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Book Review Essay: *Conversations with Lacan* by Sergio Benvenuto, Routledge, 2020

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In a lucid passage of the book, Benvenuto describes an oedipal return and repetition. Using an autobiographical narrative, he describes how as a rebellious student in the 1960s, in a stand against pure subjectivism, he moved to Paris from his hometown in Italy to look for an objective “human science.” Later, he discovered European psychoanalysis in general and Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular as a serious project criticizing the neo-Kantian American scientism of the emerging cognitive sciences, in which the “human” was reduced to objectified parameters. Coming from a psychology background, he discovered that Lacan’s lectures were far from didactic. The Lacan that he discovered had already integrated his criticisms of scientism with his criticisms of institutional knowledge, embodied at the time by the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA). Benvenuto describes a journey in which he started to look for “truth” in an objective sense, which he assumed structuralism would provide, but when he was fully immersed in auditing Lacan’s seminar, he found that Lacan was not so much teaching the Hegelian dialectic as enacting it practically.

Benvenuto takes a multidisciplinary approach to this comprehensive reflection on how Lacanian ideas are encountered in our time. He uses many theoretical concepts, including existentialism and idealism, to show how Lacanian ideas and practices are intertwined. If we consider psychoanalysis a theory of the subject that gives primacy to the object, then we can understand the essence of Lacan’s lectures, which Benvenuto states were very easy to grasp if you were in personal attendance, even though, in our time, Lacan’s texts seem very complex and are the source of much academic debate. Benvenuto explores this at length. At the beginning of the book, he elaborates a key

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concept—that Lacan’s lectures should be considered analytic materials rather than didactic materials. This crucial position, which is usually dismissed by Lacan’s orthodox followers, by itself explains and clarifies much of the confusion that a newcomer to Lacanian circles might experience.

The newcomer’s bewilderment needs to be understood as the natural lack of comprehension of any analyst upon seeing a new patient. The main tool of an analyst’s work is to remain open despite feeling bewildered. This confusion could easily be denied by “students in didactic environments in which the matter of truth is taken as a granted object and as a project (a thing to be found in the future).” Benvenuto takes us through the steps of how to leave didactic positions and suspend subjective domination—seeking positions that allow us to remain comfortable with the complexities of the Other.

In an important passage in his seminar on anxiety, Lacan states that the seminars should be taken as an opportunity for the audience to free associate. He shifts his position as an analyst toward that of the analysand in his seminars. This shifting position is not rudimentary; one of the prominent projects that he pursued was his criticism of institutes of formal teaching. He wanted to show that psychoanalysis needs its discourse (the discourse of the unconscious), which intentionally avoids a master–slave discourse, and he wanted to show his audience how to avoid domination. The book successfully shows how Lacan was different. It elaborates the logic beyond his idiosyncratic manner and complex writing. Here, we encounter an analyst who was so ethically committed to analysis that he morphs himself into a prominent philosophical figure, while his criticism of philosophy (as the knowledge of the masters) was the other dialectical pole of his movement. In this manner, the Lacanian technique is described as an absolutely ethical practice in which the usual ritualistic behaviours of “neutrality,” on the one hand, and mere emotional/relational primacy, on the other hand, are criticized through the lens of logic. Lacan’s agenda was to elaborate on the logic of the psychoanalytic space. He gives primacy to the Other as the owner of pleasure. Transference is considered another imaginary object, and the analyst as the “subject who is supposed to know” replaces the usual “knowledgeable therapist.” Everything, in the end, is shown to patients not only as “the image in the mirror” but the mirror itself.

I believe that many beginner learners in psychotherapy have the experience of asking themselves silently when their supervisors describe psychopathology, “How do you know this is the truth?” and “How do you know what is normal and what is not”? Benvenuto explains how Lacan took these questions seriously and how he used logic to address them practically. Answering the question, “What kind of logic underpins the discourse of analysis”? is the ethical agenda of any analyst. The analyst must keep the space of free association open, and this can happen only when the analyst himself remains the “object *cause* of desire” and not the mere object of desire. For Lacan, the golden rule of neutrality is not limited to the avoidance of enactment; its logic goes far beyond a mere ritualistic gesture, which is hypocritical and creates an aura of false power

filled with passive enactments. Benvenuto describes this logic clearly. Satisfying desire by following the pleasure principle closes the critical space for unconscious knowledge. This extends to the quest of patients for a cure for their symptoms. The primacy of the death drive for Lacan is described as the existence of the subject; in this way, the pleasure principle is the termination of lust (the combination of desire and pleasure). The termination of the analysis for Lacan is described as a logical shift: the replacement of the id by the ego. In this manner, what is being targeted by Lacan is the ego itself—not strengthening the ego, but rather questioning it. This is a total reversal of the routine perspective on ego in the cognitivism of contemporary CBT and the manfulness-based psychotherapy model. Benvenuto describes why and how Lacan’s approach is different from object-relational approaches in which the primacy of “images” of the objects does not allow the symbolized subject to talk.

In this particular “conversation with Lacan,” one could get involved in his trajectory in a non-narrative way. Lacan started an orthodox movement in response to his observation that the Freudian radical movement was becoming just another conventional, conformist, and normative institute. Benvenuto explains how the Hegelian tradition of avoiding subjective primacy guided Lacan to question the routine schema of inner psyche vs. outer psyche. He follows Hegel, who approaches the subject first as an object, but is careful not to fall into objectifications. As a true believer in Hegelian dialectics, Lacan tried to avoid a straight relationship between Subject and Object to prevent the dangerous objectification of knowledge (scientism). By putting the audience in the position of analyst, his rejection of the routine model of inner–outer is based on his observation of how this model was prone to the fundamentalism of imaginary scientism as a reference to ideological utilitarianism. By differentiating between the Ideal Ego as an imaginary projection and the Ego Ideal as a symbolized signifier, he argues that mixing these two risks strengthening narcissism. Benvenuto shows why and how Lacan moves in a narrow line and is careful not to fall into either ego psychology or relational intersubjectivity.

Once, in a reading group focused on “Seminar VIII/Anxiety,” a non-psychoanalyst friend asked me: Of all of these theories and statements that are being narrated about our psyche here, have any been tested? Or are these just fiction? Well, the answer to this question, which I believe is relevant, could be something like this: As we talk about our psyche, we can’t detach ourselves from our talk, so any claim about the objective truth of the psyche is a simplification of a circular and complex concept. When Benvenuto elaborates on the concept of *après-coup*, he clarifies this point of view perfectly:

My impression—which I have expounded upon in other writings (Benvenuto 2018)—is that après-coup appears so important because it somehow puts together cause and sense. First, I experience event 1, which produces no effects; then, at another time, I experience event 2, which gives a different sense to event 1. This sense becomes, for

example, the cause of my neurotic symptoms 3. In both cases, we are dealing with events, but the sense that event 2 affords event 1 becomes the cause of situation 3 (Benvenuto, 2020, p. 109).

In this passage, we understand why objectification is logically false: there is simply no true self (either romantically or cognitively oriented). This does not mean, however, that we are not looking for the self. *Après-coup* is a common encounter in any mental health clinical practice. The self evolves through events (e.g., traumas) that are perceived only by something else. Psychoanalysis could be this primary “something else.” Instead of showing patients an imaginary possible self, psychoanalysis should show them the logic beyond searching. Thus, for Lacan, the analytic technique is itself the theory. In this way, we can see how the analysis is emancipatory and is far from normative. Lacan’s project was to demonstrate the logic behind the emancipation and challenge normative identifications.

To understand Lacan’s views on psychoanalysis, we have to appreciate the difference between Lacan’s view of the self and the views of contemporary relational and traditional instinct-oriented theories. *Après coup*, as Benvenuto describes it, is a key to this understanding. In the ongoing debate between a socially oriented/constructive and an instinctive (biologically oriented) framework, Lacan elaborates an existential view, in which the answer to the question of freedom and determinism is demonstrated in the relations between empty signifiers of the (big)Other and events (the real). He demonstrates how primacy is neither with the naked social situation (events) nor imaginary ideas of the self. Benvenuto describes how Lacan’s topology gives primacy to the symbolic order and, by providing some examples of clinical scenarios, he reveals the unconscious as a symbolized entity:

This discovery (mirror neuron) shows that we perceive ourselves everywhere in the world and that we “become” the world that we interpret as our mirror. Our brain identifies ourselves in the world, in the sense that we interpret the world – even paintings and cartoons – in our own image and likeness (Benvenuto, 2020, p. 80).

In general, by correlating the mirror neuron theory with Lacan’s idea of narcissism, Benvenuto describes how Lacan criticizes the reciprocal views of empathy in the relational tradition:

Instead, when Narcissus saw his reflection in the water, he believed he saw an “other” very handsome boy. According to Lacan, this mirror image gives coherence to a body that still doesn’t perceive itself as an organic whole and, for this reason, the mirror image becomes the prototype of every narcissistic idealization (Benvenuto, 2020, p. 79).

For Lacan and Benvenuto, empathy can happen anywhere, even with one’s self! This explains why one of the major consequences of any new wave of psychotherapy is what

is called “intellectual rumination.” This is why “pure understanding” is not only not enough but can actually be counter-therapeutic and narcissistic. Lacan offers the logic behind an anti-narcissistic therapy, and *Benvenuto* brings this logical knowledge to our time, along with attention to our ongoing political challenges.

References

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