pistol, and the blue shoes, for him, are his erotic apex.

Antonio vividly illustrates the paradigm of every perversion: the scene of the punishment must be repeated, because only its iteration can trigger erotic desire. The dynamics here explain why most pedophiles, for example, were victims of sexual abuse by adults during childhood. What the subject suffered as violence he acts out as a form of pleasure for which a new child will pay the price.

The pervert repeats the trauma, turning passive suffering into active pleasure, because the other inflicts the trauma. In my experience, this trauma revolves around jealousy, like in the most classic Oedipus. The future pervert usually suffered as a child when he realized his mother was not just his mother; that she was instead someone else’s lover or wife. Behind every perversion, we will nearly always find an experience of exclusion from someone else’s pleasure.

This is particularly clear in cases of what I would call negative jealousy, what the French call “échangistes” and the Americans “swingers”, people who swap partners. But I would also refer to men who can only have intercourse with their partner if she cheats on him. These forms of practicing “negative” jealousy are usually labeled as masochistic. But here the man finds pleasure in being cuckolded only if his woman really finds pleasure in sexual intercourse with another. The “negative jealous man” plays with fire, because his woman might really fall in love with the other and ditch our subject. An ego-dystonia or hetero-dystonia sooner or later appears. The trauma we mentioned lies at the root of negative jealousy as well, when the child subject realized his mother was not just a mother, but also, I would say, a woman. Hence the actual other, the woman he probably loves, must take the place of the capital Other, who “cheats on” her son with a man.

The pervert is a sort of artist who uses the trauma to obtain pleasure, but at a high price: it is difficult or impossible for him to find a real partner (Clavreul 1967). And while the pervert may take advantage of the complicity of various people, he will never really be part of a couple. When Lacan says, “there is no sexual relationship,” he seems to mean that, ultimately, all sexual intercourse is perverse.
There is a well-known joke where the masochist implores the sadist to “please hurt me”, and the sadist responds with a gleeful smile, “No, never!” Gilles Deleuze (1967) said it was a stupid joke because a real sadist and a real masochist never meet, since in his opinion, masochism and sadism are incommensurable. If Deleuze was right, it would confirm the pervert’s real hell: despite the “sophisticated” pleasures he manages to find, he is, in a certain sense, fated to always enjoy pleasure alone.

**References**


